

# Spectrum of holiday movies capture the season

By **Howie Nave**

I admit it; I escape by watching movies and sometimes wish I were actually in the movie, in the time period that was taking place. I could see myself in glorious black and white just observing Jimmy Stewart as George Baily in that classic 1946 flick "It's A Wonderful Life." Given the state of the world movies are more than just escapism. They're a time capsule of what the world was like before terrorism and other modern day mayhem, or when financial institutions didn't have nearly the power they do now by bringing a nation down to its knees. Back then I guess we were naive by trusting our government or maybe politicians were more ethical?

I love this time of year, and second only to Halloween, there are more movies than ever (and continue to grow) paralleling the holiday spirit. Now that I think about it there's been an increasing number of horror flicks finding their way into the holiday season. I mean, what could be better as a horror flick than involving kids expecting Santa when instead they get a serial killer? It's all about family isn't it? And that's what makes the holidays so special.

Of course living in the High Sierra (with hopefully more snow to come) makes it even more enjoyable. There are some staples I have included here and of course snow is always one of the main characters in such classics as "A Christmas Story," "It's A Wonderful Life," "Miracle on 34th Street" and "A Christmas Carol." It's getting more and more difficult to pick the real good ones as there are so many great Christmas flicks and that doesn't even count the movies that aren't all about Christmas but rather have Christmas as the backdrop for the story.

Movies such as "Die Hard" 1 & 2, "Lethal Weapon" 1 & 2, and Paul Newman in one of my all time favorite movies, "Nobody's Fool" instantly come to mind. Whatever your favorite, these 20 for me represent some of the best that will stand the test of time for generations to come. So kick back, get some eggnog (with rum and nutmeg of course) and enjoy these by yourself or with family and friends. Merry Everything everybody!



### 1) "IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE," G (1946)

Did you know that this holiday classic, released in 1946 would have been forgotten had it not been for television? Ironic too because I could watch this over and over again on television (and have). Oh, sure, there have been several remakes of this classic bot on the big screen and on TV but nothing comes close to the original. The studio even made a colorized version of the original black and white classic (big mistake and a stupid move) but the only way to appreciate this Frank Capra classic is in its original format. George Baily (played by Jimmy Stewart) gets a second shot at life being able to see what the world would have been like had he never been born. The backdrop of Bedford Falls reminded me of Lake Tahoe in a way being a small town where everyone knows who you are and you realize friends and neighbors really do matter when you think of what the world would be like if you weren't around to enrich those lives you've touched. George doesn't realize how much he is loved and considers taking his own life when his

guardian angel, Clarence (played by Henry Travers) intervenes to save him from himself. If Clarence can prove that George truly has a wonderful life, then Clarence can earn his wings from upstairs. "It's a Wonderful Life" still holds up today and reignites the hope and optimism that does exist and will make you feel that yes, your life does in fact matter. A nice, feel-good movie with a terrific cast that includes Donna Reed, Lionel Barrymore and Thomas Mitchell.

## 2) "LOVE ACTUALLY," R (2003)



Another enjoyable holiday movie (I'm betting will one day will be considered a classic) I will sometimes watch this even in the off-season just because I really enjoy an ensemble piece where all its principle characters share a common thread throughout the movie as Christmas counts down starting from five weeks out. At the very beginning of the movie Hugh Grant does a narration over a scene at Heathrow Airport referencing the attack of 9/11 and given recent terrorist attacks that have happened, "Love Actually" is even more powerful to watch. At its core leaves us with a message of hope and forgiveness centered on family, friends and co-workers. England is the backdrop for the movie that includes a stellar cast consisting of Bill Nighy, Hugh Grant, Emma Thompson, Alan Richman, Keira Knightly, Liam Neeson and Colin Firth. Writer/director Richard Curtis ("Four Weddings and a Funeral," "Bridget Jones Diary" and "Notting Hill") has an excellent

track record when it comes to ensemble pieces and this one is no exception. From its opening narration by Hugh Grant at Heathrow Airport to its conclusion "Love Actually" will stay with you long after the holidays and you'll find yourself watching it again and again as it only gets better with each passing Christmas.

### **3) "MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET," G (1947)**

Can you believe there are still folks out there who've never seen the 1947, black and white original? A lot of people who saw the 1994 version starring Richard Attenborough and Elizabeth Perkins didn't even know they were watching a remake! That's criminal. The original black and white version still shines as one of the most heart-warming holiday classics of all time. With a cast that includes Maureen O'Hara, Edmund Gwenn and a very young Natalie Wood (in her very first feature) it's a tough movie to beat. When a young child, Susan (Wood) wants to believe in Santa Claus but her successful working mother doesn't it sets up the story beautifully. Santa's existence is a matter for the courts to decide when a Macy's Day parade Santa (Gwenn) fills in for a drunk one and we soon discover he is the real deal. Soon it's up to young lawyer Fred Gailey (John Payne) to convince Susan that there indeed is a Santa Claus and has to find a way to prove that the spirit of Christmas can even change non-believers such as Susan's mom, Doris (O'Hara"). What a great flick this is and if anyone ever had any doubts about the existence of Kris Kringle, they'll be proven wrong. "Miracle on 34th Street" will not only convince you to believe but with a great cast and supporting cast that includes Thelma Ritter and Gene Lockhart how could you not believe in Santa Claus?

#### 4) "BAD SANTA," R (2003)



As I write this plans are in the works for a "Bad Santa 2" with Billy Bob Thornton reprising his role as the anti-Santa in the anti-Christmas movie that was hysterical. Don't know how the filmmakers will pull off a sequel especially since the passing of John Ritter and Bernie Mac who were so memorable in the original (although Mac's character does die in the first one). "Bad Santa" I must forewarn you if you haven't seen it yet this movie is not for the kiddies and for adults who have no sense of humor. "Bad Santa" is very R-rated, hilarious and not for the faint of heart. Maybe because I'm a comic (and part time cynic) but I never laughed out loud so hard and so long the very first time I saw this. Maybe because it flies in the face of anything one would expect over the holidays or that it is so rude and in-your-face whatever just made "Bad Santa" fun to watch. Believe it or not this flick has a soulful ending to it and makes even the most cynical, non-believer (Billy Bob Thornton) into a character of warmth. Again, let me warn you if you haven't seen this it's not for those who have never uttered a swear word. Thornton plays Willie, an alcoholic, bad-mouthing department store Santa Clause who, along with his foul-mouthed partner in crime dressed as an elf, Marcus (Tony Cox) rob department stores every Christmas time with great success. Director Terry Zwigoff ("Crumb," "Ghost World") really hits the mark with

this sarcastic flick and will leave you howling with laughter throughout if you just give it a chance. The movie also stars first timer to the screen Brett Kelly as the snot-nosed, 8-year-old boy who everyone picks on and really believes that Willie is Santa. Cloris Leachman has a small part as the spry grandma and makes every moment of her screen time that you just find yourself bursting out in laughter. Laura Graham is also hysterical as the bartender Sue who has a thing for guys that dress up in Santa suits.

#### **5) "NATIONAL LAMPOON'S CHRISTMAS VACATION," PG-13 (1989)**

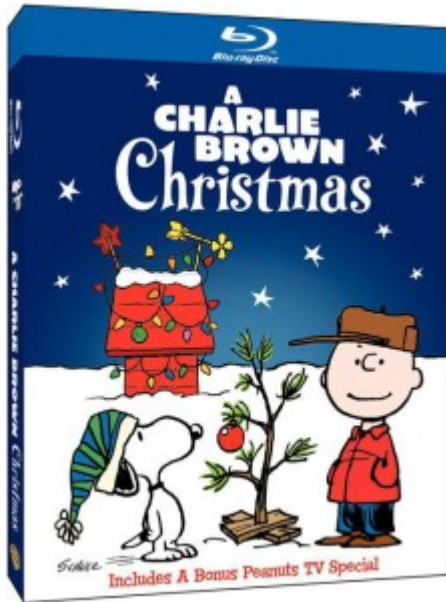
Chevy Chase, star of the "National Lampoon Vacation" franchise, will probably be best remembered for this holiday spoof because it continues to be one of the most popular Christmas movies year after year. One cannot help think of this movie when hanging up the Christmas lights and finding that perfect Christmas tree. As head of the Griswold family Clark (Chase) personifies everything that inevitably goes wrong as the Christmas holiday counts down to the big day. Beverly D'Angelo is the patient, loving wife to Clark who loves him regardless of his stressed-out antics when the unexpected in-laws show up. By the way Randy Quaid will forever be typecast as Cousin Eddie, you know that right? "Christmas Vacation" has all of the holiday family traditions from finding that elusive perfect Christmas tree, how to spend the Christmas bonus from work and the always hilarious, time-consuming task of creating the perfect Christmas decorated house with enough Christmas lights to light up the entire neighborhood. Speaking of the Christmas bonus check the movie also stars Brian Doyle-Murray as Clark's Scrooge-like boss. Directed by Jeremiah S. Chechik "Christmas Vacation" is still a family favorite and seems to only gain in popularity with each passing year as it becomes introduced to a whole new generation.

## 6) "A CHRISTMAS STORY," G (1983)



One of my all-time favorite Christmas movies based on the recollections of humorist Jean Shepherd, "A Christmas Story" epitomizes your basic urban family from the 1940s with Peter Billingsley in the leading role as Ralphie. I couldn't even tell you what his last movie was but I will tell you that this movie will forever be the one that he'll be remembered for. Ralphie has only one mission in life: to be the proud owner of a Red Ryder air rifle BB gun. That's all he wants for Christmas. Melinda Dillon plays Ralphie's mom and after watching this timeless classic a bunch of times actually plays every mom I have encountered; she is that good. It's a great family movie to watch told in a narrative format (voiced by Jean Shepherd himself). I remember the very first time I saw this movie I wanted to see if your tongue really would get stuck on a frozen flagpole. Don't try it kids, it does! "A Christmas Story" is a must-see and who can forget that immortal line from the movie when Ralphie says he must have that BB gun? "You'll shoot your eye out with that thing kid!"





**7) "A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS," G (1965)**

This holiday classic just celebrated its 50th anniversary and almost never made it to the small screen, but lucky for us it did and remains an animated classic to this day. "A Charlie Brown Christmas" became an instant hit when it first aired back in 1965 and introduced me not just to Charles Schultz's famous cartoon strip but also turned me on to jazz via the great Vince Guaraldi who supplied the soundtrack and the sound that would forever immortalize Charlie Brown and his friends via Guaraldi's music. I always wanted to be Schroeder after hearing him bang out those cool piano pieces. When Charlie Brown complains about the overwhelming materialism that he sees during the Christmas season, Lucy suggests that he become director of the school Christmas pageant. Charlie Brown accepts, but it proves to be a frustrating struggle. When an attempt to restore the proper spirit with a forlorn little fir Christmas tree fails, he needs Linus' help to learn what the real meaning of Christmas is. It's funny too that ever since this animated gem any sad looking Christmas tree to this day is referred to as a "Charlie Brown Christmas tree."

**8) "HOME ALONE" PG (1990)**

Before the less than adequate sequels and Macaulay Culkin's growing pains, "Home Alone" was one of the late director John Hughes's best holiday efforts ever. Nobody at the time thought



that this would become such a hit but apparently Hughes knew otherwise. Culkin plays the resourceful 8-year-old Kevin who wishes his family would just go away and leave him alone right before Christmas. Accidentally, they do, and he's left to defend for himself against two dopey criminal types (Joe Pesci and Daniel Stern). Billed as "A Family Comedy Without The Family" this family film is funny and entertaining with a stand out performance by Catherine O'Hara as Kevin's mother. Hughes may be gone, but his movies will always remain and this one is one of his best to be played again and again every Christmas and also to remind you that if you're from a large family you can still have a voice.

#### **9) "ELF" PG (2003)**

I remember when "Elf" first came out I thought to myself, "OK, Will Ferrell seems to click in this character as Buddy, an over grown human elf but will it wind up being kind of stupid? It wasn't bad and the "Anchorman" star was not only able to pull off the funny but also the spirit that is Christmas. I also enjoyed this movie because both kids and adults can enjoy it without being sappy and offers up a bit of the optimistic that brings out that kid in all of us. Buddy (Ferrell), through a mishap was raised at the North Pole in Santa's toy factory. Director Jon Favreau (along with screenwriter David Berenbaum) balances the movie with just the right amount of funny and sentimentality. Buddy leaves the North Pole to seek out his biological father (played by James Caan) in New York. As a fish out of water Buddy can't believe that there are actually people as tall as he is. He also discovers plenty of Santa Claus impostors everywhere in NYC. When Buddy finds out that the Santa is coming to Gimbels, he assumes it will be the real Santa (Edward Asner) and not just one of his helpers this time. "Elf" gets better watch time I see it and having Bob Newhart in a brief cameo makes it that much more enjoyable.

#### **10) "HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS," G (1965)**

Based on the Dr. Seuss classic, this tale is still a delight to watch. Forget the fancy CGI graphics of today “Grinch” still has that charm as if the book were speaking (and singing) to me and still evokes fond memories from the very first time I saw it on TV. Directed by the legendary Chuck Jones from Warner Bros. fame and narrated by Boris Karloff, this 26-minute animated TV classic about a Christmas-hating Grinch who wants to make everyone as miserable on Christmas as he is still is one of the most original Christmas stories ever. The poor, small-hearted Scrooge learns the true meaning of Christmas through the loving Who’s in Whoville. And who can forget that poor dog of his that has to haul that enormous sleigh too wearing those antlers?!

#### 11) “EVELYN,” PG (2002)



This is one you’ll have to really do some hunting for, but trust me it is very worth the effort. Starring (and produced by) actor Pierce Brosnan, this little holiday movie was like finding a pearl in a sea of muddy water. I only first heard about this movie while living in the Bay Area and the studio had a private screening hoping to get the word out. I became a believer immediately and putting the word out whenever I can especially at this time of year. “Evelyn” centers on a young Irish girl, Evelyn (Sophie Vavasseur) and is set in 1953 Dublin. Based on a true story, the film stars Pierce Brosnan as Desmond Doyle, a poor painter and interior decorator whose

wife walks out on him during the holidays leaving him to fend for their three children Maurice, Dermot, and Evelyn. Back then the government mandated that children must be placed in the custody of the state and not that of the father even when their own mother abandons them. That law would soon change when lawyers Stephen Rea and Aidan Quinn (with Alan Bates in tow) takes on the establishment. Director Bruce Beresford utilizes the emotional side of the former 007 star and shows us his fatherly side with great results. Also impressive is that of American actress Julianna Margulies as Doyle's love interest and pulls off a good Irish accent too. It's a fantastic holiday flick and one to definitely watch with the entire family.

## **12) "WHITE CHRISTMAS," G (1954)**

One of the most time honored classic Christmas musicals, "White Christmas" featuring such stars as Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, Vera-Ellen and Rosemary Clooney. Bing croons such Irving Berlin classics as "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," Vera-Ellen taps up a storm, Kaye entertains with his usual goofy antics, and this movie is overall a lot of fun. "White Christmas" offers up a lot of comedy, a little bit of romance, and just enough holiday sentiment to go around.

## **13) "A CHRISTMAS CAROL," G (1951)**

Also known as the "Scrooge" movie, Alastair Sim plays the quintessential Ebenezer Scrooge. It almost appears that all other incarnations were based on Sim's definition of the character after seeing his performance here. So good in fact that he was almost typecast. Other Scrooges were based on his adaptation, that much is certain. Based on the Dickens' classic, this adaptation about a miser who doesn't believe in Christmas until three ghosts come to take him on three voyages still sends chills through me. Vivid with what life was like in 19th-century London, the terrific performances of the cast, including Kathleen Harrison as Mrs. Dilber, make the story

come to life. This version of "A Christmas Carol" is the one to see.

#### **14) "JOYEUX NOEL," PG-13 (2005)**

Written and directed by Christian Carion ("The Girl From Paris"), this French movie was nominated for an Oscar under Best Foreign Film and recreates an incredible incident that took place on western front during the First World War. It was Christmas Eve 1914 the first year of the war. German, British, French and Belgian troops who had been slaughtering each other for months initiated a spontaneous and unsanctioned truce if you will. They put down their guns, sang songs with each other, played soccer, shared rations and posed for photos. They had joint religious services and helped each other bury their dead. Mixing fictional characters with historical fact, "Joyeux Noel" becomes an extraordinary film and shows what can happen instantaneously during the madness of war.

#### **15) "MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS" G (1944)**

This is a delightful musical film that tells the story of a turn-of-the-century family in suburban, mid-western St. Louis of 1903, who live in a stylish Edwardian home at 5135 Kensington Avenue. The city, and the well-to-do Smith family (with four beautiful daughters), is on the verge of hosting (and celebrating) the arrival of the spectacular 1904 World's Fair. The movie first paired director Vincente Minnelli with Judy Garland and was the most popular and financially successful film produced by the legendary Arthur Freed and directed by its star's future husband, newcomer Minnelli (who married 23 year-old Judy Garland a year later on June 15, 1945, it was Garland's second marriage). This classic was Minnelli's third film (after the all-black musical "Cabin in the Sky" (1943) and the music-comedy, "I Dood It" (1943) with Red Skelton and it was Minnelli's first full-length film in color. After their marriage, Garland and Minnelli also worked together on "The Clock" (1945) and "The Pirate" (1948).

#### **16) "THE HOLIDAY," PG-13 (2006)**

It can be a fine line between an emotional holiday movie and your classic chick flick. Sometimes men even get to get to use that as an excuse to get choked up and say it's because of the holidays. Writer/director Nancy Meyers assembled a good-looking cast that includes Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet as two women (Amanda and Iris, respectively) who find themselves at the end of failed relationships. The fact that it takes place just before Christmas amplifies the loneliness factor to the point where they both swap living locations after meeting online. Amanda lives in Los Angeles and Iris lives in Surrey, England, with things heating up after Iris' brother, Graham (Jude Law) drops by Iris' house and meets Amanda. At the other side of the pond Iris meets Miles (Jack Black) a film composer. Kudos to Black for being a very sensitive and calm guy this time around and he steals the picture.

#### **17) "THE BISHOP'S WIFE," G (1947)**

When a movie moves you to tears because of the incredible casting and excellent storyline you can't help but ask yourself, "Why don't they make movies like this nowadays?" Exactly. In what I believe to be one of his best roles ever, Cary Grant plays Dudley, the unexpected hero who is more than just angelic. His assignment is to make us as a species be more well, human. He is the answer to the prayers coming from Episcopal Bishop, Henry Brougham (played by a young David Niven) whose plans for an elaborate new cathedral has run into a stumbling block of sorts as is his own personal life. Loretta Young gives a very moving performance. Directed by Emil Newman "The Bishop's Wife" will warm the hearts of even the toughest cynics out there especially with Christmas fast approaching.

#### **18) "HOLIDAY INN," G (1942)**

Talk about your incredible chemistry. With music by Irving

Berlin sung by (and starring) Bing Crosby and dancing by Fred Astaire all I can say is “Whoa!” The movie is actually based on an idea by Irving Berlin about a retired song-and-dance man, Jim Hardy (Bing Crosby), who retires from showbiz to become a gentleman farmer in New England only to get back into the business combining both worlds for special holidays. The film’s highlight is Fred Astaire’s bang-up performance of July 4 “Let’s Say It with Firecrackers.” “Holiday Inn” however will probably best be known for introducing the world to the first public performance of the song “White Christmas.” Crosby first sang that song on his NBC radio show “The Kraft Music Hall” on Christmas Day 1941. Moviegoers then saw Bing sing the holiday classic seven months later when the movie came out. The song went on to become one of the biggest selling songs in the history of music. This was the first of three films to feature Crosby singing “White Christmas.”



**19) “THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS,” PG (1993)**

Who would have ever imagined that Disney’s name would be attached to something that might scare the little ones, huh? OK, the music might scare you (not intentionally) but the stop-motion animation will mesmerize you (especially in an age where everything can be done so easily on computer). I think this might be the only stop-animated flick that I’ve seen both at Christmas and Halloween. Cross-marketing the holidays (and the seasons) might be a new trend. “The Nightmare Before

Christmas" is the brainchild behind director Tim Burton, the man who gave us "Batman," "Beetlejuice" and "Edward Scissorhands." He actually used to work for Disney so maybe this was his revenge having to work in an environment that was sugary sweet for families knowing one day when he was famous would be given the license to make something truly off-the-wall and attach Disney's name to it. Burton didn't direct, this time the honor going to Henry Sellick. The cast of voices is an excellent choice that includes Danny Elfman (who also supplies the soundtrack), Chris Sarandon, Paul Reubens, Greg Proops and Catherine O'Hara. With the help of screenwriter Caroline Thompson ("Edward Scissorhands," "The Secret Garden") "The Nightmare Before Christmas" is a balancing act between the darkness of Halloween and the hope and cheer of Christmas and that's when everything goes awry. You can blame it on Jack Skellington, a ghoulish character who runs Halloweentown, a place devoted to creating a bigger, better and scarier Halloween each year. Also known as "The Pumpkin King," Jack has ambition and wants more than just two holidays. After a chance visit to Christmastown, he decides to kidnap Santa Claus, take his own skeletal reindeer on a Christmas Eve ride and drop booby-trap toys down chimneys complete with little creepy things that crawl in the night devouring Christmas trees! If that doesn't freak the little tots out I don't know what will. It's hard to believe but Jack is actually pretty nice for a ghoul. He's just a misguided artist (aren't they all?) that's all.

## **20) "RUDOLPH, THE RED-NOSED REINDEER," G (1964)**

Another animated television special that rounds out my Top 20, this was one of the very first shot using the stop-motion animation technique (as Burton would utilize in his "Nightmare Before Christmas" years later) and gave singer Burl Ives his best year ever when it came to producing the now Christmas classics, "A Holly Jolly Christmas" and "Silver and Gold," two songs he sang as the character Sam the Snowman in this holiday



special. He narrates this holiday classic telling us the story about Rudolph who was in effect ousted from playing any reindeers games because of his bright red honker. Rudolph teams up with Hermey, an elf (voiced by Paul Soles) who wants to be a dentist, and Yukon Cornelius (voiced by Larry D. Mann) a prospector. The animated special became an overnight success launching the Burl Ives' Christmas songs into regular radio rotation history after this aired.