

The Weekly Magazine of Broadway and Beyond

# In Theater

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## Royal Family

Backstage at *The Lion King*  
with Samuel E. Wright  
and Jason Raize

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Petula Does Norma on the Road  
*Ragtime's* New Faces

• L107 •

**O**n the back wall of the New Amsterdam Theater stage — hidden behind the colorful backdrops and majestic sets of *The Lion King* — hangs a series of poster-sized black-and-white portraits of '30s-era Ziegfeld girls. A reminder of the history of this beautifully restored theater, each photo has been autographed by the lady herself after "coming home" to see a performance of Disney's mega-musical.

"They're always there, watching

lesque house above this one, where the affluent members of the audience used to go after the regular *Follies* to get a more revealing version of the same show. That's Olive's domain."

Both stars insist that they have felt Olive's presence. "Oh, yes!" Wright says. "If I'm not careful, Olive gets jealous. I have to watch what I do. The night before the whole company was going to go to Disney World, unbelievable things started happening on

stage: The sets were acting up, the lights, everything. I actually thought we might have to stop the show. Then it hit me like a ton of bricks. I went to the stage manager and said, 'Did anybody invite Olive to Disney World?' And she went, 'Oh, no!' So we stood together in the office and said, 'Olive, if you would like to go to Disney World, you certainly may. The plane is leaving at such-and-such time, and we're taking a bus to the airport.' The

# LONG LIVE THE KINGS

**SAMUEL E. WRIGHT AND JASON RAIZE RULE THE PRIDELANDS AS MUFASA AND SIMBA IN *THE LION KING*.**

**BY KATHY HENDERSON; PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRUCE GLIKAS**

over us," says Samuel E. Wright, a 1998 Tony nominee for his stirring performance as *The Lion King's* patriarch, Mufasa. "And Olive is everywhere." Wright pauses. "Olive is our ghost."

Sounds like a lovely (um, unbelievable) legend. "I'm not kidding!" Wright says with a booming laugh. Agrees Jason Raize, the charismatic young actor who plays Simba, "Olive is a fixture of our performances. She was a Ziegfeld girl who passed away here in the theater. There's a bur-



next show went as clean as a whistle."

Wright credits his ghostly friend with helping him through Mufasa's big death scene. "Olive keeps me from passing out sometimes," he claims.

"Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation," Raize interjects with a laugh.

"I'm lying there trying to pretend I'm dead," explains Wright, "but I've just finished running through a stampede, so what my body really wants to do is [gulp for air]."

"He's good at it,

too," Raize says of his co-star's corpse routine.

"Sometimes," continues Wright, "I feel this breath of air. I don't know where it's coming from, because there's nobody on stage with me. I'm sure it's a set piece moving..." The actor raises his eyes to the heavens and whispers, "No, it's Olive."

By now, it should be obvious that there's a great spirit — in addition to Olive — present at the New Amsterdam, exemplified by the friendly banter of *The Lion King's* father and son. Now that the musical is set to run for the next couple of decades, it seemed like a good time for *InTheater* to check in with two of the original stars, who have worked together for almost two years (from first rehearsals and a pre-Broadway tryout in Minneapolis). Between shows on a recent Saturday, dressing room-mates Wright and Raize lounged on the New Amsterdam's staircase and chatted about the show and each other.

As any theater actor will admit, it can be tricky to remain focused and excited about a role as the run goes on. But *The Lion King* is a very special case. "The people who are in these seats *really* want to be there," notes Raize. "They've waited for a year to see our show, and their energy just gets shot onto that stage. There's no way you can walk out there and not give them a show."

It helps, of course, that the first 15 minutes of *The Lion King* surely rank

among the most exciting opening numbers ever staged on Broadway. Raize, who doesn't appear until the end of Act One, confesses, "I throw on a hat sometimes and come out to watch ['Circle of Life']. Just feeling that kind of energy is unbelievable — kids are hanging out of

lament] 'Endless Night' is a very touching moment for me."

"I like that, too," Wright says. "One of my best moments in the show is listening to Jason sing 'Endless Night.' When I'm on, everything is such a whirlwind; I'm just trying to get through it. My character is really strong. I'm 51 years old, and I would think twice about some of the things Mufasa does out there. My favorite moment would probably be when the elevator goes down after I'm dead and they take off my hat." Both actors laugh uproariously.

Speaking of those hat-like masks (spotlighted on our cover), Wright and Raize admit that they were initially wary of being costumed as lions. "When I was asked to audition," says Wright, "I said, 'I'm not going to put on a lion suit.' I was picturing Bert Lahr in *The Wizard of Oz*. I kept saying, 'No, no, no.' Finally, Julie [Taymor] sent over a drawing of



Wright and Raize with director Julie Taymor's intricately carved masks. At auditions, "If someone said, 'You want me to wear this?' he was out," Wright says.

the aisles waiting to see the animals and that legendary elephant." As Wright — who climbs Pride Rock to present Baby Simba to his subjects at the number's climactic moment — puts it, "From the very start, the audience is with you."

Asked about their favorite moments in the show, both actors begin by mentioning scenes they *aren't* in: "Some of mine come in the first act," says Raize, "when I'm listening to the show on the loudspeaker as I'm getting my makeup on. That's an important character setup, because so much of the story happens before I come on stage. But [Simba's musical

Mufasa's costume, and I said, 'Hmmm.' Julie told me later that they had a couple of heads and props at the auditions. If someone said, 'You want me to wear *this*?' he was out. She was looking for people who said, 'Oh, neat! When can I put it on?'"

Raize's moment of terror came after he got the part. "I had this amazing adrenaline rush of having gotten a Disney show. And then they said, 'You need to come in so that we can fit you for your corset.' I said, 'I've seen corsets in period films, and I don't want to wear one!' They said, 'It's got African beading; it will be cool.' But [accepting the



Wright checks his makeup. (Note the lion fountain.)



Raize cuddles Ruby, his new dachshund puppy.

corset] was a process." Again, the actors share a laugh.

Though they never appear together on stage, Wright and Raize share a pivotal scene, when the disembodied voice of Mufasa challenges Simba to embrace his destiny as king of the pridelands. "That's one of my most poignant acting moments," says Raize, "because I have no one to look at when Sam does the voice of the Mufasa mask."

"We do that scene live," reveals Wright. "I'm sure people think it's taped, but I'm standing in the wings talking into a microphone. I have to look at Jay, because I take what I say and how I say it off of what he's doing."

"It changes every night," says Raize. "Sam is a big part of the second act for all the actors as they do the show, because he's always there in the wings."

Explains Wright, "I can't just sit in my dressing room reading a book during the second act. This is a really good gig — I sing one song, I die in an hour and 25 minutes, and I get nominated for a Tony! Everybody else is working hard, so I put on my costume, come down, and have fun. There hasn't been a time yet when Jay walks up that rock at the end of the show that I don't get goose bumps. I must still be having fun if that happens."

## TIX TALK

**G**etting tickets to *The Lion King* has the reputation of being a blood sport. A weary Ticketmaster operator told *InTheater* there wasn't "a chance in hell" of landing tickets anytime soon. Just how impossible is it?

It depends. If nothing but a pair of prime orchestra seats will do, the wait is as bad as you've heard. (We're talking January 2000 — and that's just for weeknights.) Lone orchestra tickets are available now for July and single seats elsewhere in June.

But if you're not above guerrilla tactics (no, not scalpers), you might be able to see the show tonight. Twenty standing room tickets go on sale each morning at 10 a.m. It's one-per-person and first-come, first-serve (people start lining up around 9); the \$20 tickets are in the orchestra or front mezzanine. The box office also receives 10-20 cancellations a day, which are re-sold at regular prices (\$25-\$80). Folks start lining up at 2 p.m. for an evening performance.

— Brooks Barnes

Raize and Wright share an easy relationship, teasing each other about their taste in music and Wright's penchant for wandering through the Virgin Megastore in a daze. But the young actor obviously respects his more experienced co-star, whose credits include *Promises, Promises*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Pippin*, and a Tony-nominated performance in *The Tap Dance Kid*. Says Raize, "This has been an amazing journey, and Sam helped me get ready for what we were going to experience in New York in a non-imposing way. He'll say, 'How did the interview go? How are you feeling about everything?' It's been a long road — I've never had to keep up a role for this long, and Sam has the experience of working in major productions for a long time. He has always been very sensitive."

Wright, a father of three, sounds a paternal note when describing Raize's talent. "I feel really close to Jay. He's enormously talented and has an amazing mind. He's in the process of recording his music now, and he's very attuned to the industry. I thought that I knew stuff about the industry, but Jay networks much better than I do. I expect great success from him in whatever he chooses to do, whether it's singing, acting or, indeed, producing or directing."

"Thank you, Sam," Raize replies, obviously touched. "I've been working on my first recording for four months, and Sam gives me good pointers. [Wright has a gold record for *Sebastian's Party Tunes*, recorded in the voice of the lovable crab he created in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*.] Usually, if you say 'Broadway,' record companies run the other way, but Universal Records signed me. Desmond Child is producing the album; it will have lots of different styles. People usually associate your background with the kind of music you do, but I'm adopted so I don't know my background. Unknown ethnicity: unknown musical genre. We'll do a little of everything." Raize's CD is due in June; for updates, check his website at [www.wwwwebstage.com](http://www.wwwwebstage.com) \ JasonRaize.

Wright has also remained busy: He runs a performing arts school in

upstate New York, where "350 very talented children study from three in the afternoon to nine at night. We do eight professional productions a year." Why a school? "Well," laughs Wright, "I didn't buy a yacht after *The Little Mermaid* — I bought a school!"

Continuing his Disney association, Wright will play the voice of a leading character in the forthcoming computerized film *Dinosaurs*, alongside Joan Plowright and Max Casella (formerly *The Lion King's* Timon). "It's not a cartoon," Wright explains, "it's the next generation up from *Jurassic Park*. The dinosaurs are like living creatures, and the film gives you a sense of their ancestry."

Just then, a physical therapist beckons Wright to an alcove off the orchestra. "You have to see our dressing room," he says in parting. "We're both junky, but it's neat junk." Raize leads

the way via the stage (where Taymor's amazing puppet creations fill every corner, waiting to be brought to life), waves at the Ziegfeld girls on the wall, then snakes his way to the actors' small but inviting lair. Not surprisingly, there's a leonine theme, with tiny lion fountains, stuffed animals, posters, and pillows featuring the king of beasts. The boom box wears a coating of powder dust, and the mirrors are covered with photos of cast members' children.

As Raize heads downstairs to play with his new dachshund puppy, Ruby, he says, "When we were creating this show, we developed our own community. We had a sense of almost being in a bubble. We couldn't really explain what we were doing to our friends — all we were thinking was that we hoped people would like it. And the result was this amazing piece that we are all incredibly blessed to be a part of." ■

## DISNEY UPDATE

In the wake of *The Lion King's* spectacular success (not to mention the fact that *A Bug's Life* crushed the *Babe* sequel at movie box offices over the holidays), Peter Schneider was recently promoted to president of The Walt Disney Studios. He retains the title of co-president of Walt Disney Theatrical Productions with his longtime associate, Thomas Schumacher, who was also promoted to president of Walt Disney Feature Animation.

"I'm going to stay involved in theater," Schneider told *InTheater* in a telephone interview, teasingly adding, "It's the one bright spot in my life, and why would I give that up?" The producer grew more serious when asked what winning the 1998 Best Musical Tony Award meant to him. "Tom and I were so proud of *The Lion King* and so overwhelmed by the audience response to it," he said. "The Tony was a fundamental validation from the artistic community. As you know, it was a very closely contested race, and I think the award acknowledged that the [Disney] company's work had taken a step forward. All anyone can ever do is try to do good work, and do it better every time out."

On other fronts, Schneider called pop star Toni Braxton "a breath of fresh air" in *Beauty and the Beast*. "We'd wanted to do some multiracial casting with the show, and she and Meshach Taylor bring a real energy and vitality. We're very pleased by how she sings; we love the new song ["A Change in Me"]. And the show has had a great six months [at the box office]. We've brought a new audience to the theater, one who'll go when the right thing is on the stage. I think it's great that the African-American audience has turned out and cheered Toni Braxton. And I think she was very brave to do it."

As for *Aida*, Schneider said, "[Director] Rob Roth did a wonderful job in Atlanta, but we wanted to go in a different direction with the creative team." The choice of Robert Falls, a director not known for musicals, shouldn't be a surprise, Schneider added. "We are aggressive about working with talented, interesting people. Sometimes it's good, and sometimes it doesn't work out the way you want it to." Schneider plugged the all-star *Aida* concept recording, and alluded to "rumors" that the show will play Chicago before coming to New York in the spring of 2000. "It's all about theater availability [on Broadway] and how good the show is. But we are committed to going the next step and bringing it to New York."

Finally, Schneider spoke about the June 1999 opening of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in Berlin. "The Germans commissioned us about three years ago to come up with an original piece for a new theater in Berlin. James Lapine is directing and writing the book; Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz have written the score. We are excited about it — and a little nervous because it will be in German. I haven't a clue as to whether it will go anyplace else, but we're very happy with the creative team, and the show is coming together." — K.H.



Schneider