

The Lion King

The recent Disney appetite for recycling its phenomenally successful animated work into “new” live action versions is ravenous—and it isn’t necessarily producing quality output. The most recent trend started with 2015’s “Cinderella” (spinning off a 1950 film) and “The Jungle Book” (2016). Then came “Beauty and the Beast” (2017) mimicking the acclaimed 1991 animated version, and the trend continues to accelerate with recent retreads of “The Jungle Book,” “Dumbo,” “Aladdin,” with others (like “Mulan”) coming down the pike. The specific and current case in point: “The Lion King,” now dominating cinemas.

No one needs a reprise on the film’s storyline; this essay addresses its physical limitations. The original Disney “Lion King” was an expert mix of the classic Disney formula of comic bits, mainly from sidekicks, touches of pathos and drama—never too graphic—and sweet and/or inspiring music. The new CGI version includes these elements, but it is finally undermined by the very realism the filmmakers are so painstakingly trying to create.

This “Lion King,” directed by Jon Favreau, has amazingly real re-creations of African animals throughout, *palpable* in all their variety of hair, skin, and posture. It’s that very realism that, for me, undercuts the film as a contemporary fantasy. Unlike the fanciful and lively animated figures in the cartoon, not meant to be “real” at all, these animals are authentic (even though they are computer-generated), with tangible weight and presence. You can sense it in their eyes—or rather you *cannot* sense it in their eyes, since the beasts’ eyes staring at you do *not* show you a human spark but rather the unreadable visage of another species. This “Lion King” reminds you of the old Disney nature films, “True-life Adventures,” rather than a narrative film. Animated animals don’t possess that gravity; they are clearly fantasies on celluloid, and we can willingly anthropomorphize them with ease and always have.

This realistic, palpable vision of the animal kingdom changes how scenes are received. Violence and tension, blood and hair—all are real enough to touch and to feel more in the gut, making the film slip from a “PG” rating to solid “PG-13” and even hinting at “R.” The villain, Scar (Chiwetel Ejiofor), for example, is far scarier and threatening in live action than in the animated version. In an interview, the actor Ejiofor confirmed this, describing Scar as more “psychologically possessed” and “brutalized” than in the original film, noting: “He’s possessed with this disease of his own ego and his own want.”

Also, comic and bright moments are heavier and more gravity-bound. The comic sidekicks, Pumbaa and Timon, are funny when they show up (and it’s a great relief when they do), but the humor is *despite* their impeccable re-creations as a warthog and a meerkat. Their comedy is in the lines of dialogue delivered by deft comic actors (Seth Rogen and Billy Eichner). Other previously comic characters, like the three principal hyenas who are henchmen of Scar, have also shifted gears. As Favreau himself has said of the three they “had to change a lot” to fit the remake’s realistic style, stating that “[a] lot of the stuff around them [in the original film] was very stylized.” One of the hyenas’ voices herself, Florence Kasumba, added this: “Those hyenas were funny. These hyenas are dangerous.”

Similarly, the show's tunes, following much of the original score, just don't soar the same way, as is most evident in the sweeping "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" duet between Simba (Donald Glover) and Nala (Beyonce). More, the intermittent songs just seem more plainly out of place in a true-to-life setting rather than bursting out from a fanciful cartoon.

There is yet another reason this reread is weighed down: it runs a full 30 minutes longer than the original!

OK, I'm sour on the film's substitution of dutiful live action instead of imaginative animation. Still, one can admire the sheer time and toil to produce a vision of a splendid East Africa on screen. Favreau and his team not only were able to show a wondrous mash-up of disparate animals (I kept thinking of the famous painting "The Peaceable Kingdom" by Edward Hicks in our own National Gallery of Art), but they present us with a sweeping and magnificent landscape throughout (though some forest scenes don't look anything like East Africa). Sure, you can **admire** the film just by feasting your eyes on it, but it's much harder to **love**.

In 25 years from now, on the 50th anniversary of the original film, I have no doubt that dutiful parents around the world still will be showing the 1994 version of Simba and his friends to their kiddies in the family room, not this (laborious? money-grubbing?) sequel.

(The film is rated "PG" and runs 118 minutes.)

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