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A Resplendent Palace for 'King David'

By BARRY SINGER

THERE WON'T BE A Ziegfeld girl in sight next Sunday night onstage at the Walt Disney Company's newly restored New Amsterdam Theater on West 42d Street. Trading pulchritude for pageantry of a purely biblical nature, Disney will re-open Ziegfeld's long-neglected former Follies home with "King David," a new musical by Alan Menken, the composer of a number of secular Disney musical successes.

Described by Disney as "a world premiere concert event," "King David" is not yet a fully staged Broadway musical. With lyrics by Tim Rice, whose biblical songwriting credentials include "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," the work is more of an oratorio. It will be sung by a cast of 46, backed by an orchestra of 54 and directed by Mike Ockrent. The soloists include Marcus Lovett as David, Roger Bart as Jonathan, Stephen Bogardus as Joab, Judy Kuhn as Michal, Alice Ripley as Bathsheba, Peter Samuel as Samuel and Martin Vidnovic as Saul.

As Mr. Menken and Mr. Rice described it recently, seated side by side in the New Amsterdam's grandiose restored bar and lounge area, the nine-performance engagement of "King David" (previews begin on Thursday; the last performance is May 23) may at this point be Broadway's most lavish workshop.

"It's really a fairly un-Broadway piece," said Mr. Rice. "It's something that we hope will work eventually on Broadway, but the great thing is we haven't had to worry about how we get people on and off stage. It's a work in progress."

"King David" is the third Disney collaboration for Mr. Menken and Mr. Rice. The project emerged from a mutual desire to work on something from scratch. "Tim and I first wrote together when he stepped in four years ago to complete 'Aladdin' after my partner, Howard Ashman, died," Mr. Menken said. "Then we worked together again, adding a couple of numbers to "Beauty and the Beast" when it was adapted for the stage."

Mr. Rice is adapting his lyrics for Disney's musical "The Lion King," a stage version of the 1994 animated film, directed by Julie Taymor, with music by Elton John, that is scheduled to open at

the New Amsterdam in November.

It was Mr. Rice's longtime interest in the character of King Saul that sparked "King David." "But we never really had a chance to get going on a King Saul musical," Mr. Rice said. "Often opportunity precedes inspiration. In this case, I received a call from the European film producer Andre Djaoui, who wanted to create an event for Jerusalem 3000, outside the walled city, using the story of David. He said a musical, but the enormous space really could only handle a concert. So that was the assignment we took on. Gradually, over the next couple of years, two things happened. Meeting the dates became really difficult for us. And then Disney came aboard as a producing partner. And they had this theater . . .," he said, gesturing at the eight murals surrounding the domed ceiling.

"Organizing the story into a musical form has been a challenge," noted Mr. Menken.

Mr. Rice elaborated: "The first act is David and Saul, primarily. Then the second half is David at the peak of his temporal powers, finding that his descendants, for one reason or another, are proving not to be what he had hoped."

For Mr. Menken the project has meant writing "something like 5,000 bars of music." By comparison, he said, "Beauty and the Beast" was 2,200 bars. " 'King David' was almost like writing an album, playing with styles: Semitic Middle Eastern, cantorial, pop, classical," Mr. Menken added. "There are five orchestrators, some of them working round the clock, and we're still probably not going to get this completed by the first orchestra rehearsal."

Photo: A model of the set for "King David," designed by Tony Walton and beginning performances on Thursday at the New Amsterdam Theater. (Disney)