

Impressive leap in visual effects

New 'Lion King' returns but it's harder to feel the love

By Jake Coyle

Life moves in a circle. "The Lion King" tells us, and, increasingly, so does studio moviemaking.

Close on the heels of "live-action" remakes of "Aladdin" and "Dumbo" and on the precipice of a reborn "The Little Mermaid," "The Lion King" is back, too. Round and round we go. Cue Savannah sunrise. Cue "Naaaants ingyoyama bagithi baba!"

The remakes have themselves been a mixed bag offering some combination of modern visual effects, fresh casting and narrative tweaks to catch up more dated material to the times. Don't count on a new "Song of the South," but much of the Disney library will soon have been outfitted with digital clothes for the Internet era.

It's easy to greet these remakes both cynically and a little eagerly. In the case of "The Lion King," the songs are still good, the Shakespearean story still solid. And, well, Beyoncé's in it.

And yet Jon Favreau's "The Lion King," so abundant with realistic simulations of the natural world, is curiously lifeless. The most significant overhaul to an otherwise slavishly similar retread is the digital animation rendering of everything, turning the film's African grasslands and its animal inhabitants into a photo-realistic menagerie. The Disney worlds of cartoon and nature documentary have finally merged.

It's an impressive leap in visual effects, which included Favreau, cine-

matographer Caleb Descheanel and VFX chief Rob Legato making use of virtual-reality environments. Some of the computer-generated makeovers are beautiful. Mufasa, the lion king voiced again by James Earl Jones, is wondrously regal, and his mane might be the most majestic blonde locks since Robert Redford. And the grass stalks of the pride lands shimmer in the African sunlight.

Dynamic

But it's a hollow victory. By turning the elastic, dynamic hand-drawn creations of Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff's 1994 original into realistic-looking animals, "The Lion King" has greatly narrowed its spectrum of available expressions. Largely lost are the kinds of characterization that can flow from voice actor to animation. (Think of how closely fused Tom Hanks is with Woody in the "Toy Story" movies.) Here, most of the starchy voice actors (including Donald Glover as the grown-up lion prince Simba, Beyoncé as the older lioness Nala and Chiwetel Ejiofor as the villainous Scar) feel remote from their characters. And, in many cases, so do we.

It's worth asking: Just how real do we need our talking animals? Do we need the feathered majordomo Zazu (voiced by John Oliver) to look enough like a red-billed hornbill to win the approval of avid birders? "The Lion King" may well be a pivotal stepping stone toward CGI splendors to come, but for now, it feels like realism has been substituted for enchantment.

That doesn't stop an army of top craft professionals and an enviable voice cast from doing their best to inject some vitality into "The Lion King." The familiar songs by Elton John and Tim Rice are back, along with a new tune by Rice and Beyoncé, though this time, the score by Hans Zimmer, with Lebo M., feels more airy and buoyant.

Yet the degree to which this "Lion King" mimics the first is disappointing. (Jeff Nathanson gets a solo writing credit but scene-to-scene the film hues extremely close to the original.) There's a sound case to be made that the tale, which has been running on Broadway for more than 20 years, needs little revision.

But the few deviations taken by the filmmakers make you want more. The role of Nala has rightfully been elevated and toughened. The most rope for rifting has been extended to the new Timon and Pumba: Billy Eichner and Seth Rogen. Taking over for Nathan Lane's meerkat and Ernie Sabella's warthog, Eichner and Rogen make their own shtick together and they, more than anyone else, give "The Lion King" a breath of fresh air, even as they make plenty of jokes.

Yet that's hardly enough to warrant a bland, unimaginative rehash like this, let alone merit Beyoncé's imperial presence. Instead, "The Lion King" is missing something. A purpose, maybe, and a heart. The life expectancy of Disney classics has begun to feel more like a hamster wheel than a circle of life, and it's getting harder and harder to feel the love. (AP)

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This image released by Sony Pictures shows Tom Holland (left), and Samuel L. Jackson in a scene from 'Spider-Man: Far From Home'. (AP)

Film

Docu recaps Hamilton's life in compelling fashion

'Unstoppable', devotional sports film

By Owen Gleiberman

No matter how many times you hear the story of Bethany Hamilton, the US professional surfing champion whose left arm got bitten off by a tiger shark when she was 13, it exerts an emotional power that can't be denied. At this point, however, the story is so familiar that it has taken on the quality of a larger-than-life American parable of tragedy and faith and perseverance and triumph. It's been told on talk shows, on sports TV, in celebrity media, in Hamilton's 2004 memoir, "Soul Surfer", and in the not-bad Hollywood biopic that was made from it.

So when you watch "Bethany Hamilton: Unstoppable", a documentary that recaps Hamilton's life in compelling fashion without adding anything of special novelty or depth (though much of the surfing footage is spectacular), it can feel like you're seeing a perfectly fine devotional sports biography that doesn't elevate the saga it's telling to the next level.

I'm not suggesting there's a "dark side" to Bethany Hamilton that isn't being revealed here. Yet the film's tone — 99 minutes of inspirational sweetness and light, plus a whole lot of defiance and victory — isn't so much suspect as it is, at this point, a bit limited. You get to see Hamilton at work and at play (which, for her, are the same thing), and she's such a plucky, upbeat femme-jock of few words that she never fails to come off as a driven but saintly striver. With her sunwashed platinum-blond hair and lower jaw that juts out in determination, she's like Ann Coulter if Ann Coulter were a nice person.

Yet I wish "Unstoppable" revealed some-

thing about Hamilton I didn't know from seeing her on "Oprah".

The story of how she lost her arm, and recovered, has always been such an awesome lesson in facing down adversity that the film's director and cinematographer, Aaron Lieber, doesn't even try to find an original angle on it; and maybe there isn't one. We see news flashbacks to Oct 31, 2003, the day that Hamilton was attacked by a tiger shark off the coast of Kauai. We see a shot of her junior surfboard being held up with a clean shark bite out of the middle of it. "It was pretty heavy," recalls her mom, in what sounds like the ultimate understatement, until she adds, "but I was so thankful she was alive!"

Expresses

We see footage of Bethany in the hospital, shortly after the calamity, and beneath her dazed demeanor she has the grace to say, "I'm glad it was me and no one else out there" — by which she means her surfing bestie Alana Blanchard. "I'd just rather have it be me than Alana," she says, "because I love her so much." That's a profound thought for a teenager to offer from her recovery bed, because what it expresses is that Bethany Hamilton loved something more than herself. Maybe it was Alana, or Christ, or surfing, or simply the life outside herself (or all of the above). And that's what saved her.

It was assumed that her surfing career was over, but within days she voiced concrete hopes of surfing again with one arm. We see a TV interviewer ask, "Do you think you're going to surf again?" "I think?" she says, incredulous. "I know I'm going to surf again." She was back on her board four weeks later.

Since she wasn't able to duck dive to get out to the big waves, her father installed a spe-

cial handle on her surfboard that enabled her to duck dive. It wasn't long before she won the Nationals, redefining bravery — and talent — in surfing. By 14, she had become a media darling, with appearances on everything from the talk shows to "The Teen Choice Awards". She visited Iraq War soldiers in the hospital and appeared in "Dolphin Tale 2". And she became a poster girl for the Evangelical movement, since faith was such a crucial element of her story.

All of this takes up the first 45 minutes of "Unstoppable". And then? Then the film shifts to the adult Bethany, her cataclysm far behind her, as she competes for the world title in 2015, just four months after her son, Tobias, was born. As a new mother, she says that for a while she tried but failed to devote herself to surfing as consumingly as it demanded.

Yet nothing deters Bethany, and nothing deters "Unstoppable" from returning to its shiny narrative of triumph. After her loss, she competes in the championships at Fiji, and there's a training/surfing sequence — a "Rocky" montage — set to M83 performing "Oblivion", which sounds like "Take My Breath Away" with less synth and more God. We get to see her training techniques (running under water with a weight, riveting back and forth on her back on a birth ball). And the imagery of Bethany surfing is breathtaking: tucking into the barrel, cascading down waves of such enormity that they're like cliffs of water.

"Unstoppable" starts as a tale of transcending tragedy, but it ends up where almost every other surfing documentary does, at that place where the majesty of surfing — the Zen of it, the deathly beauty of it — becomes all. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Sony's second weekend of "Spider-Man: Far From Home" is heading for a leading \$37 million, easily topping "Toy Story 4," "Crawl" and "Stuber," early estimates showed Friday.

Disney's fourth weekend of "Toy Story 4" will finish a distant second with \$20 million, followed by the openings of Paramount's alligator disaster movie "Crawl" with about \$12 million and Fox's buddy comedy "Stuber" with about \$7 million.

"Spider-Man: Far From Home" is declining about 59% from its first weekend, which followed the Independence Day holiday, and should wind up the weekend with about \$265 million in its first 13 days in North America. **Tom Holland's** superhero adventure, the 23rd entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, has also generated \$392 million internationally for a global tally of \$613 million.

"Toy Story 4" is showing impressive holding power with a 40% decline. The latest installment in the 24-year-old animated comedy franchise has generated \$320 million in its first 20 days in North America and \$667 million worldwide. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Another familiar face is returning to the James Bond franchise, as sources confirmed to Variety that **Christoph Waltz** will reprise his role of the super-villain Blofeld in "Bond 25".

Waltz first appeared in the most recent Bond pic, "Spectre", as the iconic villain who had previously played by **Donald Pleasance**. Max von Sydow and **Telly Savalas** in previous installments of the franchise.

The film is currently shooting in London and Waltz is among a number of actors returning to reprise their roles, including star **Daniel Craig**, **Ralph Fiennes**, **Lea Seydoux** and **Naomie Harris**.

"Bond 25" is directed by **Cary Joji Fukunaga** and co-stars Oscar-winner **Rami Malek**, **Ana De Armas**, **Lashana Lynch**, **David Dencik**, **Billy Magnussen**, **Dali Benssalah**, **Jeffrey Wright**, **Ben Whishaw** and **Rory Kinnear**. When the film was shooting in Jamaica, Craig injured his ankle and had to take a two-week

break from filming. It's also set to travel to Italy and Norway.

The production had another brief setback when an explosion at a Pinewood Studios soundstage in June injured a crew member. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: "The Haunting of Hill House" star **Oliver**



Cohen



Waltz

Jackson-Cohen is joining the cast of "The Invisible Man" as the title character for the Blumhouse-Universal Pictures project.

"The Invisible Man" is inspired by Universal Pictures' classic monster character, first portrayed by **Claude Rains** in the studio's 1933 movie. The story was based on H.G. Wells' science-fiction novel about a chemist who has

discovered the secret of invisibility while conducting a series of tests involving an obscure drug called monocane. In 2008, "The Invisible Man" was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress.

Elisabeth Moss, **Aldis Hodge**, **Harriet Dyer** and **Storm Reid** were previously announced as

joining the project. The film will shoot in Sydney, Australia, later this month. Universal has set a March 13 release date.

The thriller will be written, directed and executive produced by **Leigh Whannell**, who wrote, directed and executive produced the 2018 sci-fi thriller "Upgrade", and who wrote and produced "In-sidious: The Last Key". (RTRS)