Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Computer techniques add a lot, but take away something vital

Rating: «« out of «««««

Running Time: 118 minutes

This week’s big release is Disney’s photo-realistic take on the 1994 animated classic, *The Lion King* .
Fans of the original film may be happy to learn that the primary story hasn’t been changed a great deal. Instead, the selling point is the CGI animal creations backed by an impressive Africa savannah. On a technical level it’s a marvel, with stunning visual effects and imagery. Unfortunately, the extended running time drags events out, resulting in some logy pacing.

The story follows Simba (Donald Glover), a kind-hearted lion forced into self-banishment after an incident orchestrated by his power-hungry uncle, Scar (Chiwetel Ejiofor). Scar attempts to take control of the kingdom by plotting to end the life of Simba’s father, Mufasa (James Earl Jones). Feeling responsible, Simba permanently leaves the Pridelands and befriends carefree warthog Pumbaa (Seth Rogen) and meerkat Timon (Billy Eichner). Years later, Simba’s

childhood friend Nala (Beyoncé Knowles-Carter) discovers Simba living a carefree existence. She begs him to return and take the throne from the tyrannical Scar. The protagonist is forced into facing his past, as well as his place within the animal community.

This adaptation reuses many of the same images and jokes, although there are a couple of minor alterations. The hyena Shenzi (Florence Kasumba) has been given a more prominent role and position of authority within the antagonist’s group, acting as a leader of the pack. This has clearly been done to give Nala a foe to face off against during the climax. Additionally, some of the conversational interactions between characters seem to have been extended in this particular version.

Glover acquits himself well in the role of Simba and the talky approach works to the benefit of some performers. In particular, comedians Rogen and Eichner, add energy and a hint of improvisation to the proceedings. These goofy characters are charming, but some of the others come across as stiff (or perhaps too reverential of the source material), resulting in a lot of jokes that fall flat. And the unfortunate side-effect of a movie that has had its running time extended by thirty minutes without a lot of new plot material, is that it drags. Perhaps the filmmakers were so enamored with the visuals that they felt the stunning images would carry the picture through its slower sections.

Admittedly, the movie is a technical marvel with incredible photo-real animal creations and spectacular vistas. The impressive digital crafting affords director Jon Favreau (*The Jungle Book* , *Iron Man*) the opportunity to pull off some elaborate shots, including a lengthy sequence following a tuft of Simba’s hair being released and moving across the country via birds, little insects and nature itself before eventually finding its way back home to the Pridelands.

And the animals look just as remarkable thanks to current computer techniques that have been employed. In some scenes they literally look like their real life inspirations. There can be no doubt that this movie represents a new highpoint in technology. Unfortunately, the lions and other animals are so realistic at times that one aspect does stand out as distracting and decidedly strange. To put it gently, it seems as if all of their private parts have been digitally removed.

Obviously, this wouldn’t matter at all in a animated feature, but when near perfect looking animals are captured with low-angles, and nary a nipple or set of testicles can be seen, it

actually stands out as being...well...slightly odd to witness. There must have been numerous meetings at Disney about the subject. I would have been amused to be a fly on the wall for those talks. But it seems as if the final choice adds a certain phoniness to their otherwise incredible digital creations.

The Lion King is a stunning technical feat that includes plenty of striking images. However, with the exception of a few warthog and meerkat related moments, the events presented don’t offer anything new and little that tops the original animated classic. The visuals will likely entertain children, but even the tykes may get a little squirmy by the time the credits roll.

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