

Beauty (Continued)

candidate for this sort of re-working, but the 2017 Bill Condon feature, **Beauty and the Beast**, released by Disney on Blu-ray (UPC#786936853681, \$40), is something of a letdown. It is forthrightly less cinematic than the cartoon was. There is no excitement about what is being accomplished as there was in every cut, every camera angle and every note of the animated feature.

Presented with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, there is little appreciation for the widescreen framing. Sometimes, all of the action is just bunched in the middle, and other times, things are spread out randomly to fill the screen. The editing is bland, flowing with the music at times, and hitting the beats almost too precisely, yet rarely offering a harmonic counterpoint. It may also be that the enhanced visual information in the live action feature dilutes the impact of the music. Running 129 minutes, the story has been altered in places, but while some of the alterations are an effective addition to the narrative (the heroine sees her past as a child), the biggest one (a witch places a curse on the Beast in a manner reminiscent of the opening of **Sleeping Beauty**) has no balancing resolution (the removal of the curse goes unnoticed as the film focuses on its effects rather than its act). The film is not entirely a waste of time, by any means. Its source was simply too good to spawn a bad movie. There are new songs that are largely unmemorable, but the old ones are lively and captivating the way familiar tunes often are. One number, *Be Our Guest*, does live up to its transition (although even then, the original version was far more spectacular), and the ballroom dance—ironically, the piece that was computer animated the first time out—has more life and flexibility with this pass. More importantly, the romance that is the core of the story and that must be entirely believable for the story to work at all is fully successful. Emma Watson plays the heroine, who is imprisoned by the Beast in his castle in exchange for her father's freedom, but gradually comes to love him as he begins to love her (the story is generations old, and much analysis has been written over the years about the symbolism involved, just as there have also been many variations of the tale's sexual dynamics). So the film succeeds on paper, but when it comes to the magic of the movies, its best accomplishment is to have viewers running back to revisit the original cartoon feature, to truly bask in how glorious cinema can be when every component of a film is designed and executed with perfection.

Dan Stevens plays the Beast, with Luke Evans as the egotistical villain. Hidden behind costumes or animation are a bevy of stars, including Kevin Kline, Ian McKellen, Ewan McGregor, Emma Thompson, Audra McDonald and Stanley Tucci. The color transfer is precise and the image is sharp, making the blend of animation and reality seem unnoticeable. The 7.1-channel DTS sound has a full dimensionality and clearly defined separations. There is an audio track that describes the action ("Belle gives the Beast a low curtsy. He bows his ram-horned head to her. She offers up both her hands. He takes them and lets her lead him onto the dance floor. They dance."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, a music video with Ariana Grande and John Legend, a 2-minute production featurette about making the music video, a 3-minute interview with Celine Dion about the number she performs on the soundtrack (she had turned down an opportunity to sing on the cartoon), a 14-minute look at an elaborate table read of the script by the full cast that also had them singing songs and doing the basic dances, 46 minutes of decent production featurettes including a piece about the women who had major jobs behind the camera, and 10 minutes of interesting deleted scenes that often contain bits of business or drama that do not match the tone of the completed film.

A DVD platter is also included, although the picture is just a tiny bit less sharp, and the 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound isn't nearly as flourishing. The language options are the same as the BD and there is one special feature, the music video.

Transfixing Monday

The transfixing Mike Figgis romantic crime feature from 1988, his debut film, **Stormy Monday**, has been issued in a highly worthwhile DVD + Blu-ray by Arrow Video (UPC#760137030980, \$30). With the exception of a narrative flaw at the very end, which can take a bit of wind out of your sails if it starts to bother you, the film is an exquisite, jazz-themed expression of cinematic poetry with a coherent plot and richly drawn characters. Set in an area in Britain's Newcastle that is ripe for urban development, Sean Bean is a drifter who takes a job at a jazz club run by Sting (both gives fine performances). Tommy Lee Jones is an American developer intent upon buying the club as part of a larger renewal project, and has some overly eager thugs working for him to meet these ends. Finally, Melanie Griffith is a waitress who has been living in England as a kind of advance scout for Jones' character, but complicating everything, she and Bean's character fall in love. The film hits its crime story beats in a relaxed manner, but they nevertheless accumulate to a decent level of suspense across the 93-minute feature. In the meantime, the Roger Deakins cinematography is gorgeous in shot after lyrical shot, and the film's musical score, a worthwhile mix of jazz and blues (some of it composed by Figgis), often lingers in the background when it is not at the forefront. Hence, the film is a captivating blend of mood and drama that endures in a viewer's memories long after it is over.

The one irritating error? A minor character, a musician in the band playing at the club, is blown up outside the club in a car by an explosion that

was intended for someone else. Although the heroes rush out to witness the murder, and an ambulance is seen arriving a few minutes later, not long after that there a shot of the band still playing in the club, apparently oblivious to everything that has gone down or the death of their companion. Figgis can almost get away with it sort of, because the film is so poetic (it is suggested in one of the supplements that the entire narrative is just a dream), but it is a testament to how well executed the plot is that he really doesn't.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The transfer is beautiful and shows off Deakins' work to its best effects. The DTS sound has a lovely, immersive dimensionality, but unfortunately, car engines and a few other sound effects have a disruptive reverb. There are optional English subtitles, a trailer, a small collection of promotional photos in still frame, and a very good 33-minute documentary that talks not just about the creation of the film, its thematic elements (including the dream speculation) and its performances (Sting was playing himself, not 'Baron Frankenstein' or something, which is why he is so effective), but a comprehensive history of Newcastle (where both Figgis and Sting originated) in movies and the subsequent gentrification that has gone on in just the area Figgis speculated it would. "**Stormy Monday** also works as a kind of love letter from Mike Figgis to what is basically his home town. But it's not Newcastle as it really was in 1986/1987. It's a kind of fantasy dream of Newcastle. When Sean Bean meets Melanie Griffith, she's finishing work at midnight and they go around the corner to a bar and buy drinks. The idea of buying drinks after midnight in Britain in 1986 is clearly not something from the real world. So Mike Figgis is in a way presenting Newcastle as it could be, his vision for the city in the same way that [Jones' character is within the film]."

Figgis also provides a commentary, prompted by film journalist Damon Wise. They talk about all aspects of the production, including the long time it took to get the film off the ground, the locations (the denizens of Newcastle got very excited when the movie fronts went up, because they thought the area was really going to get a nightclub), the cast (Griffith was skittish, but snapped out of it whenever the camera was on; Jones was 'scary' and had Figgis cowering after Figgis had the temerity to suggest Jones do a nude scene; Jones was also unhappy with the film's somewhat anti-American tone), directing ("I have this theory about doing love stories, men and women, and that is that you need to get the actress right. It's very hard for men, these love scenes are very tricky for men, and usually, if you analyze it, the woman is doing most of the work, I mean emotionally and acting-wise, to make it work.") and the film's intoxicating imagery ("We looked at all things I think everybody now looks at and probably did then, too, which was Edward Hopper paintings, a huge thing. My references were all kind of iconic American, sort of sad/beautiful night exteriors from another era. The truth is, the first draft, or the draft of the script that we went into production with, described how the streets were absolutely throbbing with people, as in **Blade Runner**, you know. There was going to be Chinese neons everywhere, there were going to be thousands of people in the street. And as ever, when you start having budget conversations, there was a moment where the producers said, 'Listen, you're going to have to lose something. We can't afford to do this whole thing. You're really going to have to lose all your extras on the streets, because that's a big expense and time consuming, or you're going to have to lose a major scene.' And so I agreed to go for the lonely, wet streets, reflecting-the-neon kind of look. But it wasn't my original intention at all. I mean having said that, it works much better not to have so many people in a lot of the scenes.").

Unstuck in time

A terrific low budget time travel movie in which the heroine has to piece together what is happening to her and how to stop her constant fluctuations in time and space, **Displacement**, has been released by All Channel Films (UPC#710051995032, \$23). Shot in Southern California, the film appears to evoke *Mesher in the Afternoon* in a couple of sequences, as the heroine enters a house and then sees herself walking outside from an upstairs window, and it has that sort of dream sensibility as it explores questions of love and grief, and how untethered those feelings become from the constructs of reality. Courtney Hope stars, portraying a brilliant quantum physics student—since her father's character is also a physicist, it's plausible, but her performance rarely sells that point—who creates and becomes dislodged in a time rift. She must repair the rift to stabilize her existence (if not stopping the world from breaking apart) while also reconciling with her loved ones and preventing a corporation from acquiring her formulas and selling the process as a weapon. All of this is accomplished in the film through conversations

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