



MOWGLI RETURNS TO THE JUNGLE

Bruce Reitherman reflects on life, art, his father/director 'Woolie' Reitherman and growing up as Mowgli in THE JUNGLE BOOK.



Bruce Reitherman provided the voice and model reference for the character Mowgli in Walt Disney's animated film THE JUNGLE BOOK.

Many are familiar with the jungle's favorite mancub whose adventures were first told within Rudyard Kipling's 'Mowgli's Stories.' Walt Disney explored this timeless tale in his 22nd animated feature film THE JUNGLE BOOK, featuring the story of a human boy who is raised by the animals of the jungle.



Bruce Reitherman and Mowgli, at 10 years old, during the production of THE JUNGLE BOOK.

Yet as carefree as Mowgli's days in the jungle may seem in the film, the making of this Disney classic was not without

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problems. With the production running over a lengthy period of four years, the initial boy cast in the role of Mowgli experienced a dramatic change as his voice began to shed its high-pitched

innocence. After numerous child actors were tested, it was 10 year old Bruce Reitherman, the youngest son of 'Woolie' Reitherman the director of the picture, who stepped into the vacated spot. "I was just a normal kid-next-door. I think that's what they were after," recalls Reitherman. "They didn't need a kid with a tremendous ability to 'act' like a kid, they just wanted a kid to be a kid, so it was type-casting for me, I suppose."

Ironically, this turn of events marked the beginning of a life-long career with film and animals for Bruce Reitherman. As the inspiration behind Mowgli of Walt Disney's THE JUNGLE BOOK, young Bruce – the quintessential kid – fulfilled every child's wish

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to play all day and 'talk' with the animals of the jungle. Now, 40 years after his jungle adventures, Reitherman is an international award-winning wildlife filmmaker and the subject of a new bonus feature on the Diamond Edition DVD release of THE JUNGLE BOOK.

With over 20 years of documentary development, directing, location work and production experience Bruce Reitherman has traveled to photograph exotic locations on six continents. Surviving encounters with scorpions, black widow spiders, rattlesnakes, bears

and even a foul-tempered mother moose, Reitherman recognizes the symmetry of his childhood animation adventures. "It may have had a lot to do with ending up in a filmmaking career myself," notes Reitherman. "Early on, I realized that making movies about the natural world was what I really wanted to make my life about and there's no better way to see a film take shape than to watch an animated feature in progress."

Laughing at the irony, Reitherman is quick to note that his role as Mowgli is only part of a more interesting story within his life. "To me, my association with the legacy of Walt's Nine Old Men and my Dad's achievements and the Walt Disney Studios is a much more exciting part of who I am."

One of the earliest artists with the Walt Disney Studios, Wolfgang Reitherman joined the animation department



Reitherman focuses on a shot while filming elephant seals along the California coast.



long before production began on 'Snow White.' "He studied quite literally at the feet of the master, Walt Disney," remarks the younger Reitherman. Over the years, 'Woolie' rose thru the ranks within the studio and was hand-selected by Walt to helm the Animation division as Disney grew busier with his television and theme park efforts. It was 'Woolie' who kept the Animation Studios thriving after Walt Disney's unexpected death in 1966 during the production of THE JUNGLE BOOK. "It's a very critical period that he took over," notes the younger Reitherman. "I don't think that he would take much credit for having been the one that steered the ship through the dark seas, but he was the guy that had to stand at the wheel and the evidence is that he did a pretty good job of it." 'Woolie' Reitherman successfully helmed the Animation division before retiring in 1981 and passed away unexpectedly in 1985.



THE JUNGLE BOOK.



'Woolie' Reitherman demonstrates the subtleties of a scene to his youngest son Bruce during a recording session for THE JUNGLE BOOK.

son while Bruce was a budding biologist/cameraman in his early 20's. These letters are now part of a treasured folder that Bruce Reitherman carries with him when he works, including one particular letter entitled 'Pearls of Wisdom by Popper,' the name the young Reitherman used to call his father. "With his great sense of humor, he tells me in this letter a few basic things about the craft of filmmaking – 'It has to be your story...think in terms of characters and personalities...make it dramatic...' the fundamental basis of good entertainment." Yet for Bruce Reitherman, there's much more within these storytelling themes. "I think my Dad saw his art as life in a sense, so when he's telling me things about filmmaking, I think he's really trying to tell me things about life."

The universal themes of life that first drew Walt Disney to the story of Mowgli and the themes that a father carried through in his direction of THE JUNGLE BOOK, clearly

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Bruce Reitherman is clearly proud of his father's legacy within Disney Animation and the groundbreaking efforts there that shaped animation into one of the defining art forms of the 20th century. "It had to do with their ability to look at life... closely, deeply, sensually," notes Reitherman. "I think all those guys had a strong sense of how to observe life and then make it an art by generously trying to communicate their observations, their understandings, their perspective through the medium of their art."

A decorated military pilot, 'Woolie' Reitherman joined the US Air Force during World War II, serving in Africa, China, India and the South Pacific, even earning the Distinguished Flying Cross medal for his service. This devoted father of three boys sent a series of letters to his youngest



Father and son together in later years on one of their many wildlife adventures.

resonate with the son who was – and is – the boy who lives with the animals. "It's really about growing up," reflects Reitherman. "It's about a kid deciding to become his own self." As he carries forward his father's advice into his own films, Reitherman notes, "I suppose that's what every good movie does – in a way that communicates something to you – it's giving you not just a way of looking at things, but a sense of the path forward for yourself." ■ mj

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