

Disney's 'Lion King' Roars Back



The Lion King © / TM Disney

"All the world's a stage," said a traveling actor in Hamlet shortly before his troupe performed a play that incited a bloodbath.

Don't expect anything quite that dramatic in this space in the coming months, but hopefully we will be able to provide some entertainment, some insight, and maybe even a little titillation with this regular feature that will discuss all things theater, especially as it impacts the local theater scene.

As a Bethel Park resident who has spent much of the past six years reviewing, previewing, profiling, and discussing theater for local publications, I have seen more high school, community, semi-pro, and regional theater productions than I can count—and I never get tired of it. I was the first to do regular previews of all area high school musicals and I now maintain my own website on the subject (www.springhsmusicals.com). Still, some of this column will be merely one man's opinion, which may be no more valid than any other. That will be the fun part. If you disagree (or agree) with me, let me know at ajcaliendo@yahoo.com.

I don't, however, expect much disagreement on this issue's topic from anyone who got shin splints waiting in line for tickets to the 2004 Pittsburgh Broadway Series presentation of Disney's The Lion King, which came to town for a mere six weeks as a bonus add-on to the series' scheduled shows.

As it turned out, that six-week stop—not nearly as long as it played some "major" cities—fell far short of satisfying the demand for tickets. But then truncated engagements are the norm when Pittsburgh is the destination city. In fact, for the tour of the recent Broadway smash Jersey Boys, the city has been left off the schedule completely, at least for now. That show will stop for a whopping six-month run in Chicago and play for shorter periods in Houston, Minneapolis, and Cincinnati.

The reason for bringing this up now is that, four years later, The Lion King is returning to Benedum Center for another run (January 10 through February 17), this time as part of the season line-up in the PNC Broadway Across America Series. Co-presenters are the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust and Live Nation (I hope I haven't left anyone out).

The 2004 tour stop was a nightmare for theatergoers who wanted tickets but didn't have a season subscription to the series or hold the right credit card. The lucky folks who did fulfill those requirements were offered tickets in advance of the public sale at a rate of eight tickets for every subscription. That policy put those who could not hack the price of a subscription—about \$103 to \$423 per person—at a disadvantage. By the time the public sale was held, a precious handful of seats remained for the crowds that were lined up around the block.

Fran Engler, vice president of the southeastern region for Live Nation, was working for the Cultural Trust in 2004. She says that this time, rather than following the usual practice of cutting the number of weeks for a show's second run in a city, it was decided to keep the number of performances the same as 2004. As of late October, there were still tickets available for many performances, although the lucrative orchestra-section seats were few and far between. "It's a good problem to have," Engler continued, "because Disney sees the market is very strong."

Whew, that will be a relief to the kids whose parents didn't have the connections in 2004 to score tickets to a show that was tailor-made for the younger set.

In fairness, Pittsburgh's larger theaters, Heinz Hall and Benedum Center, must also accommodate the ballet, the symphony, the opera, other touring shows and a variety of concerts.

So, if you missed the opportunity to see The Lion King the last time, this could be your chance. Or, if you are planning a trip east, you can still see it on Broadway as it continues a run of ten years and counting. Either way—enjoy!

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