

Christmas favorites entertain



BY ANDY MOORE
Reviewer

A Christmas Carol (2009)

Disney is capitalizing on yet another retelling of Charles Dickens' fable of charity, humanity and redemption. We've seen it with Mickey Mouse, the Muppets (minus Jim Henson) and now "A Christmas Carol" is here in 3D.

Jim Carrey exhibits his talents playing the voices of Ebenezer Scrooge as a young boy, a middle-aged man and an old man, plus the ghosts of Christmas past, present and yet to come. Gary Oldman does the voice for Bob Cratchit, Tiny Tim and the ghost of Jacob Marley. Other celebrity voices include Cary Elwes, Robin Wright Penn, Colin Firth and Bob Hoskins.

The overall product was faithful to the story, but the funny voices and visually stimulating animation distract the audience from Dickens' provocative dialogue and social commentary. Otherwise, it did not leave Dickens rolling in his grave.

This is a story that gets better every



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time I see it adapted to film, and of course Charles Dickens' original text is a must-read for the holidays. As a kid, "A Christmas Carol" is a ghost story about an old miser, and as you grow older it becomes a bleak depiction of industrialized England and a commentary on class division. It gets better and more meaningful every time.

If you see this 2009 version, I'd recommend also viewing the 1984 version with George C. Scott as Mr. Scrooge. I guarantee it will be on TV during Winter Break. Also, don't forget these three other classics.

"A Christmas Story" (1983)

Based on the short stories of Jean Shepherd, "A Christmas Story" is about a boy who wants nothing for Christmas but a Red Ryder BB gun, but he hears the same old mantra from his parents, teachers and

even a grouchy mall Santa. They tell him, "You'll shoot your eye out."

This is not so much a story about Christmas as it is about a typical kid who can't avoid getting into trouble, such as witnessing his moron friend stick his tongue to a frozen flag pole, beating up bullies and repeating the same profanity he hears from his father (Darren McGavin). This and several other subplots help the film remain a classic.

"Nightmare Before Christmas" (1993)

Leave it to Tim Burton to combine Halloween and Christmas in this stop-motion animation flick that remains original more than 15 years later.

Jack Skellington is a resident of Halloween Town, a place populated by typical Halloween monsters, but he is tired of the same routine every year. When he discov-

ers a portal to Christmas Town, he wants Halloween Town to adapt the more "jolly" holiday rituals of Christmas. Jack hires three trick-or-treaters to kidnap Santa Claus so he can take over Santa's job of delivering gifts on Christmas.

Danny Elfman composed the memorable and hilarious sound track that was nominated for a Golden Globe for best original score. It also was nominated for the visual effects Oscar but lost to "Jurassic Park."

"Bad Santa" (2003)

This isn't exactly a classic, but nothing is more horrifying than a drunken lunatic for a mall Santa, played by Billy Bob Thornton.

Every year, Willie (Thornton) works as a mall Santa and, on Christmas Eve, disables the security and empties the department store safe. He then spends the rest of the year in Florida spending all of the money on liquor before the next Christmas, when he repeats the same routine.

This is not something you want to watch with the whole family on Christmas Eve. It's more appropriate to watch this with your friends after the spiked eggnog kicks in. The indecent humor is incessant throughout the film, and it is more quotable than any other Christmas film I've seen in the last decade.

Produced by Joel and Ethan Coen, "Bad Santa" includes stars such as the late John Ritter and Bernie Mac, plus minimal dialogue from the senile grandmother played by Cloris Leachman.



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Rockers show new style



BY COREY BOMMEL
Reviewer

The latest album from New York natives The Bravery might have been created in the 2000s but feels like it was crafted in a dark basement in the 1980s.

The Bravery's third album "Stir the Blood" evokes a neo-new age sound, blending synthesizers into semi-punk rock beats. They fail to mold this style as their own, like other recent new-age inspired bands such as The Killers have, but instead mimic the styles of popular bands of the '80s.

This album breaks away from their previous two releases, which were slightly faster, less gothic and had more pop hooks that made for great album sales. Their previous style led them to be included on television sound tracks such as "The O.C." and "Friday Night Lights", boosting their notoriety. This decision to change their style reflects personal tragedies of the band, notably

an attempted suicide by the lead singer's girlfriend, and produces an album that is closer to the hearts of the band but probably will hamper commercial success.

During most songs lead singer Sam Endicott moans in what amounts to an unoriginal imitation of Robert Smith of The Cure — not horrible, just lacking charisma. In a few songs he even sounds a little like an angry Bono.

The band does back up Endicott nicely, if simply in form. When he is angry the drums pick up the beat. When he is mopey and introspective the synths and bass thrum out bleakly. Very rarely does the music break out in its own spotlight.

The vocals steal the show for most of the album. The lyrics are simple and devoid of any great metaphors or sing along hooks to make them stand out among a crowd of similar artists.

The biggest stand-out track on "Stir the Blood" is "HateF---," a very 21st century The Cure-inspired tune. This is one song in which the guitar has a chance to stand out, with a short but intense prog-rock guitar solo that punctuates a snapping drum beat. It's a song of violent love, with Endicott droning out, "And there will be no tenderness / No tenderness / I will show no mercy for you / You have no mercy for me."

This album fails to bring anything groundbreaking to the table, but fans of New Age artists such as The Cure probably will find this album to be worth a listen.

Adam Lambert

American Idol's season eight runner-up Adam Lambert released his first major label album since losing the top spot to Kris Allen earlier this year. "For Your Entertainment" offers 14 tracks co-written and produced by a diverse sampling of the entertainment business. This leads to an album that has many exceptional tracks that tend to be all over the place. The diversity extends from Weezer rocker Rivers Cuomo all the way to pop-star Pink.

Written by Muse front man Matthew Bellamy, the high-drama ballad "Soaked" consists of Freddy Mercury and Thom Yorke stylized vocals on top of synthetic music. Lady Gaga's contribution, "Fever," is pure Scissor Sisters, disco synth rock, and Lambert sounds right at home on this one. Gaga's tendency toward sexual lyrical content is evident, as Lambert sings out, "There he goes / My baby walks so slow / Sexual tic-tac-toe."

Lambert's voice imitates various famous singers with supreme accuracy, but instead of being good at singing every style thrust upon him, Lambert should focus more on becoming the best at his own vocal style. This album is great for those who like diverse pop-rock albums or anyone who enjoys listening to popular radio hits. "For Your Entertainment" is just that, an album aiming not to innovate, but purely to entertain, and in that it succeeds.

"Education" exhibits talent



BY KEN DUSOLD
Reviewer

Carey Mulligan is a name theatergoers should remember. Critics and viewers agree that her career looks as promising as Audrey Hepburn's after "Roman Holiday," which should bode well for Miss Mulligan during the upcoming awards season, as Hepburn won an Academy Award for that film.

Mulligan stars in Danish filmmaker Lone Scherfig's romantic drama, "An Education." Since its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival earlier this year, "An Education" has been collecting fanfare and accolades in every city in which it has set up a temporary home. The film, with a screenplay by Nick Hornby ("About a Boy" and "High Fidelity"), is an early favorite for a Best Picture nomination at next year's Oscars, and I have no doubt it will put up a terrific fight for the coveted statuette.

"An Education," set in 1961 London,

follows 16-year-old Jenny (Mulligan), who is trudging through the daily grind of homework, tests and orchestra practice. Driven by her traditional, middle-class parents, Jack (Alfred Molina) and Marjorie (Cara Seymour), the intelligent Jenny is bound for Oxford University, where she plans to study English literature, followed by a life in Paris. Her dreams are great, but then again, so is her naiveté.

Jenny has craved a world very different from her own. A door to that world is opened when David, a suave, handsome and clever man who is twice Jenny's age, drives into her life. He offers to give her cello a lift home because it is raining and he's a music-lover. He takes her to classical music concerts, jazz clubs, auctions and high-end restaurants. He sweet-talks her parents and reminds them of what it means to be young and adventurous, all the while taking their daughter on a whirlwind journey to discover the most important lesson in life. This is what she thinks she wants. This is the reason, she tells herself, that she worked so hard all those years in school — to experience happiness.

As David's influence on her blossoms, so do the distractions among her intrigued girlfriends, the worries from her English teacher, Miss Stubbs (Olivia Williams) and the resentful feelings of the private school's headmistress (Emma Thompson). Jenny blows off the school's faculty along with their warnings of getting involved with this older "gentleman friend." Instead she decides to skip classes to join David and his uppity friends in more exciting endeavors, such as when

they allow her to buy a one-of-a-kind painting from her favorite artist during a live Christie's auction and when David takes her to Paris for her 17th birthday.

Unfortunately for Jenny, Miss Stubbs and the headmistress's fears are proven correct. David is hiding from who he really is, ultimately culminating in Jenny's sad realization that everything she wanted could slip away so easily.

It is here, in the final quarter of the film, that Jenny's real education begins. It becomes apparent that what she needs most and that which will serve her best is falling in love, not with David, but with her real self, all the while accepting the world as it is and taking advantage of it.

An outstanding cast supports Mulligan. Peter Sarsgaard mixes Sean Connery's James Bond with Thomas Haden Church's character in the film "Sideways" to create David, who is a lying cad one can't help but like. His smile and laugh softens even the heart of Jenny's over-protective and controlling father, Jack. The choice of Alfred Molina as Jack was perfect. Molina's slightly awkward and hesitant character brilliantly contrasts the strict rules and hard-line beliefs he imposes upon his family.

Olivia Williams plays Miss Stubbs as a reserved but caring teacher. However, Williams could have done a bit more with her character's emotions in exchanges with Jenny. Also worth mentioning is Emma Thompson's short but memorable performance as Jenny's uptight headmistress. There can be no question Thompson relished her role as this spiteful and despised woman who shows no remorse



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for anyone caught breaking the school's hallowed rules.

Although the film is not perfect (there is no explanation for how Jenny gets out of school without experiencing repercussions for her unexcused absences), "An Education" is one of the best films of 2009 — a testament to its freshman star's advanced talent.

"An Education" is playing in select theaters nationwide.