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ISSN 0376-1631

0 74470 92783 9

Raize of Light

After a secluded childhood, Jason Raize is getting used to the spotlight in *The Lion King*.

By Patrick Pacheco

When Jason Raize heard that director Julie Taymor was looking for an actor of “unidentifiable ethnicity” to play older Simba in the Broadway musical *The Lion King*, he knew that he was right for the role. After all, the 22-year-old actor had played roles usually taken on by Latino, Asian, and African-American actors in touring productions of *Miss Saigon* and *The King and I*. In community

Indeed, “unidentifiable” is a label that seems to suit the elusively protean Raize, who won the coveted role of heir apparent in what has become the most phenomenal hit in recent Broadway history.

In person, Raize reveals himself to be a fascinating and complex puzzle not only of ethnicity but also of emotional and psychological makeup — one, in fact, that mirrors to a sympathetic degree the role of

you?” he is asked after he orders a cheddar cheeseburger and onion soup between matinee and evening performances.

“I don’t know,” he responds matter-of-factly. “I’m adopted.”

His adoptive parents, he explains, are two professors — one Jewish, one WASP — who raised him and his two siblings, also adopted but from other families, on a remote 160-acre estate atop the



“I’m trying to learn tact and diplomacy,” says Raize. “It’s tough keeping everything in perspective.”

theater, he’d even been cast in parts as diverse as Tulsa in *Gypsy* and, of all things, Rolf in *The Sound of Music*. (He dyed his curly black hair blond for the role.)

the restless and frustrated adolescent lion prince he is playing in Taymor’s visionary stage adaptation of the animated Disney classic.

“So, exactly what ethnicity are

Catskill Mountains in upstate New York. There was little ethnic or religious identification in the Raize household; they were Unitarians, although his father once felt com-

pelled to take his younger son to a couple of Hebrew classes. "My parents were white; I felt white." To complicate matters, his original adoptive mother died when he was three, and he was adopted a year later by his father's second wife. When Raize was seven, his brother died of lung cancer at nine years of age. Eight years later, his parents divorced, and he went to live with his father in Oneonta, 20 miles away. Raize supposes that he may eventually feel a curiosity "to tie up loose ends" by discovering his biological parentage, "but I don't feel that way now."

Whatever the original gene pool, Raize is an exotically handsome young man with hazel eyes and mocha coloring. In the course of an interview, he exhibits a playful charm that one suspects belies a cunning which is part instinct, part survival strategy. There is something of the motherless child about Raize that makes one want to protect and help him. Later in the interview, he reveals that he has had a number of mentors — including *Lion King* choreographer Garth Fagan, producer Thomas Schumacher, and Elton John's manager John Reid.

"What I immediately recognized about Jason," says Fagan, "was his talent and, more importantly, his passion. He has a beautiful voice and his dancing, well...he was disciplined and willing to try, to fail, and then to try again. He worked very hard and just grew

and grew in the role."

Raize's cheerful yet steely resolve proved crucial in winning the role of Simba. Just as auditions for *The Lion King* were starting, he was cast in a swing role in the Hayley Mills touring version of *The King and I* by Jay Binder, who was also working on *The Lion King*. The casting

director refused to let him audition for Simba, as it would be conflict of interest. Undeterred, Raize showed up at an open call. "Just because somebody tells you 'no' doesn't mean you have to accept that," he says. "I really believe that you make your own luck in this world." After three weeks of more callbacks, Julie Taymor informed him Raize the role was his.

"From the very beginning, I had a connection with Simba that was very, very personal," says Raize. "I could identify with the chaos bubbling inside of him. He can't give a name to it, but he wants direction and he doesn't know where to go. I've felt that anxiety a lot in my life.

I've had these incredible urges to do something, but I didn't know where I wanted to go. Like Simba, I put huge parts of my adolescent self aside — feel-



"There is a great sense of peace that you get from solitude," Raize reflects.

ings, desires — until self-awareness came and this deluge of emotion burst through. So when I sing, 'He Lives in You,' it comes from a very real place inside me."

It is just one of the many ironies of Raize's life story that a young man playing such a huge part in a pop culture phenomenon should have known so little about it until he was 16. Movies and television were practically non-existent during his secluded childhood. The only Disney film he'd seen as a boy was *Fantasia* (because his father, he says, liked the music). The home in which he was raised valued intellectual discourse above all else, and Raize — with no friends apart from his sibling — grew up immersed in books, most notably science-fiction fantasies about heroes whose intense emotional problems mirrored his own. "But they had more tools at their disposal, some magical, than I had," he recalls. "They also had strong wills, and I absorbed those lessons of standing on your own two feet pretty early on."

One of the few times, in fact, that he was allowed to indulge in outside activities was on the day his brother died. Neighbors took him

Raize shares a triumphant opening night curtain call with co-stars John Vickery, Scott Irby-Ranniar, and Samuel E. Wright.



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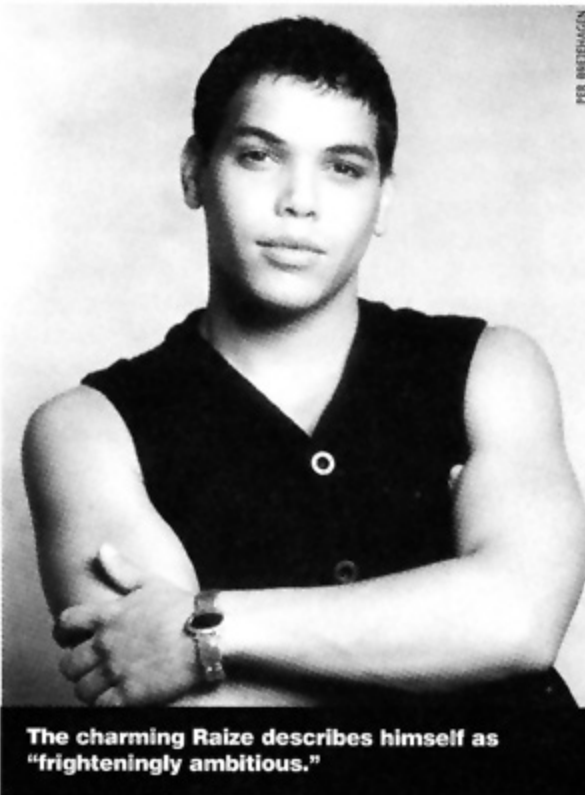
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and his sister to a circus for the first time, and he was utterly thrilled with the experience. While his parents had patiently explained to him and his sister all facets of his brother's cancer and the likelihood of his death, he recalls that he was still shocked to return from the circus to find his brother gone and his room totally stripped of his effects. "The main thing I felt was guilt that I had been having so much fun while he was suffering so terribly," he says.

Finding it difficult to keep up with his parents intellectually,

himself. "It was such a revelation," he said. "I even got to sing."

Opportunities for both exposure to pop culture and theater multiplied when his parents divorced. At age 16, Raize moved with his father to the "city" (Oneonta), where he discovered the Orpheum Theatre, a small community outfit. After graduating from high school, he enrolled in Manhattan's American Musical and Dramatic Academy and began auditioning for Broadway shows, even though he'd only seen one — a revival of *Fiddler*



PER BREIDENBACH

The charming Raize describes himself as "frighteningly ambitious."

on the Roof — and hadn't liked it much. Still, the idea of "live performance in such a huge space" really got to him. His heart would later be captured by *Miss Saigon*. "I started auditioning for it when I was 17, and finally got it just before I turned 21. Persistence pays off."

By then, Raize — having dropped out of AMDA after spending a summer at Bucks County Playhouse in the title role of Maury Yeston's *Phantom* — had already

which was expected of him, Raize developed an alternative strategy. He mined intuitive and instinctual impulses which he then used to push their emotional buttons — something which he became very good at. Other than driving his parents crazy, this acute talent to read and interpret human behavior remained a secret weapon until his mother sent him off to a Shakespeare summer workshop. Playing roles like Orlando in *As You Like It* and Feste in *Twelfth Night*, Raize finally had an outlet for all the pent-up emotions within

toured for a year as Pontius Pilate in the Ted Neeley-Carl Anderson revival of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. A callow 19-year-old at the time, the actor recalls with a wry smile, "I had a lot of learning to do, especially when it came to a company of actors who'd had a lot more experience than I had. I'd get off the bus when we got to a town and run to the theater like a kid in a candy store. They thought I was pretty crazy."

In just a short time, of course, that naive exuberance has yielded to much higher stakes with the

tremendous success of *Lion King*. In the course of the interview, it is clear that Raize is trying to maintain his footing — which has not always been easy. He says the company is just now coming to terms with the expectations and pressures of being the hottest ticket, perhaps, in Broadway history. He hopes that they can learn to sustain and celebrate “the joy” of the work, but that camaraderie is sometimes compromised by the competitive pressures, jealousy, and the assertion of prerogatives that accompany any hit show. Describing himself as “frighteningly ambitious,” he says he is trying to keep his feet on the ground as company members jockey for position and access.

“I’m trying to learn tact and diplomacy,” says Raize with such utter guilelessness that it’s almost comical. “My poor agents. They don’t want to hear from me; I’m at a really bad age to be calling them all the time. But there is so much I want to do. It’s tough keeping everything in perspective.”

In this, at least, Raize may have a leg up on everybody else thanks to his reclusive upbringing. Nature walks were a daily occurrence, and from those he learned that in the larger scheme of things, he wasn’t all that big of a deal. “There is a great sense of peace that you get from solitude,” he says. “One of my favorite places when I was a child was this lopsided open field where I could see the grass waving in the wind, bordered by trees and pure sky. I’d sit there all the time, just thinking. And when I sing ‘Endless Night’ in the show, that’s where I go. It’s a very comfortable place, both for me and for Simba. I don’t have to ‘act.’ I don’t have to do anything out of the ordinary. I just have to be.” ■

PATRICK PACHECO writes the “Play By Play” column in *Newsday* and covers the arts for *The Los Angeles Times*.

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