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Lion King at 30: the global hit that Disney didn't believe in

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Languages

Français

English

Thirty years ago audiences were introduced to the epic story of one little lion's journey to find himself and his family. Little did Disney know what a roaring success the Lion King would be when it was released in 1994. In fact, they fully expected it wouldn't be.

In the 80s and 90s, the movie studio experienced huge hits with the animated films *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). This left many of the creatives at the Disney studio keen to continue making princess stories. Disney executive and Hollywood stalwart Jeffrey Katzenberg was banking on *Pocahontas* (1995) to be their next hit.

Therefore, the Lion King's development was undertaken by artists and storytellers who were expected to produce something that would only ever be second best. It's this underdog feeling that resulted in a hungry and competitive creative team producing this original hit story (it's not a direct retelling of Hamlet, as some might think).

Taking heed of its immediate film predecessors, Disney ensured the movie put music at the forefront of its storytelling, teaming up film scorer Hans Zimmer (Rain Man, Gladiator) with lyricist Tim Rice (Aladdin, Jesus Christ Superstar) and acclaimed international pop star Elton John. This combination of talent resulted in a soundtrack that won the film two Oscars in 1995 (best score and best original song for Can You Feel The Love Tonight?). The songs and music have played a critical role in the cultural and commercial impact of The Lion King. While some elements might change, in nearly every adaptation the songs have remained.

The measure of success often used for movies is box office revenue, and the film's 1994 total was US\$763 million (£603 million) worldwide. Compare that with Disney's previous great successes, The Little Mermaid US\$84 million worldwide and Beauty and the Beast US\$249 million. Pocahontas, the great hope, also failed to outperform The Lion King bringing in US\$142 million.

After *The Lion King*'s early success, Disney's subsequent movies (including *Pocahontas*) did not live up to commercial expectations. From the mid-90s, Disney's dominance at the animated movie box office was overtaken by Pixar and their hits, including *Toy Story*.

Disney experienced inconsistent success until 2010 when they embraced CGI 3D animation as the primary production technique for their movies. This new style was applied to their tried-and-tested format of retelling classic fairytales and placing music at the heart of the storytelling, leading to hits such as *Tangled* (2010) and *Frozen* (2013).

The *Lion King*'s enduring success should be a stand-out moment of clarity for Disney: with a focus on good quality animation and solid music storytelling, even the unexpected can become a roaring success.



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