

Review #62 : *Beauty and the Beast* (2014)

Vincent Cassel and Léa Seydoux

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COCCpWhR3Q>



In the 21st century, how can a fairytale still enthral audiences ?

It's very simple actually. There are **stories ripe with opportunity to create great visual**, frequently with **lots of action**, but the stereotyping, themes, and gender representation can be a bit tricky in today's more liberated culture. A story such as *Beauty and the Beast*, with a heroine who reluctantly sacrifices herself to beast to save her family, only to fall in love with said beast, isn't necessarily a role model. Still, there was **more than opportunity to adjust for a great sacrifice story and stunning visual spectacle**. Unfortunately, that's not exactly what we could say about the 2014 version by Christopher Gans.

SYNOPSIS

1720. After the wreck of his ships, a ruined merchant exiles himself in the countryside with his six children. Among them is Beauty, his youngest daughter, a joyful girl full of grace. One day, during an arduous journey, the **merchant stumbles across the magical domain of the Beast**, who sentences him to death for stealing a rose.

Feeling responsible for the terrible fate which has befallen her family, **Beauty decides to sacrifice herself and take her father's place**. At the Beast's castle, it is not death that awaits Beauty, but a strange life in which fantastical moments mingle with gaiety and melancholy. Every night, at dinner, Beauty and the Beast sit down together.

They learn about each other, **taming one another like two strangers** who are total opposites. When she has to repulse his amorous advances, Beauty tries to pierce the mysteries of the Beast and his domain. And when night falls, the Beast's past is revealed to her bit by bit in her dreams. It is a tragic story, which tells her that this solitary and fearsome being was once a majestic prince. **Armed with her courage, ignoring every danger, and opening her heart**, Beauty manages to release the Beast from his curse. And in doing so, she discovers true love.

REVIEW

Christophe Gans's effects-heavy, emotion-light new telling of the classic fairytale is a garish spectacle with no clear audience in mind

Christopher Gans's **ode to macho excess** is garishly mounted, emotionally vacant with a lavishly antler-strewn interpretation of the evergreen fairy tale. Borrowing from de Beaumont to Disney, via Cocteau — but cut from (almost) the same CGI-enhanced cloth as 2012's *Snow White and the Huntsman*, this busy update plays up the sword-swishing action while playing down the Gothic romance, with no clear audience in mind. With stars **Lea Seydoux and Vincent Cassel** given little to do but admire the scenery, the film is nothing but a showcase of (rather mediocre) visual effects.

After 2001's crossover smash *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, Christopher Gans is coming off something of a **commercial hot streak**, following the **revisionist fairytale market** already saturated by Hollywood of late, yet Gans is possibly too aggressive a stylist for the material here : his *Beauty and he Beast* seems a bit **too beastly than beautiful for the family market**.

At least for the film's introduction, a kind of **storybook classicism** seems to be at play, with Gans's script framing the tale as a bedside story — printed on ornate, digitally yellowed paper — for a pair of wide-eyed poppets, delivered by an unseen mother figure. Well, *mostly* unseen. The eyes are hidden, but what viewer wouldn't recognize lips as pillowy as Seydoux's? That, at least, is an early tip-off that the proceedings, however jazzed-up elsewhere, won't be veering too far from the '*happily ever after*' formula.

The lensing by ace DP (Digital Photography) Christophe Beaucarne also seems complicit in the mood of retro style, conjuring the **honeyed, heightened lighting** and meticulous compositional sense of **Romantic painters like Caspar Friedrich and John Constable**.



Thierry Flamande's mossy, cluttered production design does much the same, with a nod to the **floral grandeur of Jean Cocteau's** unsurpassable 1946 version. Initially, then, the visuals imply a certain fidelity to the fairytale's original version, as published by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve in 1740. Gans also **restores a number of narrative details** that the Disney telling has largely wiped from the popular imagination, notably the characters of heroine Belle's two vindictive older sisters and the financial ruin of her loving father (**André Dussollier**).

A few elements have been reconfigured though : Belle's family has now notably and rather needlessly been **expanded with a trio of young, dashing brothers** — an addition presumably made with a younger male auditory in mind. Otherwise, however, the song remains the same. After her beleaguered father is captured by a fearsome Beast (**Vincent Cassel**, obviously years too old for the part and disgustingly beastly, even without feline prosthetics), pure-hearted Belle (**Léa Seydoux**) offers herself in his stead, agreeing to be held captive in his remote castle.

Missions of seduction and rescue ensue. As in the Disney film, Gans **departs drastically from the more intimate fairytale** for a gung-ho finale that pits the two unlikely lovers against a gang of oppressors. As the film races to this whiz-bang third act, however, the second is a mere formality — Gans relies on the audience’s prior knowledge of the story to fill in the emotional beats, yet the growing affection between Belle and the Beast is scarcely dramatized. Matters are hardly assisted by the **total absence of chemistry** between Seydoux and the makeup-immobilized Cassel. Meanwhile, with no romantic attachment to Belle, the motives of chief villain Perducas (Eduardo Noriega) are particularly murky. So, too, is a daft new backstory for the Beast, relayed in sporadic, pace-hampering flashbacks, and offering a curious twist on the Diana’s arrow *deus ex machina* of Cocteau’s film.

Gans’s script gives every impression of having been **repeatedly reworked over time**, with not all of its abandoned ideas completely removed from the final product. Most distracting among these is a band of creepily CGI-animated mutant fox-hounds that silently shadow Belle around the castle — an apparent nod to the anthropomorphized household items of the Disney film. ‘*They’d become my best friends in the castle*’, Belle’s voice-over informs us early on, though we never see them exchange so much as a glance in the course of the film.

Worse, Seydoux’s Belle is such a **moue-mouthed sardonic void** that it’s easy enough to believe even her best friends would be rather distant ones ! And she has an exceptionally punchable face. Given **no route into the heroine’s inner life** by the script, the actress settles instead for looking sexy in Pierre-Yves Gayraud’s *very* low-cut gowns — the haute couture design elements of which underline the *perfume-add quality* of the film.



Visual effects are variable in terms of actual effectiveness. Sequences like the positively **Biblical parting of a pine forest**, clearing the path to the Beast's castle, are genuinely impressive. Yet too many other flourishes, like the fast-growing rose plants and giant stone totems (pales copies of *Jack The Giant Slayer*) that surge out of nowhere to herald the Beast's arrival, are **vulgar synthetic embellishments** that completely undercut Beaucarne's artful imagery, and there's digital wizardry galore (a total budget of over £30 million) in a disastrous finale...

Among the film's most regrettable failings is the **wasted opportunity of creating a great script**. In order to stretch the story to 120 minutes, some gaps had to be filled in both the background of Belle's family and how the Beast met his fate, but the result didn't quite live up to my expectations. First off, the film takes far too long to get to the Beast (a full half hour), setting up the story of the family's descent into poverty with the sons lamenting the lack of gambling in their lives and the horribly vapid daughters the lack of opportunity to find a rich husband. Once Belle arrives at the Beast's castle, their few dinners together afford **little engagement, and therefore little understanding of how Belle could fall in love with him**. The parallel love story between the bad guy, Perducas, and his psychic girlfriend ends in tragedy for both of them — supposedly a **lesson about selfishness in love**. But after a while, I'm quite sure the audience stopped paying attention to the story to focus on pretty sights...

Moreover, the team failed in **updating the story for a contemporary audience**, the way *Snow White and the Huntsman* did — and won hands down. I'm not talking about bringing 'gender' questions and gay 'families' in the plotline while turning many of the themes of fairytales and folktales pretty much on their heads as in the recent *Frozen* — a variation on original story of *The Snow Queen*, but in making the characters somewhat closer to us. And that, even more its half-convincing CGI, is the film's biggest failure in my mind. And, well, as far as the '*happy ending*' is concerned, I don't exactly call a prince raking in a garden the ideal final shot, although irradiated with golden sunrays — and with the appropriately graceful violin background^^ !

CONCLUSION

This version won't be worth re-watching. Time to go back to the first and foremost versions of them all : before the days of CGI and modern creature makeup, Cocteau's 1946 version of the fairytale is a fantasy **alive with trick shots and astonishing effects**, giving us a Beast

who is lonely like a man and misunderstood like an animal. Cocteau, a **poet and surrealist**, was not making a children's film but was adapting a classic French tale that he felt had a special message after the suffering of World War II : *Anyone who has an unhappy childhood may grow up to be a Beast.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsXkv1mpRUK>



Those familiar with the 1991 cartoon will recognize some of the elements of the story, but certainly not the tone. Cocteau uses **haunting images and bold Freudian symbols** to suggest that *emotions are at a boil in the subconscious of his characters.*

The Beast's dwelling is one of the strangest ever put on film – **Xanadu crossed with Dali**. Its entrance hall is lined with candelabra held by living human arms. The statues are alive, and their eyes follow the progress of the characters. The gates and doors open themselves. As Belle first enters the Beast's domain, she seems to run dreamily a few feet above the floor. Later, her feet do not move at all, but she **glides, as if drawn by a magnetic force** – this effect has later on been borrowed by Spike Lee. She is disturbed to see smoke rising from the Beast's fingertips – a sign that he has killed. When he carries her into her bed chamber, she has common clothes on one side of the door and a queen's costume on the other.

Belle has come to the castle as a hostage. She lives at home with her father, two unkind sisters and a silly brother, whose handsome friend wants to marry her. But she cannot marry, for she must care for Papa. His business is threatened, and he learns on a trip to a seaport that he has lost everything. On his way home, through a forest on a stormy night, he happens upon the Beast's castle, and is taken prisoner and told he must die. The Beast offers a deal : He can go home if he will return in three days, or **he can send one of his daughters**. The other sisters of course sniff and make excuses, and their father says he is old and nearly dead and will return himself. But Belle slips out and rides the Beast's white horse, which knows the way to the castle. And the Beast's first words tell her : *'You are in no danger'*.

Indeed she is not. The Beast has perhaps intuited that a daughter who would take her father's place has a **good heart**. He tells her that every night at 7 he will ask her the same question : *'Will you be my wife?'* She shudders and says she will never marry him, but eventually her heart softens, and she pities him and sees that he is good. He gives her a **magical glove** that allows her to travel instantly between the castle and her home, and there is intrigue involving the key to the garden where his fortune is held. **The sisters plot and scheme**, but Belle of course prevails. Her father rises up from his deathbed, the Beast sinks into a **final illness** instead, and when she begs him to rally, **his dying words are pathetic** : *'If I were a man, perhaps I could. But the poor beasts who want to prove their love can only grovel on the ground, and die.'*

Then there is another death, the **striking death of the faithless family friend** who wanted to marry her : **as his body turns into that of the Beast, the Beast comes back to life** and turns into a Prince. Odd, how appealing **Jean Marais** is as the Beast, and how shallow and superficial he seems as the pompadoured prince, although tall and imposing, with his extraordinary profile and matinee idol looks. Even Belle doesn't leap cheerfully into his arms, but looks quizzically at her new catch and confesses she misses the Beast. So did Marlene Dietrich, who held Cocteau's hand during the suspenseful first screening of the film at a Paris studio. As the prince shimmered into sight and smilingly presented himself as Belle's new lover, she called to the screen : *'Where is my beautiful Beast ?'*

***Beauty and the Beast* is a poetic film made by an artist.** Because Cocteau was not sure he had the technical mastery for such an ambitious production, he recruited the gifted cameraman Henri Alekan to handle the **tricky changes between outdoor realism and**

indoor fantasy, and the theatrical designer Christian Bérard to design the makeup, sets and costumes — his ideas were based on the **illustrations of Gustave Doré**.

Watching it again tonight, I felt an unusual excitement. Its devices **penetrate the usual conventions of narrative** and appeal at a deeper psychic level. Cocteau wanted to make a **poem and to appeal through images rather than words**, and although the story takes the form of the familiar fable, its surface seems to be masking deeper and more disturbing currents. It is definitely not a children's film. Is it even suitable for children? Some will be put off by the black and white photography and the subtitles — unless you're fluent in French. Those who get beyond those hurdles will find a film that may involve them much more deeply than the Disney cartoon, because it is not just a jolly comic musical but deals, as all fairy tales do, with **what we truly dread and what we truly desire**. Brighter and more curious children will be able to enjoy it very much, I suspect, although if they return as adults they may be amazed by how much more there is.

