

Actor L. Steven Taylor is the king behind 'The Lion King'

By MARK KENNEDY
AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — L. Steven Taylor got the call that would change his life in 2005: Would he like to make his Broadway debut in "The Lion King"? It was just a six-month contract but he took it, uprooting his family and moving to New York.

"Six months has turned into 16 years," Taylor says with a smile. "The show just kept kind of pulling me back, calling me back. It's home for me."

Taylor got the honor to restart "The Lion King" this week as Mufasa, the king, after 18 months of silence due to the pandemic. Roars greeted him as he stood atop Pride Rock at Tuesday's reopening. Being back is both familiar and not.

"It's just different and the same," he says. "It's kind of these two feelings fighting with each other constantly everywhere."

Taylor started in the Broadway ensemble, went out on tour, took a break to do other work, returned to the ensemble, went back on tour and has been Mufasa on Broadway for the last six years.

Taylor — born Steven Lamar Taylor but who goes professionally as L. Steven Taylor — has matured into the Mufasa role, gradually making it his own. He was a young father when he started in the show and now his son is off in college — studying musical theater.

"This is everybody's favorite father, you know what I mean? That weight of the gravity of what I was stepping into was super heavy on me at first just because I just wanted to do it right," he says.

"When I first stepped into the role, I was 26. I was a very young father. And all I was trying to do was not trying to mess up. So every time I put on the costume, I felt like I was kind of playing in daddy's clothes."

Over time, he has infused the role with his own personality and rebuilt his body to easily wear the costume, which he warns will "swallow you up," especially the king's big headdress.

"I was confident enough of who I am as a dad, as an actor, to bring those elements into this role and vice versa. There's a lot of things that I've learned through playing this role that I like to think that I've implemented into my life as a father to my relationship with my son."

Taylor recounts the first time his son watched him as Mufasa. His young son, Steven Taylor Jr., and a friend were seated in the front row when — spoiler alert — Mufasa dies and is lowered into the ground. From the stage, Taylor could hear his son's friend saying: "Your dad's dead now." To which his son replied: "He's just playing!"

Adrienne Walker, who plays Nala in the show, calls Taylor a natural leader and a comforter. He checked in on her frequently during the shutdown, once even offering to drive her to and back from the doctor's office because she didn't want to take the subway. "He is a leader and he cares and it's not show. It's just who he is," she says.

During the enforced hiatus from "The Lion King," Taylor had to pivot. He did online concerts and turned his son's old bedroom into a recording studio to narrate audio books. He



"THE LION King" cast appear at the curtain call following their first show back after the COVID-19 shutdown, at the Minskoff Theatre on Tuesday, Sept. 14, 2021, in New York.

and his partner, Holly Ann Butler, an actor in the Broadway musical "Diana," made funny videos, one of which went semi-viral called "The Tango Quarantine."

He also took the time to reflect on what he wanted to be. "Revisiting the things that were important to me during this time was a really key factor in getting me through this, reconnecting with family and even cutting some friends off," he says.

On a wider scale, Taylor has also cheered proposed reforms and commitments for the theater industry to be more inclusive galvanized by the killing of George

Floyd and last summer's protests.

"Broadway itself has always been this kind of lofty ideal that wasn't really changing. Broadway was this unmovable thing," he says. "We are what makes up Broadway and it should reflect that."

In addition to his regular job, Taylor and a castmate from "The Lion King" are writing a musical and he'd like to return to TV and film — mediums "I didn't think that I would enjoy as much as I do," he says.

"The most important thing to me is, is being able to tell stories of people who are underrepresented in whatever area. And

that's most likely where most of my efforts will go from here on out."

While "The Lion King" has been running on Broadway for 23 years, Taylor thinks it's the perfect show to usher the world toward a more equitable and inclusive future.

"We're a predominantly Black cast and so people are coming to see a predominantly Black cast telling this particular story. We represent royalty. We're not the stereotypes that you see on TV. We're kings, queens, you know what I mean? We're flawed, but we figure those things out," he says.

'A big gray elephant': Paris' Arc de Triomphe is wrapped up

By ARNO PEDRAM
Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The city of Paris is unveiling a monumental artwork built around an actual monument: the Arc de Triomphe completely wrapped in silver and blue fabric.

The installation by late artist couple Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who conceived the project in 1961, will open on Saturday. Visits will take place for almost three weeks. At weekends, the Arc de Triomphe's traffic-heavy roundabout will be entirely pedestrianized.

Visitors to the famous Napoleonic arch, which dominates the Champs-Élysées Avenue, will not only be able to see the gleaming fabric, but to touch it too — as the artists had intended.

Those climbing the 50 meters (164 feet) to the top will step on it when they reach the roof terrace.

At a press conference on

the project entitled "Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped," France's Culture Minister Roselyne Bachelot called it "a formidable gift offered to Parisians, the French and beyond, to all art lovers."

Bachelot added that it was "a posthumous testimony of artistic genius."

Bulgarian-born Christo Vladimirov Javacheff met Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon in Paris in 1958 and they later became lovers. The idea for the artwork was born in the early '60s, when they lived in Paris. Jeanne-Claude died in 2009, and Christo in May last year. The monument was to be wrapped last fall, but the COVID-19 pandemic delayed it.

Christo "wanted to complete this project. He made us promise him that we will do it," the couple's nephew, Vladimir Yavachev, told The Associated Press.

The \$16.4 million project is being financed

through the sale of Christo's preparatory studies, drawings, scale models, and other pieces of work, Yavachev said.

Passersby on Thursday looked up in awe. "It makes me think of a big gray elephant placed in Paris on the Champs-Élysée" said 47-year-old Thomas Thevenoud, who works nearby.

"You really rediscover the beauty of the form," said 39-year-old Parisian Agnieszka Wojel. "I couldn't stop taking pictures because it's extraordinary... We are very lucky."

The artists were known

for elaborate, temporary creations that involved blanketing familiar public places with fabric, including Berlin's Reichstag and Paris' Pont Neuf bridge, and creating giant site-specific installations, such as a series of 7,503 gates in New York City's Central Park and the 24.5-mile "Running Fence" in California.

Yavachev said he plans to complete another one of their unfinished projects: a 492 feet pyramid-like mastaba in Abu Dhabi.

"We have the blueprints, we just have to do it," he said.



PEOPLE WATCH workers wrapping the Arc de Triomphe monument, Wednesday, in Paris. The "L'Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped" project by late artist Christo and Jeanne-Claude will be on view from, Sept. 18 to Oct. 3.

Elton John postpones European shows after hip injury

LONDON (AP) — Elton John says he is postponing European dates on his world tour until 2023 so that he can have an operation on an injured hip.

The 74-year-old singer-songwriter had been due to play cities in Britain and Europe this year as part of the Farewell Yellow Brick Road tour, followed by shows in the U.S. in 2022.

But he said a fall on a hard surface in late summer had left him in pain.

He said in a statement on Thursday that "despite intensive physio and specialist treatment, the pain has continued to get worse and is leading to increasing difficulties moving. I have been advised to have an operation as soon as possible to get me back to full fitness and make sure there are no long-term complications."

He said that "it is with great sadness and a heavy heart that I am forced to reschedule the 2021 dates of my Farewell Yellow Brick Road tour in Europe and the UK to 2023."

He promised fans that "the shows will return to the road next year and I will make sure they are more than worth the wait."

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- ★ **Sat., Sept. 18** — Iron County Farmer's Market 10am-1pm — Friends of Mercer Public Library Open House, 2-5pm at the Mercer Library. Online auction items will be on display and tickets for Book Basket raffles will be available. For more information, call the library at 715-476-2366 or visit www.mercerpubliclibrary.org.
- ★ **Tues., Sept. 21** — Ironwood Township Farmers Market, Airport Park, 4-6pm
- ★ **Wed., Sept. 22** — Iron County Farmer's Market, 3-6pm
- ★ **Sat., Sept. 25** — Friends of the Library Used Book Sale, 7:30am to 2:00pm at the Ironwood Memorial Building — Bridges and Bluffs Half Marathon and 2 mile Run/Walk, 9am at the Ironwood City Square

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