

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Movie Review column for *Dvino Magazine*, a monthly production of *The Laredo Morning Times*.

December 2022

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A journey through Christmas present

By T. Rob Brown

The sleigh sloshes through the snow and pulls up once again as I offer out my hand to yours for a lift inside. Cozy in your best tacky Christmas sweater, you smile as we begin another journey—this time, through Christmas films present.

Handing you a steaming cup of hot chocolate with a candy cane for stirring, I begin to tell you of the unique year in holiday movies. “This is a year like no other in recent memory,” I begin.

Cracking the reins, the team of horses pull us away as we head off on a return to Christmas films.

Last month, I mentioned upcoming Christmas movies that looked promising. Let’s review some of them: *Violent Night*, which opened at cinemas on Dec. 2, *Falling for Christmas* on Netflix and *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special* on Disney+. I didn’t get an opportunity yet to see *Spirited* on Apple TV+ or *A Christmas Story Christmas* on HBO Max, but we have a couple other movies to review.

Let’s begin with the most present, the newest film on the list: *Violent Night*.

Ever since hearing “Weird Al” Yankovic’s cult classic Christmas song, *The Night Santa Went Crazy* (1996), I’ve wondered what a film about a “drunk disgruntled Yuletide Rambo” might look like. I even sat

down one Christmas season, taking notes from the song and jotting down ideas that could develop into a film. Unfortunately, that initial plan got put on the backburner and never resurfaced.

The song features lyrics like:

***“There's the National Guard and the FBI
There's a van from the Eyewitness News
And helicopters circlin' 'round in the sky
And the bullets are flyin', the body count's risin'
And everyone's dyin' to know, oh Santa, why?
My my my my my my
You used to be such a jolly guy.”***

What David Harbour and John Leguizamo bring us in the action dark comedy film *Violent Night* isn't exactly what I had in mind, but it's in that same vein. It's pulled from that same parody-inspired desire to see Santa Claus in a completely different light—not just the merry giver of presents but one who uses Christmas magic—and guns and knives and hammers—to protect a young child in need. It's time to break the archetype and remold it.

Obviously, this is not a children's or family Christmas film—it's bloody and gory, filled with lots of profanity. But if you're looking for a film for adults that makes us look at the darkness and the disappointment at Christmas, but also gives us a glimmer of hope for the future by the end, then give this one a try.

It's a film that delivers all the Christmas goodies: Gingerbread, Sugarplum, Candy Cane, Frosty, Mr. Scrooge and even Krampus. None of them stand in the way of the man with the bag.

I laughed so hard in the cinema on opening night at all the bad Christmas puns, which are delivered so well by Harbour. As far as acting goes, he does a great job of portraying the disgruntled St. Nicholas. Sure, the film has a lot of low-brow humor and might not be some people's cup of tea, but it's certainly a Christmas keeper for me. I'm adding this to my annual Christmas must-watch list. I'm going to go see it again soon.

As “Weird Al” sang: “Broke his back for some milk and cookies. Sounds to me like he was tired of gettin' gypped.” I do wish *The Night Santa Went Crazy* had been included in the soundtrack.

Stinger alert: There is a mid-credits scene.

Directed by Tommy Wirkola, *Violent Night* (2022), Rated R, stars Harbour, Leguizamo, Alex Hassell, Alexis Louder, Cam Gigandet, Edi Patterson, Beverly D'Angelo, Mike Dopud and Leah Brady. At 1 hour and 52 minutes, it received 70% on the Tomatometer and an 88% audience score at Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 7.1/10 on the International Movie Database. I give it two thumbs up for making me laugh so hard.

Lindsay Lohan, stars in the amnesiac holiday comedy *Falling for Christmas* (Nov. 10) on Netflix—not to be confused with the 2016 film of the same title. This one is sort of like a Christmas version of *Overboard* (1987, 2018) except the male love interest doesn't take advantage of her in any way—he's a boring nice guy and I'm not sure what she sees in him. Though maybe it's just because he treats her differently than those in her rich lifestyle—he treats her like a person.

This film relies on clichés and cheesy romantic sentiment, as most rom-coms do. It offers some funny moments but fell short of what I hoped for it.

Lohan brings “a soulful sense of humor, vulnerability and verve” as a spoiled rich woman with amnesia in the “heartwarming” romantic comedy, according to *Variety*. While it had some heartwarming moments, I didn’t think it worked so well overall.

Falling for Christmas (2022), Rated R, directed by Janeen Damian, stars Lohan, Chord Overstreet, George Young, Jack Wagner and Olivia Perez. Lohan’s sister Aliana Lohan also appears in the film. At 1 hour and 33 minutes, it received a rotten 59% on the Tomatometer and a 60% audience score at Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 5.2/10 at IMDb. I give it one thumb up but also one thumb down for being far less than it could have been.

Next up, Chris Pratt (Peter Quill/Star-Lord) and the rest of the crew of *The Benatar*, return for the holidays in *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special* (Nov. 25) on Disney+. Well, they’re no longer aboard *The Benatar*—it’s been replaced by *The Bowie*. Quill likes to name his starships after famous humans; I’m half surprised he didn’t call it *The Bacon*.

Speaking of which, Kevin Bacon appears as himself in this special. Much of this show is about Mantis and Drax having crazy antics on Earth. Honestly, I could have watched far more of that. But that’s not the heart of this story.

There’s a nice message here about the true meaning of gift giving. Once you understand the reason Mantis and Drax are going to so much trouble, it will create the perfect Christmas moment for one member of the team. And Bacon reminds us that not all movie stars are jerks.

Complete with a cameo from classic comic-book member of the Guardians, Cosmo, and a new, beefier Groot, the holiday special has a lot to offer Marvel Cinematic Universe fans. My only complaint is that it was only 40-ish minutes long.

Directed by James Gunn, *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special* stars Pratt, Sean Gunn, Karen Gillan, Michael Rooker (voice), Pom Klementieff, Dave Bautista, Bradley Cooper (voice), Maria Bakalova (voice), Vin Diesel (voice) and Bacon. At 44 minutes, it received a certified fresh 92% on the Tomatometer and an 82% audience score at Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 7.1/10 at IMDb. I give it two thumbs up for holiday merriment in a galaxy right here.

Without knowing about it in advance, I stumbled across a couple other new Christmas films on Netflix that you might want to give a chance.

The first is *The Noel Diary*. I remembered Justin Hartley from his run as Oliver Queen/Green Arrow on *Smallville* (2006-2011) as well as his comedic role in *A Bad Moms Christmas* (2017) and decided to take a gander at this film.

Netflix describes it as: “While closing the door to the past, he meets a woman looking for the key to her future. Is a snowy, cozy Christmas adventure the gift they both need?” Well, that description doesn’t do this movie justice. It’s about a man coming to terms with the passing of his mother and making up with his estranged father, while also making a new friend who also needs to clear up some things from her past. Their lives are far more entangled than either of them might have ever imagined.

The Noel Diary, 2022, stars Hartley, Barrett Doss, Essence Atkins, directed by Charles Shyer. At 1 hour and 39 minutes, it received 77% on the Tomatometer and a 51% audience score, plus a 6.2/10 at IMDb. I give it one thumb up for its drama and story.

The next Netflix film came as a surprise to me. It wasn't even a blip on my radar. I stumbled across it and only half-committed to it due to Freddie Prinze Jr.'s name. Once I started watching it, I noticed the main woman looked familiar before figuring out it was Aimee Garcia from *Lucifer*.

Garcia's Ella, the forensic scientist, was in my opinion the true heart of the *Lucifer* TV series. I looked forward to her character's involvement in the story and Garcia played her so well. I look forward to seeing her in more films in the future.

In this film, though, Garcia plays Angelina, who is a music star along the lines of Jennifer Lopez. She's having difficulty coming up with a great song for her next album and the studio is demanding to hear it. Basically, she's lost her muse.

Attempting to change things up, she sees a girl's social media post about how much she loves Angelina and wants to take a selfie with her. Angelina decides to make this fan's day and along the way she meets that girl's dad, Miguel, played by Prinze. He happens to be a music teacher and she sees one of his unfinished works and her inspiration returns. The two compose music together as their romance grows. But love is never that easy, right? Complications ensue.

While some might say this film is just as cheesy of a rom-com as *Falling for Christmas*, I didn't feel that. It had what it needed to do the job and didn't go over the top with it. While Lohan may be the bigger star, I found Garcia to be sweeter and more genuine in her role. Of the two films, I recommend this one more.

Christmas with You, 2022, Netflix, stars Garcia, Prinze and Deja Monique Cruz, directed by Gabriela Tagliavini. At 1 hour and 29 minutes, it received 67% on the Tomatometer and a 64% audience score, yet only a 5.5/10 at IMDb. I give it one thumb up because I'm glad I stumbled across it and I enjoyed it.

Our journey is at an end, not because there aren't any other good Christmas shows this year, but simply because we're out of time. The magic of Christmas only lasts so long.

With a "Whoah!" and a tug on the reins, the sleigh sashes back along the streets and slides to a halt at the sidewalk. "Watch your step, hold onto your hot cocoa and don't forget your scarf," I say as your feet reach for the curb.

Once you're safely back to ground, I crack the reins again and yell as I head out of sight, "The show must go on, Happy Holidays and good night."