

Curl up with the best holiday movies the season offers

BY BRAD BURKE
Copley News Service

You know actors, directors, dancers and vixens ... plot lines and stories and heroes and villains.

But do you recall, the most famous Christmas movie of all? (Sorry, it's got nothing to do with Rudolph.)

Making a good Christmas flick is a tricky proposition. For every holiday classic ("White Christmas," "It's a Wonderful Life") there are three times as many duds that stink like rotten eggnog ("A Very Brady Christmas," "Ernest Saves Christmas").

It being Christmas and all, many people are getting ready to sit down and exchange gifts or share a holiday meal. After that, however, there ain't a whole lot to do, except listen to your in-laws ramble on and on or your kids complain about the presents they didn't find under the tree. That's why we've compiled this list of the best holiday movies of all time. Pop one in, sit back and hope it's enough to get the kids and relatives quiet ... for a couple hours, at least.

"It's a Wonderful Life" (1946)

What happens: Floundering small-town businessman George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) makes a wish that he'd never been

born. In pops an angel-in-training, Clarence (Henry Travers), to show George that life for everyone in his idyllic town would have been far, far worse without him.

Why it works: If the holidays spread Christmas cheer to some, they sure do spread depression to others. "Life" is a classic because of Stewart's realistic portrayal of a man on the brink. His ultimate redemption provides a touch of hope for anyone hanging by a thin thread during the holidays.

Best moment: In the emotional climactic scene, a bell rings, letting George know that Clarence received his wings.

"A Christmas Story" (1983)

What happens: All young, nerdy Ralphie Parker (played perfectly by the wide-eyed 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."

Why it works: Simply put, this is possibly the most accurate cinematic portrayal of life in post-World War II America. "A Christmas Story" is so funny because Ralphie's family (mean old dad, bratty brother, perpet-

ually exasperated mother) could be our own.

Best moment: Ralphie and his schoolmates dare (and then double-dog dare) a friend to see if his tongue sticks to a frozen flag pole. Moments later the kid is stuck to the pole like a wad of chewing gum as his friends flee in terror.

"Miracle on 34th Street" (1947)

What happens: A cynical girl (Natalie Wood, who later graduated to superstardom in such films as "West Side Story") refuses to believe that an old bearded kook (Edmund Gwenn) hired to play Santa in a parade is the real deal. Neither do many other folks, until a good-hearted attorney (John Payne) goes to trial to prove this Kriss Kringle is no imposter.

Why it works: At some age kids just stop believing in the big guy in the red and white suit. "Miracle" works not because the kid winds up believing in Santa, but because her stingy, snobby mother (Maureen O'Hara) finally realizes that it's OK for children to, well, act like children once in a while.

Best moment: During Kringle's trial, thousands of letters addressed to Santa are dumped in the courtroom. Take that, New York court system!

"White Christmas" (1954)

What happens: Two '50s nightclub entertainers (Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye) bump into their old army general at a resort in Vermont that's about to go under because of unseasonably warm weather. With a little help from their respective love interests (Rosemary Clooney and Vera-Ellen) and some timely snowfall, the boys find a way to save the old man's business.

Why it works: Easy — the music. Crosby's best known for his baritone vocals on the signature title song (which actually debuted in another movie musical, "Holiday Inn"), but the rest of the score is just as humable. Plus, you get to see Kaye and Crosby ham it up in blue feathers and garments while lip-syncing to the tune, "Sisters."

Best moment: Forget the

snowy ending, the real climax comes when an auditorium of former soldiers salute their old general one more time.

"National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation" (1989)

What happens: The unluckiest of unlucky clans, the Griswold family, eschews vacation for a relaxing holiday at home. But lights that don't work and unpredictable relatives turn the situation into a royal flop.

Why it works: This is perhaps the last time Chevy Chase made us laugh so hard that it hurt. Plus, Randy Quaid shines as the Griswolds' cousin Eddie.

Best moment: A rabid squirrel leaps from the Griswolds' tree and tears apart their house.

"Scrooged" (1988)

What happens: Bill

Murray is Francis Xavier Cross, the slimiest slimeball in the television industry in this revision of the "Christmas Carol" story. Cross is visited by three eccentric ghosts, each of whom terrorize the naughty sap while showing him the true meaning of Christmas.

Why it works: Honestly, who better than a TV exec to need a lesson in human compassion? Plus, Murray, who to that point in his career had played goofy characters, revels in the chance to ooze sleaze in every scene.

Best moment: Cross unveils his teaser trailer for "Scrooge," an ad that shows psychopaths shooting drivers on the highway and acid rain burning the skin off pedestrians. The tag line: "Watch 'Scrooge.' ... Your life just may depend on it."

Dennos carries Hanukkah gifts

BY KRISTEN M. HAINS
Special to the Record-Eagle

Finding the perfect Christmas gift often just means one good day of shopping. However, searching for gifts for Hanukkah is sometimes more difficult.

It may be one of Traverse City's best-kept secrets that the Dennos Museum Center's gift store offers a full line of gifts for the Hanukkah season. This year, Hanukkah begins at sundown on Dec. 9.

"The museum store is one of the few places in the area to offer a full line of Hanukkah gifts," said man-

ager Terry Tarnow.

Some of the most requested items include Menorahs for lighting candles. The museum has a variety that run anywhere from \$15-\$70. They include electric menorahs as well as those that are candle lit. This year they are carrying the "Complete Hanukkah Kit," which is an aluminum box that contains a menorah as well as the candles. Tarnow recommends this as a great gift for a college student.

Another Hanukkah tradition is the dreidel game. The store has a variety of dreidels in all colors and sizes.

According to Tarnow, the dreidel game is one of the oldest forms of gambling. Each player starts with a pot, generally candy. The dreidel features a Hebrew letter on each side and each letter corresponds with a different prize. The most common prize associated is Gelt, a traditional chocolate foil wrapped coin, that is also carried in the museum store.

The gift store also stocks a full line of both Christmas and Hanukkah cards.

Kristen M. Hains is a local freelance writer.

CHRISTMAS FACTS

Wrap it up

A survey of 1,060 respondents commissioned in June, 2003 by 3M (the maker of Scotch brand tape) revealed Americans' attitudes and behaviors about gift-wrapping. Some key findings:

■ 81% of Americans wrap six or more gifts during a typical holiday season.

■ 28% of people say wrapping gifts puts them more in the "holiday spirit" than shopping.

■ One out of three people (36%) do their holiday gift-wrapping at the last minute (two days before the holiday or fewer).

■ 6% of the population admits to leaving the gift unwrapped when wrapping paper runs out.

■ Nearly 70% say they enjoy wrapping gifts. However, some people admit they would rather clean the house (19%), wash dishes (14%), shovel snow (11%) or take out the trash (10%).

■ 47% say that wrapping an odd-shaped item is a nuisance. When faced with wrapping such a gift, 26% of people say they wrap it as best they can, even though they know it will look ugly. 49% don't even attempt it — they either leave it unwrapped or simply put a bow on it.

SOURCE: Hunter Public Relations



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