

Viewpoints

More than a century of Christmas Movies

The holiday season and movies go together. This year, major studios planned the release of popular films such as “Lincoln” and “Les Miserables” for the holiday season. Yet, the most popular movies to view during the Christmas season are Christmas-themed movies. Families gather around the television to watch their favorite Christmas classics. Over the weekend, I rewatched one of my favorite Christmas films, “Love Actually,” and I began to consider Christmas films through the decades.

Christmas films date back to the silent film era. In 1910, Thomas Edison produced an adaptation of the Charles Dickens novella “A Christmas Carol.” The Dicken’s classic has since been the basis for more than two dozen movies.

The 1940s were the golden age for Christmas films. The 1940s saw the release of some of the most popular Christmas films of all time.

Near the top of this list is Frank Capra’s “It’s a Wonderful Life” (1946), in which James Stewart’s character George Bailey is given the opportunity to see what the world would have been like without him. In the movie “Holiday Inn” (1942), Bing Crosby introduced the Irving Berlin song “White Christmas” for the first time.

Vincent Minelli’s “Meet Me in St. Louis” gives a 22-year-old Judy Garland the opportunity to introduce the world to the song “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.”

Other memorable films from this period include “Christmas in Connecticut” (1945), “Miracle on 34th Street” (1947), and “The Bishop’s Wife” (1947).

Given the popularity of Christmas films in the 1940s, it is interesting that only a handful of Christmas-themed movies were made in the 1950s. “A Christmas Carol” (1951) was a remake of the Dickens’ story. “The Lemon Drop Kid,” with Bob Hope, introduced the song “Silver Bells.” The Danny Kaye and Bing Crosby movie “White Christmas” (1955) drew upon the popularity of the song Crosby introduced in “Holiday Inn” (1942); many list this film as one of their favorites.

The 1960s saw the rise of animated Christmas films. Although the quality of the animation is primitive by today’s standards, some of these films have become family favorites. Among the favorites are “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” (1964), “A Charlie Brown Christmas” (1965), and “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” (1966).

By the 1970s, some of the movies of prior decades had become classics, and as is often the case, film directors began to remake the classics. “It’s a Wonderful Life” was

remade as “It Happened One Christmas” with Marlo Thomas playing the George Bailey character, Orson Wells playing Mr. Potter and Cloris Leachman playing an angle named Clara Oddbody. “A Christmas Carol” was remade into a musical, “Scrooge,” with Albert Finney playing the title character.

Since 1980, Christmas films have followed divergent paths. The lighthearted romantic comedies of earlier eras have given way to farce, slapstick, and juvenile humor such as that found in “Scrooged” (1988), “National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation” (1989), “The Santa Clause” (1994), “Elf” (2003), and “A Very Harold & Kumar Christmas” (2011).

Other films use Christmas as an ancillary backdrop for events that could take place in any season. I can easily see why many consider the movie “Home Alone” (1990) to be a Christmas film.

On the other hand, I find it a bit surprising that “Gremlins” (1984) and “Die Hard” (1988) sometimes make the list of favorite Christmas films.

Perhaps the most apparent trend in the past three decades is the pervasive use of computer technology in the making of Christmas movies. A list of popular films that could not have been made without computer technology include “The Muppet’s Christmas Carol” (1992), Tim Burton’s “The Nightmare Before Christmas” (1993), Jim Carrey’s “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” (2000), and “The Polar Express” (2004).

Over the weekend, I spoke with a couple who had just introduced their twin four-year-old sons to the “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” movie that was made 44 years before the twins were born.

Other than being a little scared of the Abominable Snowman, the kids loved the movie.

Another friend told me her favorite Christmas film was the version of a Christmas Carol made 10 years ago.

I asked about the specifics of the film to determine which version she was talking about. I found out that she liked the version in which George C. Scott played Scrooge. The film was actually made three decades ago.

Christmas movies have the ability to erase the decades. In a season in which three, four and five generations may be gathered under one roof, erasing time can be a good thing to do.

Christmas movies help to connect the generations.

During the holiday season, I hope you find the time to enjoy one of your favorite Christmas films with someone you love.

Top of Utah Voices



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■ Commentary

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