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Yonkers, Larchmont girls in 'Lion King'

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They're just two suburban girls on the prowl. Literally. Both actresses playing Young Nala in "The Lion King" on Broadway at the moment are from the Lower Hudson Valley: Natalie Guerrero was born and raised in Yonkers and lives now in Larchmont; Alex de Castro was born in Nyack and now lives in Yonkers, right next door to Natalie's grandparents.

Consider the odds: Hundreds of would-be Nalas auditioned for the two parts this summer. (The roles are generally recast every six months or so.)

Natalie, 11, and Alex, 10, both have ties to the Hawthorne PEARLS school for academically gifted students in Yonkers: Alex still goes there; Natalie, whose family moved to Larchmont last year, used to go to PEARLS, but now attends Hommocks Middle School.

Luck was on their side, to a degree: Natalie replaced a young actress who'll be in "The Color Purple" this fall; Alex replaced an actress who had outgrown the part — she was too tall.

They began rehearsals Aug. 2, working five hours a day, six days a week, learning step routines and songs and how to act like a young lioness. Natalie's first performance was Aug. 30; Alex's was the next day.

Young Nala is best friend to Simba, the young lion at the center of "The Lion King." It's a part that involves dancing, singing and a little stage fight, when the young lioness kicks her best friend's butt, wiping the stage with him. Both girls like that part.

Says Natalie: "It's great, because we have the director's permission to push him around. It's like 'Yes! We get to do this!' " But they have to be careful, Alex adds, "not to throw him across the stage. We don't want him to get hurt."

Both girls report for duty eight shows a week, one as performer, one as standby. The two Young Nalas and two Young Simbas (J.J. Singleton and Aaron Conley) are only in the first act, so that means they spend a lot of time backstage, under the watchful eye of "wrangler" Niki White. They do homework, play videogames and pal around.

White has been with the show for five and a half years, helping dozens of Simbas and Nalas to be on time for their entrances and curtain calls.

"You always know you'll get kids who'll be good on stage. I worry about how they'll be off-stage," she says. "The great thing about Alex and Natalie is that they're such good friends."

The Journal News: What do you like about your hometown?

Natalie Guerrero: It's kind of homey and like a neighborhood. Everybody goes to each other's houses for potlucks and brunches. It's nice.

Alex de Castro: I like how we live right next to the Hudson water and it's really nice. There's lots of parks nearby and in the summer we go around.

TJN: What's in your CD player?

Natalie: "The Lion King," of course, and Beyoncé and Usher.

Alex: I listen to a lot of music. Right now, it's a mix tape: Black Eyed Peas, Gwen Stefani and another one. I think Green Day. And "The Lion King," all the time.

TJN: When we first see you, you're not Nala at all. You're the baby elephant in the opening "Circle of Life." That's kind of a wow moment! Can you hear the audience talking when you're walking down the aisle?

Natalie: When I'm the elephant, I can be happy. When I'm a lioness, I have to be hard and tough. When people see the elephant, people smile and laugh and I can smile back. But not when I'm a lioness.

Alex: Sometimes they're like "Oh my gosh! There's an elephant!" or "Oh she's so cute" or stuff like that.

TJN: Every character in a show is there for a reason. What does Young Nala add to "The Lion King?"

Natalie: Everyone's so happy-go-lucky and Nala's tough. She's like "leave me alone." She's not going to take no for an answer. She's tough, but courageous. Simba's courageous, but Nala faces her fears. She's strong.

Alex: She adds toughness. She's Simba's best friend, so if Nala wasn't there, who would Simba play with? And who would he marry?

TJN: Have your friends seen you in the show?

Natalie: One did, but by accident. They got their tickets last Christmas and I didn't even know I was auditioning then. Then she told me she was going to see it and I said, "That's like my third show!" And she said, "You're in 'The Lion King?'" The next day, she said, "You were soooo good!"

Alex: Not yet. I'm still trying to plan it out for them to see the show.
