



Music Review

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A Review of Disney's Aladdin - A Musical Spectacular

The 1992 feature-film Aladdin is considered to be part of Disney's 'Golden Age' of animation. Many of Disney's films during this period are likened to pieces of musical theatre. Character's heightened emotions and situations are given eventually through song. Aladdin as well as The Little Mermaid, Hercules and Beauty and the Beast have all made the successful transition to the Broadway and West End stage. This success is mostly due to the musical talents of Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, who wrote the songs for all the Golden Age animations bar The Lion King and also brought us the Broadway hit Little Shop of Horrors.

The most successful of these Disney 'screen to stage' transitions is, of course, Julie Taymor's The Lion King. Taymor's reimagining is a hybrid of both the popular staples of the film version whilst also leaning on traditional African puppetry, mask work and stylised movement. The Lion King stands on its own merit as a piece of theatre. Making the transition from two-dimensional animation to a fully realised theatrical experience is no easy trick but this abridged forty-five-minute version of Disney's Aladdin achieves deftly and with panache. This production of Aladdin is very much the Disney version as opposed to the traditional Arabian Tale of which it originates. Its success as a production lies in the fact that it uses theatre production effects and conventions innovatively. The performers heightened tongue in cheek performance style meets the requirement of fairy-tale family entertainment to almost pantomimic levels.

This particular production ran for an impressive thirteen years inside the Hyperion Theatre in Hollywood Land at Disney California Adventure. Billed as a Broadway level show – it is a condensed version of the story designed not as the main attraction but as part of a family's day out. The show focuses on the highlights of the story and relies to some degree on its audience's prior knowledge of the original film narrative to fill the gaps in character development or missing scenes.

An American friend once said to me, "I don't understand Brit's obsession with panto, what is it?" – well, from what I witnessed this show relied heavily on the conventions of "British" pantomime and even included the broad character types that we associate with the form. The show encouraged a 'panto' like interaction from its eager audience. The audience booed the baddies, cheered the goodies, answered back to character's questions or calls for help and even gave good natured heckles. This, married with direct address from performer to audience and pop cultural references all added, to my mind, a very British pantomime feel. What was interesting in the performances of Aladdin and Princess Jasmine is the way their movements imitated those of their animated counterparts. However, the Genie is the most problematic character to bring to life; the performer cannot achieve the shape shifting possibilities of Robin Williams' Genie, therefore, comic timing, impersonation, wit, and personality win. The Genie becomes a Las Vegas Stand Up Comedian and it works. The Genie should be funny as well as full of human warmth.

I think we have to give modern audiences more credit when it comes to theatre, especially children. A child's imagination can ignore the wires and people holding puppets and invest in the magic of the world they are being presented. The set was opulent, rich and full of colour, fit for an Arabian adventure. Although the magic carpet is performed by a person in a costume through mime and with exaggerated gestures – the body language of the performer alone gave the carpet a wonderful personality which was communicated well. Lago the wise cracking

parrot was achieved with a puppet, and the puppeteer in plain sight did not detract from the illusion. I wondered why Aladdin's pet monkey Abu couldn't have been achieved with a similar device.

The production uses projection, puppets, wire work, animatronics, and stage lighting to add perspective and manipulate the space well. At one-point Aladdin is hooked to wires which allow, with the help of projection, to descend a great way down into the Cave of Wonders. Front cloths are brought in to aid an array of impressive scene changes. The tall illustrative sets gave an effect of magnitude and fairy tale wonder.

Two impressive moments see Aladdin bestride a large puppet elephant which travels through a delighted audience and an evil Jafar transform into a tall snake which erupted from a trap door in front of the stage apron. For me, the true theatrical magic is saved for the famous carpet ride to the song 'A Whole New World' – as Aladdin and Jasmine ascend on a wire operated carpet, smoke engulfs the stage, giving the audience the impression of being above the clouds whilst performers sway and move in time to the music whilst carrying famous landmarks that are lit like lanterns. A large moon and star cloth complete the effect; making us believe that for a moment we are along for the ride.

Overall, this production meets its brief of providing a non-taxing and enjoyable romp through the streets of fictional Agrabah. The show remains faithful to the film whilst using theatre to create its own brand of magic. Under all the spectacle there is still the message: it is what is on the inside that counts. Always allow your true self to shine through!

By Mr Bailey