

DVD REVIEW

BEOWULF: DIRECTOR'S CUT

By Charlie Breit

BEOWULF, an animated film by Robert Zemeckis, is a re-telling of the classic epic poem about a great hero who battles fierce beasts and demons during the early Middle Ages. Beowulf, played by Ray Winstone, arrives on the shores of Denmark, after King Hrothgar, played by Anthony Hopkins, sends out a call to all warriors to rid his kingdom of the beast Grendel, played by Crispin Glover. Beowulf and his men battle Grendel and before his defeat, he tells his demon mother, played by Angelina Jolie, his conqueror's name. She seeks revenge and Beowulf must confront her. Beowulf is seduced by the demon hag and makes a deal with her. In time, the deal is broken and Beowulf must sacrifice himself to save the kingdom from the dragon the demon mother unleashes on them.

The movie relies on performance capture to give the animated characters realistic movement and expression. Actors were fitted with reflective dots, strategically placed on their bodies, which computers used to track their movements as captured by multiple cameras. The animation is fantastic and with the use of 3D, many scenes look extremely "real". The use of CGI also allowed the filmmakers to create perfect mythical looking characters. For example, Beowulf sports a perfect body with washboard abs. The look of the movie would be much more difficult to achieve had it been a live-action film.

The imagery wows you, but the actors' performances really make the movie. Ray Winstone has been perfectly cast as Beowulf. His powerful voice brings credibility to the main character and gives him a larger than life persona. Crispin Glover is equally amazing in his role. He brings darkness and inner turmoil to the beast, which is animated in subtle movements in his face and enhanced by his vocal performance. These nuances give the film depth, which normally isn't possible in an animated movie. Angelina Jolie as the villain seductress is also a perfect fit.

I did not agree with the writers and Robert Zemeckis decision to have Grendel's dialogue be in Olde English. The writers wanted to keep an element of the original poem, but I found it confusing and made it hard to follow the beginning of the story. Also Grendel's mother primarily speaks to him in English and the story does not explain why he speaks in a different tongue. I was only able to find out why by perusing the special features on the DVD.

The special features have some gems, but leave you wanting more. The best featurette documents how the performance capture sessions were conducted. Watching Anthony Hopkins and Ray Winstone walk onto the futuristic looking set for the first time is priceless. The use of brightly colored wire framed props and set pieces to help the actors interact with each other and the make-believe environments is brilliant. Learning about this innovative approach to animation was very interesting and I was disappointed they didn't go in to greater detail.

The other features are standard for DVD releases including interviews with the writers, deleted scenes and some short behind-the-scenes featurettes. The most interesting segments, other than the performance capture sessions, include the writers justifying their decision to take artistic liberty with the myth to adapt it for Hollywood and Doug Chiang, art director, describe how he developed the look and feel of the movie. Still, there is very little from the actors outside the performance capture featurette, which only includes Ray Winstone, Anthony Hopkins and Cripsin Glover. I wanted more regarding the actors experience during filming and the director's approach to producing a movie in this manner.

You need to see this movie simply to see what can be done with CGI and performance capture. The look of the movie is absolutely amazing. It's an interesting way to produce a movie and Beowulf is the perfect story to experiment with this medium. This is a good myth film and definitely worth the watch. I think the special features could have included more, which would go along way to justify having this DVD in the home library. I would definitely recommend that you take some time to sit down and watch this movie.