



In the real and mighty jungle...

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When we were kids, my younger cousin and I had a favourite game. Smaller and more agile, my cousin would hang off the side of the bed or a table, his squishy feet dangling and threatening to land painfully on the floor. My hands held his captive at the edge until they (fake) scratched him and I yelled “Long live the king!” and he hurtled into the great abyss of the ground. (He was never actually pushed off the bed. Someone always caught him before the fall). The game was passed down when his younger brother was born; but this newer cub was first also presented to the family airborne close to the ceiling, held up at the armpits as if by a wise old baboon. “NANTS INGONYAMA BAGITHI BABA,” we chanted loudly in the background.

It’s probably just one out of countless other household stories inspired by the



1994 Disney cult classic. *The Lion King*, when it came out, was a game-changer for Disney’s movies for a number of reasons, as a recent *New York Times* piece reminds us. It was created by two first-timer composers Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff. It was Disney’s first animation without any human characters. It was a summer release unlike the holiday releases of *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin*—the preceding movies responsible for the 1990s ‘Disney Renaissance’. And it was significantly richer in violence and dark themes than most Disney animated movies, so much so that many adults were worried about kids watching the film.

Despite these risks, *The Lion King* earned USD 24 million in the opening weekend at home and went on to become Disney’s highest grossing film to date, as well as the “best-selling VHS tape in history”. Elton John’s composition became a 10-times platinum soundtrack, with *Can You Feel The Love Tonight* bagging the ‘Best

Original Song’ award at the 1995 Oscars. More significant than these numbers is just how widely the movie permeated childhood memories and pop-culture references for several entire generations—birthing the easiest reference to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, one of the most iconic father-son stories onscreen, and certainly the most iconic motto for dealing with life’s problems with “*Hakuna Matata*”.

Is this why Jon Favreau’s live action *Lion King* seems so hesitant with creative liberties? Scared of disappointing a devout fanbase?

Released July 19 and screened here in Dhaka from July 26 (at Star Cineplex and Blockbuster Cinemas), the new live action adaptation is breathtaking visually. The Pride Lands glow as vividly as a Serengeti savanna at sunrise and every animal—the lion, the zebra, the elephant, the antelope, the hyenas, the warthog and the meerkat—all twitch and breathe and move in flawless imitation of their real life counterparts. Every fur on their bodies bristles as realistically as do the grasses of the surrounding landscape. Baby Simba is tear-inducingly adorable.

But the visuals do more than cause wonder; they also communicate important messages about the Pride Landers’ dynamics. Every dark scene in the elephant graveyard is followed by a brighter one set in Mufasa’s kingdom “touched by the light”. Disposing of the need for a black mane to mark his innate “evilness” as in the cartoon, live action Scar wears his difference from his golden-glowing sibling in his bony, wilting, greyish frame. He isn’t the ugly evil sibling just because, you realise. He’s actually a lion that



looks menacing because he’s famished; he’s uglier because he lives in a dingy cave and amidst muddy puddles, not in Mufasa’s sun-drenched Pride Rock. He’s resentful because he’s been deprived and possibly abused, as is implied by a handful of fleeting dialogues. He’s still the clear villain, sure, but his villainy offers glimpses of a backstory (mapped out in the *Lion King*-inspired book *The Tale of Two Brothers*). By thus rendering each of the creatures so realistic visually, the CGI accomplishes half the job of character development in the movie.

The bad news, however, is that it does the job rather too well. Favreau’s feat with special effects had previously brought the fun-filled drama of *The Jungle Book* beautifully to life. There, juxtaposed against Mowgli’s human presence, the beasts had straddled quite gracefully the real world of jungle-animal politics and the imagined world of their anthropomorphic parlance.

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