**‘Beauty and the Beast' review: Animated Disney musical's charms lost in translation** [Michael Phillips](http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/movies/chinews-michael-phillips-20130507-staff.html#nt=byline)

The chaotic, pushy remake of Disney’s 1991 screen musical “Beauty and the Beast” stresses the challenges of adapting a success in one form (animation) for another (live-action). We’re in for a long line of Disney remakes in the coming years: Everything from “Dumbo” to “Aladdin” is headed for a wallet near you, banking on nostalgia and brand recognition. The financial wallop of the recent, pretty good live-action “Jungle Book” redo, and the live-action "Cinderella" before that, set a high bar of corporate expectation.

“Beauty and the Beast” will no doubt please the stockholders. It’s just not a very good movie, is all.

Why? The high points of director [Bill Condon](http://www.chicagotribune.com/topic/entertainment/bill-condon-PECLB001100-topic.html)’s resume suggest he was the right person for this big-budget remake. The maker of "Gods and Monsters" and "Kinsey" possesses a basic understanding of the musical genre’s building blocks, given his success with “Dreamgirls." And since he made one of the "Twilight" movies, "Breaking Dawn: Part I" (which he himself called "a disaster"), Condon is certainly familiar with the live-action/digital effects mashup requirements. But his new movie is more of a grating disappointment, despite its best supporting turns, human and animatronic.

Condon races through the story beats at an unvarying pace, usually with his camera too close to the performers while the digital effects overwhelm the screen. [Emma Watson](http://www.chicagotribune.com/topic/entertainment/movies/emma-watson-PECLB00005022-topic.html) makes for a genial, bland-ish Belle, the freakish outsider in her provincial French village because of her interest in books and her indifference to the local hunky baritone, Gaston (Luke Evans). Underneath the digital fur and digital roars, Dan Stevens as the Beast, the transformed prince working on a rose-petaled deadline to become human again, locates some moments of pathos that stick.

The problems here, I think, are weirdly simple. The movie takes our knowledge and our interest in the material for granted. It zips from one number to another, throwing a ton of frenetically edited eye candy at the screen, charmlessly. “Be Our Guest” is nothing but visual noise. The tavern frolics, featuring Gaston and his fawning sidekick, LeFou ([Josh Gad](http://www.chicagotribune.com/topic/entertainment/josh-gad-PECLB0000006962-topic.html)), will give you that awful "Master of the House" "Les Miz" feeling. Too often we're watching highly qualified performers, plus a few less conspicuously talented ones (Watson, primarily), stuck doing karaoke, or motion-capture work of middling quality. The movie feels like a matinee of the second national tour of Disney’s stage edition of “Beauty and the Beast," somewhere around the 300th performance.

The enchanted castle objects are all there, including Lumiere (Ewan McGregor), Cogsworth ([Ian McKellen](http://www.chicagotribune.com/topic/entertainment/ian-mckellen-PECLB003185-topic.html)) and Mrs. Potts ([Emma Thompson](http://www.chicagotribune.com/topic/entertainment/emma-thompson-PECLB003838-topic.html), particularly welcome). Newbies are dominated by the harpsichord Cadenza, played by [Stanley Tucci](http://www.chicagotribune.com/topic/entertainment/stanley-tucci-PECLB003867-topic.html). There’s one shot of Tucci where he's hamming it up so ferociously at the keyboard, the movie briefly turns into an entirely different movie: “Beauty, the Beast and the Shameless Character Actor.”

The 1991 film, one of many adaptations over the centuries of the old, dark fairy tale, worked wonderfully because it was pure Broadway, written for the screen, blending comedy and romance and magic and just enough snark in the margins. Alan Menken’s music and the late Howard Ashman’s brash lyrics were augmented for the stage version by new songs, lyrics by Tim Rice. There are more new songs composed for Condon’s film, among them a flashback “Aria” sung by Audra McDonald, and “Days in the Sun,” sung by the enchanted objects, fulfilling a narrative function similar to that of “Human Again” (cut from the animated film, reinstated for the Broadway musical, which ran nearly 5,500 performances).

[Kevin Kline](http://www.chicagotribune.com/topic/entertainment/kevin-kline-PECLB002825-topic.html) gets a new song as well. He plays Maurice, Belle’s dear, tinkering father. He’s the best, sweetest thing in the movie; he brings a sense of calm, droll authority to every line reading. The poor character spends his screen time propping up the other characters, or getting trussed up and left for dead by Gaston, but the story requires it. Screenwriters Stephen Chbosky and Evan Spiliotopoulos develop a backstory for the death of Belle’s mother, and add a few touches of their own.