



Far Beyond the Bare Necessities

Bruce Reitherman reflects on his performance as Mowgli and his dad's directorial legacy on the occasion of the re-release of *The Jungle Book* on DVD. *by Jake Friedman*

In 1966, the fate of Walt Disney feature animation was in question. With Walt's focus divided between television and theme parks, his dynasty no longer ran on animation revenue and his death during the production of *The Jungle Book* forced skepticism on the studio's lasting presence. Director Woolie (Wolfgang) Reitherman had the daunting task of finishing a film without his leader at the helm. Featuring the work of Disney legends Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, *Jungle Book* was not only a hit, it was an instant classic, considered even today to be one of the greatest films the studio ever produced.

This month, the studio presents a two-disc 40th anniversary edition DVD, which includes a remastering of the audio and original film negative. It's no wonder *Jungle Book* warranted such a special treatment; animation personalities like Andreas Deja, Brad Bird and Will Finn contribute to the special features of the DVD, reveling in how the film was a unique inspiration to their career paths. Other features include a comparison between Kipling's book and the movie, the unveiling of the lost character Rocky the Rhino, a look into the making of the film and a commentary track compiled

with contemporary and original artists.

"It's easy to put animation in its own little sub-category, but ultimately all this is about good storytelling," says Bruce Reitherman, voice of Mowgli and son of director Woolie Reitherman. "Walt and the people who worked for him had a feeling for how stories work. There were times when a good story was all about building a plot, and there are also projects, like *Jungle Book*, where the story is so simple that it gives great scope for the personalities to shine."

Bruce was eight when he auditioned for his first Disney character. "I did Christopher Robin for *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree*. Then when I was ten, *Jungle Book* came along and they had actually cast a different actor. But it takes four years to finish these films and of course his voice changed, so they ended up casting me to do Mowgli."

Young Reitherman didn't record with the other actors, but spent a great deal of time in the large recording studio with writer Larry Clemmons and the story men. "It was always important for the story to drive the piece forward, and the corollary to that is that part of any actor's performance is an understanding of what his character is going through and what path he's

on. So they took quite a bit of time going over storyboards when we first got started and the guys would act out the lines to give a sense of what sort of energy the scene demanded and where it was all heading."

Bruce also modeled some scenes of Mowgli for animation reference, "Not really to get the mechanics of the motion so much," he says, "But to see what little nuances made this particular 12-year-old kid kick a rock or throw a stick. That way they could inject their animation with a sense of unique personality."

Reitherman certainly knows a thing or two about filmmaking: He is an Emmy award-winning nature documentary filmmaker, whose credits include PBS shows such as *The Living Edens* and *In the Wild*. "My dad was always encouraging me to go for the things that were personal about my experience," he says, "To try to pay attention to how I was feeling when certain things happened and to try to recreate that emotional experience and show its importance, not just blandly present a factual occurrence. His approach was to reach for bits of personality, humor and the struggles found in nature."

Reitherman talks in detail about his father on the DVD and also presents a letter his father had written him about filmmaking. "His comments were always about grabbing the things that have an emotional appeal to them. Nobody will watch the most interesting aspects of scientific phenomena if you don't make it entertaining somehow. He does talk about production quality, but that's surprisingly way down on the list. You want to make your film as classy as you can, but it's about what the characters are doing that makes it worth watching, not how well you execute it."

Reitherman concludes, "In many ways, my dad made me a good filmmaker by encouraging my willingness to look at the world, to think deeply and live richly and have a sense of generosity about how to express your perspective to the rest of the world. At its best, entertainment is a gift to the audience." *The Jungle Book* is certainly that. ■

Disney's *The Jungle Book: 40th Anniversary Edition* (\$29.99) hits stores on October 2. The two-disc set features a restored theatrical soundtrack, enhanced picture and sound, original aspect ratio version, four new games, deleted songs, a new music video and DisneyPedia's Junglemania "Ed"venture.