

Another Night at the Museum for Shawn Levy

BY BOB THOMPSON, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MAY 21, 2009



The Montreal-born director (on set with Ben Stiller) promises more 'evolved' movie sequel with Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian.

Photograph by: Night at the Museum, Twentieth Century-Fox

Shawn Levy has become the go-to guy for bringing family comedies to the big screen. The Montreal-born director has enjoyed a string of mainstream successes, starting with Steve Martin's Cheaper By The Dozen, then Martin's reboot of The Pink Panther, and then Ben Stiller's surprise 2006 smash, Night at the Museum, which earned a whopping \$570 million US worldwide at the box office.

Levy didn't do the sequels to Cheaper By The Dozen or The Pink Panther, but he was not about to let a good Museum thing pass him by the second time around. He has re-teamed with Stiller for the sequel, Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian, which opens Friday, kicking off the U.S.'s lucrative Memorial Day weekend.

That's a great deal of performance pressure, but the 41-year-old director says the sequel is up to the challenge: Compared to the original, it contains more comedy, more special effects and many more exhibits coming to life at the Smithsonian - which is really a Washington, D.C., complex of 19 separate museums. In other words, lots more of everything.

"But I wanted the franchise to evolve in content, sophistication and tone," said Levy by phone from L.A. during a break from shooting his latest film, Date Night, starring Tina Fey and Steve Carell.

In the Museum II followup, Stiller's Larry has left his security-guard job at New York's Museum of Natural History to become a TV huckster for his crass inventions. When he discovers his exhibit buddies need him in D.C., he doesn't hesitate to head to the U.S. capital.

There he confronts Hank Azaria's evil Egyptian pharaoh, who has conspired to organize other exhibit villains, including Ivan the Terrible (Christopher Guest), Napoleon (Alain Chabat) and Al Capone (Jon Bernthal), in order to dominate the world.

It's not all good vs. evil. Stiller's Larry also gets friendly with the spunky pilot Amelia Earhart (Amy Adams), who, like the others, only comes to life at night when the museums are closed.

And don't fret, fans of the original Museum: Familiar faces return, including Owen Wilson's miniature cowboy, Jedediah.

The busy mix of comedy, action and visual effects "was definitely like a Rubik's Cube to work out," said Levy, who needed 16 months of pre-production before filming last summer at a Vancouver studio and at a converted shipyard warehouse.

Levy's thankful he had Stiller to rely on. While Stiller plays a hapless straight man reacting to all the harried activity around him, the director knew his headliner was key, on and off camera.

"Ben is a supreme professional and an exacting perfectionist for all the right reasons," Levy said. "Every day Ben came prepared, ready to work, constantly seeking the best possible line and scene, and not always just for him, because he's unselfish and wanted others to shine."

And that's what scene-stealer Azaria did. The actor, who manages multiple voices on The Simpsons, does indeed have his moments as the pharaoh with a decidedly odd speech impediment.

"Hank is probably the most talented voice actor in the world," Levy said. "I figured, 'Why not use that?' so we spent an afternoon playing with these different voices, and he gave me around seven variations, all great."

Levy agreed they decided on the strangest inflection. And if Boris Karloff comes to mind when you hear Azaria's pharaoh speak, you are right on the money. "Yeah," said Levy chuckling. "There's no doubt he does a lispy Karloffian voice, and it's hilarious. Only Hank could get away with it."

In the meantime, Levy has to finish his current project, Date Night, an adult action comedy about marriage. "Tina (Fey) and Steve (Carell) are from the same smart comedy breed of Ben Stiller and Steve Martin. Every day, they bring something new to the script."

Levy is also producing Will Ferrell's upcoming Neighborhood Watch, and has been hand-picked to direct Stiller and Tom Cruise in The Hardy Men, a grown-up version of the Hardy Boys book adventures.

"Ben, Tom and I continue to work on the screenplay," said Levy of The Hardy Men. "I can't offer a timeline, but when the script is ready, we are definitely going to make that movie."

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