

## STREET CORNER SYMPHONY

CABELL - 1/4 Ticket

BAILLIE - 3/4 Ticket

### CABELL:

Marion J. Caffey's concept, direction and choreography for *Street Corner Symphony* can be summed up in one word - LAME. This poor man's version of *Smoky Joe's Cafe* makes you realize why Jerry Zaks is one of America's best directors and Mr. Caffey is not. It is a concoction of nonsensical medleys that makes you wonder if ASCAP has a ruling allowing you to use a certain amount of mea-

Photo: Fabrice Trobert



sures from a song before paying royalties. The best choreography in the show is Jules Fisher's and Peggy Eisenhower's lights. Clever and show-stopping as ever. You actually stop looking at the show to look at them. The sets by Neil Peter Jampolis and costumes by Jonathan Bixby are equally lovely though after all that pink, lavender and turquoise (or is it teal?), I doubt there is another pink-lavender-turquoise bauble bangle or bead left in all of Manhattan. This desperately "Rainbow Brigade" casted show features one white woman, who is obviously cast for the sole purpose of the one line joke: "Your boyfriend's black and there's gonna be trouble" - ba dump bump! The only member of the cast without at least two solo numbers, she has a four note 'solo measure' in the finale - Why did they bother? The other token attempt is Jose Llana, who luckily is one of the three stellar talents to grace the stage of this production along with pint-size *Smoky Joe* veteran Victor Trent Cook, who has more talent per square inch than anyone on Broadway. The third heavenly voice belongs to Carol Dennis, cast as the diva deluxe. She has the looks, the attitude and the voice to pull it off. Now if she just had a show.

### BAILLIE:

"Sing from the heart not the head." *Street Corner Symphony* whisks us back to the 60s and 70s when sequins were cool, bell bottoms were it and Motown was king. The question is: Do I want to go? Carol Dennis and Victor Trent are talents extraordinaire. She wails, he wails. Anything you can sing I can sing higher and louder. There is little subtlety in any of the musical choices or text. It is in your face and really in your ears. The sound engineer must be deaf because by the time I left the theatre my ears were ringing. Turn the knobs down! Irresistible Jose Llana, who was so wonderful as Gaby in *On The Town*, is one of those performers who you just love to watch. He has so much fun when he is on, you can't help but get caught up in his energy. Though a strong singer he is outclassed in the wailing department. Newcomer Debra Walton is a bundle of energy that doesn't seem to stop. Her rough "Proud Mary" is a highlight of the evening. Robert, if you found yourself watching the lighting is there something wrong with the production, the design, or both. Correct me if I am wrong but lighting is supposed to augment what the set designer, director and choreographer do and be basically invisible. Marion Caffey's direction and choreography are not at the level I would hope to find in New York. But, even with all the problems, the medley-ridden music and performers shine through and make this nostalgic journey a trip through the heart and not the head.

### R & J

CABELL - SHOUT

BAILLIE - Full Ticket

### CABELL:

The Houseman Studio Theatre production of *R & J*, a very contemporary telling of *Romeo & Juliet*, has taken the term "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" to the extreme. Director Joe Calarco's adaptation, or should I say, renovation of the Bard's tragedy is gutsy, imaginative and insightful, creating a stark and stylish show worthy of the legendary Bertold Brecht. At times the stomping, hissing and bird calls are about to get too much, but they never do. And if that statement confuses and confounds you - listen up. In *R & J*, the entire cast is comprised of four young school boys at a repressive school who decide to stage *Romeo & Juliet* for their own enjoyment. Four young men, no women, and "therein lies the rub". Set your fears of Homo erotica aside - that would be *Much Ado About Nothing*. This is a class act classic. Jeffrey Lowmyer's lighting is skillfully married to Mr. Calarco's staging. As for the cast, three out of four ain't bad. Greg Shamie as Romeo, etc. lacks the dexterity and comprehension of the Shakespearean tongue, giving a performance full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. As for the other three cast members, their performances and characters ran the gamut of finely crafted to exquisite. Bravos to Danny Gurwin for his portrayal of Juliet's Nurse. Tybalt was okay but the Nurse was perfection. Sean Dugan is a standout as both Mercutio and Friar Laurence; this young actor has the makings of the next Robert Duvall. Last but not least comes Daniel J. Shore as Juliet. Not a swish nor a sway did he use to cheapen or satirize the greatest ingenue of English literature. He played the character full-fledged, with honesty, giving a richly textured, impassioned performance. Kudos to producers Frederic Vogel, Bruce Lazarus and Roger Gindi. No guts, no glory: this show has it all.

### BAILLIE:

What if the "Dead Poet's Society" did *Romeo and Juliet*? Take a walk to the John Houseman Studio Theatre at 450 West 42nd Street and check out this Expanded Arts production. Joe Calarco offers a unique and exciting version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Four prep-school boys take a break from their rigorous, ordered world and begin play-acting *Romeo and Juliet*. They soon leave the play acting behind and become the characters. Four remarkable actors take up the gauntlet of this task. I didn't know what to expect. In fact, the first couple of scenes were enough to make me scope out the emergency exit. Then Daniel J. Shore made his first entrance as Juliet. From then on, I believed. Greg Shamie (Romeo) and Shore made a wonderful pair. Shamie's Romeo seemed like he came more from Brooklyn than Verona. But it worked. Their intensity was palpable and erotic. Danny Gurwin's performance as the nurse was exceptional. Sean Dugan as Lady Capulet was absolutely period, as Friar Laurence absolutely devout; in fact, Sean Dugan is absolutely fabulous. The Capulet and Montague men may be wearing the tights, but the ladies in the house of Capulet really wore the pants. The simple costuming of Gap-like pants, white shirts and school-boy sweaters was effective. Aside from the script, one very long red satin scarf was THE prop in the show. The text was cleanly adapted to a more suitable length for this space and cast. Calarco chose excerpts from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to begin and end the production. *R & J* is what is exciting about NY theatre. New, fresh and inventive this production ultimately is very satisfying.

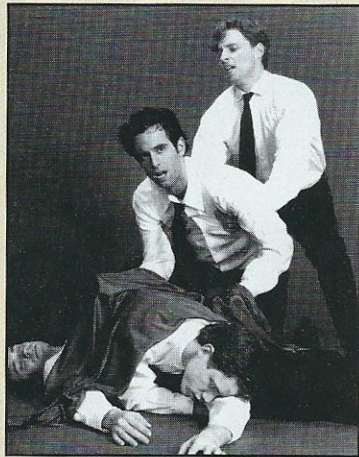


Photo: Carol Rosegg

## THE LION KING

CABELL - Full Ticket

BAILLIE - Full Ticket

### CABELL:

Julie Taymor's *The Lion King* roars on stage in its opening number with such beauty and poetry that nothing else can compare to it. The show is truly a magical experience that is not to be missed. Act One is sheer perfection. Unfortunately all acts and all numbers are not created equal; some of the new numbers desperately lack the power and melodies of the original team of Elton John and Tim Rice. "Scar's" new number

Photo: Joan Marcus

at the top of Act Two "The Madness of King Scar" is a real clunker although John Vickery is a marvelously twisted putty-tat! And the hit song "Can You Feel The Love Tonight" is so badly staged with a laughable "Dream Curly Ballet" while four nightmarish flying cupids drift above a jungle full of Howard Crabtree reject costumes. It could give you heartburn, though I would never be so tackless as to mention it. However, it is a truly wonderful show for children of all ages. Not enough can be said of the power of Ms. Taymor's vision and the vocal lushness the African-ization transformation has brought the show in its metamorphosis from film to stage. The cast is a veritable jungle of ferocious talent. Samuel E. Wright as Mufasa and Scott Irby-Ranniar as young Simba give flawless performances. They're perfectly matched in poise, voice and energy. You get a true sense of a great father-son love that is far too seldom seen in real life. Kajuana Shuford, as young Nala, is spunky and delightful with a voice twice her size while Heather Headley, as the grown Nala, brings the right touch of feline grace to her role and a rich earthy voice to match. Tom Alan Robbins, as the grown Simba, is as handsome and majestic as can be with a knockout pair of pipes. But the most remarkable performance is turned in by Tsidi Le Loka, as the narrator. She wiggles, she wails, she mesmerizes and magnetizes each and every scene. With an exotic collage and vividly textured ensemble to paint the stage, literally, the show combines the stylized forms of Japanese Kabuki theatre with an African flair and Henson-ish wonder. The sets by Richard Hudson were fluid and perfectly married to the concept of the production. Donald Holder's lighting was disappointing. Yes they were bold, yes they were varied, yes they were colorful, but they seldom seemed to create the right moment or mood to support the numbers. I found them often disruptive and anticlimactic. All this aside, Broadway finally has a Cat that really should live for-

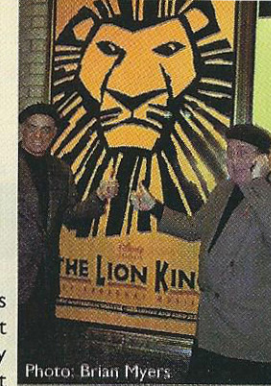
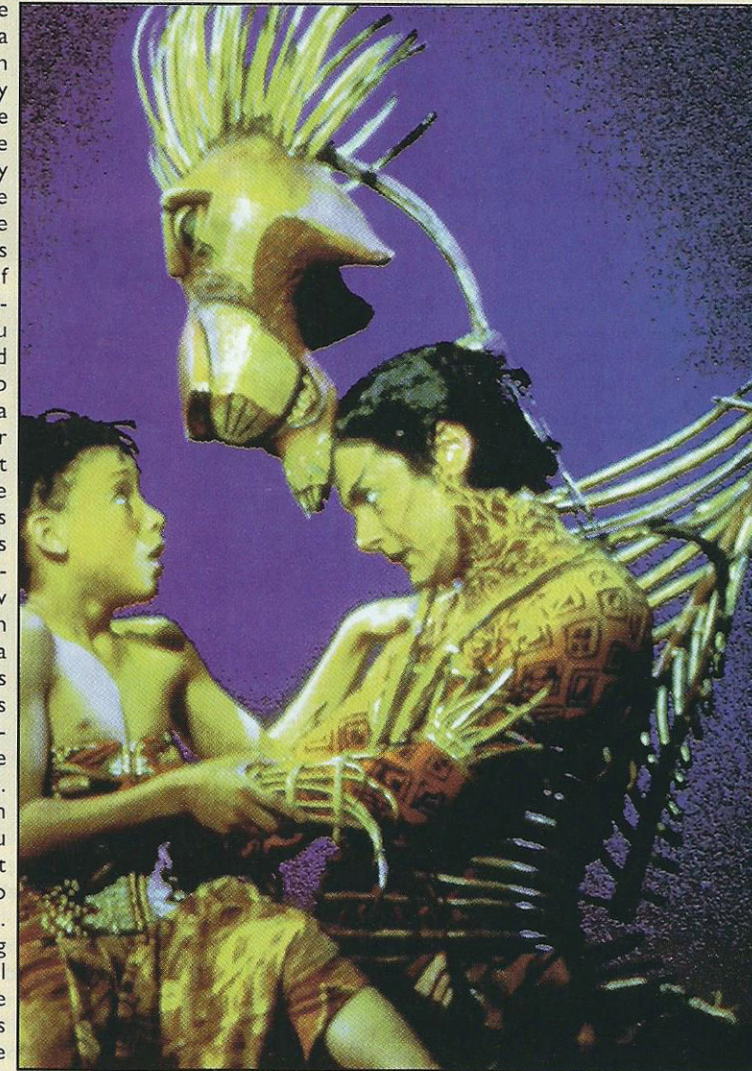


Photo: Brian Myers



ever, instead of the old one that just eternally annoys. GO!

### BAILLIE:

One of the most striking productions to ever grace a Broadway stage, Julie Taymor and Disney have a huge hit on their hands. Elephants in the aisles, birds in the air, giraffes and rhinos wandering the Pridelands, however fabulous, do not forgive some lame choices.

A 90-minute animated feature upscaled to a full length Broadway show has a slow first act and new musical numbers which add nothing.

The true star is the production team, whose creativity and vision have set a new standard. Taymor not only directed and staged this Prideland adventure but also developed the concept and design for the characters. Combining the individuality of each actor with puppets and masks, Taymor and Michael Curray have created real theatrical magic. The winning combination of Elton John and Tim Rice handle most of the music with ease.

Simba, a young lion cub who "Just Can't Wait to be King" learns important lessons from his father Mufasa who is killed in a wildebeest stampede set up by his evil brother Scar. (Don't ask, see!) Regal Samuel E. Wright is a powerful, loving presence as Mufasa. Might is Wright. Children on stage often make me cringe but Scott Irby-Ranniar (Simba) and Kajuana Shuford (Nala) shine up the stage. The scenes between Irby-Ranniar and Wright are royal. Ranniar brings the naive curiosity of Simba to life. John Vickery, as Scar, slinks and slithers around the stage like a feline Cruella DeVil. Too bad his big number (The Madness of Scar) is so weak. Hyenas Shenzi, Banzai and the dopey Ed, (Tracey Nicole Chapman, Stanley Wayne Mathis and Kevin Cahoon) are the Three

Stooges on a real bad day. Jason Raize and Heather Headley are evenly matched as the grown Simba and Nala. Attractive, delightful voices and fun to watch. The money song "Can You Feel The Love Tonight" was totally lost as the audience kept watching and applauding flying dancers. What were they thinking? Sometimes simple is best. This beautiful love song, sung by two beautiful voices should have been a real musical highlight. Max Casella (Timon), Geoff Hoyle (Zazu) and Tom Alan Robbins (Pumbaa) keep the show moving with their high energy and humor. I agree with Robert in that Tsidi Le Loka, the celebrated South African singer, as Rafiki, is magic. Everytime she was on stage the show was alive. The rest of the ensemble sing, dance and chant African rhythms and songs filling the beautiful New Amsterdam Theatre with love. I can feel the love tonight, I just had trouble hearing it.