



Ainsley Melham as Aladdin, about to rub one out.

OLD MAGIC AND SOME SWEATY PECS TAKE DISNEY'S STAGE VERSION OF ALADDIN ON A WILD RIDE.

SYNONYMOUS with cheesy kids animated features and impossible princesses, Disney are one of the megaliths of the globalized entertainment industry. They've come a long way since *Steamboat Willie*, the first animation to feature the character that eventually became Mickey Mouse.

Founded in 1923 by cartoonist Walt Disney and his brother Roy, Disney now boasts many corporate divisions and media networks including theme parks, resorts and other acquired assets such as Lucasfilm, Marvel and The Muppets.

While it could be argued that Disney's creative ethos is chauvinistic, they do what they do very well.

The theatrical arm of the company, known as Disney On Broadway, was established in 1993, taking the organisation into musical theatre territory. The pilot production was *Beauty And the Beast* (with Hugh Jackman taking the lead in Australia) was followed by adaptations of their other kids' movies *The Lion King*, *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid*.

As their screen-to-stage production line continues, the latest arrival in Australia is *Aladdin*, the story of a street urchin, a princess, a genie and a magic lamp that Disney turned into

a successful 1992 animated movie.

How does *Aladdin* stack up under stage lights? Very well. In the title role is former *Hi-5*-er Ainsley Melham who recently played Sonny Malone in the Hayes Theatre production of *Xanadu*. Swapping tight denim shorts for baggy harem pants, Melham's young hero is innocent and zesty as he traverses the complexities of friendship, new love and his own ethical boundaries.

Supporting Melham are Adam Jon Fiorentino (*Saturday Night Fever*) Troy Sussman (*Guys And Dolls*) and Robert Tripolino (*West Side Story*) as Aladdin's mates who replace the movie's monkey character, Abu. Aljin Abella as comic baddy Iago deserves special mention for delivering the best jokes consistently.

Imported direct from Broadway comes Arielle Jacobs (*Wicked*) as Princess Jasmine and Michael James Scott (*Something Rotten* and *Aladdin*) as the Genie. Jacobs' does well in a role that's not written for depth of character or snappy one liners. Scott's relaxed banter and charm win over the audience instantly.

Then there's the chorus. Their showbiz chops are impeccable, they perform miracles of costume changes, and deliver it all with an energy and intensity cranked up to 11. DNA readers will especially appreciate the men: the finest troupe of eye candy seen on an Australian stage for years. It's a fiesta of six-packs, waxed pees, guns, glutes and sweat. Book your seats close to the stage.

On opening night in Sydney (and many subsequent performances) the song *Friend Like Me* in the middle of the first act was a literal showstopper. The audience, awed by the stagecraft and performances, leapt to their feet for a deserved ovation. This feel-good energy continues throughout, but some aspects of the production irk. For example, why does a predominantly Australian cast performing a play set very vaguely in the Middle East have to deliver the lines with American accents? (The original *Aladdin* story comes from China – perhaps an example of Disney's aforementioned cultural chauvinism.)

And why does the Sultan eventually decide that Princess Jasmine can inherit the kingdom but have to share the top job with Aladdin? A little bit of equity feminism would've gone a long way at this point. (As Walt himself once said, "It's kind of fun to do the impossible.") They still get to fly off into the sunset on the magic carpet together.

Aladdin's foundations in the traditions of British panto – not a negative criticism – could also have allowed the producers to loosen up and deviate from the (tired?) Disney formula, something that would've made a great night out even better.

Word has it that *The Jungle Book*, *Frozen*, and *Pinocchio* are next in line to hit the stage.

MORE: <http://liveshows.disney.com.au/aladdin-the-musical>