

Blu-Ray Review: ‘Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga’Hoole’ Wastes Talent

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CHICAGO – The best parts of a Zack Snyder picture have consistently been the opening title sequences, from “Dawn of the Dead”’s apocalyptic montage to “Watchmen”’s brilliant prologue scored to Bob Dylan’s “The Time They Are A-Changin’.” Snyder’s latest problematic novel adaptation, “Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga’Hoole” is no exception.

The film kicks off with a promising opening shot from an owl’s perspective, soaring through the air to show off the spectacular work of the animators. Billowing clouds, breathtaking waterfalls, and towering trees provide the photogenic framework for the gorgeously lensed owls, and for a fleeting moment, the film succeeds in capturing the exhilarating freedom of flight. Yet the film instantly falls apart once the owls open their beaks and celebrity voices come tumbling out.



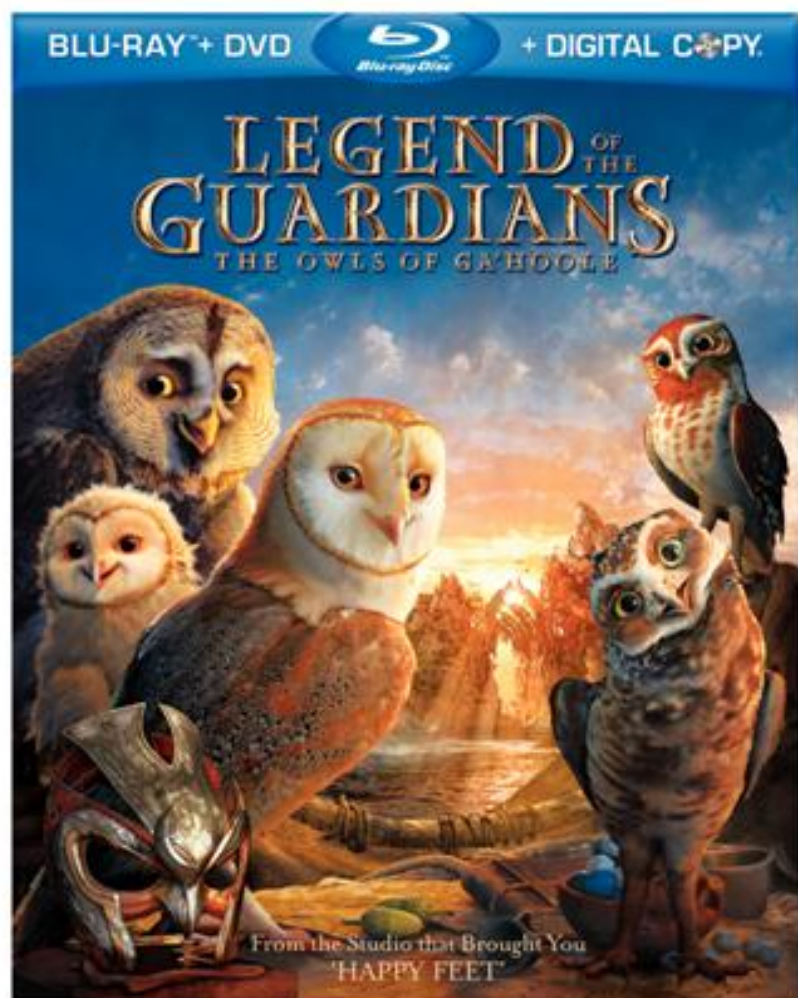
More than any recent computer animated adventure, “Ga’Hoole” begs the question: why go through the trouble of creating such realistic animals if they’re undermined at every turn by recognizable human voices? Imagine a wordless film utilizing the same animation, and you could easily weep over the lost potential. Based on Kathryn Lasky’s “Guardians of Ga’Hoole” book series, the film is a deadly serious drama that is as laughable as its self-important title.

The hero is a purehearted dullard named Soren (Jim Sturgess), a wide-eyed owl who dreams about mythological “guardians” who could save the world from the fascist control of the Pure Ones, led by Nyra (Helen Mirren) and Metalbeak (Joel Edgerton). Soon, Soren realizes that the myths are real, inspiring him to discover his inner-warrior by following his gizzard (no joke). I think this film breaks some sort of record for the most uses of the word “gizzard,” which is delivered by the actors with solemn reverence. Just try not cracking up when Sturgess, doing his best “Elijah Wood as Frodo” impression, thoughtfully utters, “I can feel it in my gizzard.”



Jim Sturgess voices Soren in Zack Snyder’s Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga’Hoole.
Photo credit: Warner Home Video

Despite its awesome visuals, the film ultimately amounts to a beautiful bore. The faces of the owls are woefully inexpressive, as if their faces had been injected with avian Botox. Their heads twitch and their eyes shift, while their thin mouths remain fixed in an eerie grin. These facial limitations force the animators to thrust the owls’ heads at the lens, as if that will get the audience any closer to the characters emotionally. It doesn’t.



Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on Dec. 17, 2010.

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

This is most apparent in scenes involving the alleged comic relief, Digger (David Wenham), who spends the whole time cocking his head to one side while bouncing off the edges of the frame. The audience ends up laughing at him, not with him. Snyder is obviously a gifted visual stylist, but he still has yet to create a character with more depth than the page of a graphic novel. Without a credible story to back up its epic imagery, this "Chronicles of Hedwig" saga is a ga'hoot!

"Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.4:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, Spanish and French audio tracks, and includes a DVD and digital copy of the film. The disc's filmmaker interviews are only available on the sugar-coated "Maximum Kid Mode" visual commentary aimed at younger viewers. Owl Otulissa (Abbie Cornish) attempts to explain the process of making a computer animated film by likening it to "your school working on a giant 3D puzzle." That's a typical example of this commentary track's unhelpful analysis. Co-writer John Orloff says that he wanted the film's fantastical world to look as real as technology would allow, without realizing how jarring the juxtaposition of his words would be upon this landscape. There's also two ultra-lame games: an "interactive costume creator" where kids can dress the owls in pirate hats, and a quiz to test one's animal knowledge by matching the "owl treats" (a.k.a bugs) to the animal that would most likely gobble it up. Fun for the whole family.

A 15-minute "True Guardians of the Earth" featurette attempts to further educate kids about owls by assembling the least compatible duo of hosts in recent memory: the aggravating Digger and (inexplicably) "Modern Family"'s Rico Rodriguez, who seems as confused as we are about his presence on this awkward extra. Equally unwelcome is a music video by the band Owl City, which seems to have been chosen for this soundtrack merely because its name begins with the word "owl." The group's catchy, upbeat synthpop rhythms really don't belong in this moody fantasy. A deleted introduction clearly illustrates the convoluted mythology in the form of a bedtime story, and probably should've been included in the final cut. Four artwork galleries allow viewers to take a closer look at the truly stunning visuals, which all belong in a better film. And anyone perking up at the prospect of a brand new Wile E. Coyote/Road Runner cartoon will be sorely disappointed by the three-minute "Fur of Flying." It brings the beloved characters into the realm of cheap computer animation that doesn't bode well for a future "Looney Tunes" feature shot in the same style. It may be the first film in history to make one nostalgic for "Space Jam."

'Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole' is released by Warner Home Video and features the voices of Jim Sturgess, Geoffrey Rush, Helen Mirren, Hugo Weaving, Abbie Cornish, Joel Edgerton, Ryan Kwanten and Anthony LaPaglia. It was written by John Orloff and Emil Stern and directed by Zack Snyder. It was released on Dec. 17th, 2010. It is rated PG.



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