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REVIEW: Zootopia (2016)

animation, review

2016 was an odd year in which the Walt Disney Animation Studio released two animated features: *Zootopia* and *Moana*. Of the two I vastly preferred the latter, but that's more praise for one rather than criticising the other. The former still feels today like part of an odd phenomenon in recent years where Disney's own

animated features started to resemble stablemate Pixar Animation Studios in terms of tone, style, and content.

Judy Hopps (Ginnifer Goodwin) is the first rabbit to be made a police officer in Zootopia, a sprawling city in which anthropomorphic animals of all species live together in comparative harmony. When a group of random citizens go missing, Judy decides to investigate – roping in a con artist fox (Jason Bateman) named Nick Wilde along the way.

Zootopia – directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore – was part of a winning streak for Disney in recent years, scoring great hits with the likes of *Tangled, Wreck-It Ralph, Big Hero 6,* and their pop culture juggernaut *Frozen. Zootopia* offered much of the same: gorgeous animation and character design, quality voice acting and a storyline that has been worked over to within an inch of its life for optimum thematic resonance, foreshadowing and character development. To an extent it was very much more of the same, but as the company was running on such a creatively strong line of attack that was not necessarily a bad thing.

This is a beautifully realised film, with a lot of thought put into how so many different species of animals could co-exist in a functional and productive fashion. It's not just logical but also howlingly funny: Judy can be dwarfed by elephants and giraffes on one scene, and then towering over a neighbourhood of mice in the next. This sort of design work is the film's best asset, and the source of many of its strongest jokes.

Its twin leads are drawn in a fairly stereotypical fashion, but they look good and are well performed by Goodwin and Bateman. In all honesty the film's characterisation feels like a minor drawback: there are no real surprises here, just well-worn genre tropes dragged out and re-purposed for the nth all-ages animated film. The same can easily be said of the film's storyline as well, which is a fairly episodic detective story that moves from one character set to the next until enough plot elements have been collected to justify an ending. It all still works to a large extent – it is a funny and enjoyable movie – but at the back of my mind there is a sense that WDAS was beginning to run on diminishing returns. The idea of a hidden villain hiding in plain sight and getting revealed

during the climax, for example, cropped up in a few too many productions to be a surprise here.

Zootopia brings a nicely expressed allegorical message about racism and cultural harmony, and it is refreshing to see it openly admit that such harmony is difficult and likely to remain imperfect. It's a slightly more adult sort of a message than you typically see in a family film. There are more than a few elements to the film that seem unexpectedly in contrast with its intended audience, including an animal meth lab replete with *Breaking Bad* references. It's the sort of pop culture referencing you usually see in a DreamWorks picture, and it seems a little out of place here.

This is the weird sort of film that is, on its own merits, perfectly well produced and entertaining, yet winds up being a slight disappointment because it feels as if it should have been somewhat better than it is. There is a sequel coming soon, although it absolutely does not need one.

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