

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Christmas future: What might it entail?

By T. Rob Brown

Standing at the edge of the street, your arms envelop your body as you shiver in the chill air of early winter. Your breath puffs out a misty cloud of moisture. Only your tacky Christmas sweater keeps the temperature from becoming uncomfortable as you await the annual holiday film sleigh ride.

Expecting the same sleigh from last year's journey through Christmas present or from the prior year's Christmas past, you shockingly see before you a dark sled with giant scythes beneath for runners, which cut through the ice and snow, as it's pulled by a team of eight tiny skeletal reindeer. They're driven by a black-cloaked man so dark and sinister you know in a moment it can't be Saint Nick.

As the slay sleigh slishes over to the edge of the street where you await, it comes to a complete stop as—to your horror—the driver points a bony skeletal hand toward you and I say in a deep gravelly voice, "This is your final chance to change your ways, Scrooge. Tonight, we journey through Christmas future."

A moment later, I clear my throat and say in a more pleasant voice, "Ready to go?" I hand you a steaming cup of hot chocolate with a candy cane stirrer, as in past years. My outreached hand, which you now realize is just gloved, helps you aboard. I snap the reins and we're off.

Our main stop might seem to be Christmas present, but it's one of a group of films where it starts in Christmas present but then moves into the future: *It's a Wonderful Knife* (2023).

The title isn't the only part of this film that derives from the Christmas classic *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). The new film's premise is that a knife murderer horrifically slays a bunch of people in Christmas present, but is narrowly stopped and killed by the central viewpoint character—Winnie Carruthers, played by Jane Widdop; not before her best friend is killed, though.

Moving to Christmas future, or the following year, the main character can't get past it. The rest of her family and friends try to move on, but she just can't. It gets so bad that she wonders what the world would be like without her. Que up reminiscent themes from the 1946 classic film, just without the obvious and good angel, the distinctive voice of James Stewart, or the black-and-white color palette.

"Does it have a Mr. Potter?" you might be wondering. Well, yes, it does—none other than Justin Long as Henry Waters. Oh, those eerie eyes. Yet, this film isn't just a copy of the classic. It may lean to the original, but it incorporates horror elements, comedy, and some exciting twists.

Through this film, we are reminded that each life has meaning and should be valued. Despite its existence in the horror spectrum, the film holds true with its Christmas message. Never doubt your own value to yourself and those who love you.

I wish I could call it a wonderful film, but it's just all right. Despite that, it's entertaining and enjoyable.

It's a Wonderful Knife (2023), directed by Tyler MacIntyre, Rated R, stars Long, Joel McHale—best known from the *Community* (2009-2015) TV show, Widdop, Jess McLeod, Katharine Isabelle, and William B. Davis—best known as the Smoking Man from *The X-Files* TV show and films. At 1 hour and 27 minutes, it received a rotten 55% on the Tomatometer at Rotten Tomatoes, yet a 72% audience score, plus a 5.6/10 on the International Movie Database. I give it one thumb up for mashing the holiday and horror genres, while playing to a Christmas classic.

Seeing films like this, we might wonder what the future Christmas movie trends might entail. Last year, we looked at *Violent Night* (2022). These darker films might not be anything new—we've had films like the much lighter *Gremlins* (1984) and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), then darker ones like *Black Christmas* (1974) and the 2006 and 2019 films of the same name, *Rare Exports: A Christmas Tale* (2010), *Krampus* (2015), and *Anna and the Apocalypse* (2017). All of these films seem to harken back a bit to the original ghost of Christmas future from the Scrooge tale *A Christmas Carol* (1938) and (1951), adapted from the 1843 Charles Dickens novel.

There's even a slew of horror films titled *Silent Night*. This includes the 2012 version directed by Steven C. Miller, the 2020 one directed by Will Thorne, the 2021 rendition directed by Camille Griffin, and the new John Woo 2023 action/thriller, which I'll be going to see later tonight after writing this column. There are even a few more with that title. Note to self: If I ever get to write or direct a Hollywood Christmas film, don't title it *Silent Night*; the world already has enough of those.

The point is, these trends seem to lean toward more horrific holiday mashups. Maybe people are tired of the classic Christmas tales? Has there even been a major light-hearted one since *Elf* (2003)? Maybe *Elf* set a golden standard most directors fear they cannot achieve, or maybe moviegoers just crave

something more thrilling. Honestly, I found *The Polar Express* (2004) to be quite boring—my apologies to the great Tom Hanks. There is the Apple TV+ musical *Spirited* from last season and it's pretty good, but also owes its ancestry to Dickens.

After all, Christmas lends itself to so many dark punny variants like "Santy Claws," "slay rides," and more with great lines like "You better watch out," "Santa Claws is watching you," "He sees you when you're sleeping," or *Violent Night's* "Santa Claus is coming to town."

In this day and age, we're more likely to see a dark Christmas showing than a new Christmas classic.

Having said that, though, Amazon Prime is offering the Eddie Murphy-led *Candy Cane Lane* this year. Based on the trailer, this one appears to include some mischievous elves who trick Murphy's character into a bad deal just so he can win some Christmas decoration competition. I'm sure I'll give it a watch soon to see if it lives up to the hype.

With the idea of Christmas future, we can also come full circle to a film from our Christmas past: *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* (1964). I mentioned this one a couple years ago and it's a film that might make you wish Santa Claws would claw your eyes out. I recommend watching the *Mystery Science Theater 3000* version for some laughs.

Also, last year's *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special*, thanks to the blip, still technically takes place in the future on Disney+. Will Mantis and Drax learn yet again this year that kidnapping a celebrity isn't really a nice Christmas present? You'll have to watch and find out.

Where do you think Christmas future will take us in movies? Will we head to the stars for holidays on alien worlds, or will Hollywood bring back the Christmas classic? Only time will tell.

Our journey reaches its end, not because there aren't any other future Christmas shows to predict, but simply because we're out of time. The sinister magic of Christmas only lasts so long.

With a "Whoah!" and a tug on the reins, the sled slishes back along the streets and slides to a halt at the sidewalk. The skeletal reindeer, which you now realize are just wearing costumes, release their warm breath into the chill air as they begin to rest. "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 have a thrilling good night."