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ARTS
THE WORK OF
WILLIAM YANG,
SNAPPER TO
THE STARS
PAGE 11

BOOKS
NEWLY FOUND
PHOTOGRAPHS OF
THE FIRST WORLD
WAR IN COLOUR
PAGES 14-15

THE SON KING

A HEARTWARMING TALE
ABOUT A FATHER AND HIS SON, STAGE
MUSICAL THE LION KING IS NOW THE
GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH
By Phil Brown



LION KING MYTHOLOGY



It may be popular entertainment but there's more to *The Lion King* than meets the eye. Analogies have been drawn between the story and Shakespeare's classic, *Hamlet*, and the similarities are obvious.

In *The Lion King*, Mufasa's brother Scar, murders him. In Shakespeare's version the King of Denmark is murdered by his brother Claudius and Prince Hamlet seeks revenge, as does Simba, by retaking the throne and his place as king.

There are many similar stories of fathers and sons in the classical canon and they run all the way through to popular culture. In a recent discussion on ABC Radio the relationship between Mufasa and Simba in *The Lion King* was compared to the relationship between Superman and his father, Jor-el, played by Marlon Brando (left, with Susannah York and Lee Quigley) in the 1978 film *Superman*.

Christopher Reeve played the Man of Steel, who often channelled his dead father for inspiration in the same way that the spirit of Mufasa inspires and counsels Simba from the great beyond. There are strong spiritual connotations to the Mufasa-Simba relationship and the symbolism and allegorical dimensions have been written about before.

The beautiful song, *He Lives in You*, sung to Simba by Rafiki, is like something straight out of the New Testament. In the *Gospel of John*, Jesus says to his disciples: "Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you."

In *The Lion King*, the lyrics of the song strike a similar vein as Rafiki sings to Simba: "He lives in you, He lives in me, He watches over, Everything we see."

Using parables and allegory is very much in the Disney tradition, according to Walt Disney's brother Roy, who died in 2009. He was proud of the movie *The Lion King* and said it was "very much in the great Disney tradition of using allegories with animals for storytelling purposes. In the early days, Walt adapted many of Aesop's fables for animation and used animal characters like Mickey and Donald to tell his stories. Later *Bambi*, *Lady and the Tramp* and *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, and some of the *True Life Adventures* further explored the approach of telling stories about animals in human terms and with strong moral themes."

The tradition continues with *The Lion King*, but though the story is essentially Christian on the one hand, its spiritual truths make it applicable and inspiring to people of every faith or no faith at all.



COVER STORY





OUT OF AFRICA

Disney's unstoppable production proves that lions really are the kings of the jungle, in the greatest show on earth, writes **Phil Brown**

It's probably a good thing that the stars of *The Lion King* don't appear together on stage.

I mean, how would they explain the fact that the actor playing the grand old lion King Mufasa, Rob Collins, is only a few years older than his stage son, Simba, rising star Nick Afoa?

That wouldn't scan, but they have a strong partnership nonetheless.

"Nick and I may not share the stage but we work closely together," Collins explains.

"There's a scene where a mask of Mufasa's face forms behind his son, Simba. I may not be in the scene with Nick, but I feel like I am because I'm at the side of the stage and I'm looking at him as I do the voice-over."

The first half of the hit musical, which opens at QPAC on September 21, belongs largely to Mufasa. In the second half, after Mufasa's death, Simba comes into his own and reclaims his kingdom.

Collins, 34, points out that his co-star, Afoa, 28, is such a pro that he often watches the first half to prepare, even though that's not a contractual requirement. I chat to the pair in Sydney the morning after another sellout show and both seem

way too enthusiastic for blokes who have already done more than 200 performances.

They explain that they love what they are doing and it's really a first big break for both of them. Afoa, whose family is from Samoa, grew up in New Zealand and had a promising career as a rugby player before a catastrophic knee injury. His other love was music and he struggled to find a niche as an entertainer. Before he landed the role in *The Lion King* he was a social worker in Auckland.

"I often wonder what would have happened if I hadn't injured myself and had continued playing rugby," Afoa muses.

When he flew to Australia to audition for *The Lion King* last year, he wasn't overly confident. Then he got called back again and after an agonising wait he got the fateful call from his agent, the call that changed his life.

"My agent was very quiet at first and then she just screamed – 'Simbaaaaa!'" Afoa recalls.

Collins smiles too at this feelgood story and possibly because, like Afoa, he came out of left field to land the key role of Mufasa in the show. Of Tiwi heritage and from Darwin, Collins had worked in the music industry previously and he and Afoa had both been in bands. But he de-

cidated he wanted a theatrical career, got into the National Institute of Dramatic Art and was in the last year of his course there when he auditioned for *The Lion King*.

"By nature I'm a pessimist, which makes me work harder," Collins explains.

"But I'm not sure if I really expected to get the role. Even when I heard I had it I was sceptical. But after three years at NIDA I was prepped."

Collins, who is married to ABC-TV reporter Laetitia Lemke (they have three children), says he is thrilled to be in *The Lion King* and thrilled to be coming to Brisbane. Afoa nods in agreement and says he and wife Kim also can't wait to leave the Sydney winter behind them.

The show's cast is a tight-knit group, Collins points out, and he says it has "an ensemble" feel and that it doesn't seem at all like the theatrical branch office of a global corporation.

"I mean, intellectually I understand it is huge and there are 10 productions going on around the world, but I don't feel the weight or the enormity of that," Collins says.

The fact is, however, that Afoa, Collins and the rest of the cast are part of something bigger, a show



that is now a global phenomenon in its 17th year.

The Lion King is one of the most popular stage musicals in the world and since its Broadway premiere on November 13, 1997, 21 global productions have been seen by more than

70 million people in a cumulative run that equals 104 years.

It has won numerous Tony Awards, grossed more than \$5 billion and it is the pride and joy of Disney Theatrical Productions. The company cares about *The Lion King*, which is why its president, Thomas Schumacher, flew here for the announcement of the Brisbane season.

"We are thrilled to bring *The Lion King* to Brisbane for the first time ever," Schumacher says.

"I know that Queensland audiences will love this New Australian production of Julie Taymor's visionary stage event."

When you talk to Schumacher you sense he cares deeply about *The Lion King* and that's probably because he has been involved since the beginning, when the company was trying to work out how to turn what had been a successful film into a stage show.

He was the guy who got brilliant director Julie Taymor involved. The result continues to delight audiences worldwide and people love the pathos, the humour and, of course, the music, including a string of Elton John and Tim Rice classics such as *Circle of Life*, *Can You Feel the Love Tonight* and the lighthearted *Hakuna Matata*.

The story is powerful – the tale of a lion king, Mufasa, murdered by his scheming brother, (Josh Quong Tart in this production, who is deliciously evil) Scar, a pretender who brings death and despair to the African savanna territory known as The

Pride Lands. Scar banishes the rightful heir to the throne, Simba, but, counselled and inspired by the wise and at times hilarious baboon-shaman Rafiki (Buyi Zama), Simba eventually returns to claim what is his. This story has broad appeal and hidden depths.

"When the movie came out *The Lion King* was interpreted as many

things," Schumacher says. "It's an allegory for our times, a spiritual journey, a brand comedy, a *Hamlet* knock-off, another story forwarding the patriarchal structure, a cash cow, a timeless myth, the next in the line of Disney animated classics ... no-one said it looked like a Broadway show in the making."

But Disney Theatrical Productions had a vision and Taymor helped realise that vision on stage with amazing costumes, masks, puppetry and other techniques. She wanted it to have a multicultural heart and beat, which it does, with performers from many countries and cultures.

It has charmed the world and if you had aspirations to act and sing in a musical, this would be your dream show, as it is for Rob Collins and Nick Afoa, who still can't quite believe their luck.

They do eight shows a week but they say it still feels new and they are still moved by it every night. Afoa says the father and son connection reminds him of his own with his father Seti, who lives in Samoa but has come to Australia several times to watch his son perform. Rob Collins says it has added poignancy for him because his own father, Bob, died in 2007.

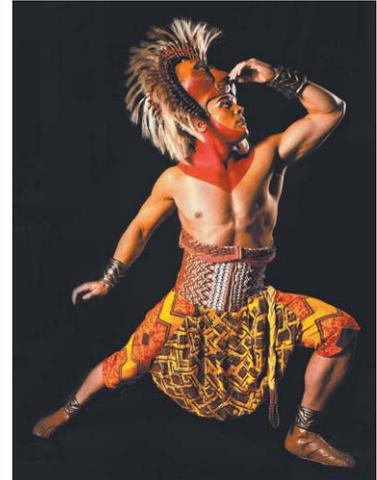
Afoa and Collins have had many deep and meaningfuls about the relationship between Mufasa and Simba and Afoa says his "raw, emotional approach" has been tempered with sagely advice from Collins.

"I started with emotion rather than intellect and my challenge was to bring that down a notch," Afoa says. "I asked Rob how I could make the feelings clearer as an actor and he was really helpful."

Meanwhile Afoa's emotive approach was admired by Collins.

"Nick asked me how to temper his emotions while I wanted to know he accessed his emotions so freely," Collins says. "It's a real balancing act."

But they manage it, night after night and their friendship is a bond that enriches their performances. They may not be on stage together but they are of one mind, heart and spirit. They are lion kings, hear them roar, soon.



FAMILY PRIDE: Rob Collins (left) in costume as Mufasa and (above) Nick Afoa as Simba in the stage production of *The Lion King*.
Pictures: Stephen Cooper