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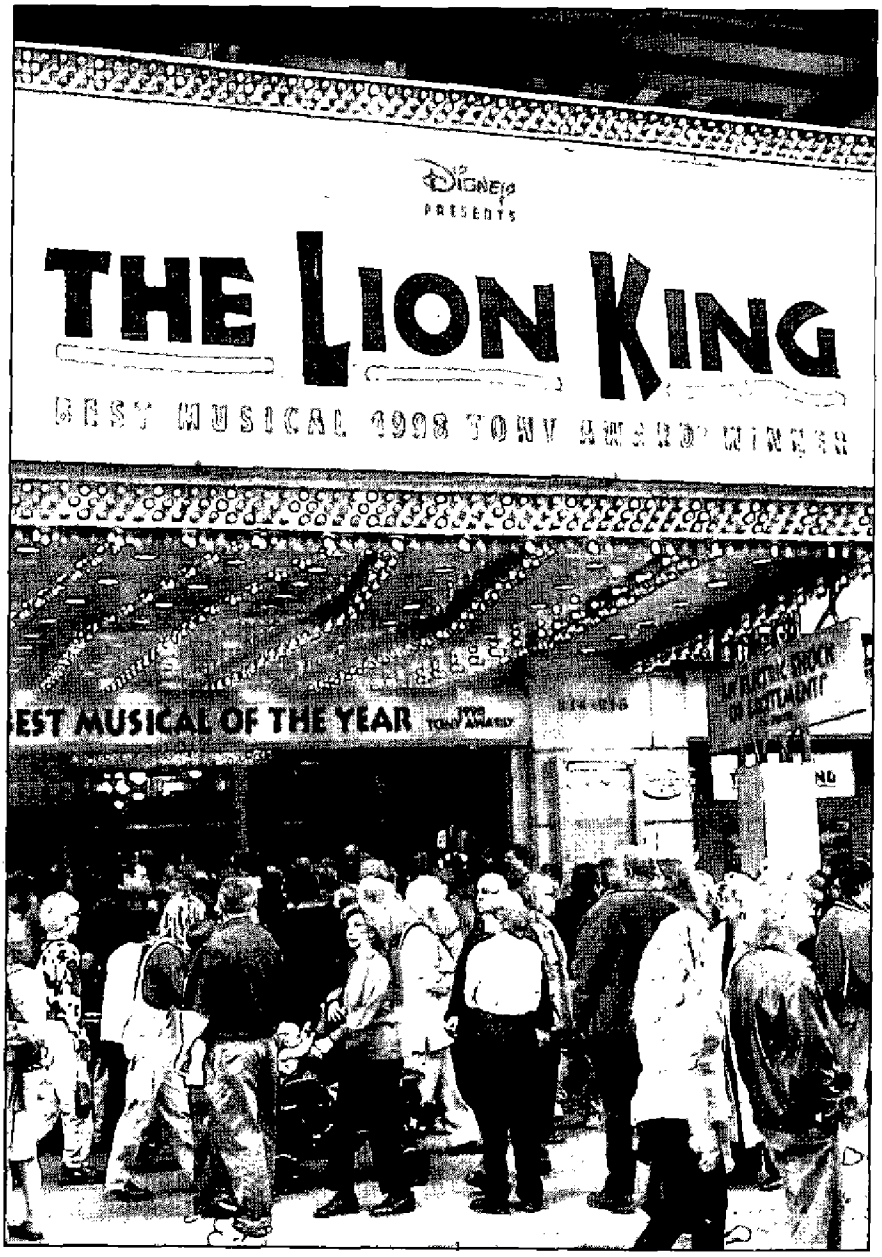
BACK ON BROADWAY



ON WITH THE SHOW! An enthusiastic crowd files into "The Lion King" on 42nd Street yesterday as the Theater District continues to rebound from economic woes caused by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Steven Hirsch

Tourists flock in on Rudy's invite

By NEIL GRAVES

Times Square has taken the terrorists' best shot and is well on its way to kicking on all cylinders.

Theatergoers are packing the seats at 90 percent while tourism has reached 80 percent of normal, industry analyst say.

"I'm cautiously optimistic," said Robert Esposito, acting president of the Times Square Business Improvement District, on prospects of a full recovery. "Every week we're getting better and better."

Times Square area hotels are checking in at 80 percent occupancy, Esposito said, while theaters, stores and restaurants on the Great White Way are clocking 4,000 visitors a day — about 1,000 off normal October numbers.

According to the League of American Theaters and Producers, ticket sales nose-dived to $3.4 million the week of Sept. 11 — it usually hovers around $10 million to $11 million that week. Now it's at $9 million to $10 million, down from the customary $11 million.

Even though five shows recently closed as a direct result of the terrorist attacks, Americans have come through to put the actors and hoofers back on their feet.

Indeed, it's Americans — not foreign tourists — who are the engine behind the turnaround, according to NYC & Co., the city's promotional arm.

Then there's Mayor Giuliani.

"There're some people, specifically from the South and Southwest, who said 'We came because your man [Giuliani] invited us!'" said Michael Mulfall, manager of the Museum Company store on 42nd Street.

"You can't keep people locked up forever," said manager Nicola Sambazis at B.B. King's Blues Club.

The New York Marriott Marquis in Times Square survived the crisis with an unusual blend of guests — those who stayed later than planned because planes were grounded, and were eventually replaced by Red Cross, federal and other rescue workers.

"Week by week it has been coming back," said Marriott spokeswoman Kathleen Duffy. "It's very encouraging when you look out on Wednesdays [matinee day] and you see the gray-haired ladies have returned."

At the ESPN Zone, the predominately male crowd has returned in droves.

"We're pretty much where we were a year ago," said spokeswoman Leslie Ferraro.

"The Yankees are helping us tremendously. I'd be surprised if all businesses on Times Square won't be back soon."

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