Rating: 2 out of 4 stars

Running Time: 94 minutes

This animated family film from Universal Pictures opens exclusively at theaters on Friday, March 8.

It has been some time since *Kung Fu Panda* graced movie screens in 2008, becoming a surprise commercial and critical hit. An equally impressive follow-up arrived in 2011, but there was a five-year break before another title came to fruition. Now, after eight more years, *Kung Fu Panda 4* is unexpectedly being released to cinemas.

Like most studio animated fare, it’ll certainly work well enough for small children. However, older viewers will note that this effort doesn’t feel necessary. In fact, it coasts along and seems to be serving primarily as a set-up for more titles involving a new character.

As the story opens, the Furious Five have temporarily gone their separate ways. The panda Po (Jack Black) has been using his skills as Dragon Warrior to help out those in need. After returning to his dojo, Master Shifu (Dustin Hoffman) tells Po that it is time for his role in life to change. He now needs to be a Spiritual Leader and train someone from the next generation to take his place as Dragon Warrior. Of course, Po hates the idea.

In the meantime, a sorceress lizard known as The Chameleon (Viola Davis) has set out to steal the panda’s mystic staff. She wants it so that she can visit the Spirit Realm and steal techniques from history’s greatest martial arts masters. But before the hero and villain can square off, Po encounters mysterious fox and thief Zhen (Awkwafina) who claims she can lead him to The Chameleon.

Obviously, it’s more difficult to maintain the freshness associated with a kung-fu fighting panda bear after three installments. And this is made all the harder without Po’s fellow animal fighters (who only appear at the close and do not speak), with whom he could trade barbs with in earlier films. Even the ever-frustrated Master Shifu isn’t in a major part of the picture, showing up mostly in the opening and final moments. It truly is unfortunate, as many of the kids who attended the preview screening were happiest during the denouement when they finally saw all of the characters together again.

Instead, the bulk of this tale follows the relationship between Po and the fast-talking Zhen, who for the most part is playing nice with the protagonist in order to get what she wants. There is plenty of back-and-forth between the pair, but only the odd quip lands. It’s clear from the outset that the producers are hoping for Zhen to become a major character in the franchise, but based on the dialogue in this film, the hoped-for chemistry between the two isn’t overwhelming.

And while children aren’t likely to care, the story also feels contradictory at times. The visual novelty of a large panda using martial arts (in some cases, to save the entirety of China from evil forces) was what made the character distinctive to audiences and characters in previous chapters, but in this sequel very few outside of his home village even recognize him. Po is now supposed to be a martial arts master who should now train the young, but he tends to make a lot of silly gaffes while fighting whenever it is convenient or necessary for the filmmakers to add a quick joke.

Admittedly, there are a few gags that do work. This includes a bit involving Po and Zhen trying to quietly sneak into the villain’s fortress. There is an entertaining moment featuring guard bulls chasing the leads through a fine ceramics shop. And it is a lot of fun to see the spirit of the original film’s antagonist, Tai Lung (Ian McShane), watch and comment on the supernatural events occurring during the finale. The odd off-handed comment here and there raises a smile, but that’s about as good as it gets.

As for the visuals, some of the locations are nice, including a bar perched on the edge of a cliff, but others aren’t as distinctive.

Alas, Kung Fu Panda 4 delivers a couple of chuckles and an interesting moment or two, but otherwise feels rather uninspired. While earlier movies in the series were impressive roundhouse kicks, this follow-up delivers little more than a light jab.

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