

Blu-Ray Review: Underwhelming ‘Attack the Block’ Low on Laughs, Thrills

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CHICAGO – Here’s a directorial debut made with such an assured sense of style and craft that one wishes it were more fun. All the ingredients are here for a splendid cult classic: deadpan gags, live-action aliens, a fresh-faced ensemble and R-rated violence all wrapped in the blessings of Edgar Wright and Nick Frost. Yet “Attack the Block” sounds a lot more fun on paper than it is in execution.

For all of its considerable charms, the picture is irrevocably marred by the least likable protagonists in recent memory. The blame cannot be placed on the young actors, who are all game and energetic. It’s the script by first-time feature director Joe Cornish that lets them down. As a cinematic rule of thumb, it’s generally a bad sign when viewers start growing impatient over waiting for the so-called heroes to get killed off.



Blu-Ray Rating: **2.5/5.0**

The film’s jarringly uneven tone gets off to a rocky start in the opening sequence, as a vicious mugging is interrupted by the crash-landing of an alien that looks as if it were directly borrowed from Ridley Scott. Yet this hardly phases the cocky teenage gang members, who track down the alien and beat it to death while cheering in elation. Yep, these are our heroes, ladies and gentlemen. A bunch of callous, wisecracking punks who spout glib pop culture references while threatening innocent bystanders with knives. It’s clear from the get-go that these kids will make the expected journey toward remorse and responsibility, while the filmmaker bends over backwards to illustrate that their criminality is a byproduct of societal ills. At one point, gang leader Moses (played by Denzel Washington lookalike John Boyega) contemplates about whether the otherworldly monsters were created by the government to aid “black boys in killing each other faster,” just like drugs and guns. It’s one of many forced metaphors that clutter the film’s final act, as if the filmmakers decided to forge a last-second attempt at making their characters the least bit sympathetic.



John Boyega, Jodie Whittaker and Leeon Jones star in Joe Cornish’s Attack the Block.

Photo credit: Matt Nettheim, Screen Gems, Inc.

Meanwhile, the ever-lovely Jodie Whittaker (still best known for her sublime breakout role in “Venus”) has little to do but fret and moan as the grown-up damsel in distress. Only Luke Treadaway manages to deliver a handful of genuinely funny moments, particularly when he defends his status as a self-sufficient adult, despite the fact that he still lives at home (he needs to put food on the table “in the proverbial sense”). As for the aliens, they are disappointingly derivative and murkily photographed, thus obscuring the superb work by seasoned creature performer Terry Notary. The behind-the-scenes footage of Notary charging through a room simian style is far more unsettling than anything in the final cut. Cornish and his effects team made the odd choice to obscure the detail in their creatures, reducing them to flat, black hairballs illuminated

solely by glow-in-the dark teeth.

What makes the film consistently watchable is the elegant lensing by Thomas Townend (Lynne Ramsay’s second unit cinematographer) and the expert pacing by editor Jonathan Amos. To be fair, Cornish does deserve credit for taking such an uncommercial approach to the characters by refusing to make them palatable for a mainstream audience. The script doesn’t shy away from exploring their multiple flaws and contradictions, but this level of authenticity routinely clashes with the filmmakers’ need to make their heroes lovable at the same time. The result is an ungainly curiosity enhanced by the obvious skill of its director who appears to have a mightily promising career ahead of him. He’s a name to remember, but “Attack the Block” is a film to forget.



Attack the Block was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on Oct. 25, 2011.

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

The movie is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.40:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and French audio tracks, and includes a one-hour documentary that quickly devolves into a video diary. The director was intent on casting kids “from the streets” who weren’t professionally trained and he spent time researching the language of South London youth. There’s a rather charming moment when he succinctly tells pint-sized scene stealers Sammy Williams and Michael Ajao (who play wannabe gang members Probs and Mayhem) precisely why he decided to make the picture. After getting inspired by a screening of “Signs,” he wondered what would happen if aliens landed in South London, and decided that “all these kids that we’re afraid of would become our first line of defense.”

Fans of the film will greatly appreciate the thoroughness of the extras contained on this disc, and the insight it provides into the mind of a first-time feature director. When Cornish realized that an action sequence set on the outer wall of a building would be too costly, he did a substantial rewrite in the eleventh hour, slashing fifteen pages out of the script. The director is a natural charmer on the disc’s three audio commentaries, as he makes valiant efforts to steer the conversation in interesting directions. In a “junior” commentary, the director asks his young cast about their thoughts regarding the depiction of their troubled characters, and whether or not they felt stereotypical (Boyega admits that he was initially turned off by them). The adult commentary (including Whittaker and Treadway) is bolstered by some priceless quips from Frost. Yet the best track by far features a candid discussion between Cornish and executive producer Wright, who considers himself a godfather of the project, and reflects on the problems he faced while filming his own directorial debut, “A Fistful of Fingers.”

‘Attack the Block’ is released by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment and stars John Boyega, Jodie Whittaker, Alex Esmail, Franz Drameh, Leoon Jones, Simon Howard, Luke Treadaway, Jumayn Hunter and Nick Frost. It was written and directed by Joe Cornish. It was released on Oct. 25, 2011. It is rated R.



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