



THE LEGEND OF THE SKY KINGDOM from Zimbabwe is an August, 2013 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library.

Zimbabwe 2005 Film Producer: Jacqui Cunningham color feature animation drama 72 minutes Sunrise Pictures

11 of a possible 20 points

*** of a possible *****

*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points

- Film Director: Roger Hawkins
- 0 Film Editor: Phil Cunningham
- 1 Cinematographer: Roger Hawkins
- 0 Lighting
- 1 Screenplay
- 2 Music: Andrew Baird*
- 2 Animation Director: Brent Dawes
- 2 Sound: Rodney Newman
- 1 Chief Voices Cast: Jason Linforth (Blockhead), Miriam Hamblin (Squidge), Gabriel Phillips (Lucky), Lucian Msamati (Italiano), Rodney Newman (Badza)
- 1 Creativity

11 total points

THE LEGEND OF THE SKY KINGDOM is a first in several respects. It is the first film to advertise itself as being constituted solely of found objects most people in Europe and North America would term “junk.” As both the initial feature-length animation from Africa and the first feature animation produced in Zimbabwe, Roger Hawkins’ film has two additional trailblazing credits.

The story the film communicates is based on John Bunyan’s THE PILGRIM’S PROGRESS, so Christian theology permeates the plot. Viewers are assumed to be already familiarized with it. Most of the geography highlighted borrows nomenclature from Bunyan’s tale, but adapts it to African vistas and wildlife. Similarly, Christian the pilgrim is replaced by three African children: Blockhead, Squidge and Lucky. Living in a Dickensian orphanage, the trio despairs of ever escaping to the freedom and happiness of the legendary Sky Kingdom. Yet to remain in their present Underground City of gloom, harsh discipline, daylong labor, and unappetizing food seems insufferable. The more aggressive and optimistic of the two boys, Blockhead, is determined to leave immediately and he finds unanticipated allies in a comically mischievous duo of strangers who happen to have wandered into his city just at a critical moment. Italiano, with an accent to match his moniker, is the more active and decisive visitor. Badza is a follower, more interested in naps and grub than work or leadership. Hesitancy prevents him from initiating plans, making him a psychological counterpart to frightened, pessimistic Lucky. Squidge, sole female character, is used as arbiter between Lucky’s doubting Thomas and Blockhead’s overconfidence and serves as a politically correct symbol of femininity.

With the assistance of Badza and Italiano, and some supernatural interference from invisible benefactor, Prince Ariel, the boys are liberated from jail, a punishment inflicted on them as a consequence of Blockhead’s defiant behavior. After a detour to collect Squidge from a dismal, disheartening orphanage dormitory, the quintet of adventurers set out to evade guards and government guardians in quest of a vastly pleasanter utopia promised by Telly, a kind of portable message service provided by the Sky Kingdom. By crossing an invisible bridge through a literal leap of faith they leave behind the Evil

Emperor's subterranean city devoted to mining and stockpiling gold. No hyena patroller is able to successfully follow them in a scene recalling the Exodus of the Israelites.

During their journey, the travelers encounter African parallels to Apollyon, Mr. Legality and Pliable. In every case, resort to faith in Ariel or prayer to him leads to victory over obstacles and even a triumphant excursion through the Valley of Death itself. Ultimately, a low-rent rocket will take the central trio to their lofty goal, leaving behind the two emissaries provided by Ariel (Badza and Italiano) as encouragers. Enlightenment is periodically provided by Gugulethu, a talkative bird similar in function to Interpreter, and a friendly monkey.

Scenery throughout mirrors that visible in the Dark Continent. Making extensive use of discarded everyday items, a resourceful crew of technicians create a credible child's view of jungle, savanna, desert, canyons, gorges and crocodile-camouflaging rivers. Pirates, a sporty troll-like bridge guardian and an army of menacing scissors vainly attempt to obstruct the young explorers. Faith in Ariel overcomes all dangers, a lesson the film overtly teaches.

Recommended viewing for adults as an inspiring technical achievement. Its "junkmation" premiered at the Annecy International Film Festival in France and won a Special Mention at the Lucas Film Festival in Frankfurt, Germany.

THE LEGEND OF THE SKY KINGDOM is especially suitable for children ages 8 to 11. Younger viewers will probably struggle with unfamiliar African settings and somewhat bizarre dialect. But older kids should find the characters engagingly novel, possessed of recognizable fears and hopes, and transparent in motivations.

Rhythmically dynamic, offering a rich array of native Zimbabwean timbres, Andrew Baird's soundtrack music wends a clear, attractive, suspenseful path through the film. It's vastly more communicative than a confusing map shown at intervals which purports to indicate what route is being followed by the child pilgrims in their trek.

This geographical murkiness is unfortunately seconded by editing which accentuates the episodic narrative and leaves viewers wondering how much space and time has been traversed between adjacent scenes. Too often, music alone adequately bridges sequential scenes. Entrances and exits of secondary

characters lack any feeling of either necessity or spontaneity, which will annoy adults, though children raised on television cartoons and completely irrelevant commercial interruptions may not mind.

Possibly due to budgetary limitations, lighting is often inadequate, making foggy scenes a serious problem. These interfere with identification of component elements of animation constructions and scenery props.

Alternating between blatant evangelistic clichés and witty dialogue, the screenplay is only sporadically interesting. Its failings divert attention to the more fascinating visual elements of the film, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

Since the vocal interpretations are ideosyncratic, sometimes satirical, and usually energetic, cast members deliver dialogue with relish and flair, obviously enjoying opportunities to portray hammy villains, naïve heroes and unflappable counselors. Special mention must be made of the comedy team voiced by Lucian Msamati as Italiano and Rodney Newman as Badza, a displaced beachcomber type, who call to mind the repartee of Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber.

Sound recording and sound effects are magnificent. Rodney Newman is to be highly commended for his achievement here.

Overall, **THE LEGEND OF THE SKY KINGDOM** is a very rewarding motion picture experience for both adult and juvenile audiences.