Blu-Ray Review: M. Night Shyamalan’s ‘The Last Airbender’ is Nearly Unbearable

Submitted by BrianTT [1] on November 23, 2010 - 2:37pm

CHICAGO – “The Last Airbender” was mercilessly-panned on its theatrical release and will likely pop up on a few “Worst of the Year” lists in the next few months. And yet, audiences didn’t seem to care too much, pushing the movie to nearly $320 million worldwide (although one wonders if it wouldn’t have made twice that were it actually good considering the fan base of the source material and prime summer release date).

Blu-Ray Rating:

0.5/5.0

Now that it’s on Blu-ray and DVD, you may be wondering whether critics had it right or if the people spoke the truth with their wallets? “The Last Airbender” is perhaps our best proof that the right source material, release date, studio, and marketing campaign can still produce a modest hit because there’s no way this thing should have been seen by anyone much less by millions. After the critical failure of “The Happening,” I never thought that Shyamalan had further to sink but this is easily his worst film to date and one of the worst of 2010.

M. Night Shyamalan's biggest hit since 2002's “Signs” may have reigned a career that appeared to be fizzling out but there’s virtually no sign left of the talented filmmaker who produced “The Sixth Sense,” “Unbreakable,” and “Signs.” The man who was once compared to Steven Spielberg has made a film that deserves comparison to Uwe Boll. And even though they are deeply-flawed, there was at least a sense of ambition and creative attempt in films like “The Village” and “Lady in the Water.” The most depressing thing about “The Last Airbender” is how much of that ambition and creativity is gone; how much it feels like the film could have been made by anybody. Although a lot of people in Shyamalan’s pay grade would have probably produced a stronger film.
The Last Airbender was released on Blu-ray and DVD on November 16th, 2010.

The storytelling ability that Night once had is gone. “The Last Airbender” is a cluttered, nonsensical mess with characters that are impossible to care about, editing that feels bizarrely-choppy, and a clear lack of confidence behind the camera. It’s as if no one involved, from the actors to the controversial writer/director has any idea what the hell is going on. And the film looks surprisingly flat, both in its production and in a truly-lackluster HD transfer that pales in comparison to most 2010 Blu-ray releases. The picture is dull, the line detail is fuzzy, and there’s an unacceptable amount of grain and lack of definition. Although considering the number of technical flaws in the film one wonders if the bad HD picture couldn’t be helped.

As for the story, it’s a jumbled mess about a world in which people can bend the elements. The concept of bending water, earth, fire, and air and the search for the wonder-child who can do all four is not that bad a jumping-off point for mythology, but Shyamalan can’t handle the dialogue in a story like this one. NONE of it sounds genuine. Everyone stares at each other in self-serious discussion of what’s happening around them. I know it’s hard to look for subtlety in a film like “The Last Airbender” but rarely has there been a work where every line of dialogue was so plot-driven, as if Shyamalan is constantly trying to explain what the hell is going on…and failing.

Noah Ringer plays the Avatar, The Last Airbender, a long-lost being who supposedly keeps the world in harmony by uniting the tribes of the elements. Katara (Nicola Peitz) and Sokka (Jackson Rathbone) find the Avatar and try to use him to save the world while Zuko (Dev Patel), an exiled prince tries to find him for his own vengeance. The Avatar only knows his birth element air and must learn the other three elements to be the savior he was destined to be. It’s a fantasy road movie!

The performances in “The Last Airbender” are simply horrendous, but it’s largely because they’re forced to push the narrative at every second, never developing characters that feel believable at all. Even with that caveat, Seitz, Rathbone, and Ringer are just bad, constantly reminding you of their acting ability even at the rare moments where you might actually get into the story and stop noticing the problems with the film. It’s the worst-kind of cheesy acting that works fine in a midnight B-movie but is unacceptable in a $100 million-plus blockbuster. This is easily the worst-performed film of the year. It often reminded me of SyFy originals.

It can be easy to forgive an untalented child actor, so perhaps even more disappointing are the technical elements, something Shyamalan used to nail. The movie just looks awful. The effects, the fight choreography, the cinematography, the editing — it’s all not just substandard but practically painful. Even kids will know this just doesn’t look right. Maybe that’s the best thing about “The Last Airbender”. It can be used as a teaching device for young ones as to how not to make a movie.

Special Features:
- “Discovering The Last Airbender”
- “Siege of the North”
- “Origins of the Avatar”
- “Katara For a Day”
- Deleted Scenes
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“The Last Airbender” stars Noah Ringer, Jackson Rathbone, Nicola Peitz, and Dev Patel. It was written and directed by M. Night Shyamalan. It was released on Blu-ray and DVD on November 16th, 2010. It is rated PG and runs 103 minutes.

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