

Broadway's 'The Lion King' pushes into virtual reality

November 18 2015, by Mark Kennedy



This image released by Disney Theatrical Productions shows Jelany Remy as Simba in the Broadway musical "The Lion King. The Disney stage blockbuster on Wednesday, Nov. 18, 2015, released 360-degree footage of its opening song "Circle of Life" that lets users look left, right, up, backstage and at the audience even when sitting on a couch. (Joan Marcus/ Disney Theatrical Productions via AP)

"The Lion King" on Broadway is offering fans a view of the musical that

even the very best seat in the theater can't rival.

The Disney stage blockbuster on Wednesday released 360-degree footage of its opening song "Circle of Life" that lets users look left, right, up, backstage and at the audience, even when sitting on a couch.

"It seemed like a really perfect marriage: A universally known song like 'Circle of Life' being distributed and displayed through a completely new technology that we hope will open up 'The Lion King' to a new generation of theater-goers," said Andrew Flatt, the [senior vice president](#) for marketing at Disney Theatrical Group.

The footage was shot on the afternoon of Oct. 30 at the Minskoff Theatre, the home of "The Lion King." It took five takes of the song with all 31 cast members onstage to capture all the footage as several hundred volunteers and fans cheered in the orchestra seats.

During the filming, the audience members were politely asked not to wave at the cameras, resist the urge to clap at the beginning and keep their energy levels up for all five takes.

To create the virtual reality world, some half-dozen GoPro cameras were mounted on a stand and placed in the center of the stage as the actors swirled around in their Julie Taymor-created costumes and masks.

The stand also telescoped 20 feet into the air to capture the view as Pride Rock rises up and baby Simba is introduced. Software stitched together the various videos into a seamless, 360-degree view—a circle of life.

Viewers can follow one performer, or look out into the aisles to see elephants arriving, see the conductor and audience faces, or peer backstage to find out what's coming next. It is a thrilling, heady experience.

"I keep turning in different directions and discovering new things," said Flatt. "I hope that the video inspires memories and perhaps brings back to the theater people who've seen the show. But, in the same token, I hope it opens up the eyes of people who never thought 'The Lion King' would be for them."

The footage can be seen free on laptops and desktops on Wednesday via YouTube and Facebook (using cursors to move around the virtual world) or smartphones and tablets (where the screen tracks movement) or special immersive headsets like Samsung's Gear VR and Google Cardboard.

It's part of a wave of immersive videos that are taking the Internet by storm. So far, such videos have been made of a "Star Wars" planet, the "Saturday Night Live" set, a Bill Clinton tour of East Africa and a LeBron James workout, among others.

The addition of "The Lion King" is noteworthy because, at 18, it is one of the oldest shows on Broadway but has embraced technology that's truly cutting edge. It's the first such video ever done in a Broadway theater. Another such video was done for the new musical "School of Rock," but that was shot in classroom.

"Nothing will replace the actual theatrical experience. We're well aware of that. But I think the way that consumers are trending at the moment is they want to know more. They want to go beyond the surface of something, and that includes the Broadway experience," Flatt said. "That's why the virtual reality platform is groundbreaking."

More information: www.youtube.com/user/DisneyOnBroadway
www.facebook.com/TheLionKingUSA

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