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Disney goes deep in 'Beauty' redux

What could be new about a tale as old as time? The beauty of Disney's live-action retelling of "Beauty and the Beast" resides in the visually spectacular, digitally enhanced, Rococo-themed production design. The movie is bedazzled, gilded and bejeweled in every over-stimulating frame — then it's 3D amplified for immersive effect.

Disney may tug a bit at the corners of this canonic fable, adding a gay character here and some girl empowerment there. But there is little it could do to "improve" the fossilized plot, short of introducing a phantom, a hunchback or Fay Wray.

The studio's only choice was to go deep by investing prodigious amounts of time, money and cultural acumen to create a savagely beautiful commercial product that appeals to every conceivable demographic in the international marketplace.

That's what Disney does best. Its dominance in the arena was affirmed by the record-breaking box office of the movie's opening.

Kremlinists and conservative Christians have complained bitterly about the orientation of Josh Gad's ("Frozen," "Book of Mormon") gay character, LeFou (which means "the fool" in French), calling for a boycott of the movie.

Rather than miss out on this cultural extravaganza, I'm willing to wager these haters will see the film anyway, gay-grouching all the way to the popcorn counter, then tapping their feet through the big musical numbers — a table-stomping tavern scene and the



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Busby Berkeley-style spectacle, "Be Our Guest."

Knowing of the controversy, I wondered while watching the movie how gay audiences will react to the fairly stereotypical presentation of LeFou. Then it occurred to me: It's 18th century France. He lives in a provincial village. His neighbors own torches and pitchforks and aren't afraid to use them.

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So he's a little closeted. He's entitled.

Besides, there's a young girl living alone in the castle with a beast. Priorities, please.

Belle (Emma Watson) is a perfect Disney princess. Her intellect outweighs her looks, and she has a spark. A misunderstood out-

sider, she feels trapped in the countryside and exiles herself in the world of books.

Belle finds an admired partner in the expensively educated Beast (Dan Stevens, "Downton Abby"), whose own exile is physical — a zoomorphic disfigurement, inflicted by the curse of a mistreated crone. He shares his vast library with Belle, teasingly disputes her taste in Shakespeare (so many better things to read than "Romeo and Juliet") and opens up to her: "When I enter the room, laughter dies."

The film, which has some dark moments and is rated PG, targets the young adult literati of the "Harry Potter" crowd, not just little girls in ice cream-colored tutus and sparkly tiaras.

Belle is a model of kind assertiveness. The Beast, in turn, grows to shed his selfishness and effectively channel his emotional vulnerability. There is parity in the moviemakers' devotion to the character development of both beauty and beast. Isolated and socially awkward loners, they offer direct shout-outs to contemporary adolescents, male and female.

This "Beauty and the Beast" successfully merges the stripling pubescent fantasies of every gender, capitalizing on the fusion. It is as much a movie for boys who long for someone to "get" them, as for girls who search for princes among beasts.

It's no spoiler to reveal that happily ever after is implied (though not mandated) by the ending.

Certain as the sun, rising in the east, that's what we expect, from "Beauty and the Beast."