



Diving Under the Sea Again

Filmmakers Ron Clements and John Musker discuss the re-mastering of the newly released *Little Mermaid* DVD.

by Jake Friedman

When the fans speak, the Mouse listens. Disney's most requested title, 1989's *The Little Mermaid*, is joining the select list of Platinum Edition DVDs this month to make it Disney's eighth in the collection. Produced at a time when there were talks of cutting Disney's feature animation division all together, *Mermaid* heralded a new age in Disney animation, paving the way for other heartfelt, Broadway-inspired projects like *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin* and *Hercules*, to name a few.

This new DVD collection contains commentary by co-writers/co-directors Ron Clements and John Musker, as well as composer Alan Menken. The second disc also offers a digital simulation of a *Little Mermaid* theme park ride that never saw fruition, narrated by the original Imagineers. There's also a new documentary chronicling the ascent of the Disney company's executive staff and the spearheading of *Mermaid*. Dozens of interviews, from actors to animators to members of the executive board, offer a window into the making of the two-time Oscar-winning (Best Song and Score) film with delicious anecdotes and archival home footage.

"Nothing's been added or deleted from the original film. It's still the same as you remember, but just some little mistakes have been

cleaned up," notes Clements, who along with Musker was closely involved in the re-mastering of the movie. "The film was the last to use hand-painted cels. We had some issues with the color," says Musker, "as we shot the film on EK Stock instead of three-strip Technicolor, partially as a money-saving technique. But then we couldn't get the colors looking the way we wanted to, and it was leading to all sorts of problems. All the different shades of red were turning into one color. It wasn't until this DVD restoration that the colors look like what we had wanted."

"Also, looking at the VHS release, the older version had much thicker lines around the characters because of our attempts to compensate for EK's lower contrast. If you compare it to most any scene in the restored DVD, you'll see a more delicate line around the characters than in the original video release. And in Ursula's grays and lavenders, there's some paint crawl, which was magnified in the earlier versions. These were all issues that the restoration was able to help fix."

"We had Ian Gooding at Disney, who has a great eye for color, helping us out, as well as Tim Peeler over at the Technicolor labs," Clements points out. "Terry Porter, who did the original sound mix, did a new mix using new sound technology to make it a little richer. So

it's the same film, but just a little enhanced."

In the 1970s, Musker attended CalArts while Clements came to Disney straight out of high school. They both wound up as animators, and from there moved to storyboard artists. "We also both love to write," adds Musker. "We knew each other from *The Fox and the Hound*," says Clements. "We worked on *The Black Cauldron* and shared some of the frustrations with that. I think we have the same sensibility—we're about the same age, we're both from the Midwest, we have the same cultural influences. But I asked John if he was interested in collaborating on a script. It hadn't really been done before, but we found that we have different strengths and weaknesses."

Their writing process is a portrait of true collaboration. "Once we have the basic story worked out, John begins the scriptwriting process, in long hand on a legal pad, free form and improvisational. He writes scenes over and over again, including dialogue and visual things, and he does this fairly quickly. When I read it, I go through it and type it up, editing it and sometimes re-writing it. But he doesn't see what I do until the script is finished, and when he reads it, it's been so long that it's almost fresh for him."

While they were directing the film, Clements and Musker marveled at the seamless progression from script to screen. "We had our share of executive notes," says Musker, "but we were able to fend off the questionable ones and learn from the good ones."

"It's common for films to blow up with problems in the middle," says Clements. It's kind of rare and unique that *Mermaid* didn't. Throughout, it stayed, in essence, what it started out being."

"You have to remember that the combination of Disney animation and Broadway musical was brand new at the time," says Musker, who along with Clements has returned to the studio thanks to the arrival of John Lasseter on the scene. While it's true that there have been more than a fair share of solid Disney musicals since, *Mermaid* holds up amazingly well and has that timelessness that justly merits it a Disney classic, 17 years after it was made. ■

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Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (2-Disc Special Edition, \$29.99) DVD is available in stores in October.