



“Battlefield: Earth” DVD Review

By Dr. John L. Flynn

One of the truly epic science fiction films of recent memory has finally been released as a special edition DVD from Warner Home Video, and genre fans who may have missed the motion picture during its theatrical run as well as those who enjoyed it the first (or second or third) time around are in for a real treat. “Battlefield Earth,” based on the best-selling science fiction novel by L. Ron Hubbard, is not only a rousing, action-packed, sci-fi adventure which evokes the best of “Star Wars,” “Independence Day,” and “Braveheart,” but also one of the finest special editions ever produced for the home video market. Loaded with commentaries (by Director Roger Christian and Production Designer Patrick Tatopolous), behind-the-scenes features, storyboards, theatrical trailers, TV spots, cast and crew bios, and lots more, this DVD release gives new meaning to the

term “special edition,” and raises the bar up a notch for future DVD offerings. This exciting tale of heroes and larger than life villains, against the backdrop of extremely cool special effects and edge of your seat action, is a must-own for anyone building their own video library.

Set in the year 3000, Earth has been conquered for its natural resources by a ruthless group of aliens known as the Psychlos. Most humans were killed or caged as animals during the short, one-sided war centuries earlier, and those who are left live as veritable cave dwellers. They have no remembrance of that apocalyptic war or the forgotten world they left behind. To them, the Psychlos are “gods” they glimpse in their evil-looking flying machines, and the ancient cities, overgrown with vegetation and the buildings falling into ruin, are forbidden places to go. So, the humans continue to hide out in the radiation zones, while the Psychlos, led by the sadistic security chief Terl (played by John Travolta), hunt them down to extinction. (The Psychlos also enjoy cheating and spying on each other almost as much as they enjoy killing and enslaving humans.) Jonnie Goodboy Tyler (played by Barry Pepper), captured as a man-animal, refuses to be Terl’s obedient servant, and unites fellow captives in a desperate attempt to regain their freedom. The others in the cast include Forest Whitaker as Travolta’s devious but dim-witted assistant Ker; Kelly Preston as Terl’s sexy, Psychlo love interest, and Kim Coates as Carlo, Jonnie’s foil, comic-relief and best friend.

“Battlefield Earth” looks like a big-budget summer epic with money to burn and a scale worthy of “Star Wars” and its other Hollywood predecessors, but in fact the film was made with the very modest budget of \$22 million (production and effects). Director Roger Christian, who won an Academy Award for his Art Direction on the original “Star

Wars,” came to the project shortly after directing the second unit on “The Phantom Menace,” and actually surprised his former boss George Lucas with his economical use of talent, production design, and special effects. Christian’s rousing and action-packed saga, which is filled with humor, adventure, and fun, takes movie-goers to a world they have never seen before—a world in which man has become an endangered species—via some innovative special effects. While not as fluid as the computer-generated images of “Titanic,” it is an impressive achievement that recalls the best work of “Planet of the Apes,” “Blade Runner,” and “2001: A Space Odyssey.” Tatopolous’s production design is incredibly detailed, and makes you believe that this is the war-torn world of 3000 A.D. When you’re not marveling at the eye-popping special effects or set design, you’ll probably be marveling at the performance of John Travolta. Starring as the Psychlo Security Chief Terl, Travolta firmly cements his star status both in terms of screen presence and acting chops. Forget Tony Manero from “Saturday Night Fever.” Here, Travolta plays one of the screen’s great villains, with equal parts of Shakespeare’s Iago and George Lucas’s Darth Vader. Terl’s underhanded interaction with Ker (Forest Whitaker) serves as a microcosm for the Psychlo’s own faux-Machiavellian machinations of death, betrayal, power plays, and secret identities (with lots of faux-Machiavellian dialogue ladled on to keep the proceedings appropriately "classical"), but it’s all briskly shot, edited, and paced with a contemporary sensibility.

The artistry behind “Battlefield Earth” is most apparent as well, from the very first scenes through the last reel of the motion picture. I have already mentioned the film's wonderful production design, but beyond the matte paintings and large-scale sets, there's a true artistry to how the motion picture was composed. Roger Christian creates a

wonderful metaphor using the simple contrast of light and darkness in the composition of scenes. This is especially apparent in the special edition DVD, where the light is perfectly balanced and the image superbly clear. For example, when we first meet Jonnie, the primitive protagonist, his scenes are filmed with the warmth of sunlight glinting off rugged mountains and green pastures. Later, when he allies himself with other primitives, the scenes are again in bright light, showing in a metaphorical sense how important and essential it is to band together against the hostile aliens. Even the gold in Fort Knox glows with a very warm light. Those scenes are contrasted against darker ones that show the Psychlo homeworld and the dome-city that they have made out of old Denver. The scenes are very dark, filmed with cold blue and dark green textures...you can almost feel the claustrophobia, death, and destruction in those sequences. The Psychlos are dark, dastardly aliens who have enslaved humanity and are strip-mining the planet, and what better way to portray this agenda than with the play of shadow and light. Similarly, the wipes, dissolves and transitions between scenes are handled with an artistry that I haven't seen in motion pictures in years; in fact, I can't recall the use of such dissolves unless I go all the way back to the original 1977 "Star Wars," and the editors on that film won an Academy Award for their work. In "Battlefield Earth," the transitions between the different scenes move the story forward like pages turning in a novel...and this artistic texture reinforces the story's literary heritage.

In addition to the film, which looks superb and sounds sensational on DVD, the special edition offers a wide array of extra materials that will enhance your enjoyment and appreciation for "Battlefield Earth." Roger Christian, Patrick Tatopolous, the staff at Warner Home Video, and Morgan Creek Productions have created a true labor of love by

selecting and arranging all of the extras in this DVD release. From the main menu, which is very easy to use and takes you seamlessly from one feature to the next, you can select not one but three different documentaries about various aspects of the film's production. "Evolution and Creation" is the best of the three in that it takes the viewer behind the scenes during the actual shooting of the film, and details the work of Travolta, Christian, Tatopolous, and other members of the cast and crew. Then there's short feature about John Travolta's alien makeup and costume design. Most revealing is the fact that during the early stages of the production Travolta's makeup/costume didn't work, and the crew was forced to work around the clock to find solutions so the production's shooting schedule didn't fall behind. And finally, there's another short feature about the creative visual effects. This documentary, which features Tatopolous and his special effects crew, is highly technical and extremely informative, and alone worth the price of the DVD. Most fans never get to see this kind of detail.

Besides the three documentary features, the special edition DVD has a storyboard montage that intercuts actual storyboards from the production with sequences from the movie and the music score. Most special edition DVDs merely show viewers the layout of the storyboard in pictures; these showcases tend to be very static, and not particularly interesting; it takes really ardent fans to go back to this material for a second or third viewing. However, the way that the storyboard montage has been assembled (with actual clips and music) is very dynamic, like a music video. Fans will feel compelled to watch this montage again and again. Similarly, the handful of theatrical trailers and TV spots are fun viewing over and over again.

The special edition also offers stills and biographies of the cast and crew, web links and other additional enhancements for DVD-ROMs, several language choices (but regrettably not Psychlo) and subtitles, and a few hidden video features. But by far the best part of the DVD is the dual-layered commentary by Roger Christian and Patrick Tatopolous. Nothing compares to eavesdropping on a conversation between two of the key filmmakers (the director and the production designer) as they discuss various aspects of the production while we watch the film with them. It is clear from their commentary that they wanted to make “Battlefield Earth” a fun movie that was both thoughtful and inspirational for science fiction fans. They not only talk about the motion picture in technical terms but also reveal their true love for the science fiction genre. For instance, Christian divulges how his love of comic books led him to shoot certain scenes with dutched camera angles. At another point in the extended commentary, both he and Tatopolous disclose how the cast and crew were attacked by monstrous black flies while filming a key sequence in the beautiful mountains of Quebec. Rarely (if ever) has this type of dual-layered commentary been done better.

Every once in a while a motion picture does something so extraordinary, it makes you desperate for more. You sit on the edge of your seat the entire film biting your nails while you are lost in the plot, the special effects, and the action-adventure. “Battlefield Earth” is one of those movies. When the motion picture first debuted in theatres last May, I laughed and cheered and cried and clapped, and enjoyed every moment and every aspect of the production from beginning to end. But I was among a select few science fiction fans who got to enjoy the film in theatres. For reasons totally unrelated to the production, critics trashed this saga of alien conquest and human rebellion during its

theatrical run, and chased many fans away with their hateful and denigrating remarks. They completely ignored or missed the film's true artistry and fun. Now that the film is available as a special edition DVD fans can finally enjoy that artistry and fun! They can also see for themselves what a largely misunderstood work of true genius "Battlefield Earth" really is. I know that when I watched the special edition DVD on my home video system I experienced all of the emotions of laughing, cheering, crying, and clapping again, and enjoyed the film from beginning to end. Experience the movie for yourself, and you'll see what I mean.

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