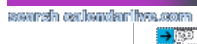




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MOVIE REVIEW
'Lassie'

Dog and movie lovers, take note: Lassie has come home.

By Michael Wilmington, Chicago Tribune

Writer-director Charles Sturridge's 'Lassie' revives a well-worn, sometimes grand tradition begun in 1938, when Eric Knight's first Lassie story was published. Since then, Knight's tale, amplified in his later 1940 novel "Lassie Come Home" — about the magnificently faithful English collie who travels 500 miles to return to her youthful master Joe — has inspired more cinema and TV, some good, some fair, than any other dog story, including the collected movie works of Benji and Shiloh.

But the latest movie devoted to the canine legend is, surprisingly, something special. It's not another thin new concoction or glossy update. Set in the original place and period (Yorkshire and Scotland on the eve of World War II), starring a photogenic new collie named Mason, it's easily the best Lassie movie since the classic first film, 1943's "Lassie Come Home."

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Like that great little picture, the new "Lassie" is faithful to Knight's story, capturing its sweep, Dickensian social contrasts and high emotion. All that is enhanced by a splendid cast that includes Peter O'Toole, Samantha Morton, Peter Dinklage, Steve Pemberton and Edward Fox — plus two delightful child actors, Jonathan Mason and Hester Odgers, as Joe Carraclough and Cilla (the old Roddy McDowall and Elizabeth Taylor roles).

Sturridge takes us to the prewar Yorkshire town of Greenhall, home of the Carracloughs, a sturdy lower-class mining family with a precious jewel of a collie. Though times are rough, 9-year-old Joe's mother and dad, Sarah (Morton)

and Sam (John Lynch), initially resist the magisterial Duke of Rudling (O'Toole), who wants to purchase Lassie for his kennel and his spunky little granddaughter, Cilla (Odgers). When the mine closes, though, Joe's parents are forced to reconsider. Lassie is sold.

Unfortunately, the Duke's head kennelman, Hynes (Steve Pemberton), is a sadist who becomes infuriated when the dog keeps escaping to return to Joe. And Lassie's determination perseveres even when the Duke takes her to his distant castle up north, commencing on the odyssey that will carry her through many adventures — notably involving puppeteer Rowlie (Dinklage), a clownish dogcatcher (Gregor Fisher), a courtroom appearance and even (added for this film) a whimsical scene with absent-minded adventurer Fox and the Loch Ness Monster.

What makes Knight's story work so well, still, is its blend of character, action, realism, social edge, fantasy and humor. Lassie is a genuine heroine, and Knight's book, the 1943 movie and this one all make us care deeply about whether she gets home. The last 20 minutes or so had me, I confess, in tears.

They were fairly earned. Sturridge, a master at film literary adaptations, made both the superb 1981 TV serial of Evelyn Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited" and the first-rate 1996 version of "Gulliver's Travels." He does just as well by Knight. What makes this film succeed are the director's quiet skill and the all-around excellence of his cast.

O'Toole gives Lord Rudling his old furious eloquence, and Morton and Lynch make a touching couple. The child actors are beguiling, and Pemberton is properly swinish as Hynes. The movie is also full of gem-like cameos and the collie actors (Mason and Dakota, Mason's stunt double) hold the camera as strongly as did Pal, the great first Lassie.

"Lassie's" most memorable performance is supplied by Dinklage, the powerful little actor of "The Station Agent," as the gypsy showman Rowlie. The scenes in his horse and carriage caravan and the feeling he gives of the special world of outsiders and artists have a discretion and subtlety that break your heart.

'Lassie'

MPAA rating: PG for some mild violent content and language

A Roadside Attractions/Samuel Goldwyn release. Writer-director Charles Sturridge. Producers Ed Guiney, Francesca Barra, Sturridge. Director of photography Howard Atherton. Editors Peter Coulson, Adam Green.

Running time: 1 hour, 39 minutes.

In general release.



'Lassie' - Sept. 1 (Samuel Goldwyn Films, Roadside Attractions)

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