

Feel Goodness of ‘Dolphin Tale’ Overcomes Clichés

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – In the tradition of live-action Disney films of another era, “Dolphin Tale” wears its heart on its sleeve, while at the same time using the characters as two-dimensional window dressing around a based-on-truth story of humans and an animal bonding together to inspire a nation.

The truth is real – a dolphin named Winter accidentally loses her tail, and without it faces a handicap that could lead to her demise. Dolphin Tale creates a fiction around that fact and has a boy bond with the animal, leading the adults to help her regain momentum. The film’s strength lies in using the real dolphin to illustrate its own journey and what she represents to inspire humans who have lost their limbs. The weakness is trying to shoehorn a number of well-intentioned fictional roles around her, who don’t accentuate much about the truth, and follow character roadmaps that have been seen before.

Sawyer (Nathan Gamble) is a 12 year old boy who is a mechanical tinkerer but doesn’t have much time for school. Banished to a summer of make-up classes by his mother Lorraine (Ashley Judd), he laments his fate on the Florida beaches where he lives. His favorite cousin Kyle (Austin Stowell) is also leaving for the army, and that pushes him deeper into his shell. Riding his bike one day, he comes upon a Dolphin who is caught in a crab trap, and helps to free it before the marine life rescue unit takes over.



Boy and His Dolphin: Nathan Gamble as Sawyer with Winter in ‘Dolphin Tale’
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

That unit is led by Dr. Clay (Harry Connick Jr.), who runs an institution that rehabilitates sea creatures and releases them back to their

environs. The dolphin, named Winter by Dr. Clay’s daughter Hazel (Cozi Zuehlsoff), isn’t given much of a chance – the doctor had to amputate her swimming tail. When Sawyer visits Winter, Dr. Clay notices their bonding, and puts the boy on the rehab team. Sawyer also gets an idea. Dr. Cameron (Morgan Freeman), is working at the Veteran’s Hospital fitting prosthetics onto lost-limbed veterans (cousin Kyle has come back injured and is in the doctor’s care), and Sawyer asks if he can do the same for Winter’s tail. The rest is how man helps animal, and animal helps man.

This film is so earnest and purposeful that it’s hard to realize, again, that perhaps the real story would be more interesting than the flimsy fiction they have to build around it. Winter plays herself, and was obviously trained to do the “Flipper”-like antics that endears her to the adults, and the audience. A subplot is thrown in that the marine life institute is being threatened by developers, and the cousin Kyle story is awkwardly used as a accent to the dolphin’s struggle. The war where he gets his injuries is never mentioned, and his condition is “fixed” by a brace, with no indication of battle scars.

The acting comes off as wooden, even with the large contingent of notable performers. Ashley Judd is given little to do as mother Lorraine, except change her mind once she sees the benefit of Sawyer’s work with the institute. Kris Kristofferson plays Dr. Clay’s father, a role any older actor could have done, given the screen time and half dozen lines. Morgan Freeman is trying to play his role as written, that of a curmudgeonly VA doctor who doesn’t have time to help a “fish” – as he calls Winter – but in the end is smiling with everyone else.

This is just nitpicking. The movie was very similar in nature to the Disney live-action animal movies and TV shows like Flipper, in that the premise is all heart and family entertainment, and the subtlety of performance is secondary or in this case, not necessary. The fact that director Charles Martin Smith is using the actual dolphin who went through all the rehab and the use of the artificial tail, gives this adventure all the credence it needs. In a cold, cynical world, the connection between a dolphin and the boy who rescued her is a warm fuzzy slam dunk, and only a Scrooge would dare rain on that parade.



Doctor and Patient: Morgan Freeman as Dr. Cameron in ‘Dolphin Tale’
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

Right before the credits roll, there is a video montage of Winter’s real story, that of several marine life experts bonding together to figure out how to get this intelligent creature back to her swimming ways. It parallels the movie, but there is something about the grainy, gritty video images that express the situation more starkly and in reality than the 3D film before it. It makes Winter that much more heroic.

This is exceptional entertainment for children, it speaks to their level of understanding about both the cruelty and sanctity of humans versus nature. Winter bonds with her new family, jumps through hoops and teaches that the joy of living is always available despite the obstacles any creature may encounter.

“Dolphin Tale” opens everywhere on September 23rd. See local listings for 3D showings. Featuring Ashley Judd, Kris Kristofferson, Frances Sternhagen and Morgan Freeman. Screenplay by Karen Janszen and Noam Dromi. Directed by Charles Martin Smith. Rated “PG-13”



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