



SOUL SURFER is one of two July, 2013 LVCA (LIGONIER VALLEY CINEMA ASSOCIATION) dvd donations to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

SOUL SURFER United States 2011 106 minutes color
Mandalay Vision Production / Life's A Beach Entertainment / Tristar Pictures /
Filmdistrict / Enticing Entertainment / Island Film Group / Affirm Films /
Brookwell McNamara Entertainment

Points Key: 2 = outstanding 1 = competent 0 = deficient

* indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

10 of a possible 20 points

1/2 of a possible ***

Points

Producers: Noah Hamilton, Nick Hamilton, Shelley Trotter, Christina Lambert,
Ron Bass, Jennifer Smolka, Joey Paul Jensen, Susie Singer Carter,
Corey Schwartz, Dutch Hofstedter, Sean McNamara,
David Brookwell, Bess Wiley, David Zelon, Douglas Schwartz
and Becky Hamilton

1 Director: Sean McNamara

0 Editor: Jeff Canavan

2 Cinematographers: John Leonetti, Douglas Holgate (aerial photography)

1 Lighting: Tim Marshall

1 Screenplay: Sean McNamara, Deborah Schwartz, Douglas Schwartz,
Michael Berk, Matt Allen, Caleb Wilson and Brad Gann

0 Music: Marco Beltrami

2 Production Designer; Art Director: Rusty Smith*; Rosario Provenza*

1 Sound: Anthony Ciccolini III, Daniel Pagan, John Reynolds, John M. Reynolds

1 Creativity

10 points

I live to surf was the motto of SOUL SURFER'S heroine, a sun-blached blonde of evangelical Christian persuasion who resided with mom, dad and two brothers on Hawaii's garden island of Kauai. The film introduces Bethany Hamilton via a montage of home movies tracing her athletic career from toddler stage up to an imminent junior competition. Besides surfing, young Bethany apparently played the ukulele and dutifully attended worship services and youth group meetings. The rest of her background is sketchily outlined: she loved to play with the family dog and was homeschooled by mother. A typical mildly rebellious teen, Miss Hamilton enjoyed sneaking out to surf at night under the stars and fireworks of a Hawaiian Halloween. Her preferred surfing partners were siblings, parents, and best friend, Alana Blanchard. There was at least one local boy romantically interested in the neighborhood champion surfer girl. Life was sweet and victory at sea successfully accomplished, to the substantial chagrin of egotistical nemesis, black-suited Malina Birch.

Each Hamilton family member gets highlighted early. Dad, an inventive, loving parent, was determined to raise a brood of surfing fanatics. Mom, a skilled athlete with strong religious convictions, showed more tolerance of individual differences and acknowledged the significance of aspects of life outside the world of competitive sports. Older brothers Noah and Timmy ate, drank, played and rode the waves. Did they hold jobs? Attend college? The movie doesn't tell us. Who were their friends? Just the Blanchard family? While Timmy had perhaps as much interest in photography as surfboards, Noah seemed to be strictly a one-dimensional beach boy.

Most viewers will already have been apprised of the tiger shark attack that resulted in the loss of Bethany Hamilton's left arm. Details omitted from more general news accounts, such as precise identification of the predatory chordate or Bethany's enticingly dangled hand trailing through the waves, are clarified, permitting better understanding of the context in which the incident

occurred. To the credit of the filmmakers, gore is minimized, keeping the focus on character rather than horror.

At its best, *SOUL SURFER* approaches the realm of documentary realism, as in scenes immediately subsequent to the assault, when a frantic rush to the reef, beach and hospital are thrillingly depicted, thrusting the audience into the midst of the kind of crisis humans hope to avoid experiencing firsthand. Since the Hamilton family served as film advisors, what is seen and heard in these shots has convincing authoritativeness. Surfboarding scenes are similarly compelling, exciting to watch and masterfully edited.

More problematic are script and acting. Saddled with autobiographical material involving assertively Christian personalities, the writers respond with dialogue often reflecting a starkly homiletic quality that alternates between being obnoxiously overbearing and blandly clichéd. Trying to walk a tightrope between fidelity to the originals and evisceration of their spiritual beliefs, the screenplay frequently settles for recording the obvious, leaving tensions and doubts displayed briefly before recourse to a Biblical passage banishes all insecurity. Problems are not so readily resolved in the offscreen universe.

Annasophia Robb as Bethany captures her character's youthful optimism and parochialism of prior to the attack, but is less successful in portraying gradual maturation afterwards into greater social responsibility. She receives little support from director or screenwriter in essaying that task, as her collaborators show greater interest in stereotypical scenes of compassion that look acceptable, but fail to project internal struggles and insights which produced the visible charity. What is missing are indications of a "dark night of the soul" through which the Hamilton family had to pass before they could turn disaster into opportunity. More specifically, scenes of Bethany coercing a preschool tsunami victim to overcome fear of water by paddling around on a surfboard don't properly connect to her own continual battle to suppress parallel concerns about sharks and drowning inside the contact zone while trying to mount and balance single-handedly on a wave-beset surfboard. The viewer is left with an impression that only the Thai child is struggling at that moment.

While on the subject of battles, Carrie Underwood, playing youth counselor Sarah Hill, too frequently exhibits inability to achieve dramatic closure, delivering

lines with correct wording, but no discernible passion or conviction. After the last word of a speech is uttered, she looks painfully insecure, as if seeking an intercessor to shoehorn her out of the scene gracefully.

Other cast members produce acceptable performances. But only Craig Nelson, playing ebullient Dr. Rovinsky and Kevin Sorbo as self-deprecating Holt Blanchard, Alana's resourceful father, consistently create credible personas.

Why does the movie end with a fifth-place finish at the 2004 Nationals rather than the championship won the following year? Is it simply due to chronology? A wish to champion the underdog? Or a belated attempt to downplay the primacy of winning against competition? Perhaps only the director can really explain a weak and unsatisfying conclusion. It's not particularly inspiring to survive the loss of an arm only to end up with a condescending invitation to share a rival's triumph. Perhaps the writers felt competitive reversal of the two characters displayed Bethany's superior maturity to best advantage.

Sean McNamara's direction of most adult cast members is proficient, but child performers are frequently tentative and mostly still in role-playing mode rather than immersed in the characters they are portraying. Sonya Balmores is wonderful when depicting a nasty, spitefully envious loser or a smugly assured winner, but she's clueless when confronted with a script twist requiring instant transformation from haughty victor to generous admirer. There is no apparent graceful way to segue from the former to the latter in a single scene. Additionally, Lorraine Nicholson's depiction of Alana Blanchard seems completely devoid of development or arc. Doesn't she learn anything from her friend's trials? Chris Pochru reacts appropriately as Timmy Hamilton, operating in the shadow of older, more assertive Noah, but the screenplay allows no opening for him to display independent character. Ross Thomas gets more physical opportunities to dramatize, allowing him to escape the wimpy label Timmy gets stuck with, but at times overacts, reducing credibility.

Cinematography is strikingly effective, particularly in ocean scenes. Indeed, the visual appearance of the film is richly atmospheric, due partly to lovely scenic locations.

On the other hand, much of the music is either forgettable mainstream surf-rock of no special distinction or more appealing traditional Hawaiian material

diluted by coupling with dramatically static descriptive contexts.

Sound recording is acceptably nuanced and clear, but neither memorably forceful nor unconventional.

Lighting is satisfactory, which is not a given in Hawaiian locations. Excessive sunlight there can pose nearly insurmountable problems of glare.

Kudos to the art department of Production Designer Rusty Smith and Art Director Rosario Provenza, Set Decorator Julie Smith and Set Dressers Everett Galisa and Jason Gregg. Their furnishings for the Hamilton home united typical teen poster mania, obsession with surfing and an airy, pastel openness rich in wide glass windows and wooden cabinetry in an attractively upscale tropical residence.

SOUL SURFER makes for eminently suitable family viewing, possessing a fascinating story line, exotic locales and terrific sporting shots. Dvd bonus features consist of eight deleted scenes totaling four minutes, a thirteen-minute documentary about making the film, a five-minute featurette highlighting photography of surfing scenes, a four-minute short detailing how Annasophia Robb transformed into Bethany Hamilton, a half-hour documentary exploring the personal spirituality of Bethany Hamilton, a five-minute mini-film about Bethany as professional surfer, and pictorial scene selections.

This dvd will be available to check out of the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania beginning Friday, July 5, 2013.