

## Dark, Dazzling 'Jungle': Disney Goes Wild



by Joe Morgenstern

- 1 **ONCE AGAIN MOWGLI** runs through the jungle in a red loincloth in Disney's re-imagining – and huge re-energizing – of *The Jungle Book*. Yet this latest version makes the 1967 animated classic look like kid stuff – sweet and lovely stuff, fondly remembered for its pretty pastel drawings, its show-biz humor and its benign take on the jungle as a pleasant place, notwithstanding a nasty tiger and a silly, sibilant snake. The new production, computer-animated except for a living, breathing boy at the center of the action, isn't pretty or sweet but utterly stunning, as well as very funny; all those vaudeville antecedents haven't been forgotten. It's a family entertainment made mainly for the worldly kids of today, junior citizens who are all too familiar with violence and wise in the ways of the media jungle, but who, being kids, will still be awed by the movie's graphic and dramatic power.
- 2 Mowgli, the man-cub raised by a family of wolves, is played by Neel Sethi. The boy's performance may serve from time to time as a reminder that wolves don't send their off-spring to acting classes, but he's a consistently agreeable presence, and his occasional, touching tentativeness plays nicely with the well-spoken animals who surround him: Bagheera, the panther voiced by Ben Kingsley; Kaa (Scarlett Johansson), the scarily seductive snake; Raksha (Lupita Nyong'o), Mowgli's adoptive wolf mother; Baloo the bear (Bill Murray, who is perfectly hilarious in a role that's perfectly tailored to his talents); King Louie (sly work by Christopher Walken) and of course Shere Khan, the terrifying tiger voiced with commanding authority by Idris Elba.

3 Talking animals can be a problem in a film that wants to be taken seriously, and seriousness colors a large part of this one. 12, not since *Babe* have animals talked so convincingly, or engagingly. And, given the agile direction of Jon Favreau and a smart, witty script by Justin Marks, they have lots to talk about.

4 When the tale begins a drought is transforming the land, and the law of the jungle gives way to a temporary 13 that's sealed by a truce. Beast can get back to eating beast – and Shere Khan can get back to chasing Mowgli, who can run like a young Tom Cruise – once the ecosystem regains a firmer footing. None of the animals, being animals, talks specifically about ecosystems – that's a mercy – but environmental considerations have caught up with iconic cartoonery.

5 One striking example concerns the elephants. In the 1967 Disney feature elephants were clowns; a long sequence was devoted to the Jungle Patrol, an elephant troop of British colonial soldiers led by a sort of Colonel Blimp. In the new film it's the elephants who have created the jungle, and Mowgli is taught to bow down before them in reverence. That reverence doesn't extend to humanity. We're the bad guys, wielding fire – the "Red Flower" – with a recklessness that devastates the jungle, although Mowgli's own role in a conflagration is conveniently fudged.

6 The greatest contrast between the two films is, predictably though still astonishingly, the animation.

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7 An important element of the narrative's heritage – not from Rudyard Kipling but from Walt Disney – is the laughs, and they're honored here in an odd way, though certainly a successful one. Instead of incorporating humor into an overall tone, as Mr. Favreau was able to do when he directed *Iron Man*, the filmmaker and writer simply stop the seriousness in its tracks for comic interludes, the best of which begins when Baloo makes his appearance and says to Mowgli, in a voice that could only be Bill Murray's, "Relax, kid." Yes, 'The Bare Necessities' is duly sung, in a Dixieland groove, and Baloo becomes, yet again, the soul of the story. (Mr. Walken's King Louie is no slouch either, channeling Louis Armstrong by way of Louis Prima and Slim Gaillard.) This time, though, it's a coming-of-age story in a medium that has come of age. Mowgli has found himself, and his beloved surroundings, as never before.

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