

## Blu-ray Review: 'Dolphin Tale' Surprisingly Delivers Quality Family Entertainment

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on January 4, 2012 - 8:19am

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CHICAGO – As a refreshing departure from the snarky, shrill and soulless time wasters passing for children's entertainment these days, this wholesome, fact-based drama works perfectly well. It captures some of the innocence and warmth that characterized '60s-era Disney fare, as well as the blandness and exceedingly high cheese factor.

What initially steered me away from this picture was its awful marketing campaign, which made the film seem as if it were a retread of the "Blind Side" formula: sunny white family helps transform a damaged creature into an inspirational beacon. It's a sad fact that the titular animal in "Dolphin Tale" has more personality than Michael Oher in "The Blind Side," which surely stands as one of the worst films ever to be nominated for Best Picture.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.0/5.0**

Yet while "The Blind Side" was a smugly self-aggrandizing bore celebrating the tolerance of a Southern conservative mamma grizzly, "Dolphin Tale" doesn't have much of an agenda. Its characters are largely fictional, aside from the dolphin itself, which is outfitted with a fully-functional prosthetic tail. Few special effects were necessary, since the dolphin (named Winter) plays herself in the film. The story of how she was rescued by members of the Clearwater Marine Hospital and received her new tail would be an excellent subject for a segment on "60 Minutes." But "Dolphin Tale" scribes Karen Janszen and Noam Dromi attempt to stretch the simple story over nearly two hours of running time by leaving no cliché unused. There isn't a single moment in the picture that doesn't fit snugly into a by-the-numbers screenwriting template. As soon as characters start laughing their way into a happiness montage, tears and tragedy are always around the corner. Yet director Charles Martin Smith (eternally remembered as the flirtatious dweeb in "American Graffiti") never allows the fictionalized framework to upstage the genuinely uplifting subject matter at its center.



Cozi Zuehlsoord lights up the screen in Charles Martin Smith's Dolphin Tale.

Photo credit: Warner Bros. Home Entertainment

Nathan Gamble stars as Sawyer, a friendless boy who abandons his summer schooling when he discovers an injured beached dolphin and helps contact the local marine hospital. He quickly befriends a doctor (Harry Connick Jr.) and his gabby daughter Hazel (newcomer Cozi Zuehltsdorff) during his daily visits with Winter. Ashley Judd has some nice moments as Sawyer's mother, as she watches her son become truly excited for perhaps the first time in his life. The real delight of the film is Zuehltsdorff, who has an infectious toothy grin and comic timing worthy of Shirley Temple.

However, it's a shame that the filmmakers didn't attempt to enhance the character of Winter by cinematically exploring her intelligent psyche. The film's running time could've easily been slashed by twenty minutes, and some sequences (particularly the flight of a toy helicopter) exist solely to show off the theatrical version's needless 3D visuals. I also could've done without the predictable casting of Morgan Freeman as yet another variation on the "Magical Negro" archetype (seriously, how many times can one man be asked to play God?). In the thankless role of an elderly Debbie Downer, Frances Sternhagen earns some unintentional laughs when the script requires her to raise the tension with lines like, "We're swimming in debt!" and "Every aquarium in the country says it's hopeless!"



Yes, the picture is corny, but it's no less cornball than Steven Spielberg's "War Horse" (in fact, both films feature slapstick sequences where adults are chased by squawking birds). Smith directs with a gentle touch and avoids the patronizing sentiment and obnoxious gags that mar so many lesser mainstream releases. In a year filled with terrible family fare, this film is an unquestionable highlight.

"Dolphin Tale" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.85:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, French and Spanish audio tracks, and includes Blu-ray, DVD and Ultraviolet digital copies of the film. In the disc's extensive collection of featurettes, the filmmakers discuss their efforts to ensure that none of the onscreen animals would be exploited. Winter's home at the Clearwater Marine Hospital was used as a backlot, and the crew eventually added a new wing to the establishment after the director deemed it too claustrophobic. The actual pool in which Winter first began rehabilitation was also used in the film. What wasn't used were any actual dolphins in the film's opening title sequence, which follows Winter prior to her injury. The digital effects are less than convincing, as is producer Andrew Kosove's claim that 3D was chosen to artistically benefit the production and create an immersive experience, since the vast majority of the film's visuals are pedestrian.

Smith says that he wanted to capture the childlike impishness of Winter, who he claims has the mentality of a ten-year-old, while focusing his story primarily on the budding friendship between the boy and the dolphin. Rounding out the special features are a gag reel, deleted scene, animated short and conceptual imagery for the Hutash Rainbow Bridge story recited by Connick Jr. in the film. Yet the most touching extra by far is an 18-minute featurette detailing Winter's miraculous backstory, while expanding on the documentary footage that plays before the end credits. We meet members of Hanger Prosthetics that developed the artificial tail as well as various people who subsequently benefited from the invention of the silicone gel sleeve (dubbed the "WintersGel"). Witnessing the faces of young amputees inspired by Winter's story is more moving than any cliché in the Hollywood handbook.

*'Dolphin Tale' is released by Warner Bros. Home Entertainment and stars Harry Connick Jr., Ashley Judd, Nathan Gamble, Kris Kristofferson, Cozi Zuehltsdorff, Austin Stowell and Morgan Freeman. It was written by Karen Janszen and Noam Dromi and directed by Charles Martin Smith. It was released on Dec. 20, 2011. It is rated PG.*



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