

Holiday phenomenon

Story behind 'A Christmas Story'

BY ROBERT P. LAURENCE
Copley News Service

It's the only Christmas movie in which the child hero gets kicked in the face by Santa Claus.

It is, of course, "A Christmas Story," the wittiest, truest, warmest, best Christmas movie ever made, the only one that depicts childhood the way it really is — the savagery as well as the sweetness.

Released in 1983, "A Christmas Story" did only middling business in its single season in the theaters. But on TV and in video (and now DVD), it has grown over the years into a phenomenon, an annual favorite seen in millions of American homes, repeated over and over on the Turner cable network every year.

Today, it has a special place in the hearts of its fans, and in that of Bob Clark, 62, the director who labored 10 years to get it to the screen.

For those who haven't had the pleasure, "A Christmas Story," based on several stories by radio raconteur and memoirist Jean Shepherd, tells the tale of Ralphie Parker, a thinly disguised version of Shepherd himself. Ralphie, growing up on Cleveland Street in the fictional city of Hohman, Ind., in the 1940s, wants nothing more for Christmas than an Official Red Ryder Carbine-Action Two-Hundred-Shot Range Model Air Rifle.

Everyone in his world seems to be conspiring to make sure he doesn't get it.

Moon-faced Peter Billingsley plays Ralphie, while Melinda Dillon and Darren McGavin are his parents. Shepherd himself

supplies the voice-over narration. (He died in 1999. See if you can spot him in a one-line cameo role.)

That voice-over was a stumbling block, however, when Clark was trying to get backing for "A Christmas Story." He first heard Shepherd telling the story of the kid whose tongue gets frozen to a light pole over a car radio. He was supposed to pick up a date, but instead he sat and listened for 45 minutes.

"I'd never heard of Jean Shepherd, but I had to hear the end of this," Clark recalled. "This was in the late 1950s or early '60s. I decided I was going to make a movie of this some day."

He'd already made a couple of low-budget films, and he contacted Shepherd. The two worked on the script for 10 years. Clark's career grew, and in 1981 he directed the raunchy teen hit "Porky's."

He'd been asking to direct "A Christmas Story," with Shepherd's narration, but studios weren't interested. "They didn't believe in narration. But after 'Porky's,' I could do pretty much what I wanted. So MGM said, 'Let the idiot do it.'"

Clark said he "believed there was a wonderful, edgy, incredible, tough-minded, yet sweet and endearing classic piece of work here."

He directed the film for no fee and put his own money into it, he said.

He directed the film in a broad, cartoonish style, he added, to allow the audi-



CNS Photo courtesy of TNT

All Ralphie Parker (Peter Billingsley) wants for Christmas is a Red Ryder air rifle. Is that too much to ask? Apparently so, as everyone from his mom to his teacher to, yes, even Santa tells him, "You'll shoot your eye out."

ence to see the world "from Ralphie's point of view. It's an exaggerated, dramatic view of the world.

"These are all things that come out of my boyhood, too. I remember things like this happening. Shepard took a lot of them out of his childhood, as well. The idea was to show that it's a tough life for Ralphie and his little brother."

The film's satirical edge and realism, combined with a sentimentality that never rings false, gives the film its unique appeal, said Clark.

"I think it's a combination," he said. "It's very funny. But more than that, there's a moment at the end, the only time when the Old Man and the Mother come close to each other, when 'Silent Night' is playing. He puts his hand on her hip, and she puts her hand on his shoulder as they look out at the snow."

Christmas collectibles

BY LINDA ROSENKRANTZ
Copley News Service

Until fairly recently, when the subject of collecting vintage Christmas tree ornaments was broached, what came to mind was traditional Victorian (mostly German) fare — silvered glass balls (otherwise known as kugels); benevolent pudgy Santa figures (called belsnickles); sentimental, pastel-hued paper angels; gilded fruit and the like.

But just as design in general went through a radical shift following World War II, so did the collecting of Christmas ornaments change with the recent revival of interest in mid-century modern furnishings.

After all, bubble lights and aluminum-foil ornaments — even trees made of aluminum — are definitely more in synch with the resuscitated lava lamps and kidney-shaped tables being seen again today.

The 1950s was a time of exuberant postwar optimism, following the years of deprivation and disquiet on the home front.

Housing construction was at an all-time high and people were making fresh starts in terms of decorating their new abodes.

When the holidays rolled around and it was time to trim the tree, many Americans resisted buying traditional ornaments that originated in Germany, seeking instead objects made in the good old U.S.A., and preferably constructed of one of the shiny new synthetic materials.

The bubble light was the hot new thing — the big novelty hit of the decade. Actually, Benjamin Franklin had thought of sealing a bubbling liquid in glass tubes two cen-

turies earlier, but it was a man named Carl Otis who adapted the idea for Christmas lights, using a mixture of methylene chloride and water to produce the desired hypnotic effects. Otis patented the idea in 1935, but only one firm, NOMA Electric, showed any interest, finally producing and marketing them in the mid-1940s.

Their popularity inspired other manufacturers to compete, the most successful of which was Raylite, with its Kristal Snow Animated Candles. Since millions of bubble lights continued to be made until the 1970s, they are relatively easy to find at garage sales, flea markets and '50s collectibles stores. Many are appreciated for the bright graphics of their packaging as for the lights themselves.

In the '60s, as anyone who's seen "The Graduate" knows, plastics was the operative word. There was an infinite variety of plastic ornaments. Some were sprayed with silver and then lacquered. Others were the see-through variety embedded with the appropriate symbols of the season — Christmas trees, bells, angels, Santas and snowmen.

Even the nativity creche scenes under the tree could now be found in acetate plastic.

Gone was the pastel palette of yesteryear, replaced by bright primary colors and flashy new tones like lime and fuchsia. Aluminum was seen not only in its basic color, but in purple, green, blue and even shocking pink.

This was true for the tree as well as its adornments, as a large proportion of the population switched to artificial trees around this

time.

According to Robert Brenner, author of "Christmas 1960-Present" (an excellent reference published by Schiffer), Dow Chemical alone sold more than 1.5 million artificial trees in 1960.

The mid-century years were a time of kitsch and fluff. Flocking was a major element in enhancing the tree itself, and some ornaments were flocked as well. Winter weather entered the living room in the form of "Saran" icicles that adorned the tree, and snowy effects were produced wherever possible.

Novelty lights of the '60s included midget bulbs from Italy and Icicle Lights, made of clear plastic cupped in a white frost covering and lit by clear miniature bulbs that produced a frosty glimmer on the trees.

Beyond the tree itself, there were countless objects that in their day might have been described as "kooky" by the older generation. They ranged from smiling Santa coffee mugs, teapots and salt and pepper shakers to flamboyantly patterned red, white and green tablecloths and napkins.

These are objects that will appeal not only to the collector but to anyone who might want a touch of that more optimistic time. And one of the best things about them is that, with few exceptions, they don't cost that much more now than they did then.

Resources:

■ "A Pictorial Guide to Christmas Ornaments and Collectibles" by George Johnson (Collector Books)

■ "Christmas 1960-Present" by Robert Brenner (Schiffer)

Christmas Caution: An ounce of prevention helps avoid holiday fires

BY JOHN O'CONNELL
Copley News Service

About this time of year, the Clark Griswolds of the world, obsessed with Christmas cheer and holiday decorating, go to their attics and haul out boxes and boxes of Christmas lighting.

Like the character in the 1989 comedy "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation," many homeowners will have their homes glowing with lights, their electric meters spinning, extension cords strung everywhere and electrical wall outlets overloaded. To prevent your family Christmas from going up in flames, firefighters have some advice.

"Every year we get fires that can be attributed to holiday activities," said Greg Walters, chief of fire prevention with the Peoria (Ill.) Fire Department.

Nationally, nearly 600 blazes per year begin with Christmas trees catching fire, causing about 30 deaths and \$18 million in

property damage.

When selecting a live Christmas tree, Walters said to make sure it's as fresh as possible. A tree that becomes too dry is a fire hazard. Needles should be green and flexible and the trunk should be sticky to the touch.

"If the needles are too dry and too brittle, it's too dangerous," he said. "You also need to keep the tree stand filled with water. When a tree gets too dry, there is a substance in the needles that comes to the surface that is very combustible."

Walters also recommends:

■ Purchasing artificial trees or greens that are flame retardant.

■ Keeping trees or greens away from fireplaces, radiators and other heat sources.

■ Using Christmas tree lights that are labeled safe by a certified testing laboratory and checking them for broken sockets, frayed cords or faulty plugs.

■ Connecting no more than three strands of lights together at one time.

Home fires

Unattended cooking is the leading cause of home fires and injuries in the United States, Walters said.

"During the holidays we do a lot more cooking," he said. "What often happens is you get a phone call and you forget you have something cooking on the stove. If you should get a call, don't turn your back to the stove. And if you leave the room, turn off the stove."

Wood-burning fireplaces are another area of concern for Walters. Before you light a single yule log, have your fireplace inspected for cracks and creosote.

Accumulation of creosote, a tarlike substance, is the main reason for cleaning a chimney. If the buildup of creosote on the chimney's inside surface ignites, a fire could result.

"The heat created from a chimney fire can get very hot," Walters said. "In older fireplaces with poor mortar joints, sparks from a chimney fire can penetrate into the attic space or the wood framework surround-

ing the chimney, causing a house fire.

"The holidays are often the first time people take the time to start a fire in a fireplace. So have it inspected and cleaned before then. And be sure your smoke alarms are in good working order, too," he said.

Walters suggests burning dry wood to reduce creosote buildup. Wood high in moisture creates more of the tarlike substance. He also recommends a fireplace screen to prevent embers from popping into the room.

Extension cords

Improper use of extension cords is another fire hazard. They should be the right size for the job and in good condition. Extension cords should be soft and pliable, not brittle.

"For decorating, I generally use extension cords rated at least 12 gauge," Walters said. "The larger the extension cord, the less resistance you have from electricity going through it

and the less heat.

"A big mistake people make is they try to hide extension cords by covering them with rugs and carpets. This is bad," he said. "Extension cords generate heat and they need to dissipate this heat. Covering them up only creates more heat which in time can break down the protective covering resulting in a fire hazard."

Mark Kawolsky, executive director of the central Illinois chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association, warned the Griswolds of the world not to mount strings of lights with a staple gun.

"If you staple through the cord, you could create a fire hazard or you could energize your gutters," Kawolsky explained.

He recommends mounting lights with string or inexpensive plastic hangers and hooks that fasten to gutters or shingles and can be kept in place throughout the year. Also, if using lights or extension cords outdoors, be sure they are rated for

outdoor use. And don't run extension cords across a driveway.

So much of holiday safety is common sense, such as following manufacturers' instructions on electrical products, Kawolsky said. "If electrical Christmas decorations and lights are in good shape and used properly, you will be fine this holiday."

Candles

Lighted candles on a tree are a "definite no," Walters said.

"Keep candles off trees," the fire prevention officer said. "That should be obvious."

Candles do play an intrinsic role in celebrating the holiday season. About 35 percent of candles are sold at this time of year, according to the National Candle Association.

"If you do use candles in holiday decorating, keep them away from combustible material and away from the reach of children," Walters said. "And put out all candles when you leave the room."



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