

'Ernest Saves Christmas' is dumb but perfect for younger audiences

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ghosts. Murray, and everyone around him, thinks he is going crazy as the haunting continues. The ghosts come, not late at night, but while he is in public.

David Johanson, aka Buster Poindexter, is the stogie-chomping cab driver Ghost of Christmas Past, Carol Kane is the sadistic and angelic Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Future is a nightmare from the cabinets of Sony and Dr. Caligari.

The original story was meant to be very sentimental, and this is a faithful remake. The film is spiced with Murray's gonzo sense of humor, but don't expect a totally irreverent movie.

All actors give great performances. Even war veteran Robert Mitchum's impression of a block of granite is believable, even funny, in his role as top of the network heap. Also worth mentioning is Bobcat Goldthwait in something parallel to a Bob Cratchet character.

This may be a film to last and join the future Christmas standards like the 1946 classic "It's a Wonderful Life" or the 1983 "A Christmas Story." Director Richard Donner and the writers have not just remade "Christmas Carol," they've totally updated it, claimed it for this generation and century. We may not need another version of this story for many years to come (but bank on several). And if you're a true romantic, you'll cry.

"Ernest Saves Christmas" is dumb fun. It probably won't surprise anyone that it is dumb, but it also can be somewhat fun.

Ernest P. Worrell is a cab driver in Orlando, Florida who happens to pick up Santa Claus at the airport. Santa has flown (by jet, not sled) in to pick his successor. A girl named Pamela, but insists her name is Harmony Star (played by the perfect actress for this season, Noelle Parker), jumps in the cab and the plot.

This Santa is losing his touch. Yes, that's right kids, after a hundred and fifty some years Santa is beginning to forget who wants what, and only new blood can save the magic of Christmas. The new man is a former children's show host now starring in a film about outer-space aliens terrorizing children.

Can Santa find his man, convince him to take the job, and get him started in time to save Christmas? Of course, this is a Disney picture, despite the PG label. It was made by Touchstone Pictures, a pseudonym for "mature" Disney films (but with this picture the definition of mature is stretched down) and was filmed at Disney's Florida studios, it's going to have a happy ending.

With the character of Pamela, an almost grown, hardnosed disbeliever out to grab all she can before someone else takes it, the film contains an element similar to "Miracle on 34th Street," but with Jim Varney as Ernest, the Three Stooges live on 35th, right next to Vern.

Optimists, sentimentalists and dreamers may enjoy this film. Certified curmudgeons should stay home, you'll get sick and the theater won't have time to clean up before the next show. Stay home and staple antlers onto mice's heads.

Not a great film, not sophisticated, not a lot of things. But if you should have the responsibility of entertaining much younger relatives at some time this holiday, this may be a good choice of activity. If you can turn your brain off for an hour and a half, you could do worse, like going to see "The Land

The humor, all of Varney's mugging into the wide-angle lens is mostly directed at a more basic level, but he can be funny on that level, and there are a few chuckles to be had. Varney mugs, and the kids will enjoy that, but his impersonation of stars and a few sly puns seem aimed at keeping the attention of the adult guardians. Director John Cherry targets a lot of the rest of the action at kids but continually throws out interesting bits for an older crowd.

The only question left in my mind is, what about Mrs. Claus, where is she?

"Ernest" may not be long remem-

bered, though it is selling out now and will doubtlessly live on in video. For the greatest effect, if you feel you must, see it at a Sunday matinee with a dozen kids talking and barfing in the row behind you.

But "Scrooged" is deserving of a lot of business now, and perhaps a place in the collective memory. "Christmas Carol" seemed to be in danger of becoming just another empty ritual of the holiday, and "Scrooged" breathes some new life through it's new context (mankind is even more the business of broadcasters). It may not be what you expect, but it is very good. Feel free to sing along at the end.



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