



MIGHTY JOE YOUNG

Released: 1998 by Walt Disney Pictures

Producer(s): Ted Hartley and Tom Jacobson

Screenplay: Mark Rosenthal and Lawrence Konner

Story: Ruth Rose and Merian C. Cooper

Music: James Horner

Cinematography: Don Peterman and Oliver Wood

Directed: Ron Underwood

Starring: Bill Paxton, Charlize Theron, Rade Sherbedgia, Peter Firth, David Palmer, Regina King, Robert Wisdom, Naveen Andrews, Lawrence Pressman, Linda Purl, Mika Boorem, John Alexander (as Joe), cameos by Terry Moore and Ray Harryhausen

Rated: PG

There are two reasons I feel remakes should be attempted. The first is to update special effects technology. The second is to update cultural, or time period anachronisms. The folks at Disney hit the mark dead center on both counts with this one.

The premise of *Mighty Joe Young* is brought nicely into the nineties, in keeping with reason number two for a remake. The *raison d'être* of bringing Joe to America is changed from that of making him a nightclub attraction to the subject of a nature conservancy cause. Joe as a nightclub act might have worked in the '40s but not in these days of animal rights activists. After what happened to Diane Fossey, of *Gorillas in the Mist* fame, the change in premise is an acceptable and logical one.

As much as I love the original film, the sequel's computer-generated effects are in another league altogether. In keeping with reason number one for a remake, they are flawless. They show no seams, keeping the viewer's suspension-of-disbelief going for the entire length of the film. It's a tribute to how far computer generated effects have come. Joe looks more like an actual gorilla this time around, yet it does nothing to diminish the big lug's appeal. He's also somewhat smaller in size, which makes him more plausible. (Joe's size in the original film kept changing according to what scene he was in.)

The level of acting is not only appropriate to this kind of film, it is top-notch for *any* film. Bill Paxton is believable in his role as a globetrotting conservationist. Linda Purl shines in a brief, but well crafted, role as the Jill character's primatologist mother. Charlize Theron, looking as adorably sexy as ever, captures the essence of Joe's human ally without becoming saccharine. Rade Sherbedgia plays a suitably dastardly poacher without resorting to twirling his mustache. If you look closely, you'll even find delightful cameos by the original *Mighty Joe Young* animator, Ray Harryhausen, and the original star, Terry Moore. The supporting cast ably carries its load, providing three dimensional characters and not merely set decoration.

Director Ron Underwood, with a script by Mark Rosenthal and Lawrence Konner, brings us a new slant on an old film without straying too far from its original intent. The convenient orphanage fire has been updated into an amusement park (Palisade's Ocean

Park!) fire, a tip-of-the-hat to Harryhausen's *The Beast from Twenty Thousand Fathoms*. In another tip of the hat to Willis O'Brien's *King Kong*, Joe does a neat little turn on the roof of *Mann's Chinese Theater* (originally named *Graumann's Chinese Theater*, where *King Kong* debuted, inspiring eleven-year-old Ray Harryhausen to a career in stop-motion animation). I was also delighted at the inclusion of the RKO radio tower introduction at the beginning of the film. It's a fitting tribute to the small, almost bankrupt movie studio which brought the world *King Kong*, a classic among classics.

This remake of *Mighty Joe Young* is sure to please fans of the 1949 movie. I found myself watching with the same wonder I experienced when I watched the original as a kid. When the screening I attended was over, there was a spate of applause that rippled through the theater. Ignore the carping of the critics, rent this feel-good treat and watch it at home with the kids. It'll put you in touch with your sense of wonder. Better yet, purchase a tape or DVD of the film for the video library. It's sure to be one of the most-watched films in your collection.