



Photos by Kendra Lolio

Cast members join around the stage for the final scene in Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School's production of 'The Lion King Jr,' during a dress rehearsal this week.

# Fit for a 'King'

## Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School launches ambitious production of 'The Lion King Jr.'

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COVENTRY — The students at Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School are bringing the African savannah to Coventry with their production of "The Lion King Jr." which opens this Friday. The show will include more than 60 of the school's best performers who have spent months preparing for their final curtain call this week.

"The Lion King Jr." musical features all the hit songs from the Disney film such as "Hakuna Matata," "I Just Can't Wait to Be King" and "Can You Feel the Love Tonight." These songs tell the story of the young lion prince, Simba, played by Johnny Marchetti, who is playful and shirks the responsibilities of royalty pressed upon him by his father, Mufasa, played by Jonathan Kenney. When his father is killed by his evil uncle, Scar, played by Anthony Lautieri, he runs away from the Pride Lands in hopes of forgetting his past. Adult Simba, played by Keith Moors, ends up befriendng a warhog and meerkat known as Timon and Pumbaa, played by Lauren Chopy and Madison Houghton, who help him to move on. When the animals of the Pride Lands beg Simba to return he is forced to



Madelyn Almedia as Rafiki talks with Nala (Julia Gencarella) at a dress rehearsal for the Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School's production of 'The Lion King Jr.'

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Timon (Lauren Chopy, right) and Pumbaa (Madison Houghton, left) talk to young Simba (Johnny Marchetti).



The "Lionesses," including Alison Abbruzzese, Benna Leigh Fournier, Liangie Reyes, Melody Asselin, Morgan Jandron, Nathalie Turchetta and Sophia Dottor.



# King

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decide whether he will fulfill his destiny to be king.

Work on the show started back in October 2016 when Co-Directors Lori and Lisa Lebrun and Kristi Robinson began working with students on learning the complicated language of the musical score which includes portions of Zulu and Swahili.

"It all started with teaching them the language," Lebrun said. "You have to teach them what it is and what it means. Then you have the songs, the harmonies, the movements."

Lebrun, who is a guidance counselor at ASFMS, said

about 120 students auditioned for the show and about 65 received rolls in the production, with another 25 students on the set and props committee.

"It's hard to believe they're 12-year-olds," she said. "They've been working so, so hard."

Artistic Director Justine Lavigne worked with the students to create props like large elephants and rhinos the students operate from inside. She will also be in charge of makeup, which for this show primarily consists of face paint and tribal markings.

The focal point of the set by far is the large wooden sun assembled and donated by local company Mowry

Construction, who also made the set's Pride Rock prop. Throughout the show the sun will rise and set as time progresses, much like the iconic sun shot from the film.

Lebrun said putting on the shows each year is truly a community-wide effort that is enjoyed by many, especially those who come to the often sold out shows to see the final product.

"We have a lot of people that donate their time. It's amazing," she explained. "It gives a sense of community I think for our town. Everybody really looks forward to it."

The ASFMS Drama Department has also developed a relationship with Riverside Middle School. The two departments now regularly share props and costumes to save on expenses. Other pieces are rented through Music Theatre International.

"We have someone renting our Beauty and the Beast stuff this year," said Lebrun. "It's kind of just a community thing where you get to know people and help each other out a little bit."

In her four years of directing at the school the department has done productions of "Annie," "Beauty and the Beast" and "High School Musical," very much reviving the theater scene at ASFMS. Lebrun said she did not have any theater experience when she began directing, but once she decided to give it a shot it was the students that made it all worth



Madison Houghton, Keith Moors and Lauren Choppy perform "Hakuna Matata."

while.

"They are the most amazing group of kids you could ever imagine," she said. "They have no idea how much they give to me. They really don't."

As a musical, the roles require heavy singing and dancing, which are skills that largely depend on the talent pool of the students auditioning. ASFMS is in no short supply of talented singers and dancers and seemed to stock the show with each and every one available.

Keith Moors, who plays the adult-version of Simba, said that he has been singing for a couple of years now and

felt the part was a good fit for him.

"I also like that I have a big part so I can show off what I can do," he said. "But the whole cast and theme is great."

Madelyn Almeida, an 8th grader who plays Rafiki, an omniscient mandrill, also has a passion for singing and performing. She said the role in the Broadway Musical version of "The Lion King Jr". is more significant than that of the Disney film. As Rafiki, Almeida will perform songs like the powerful "Circle of Life" and "He Lives in You." The part calls for a singer with wide vocal range, and

she will have a number of solos throughout the production.

"The characters in the movie and the play are so much different," she explained. "Especially Rafiki who plays a much bigger part in this show."

Tickets are \$8 per person and children under 5 are free. The Friday, March 3 opening show at 6:30 has already sold out, and Lebrun said she expects the other showings to have a similar turnout, including Saturday, March 4 at 1 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

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