'Beauty and the Beast' impresses with gorgeous visuals

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 17 March 2017 07:48

Rating: «««« out of 4

Running Time: 129 min.

Disney sure have found themselves a goldmine with their live-action remakes of animated features. *Alice in Wonderland*, *Cinderella* and last year's *The Jungle Book* all raked piles of cash, so much so that it appears to have resulted in a studio plan to get more of these types of features out every year for the foreseeable future. The latest receiving the treatment is *Beauty and the Beast*, considered one of the very best modern animated efforts from the company.

For those unfamiliar with the fairy tale, the story follows young Belle (Emma Watson), the bookish but pretty daughter of the eccentric Maurice (Kevin Kline). When Maurice gets lost in the woods and comes upon a strange castle, he is taken captive by the monstrous Beast (Dan Stevens). Belle follows and begs to swap places with her father as prisoner. As time passes, she learns of the Beast's tragic past and begins to develop affection for him. When Maurice returns to the village, he enlists the help of arrogant suitor Gaston (Luke Evans) and his lackey LeFou (Josh Gad) to help rescue his daughter.

This production certainly pulls out all of the stops. It's gorgeous to look at with grand and impressive production design. The costuming is just as elaborate and eye-popping. As expected, the musical numbers couldn't be more incredibly detailed with bright, intense and almost kaleidoscopic colors popping off of the screening during a rendition of "Be Our Guest." Naturally, there is a somewhat exaggerated tone to the proceedings. However, the human performers embrace the larger-than-life tone with aplomb. Just as in the animated feature, Gaston makes for an entertaining foil and the actors in general capture the spirit of their animated counterparts.

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So, how does a briskly paced animated feature find itself 45 minutes longer in translation? Well, there are a few extra musical numbers. They fit in well, even if one would be hard-pressed to call them essential to the story. And the pacing is a bit slower. It does take a bit too long to the get to the heart of the tale involving the budding relationship between Belle and the Beast. But when the two character are eventually placed together and the onscreen relationship does develop, it is sweet, well-handled and ultimately works.

Viewers will also find an extended and more detailed tragic back-story for Belle and her family that lends a slightly heavier and more melancholic tone to the proceedings. As for the various talking candlesticks, clocks and other objects (well played by Ewan McGregor, Ian McKellen, Emma Thompson, Audra McDonald, Stanley Tucci and Gugu Mbath-Raw), they are also given a little more time onscreen to make a lasting impression.

In truth, while the extra background does add character development and a new Beast song helps give extra detail to his story, the additions may lead to some squirming on the part of very young children. The look of the live-action production may also frighten younger, more sensitive viewers. An attack involving wolves as well as the appearance of the Beast when initially introduced comes across as a bit more intense than its animated counterpart.

Personally, I still have reservations as to why this type of adaptation is really necessary, but on a technical level one can't fault the care taken on this retelling. *Beauty and the Beast* is an incredibly well made and visually-striking adaptation. It may not have quite the impact of the recent *Jungle Book* revamp and of course it isn't as strong as the 1991 feature that inspired it, but the results could have been far worse. In the end, this is a polished and generally entertaining, if somewhat overlong, family feature.

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