

Kevin James in 'Zookeeper' is Zany Family Fun

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on July 8, 2011 - 7:11am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Not being familiar with the Kevin James filmography really helped in assessing his latest, "Zookeeper." His appeal is very evident, and the filmmakers do some funny bits with the old "talking animal" routine.

Zookeeper has a solid (and sweet) story at its base, and that allows the comedy to flow out of situations, much more organically than, for example, the very forced spastic gymnastics of Kevin James in this year's "The Dilemma." It's truly an enjoyable film for the whole family, one that finally lives up to that tired pitch.

James is the titular Zookeeper named Griffin, and we first meet him as he is riding on a horse with his girlfriend Stephanie (Leslie Bibb). He wants to pop the question, she wants to dump him. When the twain finally meets, a dejected Griffin is left in a lurch. This throws him into a tremendous funk – which is understandable – for the next five years.

He continues his stellar zookeeping, however, famous for his attention to the animal's needs and details. His associate, Kate (Rosario Dawson), is just as dedicated, as opposed to the flaky reptile keeper named Venom (Ken Jeong) and Shane (Donnie Wahlberg), a mean-spirited animal feeder. It is after hours at the zoo when the magic begins.



Kevin in Wonderland: Bernie the Gorilla (voice of Nick Nolte) and Griffin (Kevin James) in 'Zookeeper'
Photo credit: © 2011 Columbia TriStar

The animals start talking. In fact, they convene to help Griffin get his girl troubles solved and Stephanie back in his life. Joe the Lion (voice of Sylvester Stallone) is the leader, his wife is Janet (Cher), there is also Bernie the Gorilla (Nick Nolte) Barry the Elephant (Judd Apatow), Jerome the Bear (Jon Favreau), Mollie the Giraffe (Maya Rudolph), Donald the Monkey (Adam Sandler) and many others. Will they be able to show Griffin the way? You don't have to be Noah to figure that one out.

Kevin James crystalizes his "character" in this film, that of a everyman doofus who is trying to figure out how to fit into the American Dream of upward mobility, while at the same time staying dedicated to his love and purpose of zookeeping. He is absolutely charming as Griffin, and keeps the silent movie roots of decent physical comedy alive. The premise is what does him the most favors here, he isn't forcing any of the humor because it is naturally derived from the main absurdity.

Surprisingly, the talking animals are not the main focus in the story, but merely a greek chorus that provides the life lessons for the zookeeper in regard to his state of romance. Again, the script gives some highly comic characteristics to the menagerie – the lion couple bicker hilariously like an old married couple, the bears are like like a course Abbott and Costello in their banter, the neurotic elephant is a classic opposite personality and on and on. They stayed away from the obvious, although there has to be a poop flinging joke from the monkey (nicely voiced by Adam Sandler) in any talking animal picture.

The main animal/zookeeper relationship is between Griffin and Bernie the Gorilla (who is suffering from a psychological condition). Bernie is touching in this portrayal, with Nick Nolte imbuing the spirit of the depressed primate with a sense of wonder and curiosity. One of the bits is that Bernie likes the TGIF chain of restaurants, and when Griffin finally gets him there the montage payoff is one of the funniest moments in a very amusing film.

The human supporters know their roles as well. Rosario Dawson maintains her radiance (she is stunningly beautiful) but has enough of a sense of character to believe she'd be a zoo employee. Ken Joeng, that amazing scene stealer, does himself proud in the couple of routines as Venom. Leslie Bibb uplifts the beautiful-girl-breaks-up-with-schlub portrayal with some nice reactions, it sounds weird but she really understood her motivation. She's also grandly paired with an ex-boyfriend name Gale (Joe Rogan), who knocks that jealous persona out of the park.



Zoo Crew: Venom (Ken Joeng), Kevin James and Kate (Rosario Dawson) in 'Zookeeper'
Photo credit: © 2011 Columbia TriStar

It would be a nice summer gift to say Zookeeper is a complete keeper, but there were some odd choices in the screenplay. One of the strengths of the story was to base everything on certain rules of the animal kingdom ("survival of the fittest," etc.). After the zoo animal's advice to Griffin about mating procedures, he begins to take on certain characteristics that didn't fit with his overall nice doofus. It is a slight annoyance, and clashes with the strong foundation of the narrative.

But this is a celebration, I finally "get" Kevin James as a movie star. Now excuse me while I spend the rest of the weekend with a "King of Queens" marathon, topped off with the director's cut of "Paul Blart: Mall Cop."

"Zookeeper" opens everywhere on July 8th. Featuring Kevin James, Rosario Dawson, Leslie Bibb, Ken Jeong, Donnie Wahlberg and Joe Rogan, with the voices of Nick Nolte, Adam Sandler, Sylvester Stallone, Cher, Judd Apatow, Jon Favreau, Maya Rudolph and Don Rickles. Screenplay by Kevin James, Nick Bakay, Rck Reuben, Jay Scherick and David Ronn, directed by Frank Coraci. Rated "PG"



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