EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK

Tale as Old as Time

On March 17, Disney will unveil its lavish live-action retelling of Beauty and the Beast. Get ready to swoon as we take you behind the scenes of a fairy-tale classic in the making.

By CLARK COLLIS @CLARKCOLLIS

Lettering By KEVIN CANTRELL
EMMA WATSON WOULD LIKE moviegoers to please take note of her footwear. As Belle in Disney’s live-action update of its 1991 animated classic Beauty and the Beast (out March 17), the actress is sporting the kind of sturdy ankle boots one might choose for a long walk—or maybe a waterlogged outdoor Metallica concert. They are definitely not the flimsy flats the character originally wore as she searched for her father inside a castle belonging to an arrogant, cursed prince. “My Belle is very practical,” Watson says during a shooting break at Shepperton Studios, outside London. “In the movie she wears these little ballet shoes, and I knew that they had to go. If you’re going to ride a horse and tend your garden and fix machinery, then you need to be in proper boots.” That’s not the only change awaiting fans who turn up for Dreamgirls director Bill Condon’s lavish fantasy next spring. In addition to a live cast that includes Downton Abbey star Dan Stevens as the Beast and Kevin Kline as Belle’s father, Maurice, there’s a major new member of the castle’s enchanted household staff—a harpsichord named Cadenza voiced by Stanley Tucci—joining candelabra Lumière (Ewan McGregor), teapot Mrs. Potts (Emma Thompson), clock Cogsworth (Ian McKellen), and others. And while every song from the original will be featured, the new film also boasts a clutch of fresh-written numbers penned by lyricist Tim Rice and composer Alan Menken, the latter of whom wrote the tunes for the 1991 movie with the late Howard Ashman. These include a Stevens-performed ballad, “For Evermore,” and another slow-tempo track, “Days in the Sun.” That second track, Menken says, “is a moment when the castle is settling in for the night and everybody is having memories of what used to be. It’s a combination of a lullaby and a remembrance of happier days for everybody.”
A new character. New songs. Walking boots. Put together, it begins to sound like a lot of changes, but producer David Hoberman (The Proposal) says there’s no reason to worry. “It wasn’t about changing anything, it was about adding dimension to it,” he says. “We give [fans] everything that they expect and more—not more for more’s sake, more for story’s sake and characters’ sake.” If he sounds like he’s speaking very, very carefully, it’s for good reason. Few films have inspired the kind of feverish devotion as Beauty and the Beast, which cast a spell over an entire generation. It was the third-highest-grossing release of 1991 and the first animated movie to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture. Though it lost the top Oscar to The Silence of the Lambs, it did win for Best Song (“Beauty and the Beast”) and Best Score, and it went on to be
adapted as a Broadway musical that ran for 13 years. But statistics and accolades can only hint at the lasting passion for the romance between the self-possessed Belle and the hirsute Beast—the cursed prince who must find true love before the final petal falls from a rose or remain in his nonhuman state forever. “I can’t even think how many times I watched it as a child,” Watson says. “I knew all the songs by heart.”

While the new version is part of a wave of live-action updates of beloved animated films (Cinderella, The Jungle Book), Hoberman and producing partner Todd Lieberman initially pitched Disney on a Beauty and the Beast project that presented the fable from the Beast’s point of view. Following the blockbuster success of 2013’s song-packed Frozen, however, the company instead recruited the pair for a more traditional retelling that could take advantage of the latest technology. “The opportunity to do that music with what was technically achievable—the combination of that really, really excited,” says Sean Bailey, president of Walt Disney Studios Motion Picture Production.

In need of a filmmaker adept at both musicals and special effects, the producers turned to Condon, whose credits include not just Dreamgirls but the final two Twilight movies. “I saw Beauty and the Beast many times when it first opened in ’91 and obviously saw it on stage,” Condon says. “It’s definitely a favorite.” Watson had been attached to star in yet another Beauty and the Beast project, to be directed by Guillermo del Toro. When that fell apart, she happily...
signed on for Condon’s version. “I’ve never sung before, but I’ve always wanted to,” she says. Wait, she’d never sung before?

“I sang as, like, a 12-year-old at school,” she says. “So, it was like, ‘Wow, can I still do that? It’s been a long time!’ I did two or three months’ training for this. It was nerve-racking, but now I’m in a place where I feel happy with what I’ve been able to do.”

If finding the film’s leading lady was a fairy tale, then looking for someone to star opposite her was a more grim(m) experience, in part because major stars were wary of a role that would make huge physical demands on the actor but would also ultimately be computer-generated. Condon pushed for Stevens, with whom the director had worked on 2013’s The Fifth Estate.

The actor wasn’t getting his hopes up. “It felt to me like a long shot, but it was delightful when it came in,” Stevens says. As Belle’s egomaniacal suitor, Gaston, and his sidekick, Le Fou, Condon cast, respectively, Luke Evans (The Girl on the Train) and Frozen star Josh Gad. Evans reveals that the new version gives the narcissistic Gaston, who believes he’s entitled to Belle’s hand in marriage, a bit of a brushup. “I’d say there’s a little more humanity to the character [now],” Evans says. “He’s not as brash as you remember in the film. But, you know, he’s Gaston!” Filling out the household staff, Audra McDonald voices the role of Madame De Garderobe, Gugu Mbatha-Raw is feather duster Plumette, and newcomer Nathan Mack plays young teacup Chip.

Prior to shooting, Watson, Stevens, and Condon workshoped the screenplay by the director, Evan Spiliotopoulos (The Huntsman: Winter’s War), and Stephen Chbosky (The Perks of Being a Wallflower). “I definitely had issues with the script at the beginning,” says Watson, who over the past few years has become a public promoter of gender equality and in 2014 was appointed a U.N. Women Goodwill Ambassador. “We tried to tweak things to make Belle more proactive and a bit more in charge of her own destiny. In the animated movie, it’s her father who is the inventor, and we actually co-opted that for Belle. We created a backstory for her, which was that she had invented a kind of washing machine, so that instead of doing laundry, she could sit and use that time to read.”

For Condon, the greatest challenges involved staging the production numbers—the “Be Our Guest” sequence was especially trying. “It’s interesting to do our biggest musical number with nobody there, except for some cutaways to Belle,” Condon says with a laugh. “We just spent months and months and months. It’s the most intricate thing I’ve ever worked on.” Stevens, meanwhile, essentially performed the role of the Beast twice. First, he acted out his character’s physical movements on set, using stilts to enhance his height and wearing a bodysuit with tracking markers to help facilitate a CG rendering of the Beast’s torso and limbs. Later, Stevens replayed scenes seated in front of a bank of cameras, his features covered in ultraviolet paint.
makeup. That footage was used to create the Beast's face. If you think that sounds incredibly difficult, you're not alone. “I had a chat with a couple of people who know this world,” Stevens says. “When I told [Hulk actor] Mark Ruffalo what we were trying to do, he was just like, ‘No, that’s impossible.’”

Ewan McGregor played Lumière twice too, in a way, first recording a guide vocal in London with which Watson and Stevens could interact on set. He then voiced the French-accented candelabra for a second time once the shoot was over. “My French sounded a bit Spanish to begin with,” McGregor says. “Then I went over to New York, where Bill Condon was doing all his postproduction, and I recorded the whole part again. I’d done a bit more work on the accent, and I got to rerecord ‘Be Our Guest.’” Unfortunately for Ian McKellen, his own hope to front a production number came to naught. “I kept singing what I thought would be a rather good addition to the score,” he says, then starts to croon: “My name is Cogsworth!/And I’m a clock!/Ticktock!” But I didn’t get my own song.”

Condon is now overseeing the last visual effects, but Menken has seen a cut of Beauty and is impressed. “I was kind of overwhelmed,” he says. “It sounded great. It looked great. I’m excited for the rest of the world to be seeing it.” Sounds like fans could be in store for a fairy-tale ending—and then some. “We have an amazing scene where Mrs. Potts is driving a four-wheeler through a tall building in Dubai,” Gad deadpans. “We’re going to give Fast and Furious a run for its money.”