

Wild, chaotic and unhinged

Sandler on plunging into the Safdies' 'Uncut Gems'

By Jake Coyle

Adam Sandler was waiting to be thrown into a midtown fountain on Sixth Avenue for a scene in Josh and Benny Safdie's "Uncut Gems" when he noticed a familiar face on the sidewalk.

The Safdies like to capture as much authentic New York energy as possible in their films and frequently plant their cameras across the block for scenes like the one Sandler was about to shoot. So Sandler was hiding in a parked car, trying not to arouse any attention, when he called out to the passerby.

"I say, 'Lorne!' He looks in the car and gets in and talked to me for a minute," recalls Sandler of spotting his old "Saturday Night Live" boss, Lorne Michaels. "I said I'm doing this movie — I'm going to fill you in on the young and the hip — with the Safdie brothers."

"He goes, (here Sandler dons the requisite Michaels impression) 'I know the Safdie brothers. They grew up in my building,'" Sandler says, laughing and shaking his head. "I can never get anything over on Lorne. I thought I had one cool thing."

The central setting of "Uncut Gems" — the 47th St. diamond district — is just a short walk from the NBC studios at 30 Rockefeller Center where Sandler broke through in the early 1990s on "Saturday Night Live." As far as Sandler has traveled since then — and his latest will strike many as his greatest departure yet — the wild, chaotic, unhinged "Uncut Gems" is just a stone's throw from Sandler's beginnings.

It's not that Sandler hasn't since proven his considerable dramatic range. Paul Thomas Anderson's "Punch-Drunk Love" revealed the

sensitivity beneath the genial man-child persona of his comedies. And while Sandler has never strayed from stand-up or the broader comedies he's currently churning out for Netflix, he has consistently dipped his toe into drama every few years, including the James L. Brooks romantic comedy "Spanglish" (2004), Judd Apatow's meta comedy "Funny People" (2009) and Noah Baumbach's family drama "The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)" (2017).

Entirely

But the scuzzy, frenetic neo-realism of the Safdie brothers is something else, entirely. In it, Sandler stars as Howard Ratner, a gemstone merchant and compulsive gambler whose wide web of debts, betrayals and schemes render his life a mad scramble. He's like a plate-spinner who drops every plate but keeps throwing up five more. His downfall, and perhaps his destiny, is perpetually and harrowingly close at hand.

The Safdies first sent Sandler their script in 2012.

"I kept hearing about the Safdie brothers and that they wanted to talk to me about a movie," says Sandler. "I didn't know their work, so I started with 'Good Time' (the Safdies' previous film, starring Robert Pattinson as a small-time hustler). I watched them all and I loved them. We would talk on the phone and then we met each other. I mean, we are very close. We talk all day, all night about everything. I love these guys."

"When I was making the movie, I just gave them 100% trust. I just felt like I wanted to be in their world."

For years if not decades, Sandler has consistently declined inter-

views with print journalists. But on the morning after "Uncut Gems" made its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, he sat for an interview with The Associated Press alongside Josh and Benny. They had spent a late evening partying together and Sandler was regretting not basing after the premiere. "What a mistake," he said while the Safdies laughed.

Moments before the premiere of "Uncut Gems," one audience member hollered "An Oscar for the Sandman!" By the end of the movie, most in attendance agreed, too. Sandler's performance has been arguably the most acclaimed of the 53-year-old's career.

"Uncut Gems" is an especially intense experience. If you remember the loud, discombobulating drug-dealer scene in Anderson's "Boogie Nights," "Uncut Gems" runs at that high-pitched frenzy for pretty much its entire length. For the Safdies, it's long been an obsession. Howard is based loosely on a boss of their father. Though Pattinson once pursued the part and Jonah Hill was momentarily attached, the directors felt strongly about Sandler being right for it.

"We wanted Howard to be lovable. Likable is another question, but lovable is something real," Josh says. "We grew up idolizing him. The records, the movies. I just recently told Sandler I was crying watching 'The Wedding Singer' on a plane. You can just feel it in the actors opposite him. People just feel like they're involved in something ineffable."

Though separated by nearly two decades in age, the Brooklyn-born Sandler and the Queens-bred Safdies have become close, a friendship forged on basketball (they are equally dedicated Knicks fans), a shared sense of humor and a New Yorker's lack of pretense. (AP)

Variety



This image released by Sony shows Jack Black, (left), and Karen Gillan in a scene from 'Jumanji: The Next Level.' (AP)

Film

'The Next Level' offers unbalanced ride

New 'Jumanji' sticks with the formula

By Mark Kennedy

The creators of the latest "Jumanji" sequel have begun from an age-old premise — if it ain't broke, don't fix it. And they've taken note of other successful franchises to adopt what must surely be a new Hollywood motto — just add more.

So "Jumanji: The Next Level" brings together the same director, writers and actors who made the 2017 reboot so fun and then layers in more stars — Danny Glover, Danny DeVito and Awkwafina — plus more locations and special effects. The result is a largely successful, if more unbalanced ride. It's also oddly wistful and melancholic.

The new film starts off like the first, with four mismatched young people gathering together. In the 2017 "Breakfast Club"-like setup, the four high schoolers — a jock, a self-conscious dweeb, a popular girl and a nerdy girl — are sent to detention, where they get sucked into a Nintendo-esque video game.

There, in a jungle setting, they transform into avatars played by Dwayne Johnson, Kevin Hart, Jack Black and Karen Gillan. Everyone's identity is scrambled: The nerdy girl is hot and in teeny-weenie shorts, the hot girl is a pudgy middle-aged man, the insecure guy is The Rock and the football player is now pint-sized — and they all have to go through the stages of learning to accept their new bodies, talents and shortcomings. Success in the game refreshes them in real life to be better version of themselves.

"Jumanji: The Next Level" follows this same premise but re-scrambles it. Glover and DeVito, playing two estranged friends, also get pulled into the game, and everyone has a new avatar. Now The Rock employs both a honking NooYawk accent and an elderly man's befuddlement at what's happening since he's controlled by DeVito. Meanwhile, Glover gets handed Hart. "Did I die and turn into some small, muscular Boy Scout?" he asks.

Director and co-writer Jake Kasdan's addition of

two older acting legends — DeVito is 75 and Glover is 73 — to a youth-oriented, big budget action franchise is unexpected and leads to some clever humor. When The Rock marvels that his eyes are a different color in the game, Hart cracks: "All of you is a different color."

The plot is insane, as you might expect from an adventure video game quest, and takes our rag-tag group from arid deserts to snowy mountains in search of a jewel that will restore the natural order. There are elements borrowed from "Mad Max," "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and "The Lord of the Rings." Kasdan has a deft hand with both humor and action plus he's a great craftsman, nicely handling plot details and returning roles by Nick Jonas and Colin Hanks. (And kudos for adding a cameo from BebeNeuwirth, who appeared in the first "Jumanji" movie with Robin Williams.)

Intensity

The things that made the first so fun — the dangerous use of cake, dance fighting to Peter Frampton and The Rock's deployment of his avatar's smoldering intensity — are dutifully repeated. Herds of angry ostriches and mandrills are added for danger, even though the special effects are hardly seamless, often looking jerky and manipulated at key moments.

The plot or effects really aren't the most interesting part anyway. It's the body-swapping! And there are so many in "The Next Level" that it's hard to keep track. None of the actors — with the possible exception of Awkwafina — are terribly good mimics so things get a bit muddled.

The wistfulness comes from the fact that so many people in the game seem so unhappy in their real life that escape to a boiling desert and being chased by steampunk villains is preferable to real life. "I wanted to feel like someone else," says the dweeb, mournfully. Old age is handled honestly, with DeVito and Glover astonished to find their aching joints and pain vanish in the game.

Like all sequels, the second suffers from not having the delicious surprise of the first, but the seed to a third film is hinted at in the closing credits, which is more than the first film promised. In that one, the video console the young people used is smashed to bits to stop anyone getting sucked into the game. But it didn't stop a sequel. Like we said, if it's not broke, don't fix it.

"Jumanji: The Next Level," a Columbia Pictures release, is rated PG-13 for adventure action, suggestive content and some language. Running time: 123 minutes. Two and a half stars out of four.

Also:

LOS ANGELES: Carey Mulligan is a vengeance-seeking, rape-culture-dismantling badass in the trailer for "Killing Eve," showrunner Emerald Fennell's new film. "Promising Young Woman."

"Every week, I go to a club. I act like I'm too drunk to stand. And every week, a nice guy comes over to see if I'm okay," Mulligan says coldly over a violinist's rendition of Britney Spears' "Toxic."

After a mysterious event takes place in her life, derailing the "promising young woman's" future, the whip-smart and crafty Cassie begins to lead a double life as she cuts down any man who crosses her path.

"I wanted to be a doctor my whole life," Cassie, dressed in a latex nurse outfit with medical tools in hand, says in one scene as she eyes her next victim. "Lately, I've been feeling like I might want to get back into it."

In addition to her credits as Camilla Shand in the third season of "The Crown" and writer/executive producer of "Killing Eve," Fennell adds a new title to her resume as "Promising Young Woman" marks her feature film directorial debut. Laverne Cox, Bo Burnham, Alison Brie, Connie Britton, Jennifer Coolidge, Max Greenfield, Christopher Mintz-Plasse, Chris Lowell, Sam Richardson, Molly Shannon and Clancy Brown round out the ensemble. (Agencies)

HOUSTON: As a member of Houston's pioneering rap group The Geto Boys, Brad Jordan co-wrote the early 1990s hip-hop anthem "Mind Playing Tricks on Me."

Now, the 49-year-old rapper better known as Scarface is working to ensure Houston voters that no, their minds are not playing tricks on them: He is running for City Council, and he's a serious candidate.

Jordan says he knows his celebrity carried him into a run-off election slated for Saturday. But he's hoping he can persuade the voters who got him there to turn out again so he can represent the council's District D.

"You can sit back and point out the problems or you can address them and bring solutions to the table," Jordan said Tuesday, referring to chronic poverty and crime that afflicts his neighborhood. (AP)

LOS ANGELES: Crocs, Inc. in partnership with UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Priyanka Chopra Jonas, today announced that 50,000 pairs of Crocs Classic clogs will be donated over the next year to underserved school children in Belize through UNICEF. This charitable contribution supports the actor's joint mission to help children around the world and provide them with more opportunities to achieve an education.

In partnership with UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and Crocs Global Brand Ambassador Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Crocs recently donated 25,000 pairs of Classic Clogs to underserved school children in Belize through UNICEF. This is the first of two donations to be made to this region through this partnership. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Netflix is testing discounted plans in India for some long-term subscribers. The plans are only available to selected new subscribers and not existing ones.

While signing up, new users may be offered a 20% discount on a three-month subscription, a 30% discount on a six-month term and a 50% discount on a 12-month contract. These will be available only in India. Netflix currently

offers mobile, basic, standard and premium plans in India.

"We believe that our members may value the flexibility that comes from being able to pay for a few months at once," a Netflix spokesperson said. "This is a test and we will only introduce it more broadly if people find it useful." (RTRS)



Scarface



Chopra

LOS ANGELES: Lin-Manuel Miranda, director Jon M. Chu and star Anthony Ramos took the train to the top of the world to offer a sneak peek of "In the Heights."

Warner Bros.' big-screen adaptation of Miranda's (other) hit musical. "I'm thrilled we're here, and I'm thrilled we're uptown," Miranda rhapsodized at a packed crowd at a cozy restaurant space

in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City. "I started writing this show when I was 19 years old, six blocks away, where my parents live."

Before Miranda hypnotized the world with "Hamilton," he created the Tony-nominated "In the Heights," a slice-of-life musical that centers on a bodega owner named Usnavi. The movie doesn't

debut in theaters until next summer, but Wednesday night's event treated attendees to a first look at the cinematic spectacle.

Before the trailer rolled, cast members including Corey Hawkins, Melissa Barrera, Jimmy Smits and Daphne Rubin-Vega waxed poetic about their experience filming flashy dance numbers over the summer in Manhattan. (RTRS)

Features

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