



DOLPHIN TALE United States / Cayman Islands 2011 color 113 minutes  
Alcon Film Fund, LLC / Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

10 of a possible 20 points

\*\*1/2 of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

#### POINTS

- Producers: Andrew Kosove, Broderick Johnson, Richard Ingber,  
Yolanda Cochran, David Yates
- 1 Director: Charles Martin Smith
- 0 Editor: Harvey Rosenstock
- 1 Cinematographer: Karl Walter Lindenlaub
- 1 Lighting: Patrick Murray
- 1 Screenplay: Karen Janszen, Noam Droml
- 1 Music: Mark Isham, Cindy O'Connor
- 2 Production Designer: Michael Corenblith\* Art Director: Richard Fojo\*
- 1 Sound: Christopher Aud, Michael Babcock, Kelly Cabral, Scott Clements
- 1 Acting
- 1 Creativity

Here is a motion picture that is bound to make a whopper of a splash. Based on actual misadventures of a dolphin named Winter, DOLPHIN TALE is set in Clearwater, Florida, but at least partially filmed in the Cayman Islands. There is no clear protagonist in the film. Viewers are given the option of identifying with

Sawyer, a painfully introverted preteen boy abandoned to the care of his mother by a presumably disinterested dad, or with Sawyer's cousin, a state swimming champion who loses leg mobility while on patrol in an unspecified Middle Eastern country. A third choice is to imagine oneself in the dilemma of Winter, whose rudder mechanism has become badly damaged by a nearly fatal encounter with a floating fish net. How Winter became so paralyzingly ensnared in that contraption is never depicted in the picture and perhaps is not really known.

At the film's outset, Sawyer is sullen and impassive, a completely uncommitted student whose academic apathy has earned him a reserved seat in summer school. Only when preoccupied with computers, constructing models, or tinkering with handheld electronic devices does the boy feel secure. He appears to be dragged to a high school swimming pool, where an older cousin, Kyle Connellan, providently communicates to his former coach news of impending military assignment overseas. Just prior to this interview, Kyle has witnessed a rival break one of his event records. He accepts that potentially heartbreaking degradation without a trace of rue or envy, proving himself a gentleman and model sport. Combining these traits with evident patriotism and fearlessness, the Connellan youngster appears unassailably noble. Amiable, energetic, optimistic, the Olympic hopeful is as facilely charming as accompanying relation is repellingly dull. Much onscreen drama of this film is devoted to a far from convincing reversal of their characters.

A scene showing Kyle's abortive attempt to pull Sawyer from a shadowy workshop refuge into the gregariousness of his cousin's farewell party is protracted into an agonizingly sluggish contest of wills, with the outcome in no doubt whatsoever. As seconds tick silently by, the picture's putative hero becomes ever less sympathetic, a classic case of familiarity breeding antipathy. The more screen time Sawyer receives, the less attractive he becomes. Moroseness is not inviting and can be interpreted as rudeness.

After further episodes of sulky defiance and defensive alibis, viewers observe the lead character arriving belatedly at school, where discouraging peers and drily uninspiring teacher offer neither support nor welcome. A threat of physical bullying looms. Since this is a family-friendly picture, nothing of the sort materializes. Nonetheless, Sawyer can't wait to bolt from that confinement. A

dash from the schoolroom is the only liveliness he displays in the first ten or so minutes of his screen time.

More successful are cavorting dolphins, whose enthusiasm and energy provide color and contrast while offering audiences something playfully kinetic to engage with. Which is greatly needed, even at the risk of creating a subversive parallel storyline.

On what seems to be a second day of grudgingly pedaling to schoolroom purgatory, Sawyer is recruited by a fisherman to obtain expert assistance in remobilizing a beached dolphin. Fortunately, a cell phone call to 911 results in prompt dispatch of a nearby marine hospital's mobile rescue unit. Awaiting their arrival, boy and marine animal establish an empathetic link, possibly each identifying the other as a currently unhappy loner in an inhospitable environment.

It so happens that part of the staff coming to transport Winter to favorable recuperative quarters is bubbly, ruddy-haired Hazel Haskett, as persistently verbose as Sawyer is taciturn. Her clumsiness, sensitivity to animals, and proclivity towards forgetfulness is greeted with reluctant acceptance by the boy she befriends. Soon a shy partnership is established as the two children unite tentative, instinctual efforts with adult expertise to rally a dispirited dolphin back to vivacity.

Due to incurable infection, Winter's tail has to be amputated, creating a new problem of dorsal strain. Unless a substitute rudder mechanism can be invented, the injured animal is likely to die from vertebral friction and decay. As her backbone becomes increasingly stiffer, swimming facility will decrease, making successful food foraging ever more problematic.

Overseas, Kyle is wounded on patrol and returns stateside with severe crippling of his right leg. Mobility has become a paramount issue with him, also. Discouraged, lame, depressed, the cheerfully assured young man is shadowed by an obscure, insecure future. Doubt replaces certainty. The dream of Olympic medalling vanishes. Kyle becomes the despairing isolate his cousin had been.

At this point in the film, encouraging intervention with adult experience and wisdom is required. Most screenwriters settle for one sage elder to guide an initiate into mature adaptation to altered circumstances. But the DOLPHIN STORY

script team marshals a trio of grandfathers to dole out resourceful nuggets of sagacity: Dr. Cameron McCarthy, Reed Haskett, and Philip J. Hordern.

Dr. McCarthy is a specialist in fitting prosthetic devices whose work with Kyle leads into acquaintance with Sawyer, still plagued by the question of how to develop a synthetic replacement for Winter's tail. Suddenly, the youngster's predicament becomes Dr. McCarthy's conundrum. Watching the doctor devote himself freely to his cousin's obsession instills Kyle with new resolve to persevere and overcome all obstacles, both mental and physical.

Hazel's grandfather, Reed Haskett, is a fountain of supportive counselings, rather like a resident unpaid consultant. He always knows just what to say and the optimal time to deliver a useful aphorism. Or two.

Philip Hordern is the drama's *deus ex machina*, held in reserve until the last possible moment to solve the most intractable of all difficulties: how to keep an underfinanced public nonprofit economically afloat. The answer apparently is to invite some mellow, sentimental tycoon to purchase the ailing institution, possibly as an alluring tax write-off. Under continuous whining pressure from nature-besotted granddaughters, said magnate is ultimately bound to capitulate, even to the unreasonable extent of retaining the very personnel who brought the endangered organization to bankruptcy to begin with. Hey, in America, anything can happen. Right?

Yes, the screenplay is transparent, mechanical, overly familiar. Kids may not notice these defects, though, since a proliferation of animal antic shots will likely divert their attention from a predictable plot. Cliches abound, but they are instructive, socially ameliorating ones. Nothing in the dialogue will mislead or dispirit youthful auditors. Adults will just have to cope with dependably inoffensive speeches.

Sometimes the picture zips along briskly. At other junctures, delays arise from determination to milk wildlife cuteness at the expense of serious drama. This leads to strained comedy sequences, particularly those involving pesky pelican Rufus. Trimming about ten minutes of such appendages would result in a more satisfyingly streamlined film.

Generally, the acting is understated and acceptable. Aside from the miscasting of markedly unresponsive Nathan Gamble as Sawyer, performers navigate lines

skillfully and are pleasantly attractive characters, devoid of the affected hyperbole that often plagues family films. These adults are natural in their actions and temperate in speech. They look and sound like mature human beings, not refugees from comic books.

The cast is generally appealing, not least because of their comfortable interactions, which appear innate to their characters. No one overstretches for movie award glory. Easy affability reigns, to the benefit of the film as pleasant entertainment. Why not? It's summertime in Florida we're supposed to be watching.

By far the most thrilling drama lies in hurricane shots, which pulsate with documentary realism. Otherwise, Karl Lindenlaub's cinematography is functionally satisfying, never obtrusive or self-serving.

Sound is adequate, but not especially memorable or acutely registered.

Lighting and music adequately reinforce plot, but fail to provide either leadership or provocative contrast. Experimentation is nil and probably not particularly desirable. Special visual effects are stunning, when depicting torrential rain and gusting winds, but too transparently synthetic in the introductory CGI dolphin gamboling scenes.

Deserving laudation is the colorful props and scenery which enhance the film. Credit is due production designer Michael Corenblith and art director Richard Fojo, reinforced by Kurt Thoresen's generous array of engaging toys. Cool aquatints of the marine rescue center contrast vividly with glaring sunswept exteriors, storm-ravaged wreckage with orderly displays of sea life and decorative palms.

DOLPHIN TALE is a successfully agreeable motion picture for family screening. Youngsters will find Winter, Rufus, otters and sea slug charmingly diverting. Adults are likely to be more attentive to the overall story which, despite its conservative obviousness, is pleasantly enacted with sincerity by a committed cast.

A decidedly impressive dvd bonus feature is the short wordless color animation from Canada titled ORMIE. The title character's zany efforts to obtain access to an alluring, seemingly unattainable jar of cookies is consistently hilarious. Four minutes of undiluted joy from director Rob Silvestri. Additionally, the dvd includes

a deleted two-minute scene where Winter Meets Panama (dull, dull, dull) and a three-minute gag reel which should amuse child viewers.

Anyone who likes DOLPHIN TALE should also investigate the two FLIPPER feature films, now also available on Region 1 dvd. Cool delights for torrid summer days.