

‘Zootopia’ was a major hit in China. Will its sequel do as well?

BY SAMANTHA MASUNAGA
Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES

At the Beijing premiere of "Zootopia 2" last week, Walt Disney Animation Studios Chief Creative Officer Jared Bush encountered a wall filled with letters from people throughout China, all writing about what the original 2016 animated movie meant to them.

They highlighted the optimism of rabbit cop Judy Hopps and how they wanted to emulate her sunny outlook. They cited the unlikely friendship between Judy and her partner in crime, a fox named Nick Wilde, as hope that they could find common ground with different family members. It was a display Bush didn't see at any other premiere.

"It's more than just a story," said Bush, who wrote and directed "Zootopia 2," directing alongside Byron Howard. "A lot of the time, these characters have helped people through difficult moments of their life. They have a lot of love for these characters."

To this day, the original "Zootopia" ranks as China's highest-grossing Hollywood animated film, with a total box office haul there of \$236 million. Marketing ahead of the new film has included promotions with 10 brands, as well as displays throughout the country, including in Shenzhen, Chengdu and Beijing.

But over the years, the China market for U.S.-made films has changed dramatically, leading to questions about whether "Zootopia," which heads



Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps (voiced by Jason Bateman and Ginnifer Goodwin) in a still from the Disney animated movie “Zootopia 2.”

to theaters Wednesday, and its loyal following can break through the more difficult landscape that American movies face there today.

Once seen as a major - and lucrative - destination for big Hollywood blockbusters, the country now has a more robust local film industry that's pumping out strong competitors. The fraying geopolitical relationship between the U.S. and China also hasn't helped, nor has the increasing trend of younger audiences watching short-form content on their phones.

"It's important to the industry that both 'Zootopia' and 'Avatar' work," said Andrew Cripps, head of theatrical distribution for Walt Disney Studios, referring to the upcoming James Cameron-directed "Avatar: Fire and Ash."

"The overall industry needs some success at year-end, and I think this would be a tremendous sign of confidence in the marketplace."

China was once seen as

a gold mine for certain films - namely, big studio movies - that could get approval from its government for release.

A decade ago, Hollywood movies would regularly haul in more than \$100 million at the Chinese box office, with massive blockbusters like 2015's "Furious 7" and 2014's "Transformers: Age of Extinction" drawing north of \$300 million each. Some films with softer domestic debuts could count on China to supersize their box-office returns, like 2016's "Resident Evil: The Final Chapter," which grossed nearly \$160 million in China alone, but just \$26.8 million in the U.S. and Canada.

In 2016, the domestic Chinese film business saw a significant slowdown in box-office growth. As a result, revenue from imported films - largely those from the U.S., such as Universal Pictures' "Warcraft" and Disney-owned Marvel Studios' "Captain Amer-

ica: Civil War" - increased by 10.9%, said Ying Zhu, author of "Hollywood in China: Behind the Scenes of the World's Largest Movie Market."

Those foreign films accounted for 41.7% of the total market share at the time, up from 38.4% in 2015, she wrote in an email. To help boost year-end revenue, Chinese regulators even relaxed the so-called blackout on imported films during December, which was traditionally saved for local movies.

"Zootopia" opened in China to just \$22 million at the box office, but momentum grew in subsequent weeks. Though a movie from the U.S. typically got a four-week run in China, Chinese regulators made an exception and added two extra weeks, said Bush, who co-directed and co-wrote the 2016 film.

"Zootopia" was somewhat of a real surprise to us here in China," he said on a video call from Beijing while on the film's

publicity tour. "We didn't know that it was going to turn into this phenomenon here."

Known in China as "Crazy Animal City," the film's dynamic between lead characters Nick and Judy and their imperfect but caring relationship appealed to Chinese audiences, as did Judy's backstory of moving from a small town in the countryside to a major metropolis, Bush said. Animated films have also long been popular in the market.

After the film's success, Disney built the "Zootopia"-themed land in Shanghai Disneyland, which opened in 2023 and is the only such land in any Disney park. The studio recently held the movie's Shanghai premiere at the themed land, as crowds of fans (both there and in Beijing) dressed up as characters from the film, including lesser-known ones like Fru Fru the shrew and Officer Clauhauser, a pop culture-obsessed cheetah.

But since 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, China has pulled back from its embrace of Hollywood films, particularly as its political relationship with the U.S. has chilled.

Earlier this year, China planned to reduce the number of Hollywood films it allows into the country, amid tariff tensions with the U.S. At the same time, China's homegrown film industry has matured, leading to more locally-produced movies at the box office. A notable success was the animated hit "Ne Zha 2," which raked in almost \$2.2 billion worldwide, \$1.8 billion of which was in China.

And similar to the U.S., the Chinese film market has also been dented by the growth of short-form content and increasing popularity of watching entertainment on phones and tablets, keeping theatergoers at home.

That's all meant a less reliable haul for U.S. films. So far this year, the top-grossing American film in China was Universal's "Jurassic World Rebirth," which brought in \$79 million - a far cry from the massive returns some U.S. movies once commanded. The last Disney film that was released in China and made more than \$100 million was 2024's "Alien: Romulus."

But there are still niches that appeal to Chinese audiences, including family movies, big blockbusters laden with special effects and animated franchises. Cripps said he was "cautiously optimistic" about the film's reception in China, because of the franchise recognition and the themed land in Shanghai.

"Given what's happened over the last two to three years, it's hard to get overly excited until you see some actual data," he said. "But certainly, it feels good going into it."



Ed Sheeran in a scene from Netflix’s “One Shot with Ed Sheeran.”

How Ed Sheeran ended up crashing somebody's proposal in New York

BY MIKAEL WOOD
Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES

The idea of a concert special didn't exactly light up Ed Sheeran's mind.

"Every time it was pitched to me, I just wasn't excited," says the English singer and songwriter who's spent the last decade or so among the world's top touring acts. "We could do this theater and this town and this..." - it was like, 'I've seen that before.'"

But then Sheeran got a call from Ben Winston, the Emmy-winning producer and director known for his role overseeing the Grammy Awards and as a creator of James Corden's "Carpool Karaoke" series.

Actually, it was an email, Winston points out.

"You can't call Ed because he doesn't have a phone," he says. "You have to email him and hope he FaceTimes you back from his iPad."

Winston's pitch earlier this year was simple but intriguing: What if they took the one-shot approach that helped make Netflix's "Adolescence" such a sensation and used it to film a performance by Sheeran - not simply on-stage but as he goes on a journey somewhere? And instead of getting a director "kind of like the guy who shot 'Adolescence,'" as Winston recalls putting it, "Why don't we just ask the guy who shot 'Adolescence'?"

Sheeran liked the idea; so did Philip Barantini, who won two Emmys in September for directing that acclaimed miniseries

about a 13-year-old boy accused of killing a female classmate. (Winston got Barantini's number from Corden and hit him cold on WhatsApp.)

Now Netflix has just released "One Shot with Ed Sheeran," in which a camera trails the 34-year-old singer as he roams New York City, acoustic guitar in hand, between soundcheck and a gig at the Hammerstein Ballroom. The hourlong result, which true to its title presents the roving performance in a single unbroken shot with no edits, can of course be seen as a piece of high-toned promo ahead of next month's launch of a world tour behind Sheeran's latest album, "Play."

But doing the special as a so-called oner - and with a limited number of

chances to get it right - also posed an invigorating creative challenge for a performer who's been entertaining crowds since he was 15.

"Because I do the same thing every weekend, just in a different place, I don't really feel the nerves anymore," Sheeran says of his live show, which typically features him alone on-stage (even in football stadiums) with only a guitar and a looping station for accompaniment. "Whereas with this, I really felt the pressure."

Winston says the team behind "One Shot" chose New York as the setting "because we felt like every corner of New York feels like a movie set." In the show, Sheeran plays his hits as he rides in a taxi, walks the High Line, serenades a couple mid-pro-

posal and pops unannounced into a rooftop birthday party; he also clambers up to the top of a double-decker bus and joins Camila Cabello in an SUV in the middle of traffic for a duet on his song "Photograph."

"We probably could have picked a different city that was quieter and blocked off the roads and did it perfectly," Sheeran says. "But the chaos of it, I think, is what makes it interesting."

Sheeran did just three takes: a dress rehearsal on a Sunday afternoon the filmmakers shot "in case it went great," says Winston - "It didn't," he adds - then two performances on a Monday sandwiched between the morning and evening rush hours. Three camera operators passed a lightweight Ronin 4D rig among themselves as the singer moved from set piece to set piece, and not always as smoothly as they'd hoped.

One of the guys proposing to his partner took about two minutes to pop the question, according to Sheeran. "It was literally like he was on his own reality show," says Barantini. One of the women celebrating her birthday, meanwhile, "just hopped onstage and started twerking," Sheeran recalls. "For the whole song." (Alas, she's not in the take they used.)

"I was in the van watching the monitors, going, 'This is cool,'" Barantini says. "Then it got to the point I was like, 'This is not cool anymore. Can we please get her down?'" The producers used a casting director to find these folks but Sheeran says none of them knew they'd be encountering him as they went about their business in Manhattan.

For Winston, "One Shot" is in keeping with his determination to "try

and see where music goes in different places," he says. He compares the project to the time he had Adele sing outdoors at the Griffith Observatory for a CBS special in 2021 and the time he put Bruno Mars on the marquee of the Apollo Theater for a different CBS special in 2017.

"Even in the Olympic handover," he adds of the concert he oversaw last year, "rather than doing it in the Paris stadium, we were like, 'Hold on - wouldn't it be cool if you had Dre, Snoop, Billie Eilish and the Red Hot Chili Peppers on the beach in L.A.?'"

(Winston will serve as executive producer for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2028 Summer Games.)

Barantini singles out 2014's "Birdman," which Alejandro G. Iñárritu designed to resemble one continuous take, as a visual inspiration for the Sheeran special; the singer himself mentions the famous scene from "Goodfellas" where Martin Scorsese's camera follows Ray Liotta and Lorraine Bracco into the Copacabana nightclub.

Yet everyone involved with "One Shot" is eager to emphasize that, unlike those movies, their show wasn't scripted.

"It's a lot more honest than you might think," Winston says.

Sheeran recalls asking Cabello on camera as he's getting out of her car whether she'd like to join him and his family that night for spaghetti Bolognese.

"That was the only time you said that," Barantini tells the singer, "and I remember saying to you afterwards, 'That was really good - I like the improv.'" He laughs. "And Ed was like, 'No, but she is coming to mine tonight.'"