

# The New York Times

## Giving Voice to the Queen of the Jungle

LIONS are the golden-haired, amber-eyed stars of the animal kingdom. Disney's Simba even got his own hit movie and Broadway musical, although everyone knows that on kings, however regal, fierce, and protective, don't do a whole lot of hunting for their families.

"Pride," a two-hour film that has its premiere on A&E at 8 tomorrow night, uses documentary nature footage plus Babe"-style animation to create an original story about a cub who grows up to be a queen of the African plains. The film's voice talent includes Kate Winslet as Suki, a rebellious young lioness; Rupert Graves as her timid brother; Helen Mirren as their family's wise patriarch; and Sean Bean as Dark, the leader of a rival lion gang.

But the true stars of "Pride" are the big cats, real ones, who were filmed with a custom-made mobile camera that got close enough to capture their private lives.

"The Lion Queen" was our working title," said John Downer, who directed the movie for A&E and the BBC. "Male lions are fascinating, but the females are dynamic creatures. They hunt. They wander. They defend their young. You begin to imagine stories about their lives and families."

The idea for "Pride" sprang from Mr. Downer's work on "Lions: Spy in the Den," a documentary shown on ABC in 2001. For it, Mr. Downer's team, based in Bristol, England, developed BoulderCam, a high-definition video camera hidden inside a radio-controlled

Fiberglas buggy that could be driven right into the lion's den. "After the lions had a look at it and sniffed it a bit, they just accepted it," said Mr. Downer. "A lioness made it into a footrest and the first images we got were of her suckling and grooming two cubs. We were amazed. Soon we could drive it alongside them and they didn't flinch. It was just another bush."

Before venturing back to the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania, Mr. Downer developed a script with the sitcom writer Simon Nye ("Men Behaving Badly"), who balanced a family-friendly narrative with some realistic lessons about a life in the wild. Mr. Nye, whose youngest child is 5, said he was well aware of the quandary of watching

beautifully shot nature programs as a family and then "feeling a bit weird, ushering the children away from the television" when the creatures aggressively seek prey and mates.

Where Disney's "Lion King" was discreet about Simba's coming of age, "Pride," with its focus on a female, naturally runs into some thornier issues. "There is a slightly feminist angle that may be lost on anyone under the age of 12," Mr. Nye said. "Kate Winslet is very good at showing how Suki is a free spirit, a bit spoiled, questioning everything because she doesn't yet know how complicated life is."

Mr. Nye confesses a "soft spot" for the mature, idle male lions who spend

their days sunning themselves in the tall grass, dreaming of their next meal. "I imagined them chatting mindlessly, year after year, like gentlemen who lunch," he said.

Mr. Downer said the apparently idle lions (females who decline to hunt as well as "retired" males) are still valued by the group because of their winning personalities and their ability to get along, adding, "That's something we could all take a lesson from."

Watching "Pride's" voice-over actors perform their roles, Mr. Downer also learned a few things about human behavior. "We filmed them all separately, and then the animators at Jim Henson's Creature Shop used the footage to animate the lions' mouths," he said. "Sean Bean had a very convincing roar. And Helen Mirren was quite good at lion yawns."

— Justine Elias





John Downer/A&E

Helen Mirren, top, provides the voice of Macheeba, the mother of two lion cubs with the voices of Kate Winslet and Rupert Graves, in "Pride."