

Forgotten classics

Holiday season's overlooked films deserve winter break attention

BY KEN DUSOLD
Staff Reviewer

During the Christmas season, television audiences always can expect the nonstop onslaught of annual holiday favorites such as "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," "It's A Wonderful Life" and "White Christmas." Many families make viewings of some movies a tradition — fiercely honored every year with hot cocoa and handmade treats only mom can make.

However, hundreds of movies with a holiday theme are never broadcast. So, this Christmas, why not anticipate the predictable indifference one will get from watching "A Christmas Story" for the fifth time in one day and rent a couple of worthy movies networks are likely to overlook?

"Fitzwilly" (1967): Starring Dick Van Dyke, this little gem from United Artists is guaranteed to draw a smile. Van Dyke stars as Claude "Fitzwilly" Fitzwilliam, a respectable and very intelligent butler for an elderly heiress whose fortune is — unbeknownst to her — nonexistent. In order to keep her living the good life, Fitzwilly regularly leads her staff on heists around town. The film's climactic final heist takes place at Gimbel's department store Christmas Eve. Listen closely for the excellent score, composed by John "Johnny" Williams in one of his earliest films.

"Holiday Inn" (1942): No one did classic Christmas musicals like Bing Crosby. The legendary crooner starred opposite Fred Astaire in this World War II-era "feel-good" hit, which introduced the world to what would become one of Crosby's most iconic songs, "White Christmas." This signature



In the musical "Holiday Inn," Bing Crosby plays an actor competing for the affection of a co-worker. Photo courtesy of mediamatters.org

song's success on the record charts led to the 1954 musical with the same name, also starring Crosby. While less popular than the 1954 movie and bearing a similar plot, "Holiday Inn" is arguably a better musical with the incomparable pairing of Crosby and Astaire, who play off one another with terrific results. This is definitely a must-watch for musical aficionados.

"Meet John Doe" (1941): From famed director Frank Capra, this dark comedy stars Gary Cooper

and Barbara Stanwyck. The film follows a newspaper columnist (Stanwyck) after she prints a fake suicide letter attributed to "John Doe" in an effort to "stick it" to her editor having fired her at Christmas. She is rehired as the readership and public interest in helping the poor man "responsible" for the letter increases. In order to continue with the ruse, she hires down-on-his-luck Cooper to pose as the mystery man and makes him think he will

have the chance to help others like him. As in any Capra film, Cooper — who begins the film as the somewhat naïve, but lovable everyman — becomes the symbol of corruption-busting when he uncovers the newspaper's true intentions.

"Scrooge" or "A Christmas Carol" (1951): Most people have either read Charles Dickens' signature holiday novel or seen one of the numerous stage or film adaptations. The story

follows Ebenezer Scrooge as he undergoes a transformation from greedy and sinister to generous and warm-hearted after the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future visit him in the night. In the British version of the classic tale, which remains fairly loyal to Dickens' writing, actor Alastair Sim delivers what many audiences consider to be the best on-screen performance of literature's most famous penny-pinching curmudgeon.

"We're No Angels" (1955): Humphrey Bogart stars in this charming comedy in which he plays a convict who escapes from a French prison on Devil's Island on Christmas Eve with two fellow convicts, played by Peter Ustinov and Aldo Ray. The three convicts intend to steal from the villagers living in the island's port town before sneaking onto a passing ship. However, while casing a small store, they happen to learn that the family who operates it is suffering financially and fearing retribution from the store's actual owner (played by Basil Rathbone). Pure hilarity ensues as the three convicts help falsify store records to make the establishment look prosperous, decorate for the season, cook a gourmet meal and "deal" with the owner.

Other films that bring some yuletide cheer despite rare appearances on television during December include the romantic comedy, "Love Actually," which boasts an impressive ensemble cast and well-developed plot, or the ultimate action flick, "Die Hard," which can fill the void for anyone wanting a change of theme from the usual Christmas offerings.

Coloring Outside the Lines

BY MEG BURIK
Columnist

I witnessed it firsthand. I stood behind a fortified counter with only a red-laser scanning wand for protection, as a mass of early risers flooded into the retail store where I work as cashier. The click of the lock snapping back into the door frame was like a gunshot for the start of holiday shopping, opening the store to the ravenous, sales-crazy Black Friday shoppers.

Economic historian Martha Olney said the origin of the term Black Friday comes from the custom of writing profits in the accounting record book with a black pencil, and the day itself is "the day on which retailers could begin to hope they'd end the calendar year in the black," according to Publicradio.org. During the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt even moved Thanksgiving to a week earlier, making the Christmas shopping season a week longer in hopes of using that black pencil on the balance sheet, despite tough economic times.

Maybe you're one of those brave (or mentally deranged) people who waits in line for hours for that must-have piece of technology or a Tickle Me Elmo. Or maybe your style of gift buying during the season is a bit more relaxed, and you prefer the calm

perusal of Amazon.com while wearing fluffy reindeer slippers. However you purchase those gifts for your loved ones, Joel Waldfogel, author of "Scro-ogenomics: Why you shouldn't buy presents for the holidays," warns you to pocket the plastic, for now.

Some have accused Joel Waldfogel, business professor at Wharton School of Business, of being anti-Christmas with his theories about the deadweight loss

of spending on holiday season gifts. But he's not against the holiday. He's against the wasteful spending that it causes, according to the National Public Radio blog "Planet Money."

His research considers the gap between the money spent on a gift and the value of receiving a gift. How much did the gift cost the giver? How much would the recipient pay for it? He has found a huge gap in this value, which he perceives as waste, or deadweight loss, of Christmas gift giving.

For example, if an unwitting, distant relative spends more than \$200 on a year's supply of Omaha steaks for your Christmas gift and you are a vegetarian, there is a \$200 deadweight loss of money. And it's a complete

waste of resources (the cash, the steaks, the means to produce the steaks, the distribution of the steaks, etc.). Through his research, Waldfogel has found that the spending others do for us returns 20 percent less satisfaction per dollar than the spending we do for ourselves.

How can we escape this spiral of inefficient spending, according to professor Scrooge? It's simple enough — eliminate the deadweight loss of value. One way to do that is by giving the recipient the ability to choose their gift, perhaps through a gift card to his or her favorite store. That way the recipient can buy what he or she wants and the giver avoids the social stigma of giving cash as a gift.

Another option Waldfogel suggests as a good item for under the tree (or around the Menorah) is a charity gift card. In an NPR podcast, he describes how donating to charitable causes is a luxury, because based on household spending data, those with

a higher income allocate greater amounts of their budget to charities.

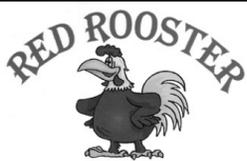
Gift giving is about providing recipients with a luxury they wouldn't usually have. But instead of giving an iPad to someone who already has a Mac and doesn't need one, we can give to charities and no value is destroyed in the exchange of an unwanted gift. Instead, people are helped.

Besides, the current frenetic gift trading is a newer practice. "According to Steven Nissenbaum in 'The Battle for Christmas,' Americans' current focus on giving presents to family members was created by elite 19th-century New Yorkers who turned away from the traditional view of Christmas as a time for the rich to give to the poor," according to the NPR "Tell Me More" blog by Michael Martin. So the Waldfogel-endorsed gift of a charitable gift card would 1) ensure no value lost by unwanted gifts 2) be sweetly Norman Rockwell in its nostalgic style of gifting 3)

help people in need and 4) be undeniably vintage.

This mismatch of gift values is no American-owned phenomenon. It happens in any society where the consumer doesn't ultimately choose his or her own gift. In fact, the December spending spike around the world (in terms of per capita holiday gift spending) is much higher in other countries, Waldfogel said.

This holiday season, don't get trampled in a stampede of Wal-Mart shoppers just to overspend on a gift your recipient may not even like. Casually stroll past the working-on-commission employees in clothing stores, avoid clicking for sales online and buy your friends and family gift cards. Whether you allow them to indulge themselves or other people through charitable causes, avoid the deadweight loss of unwanted gifts. Home-baked cookies and treats pair well with gift cards and produce enough "deadweight" during the holidays for all of us.



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