

Check In to 'Hotel for Dogs'

New film has all the amenities movie lovers — and dog lovers — want and need.

By Roger Sipe

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Courtesy Jaimie Trueblood/DreamWorksDogs are all the rage at the movies these days, from talking Chihuahuas in Beverly Hills to animated 3-D bolts of lightning. However, these recent movies eventually fail to impress most dog-loving filmgoers. Either the story stinks, the acting is weak, they're only for kids, or the dogs aren't dog-like enough.

So when you see "Hotel for Dogs" on the marquee at the Cineplex this weekend, you might be thinking: Here they go again! But not so fast. The dogs in this movie don't talk or have special fake powers; the actors include a passel of a well-received tweens and teens (starting with Emma Roberts of "Nancy Drew"), an Academy Award-winner (Don Cheadle), a former "Friends" star (Lisa Kudrow), and a member of HBO's "Entourage" (Kevin Dillon); an up-and-coming director (Thor Freudenthal); and a legendary producer (Ivan Reitman). Put them all together, along with 70-plus dogs, and you get one of the best family-adventure-comedy-dog movies of the century (OK, so the century just started a few years ago, but still!).

The film is based on Lois Duncan's 1971 children's book of the same name. The plot is pretty simple: two orphans — Andi (Roberts) and her younger brother Bruce (Jake T. Austin) — live with foster parents (Kudrow and Dillon), who won't allow the kids to keep their Jack Russell Terrier, Friday. Luckily, the kids find a nearby abandoned hotel where Friday can stay — well, nearly abandoned. There are two "caretakers," a tiny Boston Terrier and a big sweetheart of a Mastiff.

With all that open space and Bruce's mechanical gizmo-making skills, the kids start saving stray dogs from across the city, giving them residency at the hotel. With help from some of the neighborhood kids, they turn the abandoned building into a pooch paradise, with a shoe-dispensing vending machine, a do-it-yourself fetching machine, a car-riding simulator, and more. The only problem is when city dogcatchers catch on and attempt to haul the dogs in.

"Hotel for Dogs" is simply a great (not just good) film, and not one just for kids. The material isn't dumbed-down, and the dogs can't fly or talk. And it's not one of those where adults will get the humor, while the kids will only like seeing the dogs. Kids and adults will laugh on the same level at the funny parts of the film, and both will be sniffing and cheering together at the dramatic scenes.

If you love dogs and you love movies, get out of the house this weekend and check in to "Hotel for Dogs." If you can take a kid with you, great. If not, still go. You'll enjoy this instant dog classic. "Hotel for Dogs" is rated PG, and opens nationwide on Jan. 16.

Roger Sipe is the editor of Dogs for Kids magazine.