

Vibrant verve in Rio 2

By  Daniel Derksen

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Rio 2 is a fantastic animated film that is most definitely one of the best films of the year, loaded with tons of laughs, heaps of enthralling adventure and a burst of vibrant verve!

It spells fun with a capital F, from the raving opening sequence, which plunges you headlong into the colourful world and vivacious Brazilian sounds of the world's most lovable and adorable parrots: Blu, Jewel and their three kids, after they're hurtled from Rio to the wilds of the Amazon. As Blu tries to fit in, he goes beak-to-beak with the vengeful and villainous Nigel, and meets the most fearsome adversary of all: his father-in-law.

The film was born from the imagination of Carlos Saldanha, who co-directed or directed the global blockbusters Ice Age; Ice Age: The Meltdown; and Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs. Saldanha had long wanted to write a love letter to his hometown: Rio. He came up with an enchanting story about a nerdy, highly domesticated bird that goes on the adventure of a lifetime in that wondrous city.



Set in the Brazilian wilderness

Saldanha decided to set his new story in the mammoth Brazilian wilderness. "I wanted a setting very different from the one we explored in "Rio", he explained. "I thought we should move away from the city." To realise the scope and breadth of this magical world and its vivid characters fully, director Carlos Saldanha brought together an all-star voice cast, led by Anne Hathaway and Jesse Eisenberg, Oscar and Grammy-winner Jamie Foxx, acclaimed musical artist will.i.am, actor-musician Jemaine Clement, comedic actress Leslie Mann, actor Rodrigo Santoro (a Brazilian native), actor-comedian George Lopez, and funny man Tracy Morgan.

The filmmakers enveloped the action - and audiences - with a combination of fantastic and intoxicating Brazilian sounds and contemporary pop music, featuring a stellar musical cast performing under the guidance of composer John Powell and Brazilian music legend and "Rio's" executive music producer, Sergio Mendes.

Saldanha vision of a mini-travelogue that would get the characters from Rio to the Amazon swiftly and show his beloved Brazil in a fun way is awesome and spectacular, showcasing the sublime art of animation at its best.



Maps and a GPS

To mark the journey, the filmmakers devised an unfolding map and pop-up map, as well as some GPS imagery, all presented in a stylised way. As the sequence progresses, the scene weaves back and forth between the real world and the paper pop-up world.

Finally arriving at their destination - the largest jungle in the world - the family takes in the marvels of the Amazon: massive trees of all types, the limitless flora and fauna, and giant rivers.

It is a much bigger canvas and, thus, more challenging to render than building the city of Rio in the first film. "We wanted to capture the vibe of the forest and its harmony, with nature and with animals," commented Saldanha.

The director wanted a vast, wild and untamed jungle. Every area is natural and overgrown, which provides a sense of the Amazon's vastness, while at the same time highlighting its intimacy. Additionally, the Amazonian forest is a preserve in every sense of the word. "The fact is that these birds we'll soon meet have been kept alive and have managed to survive because they have been in isolation from human contact," noted Saldanha. "We created a contained bird village that's a microcosm of the gigantic Amazon."



To bring the wonders of the Amazon to life, the filmmakers relied on Blue Sky Studios' proprietary rendering software, CGI Studio, which the research and development teams have continued to evolve for over a decade.

Producer Bruce Anderson explained: "Just figuring out ways to generate so many plants isn't a matter of just adding a bunch of computers to render them. It requires technological change. Sure, we always develop new and more powerful computers, but that only gets you so far. To make the next leap you need more innovation under the hood, meaning the rendering software."

So, in Rio 2, it's on, in the Amazon, not only visually, but musically. "We wanted to look at different musical "flavours", sounds and exciting new beats that make the soundtrack for Rio 2 even bigger than the first film's," said the director. After Saldanha wrote the story, screenwriter Don Rhymer, who had worked on Rio, began fleshing out Saldanha's ideas.

It was a fruitful collaboration, which sadly ended when Rhymer passed away in late 2012. "Don was our guy," said Saldanha. "He embraced the vision of the first film and had really exciting ideas for Rio 2. His death left a big gap for us. We were lucky to have the amazing writers Carlos Kotkin, Jenny Bicks and Yoni Brenner help finish the screenplay, but Don was a very special person who played a big role in the project's development."

Breathtaking and spectacular first scene

Anne Hathaway and Jesse Eisenberg are delightful voicing the lead roles. We're reintroduced to Hathaway's Jewel and Eisenberg's Blu in a breathtaking and spectacular first scene, which tops even the gala musical sequence that opened Rio.

"We start the movie off with a bang - a big musical number - just like we did in Rio," Saldanha explained. "We had already explored Carnaval [in the first film], and knew that in Brazil, the next biggest event is New Year's. So we decided to kick off Rio 2 with all of our favourite birds back together in a New Year's musical extravaganza. It's a great way to reintroduce the audience to our characters."

While Blu deals with rigours of jungle life, a disapproving father-in-law, and a potential rival for Jewel's affections, yet another threat looms.

Nigel, who suffered the most undignified of indignities at the end of Rio, is back and steals the film. He's followed Blu and Jewel to the Amazon, and now he's hungry for payback. For Nigel, revenge is a dish best served cold - and with lots of blue feathers.

Now he flies like a chicken

In Rio, Nigel was defeated by what he calls "the pretty birds", including Blu, with the wily cockatoo losing his feathers in the

process. Now he flies like a chicken and works as a fortune teller's assistant at a third-rate street fair. Nigel is at the lowest point in his life and he's not happy about it. So when he sees the blue birds that have caused him so much misery, he seeks vengeance. "He's had some bad luck, professionally," said Jemaine Clement, who voices Nigel.

As he did in Rio, Clement focused on the character's less unsavoury qualities. "Nigel's predominant passions are Shakespeare, alliteration, revenge, and attention," he noted. "He is still evil but Nigel really wants to return to acting. Sometimes that can affect his focus on evil-doing."

If you are looking for an animated film that provides first-rate and consummate entertainment, the laugh-a-minute Rio 2 is not to be missed.

For more on Rio 2 and other new releases, go to www.writingstudio.co.za/page1037.html

ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit www.writingstudio.co.za
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