

## *South Pacific*

**By Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II  
and Joshua Logan**

**At the Hippodrome Theatre through October 9**

**By Amanda Sztein**

### **UNBALANCED SOUTH PACIFIC FAILS TO COMMIT**

The characters, writers and production staff of “South Pacific” all failed to commit. The writers were tempted by a myriad of themes, plots and subplots. Unforgiving accents, repetitive songs and lack of direction tempted the characters. The production staff could not decide on a single style throughout the show. The combination of these three factors results in an amount of temptation equaled only by a supposedly faithful boyfriend at a lingerie fashion show.

Both the original material and the current execution of this acclaimed Broadway musical, now at the Hippodrome Theatre, suffer from this indecision. The original 1949 run of “South Pacific” garnered 10 Tony awards, while the 2008 revival earned seven more. These are very misleading figures, as “South Pacific” has several internal flaws that even the best production could not overcome.

“South Pacific” is based on James A Michener’s collection of short stories. The attempt to tackle many different themes and stories creates a show with far too many plots and subplots. The musical both starts and ends with the tumultuous relationship between Southern nurse Nellie Forbush (Katie Reid) and exiled Frenchman Emile de Becque’s (Marcelo Guzzo), who experience many trials and tribulations due to his Polynesian children from a previous marriage.

Had the play explored this theme fully, it would have been more controversial, especially in the 1940s, but would also have had a more cohesive energy. Just like Nellie, who tempted and was tempted by every character despite being insufferable, the authors also had trouble committing to just one idea.

The second major plot was Lieutenant Joseph Cable’s (Shane Donovan) infatuation with Bloody Mary’s (Cathy Foy-Mahi) daughter Liat (Hsin-Yu Liao). This plot creates tension between race and class lines as well and confusingly suggested magical intervention. Once again, this had all the potential of contributing to a riveting musical but was convoluted by the inclusion of too many other plots.

The third plot had Luther Billis (Christian Marriner) and his group of womanizing sailors searching for love on the various islands. Yet another major plot concerned an undercover, secretive mission that Emile and Cable embarked on. Cable, Billis and the authors all suffer from an excess of temptation and a lack of commitment.

It took the majority of the two hours of Act I to introduce these plot points and another hour and a half of Act II to partially resolve them. There were many intriguing themes and plots within “South Pacific,” but it was an error to allow all of them to run rampant down divergent paths. This was where the audience started to wish that “South Pacific” would simply settle down and make a definitive choice.

One of the most exciting aspects of musical theater are those grand, exhilarating, show-stopping numbers that has the entire audience on their feet in boisterous applause. Unfortunately, most of the songs in “South Pacific” were carbon

copies of each other with identical notes, lyrics and rhythms—too similar to be played in rapid succession without confusion. The many reprises unnecessarily lengthened the already lengthy show.

The repetitive nature of the songs can be partially explained by the intent to give each character his or her own melodic personality, but the musical did not fully commit to the idea or execute it well. Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Phantom of the Opera" gives each character introductory melodies that are intricately woven throughout the character's songs. "South Pacific" chose to give each character the same song to sing again and again.

There were a few small problems that, when repeated, became increasingly insufferable. The sets were well crafted and invoked the sense of a South Pacific island. There were a few palm trees, a hill and rotating sets that accurately and literally portrayed a stage, shower and house: plain with a few embellishments.

The lighting effects, however, were sloppily designed and executed. The bright follow spot, that when properly used, illuminates the main characters of the screen and is extraordinarily effective, which unfortunately was not the method the lighting designer chose. On the opening night of "South Pacific," perhaps due to lack of practice, the follow spots dizzily chased the actors across the stage in frantic, unpredictable motions that were greatly distracting. Be warned: halfway through Act II, bright spotlights scan the crowd attempting to imitate searchlights. The only effect it has is blinding the audience and causing them to turn away and shield their eyes—twice.

The director and actors also decided to bombard the audience with their accents. Almost everyone in the audience understood that Emile is French but they didn't understand a word he said. His accent was strong, and the audience seemed unsure if he was Italian, Portuguese or Spanish. The accent became increasingly pronounced as Guzzo's operatic singing further impeded the audience's ability to follow along. The operatic flourishes and deep baritones impeded any possibility of comprehension. Luckily, the audience had two full renditions of the song and at least one reprise to try. Nellie's Southern accent was well executed and consistent throughout the play, but doesn't seem to be from Little Rock, Arkansas, and was instead very Georgian.

The silver lining of the show's looming, dark cloud was Christian Murriner's portrayal of Luther Billis. He singlehandedly carried the show's humor, supplying many of the one-liners that had the audience laughing at his womanizer ways. Billis had some of his best moments in witty repartee with Bloody Mary while making fun of her island wares and attempting to create his own grass skirt souvenir.

He shined most brightly during Act II's "Honey Bun," where Nellie and Billis traded genders and Billis masqueraded in a grass skirt, coconut bra and white boxers with BILLIS engraved on the seat. Amid the grumbles of the exiting crowd, there were a few audience members humming the tune of "Honey Bun."

The entire audience was infected by the same commitment problem; many were gone after intermission. Whatever loyalty the audience felt at first was undermined by a fickle play plagued by too many contrasting concepts and performances. This show proved to be too much like the unreliable, unfaithful boyfriend tempted by everything around him.

## **By Brian Novotny**

### **COCONUT PALMS, BANYAN TREES AND BORED ACTRESSES**

"South Pacific" has arrived at Baltimore's Hippodrome Theatre with nothing but good advance word about the show in general and the Lincoln Center production in particular. Things look good from the moment one walks in; on the curtain is a quote from the source material (James A. Michener's "Tales of the South Pacific"), seeming to prepare the audience for a great performance.

The curtains rise; the orchestra swells, and the audience is greeted by two children with fine voices and good acting skills, as far as children go. The children (Judae'a Brown and Cole Bullock) treat the audience to an upbeat, catchy opening number called "Dites-Moi" and the stage is set for a classic '50s show. Then our leads take the stage, and the show becomes a rollercoaster: plunging from the heights of excitement and enthusiasm to the depths of boredom. This up-and-down quality results from the quality of the two main groups of actors; the leads are slow, stationary and uninteresting, while the ensemble is vibrant and exciting.

This production does not begin on a high note. Our two main characters, rich French expatriate Emile de Becque (Marcelo Guzzo) and young army nurse Nellie Forbush (Katie Reid), immediately fail to make an impression on the audience; the two of them stand around drinking in Emile's mansion without doing much of anything for three whole songs. The audience is told that the two have some attraction to each other, though their acting does not obviously convey that.

Guzzo has a beautiful, operatic voice which he uses to his advantage in his beautiful "One Enchanted Evening," but Reid's Nellie seems unable to emote--one can be forgiven for not believing her singing about her youthful vigor and naiveté in "A Cockeyed Optimist." The situation is not helped by the fact that we have not been given any chance to learn about these characters, and thus cannot be invested in their sudden romance.

After what seems like an eternity, the scene changes. To give credit where credit is due, the set design is at once beautiful and mystical. From hill-top villas to sandy shores to war rooms, a combination of set pieces, lighting and strategically placed bamboo curtains make for a flexible and diverse stage.

It is in one such scene that the show takes its first upward swing; on a beach, a group of soldiers heckle a native woman selling souvenirs. In a refreshing change of pace, Luther Billis (Christian Murriner) and the ensemble of Seabees are obviously having fun with their roles, and so was the choreographer. For "Bloody Mary" and "There is Nothin' Like a Dame," dancing and push-ups combine to make a unique military-dance motif.

Every character, from the native Bloody Mary (Cathy Foy-Mahi) to the tough-as-nails Captain Brackett (Robert John Biederman) play their roles extremely well, drawing on old, reliable comic stereotypes and their own over-the-top acting to create a truly engaging show. Shane Donovan's Lieutenant Joseph Cable is also a thoroughly enjoyable character and singer, from his quiet, reflective moments in "My Girl Back Home" to his dramatic, fully belted "Younger Than Springtime."

All of these characters come together in a jumble of romance and wartime intrigue that makes for an exciting plot. Lt. Cable arrives on the island for Emile's help in spying on a Japanese naval base, but is persuaded by Billis to use his position to acquire a boat to the mysterious island of Bali Ha'i. There, Billis drinks and womanizes while Cable is thrown into a relationship with Bloody Mary's daughter Liat (Hsin-Yu Liao). Their relationship, rife with themes of racism versus love, ends up being much more interesting than that of Nellie and Emile; the audience sees the inception of the relationship and sees it through to the end, creating a greater sense of investment.

The orchestra, as well, deserves great praise. While the actors, at times, cannot convey the drama of a scene, the orchestra is trying their hardest to make up for it. More than mere background noise, they make or break scenes; Nellie's sudden falling-out with Emile is punctuated by a cacophony of stings and brass that make the end of the first act a truly engaging theatrical experience--the audience is rapt right up through Guzzo's final note because of the crescendo that has been building since the scene began.

The main problem, then, is with its leads and what happens while they are on stage. Much of this is just staging: in Guzzo and Reid's more romantic scenes, their blocking is to just stand there--there is hardly any motion; the whole stage seems frozen. At the same time, it seems that something could have been done; for most of the show, both actors just seem bored.

Even in show-stopping numbers like "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair," where she is assisted by a greatly more enthusiastic ensemble, Reid cannot seem to get any significant emotion across. Guzzo has the same issue in "This Nearly Was Mine"; in a song about love and loss, he seems all too calm.

Overall, "South Pacific" is a great, classic show, with great music and writing, marred by performance issues. Though minor characters steal the show, the leads leave the audience without any central figures to latch onto. With more convincing leads, the show could have been an engaging and poignant period piece with an attractive score and pertinent themes. Its gorgeous set and beautiful music cannot save "South Pacific" from its lackluster leads.

## By Haley Jones

# SLIGHT CHILL IN TROPICAL SOUTH PACIFIC

As the lights dimmed and the overture began, a dramatic note silenced the audience and set the tone for the exotic love story of “South Pacific,” a musical by Rogers and Hammerstein at the Hippodrome Theatre in Baltimore. However, as the stirring music came to a close and the Tony Award-winning show began, the performance fell short because the actors were not able to match the passion of the score. The music and ensemble were spectacular. However, the director chose performers with great voices who had difficulty connecting to the audience. The two main characters were cold and stiff when delivering their lines.

“South Pacific,” tells the story of Ensign Nellie Forbush (Katie Reid), an American nurse from a small town in Little Rock, Arkansas and a dashing older Frenchman, Emile de Becque (Marcelo Guzzo). They fall in love; however, her racial prejudices force them apart. Against the backdrop of World War II, we also come to know the characters on the tiny Polynesian island. There is Lieutenant Joseph Cable (Shane Donovan), a Princeton educated pilot from Philadelphia. He too falls in love with a young Island girl, Liat (Hsin-Yu Liao), and is forced to face his prejudices. The heartbroken men choose to leave on a dangerous mission. It is then, that Nellie realizes that love surpasses racial prejudice, and vows to return to Emile.

In the opening scene, Nellie described her personality in “A Cockeyed Optimist.” This song provides information about her character; how nothing can suppress her hope. This optimism was tested as the conflict unfolded later in the show. She joined Emile at the end of this scene to sing “Some Enchanted Evening,” where their growing feelings toward one another became apparent.

The opening scene’s focus on just the two characters and their relationship is uncharacteristic of most musicals which start with a lavish opening number. Normally, the opening number would be an exciting, fast-paced way to bring the audience in and set the tone for the rest of the show. This show started with a long-drawn-out scene between Nellie and Emile, setting a more subdued tone for the scenes to follow. Although Nellie and Emile brought the audience into their world of the warm South Pacific, their stiff performances left their love affair feeling rather cold.

As the show’s central love interests, Nellie and Emile should have carried the audience along on their romantic journey. But Reid and Guzzo were as stiff in their body language as in the delivery of their songs and lines. Numerous times the actors’ faces were turned upstage, which created a barrier between them and the audience.

With Emile being an older, refined Frenchman, it was rather odd when he mocked Nellie by mimicking her dance moves from “I’m Gonna Wash that Man Right Outta my Hair” by placing a dinner napkin over his head and moving his hips to the tune. Later in the show, Nellie became upset over the fact that Emile had kept his Polynesian children a secret from her, and she left him. During this scene, however, Emile did not express his grief over her leaving in a detectable or empathetic way.

In fact, sailor Luther Billis (Christian Marriner) imparted more sorrow over his inability to win Nellie than Emile did at losing her. Marriner’s performance as the love-sick sailor gave the show a superb comic foil. Marriner’s vocals were strong enough—communicating his emotions to every seat in the house—that Billis came alive.

The other sailors also brought the show to life. Their dances lived up to the high expectations of the iconic “There is Nothin’ Like a Dame.” Though each man sported a white hat, the sailors wore their uniforms in different ways: rolled up at the sleeves, barefoot or shirtless. The sailors each showed their own personality through their actions, despite the fact that many remained nameless. For instance, in this musical number, one sailor would be performing a flip while another did push-ups while still others jumped on each other’s shoulders. Everywhere the audience looked, there was something different to see.

The execution of the show seemed amateurish at many times throughout the show. Instead of using a curtain or crews to bring the set on and off the stage, the characters would change the setting while a scene was going on, which was distracting. This was especially true during “You’ve got to be Carefully Taught,” when Lieutenant Joseph Cable (Shane Donovan) described to Emile the reasons for hatred and prejudices in the world. This is one of the central themes in the musical. However, while this scene was unfolding, the sailors in the background were taking down the stage used in the previous scene and were even watching the conversations between the Lieutenant and Emile.

Another example of this amateurism took place during intermission, when the sailors came out onstage and started clapping with the entr’acte. This provided a feeling of being at a concert rather than a musical. Further, in the opening

scene of the second act when the sailors and the nurses put on the “Thanksgiving Follies” show, a member of the real production lighting crew was onstage handling a spotlight for the show within the show. This was noticeable especially because he was wearing regular jeans and a shirt, compared to the crisp white sailor uniforms worn in this scene. There was no attempt at hiding this production flaw.

The show itself was wonderfully written and composed. The score was intense where dramatics were due and charming when the mood was light. Richard Dunn III conducted the musicians adroitly, setting the mood for the musical and adding to the feeling of the show. The music helped to carry the show through the night.

Even though the love affair between Nellie and Emile lacked passion, the show succeeded due to the excitement generated by the show's other characters. It was a joy to watch the sailors, who had been stuck on an island for months, as they tried to flirt with the Navy nurses and locals on the neighboring island. In fact, the love displayed by the ensemble members superseded that of the leads and better represented the journey of love and distress that is “South Pacific.”

## **By Kimberly Davis**

### **THE FRIGID TIDES OF SOUTH PACIFIC**

As you shake and shiver from the frigid, cramped theater, the dreamy feeling of the ocean gives you hope that the play will take you away to the beautiful exotic South Pacific. As you struggle to forget your currently frozen state of your hands, legs and feet, you try to focus on the scenery of the palm trees and sandy white ocean shore. The sweet laughter of a little girl (Judae'a Brown) and a little boy (Cole Bullock) brings a smile to your face and you began thaw. The eye-catching introduction ends with all of your hopes freezing from the lack of warmth you receive from any sign of excitement.

“South Pacific” had all the potential to be a very lively play that would remain in your memory forever. The play was beautifully written; the set was top notch, and the actors and actresses could have really done a lot with it but failed to realize its potential. The director of the play completely overshadows the true substance of “South Pacific.” It seems as though instead of strong vocal points and clarity of vital background information truly shining, minor unnecessary details were made to be crystal clear.

On center stage you first see young military nurse Nellie Forbush (Katie Reid) and the handsome French Plantation owner Emile de Becque (Marcelo Guzzo) surrounded by an elaborate dining room with shiny wooden furniture and decorated with marvelous wine glasses and a giant window that gives the perfect view of the sea.

But that's about the only thing that is clear on stage. Nellie and Emile begin talking about the beauty of South Pacific and dig into their pasts. Nellie speaks of living in Little Rock, Arkansas, and Emile tells Nellie about France. It seems as though a chilling fog has rolled in blocking any sunshine. The unclear southern dialect of Nellie and the thick French accent of Emile certainly do not help. As we watch this all play out, the chill of inattention sets back in.

At this point of the play most of the audience begins to let their eyes droop and let the cold surround them. Suddenly we get an exciting wake up from the ebullient sailors and Bloody Mary (Cathy Foy-Mahi), an older, very sassy Tonkinese woman who is always trying to sell things to the sailors. She and Luther Billis (Christian Marriner), the leader of these rowdy, comic sailors, bring this play to life. Their constant humor, positive attitude, loud voices, clear points and their ability to draw the audience in more and more makes them stand out from all the rest.

Marriner and Foy-Mahi each have a very likeable personality that people are drawn to instantly. With their strong energy and wild ideas when things go wrong, it really fills the audience with hope for this play. The audience finds themselves sitting at the edge of their seats as soon as these two characters enter. The very heavy sexual innuendos from the sailors and Bloody Mary, however, make this play slightly unsuitable for younger audiences.

The singing either warms the audience's ears or leaves them chilly with indifference. It is also very evident that the state of interest varies from song to song. Guzzo's vocals are coated by a thick accent; this helps develop the character of Emile but also makes it almost impossible to fully understand the lyrics. Therefore, the struggle to keep heavy eyelids open begins once more.

At times Reid's vocals are very long and drawn out, but then she surprises you when she comes back with a lively peppy tone that makes the audience want to tap their toes and join the excitement. The most surprising vocals in the play however have to be Foy-Mahi's. Her comic character shows no trace of seriousness until she sings "Bali Ha'i" with unexpected elegance and not one flaw. Even her presence on stage is transformed, compared to her usual unsophisticated movements.

Nellie really comes to life when she sings one of the play's most well-known songs, "Wash that Man Right Outta my Hair," the only song that really is geared positively towards women. Reid starts off with casually saying, "I'm going to wash that man right out of my hair" to all the other military nurses. This evolves into a large musical number that has all of the nurses giggling and dancing along with her, topped off by Nellie actually washing her hair on stage.

This exciting scene ends when Emile catches Nellie singing this alone on stage after the girls have ran off. After another long drawn-out, unclear conversation, Nellie has a completely different outlook and sings "A Wonderful Guy," the polar opposite of the previous song. This could have been a very big turnaround for the play if Nellie would have kept her strong independence going for just a little while longer. But unfortunately the play goes back to its original boring state.

The romance between Nellie and Emile is not the only one beginning to bloom in the South Pacific. Bloody Mary's daughter, a beautiful islander named Liat (Hsin-Yu Liao), is introduced to U.S Marine Lieutenant Joseph Cable (Shawn Donovan). Their romance is far more interesting because an interracial relationship in the 1940s was taboo, making the audience lean forward in their seats wondering if their unwelcomed relationship will prevail or falter from the ignorant hate which is racism.

The scene switches back to Emile and Nellie as they begin to get closer and closer and they begin to sing one of the only interesting slow songs throughout the play, "Some Enchanted Evening." This song sends the very important message about never letting the person you truly love go because it could be impossible to find another like them.

The children from the first scene reappear and Nellie learns they are Emile's children from his late wife, a Polynesian woman. Nellie is very negatively astonished by this due to her very strict family background and doesn't want anything to do with Emile. One of Guzzo's most powerful moments is when he ends the act with a very strong performance of the ending of "Some Enchanted Evening." This is the only time in the play that Emile's emotions of anger and sorrow are effectively portrayed. In this song he actually projects his vocals clearly and so strong that the audience cannot help but to listen and understand.

The play's most lively scene has the audience tapping their feet when Reid gives a very different performance of the song "Honey Bun." Nellie dresses up as a sailor and prances around singing about the perfect girl that all the sailors want. This has the sailors whistling, clapping and cheering her on. Paired with her is Marriner, dressed up as a woman dancing alongside Nellie. This duo creates the most upbeat performance and Reid's vocal and comic performance awakens the audience from their long-term frozen state of boredom.

Because "South Pacific" fails to clearly point out the play's key points the audience gets lost in a frigid fog and only pays attention when a lively performance serves as a beam of thawing sunshine. But even then the sun cannot distract from the fog caused by deep confusion. The plot gets buried beneath costumes, effects and decorations. If the director would have emphasized the plot by clearly pointing out details this would have been a major improvement. Another major improvement would have been if the director magnified the actor's and actress's abilities.

The only way a viewer can truly resist the cold and lay back in the warm sun of this version of "South Pacific" is to gain a lot of background information about the show first. If you do not, I suggest either grabbing a warm blanket and prepare for the cold, the fog and boredom.

## **By Matthew Schlerf**

### **"SOUTH PACIFIC" JUST SOUTH OF A HIT**

As Baltimore theatergoers pack into the Hippodrome on an unusually cold October night, expectations are high for the opening of one of the greatest shows in musical history. The lights fade over a crowded, Tuesday-night audience as the scrim on stage illuminates text from James A. Michener's "Tales of the South Pacific," the book from which Oscar

Hammerstein and Joshua Logan based the musical. "I wish I could tell you about the South Pacific," Michener wrote, "The way it actually was. The endless ocean. The infinite specks of coral we called islands...The waiting. The timeless, repetitive waiting."

While the show that follows this opening certainly hints at the grandeur of its original, one cannot help but fall victim to the "timeless, repetitive waiting" for the spectacular performance so expected of a "South Pacific" production. Ultimately, the show falls short of such natural expectations for a number of key reasons. The director, though clearly eager to mimic the splendor of the Rodgers and Hammerstein hit, assembled a cast that, as a whole, could not do the original justice.

While some characters have sensational voices and others impeccable acting, few seem to hold both necessary traits. In addition, the three-hour runtime, which one could potentially excuse and endure in the excitement of Broadway, drags this Hippodrome production to near boredom, especially when certain songs, already mediocre the first time through, are reprised to the point of annoyance. Through all these faults and follies, the audience is forced to make do with the sparse remnants of brilliance still left of the musical masterpiece.

Set on a Navy base in the South Pacific sometime during World War II, the show begins at the estate of Emile de Becque (Marcelo Guzzo), an expatriate French plantation owner. After the ever-adorable jingle of "Dites-Moi" by native locals Ngana (Judae'a Brown) and Jerome (Cole Bullock), the children make way for the seductive battleground of Emile and U.S. Navy Ensign Nellie Forbush (Katie Reid). After deciphering the forced, Southern slur of Nellie and the garbled, French accent of Emile, the audience determines, despite a lack of plot exposition, that the two are apparently in love after a short amount of time.

Thankfully, Nellie sheds her heavy twang for a clearer singing tone, exuding a beautiful performance of "A Cockeyed Optimist." Yet despite the outstanding renditions of "Twin Soliloquies" and "Some Enchanted Evening" that follow, the sudden love connection between the two seems abrupt and loosely based. This notion is further accentuated by the fact that Emile goes from making flirtatious remarks about the climate ("It can get very hot here") to suddenly confessing a murder out of the blue, which he then tries to downplay in a light-hearted manner. Without a doubt the first scene comes as a whirlwind of forced vernacular, ambiguous emotions, surprises and love.

Now normally an hour-and-45-minute first act would bore the audience out of the theater. Thanks to the comic relief of certain characters like Bloody Mary (Cathy Foy-Mahi) and Luther Billis (Christian Marriner), however, the "timeless, repetitive waiting" for intermission is averted ...mostly. In truth, Bloody Mary, the frumpy, yet flirtatious souvenir-selling native, could pierce the doldrums of virtually any show with her hilarious pronunciation of the word "sexy."

Her flawless comic timing accentuated her sarcastic (and often raunchy) humor; when asked what the shrunken heads she sells are made of, she replies without hesitation, "made out of head!" Yet just when you think she's only around to invoke laughter and smiles, her seductively dreamy singing of "Bali Ha'i" invokes nothing but awe. The only other character with as much humor and precision as Bloody Mary is Billis, leader of the desperate Seabees and womanizer extraordinaire.

In dissecting a show like "South Pacific," one need only go as far as the leads. Nellie, for instance, storms the stage and steals the show throughout the first act, stirring excitement and emotions with the help of the other nurses in "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair" and "A Wonderful Guy." Yet as the second act wears on and the tension of the plot reaches all new levels, Nellie's performance and cockeyed optimism "is falling on its face."

At the prospect of hearing Emile's voice on the radio, Nellie portrays little emotion, letting the potential sympathy and worry of the scene fall short. In fact, the only thing worse in the second act than Nellie's lackluster acting and uninspiring presence on stage is Emile's woeful "This Nearly Was Mine" in which he belches faux-French, operatic sentiments in a manner eerily reminiscent of Kermit the Frog.

Indeed in terms of acting and singing the true lead performance of the night goes to Lt. Joseph Cable (Shane Donovan) whose mellifluous voice and commanding, yet delicate nature does justice to Rodgers and Hammerstein's classic role. The endearing intimacy between Lt. Cable and Liat (Hannah Isabel Bautista) on Bali Ha'i amidst the mesmerizing echoes of Bloody Mary's voice and the shimmering bamboo curtains of the set is without a doubt a scene to remember. Yet if the soft, "saxy" sensuality of this scene leaves the audience spell-bound, Cable's cringe-inducing crack at the height of his range on this beautiful serenade will break the spell.

Perhaps in judging the Hippodrome's production of "South Pacific" scene by scene, the show momentarily nears the dramatic splendor called for by its reputation. Yet taking into consideration the subpar acting, the incessant run-time and the monotony of mediocre reprises, the overall performance of "South Pacific" never quite becomes "some enchanted evening."

## By Nava Rastegar CLASSIC WALKS AN UNEASY LINE

"South Pacific" is a classic. We all know this, even if we don't know musicals. Part of the reason "South Pacific" endures is its theme of anti-racism, which was revolutionary when the show premiered in 1949. Of course, societies change, and what was shockingly liberal at the time is now no longer revolutionary, and at times glaringly backward. Theoretically, modern stories should have moved past simply stating that racism isn't a natural urge (in the song "You've Got To Be Carefully Taught") and that racial prejudice is just generally "bad."

We all know that "classics" often hide morals and stereotypes that would be, at the least, uncomfortable, and at the most, disgusting, by today's standards. Societies move forward, and as a work appears less progressive (because the progress has been made), the more conservative and problematic layers underneath are exposed. If the work's artistic force is great enough, it can survive its worn-out progressiveness, and the audience and the critics can push aside its problematic themes, because what it gives the world is worth more than what it hurts.

With plays, this can be especially delicate. Each production has to make its case separately, with wildly varying rates of success. It is difficult for the audience to emotionally invest in a "love story" between a privileged white marine (Lieutenant Cable, played by Shane Donovan) and a younger, nearly silent, Tonkinese girl with few other options (Liat, played by Hsin Yu-Liao). In a modern light it is such an obviously sexist narrative: a man falls in love with a beautiful woman he can project all of his desires onto. Not only has she been raised to submit to men and Westerners, she also literally cannot communicate with him. When she chooses Cable over an older man who hits her, we know it is not love; it is first and foremost survival.

While the simple existence of an interracial relationship was transgressive in the '40s, now Liat's inability to communicate her views makes the relationship uncomfortable. The almost total lack of non-white opinions in the show set in Asia is an obvious mistake that would, hopefully, never be accepted in a show written today. Whatever "South Pacific" may have done for acceptance of interracial relationships in the '40s, now it is simply reinforcing an idea of Asian women, and women in general, as most desirable when they are innocent yet sensual, silent and willing to do anything for the men around them.

In the case of the traveling production of "South Pacific," currently at the Hippodrome Theatre, the actors and designers cannot compete with the show's dated Orientalism and sexism. And for those that think the goal of feminism and "political correctness" is to ruin everything that was once good, let's talk about this production itself. There is solid talent on stage, and some mediocre talent, but none of the actors are painful.

Marcelo Guzzo, who plays Emile de Becque, the French plantation owner who falls in love with an American nurse, has an operatic voice that often makes him the most dynamic person on stage, even if the words of his songs are sometimes obscured by the heaviness of his French accent. His character's disbelief at the racism around him makes it easier for a modern audience to sympathize with, along with his true repentance for some of the genuine sins he committed in his youth.

Unfortunately, he does not have a romantic match in Katie Reid, who plays Nellie Forbush, the upbeat American nurse. Reid often seems as if she were acting in a vacuum--she knows where to walk and how to move but she has no emotional connection with the other actors. It's hard to sympathize with Nellie's when she's crying over Emile's interracial marriage, and Reid's disconnect from Guzzo doesn't make it any easier.

Emile's scenes with his children are some of the most touching in the show. Even when spoken in another language, that affection seems much more genuine than the supposedly unbreakable bond between Nellie and him. It's unbelievable that he continues to chase her after she rejects him because he had children with someone who wasn't white; their relationship seems much weaker than that.

When Kathy Foy-Mahi finally sings you are shocked at the strength and emotion that comes out of the rather one-dimensional character of Bloody Mary. “Bloody Mary” is the name the soldiers gave to the middle-aged mother of Liat. Mary sells trinkets to the sailors, and she is played as a woman motivated by money and nothing else, even when it comes to her daughter. But as Foy-Mahi sings of Bali Ha’i Island, the audience is convinced of the magic of the place, nowhere else is her strong voice as passionate. We almost don’t notice the shadow of the island being revealed in the background because her voice is so compelling. Both the audience and Foy-Mahi know that she is a much better actress than she can show in this character.

The Navy Seabees themselves are the show’s main strength; most of the show never comes close to the energy, humor and playfulness the group displays in the first group number, “There Is Nothin’ Like a Dame.” They tease and joke with each other in a way that doesn’t ever seem choreographed, though of course it is. Watching them interact is the most fun found in the show.

Christian Marriner, who plays Luther Billis, the charming Seabee who’s trying to get the most fun he can out of his time in the South Pacific, is honestly the best thing about this show. When “South Pacific” drags, you wait for him to come back on stage with his easy walk and loud, ridiculous charm. And it does drag—the show runs a little over three hours. Because Marriner is the realest person on stage, he makes his character easy to love. You can’t even be irritated at Billis’s sexism, because Marriner makes it clear that nothing Billis does is serious.

Lieutenant Cable, the Princeton educated newcomer to the island, pales next to him, but does a decent enough job with a man whose heroism is partially based on the audience having to believe that his love for Liat is pure instead of exploitative, a difficult task.

The set design is almost flawless, except for the strangely tacky and pasted-on background of the beach against the sky used all the way through the show. The decision to print part of James Michener’s short stories on the first curtain the audience sees is interesting in theory, but in practice the mood of the passage and the mood of the musical don’t gel, so it seems like a shout-out for the sake of a shout-out. The book’s intro is contemplative and dreamlike, clashing with the usually obvious and cheery tone of the show.

Pin ups painted on aluminum sheets are a nice touch to show the inventiveness and boredom of these marines. The use of bamboo shades throughout the production is fascinating, especially in Bali H’ai, where the shades move over one another to hazy, dreamlike effect. Ignoring the fact that it adds to the exoticized American view of the South Pacific, it is a beautiful effect.

The period costumes are generally fabulous, especially the awkward, handmade burlesque turkey costumes in “Honey Bun.” As for the blocking, it’s sometimes too obviously theatrical, though the reprise of “Honey Bun,” with a dozen soldiers lit so you only see their bodies, moving in unison, is incredibly chilling. It’s the only moment where the production manages to genuinely communicate the terror of war. When we see the soldiers stripped of their identities, we know how easily they can now be killed, and how little they matter in such a large war.

In the end, the question is not whether or not this is a bad show, it isn’t. The songs are fine, though they seem a bit musically obvious now; by the third reprise of “Some Enchanted Evening,” the audience’s applause was noticeably lacking. Some of the characters are incredibly likeable, Billis especially. The failure of the show is not a fault of this particular production.

The question is in the end--why? Why choose this for a revival over any other just-as-deserving show? Why try to excuse a show’s dated portrayals of Asian characters with talk of how advanced its morals were when it was written? If that’s the excuse, use “South Pacific” as a historical document, but not as a Broadway show in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Of course a show that actually focused on the native inhabitants of the South Pacific couldn’t have been produced in the 1940s, but this isn’t the ‘40s. It’s simply not original or moving enough to excuse its problems, and attempts to do so seem unhealthily rooted in nostalgia and willful ignorance. The world has changed, and the world of popular theater needs to leave behind safe fallback shows like “South Pacific” if it ever hopes to catch up.

**By Olivia D’Amato**  
**“SOUTH PACIFIC” PRINCIPALS SINK TO BOTTOM**

Imagine that you suddenly realize that one person in this world is without-a-doubt perfect for you. This person is the love of your life, your dream partner, seemingly flawless in every way. Now imagine that in that same instance, this person is ripped out from under you, leaving you alone, broken and distraught. She gives no true reason for her absence, and the look on her face reads disgust while in your presence.

How would you react? Would you meander across a room with a confused look on your face, or would you fall to the ground in agony, unable to move from the spot where you lay? If you chose the second option you would be perfectly human, and if you chose the first option I would call you Michael Guzzo playing the dapper Frenchman Emile de Becque in the touring production of "South Pacific."

"South Pacific," now playing at the Hippodrome, took my brain through a twist-and-turn roller coaster of highs and lows, all within a three-hour period. The loud and boisterous overture was invigorating and moving, as well as pleasing during the soft, romantic lulls. The initial projections of pink and orange palm trees over a navy man's description of the South Pacific provoked one's interest. Once Navy Ensign Nellie Forbush (Katie Reid) joined Emile on stage for a peppy song, though, the only thing provoking me was the ticking of the clock.

Throughout the entire show, Nellie and Emile's songs were not only boring, but confusing as well. As soon as they opened their mouths any sense of the character dropped away, and they became themselves, singing in front of a piano back in workshop. There was no fire behind their words, no passion in their phrases, and no movement in their bodies. While they sang, they simply stood there, carefully walking back and forth over center stage, afraid to drift too far in either direction. They mainly kept their hands at their sides, unless they raised them to their chests when straining for a hard note. While one was singing, the other did nothing to help their case. In the silence they too stood there, unresponsive, as if they were simply another wave in the painted backdrop of the ocean.

The real waves of excitement though, came when the two leads quietly strolled off stage, and the ensemble took the reins. The sailors took the stage in a whirl of excitement, literally running to and fro transforming the space. The stage went from a ritzy dining room to a navy campsite on the beach. The drabness of the previous scene disappeared when the quirky and eccentric local woman Bloody Mary (Cathy Foy-Mahi) and navy Seabee Luther Billis (Christian Marriner) began their dialogue. Billis' quick and cunning tongue threw out boyish insults that the quick-witted Mary immediately responded to.

Mary told the tale of Bali Ha'i; a nearby island full of native sexual practices and vice that she hoped would draw the sailors in. As Mary sang she was engaging and mysterious, pulling one in with every minor chord she hit. Her voice was beautiful and poignant, as she managed to keep some of her dialect intact, a skill Nellie completely lacked. Later on in the show Mary also showed her manipulative mother side, as she tried to get Lt. Joseph Cable (Shane Donovan) to fall in love with her daughter, Liat (Hsin-Yu Liao). Her performance was gripping, and the juxtaposition between her witty street merchant self and her pushy mother self was captivating.

Accompanying Mary on stage were the Seabees, who acted as the show's small ensemble. Any one of them was infinitely more interesting than Nellie and Emile combined. No matter where they were on stage, whether they were front and center or upstage behind a rock, every ensemble member was electrifying and animated with every step they took. The male ensemble number "Bloody Mary" was by far the best song in the show. It was fast-paced, comical and engaging as the Seabee's discussed their pent-up sexual frustration.

While the music was sung perfectly, it was obviously not the ensemble's main concern. They were more focused on remaining true to their characters and telling the story of this song, rather than turning every phrase into a perfect crescendo. The Seabees also perfectly nailed every small humorous gesture or line they were given. For example, during "Bloody Mary" their hip thrusts and small one-liners were jam-packed with sexual comedy and humor.

"South Pacific" is one of the most brilliantly written shows for a multitude of reasons. In a world of political-correctness, many shows are edited with a heavy hand, too afraid to blatantly stereotype a group of people or make an obscene comment. "South Pacific" displayed neither of these two problems. Not only was Mary's accent somewhat offensive, her ability to fall right into the hands of the Seabees' jokes was hilariously true. This show was also full of sexual innuendos, which served, as much needed comic relief from the dreary performances given by Nellie and Emile. Whether it was Billis or Mary, "South Pacific" was full of bad-mouthed characters. All and all, the writing of "South Pacific" saves any production from complete failure.

While some parts of the show left me feeling emotionally drained and helpless, much like the person getting dumped by the man or woman of their dreams, the overall effect of the show was much greater than the dullness of the two leads. While having to watch Reid and Guzzo perform ever again would surely be agony, there might be an exception if

it meant being able to watch other favorite performers. Foy-Maui's and Marriner's funny bones had me laughing the entire time. The Seabees kept me engaged and eager to see them reappear on stage before every scene. The writing, superbly done, was beyond what I expected. All and all, "South Pacific," the hilarious tale of a trying time in American history, managed to sweep me off my feet and whisk me away to the Pacific.

**By Shelby Roseman**

## **SOUTH PACIFIC: A MISSION FOR MEDIOCRITY**

The curtain rises, revealing a classic portrayal of a '40s wartime love story. Nellie (Katie Reid) and Emile (Marcelo Guzzo) are fawning over one another in entertaining, if unauthentic, dialects. They go through the motions of lovers, kissing and staring into one another's eyes, employing no real passion, but at least they know where to stand. Suddenly, the first song begins, and the two voices fill the room. They're pretty voices, obviously developed through years of strict vocal training, but they hold no real power. Like the show, this opening scene of "South Pacific" is a well-rehearsed and put-together piece of perfect mediocrity.

Key to the ineffectiveness of this show is the phoniness of the lead actors' supposed emotions. At times, it is difficult to spectate as a supposedly touching moment turns into an awkward hug and stiff dialogue. In the aforementioned opening scene of the show, for example, this lack of feeling is extremely evident in the actors' tones of voice. Without genuine displays of love, hatred and anger, it is impossible for a show to rise above the level of second-rate.

Set during World War Two, "South Pacific" focuses on the trials of two unusual couples on a military base. Scattered throughout these slightly clichéd love stories, themes of war, racism and morality can be found. Bursts of humor lighten the show's dark plot, adding a pleasurable dimension to the deeper meaning of the play. Whatever depth the play's script intended to reach, however, was made much shallower by the leads' lack of convincing emotion.

The cast of the show occasionally has shining moments. The show's Navy men, led by Luther Billis (Christian Marriner), nearly bring the audience to tears with the hilarity with their performance of "There is Nothin' Like a Dame," and one can't help but smile when Bloody Mary (Cathy Foy-Mahi), a spunky saleswoman, exclaims, "Stingy Bastard!" The cast even manages to supply some sentiment in a final scene that is surprisingly touching. Unfortunately, other than scattered laughs or isolated moments of poignancy, this specific show's characters fail to fully sway the viewer, much less to cast light on the original script's deep moral dilemmas.

It is a struggle for anyone in the audience to believe Nellie and Emile are actually in love, especially as they march amidst the stage awkwardly caressing one another. The fact that Emile's accent makes him difficult to understand adds to this disbelief. As the duo belts out "Some Enchanted Evening," meant to be an especially touching number, they act as though they are reciting the words to a grocery list. They fail to travel around the stage, or to express feelings through gestures, making their duets plain and monotonous.

Luckily, Liat (Hsin-Yu Liao), a talented supporting actress, makes her love story with Lt. Cable (Shane Donovan) seem genuine. Without this one convincing romance, the show would fall apart completely. Like Liat's story, most successful aspects of the show are carried by a strong supporting cast. The brotherhood portrayed between the men of the Navy shines brilliantly as they finish one-another's sentences and gruffly handle their fellow fighters.

Emile's connection with his adorable twin children demands the viewer's attention and recognition as well. Even as the leads fail to impress the audience, they are surrounded by a talented support system, popping in with an ingenious remark at just the right moment, such as Bloody Mary's unexpected demand, "You dance, sexy man!" Although these characters do not possess the lines to convey many of the play's central messages, the influence that they hold over the entertainment aspect of the production is unmistakable.

Also supporting the not-so-convincing leads is a remarkable set, with believable scenery that serves multiple purposes. Emile's abode, although constructed of cardboard, radiates the elegance of an antiquated mansion. Even more notable than its attractiveness, the set has amazing mobility, switching from location to location with minimal change time. At one moment, the stage contains the aforementioned house, and within 30 seconds it has changed to a beach with an equally convincing design. If all plays could make use of the same daring technical techniques as did this show, their pacing could be much improved.

Dancing through this noteworthy design on stage is the ensemble for the show. The group, though well-costumed and rehearsed, is disappointingly untalented. Although the male cast displays some complicated maneuvers, the female cast seems to lack any skill, portraying unoriginal choreography in an ungraceful manner. As these flamboyant ladies saunter about the stage during “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair,” their actions look clumsy. Although some numbers, such as the talent show, are meant to seem disorganized, this cast takes randomness too far, making select moments difficult to watch.

Through the poor choreography, false romances and disappointing leads, “South Pacific” still manages to amuse the audience, a feat not to be belittled. Moments of redemption sporadically appear throughout the show, emerging where they are most needed. It is true that the audience doesn’t leave the theater feeling any different than they did prior to the performance, but only the rare show truly changes people. Though no ground-breaker by any means, “South Pacific” is certainly not a bad show, and is rightfully classified as exceptionally ordinary.

## **By Sydnie Sparzak**

### **IM IN LOVE WITH A TERRIBLE PLAY**

With every revival of a musical or play come new changes that give the old show a little modern-day “spark,” but sometimes these “sparks” can be dangerous. From the beginning of “South Pacific,” now at the Hippodrome Theatre, you can see that the producers have made the show less than “enchanting.” The three directors failed to create any dance numbers to enhance the quality of the show, and the revival performers lowered the quality by not showing expressions or emotions in any part of the show.

As the classic melody of “Some Enchanting Evening” fills the room, the set to the terrace of Emile de Becque (Marcelo Guzzo) is revealed; an open layout with long white windows and a view of the ocean. All of a sudden, two children run out in old-school jumpers, singing a foreign song that is difficult to understand. Confused? So is everyone else in the room.

This is just the beginning of the show’s long list of problems. First on the list is not being able to understand what the characters are saying. Emile is French, but somehow Guzzo manages to have an accent that is not only not French, but also completely unrecognizable. He does have a deep, intoxicating voice, but it is very hard to hear anything when he sings or just talks. From his opening song, “Some Enchanted Evening,” to the ending reprise of it, not a word is understood. All you can do is sit and marvel at his deep voice while having a look of utter confusion on your face.

The main problem is the twisting and turning plot lines, some of which include: the forbidden love of Emile and Nellie, Cable and the Polynesian woman, and the military trying to capture a Japanese base with the help of Emile and Cable. You never seem to know which one is the main one because the scenes never stick to one plot line for long.

First you believe it is about Emile and Nellie (Katie Reid), since the opening scene is all them. Emile is a French plantation owner who came to the South Pacific because he killed a man. He meets Nellie, a nurse stationed in the nearby base. She has also run away from her home in the Kansas to see the world.

In the first scene you see them having lunch at Emile’s house, obviously a date. You can sense their awkwardness from the way they just walk around the stage and never get to close to one another. Then when Emile sings “Some Enchanted Evening” Nellie just walks away and seems that she can’t hear him. The scene ends on an even more awkward note when his Emile’s two kids run out and start to sing in French again.

The show makes a twist in the next scene when it introduces a new character, a Marine named Lt. Joseph Cable (Shane Donovan), who has been sent to the island on orders. He meets Luther Billis (Christian Marriner) and the Seabees, sailors who sell goods to the locals. Cable falls in love with the Polynesian girl Liat (Hsin-Yu Liao) on Bali Ha’i, while Emile and Nellie continue their own love story. Is the show about Emile and Nellie or Cable and Liat? You never truly understand which one. In one or two scenes the characters interact with one another, but they never seem to intertwine.

Another noticeable flaw is the lack of emotion on stage. From the very opening scene you see how the characters put no emotion into their distinct roles. When Emile tells Nellie that he killed a man she takes it calmly, as though it’s no

big deal; she says that even though she barely knows him, she trusts him. It is liked she is being hypnotized by his awful “French” accent.

The ensemble has some emotion, but it is so fake it is just as bad as the leads' emotions. During the song “There is Nothin’ like a Dame,” the Seabees run around the stage, singing, but with an expression of confusion. They start off in a circle in the beginning of the song. Once the chorus arrives, they start to run around in a wild panic, hoping off of things and running in circles for the rest of number. Their movements also do not match up with the lyrics of the song; which leads to even more confusion.

The recurring action is the characters walking around the stage, staring into the audience, but never looking at one another. This is most profoundly shown in “Bali Ha’i,” a song about a nearby island and how it calls you to “come away.” When Bloody Mary (Cathy Foy-Mahi) and Cable sing the song, the lights get extremely dim and they walk around the stage as though they are in a trance.

The most disappointing thing about the show is the dancing. It was like seeing a poorly done high school performance. “South Pacific” is not a show that has a thousand dance numbers, but when it does have a large dance numbers, it includes some of the most upbeat songs, which are usually accompanied by advanced choreographed dancing. This is not the case. In one of the most recognizable and fun songs of the show, “There is Nothin’ like a Dame,” the ensemble literally runs in circles. You see the people in the audience doing more movements than the people on stage. Not only is it sad to watch this pitiful attempt, but it is also confusing. You lose track of who is where and what is going on.

The same problem occurs during Nellie’s “I’m Gonna Wash that Man Right Outta My Hair” and the following song “Wonderful Guy.” The first song is about forgetting Emile and “washing him” out of her hair. The scene is set near the base’s one main shower that has a bucket of water on top, you can see the shadow of Bali Ha’i in the background. Nellie and the ensemble start singing and again prance around the stage. They have white towels that could have been used as a great prop; instead they just fling them around.

After the song Emile comes back to see Nellie and everyone else leaves. They talk for a while, and Nellie realizes she really loves him and does not want to “wash him out of her hair.” The second song of the scene comes into play, “Wonderful Guy.” “Wonderful Guy” is a powerful song in which Nellie expresses how she is finally in love. If only Reid knew how to portray love.

During the number Nellie sits and stares out into the audience for majority of the song. Then when she does moves, she just walks across the stage. There was no love, no passion. She was singing the song, very well at that, but just singing it. A person in love is giddy and excited. Reid is neither of these. At the end the entire female ensemble comes onto the stage to sing with her. The atmosphere does have a certain lift to it when they come out, but ultimately the lift is destroyed when you see their fake emotions and poor blocking.

The saving grace of the show was the music and humor. Richard Rodgers’ music never fails to brighten and save the show from its downward spiral into the depths of hopelessness and confusion. The familiar songs leave you singing in your seat and remind you why you actually came to see the show. Humor also plays a significant role in the show, thanks especially to Bloody Mary (Cathy Foy-Mahi). The sly and witty Polynesian woman, whose common phrase “Stingy Bastard!” makes the entire room shake with laughter.

“South Pacific,” one of the most recognizable musicals of all time is not a bad show; it is merely the victim of a bad revival. The director focused more on the score of the show than the characters’ stage presence. The cast fails to grasp the show’s intense passion and upbeat songs. The cast brings shame upon Rodger and Hammerstein. So don’t get your hopes up if you are looking for the same loveable, sing-a-long show “South Pacific” normally is, because you will be extremely let down.

**By Tori Brown**

## **SOUTH PACIFIC: A COLD DAY AT THE BEACH**

When leaving the theater after seeing a great show, one can feel exhilarated, excited or satisfied. One can feel like dancing in the streets while humming the show’s songs. However, when leaving the theater after a bad show, one can

feel disappointment, annoyance or even anger. One might lock oneself in a room and listen to a favorite song or watch a favorite DVD again and again.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's "South Pacific" was somewhere in the middle. People left the theater feeling no different than they had when they originally walked in: not terrible, yet not spectacular. For some of the older people in the audience, the show might have had them dancing to their car and singing due to the nostalgic flashbacks. But for the younger people, the show lacked that emotional impact.

For people who hadn't experienced the World War II mindset from "South Pacific," the show wasn't as gripping or captivating. Although the show didn't pierce the younger audience with the same emotions as it did for the older, the show turned out to be a worthy experience in the end. The storyline was very enjoyable, leaving the audience happy if not elated.

The show opened with bamboo-styled panels hung in front of a beach layout where the water seemed to have moving waves. Lighting designer Donald Holder carefully chose his color cues for the overture—mostly cools, showing the relaxation that the beach brings. As the overture ends, the bamboo panels rise to reveal the house of Emile de Becque (Marcello Guzzo). Though Guzzo was very talented with a deep bass, it was very difficult to understand much of what he said at all. His French accent seemed too thick and too wrong: the audience had to struggle to figure out what he was saying and find out what was going on from other actors. Some audience members go to the theater to put forth such effort, but others do not.

Nellie Forbush (Katie Reed) and Emile sang "Twin Soliloquies," seeming to fall in love shortly after meeting one another. There was only one problem with this: Guzzo and Reed shared no chemistry. It was evident that he felt for her, but more in a "Jud loving Laurie" kind of way. While Guzzo seemed smitten, Forbush's attempt at portraying her love for Emile came across as creeped-out or frightened.

As the show went on, Lt. Joseph Cable arrived on a secret mission to find Emile because the Marines believed he'd help with the war against the Japanese. Upon arrival, Bloody Mary (Cathy Foy-Mahi) and Luther Billis (Christian Marriner) tried to convince Cable to go to "Bali Ha'i" for very different reasons. Billis wanted to accompany Cable to see all of the women who were sent to the island to be "protected" from soldiers, while Bloody Mary wanted Cable to meet Liat (Hsin-Yu Liao) so they'd be married.

Though Cable ends up turning away Liat when it comes to the marriage, the chemistry in this relationship was much clearer, entrancing the audience with a Romeo-and-Juliet-esque forbidden relationship. Every time the couple was together on stage, the love was so strong that the audience felt it, and when he rejected her, the audience held their breath as they waited for him to change his mind.

"South Pacific" kept the entire audience's attention the entire show, whether the audience was riveted or confused. Nearing the end of the show, a rapid fire of events guided the audience in a whirlwind of confusion. It took the audience a few minutes to realize that Lt. Cable was dead. While one should feel the shock and sorrow after Lt. Cable's untimely death, the show failed to strike the emotions and left the audience emotionally detached. The actors focused on their character's traits and the interpersonal relationships more than the background and mindset of the characters in this specific time period, causing the show to be stereotypical.

Though the show was a bit mediocre, the tech elements were simply mind-boggling. The set was used for all scenes, whether Emile's house or the beach as the soldiers march off to war. The transitions were quick and smooth, not giving the audience any chance at all to become bored. Set designer Michael Yeargan kept all of these elements in mind, resulting in a good final product. Along with the set, lighting was also very well done, though at some points, the actors either couldn't find their light or the cues were off.

"South Pacific" had its faults, though it cannot be denied that it kept you laughing and the up-tempo songs will remain in your head until the end of time. The songs were definitely lively and held the show together. Modern-day women who have been through break-ups could definitely relate to "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair," while modern-day men could identify with "There is Nothin' Like a Dame." The songs definitely overcame all the production's problems.

# *La Cage aux Folles*

**By Harvey Fierstein and Jerry Herman  
At the Hippodrome Theatre through November 6**

**By Amanda Sztejn**

## **DRAG QUEEN OF THE STAGE**

“Don’t make the mistake of giving a drag queen a live mic!” said the effervescent, statuesque, blonde transvestite that acted as emcee while the audience found their way to their seats at the Hippodrome Theatre. The opposite could not be truer. The vivacious, gender-bending cast of “La Cage aux Folles” kept the audience laughing and entertained through two acts of singing, dancing and sight gags. The show’s greatest strength was its ultimate reliance on themes that affect all families: big changes, ungrateful children and insane in-laws.

This unconventional family’s patriarch was Georges (George Hamilton), who lived with his partner Albin (Christopher Sieber) in St. Tropez where they owned a transvestite nightclub named La Cage aux Folles. They valued, above all else, a close-knit family with open communication, spending the holidays together and enjoying a song and dance. Thus the show illustrated the ironic connection between the aforementioned family and the soon-to-be in-laws who were traditional, conservative politicians who valued the same ideals. This similarity between the families was the irony and driving force essential to the show’s success.

This award-winning musical included a star who made the work proud: Christopher Sieber in the role of Albin, the lead Cagelle of La Cage. He performed for both audiences: the fictitious La Cage nightclub crowd and the Hippodrome Theatre audience that got pelted with glitter bombs and dancers throughout the crowd.

Albin was a tall, portly man who instantaneously morphed into both men and women with ease. He had short hair that was often disguised by long, extravagant wigs that he would remove at the end of one of his routines—even if he was not in front of the right crowd. Sieber executed visual jokes, such as doing the splits on a ladder, with perfect comic timing and was able to belt out powerhouse ballads, most notably in “I Am What I Am” that closed Act One marvelously.

Sieber collaborated with actors fabulously, whether it was Albin’s life partner and La Cage club owner Georges or the dancing Cagelles. The only weakness of Sieber’s performance was his average dancing skills, which were easily compensated for by the versatile Cagelles. Sieber excelled when performing with his son Jean-Michel (Billy Harrigan Tighe) as both Jean Michel’s father’s transvestite partner and his surrogate mother.

The only significant problem for “La Cage aux Folles” was the imbalance of the first and second acts. The first act displayed strong singing, dancing and introduced many of the characters. This hour-long act, however, did not make many strides in moving the plot along. While the audience did not take issue with the lack of plot devices, this move on the writer’s part left most of the plot to occur in the second act, where the Albin learns to be a man with the help of Georges, the conservative Dindons are introduced as Jean-Michel’s prospective in-laws, and all of the conflicts get resolved.

The second act did a nice job of wrapping up all of the loose ends but felt a little rushed. Any animosity created by the hurried plot resolution was swept away by the show’s closer, a heartwarming finale between Georges and Albin that proved that, regardless of traditional standards, all partnerships are just trying to make things work out, something that the initially conservative Dindons failed to do. Georges and Albin kissed, the curtain fell, and the audience left with a sense of satisfaction and the tune of “We Are What We Are” stuck in their heads for weeks to come.

Choreographer Lynne Page deserved a tremendous amount of credit for the success of “La Cage.” Her dances allowed the Cagelles to move seamlessly from tap dancing to ballet to modern dance. Whether the Cagelles were hanging upside down from birdcages or performing burlesque standards writhing on the floor, the dancing was consistently entrancing.

The audience reacted incredibly positively to the many dance sequences and lovely ensemble singing of the Cagelles. The musical's opener, "We Are What We Are," instantly set the tone for the play with the Cagelles performing at the top of their game. This song illustrated that, regardless of the initial flaws that others may see, there is no use in pretending to be anything other than what one is.

Costume designer Matthew Wright pulled out all the stops: feathers, glitter, sparkles, the tallest heels imaginable and robotic nipple tassels (on Zaza, Albin's stage personality) kept the audience's attention. Standout costumes were the bird outfits on the towering Cagelles and Zaza's Marilyn Monroe ensemble. The entire transvestite transformation, executed by wig and makeup designer Richard Mawbey had the audience questioning which characters were women and which were men. There were at least a dozen sets, including the stage of La Cage aux Folles that transitioned from backstage to stage numerous times without a hitch.

The supporting cast of La Cage, including Jacob (Jeigh Madjus), Albin's butler/handmaiden and Jacqueline (Gay Marshall), the bubbly Chez Jacqueline owner, provided a wonderful backdrop for the main characters. Jacob provided many moments of comic relief, notably when Albin and Georges are trying to keep their identity a secret from Jean-Michel's future in-laws, the conservative Dindons. Jacqueline owned the famed St. Tropez restaurant Chez-Jacqueline where the Dindons, Albin, Georges and Jean-Michel realize their differences at the finale, "The Best of Times," a riveting, audience-inclusive song.

"La Cage aux Folles" is not for everyone. From the colossal blonde emcee that was an equal-opportunity offender to all of the spectators to the many transvestite characters that paraded on the stage in revealing costumes, this show narrowed its potential ticket-buyers. If somebody is looking for a fun, exciting and ultimately incredibly sweet musical, this travelling revival of "La Cage aux Folles" is the one to see. A lot of Broadway shows surround themes of family values but none do it as creatively as La Cage aux Folles. And remember: definitely give these drag queens a live mic.

**By Brian Novotny**

## **COME FOR A GLIMPSE; STAY FOREVER**

"La Cage aux Folles" has hit the Hippodrome hard. This farcical tale of drag queens and drama is sure to keep audiences rapt with equal parts comedy and seriousness, a combination that makes for an incredibly effective show. This is perhaps the show's--and the actors'--most impressive feat: that it can laugh at itself and its subject matter in one scene, and treat it with absolute solemnity in the next. This allows the audience to enjoy the characters in their comedy, and to sympathize with them in their drama.

With the opening number "We Are What We Are," the audience is introduced to the setting: the risqué nightclub La Cage aux Folles, a "rather gaudy, but... also rather grand" center for drag entertainment on the French Riviera. The song itself is a rather typical ensemble opening, with the lyrics sounding mostly like fluff. The great thing about this scene, however, is that it balances the overt with the subtle: a drag queen dancing act cannot help but be over-the-top, but it is counteracted by understated acting--for instance, one actor portrayed a dancer who was not at all into the act, giving the song and its characters a bit more depth. This complexity of character seems to pervade the song--one dancer is a singer, one is a dominatrix, and so on; this gives the impression of a realistic, varied cast.

After the opening number, the two leads are introduced: Georges (George Hamilton), who runs the club, as well as his lover and the club's headliner, Albin (Christopher Sieber), possibly the most fabulous drag queen/Tom-Cruise lookalike in show business. Also known as "Zaza," Albin is immediately established as a true diva in "A Little More Mascara." This is the first number to showcase the production's unique choreography: in this song, Albin applies makeup in time to the music, giving the song a very distinct rhythm.

Much of the show's strength is in its choreography. Most of the time it maintains great physical comedy: when one would expect Georges and Albin to perform a lift, the latter's weight becomes the butt of a joke; later, there is an entire song ("Masculinity") devoted to making jokes about how to be manly.

The production also makes a show of being romantic as well as comic. "Song on the Sand" is not only a memorable melody, but is also perfectly built up in the scene beforehand--the dramatic and romantic tension (caused by Georges' reluctance to tell Albin about the wedding) practically demands that Georges break into song when he does. All the while, the show refrains from taking itself too seriously; the pressure is always broken up by some witty comic relief from Albin or Georges (specifically, Albin expresses a wry suspicion of the "crash of the waves," this being the Mediterranean).

The supporting cast is also phenomenal: the aforementioned dancers are some of the most graceful and flexible to ever hit the Hippodrome; Albin's maid Jacob (Jeigh Madjus) steals the show whenever he is onstage--probably because he is the most convincing drag queen in the production, with a plethora of costumes (from a nightgown to an 18th-century butler's uniform); Georges' son Jean-Michel (Billy Harrigan Tighe) and his fiancée Anne (Allison Blair McDowell), as well as her cartoonish uptight family all fulfill their roles beautifully, and round out the cast very well.

The production's conflict comes from Jean-Michel trying to hide his parents' sexuality from Anne's parents, and how this deceit forces all the characters to question their relationships with each other and their own identities. Yet even with this heady subject matter, "La Cage aux Folles" still manages to be a farce--the whirlwind of attempts at deceit lead to laugh after laugh, ensuring the audience never feels too depressed.

The only major issue with this production lies, unfortunately, with Hamilton's acting--it is obvious that he is not used to stage acting, and has a tendency to deliver lines flatly or just forget them altogether. This is to be expected; it is obvious that Hamilton was brought on the cast for star power, not his acting ability.

Otherwise, "La Cage aux Folles" is a beautiful production with a great combination of comedy and drama; the show itself is best summed up in two sequential songs: the title song, "La Cage aux Folles," a bawdy, non-serious number that accentuates how foreign and enticing the club's dancers are; this is followed by "I Am What I Am," an angry, indignant reprise of the opening that stresses the importance of self-worth, poignant and relatable to anyone in the audience. It is this rapid-fire change in mood that allows the audience to feel like they know both sides of the characters; this and ultimately makes them more invested in the plot, making for an amazing performance.

**By Haley Jones**

## **GAUDY, GLITZY, GLAMOUR MEANS A GREAT TIME**

From the moment one walked through the doors into the Hippodrome Theatre in Baltimore, one entered the usually disparaged sub-culture of homosexuals and transvestites, a place where "heterosexual" is considered an insult and parents of sons are disappointed at the announcement of marriage to a woman. As different as this world was from mainstream culture, "La Cage aux Folles," the show that contained this world, deviated just as much from a traditional Broadway musical.

Instead of merely providing entertainment for a passive audience to watch--as with a movie or television--"La Cage aux Folles" allowed the audience to take part in the action by speaking directly to them and interacting with them throughout the show. Moreover, "La Cage aux Folles" dealt openly with subject matter that polite society prefers to ignore, showcasing the lifestyles and temperament of homosexuals as special and worthy of observation. The show's step away from mainstream musical theater due to its subject matter and way of presentation paralleled to the deviation of the actors from the customary culture of the time.

These parallel deviations made the show as successful as it was. The show's departure from the norm corresponded directly to the characters' different mindset compared to those not involved in their sub-culture. This parallel helped the audience members grasp the main theme of the show: accepting and being proud of oneself. The actors were used to transmit the message of the playwright, and the show's originality in having those actors interact with the audience helped convey the overall meaning.

"La Cage aux Folles" told the story of a Georges (George Hamilton) who owned a transvestite nightclub, also called La Cage aux Folles, in Saint-Tropez. His partner, Albin (Christopher Sieber), was the star performer under the stage name Zaza, and together the two had raised Georges' son, Jean-Michel (Billy Harrigan Tighe). One day, however, Jean-Michel announced that he planned to marry a woman, Anne (Allison Blair McDowell). Not only was Jean-Michel having a heterosexual relationship, but the woman whom he wished to marry was the daughter of M. Dindon (Bernard Burak Sheredy), a member of the Tradition, Family and Morality Party who wished to eradicate transvestite clubs in the area. However, Georges and Albin plan an outlandish scheme to try to deal with their situation.

Unconventionality struck theatergoers as they entered the theater. Welcomed by a six-foot-tall drag queen at the doors of the box office, audience members were then ushered into the theater through hot-pink feather boas in place of the customary red velvet ropes. While everyone was being seated, the same man began conversing and interacting with the audience. This was not only amusing but also helped the audience enter the mindset of the show they were about to see, a show that was not to be taken seriously, but supposed to be an engaging look into the ways of life of a

distinct sub-culture.

The actors played to the audience throughout the show, throwing beach balls and tissues to them, and getting everyone clapping to the songs. As Albin, Sieber left the house in stitches by never forgetting that there was an audience before him. He was powerful in all of his songs, especially in his stirring performance of “I Am What I Am.” Albin’s solo rendition of this song was sung as a personal and emotion-laden reaction to being told by Georges and Jean-Michael that he was not invited to the dinner to meet Jean-Michael’s fiancé and her parents.

Despite his early and fervent protests that it was his right and duty to attend, Albin was made clear to understand his presence was not welcome on account of his “different” nature. This song was a climactic stand of defiance by which Albin proclaimed his sense of self-worth. Sieber performed this solo as if it were an announcement to the world that he can only be himself because he can’t be someone else.

Georges’ reserved demeanor provided a stark contrast to Albin’s flamboyance. Hamilton, with his pink suits, tanned skin and white hair looked every part the owner of La Cage aux Folles. However, his acting, as the more mainstream of the two, was less than exciting. Hamilton lacked the vocal power needed in many of his songs, especially in “Look Over There,” when Georges was trying to describe how much Albin loves Jean-Michel. Hamilton took the role as the less colorful character too far to the point of being somewhat dull in his expressions and movement.

Les Cagelles, the six ensemble performers who performed at the transvestite nightclub, were accomplished performers, talented in ballet, tap and gymnastics, and showed their strength and flexibility in all of their dances, especially in “La Cage aux Folles,” the show’s title song. This number started out with Les Cagelles in a birdcage, literally translating the name “La Cage” (the cage). Throughout the rest of the song, Les Cagelles demonstrated their proficiency in dance and acrobatics, energetically executing multiple splits, kicks and flips. Les Cagelles served as background dancers to Albin, who made sure it was known that he was the star of the show by pushing his way to the front of the dancers.

If the actors were gaudy and flamboyant, the setting and costume were equally so. While in the nightclub, there was no attempt to make the backdrop look realistic; it looked as if it were made of cardboard and hung from string. This helped, not hindered, the show for it reinforced the scenario that this was a show within a show that was supposed to be fun and tawdry. In fact, in one scene, Albin was performing alone onstage, and a metal fan was wheeled onstage to blow his dress up and blow his hair back. This gimmick satirized a famous Marilyn Monroe scene and was made to look as tacky as possible.

The directors and actors did not try to disguise anything as realistic. They recognized that they were acting on a stage in front of an audience. The homosexual characters in the show were not ashamed of who they were, as evidenced by how they sang and danced. This rang true in the entrancing opening song, “We Are What We Are,” and held up when Albin and Georges were being lectured by M. Dindon about the “evils” of homosexuality. Georges and Albin did not try to defend themselves; they just sat and accepted that they were different even as M. Dindon berated them with a slew of insults.

Though dealing with a controversial topic, “La Cage aux Folles” was entertaining yet meaningful to the audience. The show’s deviation from mainstream musical theater in parallel with the characters’ nonconformity to popular culture made the show a success. In its interactions with the audience and style of presentation, the actors clearly expressed the main theme of the show. The set and gimmicks throughout the show reinforced the characters’ determination not to disguise anything, but be open with and proud of oneself. This message was imparted to the audience not by lectures and sermons but through hilarious lines, songs and dances. Just as Georges had hoped in the final scene, the audience definitely “left with more than a folded program and a torn ticket stub;” they left with a feeling of openness and self-satisfaction.

## **By Kimberly Davis**

### **5 SHIMMERING STARS FOR LA CAGE**

As you enter the Hippodrome, a stunning woman in a long pink dress, pink heels and flowing blonde hair crosses her legs and sits on stage laughing. You double check to make sure that you are still in a theater and not in the middle of a nightclub. Soon you realize that the stunning lady interacting with the audience is not a woman but a man dressed as a woman. You realize that this isn’t a nightclub but rather “La Cages aux Folles,” a play that you will not soon forget.

As the audience sits back in their seats after the opening, they now know they should expect the unexpected. They’re

not disappointed; soon drag queens dressed in flashy, provocative, shimmering colorful attire are throwing giant beach balls to the audience. The one aspect that makes “La Cage aux Folles” far more interesting than other plays is its ability to demand attention. If a play does not have enough eye-catching moments then the likelihood of being sidetracked is very high. But while watching “La Cages aux Folles” your mind is focused only on the excitement on stage.

“La Cage Aux Folles” never fails to surprise us even at the most serious times of the play. The word “boring” never comes to mind while watching this play’s constant, untraditional twists and turns. The cast’s strong acting and singing talents makes sure the audience does not ignore their presence for one second.

The very regal Georges (George Hamilton) enters to introduce “La Cage Aux Folles” as if he were the emcee of a real nightclub. Suddenly the stage is vibrantly lit and flooded with gorgeous ebullient drag queens. Dressed in vivacious, shimmering outfits they dance with perfect precision, making sure not a step is miscalculated. The feeling of no longer being in a play but rather a nightclub seeps back in.

Georges’s lover Albin, who performs as the very sassy drag queen Zaza, is not your traditional parent. Whether Christopher Sieber is playing the role of Albin or Zaza, his singing is always strong. The way Sieber is able to stop in the middle of a sentence and just move into song and makes it look so natural is a hard skill to master. We first see Sieber’s amazing talent unfold when he performs “A Little More Mascara.” In this song Albin says that when he is Zaza he feels as though he can take on the world. The way Sieber enters into this song is so smooth you believe that he is telling you an elegant tale rather than singing.

The strong family ties between Albin, Georges and their son Jean-Michel (Billy Harrigan Tighe) is one of the most heartwarming aspects of “La Cages aux Folles.” Problems first arise when Jean-Michel wants to bring home his new love Anne (Allison Blair McDowell). Anne comes from a very strict, conservative family whose lifestyle is the polar opposite of Georges and Albin’s.

Anne’s parents are extremely conservative and her father is against anything that is not “normal.” Being the caring mother that Albin is, he agrees to hide away for the night to help his dear son. The audience is shocked at this twist in the play knowing how flamboyant and how proud Albin is of himself. But still the audience can’t help but get a sense of motherly love streaming from the stage when Albin takes a stand to help his beloved son.

The strongest and liveliest but also most meaningful song is “We Are What We Are.” This song really makes the biggest impact on the audience for it expresses one of life’s most important lessons, “Be yourself.” The way the drag queens and Zaza perform this on stage takes the audience by surprise because they intertwine seriousness with humor without letting the message escape. The drag queens and Zaza begin performing this by dancing ebulliently and somewhat humorously but then end with a strong serious tone.

The heavy sexual innuendos in “La Cages aux Folles” make it far from a kid-friendly play. Parents might feel a little uncomfortable with their child viewing the provocative choreography, the near nudity exposed by the short skirts and dangerously plunging V-neck collars. Even though there are family values within the play, the inappropriate references overshadow it.

“La Cages aux Folles” delivers the strong message that you should always be yourself no matter what. Albin and his alter ego Zaza embody this message because no matter what type of person they are on the outside, they are loving parents on the inside. Many people don’t view drag queens and homosexuals as normal, but everyone in the show is able to remain confident about themselves and to forget all the hate. The differences in the character’s appearance, actions or identity do not make them forget the fact that their individuality is precious.

“La Cages aux Folles” is a play that almost anyone can enjoy. The creative twists and turns of the plot really make this show stand out from most while still never going off course. “La Cages aux Folles” creatively and perfectly intertwines comedy, romance and drama never leaving the audience with boredom but anticipating the next surprise. The audience most certainly feels taken away from their daily lives and swept away to an extremely different kind of life. If you are in the mood for a play that always has an exciting new twist and turn that keeps you on your feet, “La Cage aux Folles” is definitely the play for you.

## By Matthew Schlerf

# QUEENS STEAL THE SHOW AT “LA CAGE AUX FOLLES”

The stage is dim and the orchestra silent. The audience, caught in the suspense of the moment, dares not blink or move. A spotlight floods center stage and a man, who is a woman, who is a queen, steps into the light. Albin (Christopher Sieber) whispers into the nightclub air, not as Zaza the performer, but as himself: “I am what I am.” Hearing the words aloud, Albin gains confidence and command of the stage, deepening his voice into a soulful belt. The audience takes in every word, as the theater fills with the power of a heart wounded by the betrayal of a mother and a lover.

The queens rock the Hippodrome Theatre this fall with a spectacular rendition of Harvey Fierstein’s musical masterpiece “La Cage aux Folles.” Despite a relatively small cast of 20, the show excels in all aspects of a great musical, from its phenomenal acting and singing to its humorous and dramatic quality. Yet giving credit where credit is due, the “Cagelles,” led by Zaza, carry the show from scene to scene with their energy and skill and bring out the best in all the other actors. And Sieber’s rendition of “I Am What I Am” is the epitome of this vitality.

Albin, a nightclub drag queen, has just learned from his partner Georges (George Hamilton) that their son, Jean-Michel (Billy Harrigan Tighe), does not want Albin at the dinner with his fiancée’s ultra-conservative parents. Though Albin has acted as a mother to Jean-Michel since his biological mother left him at a young age, he is afraid that Albin’s homosexuality will alarm Anne’s parents. Hurt that his nature could cause such shame and embarrassment, Albin vents his emotional distress onstage through a moving solo.

As his vocal and psychological confidence grows, Albin embraces his identity, accepting himself for the way he was born. At the height of this powerful and vulnerable moment for Albin, Georges appears upstage and watches quietly as his lover sings with strength and pride under the spotlight. As the number ends, he walks downstage and begins clapping with the ecstatic audience. Albin pauses solemnly at the sight of Georges, and with dignity throws his wig in his face, and marches offstage. The lights fade out and the curtains close—end scene.

The majority of the story transpires in Georges’s drag nightclub on the French Riviera. Georges, who lives above the club with his partner and lead performer Albin, is surprised by the unexpected news that his son Jean-Michel is engaged. While at first worried about his son growing up so fast, Georges eventually approves of the engagement after Jean-Michel proves that he is truly in love with his fiancée Anne (Allison Blair McDowell) in “With Anne on My Arm.”

But Anne’s father is M. Dindon (Todd Thurston), a conservative politician who has been shutting down local drag clubs to preserve family morals, and to make matters worse Jean-Michel has invited him over to dinner. Jean-Michel wants to hide his parents’ homosexuality from Anne’s parents, so he insists that the apartment be redecorated in more traditional manner and that his birth mother, not Albin, be present at the dinner.

This of course results in a frenzy of emotions and conflicts (“Song on the Sand” and “I Am What I Am”) until Albin ultimately decides that he will show up to the dinner not as Jean-Michel’s flamboyant mother, but as straight Uncle Al (“Masculinity”). Yet when Jean-Michel’s mother fails to arrive at the dinner, Albin comes out to Anne’s parents in full drag, introducing herself as Georges’s wife. A sequence of hilarious scenes and numbers at the apartment follow, including “Look Over There” and “Cocktail Counterpoint,” until the two families go out to “Chez Jacqueline” for dinner.

With so small a cast and such a wonderful ensemble, the weak links in the show are glaringly obvious. Georges, owner of the drag nightclub “La Cage aux Folles,” is a disappointment from the very first scene. As master of ceremonies at such a risqué establishment, Georges should display at least some vigor and excitement in his welcome to the club—especially since this is the stage debut of Hollywood celebrity George Hamilton. However, Georges comes across as flat and emotionless, flaws that can be readily attributed to Hamilton’s age and lack of off-camera experience. All things considered, the throwing of Albin’s wig in Georges’s face before intermission fulfilled the secret wish of most of the audience after his dreadful performance in the first act.

Fortunately, Georges’s relationship with star performer Albin covers his subpar acting (and incessant stuttering); the power of Sieber’s stage presence makes up for nearly every mistake and inconsistency in the show. His strength as a performer also disguises the dearth of emotion and credibility on Hamilton’s side of their relationship.

While no one would ever believe Georges to be a homosexual, the contrast between his stoic demeanor and Albin’s flamboyant passion makes them a hilarious couple. Their romantic juxtaposition manifests itself throughout “A Little More Mascara,” with Albin floating around stage and Georges shuffling behind. The moment when Albin’s dramatic frenzy lands him stuck on the armrest of the couch and Georges is left helpless trying to hoist his lover down is perhaps

the funniest scene in the show.

Sieber's brilliance as a performer is rivaled by his fellow queens at "La Cage." As a collective act, the "Cagelles" are hilarious and entertaining, yet it is their individual personalities that make them such a hit. To see six grown men jump into synchronized splits on stage is a quite an incredible feat, but then to watch as the drag queens dissolve into shrieks and giggles at each other's spins and frolics makes them all the more enjoyable to watch.

A scene with the "Cagelles" is never just a generic song-and-dance routine from a musical ensemble; it's a show within a show. The Hippodrome stage has been transformed into the nightclub setting of "La Cage aux Folles," complete with audience tables, side-wing orchestra, and a frantic stage manager, Francis (Dale Hensley). The queens fight with each other for the spotlight and squeal with excitement when they are having fun because they are literally performers within the performance. The show thus becomes lively and comical whenever the "Cagelles" appear on stage, whether they're throwing beach balls in the audience, dancing together inside a birdcage, or massaging their feet and bickering backstage.

With such a powerhouse of drag queen actors and the indomitable force of Albin as a lead, "La Cage aux Folles" is a show not to be missed. Leading the queens in their theatrical magnitude, Sieber is not only inspiring to the audience, but to his fellow actors as well. While the gender of some actors is definitely an "illusion," the comic grandeur of "La Cage aux Folles" is an indisputable fact.

## By Nava Rastegar A BEATING HEART UNDER THE SEQUINS

Isn't it wonderful when a feel good musical, the most easily written-off of genres, actually makes you feel good? The production of "La Cage aux Folles," currently at the Hippodrome Theatre, is such a musical. This is a show built on glitter and, despite itself, "family values," and it's that unlikely combination of the wicked and the domestic that makes the show such a triumph.

When "La Cage" was first produced it was revolutionary in how conventional it was. Regardless of how effeminate Albin was or derisive his remarks toward heterosexual society were, he was dealing with the universal, assumed heterosexual, problem of parents watching their child detach from them. Now the "nuclear gay family" is almost a convention in itself: see "Modern Family" or "The Kids Are All Right." So this "La Cage" is aware that it can't pretend to be as shocking as it once was, but it does manage to be fun, and a little bit heartbreaking.

Let's start with the fun: the drag queens at La Cage, the drag club on the French Riviera around which the show centers, are a marvel. Long, long legs, incredible dance moves, and costumes that hover between terrible and gorgeous all combine to make these men the perfect chorus. Their crowning moment comes not in a song but in the slightly eerie and beautiful title dance that they perform in the set's low-lit cage. They snap in and out of the bars in perfect unison, and then seamlessly move to languorous, astonishing stretches. When one of the "birds" pulls a leg up to his head, you hear the audience gasp.

The costumes toe the fine line between trashy and fabulous, such as the "flamenco" outfits of long black skirts and red-and-black silk corsets, topped with bizarre rainbow wigs. The sets and backgrounds toe the same line. Albin's room is decorated to a Joseph Cornell level of poetic collection; one elegant and frequently used background is simply light shining out of pinpricked stars. On the other hand, we also see outlandish golden palm trees carved into the pink stucco that frames the stage. The show never lets the serious elements override the fun, but the design also reminds you that those elements exist, and that there is something to be taken seriously here.

Despite some seriously ineffective acting by certain members of the central cast, "La Cage" manages to be more than a piece of fluff. Most of the responsibility for this success falls to Christopher Sieber, playing Albin, also known as Zaza, the aging lead act at La Cage. Sieber is effective because, along with his sense of comedy and his strong voice, he manages to live in every single moment on stage. He almost never stops moving. He never drops his attention—he seems constantly engaged in everything that is happening—and he himself is so engaging that it's almost hard to sympathize with anyone else in the show. When Jean-Michel, George's biological son, shows up, Albin is more excited and loving than the boy's "real" father.

When Jean-Michel (the solid if sometimes dull Billy Harrigan Tighe) returns and tries to hide Albin for the sake of pleasing his close-minded in-laws-to-be, you want to write Jean-Michel off then and there. When Albin's partner

Georges (George Hamilton) tries to do the same, you cannot possibly understand how a constantly charming and dynamic man like Albin could settle for someone like that.

This problem isn't helped by the fact that Hamilton himself is an amazingly flat actor. At first, it can be excused as his character's career as a showman bleeding over into his everyday interactions, but as the show continues it becomes clear that Hamilton cannot turn off the false charm of La Cage's announcer. In "Song on The Sand," a number whose cliché lyrics can only work with genuine emotion, Georges still seems like he's performing, not even for Albin, but for the audience.

Every one of Sieber's actions feels more real than Hamilton's; even when Georges is trying to teach Albin to be more masculine ("Masculinity"), Sieber's supposedly weak growl is stronger than any of Hamilton's actions. Thankfully, Sieber manages to act for both of them; his talent is such that he almost makes you believe that we are watching a whole love story, rather than the one-sided affection on Albin's part that the audience actually witnesses.

Alison Blair McDowell, who plays Anne, the love of Jean-Michel's life, similarly radiates affection, though thankfully her partner manages to bring some emotion as well. The joke of this production is that most of the time, Jean-Michel seems much more uptight than Anne, despite her conservative family and his highly non-traditional one. The audience first sees her in "With Anne on my Arm," where she is literally brought to life by Jean-Michel's imagination. Though she doesn't even speak in this scene, her easy, lovely dancing and the constant delicate touches she and Jean-Michel exchange convince the audience of their affection.

Her father Monsieur Dindon, leader of the "Tradition, Family and Morality" party, is played by Bernard Burak Sheredy, who, if not memorable, at least does not play Dindon as an over-the-top villain; instead he is just stodgy. Her mother, played by Cathy Newman, is similarly unmemorable, but this is probably a problem of the one-dimensional roles themselves rather than the casting.

However, Jeigh Madjus, who plays Jacob the butler and aspiring drag star, does manage to make this side role consistently fascinating. Madjus, much like his character, seems like he's constantly trying to upstage all the other actors with wit, charm and any other means available as he leaps across the stage. Sometimes he succeeds.

"La Cage aux Folles" is in no way trying to be revolutionary. Albin and Georges' relationship fits into a series of easy-to-accept, desexualized gay relationships. They were meant to be "conventional" and by now much of the shock tied into that has worn off. But you felt for Albin in 1983 when he was rejected for his mannerisms and when he was tossed aside in favor of "fitting in," and you still feel for him today. This production is good, it is a solid show, and occasionally it is brought to the level of incredible. It is artifice and glamour with a heart and soul, and there is nothing more appealing.

## **By Olivia D'Amato**

### **SEQUINS, STILLETOS AND SUCCESS**

The curtain rises as pink and purple lights pour onto a back curtain containing faded palm trees. The overture begins and suddenly, a well known figure appears, tanned skin and all. George Hamilton suavely enters the stage and introduces himself as Georges, the grand marshal of La Cage aux Folles. This drag club in the middle of Saint Tropez is as provocative as the drag queens who work there. Harvey Fierstein and Jerry Herman's "La Cage aux Folles," now at the Hippodrome Theatre, proves a comic and heartwarming musical. While the costumes are magnificent, the music thrilling and the characters hilarious, there is one aspect of this show that stands out from all the rest.

In today's era of musical theater, it is seemingly impossible to find the proverbial "whole package." Too often is singing compromised for acting or vice versa. Countless leading men and women get by on one aspect of talent, while virtually none excel in all. This reality makes Christopher Sieber one amazing anomaly.

As soon as Albin (Sieber) takes the stage the audience is in for the night of their lives. Due to his grandiose demeanor and aggrandized reactions, Sieber is engaging as soon as he speaks his first word. His facial expressions are truthful and on point, showing his understanding of the character. Every reaction is real, as if it has not been performed over 20 times within the past few months. His talent soon carries into his singing voice during the number "A Little More Mascara." It is actually somewhat jaw-dropping to hear a male singer with such a distinctive and empowering voice juxtaposed with make-up and a girdle.

Needless to say, within the first 15 minutes of "La Cage Aux Folles," the Hippodrome Theatre is completely and utterly

transformed into a drag paradise in the middle of St. Tropez. Also present in this alternate, glittering universe, is the ever-hilarious Jacob (Jeigh Madjus) who serves as Albin's maid, butler and personal assistant extraordinaire. Wearing a belly shirt and ridiculously flamboyant tutu, Madjus commits to his character 110 percent the La Cage royalty. As quick as Jacob's sharp tongue was the change into a more dynamic plot development.

The entrance of Jean-Michel (Billy Harrigan Tighe) allows the audience to glimpse into the past when Albin and Georges parented a son together. Jean-Michel brings good and bad news, explaining he is to wed, but that he does not want Albin to meet his fiancée's parents. When Jean-Michel learns that the girl he is marrying has a father who is against gays, he panics to straighten up his "life." Tighe does a fine job portraying Jean-Michel; his true strength is ultimately his voice. It is sweet and masculine and endearing all at once as he sings the melodious "With Ann on my Arm." Tighe is equally impressive in a cast full of standouts, but once again, Sieber takes the cake in the finale of Act one.

"I Am What I Am" is quite possibly the most chilling performances ever given on the Hippodrome stage. It starts off slow and retrospectively as Albin recalls all he has done for Jean-Michel. It then builds, and by the time the third verse comes around, all resistance is over. Between the vibrant vibrato and passionate performance Sieber captivates the entire audience with his voice as well as his portrayal. His passion is evident in every word and although the blocking is minimal, every movement he makes has a purpose.

The ensemble of "La Cage aux Folles" (both the club and musical) is, for lack of a better word, perfect. From over-the-top and cheeky to sarcastically disinterested, each Cagelle has his own individual personality. During the opening number, "We Are What We Are," they truly give their all to a performance quite unlike any other. The energy they perform with is unbelievable as they kick their legs high and shake their hips to the music. Their voices are also all distinctive and loud, yet they complement each other beautifully.

While the cast of "La Cage aux Folles" makes the production what it is, a lot of the credit rightly goes to the writing. The overall book is hysterically provocative, producing one-liners such as Albin's line to Jean-Michel, "Judas...traitor...heterosexual!" It would be very easy for a show like this to go overboard with sexual inappropriateness and rowdiness, but it stays tastefully entertaining. The writers really capture each character and find ways to make the dialogue pack more than just witty banter. Through the use of subtext, each cleverly written line hints at the speaker's inner thoughts.

As the plot comes to an end and the finale begins to start, it is hard not to become slightly upset that the magic ride that is "La Cage Aux Folles" is over. The characters grow so much over the course of three hours we feel we are right there with them, and it is hard to let them go. Like every show, however, the curtain closes and the dim fluorescence of the Hippodrome lights is restored. Sieber's brilliant performance however, will never fade from my mind.

**By Shelby Roseman**

## **LA CAGE AUX FOLLES BRINGS ON THE GLITZ**

How many men would be willing and able to appear onstage in front of hundreds while strutting in tight satin leotards? It is hard enough for a producer to locate just one man talented and confident enough for such a role, but the producers of "La Cage aux Folles," now at the Hippodrome Theatre, fill the show with such attention-grabbing actors, each able to remain confident while appearing ridiculous.

The performers in this touring production show no signs of worrying about others' opinions, mirroring the script's bold characters. Because the show itself is comprised of daring characters, the flashy attitudes of the actors are necessary to make the show believable and effective. Neither the characters nor actors mind performing a striptease in front of large crowds, wearing makeup or expressing themselves. This script is witty and daring, touching on topics that many people shy away from, and it takes a self-confident actor to represent such self-confident characters.

As the brilliant drag queens, adorned in feathers and the makeup of pageant girls, act their way through "We Are What we Are," the show's opening number, their excitement radiates throughout the crowd. By correctly setting the scene, the performers engross the audience in the show, making them tap their feet along to the beats and develop compassion towards the multi-faceted characters. Whistlers and beach balls coming from the stage into the audience make the viewers feel as though they are truly in a raunchy nightclub, and allow them to become emotionally attached to the play's central characters.

"La Cage aux Folles" tells the story of two homosexual men, Georges and Albin, who own a successful French nightclub, also called La Cage aux Folles. One day Georges' son, Jean-Michel, comes home to visit, bringing news of an

engagement to Anne. Jean-Michel wants to bring Anne's family home, but her parents are strict advocates for the traditional morals and values that George and Albin obviously lack. Jean-Michel wants his father and Albin to pretend to be heterosexual. The result is an unforgettable comedy unlike any other play of its time.

The boldest member of this confident cast is Christopher Sieber as Albin. This incredible actor wows the audience with his humorous sour faces and wide hand motions. The crowd erupts into laughter as Sieber exclaims, "Oh, Georges, he's getting married! Where, oh, where did we go wrong?" with a curious expression that mixes despair with the humorous disposition of the character. This versatile actor supplies much of the play's vigor, and stays true to the theme of the script by exuding the confidence of one who loves himself the way he is.

Albin's clean-cut partner, Georges, is played by silver-screen star George Hamilton. Hamilton's acting style is reserved, and his singing often falls flat. He does a sufficient job portraying the sensitive father-son relationship between himself and Jean-Michel, but his role basically exists to provide contrast to the flamboyant attitudes of the surrounding cast. When the show opens with Hamilton announcing the performance, quickly followed by Les Cagelles, the juxtaposition makes the shimmering dancers even more incredible.

Even without George as a contrast, the overall spectacle of Les Cagelles would still be a high point of the show. Every one of Les Cagelles is extremely well trained and flexible, but what truly makes the dancers stand out is the fact that each retains a distinctive personality. Hanna (Mark Roland), for example, seductively smacks his thick leather whip, while another Cagelle is always a step behind his peers and appears amusingly defiant.

The remaining supporting cast members each add their own flavor to this melting pot of a show. While Anne (Allison Blair McDowell) and Jean-Michel (Billy Harrigan Tighe) are verbally uninteresting, their dancing in "With Anne on My Arm" is lovely and graceful. Jacob (Jeigh Madjus), Albin's spunky maid/butler, makes up for the couple's lack of verbal enthusiasm with his sassy remarks. There is no more perfect way to deliver the line, "just a little something to serve your every need" than the hip-accented and pouty manner in which Madjus declares it, and this pattern continues throughout his invigorating performance.

The lighting and music of this show add to its believability, building upon its interactive nature to make the audience think they are at a club. The songs contain pizzazz when the situation requires as much, such as during "Les Cage aux Folles," and solemn moods when this is more appropriate, such as during "Look Over There." This adaptable attitude helps to showcase the actors' abilities.

Through glitter, glamour and glitz, the show's message to remain true to oneself shines brightly. Watching grown men act so freely as feminine characters makes any inhibitions held by the audience members seem senseless. At the end of the night, this spectacle leaves the audience feeling as though "We are what we are," and that is just who we need to be.

**By Sydnie Sparzak**

## **PRETTY IN PINK? MORE LIKE PERFECT IN PINK**

"La Cage aux Folles" is not just a show about drag queens. It is a show that teaches you to be proud of who you are, to always love yourself, to love those around you, and to be thankful for those who love you. It is a show that has morals.

"La Cage aux Folles" seems like a show just about drag queens; so you become a little hesitant. On the way to the Hippodrome Theatre you see a cheap billboard with George Hamilton as the emcee for a drag show. You walk into the Hippodrome only to be greeted by a tall drag queen herself (Lily White Ass), in the brightest pink dress. She sits on the stage, and talks to the audience for a good 10 minutes, making jokes and easing the mood in the room. It's still a drag queen show, but your resistance melts. You become calm, even excited. The orchestra plays the prelude, while the silhouettes of the Les Cagelles dancers appear. Right there, you know it's not going to be a good show, but a perfect one.

For a musical to be perfect it must have four elements: excellent dancing, strong voices from all, leads and chorus staying in character, and energy that keeps the audience wanting more after the show is over. "La Cage aux Folles" exemplifies all of these and more.

The Les Cagelles, the dancers at La Cage, are drag queens with diverse but distinctive personalities—and with the ability to kick their legs higher than themselves. Not one performer is weaker than the other; they are all equally

strong singers. Albin (Christopher Sieber) is the prime example of staying in character. Not once could you pick out a moment and say to yourself “That was totally NOT gay.” His character is a challenge; luckily Sieber brought his A-game.

The show opens and closes with dancing. In the La Cage aux Folles nightclub, one could find women dressed up in risqué clothing, dancing their hearts out. But the catch is, they are not women. They are men, drag queens to be exact, dancing in high heels. Seems quite absurd, and kind of impossible? Well it is absurd, but not impossible. The Les Cagelles are always graceful when they dance. You can see the dedication and hard work they put into making the dancing perfect. They are the main entertainment of the show and give the crowd the most energy. They are what they are.

Vocal harmony is found, yet again, in the Les Cagelles. There are six men, all of different vocal types, singing together. In the opening number, “We Are What We Are,” their harmony is displayed most profoundly. The song explains how the dancers are “who they are.” They do not care what other people say or think about them, because they are themselves. They are in tune and don’t seem winded, despite the fact they are dancing their drag queen hearts out. The leads also have wonderful voices. George and Albin’s song, “With You on My Arm,” is a sweet and heartfelt duet that showcases Sieber’s and Hamilton’s vocal ability.

Right from the moment Sieber appears in Albin’s and George’s apartment in a white corset, you believe that this man is a homosexual. The way he talks, walks and acts all contribute to this. He talks in a semi-high pitched voice, walks as elegant and graceful as a swan queen, and acts like a flamboyant gay man. He is the spitting image of a drag queen, and stays this way throughout the entire show.

Every time Sieber puts on a new outfit, it transforms him into a new rendition of his die-hard character. He embraces that character and makes it his own. This is seen when he transforms into Jean-Michel’s (Billy Harrigan McDowell) mother. Sieber’s most challenging and chilling number is Act One’s closing song, “I Am What I Am,” which articulates what the musical is all about; not only being who you are but also being proud of who you are. Albin may be a drag queen, but he is also a person who knows who he is. He turns that to his advantage; showing that it’s OK to be yourself as long as you are true to yourself.

“La Cage aux Folles” leaves you laughing, crying and, most importantly, wanting more. This is what makes a show perfect: when the curtain closes and you don’t want to leave your seat, when you start singing the songs outside because they are stuck in your head, when you feel uplifted and in just a good mood. “La Cage aux Folles” makes you feel like it’s OK to be whoever you are as long as you stay true to who you are. Not many shows can give that impression to the crowd. When a show, just one show, can leave you like that, you know it has been marked down as unforgettable, as perfect.

## **By Tori Brown**

### **A NOTABLE EVENING AT “LA CAGE”**

While flooding into the Hippodrome Theatre to find their seats, the audience’s eyes are immediately drawn to the fluorescent pink drape, followed by the shuffling sounds of the musicians preparing in the lofts. A tall man in a blonde wig and pink gown makes his way center stage to keep the audience engaged as they wait for the delayed start of the show. This was typical of the entire show, for the cast of “La Cage aux Folles” kept finding different ways to keep the audience entertained, whether they were throwing large beach balls into the audience, making dramatic changes from man to woman or throwing themselves completely into their songs.

Whenever the show broke the fourth wall, the audience was given new, intimate ways to connect with the characters on stage. If the show hadn’t involved the audience as much, the audience wouldn’t have had such a strong connection to the show, and maybe would have gotten lost in the plot, which was a bit slow in the developing. The audience at “La Cage,” the French nightclub the show was named after, blended in with the audience at the Hippodrome almost instantly. The “performance” made the audience feel as though they were actually there at the nightclub. All eyes in both audiences were drawn to the dancers, making it seem as though both audiences were equally entranced by the shows.

Much to the blonde's dismay, the overture sounded, almost instantaneously stealing the attention of the audience with the smooth, flowing music, accompanied by the cool blue lighting, clashing with the pink curtain. The lights slowly changed to a warmer red with the shift to a more staccato accent, as Georges (George Hamilton) entered to introduce the opening number in the drag club known as "La Cage aux Folles." All of the male dancers at the club, or "Les Cagelles," each with a remarkably different personality, danced their way onto the stage energetically leading up to the entrance of Zaza, also known as Albin (Christopher Sieber).

The plot intensified as Jean-Michel (Billy Harrigan Tighe) returned home with the news of his engagement, singing "With Anne on My Arm." Albin and Georges were both startled, not by the engagement, but by the fact that Anne (Allison Blair McDowell) was a woman. Even more to their dismay, Anne was the daughter of Monsieur Dindon, the head of the Tradition, Family and Morality Party, which was set on closing the local drag clubs. The love between Anne and Jean-Michel was clear, though it seemed more like a playful fling than a long-term romance.

Quickly following the news of the engagement, Jean-Michel informs Georges that Monsieur Dindon will be spending a night in their home to become better acquainted with his "family." In hopes of approval from Anne's parents, Jean-Michel asks that Georges have Albin go elsewhere for the night, only to be replaced by Sybil, his deadbeat mother. The intense love between Georges and Albin shines through when Georges painfully asks Albin to take leave for the night. It was very clear to the audience that Albin was heartbroken by the request as he performed the extremely powerful "I Am What I Am." Ripping his wig off and bearing his soul, Albin tearfully showcased his dramatic anguish, finally throwing his wig at Georges before storming off.

The curtain rose at the start of Act II, revealing the living area of the home. Jean-Michel had left no evidence of the room's usual flamboyance. To make it more suitable for his coming guests, he had turned it into a bland, religious home, with no color and a completely monotonous feel. The show had the audience feeling alive and enthralled up to this point, but the sudden change left them feeling as uncomfortable and awkward as Georges and Albin in this bland, heterosexual lifestyle. Thus director Terry Johnson was able to make the audience identify with the show's leading characters.

Albin's effort to help Jean-Michel earn the blessing of Monsieur Dindon didn't go unnoticed in the end. Soon after Dindon found out the shocking truth about the family, Jean-Michel stood up for Albin, referring to him as his true mother. The combined parental love coming from both Georges and Albin touched the audience, leaving them happy that even in the hardest times, no matter who the parents are, they'll always be behind you one-hundred percent. This message came across clearly to the audience; though Albin and Georges weren't conventional parents, they loved and supported their son.

The timeless music throughout the entirety of the show made sure the audience was entranced and dancing along with each and every number. The songs ranged from extremely energetic, like "La Cage aux Folles," to slow and thoughtful, like "Look Over There." Showstopper "I Am What I Am" was the perfect song to end act one, leaving the audience wanting more. Choreographer Lynne Page did a superb job with each lively dance, being sure that "Les Cagelles" weren't just pretending to be breathless as they went "off-stage."

"La Cage aux Folles" did a wonderful job at keeping the audience on the edge of their seats the entire time, as well as sending the messages that you should be who you are no matter what. Whenever someone "on-stage" at "La Cage aux Folles" started singing to the audience, the entire house came alive. At the end of curtain call, the audience departed with a smile on their faces as they hummed along to the timeless songs in their heads. Breaking the fourth wall in a show is always a large risk, but "La Cage aux Folles" made the audience part of their captivating story of individuality and love.

# *Disney's The Lion King*

**By Roger Allers, Irene Mecchi, Elton John and Tim Rice  
At the Hippodrome Theater through January 8**

**By Brian Novotny**

## **KING OF THE JUNGLE, JACK OF THE STAGE**

When talking about “The Lion King,” the first question is always: does the stage version do the movie justice? Well, fear not, Disney fans, “The Lion King” on the stage is an experience just as fulfilling--if not more so--as its animated counterpart. This production’s strength lies in its aesthetics: beautiful sets and costumes, accompanied by a uniquely African score to create an unforgettable ride, even if it stumbles along the way.

The story, of course, does not go far beyond “Hamlet with lions”; Mufasa (Dionne Randolph), the King, is killed by his brother, Scar (J. Anthony Crane), who makes the former’s son, Simba (Niles Fitch), believe he is responsible for the murder himself. Years later, an older Simba (Jelani Remy) is convinced to return from exile and face his uncle. The show’s power does not come from the plot, however, but from the way it is presented--it does not create a story, but an experience.

“The Lion King” has a style all its own; to call it minimalist would be wrong, but so would calling it complex. Most of the “animals” are simple puppets--but the puppeteers are always visible onstage, obviously creating the movement. Zazu (Mark David Kaplan) is a man in a blue suit holding a bird puppet over his head; Timon (Nick Cordileone) is a man in green behind a cartoonish meerkat.

Yet the audience never focuses on the actors because the show never draws attention to them—they are simply part of the production. This technique allows the actors to give their full range of emotions while still maintaining the more bestial features of their characters, keeping with the overall motif of the show--a very human story conveyed by non-humans.

Those actors with actual costumes also have their own flair: they range from a one-piece and tail for young lions, to men on stilts towering over the rest of the cast as giraffes. Of particular note is a costume piece shared by Mufasa and Scar: what initially looks to be just a lion-shaped headdress swings forward to cover their faces when the actors bend over--a simple but incredibly effective method of conveying the characters’ more intense emotions from the stage, as their leaning down seems to elongate their bodies, making them look more bestial.

One moment in particular stands out - Scar and Mufasa have a tense moment, and stare each other down. Instead of simply looking at each other, which may not have read to the audience, the headdresses swing down and come close to touching - creating a more intense standoff that can be seen from farther away.

The set is also almost uniformly breathtaking--the iconic sunrise opening from the movie is replicated with a rising, circular, orange curtain, yet it still inspires awe. Much of the African savannah is created with dancing ensemble members holding squares of tall grass over their heads. Solid set-pieces are also inspired: Pride Rock is a giant rotating stairway that comes to a halt just as whoever is scaling it reaches the summit; the Elephant Graveyard creates a raised platform revealed only by short bursts of light, giving it an eerie feel.

The show is nothing, however, without its music--a score of crowd favorites from the movie, a few new songs written specifically for the show or cut from the original, and ensemble pieces composed entirely of African lyrics. The last without a doubt makes the show, even if they are non-essential to the plot itself. Songs like “Grasslands Chant” and “The Lioness Hunt” are little more than glorified scene transitions--“One by One” is just the entr’acte!--but are still some of the most memorable parts of the musical; their utter foreignness works to their advantage.

As for songs from the movie, they are generally faithfully reproduced; “Circle of Life” still leaves viewers in awe from the scope of its staging; “Be Prepared” still showcases Scar’s villainy in all its hammed-up glory and even gets a more menacing reprise.

The show also boasts several new English-language songs. “They Live in You” finally gives a voice to Mufasa, as well as adding an incredibly moving and fatherly song to the show; its reprise in the second act, “He Lives in You” is also stirring, creating a moment of hope in what has been a generally bleak few scenes. The new songs also create new depths--Scar’s “The Madness of King Scar” and Nala’s (Syndee Winters) “Shadowlands” both add development to what were originally fairly one-note characters.

The production, however, is not without its flaws--and in an otherwise stellar show, they are all the more egregious. Several of the new songs fall flat: “Chow Down,” the anthem of the hyenas (Monica L. Patton, Omari Tau, Ben Roseberry) seems to go for an ‘80s rock sound, which does not at all mesh with the rest of the show. Simba’s “Endless Night” has a different problem: it tries to be a heartrending ballad but fails and becomes an incredibly boring song that seems to drag on for hours. The second act in general has pacing issues—everything before the climax simply drags, with lots of dialogue, unbroken by music.

By far the most disappointing of these faults, though, is how two songs in particular are handled. In the movie, “Hakuna Matata,” was an upbeat song accompanied by an incredibly vibrant animation sequence; here it is completely abandoned by the previously ubiquitous set, leaving the stage looking barren. Perhaps they simply could not replicate the sequence on-stage; “Can You Feel the Love Tonight” has no such excuse. In what should have been a slower, subtler scene, Simba and Nala are joined by what look like the costumes from a high-school production of the show; the whole scene is nowhere near up to par with the rest of the production.

Yet even with these flaws, “The Lion King” still manages to impress. It is one of the most aesthetically pleasing shows to ever hit the stage. Its use of puppets to create a more animalist world is something that everyone should experience at least once, and its amazing staging must be seen to be believed. Its more naturalistic feel only serves to enhance the very human themes of love and justice, which is what makes the show so powerful.

## **By Haley Jones**

### **A ROARING GOOD TIME**

As the music swelled and the golden-orange sun rose, the audience watched with awe as this cartoon-musical began. Dozens of school groups, previously shouting and running around, were suddenly transfixed as their favorite Disney movie came alive on the stage of the Hippodrome Theatre. Only “The Lion King” could silence masses of children, teenagers and adults alike for three hours. “The Lion King” took the audience away from the chilly temperatures of Baltimore in December and brought them under the bright, warm African sun.

“The Lion King” was not merely a babysitter for restless youngsters; it was an artistic masterpiece. Rather than replicate the looks and motions of the animals through exact costuming and makeup, the designers, director and choreographer of “The Lion King” used beautiful puppets, lighting, costumes and body movements to depict the animals in the Savannah, without actually putting the actors in lion suits and having them walk on all fours. The effect of this approach was to mimic reality rather than attempt to fake it. By blending many otherwise unrelated elements into a skillful presentation that appealed to the audience’s desire to believe that what they were watching was real, it became a symphony of colors, textures, shadows and action. “The Lion King” on stage is a day-in-the-life presentation of the African Savannah.

If “The Lion King” had used realistic representations of the animals and scenery, the effect would have had much less of an impact on the audience. By mimicking the proportions, colors and shapes of the living things of the Savannah, the audience was able to relate to and become more engrossed in the plot of the show. This is because, even though the actors wore masks, handled puppets and had a variety of face painting and makeup, they still appeared as human beings trying to work through a conflict.

It is easier for humans to relate to other humans, which therefore helps “The Lion King” reach deeper into the minds of the audience because they can better understand the feelings and thoughts of the characters onstage (it is harder for a human to feel connected to an animal that walks on all fours and has a furry mane). Also, if “The Lion King” had faked

the animals of Pride Lands by dressing the actors as the actual animals—fur and all—the overall impact of the show would lessen because it would just be an amateurish spectacle for children, rather than a show touching the hearts of all ages.

Based on the Disney animated film, “The Lion King” tells the story of sibling rivalry, jealousy and love all within three hours of singing, acting and dancing. The story starts with the presentation of Young Simba (Niles Fitch) to the crowd of animals awaiting his presence. This lion cub is heir to the Pride Lands kingdom ruled by his commanding yet charismatic father, Mufasa (Dionne Randolph). However, Mufasa’s scheming brother Scar (J. Anthony Crane) has convinced himself that he deserves to be king, so he devises a plan to turn this belief into reality.

Along with the help of his three bumbling hyena henchmen—Shenzi (Monica L. Patton), Banzai (Omari Tau) and Ed (Ben Roseberry)—Scar plots to do away with the present and future kings of Pride Lands, so he can have ultimate power. However, his plan backfires when he realizes that the second half of his scheme had not been fulfilled.

Puppets and shadows were used throughout the show to suggest the movement of the characters, especially when it was difficult for the actors to perform the actions themselves. These effects were crucial to the presentation in that they provided a sense of realism and glimpses of daily life in the Savannah to the set. The visual effects were skillfully used prior to the actor’s appearance for various scenes by setting a tone for what was to come. This was the equivalent of a dissolve between scenes often used by videographers to introduce the next phase of the story.

This technique was also demonstrated during the final fight by Simba and the lionesses against Scar and his pack of hyenas. The actors had to act out the chaos and intensity of a life-or-death fight between wild animals. Instead of the actors pretending to fight each other, which could seem fake, the audience was able to experience the turmoil of the war through the use of puppets’ shadows behind a curtain on the stage. These silhouettes showed representations of the animals on either side of the fight moving around constantly, all backed by dramatic music.

Every actor on the stage abstractly represented the animal he or she was portraying through beautiful and artistic puppetry. However, Timon’s (Nick Cordileone) costume did not match the standard set by the garments and depictions of the other animals. While Cordileone’s acting was superb in the role of Timon, his appearance did not fit with the other animals shown throughout the show. He came onstage dressed in bright green from head to toe. Rather than having an abstract representation of a meerkat, Cordileone looked like he was operating a big stuffed animal.

His performance of Timon looked cheap in contrast to the beautiful costuming of the other characters, such as those of the animals in the opening scene “The Circle of Life.” This scene incorporated interesting representations of specific animals in Pride Lands, one of which was a stunning puppet of a jaguar. The actor manipulating this puppet was poised and graceful in his motions, while the puppet itself looked realistic in its deep brown and tan colors, and its carefully sculpted head. The actor gave life to this puppet by using his own limbs in conjunction with those of the jaguar—his feet were those of the animal, while he operated the other limbs through rods.

Instead of using stationary set pieces, actors were used to portray the scenery, dressing as grass, flowers and other plant-life in the plains and the jungle. In one of the first scenes, to simulate Mufasa and Simba running together through the plains, ensemble members came out wearing hats made of wooden boards with tall grass on top. These actors also wore wooden hoop skirts that swayed as they moved, imitating the way the plains grass moves in the breeze.

While it was obvious that the motion of the plains was a simulation portrayed by actors, this was a case where the artistic and novel use of props and specially made costumes particularly impressed the audience. A more conventional application of grass-like costumes and fans to produce wind would have likely looked like a desperate short-cut.

In another scene, older Simba (Jelani Remy) was in the jungle with Timon and Pumbaa (Ben Lipitz), during “Can You Feel the Love Tonight.” Here Simba and his childhood friend Nala (Syndee Winters) realized their love for one another. Ensemble members were dressed as beautiful tropical flowers, ferns and other vegetation, and sang in harmony with the two leads. Putting the actors to use as scenery enhanced the musical as it added originality, movement and life across the entire stage, again adding a cinematic quality to the production that mesmerized the audience with its splendor.

“The Lion King” delivered the iconic songs and scenes the audience had come to see. “He Lives in You,” in which Mufasa is speaking to Simba and pushing him to return to Pride Lands to reclaim his life, brought chills to the audience as they watched Mufasa’s face appear among the twinkling stars on the backdrop of the stage. Remy’s performance of

this song touched the minds and hearts of the audience as he spoke to his late father. The ensemble continued this feeling as they came onstage to close the number with perfect harmonies and energy.

Winters' performance as Nala also deeply touched the audience, especially in "Shadowland." In this song, Nala unveils her intent to venture out and find a way to save Pride Lands from the harmful reign of Scar. Winter's pure, clear voice, backed by the beautiful movements of the lionesses with their flowing tan costumes, was a beautiful sight to see on the stage.

This on-stage performance of "The Lion King" provided a means for the audience to use their imagination in that it was a fanciful escape from the everyday. Never mind that animals cannot actually talk—the majesty, radiance and artistry of the production was sufficient to let the spectators live briefly in a different world. The show sets the spectators' mind to a new level of perception with its pageantry and sophisticated use of technical props.

"The Lion King" does not spoon-feed the show to the audience, rather it stimulates the imagination to make sense of and find truth in the performance. Rather than let the audience watch a realistic representation of lions running across the stage, "The Lion King" uses puppets and shadows to mimic the animals of Pride Lands. The audience is able to relate to the characters and grasp the emotional aspect of the show with this form of presentation because the actors retain their human form, including the visible puppeteers, giving the audience a tangible connection and a stimulating performance to watch.

The colors of the set, the suggested rather than accurate portrayal of animals with the costumes and use of human actors to implement a dynamic background, all served in concert to present a living drama between wild animals in Africa. Only by force of reminder would a member of the audience stop to think that the action taking place before him or her was actually being played out by fellow humans.

**By Kimberly Davis**

## **THE SILENT ROAR OF THE MIGHTY LION**

What does it take to live up to the expectations of a classic? Are overly decorated designs, cheesy jokes, off-topic references and unnecessary music numbers really going to outdo a classic? The stage production of "The Lion King" uses these dubious elements to bring the original movie to the theater. Many times we see the stage version trying to pass itself as better than the original but the overdone adaptations make it fail miserably. These adaptations are truly the ruin of this play.

Almost all adaptations try to outdo the original. There have always been arguments in film and theater if classic originals should ever be adapted. Sometimes adapting an original can add a new perspective which can give a better view of the original. But then some adaptations completely disgrace the original. Making an adaptation to a classic can be very risky, but sometimes you get one that works. The stage adaptation of "The Lion King" is not one of those, though it had a lot to live up to.

Taking on a family classic like "The Lion King" seems like a very interesting idea but an extremely risky one. Anyone who has ever watched the 1994 movie production of "The Lion King" knows that a lot of hard work was put into it. They also probably realize that it was an unexpected hit even though it was a cartoon. When something accidentally becomes famous any minor adjustment destroys that. Throughout this particular adaptation at the Hippodrome Theatre, for example, the audience has to sit through dull references that are supposed to outdo the original but just come out as unoriginal.

When the show begins, your mind is so focused on how everyone has been raving about this play you fail to notice the dull stage scenery. You believe that the stage will explode with life as soon as the lights are dimmed. All of a sudden the silence is ripped by the memorable song "The Circle of Life." But everything else from this point falls short of memorable.

One of the things that made the movie production of "The Lion King" so popular was its upbeat and emotional music. Every song was necessary and helped the plot unfold. To outdo the movie production, however, new songs were added to give the same effect but failed horribly to do so.

The once dull stage is now taken over by dozens of people dressed in African clothing and culturally painted faces. The now crowded dancing stage makes it more than a little difficult to focus on one thing at a time. Your eyes are constantly moving from one pattern to the next, not focusing on what lies underneath. From the eccentrically crafted, overly decorated costumes and their bizarre attachments, to the wild facial paints and wild running, it is almost impossible to concentrate. Though the stage is full of life, the feeling hardly transfers to the audience.

Both the stage and movie production are centered on the plot of a young lion named Simba and his mighty Lion King father Mufasa (Dionne Randolph). As soon as Young Simba (Niles Fitch) is born, he is already named the next Lion King once his father steps down. There is one person, however, who is extremely livid with the fact. Scar (J. Anthony Crane) is Mufasa's evil, jealous, older brother. As Simba is growing up we see him doing trying to find cruel ways to ruin both Simba and Mufasa.

Once everything has finally settled down we are shown Scar's cave. This scene is far easier to focus on but the dull, dry conversation loses everyone's interest. When we are introduced to Young Simba, however, his surprising acting talents make the audience channel in. Young Simba energetically runs around the stage exploring all that he can and just enjoys his youth. Fitch manages to make Simba's childishness glow and brighten up the whole stage.

The costumes are laced with a variety of different patterns and the facial paints to represent the cultural aspect of Africa where "The Lion King" is based. The costumes, however, do not improve on the movie but they instead overshadow the actual performers. The costumes make it very difficult to see the characters as they are.

For example: the costumes of Zazu (Mark David Kaplan), Scar, Timon (Nick Cordileone) and Pumbaa (Ben Lipitz) are so extravagant and garish that we forget about the real character. Zazu's costume consists of various shades of blue and white facial paints on top of the original character. Even though these characters are not main characters, they still affect the plot. Timon and Pumbaa for example, raise Simba into a man and contribute to how his personality changes over the years. Throughout the show we see Zazu flapping around on stage, but distracted by the face paint we forget the true meaning behind his character.

On the other hand the costumes of the lions Mufasa, Young Simba, Young Nala (Kaliah McFadden), Simba (Jelani Remy) and Nala (Syndee Winters) make them seem more in tune with the audience. Unlike most of the characters' costumes Mufasa's consists of subtle facial paint and simple decorations. So when Mufasa does step on stage eyes are not just focused on the costume, but rather him as an essential character.

The only scene throughout the entire play that really transfers a deep emotion to the audience is the mighty Mufasa's death scene. From a proud powerful stance to a firm, deep voice, Randolph is Mufasa. The frantic scene of stampeding animals ending with the fatal tumble of Mufasa makes the hearts of the audience ache. Though the movie production of "The Lion King" is the better version, the play actually does a better job of capturing Mufasa's demise.

Songs such as "Circle of Life," and "I Just Can't Wait to Be King" are necessary to the plot of "The Lion King," but the stage production of "The Lion King" includes several songs that are not necessary. For example, "They Live in You" is meant to be an important lesson in the play, but instead it came off as superfluous and was performed with low-pitched, dull vocals.

Originally "The Lion King" was meant with children in mind but actually caught the attention of a variety of audiences people of all ages can enjoy. The stage version of "The Lion King," by contrast, seems geared more towards children. The elaborate costumes of all the characters makes it easy to keep the children preoccupied but fails to do so for the rest of the audience. When viewing a play children are more easily intrigued by the actual presence of the play rather than the intricacies of plot. Older audiences, on the other hand, focus more on the contents of the play, which is overshadowed in this instance by all the designs.

People who are very huge fans of the original movie may be very upset with the changes in the stage production, while others may be attracted to it. So the real question is: Do you want to see a version of "The Lion King" that transfers so much emotion that you can really feel it inside you? Or do you simply just want to see a play that passes the time? If you really want to feel emotion, this version of "The Lion King" is not for you. People who are interested in seeing a new perspective of an original might actually enjoy this adaptation, but original "Lion King" lovers will be highly disappointed.

**By Nava Rastegar**

## **SPECTACLE OVER SUBSTANCE, BUT WE DON'T MIND**

The high stylization of “The Lion King,” now at the Hippodrome Theatre, is simultaneously its failure and its saving grace. Plot points are tripped through as if they were storyboards; the new songs are obviously trying too hard to stand out, and the acting could use some depth across the board. But the show manages to magically fuse inanimate objects with humans, creating something more animal than either the performers or their costumes alone.

This building of animal characteristics on top of human bodies forces the audience to twist their view to deal with these new, alien creatures, and this shift gives the entire show a feeling of constant surprise. Puppetry is half statue and half life, and this quality helps the musical bridge the gap between stage play and drawn film. The beauty of a puppet or a piece of staging saves many songs that would otherwise come up short in comparison to the musical's source film.

One of the best examples of this is “Can You Feel the Love Tonight,” a beautiful, well known song. Jelani Remy, who plays Simba, does not quite have the vocal power to make the song as magical as it should be. Instead the magic comes from the hundreds of glittering leaves and vines hanging above, and the chorus of human-plants that populate the living forest supporting Simba and Nala's romance. When you see the whole forest transformed and moving for these two, you believe in the strength of their love, even if the performers themselves are not quite convincing.

“The Lion King” is worth the price of admission just to see the astonishing design. The appearance of a whole elephant puppet in “The Circle of Life”, operated by four actors inside of its legs, earned its gasps of delight from the audience. When the sun rises from the stage in slats of transparent golden plastic; you see the rippling heat of the savannah. The bristling, boney and broken effect of Scar's costume explains the treachery of his character better than the actor ever could. The use of swirling dancers with grass hats and root skirts to symbolize the savannah that Simba and Mufasa move through is an inspired and particularly effective way of conveying movement.

As for the performances and the songs, the reaction is more mixed. The child actors playing young Simba (Niles Fitch) and Nala (Kailah McFadden), the son of the king Mufasa and Simba's brave betrothed, are good for child actors, but they still seem to be showing off more than acting and are often unable to handle moments that focus solely on them. The death of Mufasa (Dionne Randolph), the rightful king of the savannah, fails to emotionally resonate when his young son falls to his knees by his father. This intimate moment doesn't travel across the Hippodrome's huge audience.

Instead the tragedy sinks in through a later song from the women Mufasa affected. Teenaged Nala (Syndee Winters), Mufasa's wife Sarabi, (Tryphena Wade), and the baboon shaman Rafiki, (Buyi Zama) form a triangle around the body of Mufasa, each singing a different strain of the melody, each alone in her grief. These three women are also probably the best actors in the show. Winters' voice is young and sweet but strong, and it promises Nala's future power. Wade captures both the dignity and power of a queen, balanced by a mother's love and humor.

“The Lion King” is essentially a coming-of-age story, with a royal, animal context. Simba, the lion cub of King Mufasa, goes from a baby to a young boy, to a self-absorbed teenager, and finally to a man who can accept his responsibilities. Simba is raised expecting to be king, and he would be, but for his father's conniving brother Scar. Scar kills Mufasa with the help of the amoral hyenas, and Simba flees to the jungle, fearing his pride's anger. Nala, his childhood friend and fiancée, goes looking for help when famine sets into Pride Lands, and she is shocked to find Simba.

Throughout the narrative, Rafiki acts as narrator, comic, and a spiritual center. Though many of Zama's songs are not in English, Rafiki pulls focus in every one of her scenes. Her voice is strong and rich, which helps establish her power as a shaman, but she also never loses a sense of humor. Rafiki has constant small pieces of physical comedy, such as when she swings into frame on a vine to act as a voice from above telling Timon and Pumbaa (the warthog and meerkat who take care of Simba after he runs away from his father's death) where Simba is. This almost surreal moment got one of the biggest laughs in the show.

Strangely enough, most of the songs in African languages surpass the English numbers in both emotional power and pure aural beauty. It may be that they are simply better songs. Many of them are also choral songs, and the effect of a dozen people singing softly in unison can be stirring in a way the singing of a decent performer on their own will never be.

It may also be a fault of the English lyrics; when they fail to be as emotionally affecting as the instruments themselves, the entire number is pulled down. And perhaps the lyrics aren't important. Though we often think of words as

essential, as the best way of transmitting information, “The Lion King” chooses to focus on visuals and music, instead of the dialogue, which serves mostly to advance plot rather than character development.

The majority of the score is traditional Broadway and orchestral music, combined with the percussion of two men who handle everything from huge pounding drums to tiny, shivery maracas through the course of the musical. Generally, the music is effective; traditional enough to pull in the audience yet foreign enough to establish the setting and to add an element of wonder and surprise. The music fails when the songwriters attempt to add modernity to the score, as in the cringe-worthy rewrite of the hyenas’ song “Chow Down.” This song has been bizarrely converted to an attempt at rock music. Not only is it the most pop type of rock and roll possible, it doesn’t gel with the rest of the show at all. The actors seem as confused by it as the audience is.

The show’s costuming and choreography is more emotionally communicative than its actors or script. There is a point at which “style” (that is to say, design, costumes and choreography) becomes “substance” and “The Lion King” has crossed that point. The visuals are the most compelling, and often the most moving, part of the show, and that’s not a failing. A bit more of an effort to move away from the performances of the film might have helped the actors. J. Anthony Crane, who plays Scar, is not Jeremy Irons, but the director seems to be forcing him into a pale imitation of the film’s actor.

There are plenty of problems like this. Many scenes are invariably going to be compared to the movie and often, the closer they are to the original, the worse they seem. But even with these problems, “The Lion King” has a power beyond its script, beyond its actors, beyond its songs. It has the power of expert animation--there is a level of beauty in these puppetry imitations of life that real life can never reach. When the lionesses hunt the gazelle, the noble masks and their angular arm movements, dripping yellow cloth, merge so that the lionesses seem almost like birds. Sky blends with savannah, animals blend with humans, masks blend with faces, and “The Lion King” succeeds through the unreal mix.

## **By Olivia D’Amato**

### **THE KING OF ALL SHOWS**

As the lights began to dim and the audience quieted down in the Hippodrome, fog drifted onto the stage. The lights shifted to a deep blue, as a translucent, orange, paper sun rose from the floor. All of a sudden the famous line, “Nants ingonyama bagithi baba,” meaning, “Here comes a lion,” interrupted the dream-like sequence as the mysterious, baboon Rafiki (Buyi Zama) took the stage. Her voice rang loud and clear, her presence powerful as she sang “Circle of Life,” putting the movie version to shame.

The stage production of “The Lion King” far exceeded its movie predecessor in many other ways as well. The writers were able to move the plot along much faster than the screenwriters did. This made the stage production extremely action-packed; therefore, it was much more exciting to watch. The music of the stage production also increased the value of “The Lion King” exponentially. While the movie seemed to repeat the same melody over-and-over again, the entire score of the musical production was done impeccably. The music truly expressed what was happening in the story, through a much more interesting method of storytelling, song.

After a few moments Rafiki was joined on stage by the rest of the animal kingdom, who wore costumes so magnificent it was as if there were real elephants and giraffes on stage. The giraffes were easily over 10 feet tall, operated by performers walking on four stilts, controlling the mammoth costumes with their entire bodies. Next to join the parade of animals were the zebras. With a head in front of them and the rest of the body in back of them, the performers controlled the zebras with puppet strings, making each move realistic.

Accompanying the zebras and giraffes were also birds, which flew effortlessly through the air attached to seemingly invisible wires. Among the animals were also numerous performers with gazelles on their heads, as well as both hands, which truly appeared to be gracefully galloping through the great crowd. The true theatrical feat, though, was the emergence of the elephant. Amidst the stage’s organized chaos, a massive grey figure began to climb the stairs, and once it reached the stage a gargantuan elephant fit for the Savannah was revealed. The elephant consisted of four performers, one per leg, walking succinctly in order to appear as one, giant entity.

At this point, the song reached its climax, with the full animal kingdom on stage singing in perfect harmony as the orchestra bellowed under them. These amazing costumes truly surpassed the audience's imaginations, propelling the stage version even further into their hearts than the movie. Being able to see the puppeteers provided a sort of rush to the audience, entrancing them by their almost magical skills.

The performers in "The Lion King" were as amazing as the costumes they were wearing. Zazu (Mark David Kaplan), the comical right-hand bird to Mufasa, was charmingly hilarious, providing punch lines that thoroughly amused the audience. His upper-class British dialect also enhanced his character and added some variety to the show.

Young Simba (Niles Fitch) did not lack a funny bone either. He portrayed the young and restless Simba, son of Mufasa and next in line for the throne, perfectly. He was overly feisty and aggressive, yet adorable as well. It was evident that the audience immediately fell in love with him, which later on contributed to their support of him against Scar, Mufasa's evil, power-hungry brother. Scar (J. Anthony Crane) was truly the best actor on the stage—evil and diabolical while also darkly hilarious. His mischievous demeanor added to the audience's hatred of him, which testified to his total immersion into his character.

The harmonies in "The Lion King" were impeccable. The large ensemble numbers truly sounded as if they had been previously recorded because they were too good to be true. Every note was hit with a zeal and passion that could not be replicated by any other cast. Although most of the songs were not in English, the passion and portrayal of the words allowed the audience to understand what they were saying. Because the stage version used the actual Zulu language, it gave it a much more authentic feel than the movie had.

The African melodies seemed to dance among the performers, and strong percussion, which gave a sense of unity, powerfully held the music together. While many songs were of African descent, some were much more modern, such as the rock-esque "Chow Down." With a melody driven by an electric guitar and a strong drum line, "Chow Down" was inherently different from the rest of the music in "The Lion King," but was a positive surprise.

All in all "The Lion King," is truly meant to be seen on stage, for the movie version does not do the story justice. The costumes were otherworldly; leaving the audiences jaws dropped the entire show. The performers were alive and connected, and were able to vibe off one another to improve the overall effect of the show. Musically, the show was a huge success. Old, familiar songs were given new meaning and life through these performers' voices. "The Lion King" will surely wipe one's mind of all problems for a few hours, and transport them to Pride Rock.

**By Shelby Roseman**

## **PERFECT FOR ALL STAGES OF THE CIRCLE OF LIFE**

Updating a story embedded into the heart of America's '90s kids is daring; the viewers approach with the mentality that nothing can compare with the original. However, as soon as Rafiki (Buyi Zama) fills the theater with song, sung in a powerful and authentic African voice, and the conga drummers in the box seats on either side of the audience begin tapping the familiar drumbeats of the show's opening number, it is obvious that this cast has not taken on too large a task.

Instead, the production goes beyond what is expected, even before puppeteers with life-sized animal costumes enter the stage. And if the audience is not impressed by the gazelles and monkeys, moving with the fluid steps of real animals, the massive grey elephant and towering giraffes convince them that it is possible to make the original even better, and prepare them to experience emotions much more intense than those of their childhoods.

The famous characters are not dishonored by the new portrayals but instead are brought to life by versatile actors. The Young Simba (Niles Fitch), the protagonist future king of the show, has a lively spirit that comes out as he twists and roars like the adult lion he will someday be. His performance in "I Just Can't Wait to be King" sounds a lot like that of the movie, but the massive multicolored bird on which Simba sits makes the on-stage performance even more colorful and alive, since everything is on a larger, more dimensional scale than it is onscreen.

Young Simba's performance is so impressive that the audience is upset during the play's version of "Hakuna Matata," one of the rare songs that falls flat simply because it does not have as many moving plants and exotic costumes as the others. Not only is the audience disappointed because there aren't quite enough dancing flowers, but because all of the die-hard movie fans know that a new actor will replace Young Simba mid-song as he reaches adulthood.

However, this disappointment immediately disappears as the older Simba (Jelani Remy) swings in on a vine and belts out the remainder of the song in a clear, soulful voice and with the animal-like energy of any free-ranging young being, human or not. Unlike young children watching pretty animals sing and dance, the older viewers of "The Lion King" feel strong connections to both Simbas, shown through their reluctance to say goodbye to the young version, as well as the applause that erupts when the elder Simba arrives.

The comic aspects of the show, just as with the movie, are carried by Simba's caretakers Zazu, Timon and Pumbaa, played by Mark David Kaplan, Nick Cordileone, and Ben Lipitz respectively. The ongoing joke regarding Pumbaa's gas problem, although childish, reminds the viewers where this show comes from. These silly comments from the comic cast lighten the mood of an otherwise dark plot, making both the show and movie better suited for children.

Onstage, such comments also remind the viewer that overall, this is based on a children's show, even though the production makes scenery bigger, animals fiercer and facial expressions stronger. All of the dazzling ponds, immense animals and intense emotions cause the viewer to become strongly attached to the show, and it is important to remember that such strong attractions are caused in part because of childhood memories. Although the viewer is experiencing the production as an adult, and understands the topics of life cycles, it is the childhood memories that make the production fun and enjoyable. Remembering the way that the show was seen through a child's eyes shows the audience how much they have grown, and alerts them as to the depth of the show.

It is when Simba is prancing through the jungle with some combination of lighthearted characters that the audience can observe that the forest, rivers, grass and plants are alive. The show's easygoing characters, which are towards the bottom of the food chain, work with their environment, and demonstrate the delicate balance of nature. In fact, Simba is with Rafiki, his eccentric, mystical guardian monkey, during the show's most impressive number, when his father's message regarding the circle of life sinks in, and he becomes a true king.

This powerful rendition of "He Lives in You" is the song that varies the most from the original, movie, incorporating a massive mobile lion head and a spontaneous appearance of twirling African dancers. It is also the most effective song of the show, since it not only involves a large cast, but also dares to differ from the original movie, and caters to the refined tastes of an older audience that appreciates the arts for more than fun plots and pretty sunsets. However, keeping the music and lyrics of the original piece maintains the theme of the original movie, and therefore the influence of childhood memories still holds strong.

The darker characters of the story, headed by Scar (J. Anthony Crane), Simba's uncle and rival, are necessary to carry the show's plot, but their shady coloration and mellow vibes do little to add to the show's excitement. Their musical numbers, as well, do not seem to fit with the overall tone of the show. While most numbers contain African percussion and traditional beats, Scar's hyenas sing rock-and-roll songs, and contribute little to the show besides exemplifying the fact that these characters are different from the rest. Much of the audience's connection to the show stems from the production being a more impressive version of a familiar movie, but Scar's hyenas are so random that they don't fit with the atmosphere of the production, and their songs confuse the audience.

This multi-dimensional production further brings out the implied themes of its two-dimensional counterpart, thus making the effect stronger. As hundreds of set pieces drop from the sky, zip across the stage, and flow through trapdoors, the audience is sucked in, in touch with the world onstage. The emotions that were tough to comprehend as a child are brought to the surface, but this time, the viewer has had enough life experience to understand life and death, and real tears alter with face-numbing smiles, depending on the scene. Watching "The Lion King" movie as a child, I almost cried several times. In this production, the tears were real, as was the joy.

## **By Sydnie Sparzak**

### **KING OF HIPPODROME THEATRE**

A mixture of excitement and nervousness fills the air. Will the stage production of "The Lion King" live up to the brilliant movie? Then you hear Rafiki's (Buyi Zama) opening chant of "Circle of Life": "Nants ingonyama bagithi baba."

A shiver of anticipation runs down your spine. The curtain opens and an astonishing sun rises from the floor. The chorus joins in at the same moment that large majestic animals walk down the aisles.

You don't know where to look, so much is going on. On your right is an elephant and her baby, to the left is a giraffe, and forward are birds and cheetahs. The unexpected surprise? All of these animals are humans dressed in costumes. The actors and actresses support and guide the costumes, creating the illusion of being real animals. The most impressive costume was the giraffe, whose actor guided the costume with stilts on their hands and legs.

It takes a lot for a stage production to live up to the movie it is based on. You have to convince the closed-minded people that going from the silver screen to the stage is possible. Everything has to be perfect, or else negative judgment will come easily. Luckily, the producers of "The Lion King" made such a judgment nearly impossible. They put so much effort into all the right places. The designers of the costumes made the animals seem alive. The actors and actresses are superb in seeming like wild animals. All in all, the stage production of "The Lion King" is as brilliant as the movie.

As if you don't already know where to look, out comes Pride Rock on stage left. A massive mountain that goes right, left, and does 360-degree turns. On it are Mufasa (Dionne Randolph) and Sarabi (Tryphena Wade), king and queen of the lions. The song ends when Rafiki holds baby Simba up. When Mufasa dies, Simba will become the next king since he is the first born son. Everything seems well except for Mufasa's brother, Scar, who wants to steal the throne.

One of the most mesmerizing things about the stage production of "The Lion King" is the set design. Each scene has its own moment when something comes out and leaves us in total awe. In "Circle of Life," it's Pride Rock. In the Elephant Graveyard scene, it's the gigantic skeleton. "They Live in You" has a beautiful sky, with stars that fill the entire room with light and warmth. Each set fits the mood about what is going on. And while some scenes might come up twice, there is always something new in them to make each time different from the last time you saw it.

A set is only great when there are people on it. In order for the people in the audience to believe that what they are seeing on stage is real, the performers need to have chemistry. Luckily, Simba (Jelani Remy) and Nala (Syndee Winters) have exactly that. In "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" you can hear the love in their voices.

The notes Nala hits are so strong they fill the entire theater. They're best friends in the beginning of show, but now that they are older, they have grown to love one another. But what is even better is that once you look on stage, you can see the love. They move towards each other with hesitation but eagerness. It's a surprise that the room didn't explode with the mixture of emotions going on all at once.

It can easily be said that the movie and stage production of "The Lion King" are very similar. They both contain all the same characters with the same plot line. The only difference is that the stage production adds a few more songs and changes a couple lines. But there is something more about the stage production that makes it different. On stage, it comes alive. It makes you feel as though you are in Africa too.

This is why the stage production is so popular. The saying "I need to see it to believe it" is perfect for "The Lion King." On stage you see the animals move; you see the people sing; you watch them through their journey, and you see the love. Not only can we see all of these things happen; we also believe them, which is the hardest thing for a stage production to accomplish.

While the set and performers contribute tremendously to the show, the music is what makes the show so memorable. The classic songs of Elton John and Tim Rice never fail to leave you singing in your seat. But it's not only the words that are memorable. "Under the Stars" would be nothing without the melody that plays when Mufasa is talking. It is what brings the emotions to the surface. It adds power to the words that the characters say.

"The Lion King" forges a bond with parents and children alike. Since the Disney classic is only available on DVD, it gives the chance to see the show come alive. The stage performance offers a realistic approach, compared to the movie. With realism comes passion and emotion. So if you are looking for a show that will leave you feeling with an explosion of emotions, "Hakuna Matata!" "The Lion King" is the show for you.

**By Tori Brown**

## **BE PREPARED FOR A BREATHTAKING SHOW**

Even though “The Lion King” was a Disney show, it was far from just a show for children. With the timeless song “Circle of Life” flooding the Hippodrome Theatre, even the oldest patron felt like a child again. When the stage filled with a multitude of breathtaking animals, bringing the audience to Pride Rock for the presentation of Simba, even the older audience members were lifted by a lighthearted excitement.

To make the show appealing to more than just children, writers Roger Allers and Irene Mecchi incorporated some jokes that only older members of the audience would understand. When Scar (J. Anthony Crane) sings “The Madness of King Scar,” he talks slyly about “having cubs” with Nala (Syndee Winters). The show did wonderfully at keeping the entire audience’s attention with the jokes and music.

Not only did the animals inhabit the stage for the opening number, they swarmed into the audience and boxes. Costume designer and director Julie Taymor did an extraordinary job in taking the portrayal of animals to an entirely new level through acting and costuming. The cheetah, giraffes and elephant wore the most notable ensemble costumes.

The cheetah had a body suit with the body of the animal encasing his waist while the arms and head were connected to his hands like marionettes. Each giraffe was balanced on a set of four stilts and topped by an incredible head piece strapped to the stilt walkers head. The elephant was an enormous costume controlled by five people, one person in each leg and another controlling the trunk and ears. The way the costumes were rigged helped make the show feel more authentic to the audience. The costumes were designed to look more real, taking the literal shape of the animal, making the audience feel as though they were surrounded by actual animals, not actors in masks. This was a major part of the show’s success.

During the more intense moments when the king of Pride Lands, Mufasa (Dionne Randolph), confronted his brother Scar about not attending the presentation of Mufasa’s son, the two adult lions would bend forward and their headdresses would fall forward, becoming like masks. The actors didn’t let the costume do all of the work for them, though, for the actors, even when their faces were covered, threw themselves into the characters completely, really becoming those animals, whether it was through swift movements or animalistic growls.

Scar’s hyena escorts—Shenzi (Monica L. Patton), Banzai (Omari Tau) and Ed (Ben Roseberry)—held in their hands the heads of their costumes, connected by a line of fur that continued down a grey and black body suit. They became more sinister with every high-pitched laugh.

Scenic designer Richard Hudson made sure that each place echoed the feel of the characters who inhabited the scene. Pride Rock, which came out on stage on tracks that moved into a circle, possessed a feeling of life and comfort and life until Scar had taken over, causing it to contract a more dark, unhealthy feeling, much like the feeling of Scar’s cave.

After the death of Mufasa, the audience shared the grief of young Simba (Niles Fitch). Sound designer Steve Canyon Kennedy added the echo effect as Simba called for help. This effect enhanced the feelings of grief in every audience member. After seeing his despair following the discovery of his father, Simba was almost desperate to wake him or find help. The audience really felt the desperation, causing some to hold their breath or maybe even shed a tear.

When young Simba ran away after being blamed by Scar for the death of Mufasa, he was found by the boisterous couple, Timon (Nick Cordileone) and Pumbaa (Ben Lipitz). Upon noticing that Simba was “blue,” the two decide to take him in and teach him about their live-and-let-live motto, “Hakuna Matata.”

Although the sad, mournful song “Rafiki Mourns” came right before, choreographer Marey Griffith designed “Hakuna Matata” to be light and bouncy. The liveliness of the song filled the audience back up with enthusiasm and anticipation for Act II. In the midst of the song, there’s a time lapse where Simba returns as a grown lion (Jelani Remy).

The show returns with the lively song, “One by One,” bringing the audience back to the edge of their seats with the message that they’ll never be held back and will always love who they are. The phrases such as “Siza nqoba ngoba thina siya zazi,” which means, “We will win because we know who we are,” also helped the audience relate apply the message to situations in their own lives. The song gave off a feeling of lightheartedness with multiple actors in the aisles and balcony waving around the kites that as if they were birds flying high above our heads. Though presenting the same message, Nala leaves Pride Rock, promising to never forget her pride with “Shadowland.”

Throughout the entire show, the ensemble never lost their energy. Rafiki (Buyi Zama) spoke in Swahili and Zulu throughout the show but never failed to help the audience understand. Whatever she was feeling, the audience felt the same passion. Right after Simba sang “Endless Night,” Rafiki realized that Simba was still alive. When she showed up, expressing her excitement and disbelief through Swahili chants, the audience grasped her feelings completely.

“The Lion King” definitely lived up to all expectations. Even those who have seen the 1994 film would be amazed with the adaptation. Every scene, though similar to that in the film, was improved greatly with added wit and intensity. Lighting designer Donald Holder used many different elements like strobe lights and shadows on the scrim to bring across the power and humor. The shadow of the mouse in act one scene two brought a childish feeling of anticipation to everyone in the audience.

Fans of the film will quickly become entranced with the variation and feel as though it is the first time they’ve ever seen it. The show added new songs like “Chow Down” and “Endless Night” and scenes like in the beginning of Act Two when Timon is washed down a river. The additions really furthered the overall excitement. “The Lion King” is a great show that will leave children entranced and their parents reminiscing.