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Intolerance is the real message of 'The Lion King'

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I sat down in a theater full of excited children squirming with eagerness to see a preview showing of "The Lion King." Hanging on to our seats, we careened into a world of voluptuous savannahs, elephants heavy beyond imagining, lion families swollen with wisdom and gleaming tenderness and a sorcerer blessing the cub destined to carry on the orderliness of this world.

But something is wrong in paradise. Jealousy lurks in the form of a treacherous uncle, Scar, seething under the weight of an accident of birth that gave his brother, and not him, the throne. Now that the king has a son who blocks his inheritance of the throne, Scar conspires with the outcast hyenas to murder the king and his cub. In return, Scar will let the hyenas, poachers who live in the barren desert outside the lions' domain, share in the bounty of this fertile land.

The father dies a horrible death, but the cub escapes, believing himself respon-

sible. Scar ascends the throne. As the story unfolds, ancient themes emerge: of chaos when the natural order is broken; of suffering and healing; of growing into nobility and responsibility; of avenging deep wrongs.

But what are the wrongs here? Despite the well-meaning controversy over the violence in this movie and its appropriateness for children, I feel that we are somehow missing what is really controversial. Let me explain.

Lions Pride is a land of rules and traditions; an orderliness that maintains its prosperity. As Mufasa, the Lion King father states, life has a natural order where each creature has its place and its function. Problems arise when those places and functions are overstepped. Luckily for the lions, their place is rich in food and beauty. Unhappily for Scar, his nearness to something better than his allotted place is eating him alive. So he enlists others whose allotted place is also unsatisfactory: the hyenas.

The hyenas are loathsome creatures who live in the barren wastes of the elephant graveyards. Jiving in African-Ameri-

can dialect, they will do anything, it seems, for a free zebra leg. When they poach on the lions' luscious plain, they are driven back into their own dusty caves. After Scar ascends the throne and lets them in, their huge numbers and rapacious appetites reduce Pride's Rock to poverty.

As I watched this movie, moved by the horrific death of the strong and tender father and the undeserved guilt of the grieving son, another layer of consciousness emerged. I began to feel as though I were seeing two movies, one superimposed on the other. In one — a tale of good and evil — growth and redemption unfold. In the other — a story of racism and inequality — poverty and degradation play out.

This movie is full of stereotypes: The good-for-nothing hyenas are urban blacks; the archvillain's gestures are effeminate, and he speaks in supposed gay clichés. The film embeds messages that are hostile to the impoverished and the different. Why should lions be rich while hyenas are poor? The implication here is that somehow the lions deserve what they have and must guard against those who have less. Why does Pride's Rock deteriorate to barren

rubble when the hyenas move in? Because they have too many children — they eat too much. There's no thought of sharing here, no compassion for their unequal plight.

Sound familiar? As in *Pride's Rock*, we are a country that is reluctant to share. We will tolerate no new taxes to fix our schools, provide housing for the homeless, support drug treatment for the addicted, job training for the unemployed, health care for the uninsured. We are increasingly punitive and hostile toward the poor. We depict welfare recipients as freeloaders even though the majority are children. Most of the women on welfare would work if they could, but jobs are scarce, the minimum wage is below the poverty level, child care is often nonexistent or unaffordable, and without welfare, health care would be unavailable. People who are poor are largely trapped in a system that denies them the tools to escape yet blames them for their imprisonment. I believe that we perpetuate that blame through our popular culture.

"The Lion King" is this summer's popular culture, and messages emitted by that culture profoundly influence us and our children.



The hyenas are not so loving.

What I find most frightening about "The Lion King" is not the violence toward the king and his cub but the violence implicit in a social system that is so rigid, so intolerant and so unfair. Yet this movie swallows that violence whole-hog and perhaps unaware, and plays it back as the way things ought to be. Unless we can see the hidden stories behind our popular mythologies, I fear that we will only continue on a dangerous and heartless path.

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