

ZOOM

The lion kings 5/11/08

Caspian may be a prince of Narnia, but Aslan is king. In **"The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian"** (opening Friday), Aslan is a mighty impressive creature: He's voiced by Liam Neeson, grows literally larger with each movie — and is a symbolic stand-in for Christ.

But Aslan is far from the first king of the jungle to dominate the movies. Lions have been roaring their way across the silver screen since the earliest silent film travelogues in deepest Africa. Hollywood loves royalty almost as much as it loves violence — and lions embody both of these qualities (no wonder MGM uses a lion as its logo). Here are some of the noble creature's most memorable movie moments.



▲ BORN FREE (1966)

It's good to be the king: Elsa the Lioness became arguably the most famous lion in history when a book and movie about her life reentering the wild became massive worldwide successes. The movie spawned a sequel, a TV show and even a hit song. The actors in the film became fierce animal rights activists.

But heavy lies the crown: Elsa died of a rare blood disease. However, her cubs or their descendants are believed to still be roaming the Serengeti.



▲ THE WIZARD OF OZ (1939)

It's good to be the king: Bert Lahr snaps and growls with silly abandon when the Scarecrow, Tin Man and a little girl cross his path in Oz. "Put 'em up!" he purrs.

But heavy lies the crown: Dorothy (Judy Garland) soon finds out why he's dubbed the Cowardly Lion. Just a little pat on the nose sends him away crying. If only he could find some courage.

THE GHOST AND THE DARKNESS (1996)

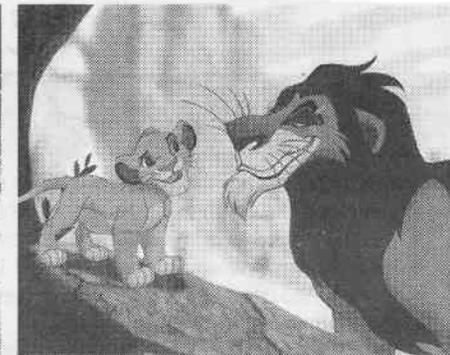
It's good to be the king: Two ferocious lions snack on the crews brought into East Africa to build a railway bridge around the turn of the century. Based on a true story in which the lions gorged on more than 130 workers.

But heavy lies the crown: Time for a diet? Engineer Val Kilmer decides enough is enough and calls in great white hunter Michael Douglas. The lions — dubbed "the Ghost" and "the Darkness" — know the gig is up when movie stars arrive.

TARZAN THE APE MAN (1932)

It's good to be the king: Tarzan (Johnny Weissmuller) is bloody and exhausted from winning over Jane and fighting off the white man when he must wrestle and kill not one, but two vicious lions.

But heavy lies the crown: PETA is nowhere in sight. Tarzan puts on a choke hold and then stabs the lions to death. A third lion comes in for the kill on the weary ape-man, but an elephant rescues our hero at the last moment.



▲ THE LION KING (1994)

It's good to be the king: All the animals pay homage to King Mufasa, who lords over the jungle with wisdom, courage and the stirring voice of James Earl Jones. The birth of his son Simba is practically a national holiday.

But heavy lies the crown: That green-eyed monster, jealousy, is even more powerful than the king. Scar (Jeremy Irons) lures Mufasa to his death and convinces Simba it's the boy's fault, which sends the kid into self-imposed exile.

GEORGE OF THE JUNGLE (1997)

It's good to be the king: With the great white hunter (Thomas Haden Church) running away in fear, a lion has the tasty morsel Ursula (Leslie Mann) all to himself.

But heavy lies the crown: That is, until George (Brendan Fraser) shows up, pile-driving the lion in classic wrestling fashion. How humiliating, especially since it's all a put-on to impress the tourists.

BIG TOP PEE-WEE (1988)

It's good to be the king: When the circus comes to town, a lion escapes and lies in wait at Pee-wee's (Paul Reubens) house. When he walks in, the lion — in classic cartoon fashion — pictures Pee-wee as a giant steak. "Nice kitty," says a skittish Pee-wee as he backs away.

But heavy lies the crown: "Who's a fluffy kitty?" giggles Pee-wee moments later, after taming the lion — and making a new friend — with his nerdy charm. Too bad the lion tamer and his nasty whip are soon on the scene.

Michael Giltz