

‘Beowulf’ in IMAX 3D Affords Break For Big Actors to Improve Even Themselves

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CHICAGO – It’s all the rave today to exhume an epic from long, long ago and bring it back on the monster screen bigger, better and with more grandeur than ever fathomable before.



Angelina Jolie in “Beowulf”.

Image credit: Paramount Pictures

Today’s “Beowulf” represents that decade-long quest for “[Stardust](#) [16]” scribe Neil Gaiman. While navigating the feat of serving this lordly tale justice, he also had to undo a deeply rooted childhood stigma of indifference in the eyes of director Robert Zemeckis.

While the story of “Beowulf” is the oldest epic poem in the English language, Zemeckis from his early days was unaroused by it.

“Frankly, nothing about the original poem appealed to me,” Zemeckis said about the original story. “I remember being assigned to read it in junior high school and not being able to understand it because it was in Old English.

He added: “It was one of those horrible assignments. I never really thought about it after that [and] never considered that it might make for an interesting story.”

Gaiman and co-writer Roger Avary (“Pulp Fiction”) had to fashion a 180-degree change of heart. They indeed captivated Zemeckis, who returned to his new art form from “The Polar Express” that opened the can of worms on a new age in filmmaking.

It’s not Pixar. It’s not just CGI. It’s “performance capture”.

With a steep price tag in excess of \$150 million for “Beowulf,” the unproven concept is competing with itself in an attempt to slather the most palatable sauce you could coddle on the best filet mignon you could ever gorge.



From top to bottom, this image shows the progression in “Beowulf” with performance capture technology.

Image credits: Paramount Pictures

Despite early talks of the titillating format potentially representing a replacement to using human actors in their actual skin, the nature of its immediate gratification is now being pitched as less about the technology and more about the actors crafting the new mold.

It's like what online avatars are doing to offline creators: zapping the pimples, ballooning the boobs and bulking the muscles. It's essentially making big-name actors better than even they can be.

Ray Winstone as Beowulf – who went into battle buck naked with the overpowering demon Grendel – wishes he could be that chiseled.

Angelina Jolie – who was nervous with her own libidinous revelations – could learn a thing or two about her digital self and certainly make Brad Pitt jealous. Jolie as a seductress to the nth degree is big selling point for this film.

Zemeckis said of his Jolie selection: “When she stepped on set and became that character, it was a powerful thing to watch. She was just magnetic. She hypnotized everyone. Nobody can do that kind of sultry character as well as Jolie.”



Ray Winstone as Beowulf in “Beowulf”.

Image credit: Paramount Pictures

“I loved it,” Jolie said about the format. “At first, I thought [it was] going to be so weird [with] these dots on our faces in these wetsuit-type costumes with no props or sets. What it really does is strip everything down to the essentials of performing.

“There is so much freedom to just be everything in the moment – and give it your all – because it’s being covered completely and you can overlap and you can play and you can improvise.

“There’s also an immediate friendship between the actors. When you’re both covered in dots, you become very close and you rely on each other.”

Jolie’s maternal instinct kicks in while playing Grendel’s mother. She said: “If someone hurts your son, you would go to the ends of the Earth to avenge him.”

Jolie, who describes her character as a “sexy lizard” who could assume a quasi-human form, had to personify the beguiling woman reptile without the benefit of costumes, prosthetics, props or makeup. She largely relied on Zemeckis’ direction.

As for the film’s rating, something is seriously amuck here.

Even if you extricated the entirety of Jolie’s full-frontal flesh time, the MPAA is offensively off its rocker in handing this film a “PG-13” rating instead of the “R” rating it absolutely should be.

The graphic violence and the adult jokes alone make it wholly inappropriate for kids around 13 years old.



Grendel in “Beowulf”.

Image credit: Paramount Pictures

Moving on, the real – albeit modified and perhaps even improved – Anthony Hopkins, John Malkovich, Robin Wright Penn, Alison Lohman, Crispin Glover and Brendan Gleeson all offered up a performance capture version of themselves, too.

To get today’s most lavish filmmaking realized, digital sensors are affixed to their faces and bodies via a form-fitting Lycra suit. Their live performances are “captured” and input into Sony Pictures Imageworks mega computers.

Action happens in an invisible box called a “volume,” which is segmented into quadrants that can house up to 40 cameras. This is performance capture-speak for a soundstage and is thusly because multiple cameras can capture scenes in a three-dimensional space.

If you transport back to your early school days, we recall that the geometric formula for volume is “x,” “y” and “z”. These equate to width, height and length. In film, a volume is the area where the cameras are all aimed within which face and body data are captured.

Takes (or “beats”) from multiple sessions can be edited, blended, mixed and matched to amputate most of the cartoon-like visuals we’ve seen in the past. Instead, the imagery is tethered to the actual creative expression of the actors and the director.



Angelina Jolie in “Beowulf”.

Image credit: Paramount Pictures

The magic is in its detail. Performance capture loves to flaunt its aptitude with human hair, water, fire, skin, the bumps on skin and the creases enveloping muscle.

The mouth is still an area of contempt for careful critics, though, who’ve grumbled even in “Beowulf” about its sometimes wooden and unnatural ways.

If you remove your IMAX 3D lenses at any point during the entirely 3D picture, you can in fact discern flaws shielded by the technology. Also, the float factor still needs ironing out as humans don’t glide so gracefully.

Nitpicky criticisms aside, you’d be making a regrettable mistake waiting to view “Beowulf” on DVD at home or even on a standard movie screen. The film is the most IMAX-worthy picture released to date and seeing it any other way is like shutting one eye with 20/100 vision in the other.

By **Adam Fendelman**

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