

"Zootopia 2"

The kids will really give thanks for this animated sequel. Watered down? Maybe. But it's a party invitation no one will refuse.

By Peter Travers

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The first "Zootopia" won an Oscar as best animated feature nearly a decade ago. Anyone for seconds? The sequel, with 18 new and returning characters, has the same surging comic energy, eye-popping colors and irresistible impulse to party sure to bring family audiences out in droves. Can "Zootopia 2" take down juggernaut "Wicked: For Good" at the Thanksgiving weekend box office? I wouldn't bet against it.

What "Zootopia 2" doesn't have that the first one delivered big time is an itch to break the rules and paint outside the marshmallow box. That first Z baby about animal cops and robbers, had attitude, a potent feminist streak, a tough take on racism, and a cinema-centric plot that referenced "The Godfather," "Chinatown" and "L.A. Confidential." The kids rightly paid zero attention, but the grownups who tagged along appreciated the effort. "Zootopia 2" is way more cautious about tampering with a potential goldmine. The new timidity is not a dealbreaker—the sequel earns its stripes as a laugh-a-minute hot ticket—but I miss the risk.

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And now on to the good stuff. Yes, both the leads are back. There's irresistible Ginnifer Goodwin voicing Judy Hopps, a farm rabbit with 225 siblings who's now a kickass cop in Zootopia, a gorgeously designed barnyard metropolis where predators and prey live in segregated harmony. I didn't say peace; the town isn't perfect.

Enter snarkmeister Jason Bateman as Nick Wilde, a scammer of a fox who's reformed so much that he too is now a cop, playing naughty to Judy's nice. There's some flirting to suggest a mixed-species connection. But this isn't a Netflix holidays romcom. And they bicker up a storm, like Blake Lively and Justin Baldoni behind the scenes on "It Ends with Us."

Something must be done, so Chief Bogo (a cape buffalo again voiced by Idris Elba) orders them to a "partners in crisis" workshop led by Dr. Fuzzby (Quinta Brunson) a therapy quokka.

This sounds a bit conventional, compared to the first movie when predators reverted to nature and went on snarling, violent attacks that were savage enough to make impressionable tots hide under their seats. Also, there are fewer movie references, though a chase through a hedge maze has a chilly "Shining" vibe.

You'll be pleased to know there is a villain. So come on down Gary De'Snake, a reptile graced with the vocal chops of "Everything Everywhere All at Once" Oscar winner Ke Huy Quan. But hold the hisses. Gary doesn't slither with evil for long. See it turns out that Gary only wants to restore the reputation of his family and other vipers who feel slimed by cancel culture.

Things converge at a Zootennial Gala, celebrating 100 years since the city's founding. The party is hosted by a family of lynxes who are descendants of Zootopia's founder, Ebenezer Lynxley. Judy befriends young Pawbert Lynxley (Andy Samberg) and his daddy, Milton (shaded with just the right degree of suspicion by David Strathairn).

The plot is a needlessly complicated affair about weather walls—each animal species needs its own weather—and who owns the patent. Wait, what! A kiddie comedy about patent law? Yawn, right. Hold on. Soon Judy and Nick are being framed as accomplices. They get help from Nibbles Maplestick (a scene stealing Fortune Feimster), a beaver conspiracy theory podcaster who knows where the bodies are buried in this deceptively happy town.

So "Zootopia 2," directed by Jared Bush and Byron Howard—Bush did the

script— puts Judy and Nick on a race to clear their names. Some mystery, as if we didn't know the outcome. It doesn't matter. Not really. Not when Bush and Howard keep the action hopping with characters we've come to know and love. Even Gary De'Snake. All the voice actors have a blast cutting loose, even Shakira who returns as the pop star Gazelle, with a new song called "Zoo" that seems built for endless kiddie streaming.

Ditto the movie. OK, the sequel feels safer than the original and I'm sorry about that. But "Zootopia 2" with its zippity-doo animation and surprises around every corner gets the job done. The delight and dazzle of this family-friendly follow-up is undeniable, bringing it all home in a climax that should have audiences panting for a "Z3." Forgive my Nick-like snark, but hasn't that been the point all along?