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THEATER

THEATER; Just Two Animated Characters, Indeed

By BARRY SINGER

THE face of the Walt Disney Company on Broadway these days has many masks. Some are daring and innovative, like those of "The Lion King." Others are theme-park safe yet intimidating -- both Beauty and Beast.

Strip them away and what is left? A matched pair of Disney executives who reflect the company's theatrical countenance: Peter Schneider, president, and Thomas Schumacher, executive vice president, of Walt Disney Theatrical Productions. (They also run the Disney feature animation empire in Hollywood.) Largely unknown, and mostly unseen, save for a televised dash to the stage of Radio City Music Hall to claim the best-musical Tony Award last June for "The Lion King," the two men may be, potentially, Broadway's most powerful concealed weapons.

"Hi. We're the Disney guys."

It is 9:30 in New York on a weekday morning in August and Mr. Schneider is standing alongside Mr. Schumacher, facing about 60 Disney employees -- administrators, cast and crew -- many nervously contemplating their first day on a new job. "Elaborate Lives: The Legend of Aida," Disney's widely anticipated follow-up musical to "The Lion King," begins rehearsals today in this studio near Union Square for an Oct. 7 premiere out of town. It will be a co-production with the Alliance Theater Company in Atlanta, a midsize nonprofit institution with a preponderantly white subscription audience and a celebrated black artistic director named Kenny Leon.

Beaming mischievously, Mr. Schneider and Mr. Schumacher try to disarm the crowd, just a couple of wisenheimers who happen to be paying the bills.

Mr. Schumacher: "We're very informal."

Mr. Schneider: "Yeah, we just don't like to talk."

Mr. Schumacher: "We don't?"

From the sidelines, Mr. Leon looks on, bemused. "I love watching these guys work," he says. But what exactly is the Alliance Theater Company's role? Will Mr. Leon have any influence on the production? The smile turns beatific. "Absolutely none," Mr. Leon says. "But we're feeding at the top of the food chain."

"Elaborate Lives" uses no masks. A rock-and-roll retelling of the operatic Aida story, it has a multiracial cast of 28 relative unknowns, a la "Rent," including Sherie Scott as the Pharaoh's daughter, Amneris; Hank Stratton as her betrothed, the warrior Radames, and Heather Headley -- the original Nala in "The Lion King" -- as the enslaved Nubian princess Aida, whom Radames loves and martyrs himself alongside.

The show also has a pioneering laser-powered set at a cost that some involved, who would not speak for attribution, put at $10 million. This is theme-park technology devised by Disney's legendary Imagineering unit. The central element: a vast pyramid that redeploys dizzyingly before finally entombing Radames and Aida forever.

"Elaborate Lives" unites a variety of people who have helped Disney lay siege to Broadway over the last five years: Elton John and Tim Rice, primary composer and lyricist for "The Lion King"; and Linda Woolverton and Robert Jess Roth, primary book writer and director for "Beauty and the Beast." Unlike its predecessors, though, "Elaborate Lives" (the title derives from one of Mr. Rice's lyrics) has no animated ancestor. The show will be Disney's first wholly original theatrical musical.

While some critics have praised the company's visual achievements in transferring "Beauty and the Beast" and "The Lion King" to the stage, others have found the dramatic underpinnings of the productions less praiseworthy. The question remains: Can Disney create a brand-new musical with the substance of the best Broadway shows?

Michael D. Eisner, Disney's chairman and chief executive officer, the man Mr. Schneider and Mr. Schumacher often refer to shamelessly as "Dad," acknowledges that this time around things are both different and yet much the same. "We had a six-year tryout, as it were, with 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'The Lion King' as movies," he says. "We then took 'Beauty and the Beast' to a regional theater in Houston to develop it as a musical. We took 'The Lion King' to a theater in Minnesota. And now we're going to a smaller, less expensive venue in Atlanta with 'Elaborate Lives' because this is, by design, a smaller, less expensive show.

"The fact that 'Elaborate Lives' wasn't a movie first has its advantages. Dealing with a treasure like 'The Lion King,' we had more to lose by screwing up than with something like 'Elaborate Lives,' which, if we screw up, nobody will remember."

Perhaps. But all eyes, especially on Broadway, have been focused on Disney since the company agreed to restore and occupy the New Amsterdam Theater, a major anchor in the

redevelopment of 42d Street and the rejuvenation of Times Square. In a little less than five years, this multibillion-dollar corporation has become a major player on Broadway.

Alan Menken and Howard Ashman's "Beauty and the Beast," Disney's first cartoon-theater transfer, is still running and has thus far spun off companies in 11 cities worldwide. "King David," a cantata-scale, partly dramatized concert version of the Bible story, by Mr. Menken and Mr. Rice, reopened the New Amsterdam last year for a limited run. It was followed by "The Lion King," directed by Julie Taymor and based on the Disney animated hit. The show remains today a commercial and critical blockbuster.

" 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'King David' were not done by Peter and Tom," Mr. Eisner says. "We just sort of did them out of corporate. When theater became a more strategic direction for the company, we had to make a more formal arrangement. I grew up in New York, I personally loved the theater and I personally knew enough about it to know that we should stay away from it.

" 'The Lion King,' however, enhanced our brand," he continues. "We've been O.K. around the world, but in the intellectual community in New York, we surprised them with 'Lion King.' All of which was not pre-planned. We got lucky. But Peter and Tom made that happen. In fact, I would not have gone into Times Square without them."

If Mr. Schneider and Mr. Schumacher are known for anything on Broadway right now it is for their audacious hiring choice of the iconoclastic Ms. Taymor to oversee the stage transformation of "The Lion King." Yet, in "Elaborate Lives," the two men are returning to the company fold, employing a team largely drawn from the Disney world of animation and theme parks. This is precisely why many people in the Broadway community, prior to "The Lion King," refused to take Disney's efforts at creating musical theater seriously. So wouldn't Mr. Schneider and Mr. Schumacher characterize this as a step backward?

"Elaborate Lives" actually came first, says Mr. Schneider. "At the same time four years ago that we started considering 'Lion King' for Broadway, Elton and Tim wanted to do something that was not animated and we had this children's book we'd bought for animation, 'Leontyne Price's Aida Story,' that we came to think might work better as a stage musical."

Mr. Schneider talks fast, even faster than Mr. Schumacher. Both men are also of medium height and appear almost delicate -- Mr. Schneider pale and wiry, Mr. Schumacher more placidly pallid. In sneakers and jeans, Mr. Schneider projects eternal friskiness, though at 47, he is the elder. Mr. Schumacher, 40, is contrastingly fashion conscious and studious, with a trim mustache, designer eyeglasses and couture linen suit. Like the patter in the animated movies they produce, the two wisecrack endlessly. As in those films, the labor beneath the carefree facade is clearly prodigious.

"They have great give and take," observes Michael Ovitz, the former Hollywood superagent who had a brief run at Disney as Mr. Eisner's second in command before their famous divorce. "People say, 'They practically finish each other's sentences,' but in fact they don't finish each other's sentences, they respect each other's sentences. I imagine they've probably had a ton of disagreements but you'd never know it. They're simply one of the best marriages I've ever seen."

Mr. Schneider generally strikes the major business chords, while deferring to Mr. Schumacher on esthetic matters, though the division remains fluid. At a production meeting after the first full runthrough of "Elaborate Lives," it is Mr. Schumacher who sets the agenda, with Mr. Schneider chiming in from across the table, seconded by a handful of Disney animation staff members flown in from Burbank.

"It's a score of ballads," Mr. Schumacher begins somewhat ruefully. "I don't see any way out other than heaving stuff over the side." He glances knowingly at Mr. Schneider. "We've had this problem before."

They look at each other. " 'Pocahontas,' " both mutter simultaneously. " 'If I Never Knew You,' " explains Mr. Schumacher. The animation contingent nods. "An exquisite Alan Menken ballad. But audiences didn't want to hear it." He pauses. "We took it out."

Mr. Schneider seems crestfallen. "I'm still not sure we did the right thing."

Mr. Schumacher eyes his cohort, who is about to catch a plane back to Los Angeles. "Peter," he asks, "did you eat?"

ONE week later, the two are home in Burbank together for a moment, at the Disney Animation building that Mr. Schneider basically built -- a corporate hive of more than 2,000 animators, writers, computer technicians and number-crunchers -- all laboring beneath the giant, pointy sorcerer's hat that literally crowns the place.

"Nobody had my job before me," Mr. Schneider announces, sprawled on a sofa in his office, sneakers up, head back. "Animation was not a business 15 years ago. The company went through this cataclysmic change when Michael Eisner, Jeffrey Katzenberg and Roy Disney took it over in 1984. Their vision was to restore live action and thereby revive the company. And Roy, when asked by Michael and Jeffrey what he wanted, said, 'Give me animation.' "

From its humble beginnings in 1923 under Roy Disney's uncle Walt and father, Roy Sr., the Disney company enjoyed, of course, a run of unadulterated success as the industry pioneer in feature animation, riding "Snow White," "Pinocchio" and "Bambi," to say nothing of Mickey Mouse, to the summit of American popular culture. In the wake of Walt Disney's death in 1966 though, the animation division lapsed into a decline.

Mr. Schneider was 34 when he arrived in 1985. "There were 190 people here making a movie every 3 or 4 years," he says. As Mr. Schneider tells it, Robert Fitzpatrick, then head of the California Institute of the Arts, who had just organized the Olympic Arts Festival, which Mr. Schneider ran, recommended Mr. Schneider for the job.

Why was he hired, Mr. Schneider asks rhetorically: "Because it fundamentally meant no difference who they hired. They didn't care. Roy cared. But in retrospect, Jeffrey and Michael couldn't have cared less. Animation? Who cares? It wasn't making any money. As a matter of fact, it was losing money. I got lucky because they were not that picky and I was at the right place at the right time."

MR. SCHNEIDER grew up in Wisconsin and graduated from Purdue University in 1971 with a theater degree and aspirations to be a director. Mr. Schumacher, the grandson of a silent-film studio head and a graduate of U.C.L.A., was a worshipful lover of the theater when he found himself, in 1983, at the age of 26, sharing a tiny office at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles with Mr. Schneider, who was coordinating the theater component of the Olympic Arts Festival.

"I was the only person who would have lunch with him; everyone else was bothered that an outsider had been brought in," recalls Mr. Schumacher, sitting in his sumptuous office, furnished by Matthew White, a decorator and Mr. Schumacher's companion of 17 years.

By then, both Mr. Schneider and Mr. Schumacher had worked extensively in the theater, Mr. Schumacher in and around San Francisco and Los Angeles, Mr. Schneider in New York, Chicago and London. When Mr. Schneider and Hope Tschopik, his future wife, were promoted to run not just the theater program but the Olympic festival itself, they invited Mr. Schumacher to work for them as a line producer. Three years later, he found himself being pestered by Mr. Schneider to "come to Disney."

"I had all the preconceived notions about Disney," Mr. Schumacher remembers, "and I didn't feel like a Disney person, even though I'd worked extensively in children's theater. Why did I finally come? Peter. It seemed like a great adventure."

In a span of five years, from 1986 through 1990, six new animated features were released under Mr. Schneider's supervision, including, "Roger Rabbit," a joint project with Steven Spielberg and Robert Zemeckis, and "The Little Mermaid," a full-fledged Ashman-Menken musical. All the movies did appreciably well; the latter two, though, grossed astonishing sums.

Mr. Schneider smiles. "Suddenly, everyone realized, 'Oh, my God. There's money to be made in this business.' "

In fact, after the effusive critical reception of "Beauty and the Beast" as a musical that bettered anything Broadway could offer, Mr. Eisner began thinking something that Walt Disney

probably never had: perhaps Disney should be on Broadway.

"Beauty and the Beast," the stage musical, opened in 1994, generating considerable ticket revenue as well as industry condescension from a Broadway community that widely viewed it as inferior work. Mr. Schneider and Mr. Schumacher will not assess the production on the record beyond stating that it was "unfairly dismissed."

That same year, though, as Mr. Katzenberg exited Disney acrimoniously, leaving Mr. Schneider at the top of Disney Animation, the division released "The Lion King," destined to become one of the most critically acclaimed and financially profitable films ever made -- animated or not. When it inevitably came under consideration as a Disney Broadway venture, Mr. Eisner asked Mr. Schneider to help out. "But I said to Michael," Mr. Schneider recalls, "either keep the whole theater business -- which is fine -- or give it to me and Tom. And Michael said, 'O.K., it's yours.' "

Both men say they were adamant about elevating Disney's theatrical standards. "Peter and I knew that 'Lion King' would have to be different," Mr. Schumacher says. "Push-the-envelope unique. And we got lucky. We caught Julie Taymor at the exact right moment in her career."

To many (including Ms. Taymor herself), she was a surprising choice: a self-described "nonprofit baby," known for adventurous, cross-cultural stage works.

"There was trepidation on both sides, when Peter and Tom first approached me," Ms. Taymor says. "They worried that I was too far out and I worried that they were Disney. But once we started to get into it, once I came up with ideas and a direction that they could back and present to Michael Eisner, there was incredible support and tremendous understanding. Because they know theater, more so than most any New York producer."

Certainly more than most New York producers, Mr. Schneider and Mr. Schumacher work with few financial restrictions. "Beauty and the Beast" was the most expensive musical ever mounted on Broadway up to that time, with an official cost of $12 million, though some estimates were considerably higher. Estimates about "The Lion King" have ranged from $11 million to $15 million, though Disney has never released a production cost figure.

Perhaps, as the producer Rocco Landesman has observed, "No one on Broadway will ultimately imitate or even attempt to compete with Disney because in the end no one else can afford to."

Side by side, in a shadowy back row of the Alliance Theater, Mr. Schumacher and Mr. Schneider hunker down behind their laptops. It is Sept. 17, and the first public preview of "Elaborate Lives" is in a scant few hours, the opening three weeks away.

While Mr. Schneider slips ever lower in his seat -- the signature Schneider slouch, a progressive

descent into posturepedic oblivion, Mr. Schumacher pulls out a fresh bottle of water. "This is the essential difference between making movies and making theater," he announces wryly. "With movies, they bring you water. With theater, you bring your own."

For now, far from Broadway, Mr. Schneider and Mr. Schumacher will be confronting the doubters who viewed "The Lion King" as a Disney anomaly. Is making a cartoon movie musical really the same as creating one for the stage? Can the same formula apply? Should it apply?

"They keep saying that animation is like doing musical theater," Ms. Taymor has said. "It's not been my experience."

Mr. Schneider will have none of this. "The process of development is fundamentally the same," he insists.

"I do worry," Mr. Eisner had conceded a few days before. "Their main responsibility is animation. That's 90 percent of their job. I reluctantly assigned them to do the theatrical work because I had no choice, they're so good. But I prefer them creating product for 2,000 theaters, not 1."

Photos: Thomas Schumacher, left, and Peter Schneider at the Disney Animation building, their offices in Burbank, Calif. At rear, a drawing from the 1940 film "Pinocchio." (Marissa Roth for The New York Times) (pg. 7); Heather Headley, center, as the title character in "Elaborate Lives: The Legend of Aida," Disney's new stage musical. (Sara Krulwih/The New York Times) (pg. 7); Mr. Schumacher, left, Mr. Schneider, Linda Woolverton, who wrote the book for "Elaborate Lives," and Tim Rice, who wrote the lyrics, in Atlanta last month. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times) (pg. 7); Peter Schneider, center, and Thomas Schumacher (in jacket) watch as Japanese actors on the stage of the New Amsterdam Theater learn to operate puppets from "The Lion King" for a production of the musical that is to open in Japan this winter. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times) (pg. 30)
