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POP/MUSIC

POP/MUSIC; On an Assembly Line of Hits

By BARRY SINGER

THAT "THE LION KING" IS NO ordinary musical -- neither visually nor commercially -- is by now incontestable. The show is a monumental hit, justly applauded for the adventurous cross-cultural stage sorcery of its director, Julie Taymor. The Disney Company has also received considerable acclaim for gambling on a theatrical iconoclast like Ms. Taymor in the first place. But what has been ignored is the out-of-the-ordinary process by which the musical score for "The Lion King" was created.

The movie version was a cartoon epic, salted with five original songs by Elton John and Tim Rice. Its depiction of the torturous journey to adulthood taken by Simba, the royal lion cub, was a box-office smash, producing three hits that became instant favorites with children: the anthemlike "Circle of Life," the farcical "Hakuna Matata" and the romantic pop ballad "Can You Feel the Love Tonight." The soundtrack, a symphonic Hollywood exercise tinged with African flourishes, also won an Academy Award for the composer Hans Zimmer.

Bringing "The Lion King" to the stage meant bolstering this slender score with enough new songs to justify calling the results a musical. How this was accomplished represents a benchmark in the reconfiguring of Broadway musical theater tradition by movie-style Disney corporate culture.

The notion of a Broadway musical as the work of a single composer and lyric writer is a cherished convention in modern musical theater. "The Lion King," though, does not subscribe to it. Mr. John and Mr. Rice are billed as the show's lead composer and lyricist; they did not, however, write the new Broadway score alone. The program credits reveal a score composed by committee, with no fewer than seven composers and lyricists cited, including Mr. John, Mr. Rice, Ms. Taymor, Mr. Zimmer and his partner, Jay Rifkin, along with two other veterans of the movie "The Lion King."

Standard Broadway musical scores generally consist of original songs written to a script's specifications, sometimes supplemented by an occasional "trunk song" culled by the composer from previous work. In this regard, "The Lion King" is also atypical.

To begin with, Mr. John and Mr. Rice were re-enlisted to compose only three new tunes for Broadway. Though Disney declines to comment on this decision, Mr. John says he was at first perplexed by his limited role but now understands the reason for it. "I think they wanted to accentuate the African, which was a very clever move on their part," he says. "In fact, some of the African things work better

than some of my things."

Ms. Taymor confirms that her prime musical concern in reimagining "The Lion King" was to make the movie's authentic African subsidiary music more prominent. To accomplish this, she was helped by an offer of a music cache already owned by Disney.

"When I was first offered this job," she recalls, "along with a CD of the soundtrack, I was given an album called 'Rhythm of the Pridelands -- Music Inspired by Disney's "The Lion King." ' I was told that anything I could figure out to use on it was a plus. I had really been thrilled by the sound of the South African chorus in the movie, and the sound of that chorus was a musician named Lebo M. 'Rhythm of the Pridelands' had more of Lebo's music. And that really excited me."

Lebo M., a Soweto native named Lebo Morake, who has been performing since the age of 9, was a product of South Africa's nightclub scene before attending the Duke Ellington School of Music in Washington and then working in Hollywood. His contribution to the film "The Lion King" consisted largely of background music, which he wrote with Mr. Zimmer, and vocal arranging in his own African idiom. The Zulu cries that opened the movie were also shouted out by Lebo M.

"Rhythm of the Pridelands," recorded primarily at Mr. Zimmer's studio, was an opportunity for the film's supporting musical contributors to capitalize on the movie's vast success. The album contained 11 songs, most of them sung by Lebo M. and written with Mark Mancina, another composer-lyricist who had played a significant role in the movie.

Mr. Mancina, who composed the soundtracks for "Speed," "Twister" and "Con Air" and won a Grammy as co-arranger and co-producer of "The Lion King" soundtrack album, was tapped as something of a ghostwriter for Broadway.

"I was hired two years ago with Julie to put this show together," he says. "My responsibility was the entire score, whether that meant adapting new songs, rewriting songs, writing new songs, writing new score, adapting old score. My only other collaborators were Julie and Lebo. Everybody else whose name is up there was not directly involved in the creation of this show. Tim Rice attended a meeting once in a while and a few performances. Otherwise they were not there."

Mr. John acknowledges that he never saw a performance until opening night, perhaps a first in Broadway history for a musical's composer. "I intended to," he says. "But unfortunately there were funerals to attend, and I just didn't feel like traveling."

As Mr. Mancina explains it: "Elton submitted demo tapes. The form was then completely left up to me -- how many choruses, what keys, modulations. For Elton it was: 'Here's the melody. Here's the lyric. Good luck.' "

Ms. Taymor agrees. "Mark and I did an enormous amount of work with Elton's songs to make them fit with the scenes and the character," she says. "And Mark wrote some other score stuff based on Hans Zimmer's music in the movie. Most of the rest came from songs on 'Rhythm of the Pridelands' that I

loved and felt could be given to other characters."

THAT THE MUSIC WORKS AT all is a further tribute to Ms. Taymor's esthetic judgment. For the score of "The Lion King" ultimately seems to have been composed by Ms. Taymor using multiple composers as her instruments.

"People expect this to be an Elton John musical like Paul Simon's 'Capeman,' " she says. "And that's really not the case, nor do we pretend that it is. I'd like this to be seen as an exciting, positive collaboration rather than, 'Oh, there were so many composers.' What I love is that the South African sound pulls all of the pieces together so that it's not one eclectic mess. 'Lion King's' power is that it is a true bridge between western pop, South African pop and South African traditional music."

Mr. John, for one, seems persuaded by Ms. Taymor's contention. "You have to work by committee," he says. "It's part of the process, I guess. Who am I to argue?"

Photos: GET THEM REWRITE Mark Mancina was hired to adapt songs for "The Lion King." (Monica Almeida/The New York Times); NEW EMPHASIS The authentic African background music of the movie moves more to the foreground in the musical. (Joan Marcus/Marc Bryan-Brown/Disney)