

Superhero dog and sassy cat deliver 'Bolt' load of laughs

Contributed by Tim Riley
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BOLT (Rated PG)

Animation films present a set of challenges, usually to be overcome with some new technique or creative approach. With a pedigree forged from the union of Walt Disney and Pixar Animation Studios, "Bolt" is a pioneering piece of technical marvel otherwise known as Disney Digital 3-D.

This is Disney's first animated feature to be conceived and designed for 3-D, meaning that it's an in-house production where quality control is paramount. The filmmakers save the best 3-D moments for big action sequences, avoiding the pitfalls of excessive and unnecessary gimmicks.

Despite the amazingly well-done animation, "Bolt" is more interested in its story than dazzling with its effects. This movie should be equally enjoyable in the absence of the 3-D format.

Like most Disney films, "Bolt" fills the screen with laughs and adventure, but pulls on the emotional heartstrings with tender efficacy. Bolt (voiced by John Travolta), a white-haired canine, lives in the fantasy world of Hollywood, where he's the star of an immensely popular TV series about a pooch with incredible super powers whose every day is filled with adventure, danger and intrigue.

He's very attached to his owner and TV co-star Penny (voiced by Miley Cyrus), who's constantly in danger and needs to be rescued by Bolt. The villainous star of the TV series is Dr. Calico (Malcolm McDowell), whose fiendish plot for world domination is abetted by cats acting as accomplices. Indeed, Dr. Calico is a low-rent James Bond villain, more or less on par with Dr. Evil from the Austin Powers movies.

Living in his fictional world, Bolt has come to believe that he's been genetically engineered to have amazing powers, including incredible strength, laser vision and a powerful superbark. Bolt is accustomed to stopping speeding cars or ripping up asphalt by exercising sheer physical power beyond all reason. Breaking loose from his on-set trailer when concerned for Penny's safety, Bolt is accidentally packed in a crate and shipped to New York.

Once in Manhattan, Bolt finds that reality begins to challenge his delusions, discovering that daredevil stunts don't go according to plan. Wandering aimlessly through the city streets, after several predictable mishaps in the urban jungle, Bolt takes hostage a scrappy, streetwise alley cat named Mittens (voiced by Susie Essman), embittered at having been abandoned by her human owners.

Convinced that Mittens is one of Dr. Calico's henchmen, Bolt insists that the sarcastic feline will show him the way back to California, a plan that takes root when they find a Waffle House place mat with a map of the United States. Indeed, the story requires that you suspend major disbelief about the resourcefulness of domesticated animals.

At a rest stop somewhere in fly-over country, Bolt and Mittens encounter Rhino (voice of Mark Walton), an eager hamster sealed in a plastic ball who spends too much time watching television. As a result, Rhino happens to be a diehard fan of Bolt's adventures who has memorized the details of the dog's numerous missions. Leaving the safety of his RV, Rhino heeds the call of duty, living out his ultimate fantasy by teaming up with Bolt for a real-life adventure.

Given that this is an animation film where little of the action passes for even remotely credible, "Bolt" takes tremendous liberties with reality, though it goes down smoothly because of the humor. It's fun for adults and children, though for different reasons, to watch the trio of mismatched animals traversing the country in search of Hollywood.

Memorable encounters include a breakout from the pound and getting advice from pesky pigeons, whether the obnoxious New York wise guys or the aspiring screenwriter types in Tinseltown.

The wonderfully delusional Bolt is the star of the show, but he is frequently at risk of being upstaged by the sassy Mittens, who has to undertake the task of teaching the superhero dog how to act like an ordinary pooch. Nevertheless, there's an enjoyable dynamic between cat and dog, trading on the usual suspicions, though Mittens gets the best lines, often dripping with sarcasm.

Aside from a few disturbing images, particularly of raging fire threatening the lives of animals, "Bolt" is terrific family-friendly entertainment for audiences young and old. Disney delivers great animation and laughs, a nice combination.

DVD RELEASE UPDATE

When the studios come up with clever packaging for some old movie favorites, the urge to buy is almost irresistible.

For reasons not clear to myself, I've always loved the "Pink Panther" cartoons as well as the movies. Well, the cartoons are sometimes better than the movies, particularly when you start reaching the end of the film franchise with duds like "Curse of the Pink Panther" and "Son of the Pink Panther."

But, this "Pink Panther Ultimate Collection" just might be an absolute necessity, since it includes nine films, nine cartoon classics and the quintessential encyclopedia, "Pink Panther, the Ultimate Guide to the Coolest Cat in Town."

I love the original 1964 "The Pink Panther," starring Peter Sellers as everyone's favorite bumbling detective. The collector's edition of this classic comedy film contains over 60 minutes of never-before-seen footage that can only be found in this special box set. This is what I want for Christmas.

Tim Riley writes film and television reviews for Lake County News.

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