Flawless ‘Beauty and the Beast’ is a New Classic

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on March 16, 2017 - 3:37pm

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Rating: **5.0**/**5.0**

CHICAGO – Do not doubt the power of live action to create a new atmosphere of joy and…dare I say it…beauty. The re-imagining of the animated classic “Beauty and the Beast” is everything that the previous was and much more. It packs a true and emotional wallop that follows through to the end.

Basically the same narrative/song formula is used, but a live action Broadway feel is given to this film version – directed by Bill Condon (“Dreamgirls,” “Chicago”) – that adds more soul and more resonance to the staging, story and iconic songs. It may feel that you’ve seen it before – especially if you’re in the generation that wore out the videotape/DVD – but to me this version reaches for something beyond the cartoon. It’s narrative and motivations are richer, and the arc of the connection between Belle and the Beast is more mature and rises to the very happiness of the conclusion. The unlikely coming together of the couple has implications for all the characters in this version of story, and the magic does come from their endgame. The structure and power of the 2017 BandtheB stands up with the best musicals in cinema, which is not an overstatement, considering its depth and feeling.

The funny girl named Belle (Emma Watson) lives in a provincial European town in the Middle Age past. She is an outsider who loves books, and has been raised by an eccentric father (Kevin Kline), after her mother died when she was young. Despite being shunned by the general townsfolk, she is a Beauty, and is pursued by the most handsome-yet-vain suitor, Gaston (Luke Evans), who is accompanied by his sidekick LeFou (Josh Gad).



Tale as Old as Time: Belle (Emma Watson) and Beast (Dan Stevens) in ‘Beauty and the Beast’
Photo credit: Walt Disney Studios

Her father, during a trip to the market, is forced to trepass within a eerie castle. He is kidnapped there, by the horrid Beast (Dan Stevens). Belle comes to his rescue, exchanging his imprisonment for her own. While confined, she meets a staff of animated household objects, including Lumiére (Ewan McGregor), Cogsworth (Ian McKellan), Mrs. Potts (Emma Thompson), Garderobe (Audra McDonald) and Cadenza (Stanley Tucci). How can the castle’s spell be broken, and all human forms returned? If Belle and the Beast can somehow love each other.

I’m tempted to offer caution to those who have the animated version entrapped in their DNAs… this might seem too derivative. But I’m asking you to let that go, if it’s possible, and understand what this version is doing. It ups the ante of the legend, and adds some of the adult complexities that harken back to the original French film rendering – Jean Cocteau’s “Beauty and the Beast” (1948). Before you think, “stupid film critic, get off the high horse,” I added that because it is an adult story in a way, as Belle and the Beast look not only to save their own souls, but to salve the bitterness and the group think of their countrymen.

The songs from the original are intact, with some new ones added, and they all are brought to life with a verve that is like the exciting rhythm of an accelerated heartbeat. The “hits” were given luxurious new stagings, like “Belle” and “Beauty and the Beast,” but the two best are “Gaston” and “Be My Guest.” The staging of Gaston was a reminder of the bottle dance of “Fiddler on the Roof,” with quixotic choreography and Broadway “pauses” to amp up the comedy. Be My Guest, not exaggerating, stands up to the great musical song stagings in movie history. It combined computer generated antics with a virtual lesson in how to deliver such a tune, a mix of dance,song and presentation styles that left me breathless.



Be Their Guest: Mrs. Potts (Emma Thompson) and Lumiére (Ewan McGregor) in ‘Beauty and the Beast’
Photo credit: Walt Disney Studios

Also, the cast who delivers all the gladness was in top form. Emma Watson understands Belle’s understated-yet-heroic approach to her own consequence. Playing the Beast, Dan Stevens was able to look noble and handsome in both forms of being. Luke Evans as Gaston was able to pull off the narcissist, and Josh Gad – a veteran Broadway baby – is killer as Lefou (and is involved in that whole “gay” controversy, which might be one of the most childish reactions to a movie in a long time). The human results of the animated household objects are perfect, and again we stand in awe of Ewan McGregor’s performance range (as Lumiére).

I really hope that someone out there has the same deep satisfaction and sheer happiness I felt after experiencing the movie. This is what cinema therapy is, a brief respite from the cold hard realities of everyday life. The words “Beauty” and “Beast” seem like contradicting terms, but in essence it’s our own inner conflicts, and how the opposites react when stirred around within us.

“Beauty and the Beast” opens everywhere on March 17th, in 3D, IMAX and regular screenings. See local listings for 3D/IMAX theaters and show times. Featuring Emma Watson, Dan Stevens, Luke Evans, Kevin Kline, Ewan McGregor, Ian McKellen, Emma Thompson, Audra McDonald and Stanley Tucci. Screenplay adapted by Stephen Chbosky and Evan Spiliotopoulos, from the tale by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont. Directed by Bill Condon. Rated “PG”

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