

'Lion King' Roars Into Pantages Run

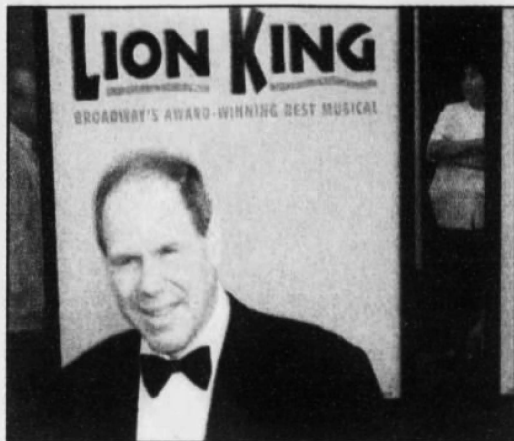
■ **Theater:** About 2,700 attend the premiere for the Disney creation. It was a mega-hit in New York, but L.A. may be a tougher challenge.

By **BOOTH MOORE**
TIMES STAFF WRITER

An old-style Hollywood premiere for Disney's Los Angeles production of "The Lion King" roared into the renovated Pantages Theater on Thursday night as 2,700 guests were greeted with a block-long red carpet, a flurry of flashbulbs and jostling news crews.

Among the first to arrive was Disney Chairman and chief executive Michael Eisner, who said: "It's a big night. It brings our major theatrical work to Los Angeles where it was all created."

"Lion King" was the biggest hit on Broadway since it debuted in 1997. Rave reviews in New York were followed by six Tony Awards, including those for best musical and best director.



LAWRENCE K. HO / Los Angeles Times

Disney chief executive Michael Eisner attends the premiere for "The Lion King" in Hollywood.

But this is Los Angeles, a place not known for supporting live theater. The target audience stretches from San Diego to Santa Barbara and from Santa Monica to Las Vegas.

Given the challenges, "Lion King" will serve as a test for how long even a musical theater megahit can run in Los Angeles.

Striding down the red carpet with his wife, Patty, Disney board Vice Chairman Roy Disney expressed

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LAWRENCE K. HO / Los Angeles Times

Director Julie Taymor, left, smiles for photographers outside the "Lion King" opening. The musical won six Tony Awards in New York.

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confidence that Angelenos will flock to the theater spectacle.

"It's such a good show," he said. "I've not seen anyone walk out without a silly grin on their faces, and usually a few tears."

Most of the audience seemed to agree with him.

"A lot of times you hear so much about a show, only to be disappointed," Joani Robbins, a voice-over actress from Los Angeles, said after the performance. "But this was better than I expected."

Her friend, Christina Frank, a television producer from Santa Monica, said: "Joani went through a whole box of Kleenex."

Thomas Schumacher, a producer of the show, says that a relatively low \$12 to \$77 ticket range caters to a variety of economic groups and reflects the production's message of diversity.

"I decided to put the show on here because it's a great location," Schumacher said. "It's the best theater in town . . . and ticket sales have been terrific."

The 1930s-vintage movie house was fully revamped for the event by theater owner James M. Nederlander at a cost of \$10 million. Every surface of the building was painted, cleaned, rebuilt or restored under the guidance of interior designer Roger Morgan of Sachs Morgan Studio in New York.

On Thursday night, the crowd seemed almost as impressed with

the theater's renovations as with the production itself.

Staring wide-eyed at the glittering decor during intermission, D'nez Westmoreland, who works for an executive search company in Los Angeles, said: "It's breathtaking. It feels like daytime."

The African-themed after party, held in tents across the street, had the upbeat appearance of one of Disneyland's Adventureland rides.

Celebrities—many of them clad in leopard-print coats and blouses—were entertained by chanting percussion groups at tables illuminated with giant giraffe light fixtures. Hors d'oeuvres on platters draped in green grass were delivered by women dressed in hoop skirts with spirals of ants seeming to cascade down the sides.

Among the guests were Laura San Giacomo, David Hyde Pierce, Wendie Malick, Debbie Allen, Lucy Liu, Steve Martin, Alan Cumming and Calista Flockhart.

Although Disney will not reveal current figures for ticket sales, it extended the run of the show to Oct. 1, 2001, from a planned July 1 closure. The company sold \$3.7 million in tickets on the first day the box office opened last May.

Still, "Lion King" comes at a time when New York is generating few major shows—particularly big musicals—with popular appeal. The heyday of "Cats," "A Chorus Line" and "Les Miserables" is over. Across the country, 2,000-seat theaters sit empty.

Whether "Lion King" can revive the genre remains to be seen.