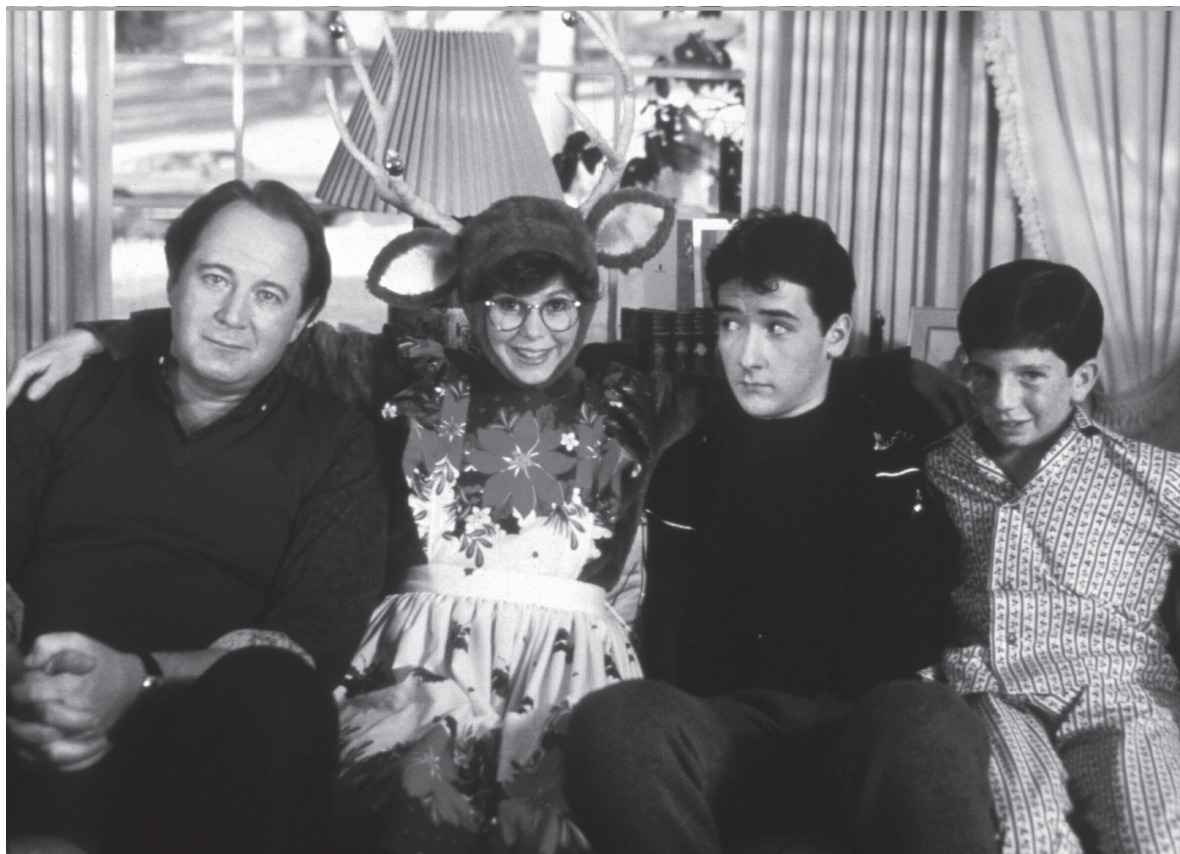

CHAPTER 3



(left to right) David Ogden Stiers, Kim Darby, John Cusack, and Scooter Stevens in *Better Off Dead* (1985).



Like a Bowlful of Jelly

CHRISTMAS COMEDIES

Christmas can make you crazy if you let it—everyone's so busy with social engagements, decorating, buying and wrapping presents, and sending Christmas cards that it's a wonder that more of us don't snap from the stress. Every so often, you just have to stop and laugh at it all.

And besides, aren't some of your favorite Christmas memories the funny ones? Putting gift bows on the dog, recalling elaborate delicacies that didn't make it out of the oven, or swapping stories about the worst gifts ever are always good for some chuckles. (Somewhere in the stacks of my family's slide carousels is a beloved photo combining two terrible gifts we received one year—my brothers and I are holding our noses as we dangle 100% acrylic sweaters over a padded toilet seat.) So don't let the holidays, and that blustery cold-and-flu-season weather, get you down. Give your immune system a break and have some laughs with these hilarious Christmas comedies.

About a Boy (2002)

PG-13; 101 min. Written by Peter Hedges, Chris Weitz, and Paul Weitz, based on the novel by Nick Hornby. Directed by Chris and Paul Weitz. Starring Hugh Grant, Nicholas Hoult, Toni Collette, Rachel Weisz. (Universal Home Entertainment)

Will (Grant) has made a lifestyle out of being unemployed and uncommitted. He lives comfortably off the royalties of “Santa’s Super Sleigh,” a ridiculous Christmas carol written by his father—it’s not unlike the awful but earworm-y “Hooray for Santa Claus” from *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* (p. 184)—and he breezily avoids getting tied down to the women who drift in and out of his stunning but sterile bachelor digs. At one point, Will figures that single moms make the perfect conquests; he comes off better than whatever jerk just dumped her, and then she’ll eventually drop him because she’s not ready to have a man in her life. But then he meets the unstable Fiona (Collette) and her shy, nerdy son Marcus (Hoult) and finds himself actually having to be there for another human being. Is Will ready to leave his old life behind and actually start believing that “no man is an island”?

This sweetly warm and witty adaptation of the wonderful Nick Hornby novel features a passel of terrific performances—Grant has perhaps never been better at playing a shallow cad—and the two Christmas sequences tie the overall plot together perfectly. Even with American screenwriters and directors, this movie feels essentially British, but at the same time, its characters and situations are so recognizable as to be utterly universal. And who would have guessed that Hoult would transform from the awkward tween of this movie to playing much more adult objects of desire on the BBC series *Skins* and in Tom Ford’s *A Single Man* (2009)?

FUN FACTS

- The Weitz brothers are third-generation Hollywood; their grandparents are Mexican screen legend Lupita Tovar and studio-exec-turned-agent Paul Kohner (the couple met when she came to Hollywood to star in the Spanish-language *Dracula* in 1931); their uncle is director-producer Pancho Kohner; their parents are actress Susan Kohner, an Oscar nominee for the remake of *Imitation of Life* (1959), and fashion designer John Weitz.
- Co-writer Peter Hedges must have a thing for holidays—his directorial debut, *Pieces of April* (2003), takes place entirely on Thanksgiving.
- The film's delightful song score was composed and performed by Damon Gough, under his stage name, Badly Drawn Boy. While not Christmas music, it's nonetheless a great soundtrack.
- Will's reference to Haley Joel Osment is something of an inside joke, since Collette played Osment's mother in *The Sixth Sense* (1999).

***Better Off Dead* (1985)**

PG; 97 min. Written and directed by Savage Steve Holland. Starring John Cusack, Diane Franklin, David Ogden Stiers, Kim Darby. (Paramount Home Video)

When Lane Meyer (Cusack) gets dumped by the object of his obsession—girlfriend Beth (Amanda Wyss)—suicide seems like the only option, but his attempts at it all go grandly wrong. Failing to do himself in, Lane decides he'll win her back by skiing the infamous K-12 slope, which has been conquered by just one person: Beth's new boyfriend, the arrogant and obnoxious Roy Stalin (Aaron Dozier). If Lane manages to ski the K-12 without breaking his neck, maybe he'll figure out that the real girl of his dreams is Monique (Franklin),

the French exchange student staying with the weird Smith family across the street.

There's not a whole lot of plot in Holland's feature debut, but what makes *Better Off Dead* such a cult favorite is its wall-to-wall absurdist humor, from the ubiquitous paperboy who chases Lane through town demanding "MY TWO DOLLARS!" to the horrifying food prepared by Lane's mom (Darby) to the girl who's dating the entire basketball team to the claymation hamburger that channels Van Halen. One of the movie's most quoted lines comes when the obnoxious Mrs. Smith (Laura Waterbury) tells Monique, "That's a Christmas present. Do you have Christmas in France?" Then she squeezes the girl's cheeks and screeches, "Chriiist-maaas. CHRIIIST-MAAASSSS!"

FUN FACTS

- The Korean drag racer who impersonates Howard Cosell was dubbed by impressionist Rich Little.
- A character standing behind Beth at the New Year's dance is wearing a striped "Freddy Krueger" sweater—actress Wyss portrayed Krueger's first victim in the horror hit *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984).
- Actor Dan Schneider—who would go on to star in TV's *Head of the Class* before becoming a successful producer of children's television—later noted that he completely improvised Ricky Smith's dorky dance moves.
- Two interesting tidbits from an interview with Holland: The girl who broke his heart in real life called him and said, "I've been in therapy because I saw your movie, and I had no idea." Holland also reveals that Cusack hated the movie. The director screened *Better Off Dead* on the set of his follow-up film *One Crazy Summer* (1986), which also starred Cusack, and Holland claims Cusack came up to him afterwards and said, "You know, you tricked me. *Better Off Dead* was the worst thing I have ever

seen. I will never trust you as a director ever again, so don't speak to me."

***Christmas in Connecticut* (1945)**

Unrated; 102 min. Written by Lionel Houser and Adele Comandini; story by Aileen Hamilton. Directed by Peter Godfrey. Starring Barbara Stanwyck, Dennis Morgan, Sydney Greenstreet, S. Z. Sakall. (Warner Home Video)

Magazine readers coast to coast swear by the homemaking advice of Elizabeth Lane (Stanwyck), who writes about cooking, cleaning, and handicrafts from the beautiful Connecticut estate she shares with her husband and child. What her many fans don't know is that she's a fraud—Elizabeth is unmarried and childless, lives in an apartment in Manhattan, and relies on Felix (Sakall), who owns the restaurant downstairs, to do all her cooking. When war hero Jefferson Jones (Morgan) writes a fan letter to her magazine—he reads her columns while recovering in the hospital (where he's denied solid food)—publisher Alexander Yardley (Greenstreet) decides it would be a publicity coup to have Jones spend Christmas with Elizabeth and her family. To keep her job, Elizabeth's going to have to come up with a fake house, husband, and child—and if that weren't tricky enough, the "married" writer finds herself falling in love with her fan.

Decades before Martha Stewart made us feel inadequate in the kitchen, there were plenty of experts writing about whipping together soufflé for breakfast before building your very own log cabin in the afternoon. So it's something of a relief to find out that, just maybe, some of these home-ec whizzes are really faking it. Stanwyck and Morgan (who looks a lot like *Glee* star Matthew Morrison) have real chemistry, and Greenstreet and Sakall—who both appeared in *Casablanca* (1941)—rank among Hollywood's greatest scene-stealing second bananas. And it definitely says something about America

in 1945 that you could open a breezy romantic comedy with a scene of a U.S. troop ship getting sunk by a U-boat (Jones is one of two survivors).

FUN FACTS

- Arnold Schwarzenegger made his directorial debut with a 1992 made-for-TV remake starring Dyan Cannon and Kris Kristoferson. Suffice it to say that it's no mystery why the governor of California was never asked to direct again.
- If the Connecticut farmhouse looks familiar, it's because the set was also used in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938).
- Like many films that now pop up on TV every December as holiday favorites, *Christmas in Connecticut* wasn't originally released at the end of the year—it opened on August 11, 1945. The film has come to be considered a classic over the years, but Time magazine's critic at the time called it “thoroughly moth-eaten.”
- Sakall, famous for his kind, jowly face, was often credited in films as S. Z. “Cuddles” Sakall, although he apparently hated the nickname.
- In 2007, *Variety* announced that another remake of *Christmas in Connecticut* would go into production.

Comfort and Joy (1984)

PG; 106 min. Written and directed by Bill Forsyth. Starring Bill Paterson, Eleanor David, Clare Grogan. (Currently not available on DVD in the U.S.)

Radio DJ Alan “Dickie” Bird (Paterson) is devastated when, just before Christmas, his beloved girlfriend Maddy (David) walks out on him. (He keeps dreaming of her return, making him all the more depressed when he wakes up alone.) Alan's life seems to be going nowhere, until he finds himself caught between two rival gangs of

ice-cream truck operators. (When Alan starts using his radio show to pass messages between “Mr. Bunny” and “Mr. McCool,” the station manager begins to think Alan is nuts, prompting the boss to ask his lawyer, “Do you think there’s a sanity clause?”) Can Alan use the popular “Dickie Bird” radio show to bring an end to this frozen-treat gang warfare in Glasgow? And will brokering a truce help him to finally get on with his life?

Writer-director Bill Forsyth, at his peak, was one of the great observers of everyday comedy and tragedy. With international favorites like *Gregory’s Girl* (1981) and *Local Hero* (1983), he hit on a perfect formula that involved recognizably human eccentricity, subtle and deadpan wit, and the universal search for love and understanding. One of his best films, *Comfort and Joy* gives us a bleak and rainy Scotland that’s nonetheless suffused with the Christmas spirit, with soggy Santas everywhere. Dickie Bird may feel rejected and alone, but everyone—including the ice-cream thugs who keep destroying his car—asks him for an autograph and to make a request on his popular morning show. Balancing laughs, sweetness, and an underlying tone of melancholy, Forsyth concocted one of the all-time great Christmas movies. Here’s hoping a U.S. video company finally gives this delightful movie the domestic DVD release it so richly deserves.

FUN FACTS

- There was a real “Ice Cream War” in early-1980s Glasgow that inspired this film; it was later suspected that drug dealers, using ice-cream trucks to hide their business, were battling over turf. The subsequent court cases of those arrested for murder in the fracas dragged on for 20 years.
- At a 2001 screening, Forsyth said he removed a scene toward the end of the film that implied the possibility of a romance between Alan and Charlotte (Clare Grogan), the girl from the ice-cream van. Grogan, who also appeared in Forsyth’s *Gregory’s Girl*, is

perhaps best known as the lead singer for Scottish New Wave band Altered Images.

- Forsyth claimed that a major inspiration for his screenplay was the Dire Straits album *Love Over Gold*, so it's no wonder that several lines of dialogue paraphrase lyrics by the band. Forsyth also hired Dire Straits frontman Mark Knopfler to compose the score.
- *Comfort and Joy* was the film selected for the first-ever royal premiere held in Los Angeles, in honor of Britain's Princess Anne in July of 1984.

***Desk Set* (1957)**

Unrated; 103 min. Written by Phoebe and Henry Ephron, based on the play by William Marchant. Directed by Walter Lang. Starring Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, Joan Blondell, Gig Young. (20th Century Fox Home Entertainment)

When efficiency expert Richard Sumner (Tracy) starts sniffing around the research department of the Federal Broadcasting Company TV network, the librarians naturally get suspicious. That department's head, Bunny Watson (Hepburn), knows that Sumner is the inventor of an "electronic brain" called EMERAC, and she worries that if he installs one of his supercomputers, she and research librarians Peg (Blondell), Sylvia (Dina Merrill), and Ruthie (Sue Randall) will all be out of a job. The more time she spends with Sumner, the more Bunny grows to like him, much to the chagrin of network executive Mike Cutler (Young), who starts taking Bunny a little less for granted now that there's a little competition for her affections. After a wild and drunken Christmas party, Sumner's true plans come to light—will Bunny keep her job, and can Sumner win her heart?

Critics at the time dismissed *Desk Set* as a lesser Hepburn-Tracy collaboration, but those of us who grew up watching this movie over

and over on TV feel otherwise. Their famous shared chemistry is firing on all cylinders, as they play exceedingly intelligent people who ricochet brilliantly off each other. (Their rooftop lunch-interview is a little marvel of zingy give-and-take.) The smart dialogue flies fast and furious, and between the laughs you'll find yourself learning interesting trivia tidbits about everything from the island of Corfu to the king of the Watusis. The film's Christmas party sequence is a blast, from Eisenhower-era alcohol abuse and sexual harassment to the constant phone calls from tipsy co-workers demanding the names of Santa's reindeer. (Thank goodness this film is finally available letterboxed on DVD, where Lang's split-screen telephone-call scenes are no longer chopped up incomprehensibly by pan-and-scan.) *Desk Set* is a delectable visit to an era when computers were the size of large rooms and everyone didn't have instant access to the Google.

FUN FACTS

- *Desk Set* screenwriters Phoebe and Henry Ephron are the parents of filmmaker Nora and author Delia.
- While FBC is a fictional network, its offices just happen to be located at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, home of NBC.
- EMERAC stands for Electromagnetic MEMory and Research Arithmetical Calculator.
- The character of Bunny was based on a real-life librarian at CBS, Agnes Law.
- Ray Kellogg, credited with the film's "special photographic effects," went on to direct two famously terrible low-budget monster movies—*The Killer Shrews* and *The Giant Gila Monster* (both 1959)—as well as John Wayne's hooray-for-the-Vietnam-War epic *The Green Berets* (1968).
- Tag line from the film's poster: "Meet the Desk Set . . . From 9 O'Clock Coffee to 5 O'Clock Cocktails—And, Oh, Those Fabulous Christmas Parties!"

***Elf* (2003)**

PG; 97 min. Written by David Berenbaum. Directed by Jon Favreau. Starring Will Ferrell, James Caan, Bob Newhart, Zooey Deschanel. (New Line Home Entertainment)

Buddy (Ferrell) has been raised among the elves at the North Pole, but his height, gawkiness, and lack of toy-making skills make him feel like an outsider. Papa Elf (Newhart), his adoptive father, explains that Buddy crawled into Santa's sack as an infant and that he's really a human. Buddy travels to New York City to meet his father, Walter (Caan), who never knew that Buddy existed. Walter, because of his selfish and unkind management style at a children's book publishing company, is on Santa's Naughty List, but Buddy hopes to reintroduce him to the wonder of Christmas. Buddy wreaks havoc at Gimbel's department store after getting into a fight with their fake Santa ("You sit on a throne of lies!") and eventually feels as out of place in Manhattan as he did in Santa's workshop, despite falling for pretty, kind-hearted Jovie (Deschanel). On Christmas Eve, though, Buddy may be the only person who can bring Walter's family together and help Santa fix his sleigh in time for his annual run.

Who would have imagined that a Christmas comedy in the jaded, cynical 21st century could be hilarious *and* sweet and sentimental *and* appropriate for all ages? Ferrell has made a career out of playing awkward naïfs, and Buddy is hands-down the most bumbling and innocent character he's ever portrayed. The romance between Buddy and Jovie is just lovely—they first bond dueting on "Baby, It's Cold Outside"—and Favreau wisely packs the cast with terrific character actors like Newhart, Caan, Ed Asner (as Santa), and Mary Steenburgen. Anyone who thinks that they don't make Christmas movies like they used to obviously hasn't seen *Elf*, a movie that manages to be both crisply modern and old-school warm and fuzzy.

FUN FACTS

- Favreau asked his friend and producing partner Peter Billingsley to make a cameo appearance as one of Santa's elves—and yes, that's the same Peter Billingsley who starred in *A Christmas Story* (p. 199) 20 years earlier.
- Gimbel's Department Store in New York City went bankrupt in 1987; it surfaces here as an homage to *Miracle on 34th Street* (p. 207).
- The film rushed into production to take advantage of New York City's elaborate Christmas decorations, including the tree at 30 Rockefeller Plaza.
- *Elf* cost \$33 million and grossed \$70 million in its first ten days of release.

***The Hebrew Hammer* (2003)**

R (language, some sexual references and drug use); 85 min. Written and directed by Jonathan Kesselman. Starring Adam Goldberg, Judy Greer, Andy Dick, Mario Van Peebles. (Comedy Central Home Video)

As a child, Mordechai was the only Jewish kid at Saint Peter, Paul and Mary Elementary; he's taunted by the Gentile kids, condescended to by his bigoted teacher, and his dreidel gets stepped on by a street-corner Santa. So Mordechai grew up to be the Hebrew Hammer (Goldberg), a bad mother (shut your mouth!) who owns the streets and defends his fellow Jews. (He also dresses like a cross between a pimp and a rabbi.) When Santa Claus' evil son Damian (Dick) launches a dastardly scheme, the Jewish Justice League enlists the Hammer to save Hanukkah. Teaming up with Esther Bloomenbergensteinthal (Greer), and with a little help from Kwanzaa champion Mohammed Ali Paula Abdul Rahim (Van Peebles), the Hammer hopes to preserve the Festival of Lights—even if it won't impress his mother (Nora Dunn).

An outrageous spoof of 1970s blaxploitation movies and holiday films—*A Christmas Carol's* Tiny Tim (Sean Whalen) is Damian's evil sidekick, who brainwashes Jewish children with pirated videocassettes of *It's a Wonderful Life* (p. 202)—filtered through a hilarious Hebraic sensibility, *The Hebrew Hammer* pretty much invented the Hanukkah Movie genre. (Try getting through Adam Sandler's dreadful animated *Eight Crazy Nights* (2002) sometime, and you'll better appreciate *Hammer's* qualities.) From its tweaking of paranoia about the “worldwide Jewish conspiracy” to the surprise revelation of the Hebrew Hammer's ultimate weapon, this movie keeps the gags coming in a constant barrage. Here's hoping the Hammer will return to save Purim or Shmini Atzeret.

FUN FACTS

- The script originally called for a cameo appearance by Connecticut senator Joe Lieberman, but he turned down the role; another Jewish politician makes a surprise appearance in his stead.
- Goldberg told an interviewer that he knew he had to make the film if for no other reason than to immortalize the line “Shabbat Shalom, mother****er!” onto celluloid.
- Tony Cox pops up as Jamal, one of Santa's elves—*The Hebrew Hammer* played in theaters at the same time as *Bad Santa* (p. 22), which also featured Cox in an elf costume.

Holiday Affair (1949)

Unrated; 87 min. Written by Isobel Lennart, based on the story “Christmas Gift” by John D. Weaver. Directed by Don Hartman. Starring Robert Mitchum, Janet Leigh, Wendell Corey, Gordon Gebert. (Warner Home Video)

During the busy Christmas retail season, Steve (Mitchum) meets Connie (Leigh) when she buys a toy train from the department

store where he works. When she comes back the next day to return it, Steve realizes that Connie is a professional shopper, sent out by a rival department store to compare prices. Because she's a war widow with a son to support and would lose her job if caught, Steve doesn't report her to management—and gets fired himself for his trouble. Steve and Connie grow close as they spend the next few days together, much to the chagrin of her stolid boyfriend Carl (Corey). Can free-spirited Steve win the love of the practical-minded Connie? And will her son Timmy (Gebert) ever be happy to see a new man in his mother's life?

As a friend pointed out, “The only way single mom Janet Leigh would turn down a successful boyfriend for an unemployed bohemian is if the bohemian is played by Robert Mitchum.” So yes, for all of Steve's rootless ways and dreams of moving to California to work on boats, it helps to have the exceedingly charismatic Mitchum play the character. Freudians would have a field day with the way that Connie treats Timmy as the man of the house following her husband's death, to the point where they even call each other “Mr. Ennis” and “Mrs. Ennis.” (When Connie tells Timmy that Carl has proposed, he replies, “If you marry him, you won't be Mrs. Ennis anymore!”) *Holiday Affair* requires a certain suspension of disbelief, but it's worth watching for the crackling chemistry between Leigh (making one of her earliest screen appearances at age 22) and Mitchum, as well as some rather deft comic moments from Corey.

FUN FACTS

- Poster tag line: “Mitchum's latest! It happens in December . . . but it's hotter than July!” Exhibitor guide: “Here's a romantic treat that'll take your heart for a merry sleigh ride—Mitchum playing ‘santa’ [*sic*] to a lovely young widow! And wait'll he finds out the mistletoe's *loaded!*”
- RKO chief Howard Hughes reportedly insisted that Mitchum play the role—a departure from his usual tough-guy characters—to

repair his public image after being arrested for marijuana possession in 1948.

It Happened on Fifth Avenue (1947)

Unrated; 116 min. Written by Everett Freeman, with additional dialogue by Vick Knight; story by Herbert Clyde Lewis and Frederick Stephani. Directed by Roy Del Ruth. Starring Don DeFore, Gale Storm, Ann Harding, Charles Ruggles. (Warner Home Video)

Every Christmas season, millionaire Michael O'Connor (Ruggles) boards up his Fifth Avenue mansion and winters in Virginia. And every year, while O'Connor is out of town, homeless man-about-town Aloysius T. McKeever (Victor Moore) sneaks into his house to stave off the winter cold. When veteran Jim (DeFore) gets evicted from his apartment so that O'Connor's company can tear down the building to put up a skyscraper, Aloysius invites him into the mansion. Soon, they've got lots of company: O'Connor's daughter Trudy (Storm) turns up to get some clothes, and the men assume that she too is impoverished; Trudy becomes smitten with Jim, so she doesn't tell them otherwise. Looking for Trudy, O'Connor and his estranged wife Mary (Harding) wind up joining the household (pretending to be poor and homeless), as do a trio of Jim's old Army pals, with their wives and children. Will O'Connor allow his daughter to marry a man without means? And will Jim want to marry her when she finds out she's related to his wealthy nemesis?

When Senator Joseph McCarthy and his goons set out to look for Communist influence in Hollywood, they no doubt went nuts over *It Happened on Fifth Avenue*, a movie that champions the poor, challenges the rich to rediscover their humanity and generosity, and even celebrates the joy of communal living and the power of collective bargaining. (Jim and his fellow veterans plan to pool their money and purchase an abandoned army base to turn it into

apartments, not knowing that O'Connor and his board of directors have their eye on the same property.) Sadly, co-writer Lewis did eventually find himself blacklisted by the industry after McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, but no matter what your politics, you'll likely be charmed by the sprightly comedy and romance here, even if *It Happened on Fifth Avenue* winds up running a little long. From the sparkling performances to some hilarious bits involving an uneven restaurant table and a moth-obsessed tailor, this is a quirky and sweet holiday movie that deserves discovery.

FUN FACTS

- Many of the cast members went on to successful careers in television: DeFore played "Mr. B" on the long-running sitcom *Hazel*, Alan Hale Jr. (who plays one Jim's vet pals) got lost with the castaways of *Gilligan's Island*, and Storm starred on two hit programs, *My Little Margie* and *The Gale Storm Show*.
- Frank Capra's Liberty Films had originally acquired this story, but eventually abandoned it in favor of what would become *It's a Wonderful Life* (p. 202). The film received an Oscar nomination for Best Original Story but lost to another Christmas movie, *Miracle on 34th Street* (p. 207).
- The film was originally set to open at Christmas 1946 but was delayed for reasons unknown until Easter 1947.
- The song "That's What Christmas Means to Me," which debuted in *It Happened on Fifth Avenue*, became a hit for Eddie Fisher in 1952.

Just Friends (2005)

PG-13; 96 min. Written by Adam Davis. Directed by Roger Kumble. Starring Ryan Reynolds, Amy Smart, Anna Faris, Chris Klein. (New Line Home Entertainment)

In 1995 New Jersey, overweight high school cheerleader Chris (Reynolds) pledges his undying love for his best friend Jamie (Smart) in her yearbook. A jock humiliates Chris by reading his words to everyone at Jamie's graduation party; she twists the knife by telling Chris, "I love you . . . like a brother." The humiliated Chris vows he'll one day become somebody important just to show them all. Ten years later, Chris is a trim and sexy record exec and a ladies' man who treats women like dirt so that they'll sleep with him and never think of him merely as a friend. En route to Paris with moronic celebutante-turned-singer Samantha (Faris), Chris' plane is forced to land in New Jersey, and he decides to spend Christmas in his hometown, with the goal of sleeping with Jamie and breaking her heart. To his surprise, Chris discovers he still loves her—can he win her from their smarmy, folk-singing classmate Dusty (Klein)? Or are Chris and Jamie doomed forever to be just friends?

Nothing is sacred in this ribald comedy, from elaborate holiday lawn displays (which get destroyed, spectacularly) to children (as a group, they tend to be pretty obnoxious in this movie, particularly when it comes to Chris' attempts to woo popular student-teacher Jamie) to the popular tearjerker *The Notebook* (which becomes the punch line of several jokes). While Reynolds is memorable as a formerly fat guy whose efforts to avenge his high school humiliations fall flat, the movie belongs to Faris, an inspired comedienne who takes the nothing role of Paris Hilton-wannabe Samantha and mines it for one brilliant comic moment after another.

FUN FACTS

- One of the DVD's deleted sequences features Reynolds' then-girlfriend, singer Alanis Morissette, as herself.
- To get into the manic frame of mind of her character, Faris reportedly chugged Red Bulls before filming her scenes. Her metabolism probably appreciated the jump start, since temperatures on the film's Saskatchewan set dipped to 58 below.

- The story was inspired by producer Chris Bender, who spent seven years trapped in the friend zone with his future wife before they finally became romantically involved. The production couldn't get legal clearance for the name "Chris Baxter," so they went whole-hog and named the lead character "Chris Brander" in his honor.

***Love Actually* (2003)**

R; 135 min. Written and directed by Richard Curtis. Starring Hugh Grant, Emma Thompson, Alan Rickman, Liam Neeson. (Universal Studios Home Entertainment)

Christmastime in London sets the backdrop for a number of intertwining love stories: Karen (Thompson) worries that her marriage to Harry (Rickman) is falling apart because of his apparent flirtation with his secretary. Two of Harry's employees, Sarah (Laura Linney) and Karl (Rodrigo Santoro), try to muster up the courage to acknowledge their mutual attraction. Karen's brother David (Grant), who happens to be the new Prime Minister, finds himself falling for Natalie (Martine McCutcheon), the girl who brings in the tea. The newly widowed Daniel (Neeson) wrestles with his grief while his young stepson moons over his unrequited love for the prettiest girl in school. A goofy-looking guy travels to America in the hopes that gorgeous American babes will swoon over his British accent. A cuckolded author (Colin Firth) goes to France to work on his new book only to find himself hopelessly besotted with his maid, who speaks only Portugese, while pop singer Billy Mack (Bill Nighy) hopes for some late-in-life validation by scoring the coveted Christmas Number One slot with a cheesy, holiday-themed cover of "Love Is All Around." And so on.

If you're not a fan of the posh quippiness of Richard Curtis, then *Love Actually* isn't the movie to win you over to his charms. But if

you like watching photogenic Brits juggle heartfelt emotion, zippy dialogue, and semi-excruciating social faux pas, you'll have a ball with this movie, which shockingly holds together tightly despite casting out its lines in a million directions. (There are several more subplots not even covered in the synopsis above.) There are laughs, there are tears, and there is the contemporary Western Christmas in all its tinsel glory. It's arguably indefensible on many fronts, but *Love Actually* remains shamelessly entertaining.

FUN FACTS

- Nighy's "Christmas Is All Around" was actually released as a single in the UK at Christmastime on the off chance that it might top the charts in real life. The Wet Wet Wet cover of the Troggs' "Love Is All Around"—featured on the soundtrack of the Curtis-scripted *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994)—was a huge hit in the UK with nine weeks at Number One, so Curtis was making fun of that song's ubiquity by opening *Love Actually* with another version of it.
- Believe it or not, the slender Emma Thompson is actually wearing a fat suit in the film to give her a more average-sized body.
- Two years after *Love Actually* was released, a speech delivered by real-life British prime minister Tony Blair made reference to a press conference that fake PM Grant gives in the film.
- Although this was Curtis' directorial debut, several of the cast members were already firmly entrenched in his repertory company, having appeared in projects he'd written: Grant had previously starred in *Four Weddings, Notting Hill* (1999), and *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001); Thompson co-starred in the Curtis-scripted *The Tall Guy* (1989); and Rowan Atkinson (who turns in a cameo in *Love Actually* as an unctuous salesclerk) goes all the way back to Curtis' television projects, including *Mr. Bean*, *Blackadder*, and *Not the Nine O'Clock News*.

- One of the best barbs in the 2009 political comedy *In the Loop* comes when one character references the Hugh Grant character, telling a would-be political smoothie, “Shut up, *Love Actually!*”

National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation (1989)

PG-13; 97 min. Written by John Hughes, based on his story “Christmas ’59”. Directed by Jeremiah Chechik. Starring Chevy Chase, Beverly D’Angelo, Juliette Lewis, William Hickey. (Warner Home Video)

Clark Griswold (Chase) just wants a picture-perfect family Christmas—is that too much to ask? Apparently, yes. After nearly getting killed on the freeway on his annual tree-gathering trip to the woods, he comes home with a tree so huge it takes out his living room windows and leaves Clark covered in sap. Add to that visits from two sets of squabbling in-laws, the unexpected appearance of his wife’s free-loading bumpkin cousin (Randy Quaid), strings of uncooperative Christmas lights, and the threat of holiday bonuses being withheld by his cheapskate boss (Brian Doyle-Murray), and Clark becomes more manically intent on having the happiest holidays ever, even if it kills him. Or anyone else.

This third entry in the *Vacation* series was the most successful (and, for some time, the highest-grossing film with “Christmas” in the title), and while it doesn’t reach the comic heights of the original movie, *Christmas Vacation* provides insight into the Clark Griswold character and why he fetishizes the idea of perfect family holidays. (Just look at his face as he watches old home movies while trapped in the attic.) The mishaps that befall the Griswold family, from the disastrous decorations to the dreadfully dry turkey to the irritating yuppie neighbors (including Julia Louis-Dreyfus, post-*Saturday Night Live* and pre-*Seinfeld*), feel very recognizable, which is prob-

ably why generations of viewers have made this manic Christmas comedy of errors a holiday favorite.

FUN FACTS

- The eggnog glasses that Clark and cousin Eddie drink from feature Morty Moose, the mascot of Wally World, the amusement park visited by the Griswolds in the original *Vacation* (1983).
- *Christmas Vacation* was another holiday hit for writer John Hughes, released after his Thanksgiving comedy *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1987) and before his Christmas smash *Home Alone* (p. 6). This film is based on his *National Lampoon* story “Christmas ’59,” a follow-up to “Vacation ’58,” the tale that inspired the original movie.
- Frank Capra III, the film’s assistant director, is the grandson of the director of *It’s a Wonderful Life* (p. 202) and *Meet John Doe* (p. 97).
- The Griswold home, located on the Warner Bros. lot, was also used as the Murtaugh family house in the *Lethal Weapon* (p. 253) movies.

Nobody’s Fool (1994)

R (some language and nudity); 110 min. Written by Robert Benton, based on the novel by Richard Russo. Directed by Robert Benton. Starring Paul Newman, Jessica Tandy, Dylan Walsh, Melanie Griffith. (Paramount Home Entertainment)

Charming old wastrel Sully (Newman) rents a room from his fourth-grade teacher Miss Beryl (Tandy), does occasional work for contractor Carl Roebuck (an unbilled Bruce Willis), steals and hides Carl’s snowblower, flirts with Carl’s wife Toby (Griffith), and plays a lot of poker with the colorful characters in his small town of North Bath, NY. But when Sully’s long-estranged son Peter (Walsh) extends his Thanksgiving visit following a spat with his wife, Sully

finds himself having to be a father to the child he'd long neglected and also a grandfather to Peter's son Wacker (Carl John Matusovich). For Sully to break his family's cycle of bad parenting, he's going to have to confront the demons of his own past. And maybe finally fix that front stoop for his landlady.

"God, I love small towns," observes one character. "Where else in the world would they let a guy out of jail for three hours just to serve as a pallbearer?" Adapting Richard Russo's novel, writer-director Benton turns the frigid hamlet of North Bath into an organic, breathing space, as full of busybodies and gossips and rivalries and love affairs and good and bad neighbors as Preston Sturges' Morgan Creek or *Gilmore Girls'* Stars Hollow. In one of the best of his latter-day screen performances, Newman proves he could still play coming-of-age characters, even in a time of life when most actors retire. Griffith and Willis reveal vulnerable, funny sides of themselves rarely captured on film, and then-newcomers Walsh, Pruitt Taylor Vince, and (as a hysterical town cop) Philip Seymour Hoffman demonstrate lots of early promise. *Nobody's Fool* is full of people you'll love getting to know, so don't be surprised to find yourself wanting to visit them every year during the holidays.

FUN FACTS

- Newman and Willis had worked together previously; the latter had been a bit player in *The Verdict* (1982). Willis, who was a major movie star by the time *Nobody's Fool* was released, wanted to downplay his supporting role in the film; his name appears only in the closing credits, and he worked for \$1,400 a week. (He probably lost money on the film, since he bought fur-lined parkas for some members of the cast and crew because of the frigid temperatures on the upstate New York shoot.) Not that Willis didn't exercise his star prerogative: He had producers ship his personal gym from his home in L.A. to the set, and he had a clause in his

contract stating he could leave immediately if his then-wife Demi Moore went into labor.

- Griffith also had a working history with Newman; she made one of her first appearances in 1976's *The Drowning Pool*. Her character's reference to "Bonnie and Clyde" in this movie has significance because Benton co-wrote the legendary 1967 film.
- Tandy died before *Nobody's Fool* reached theaters; the film is dedicated to her.

Nothing Like the Holidays (2008)

PG-13; 98 min. Written by Alison Swan and Rick Najera; story by Robert Teitel and Rene M. Rigal. Directed by Alfredo De Villa. Starring Alfred Molina, Elizabeth Peña, John Leguizamo, Vanessa Ferlito. (Anchor Bay Entertainment)

Like all family reunions, the Rodriguez's Christmas get-together promises to be fraught with drama: Mauricio (Leguizamo) and his wife Sarah (Debra Messing) are squabbling over her putting career ahead of having babies, Jesse (Freddy Rodriguez) is home from the war in Iraq—still carrying a torch for his old girlfriend Marissa (Melonie Diaz)—and unsure if he wants to take over the family *bodega*, while Roxanna (Ferlito) fibs about her success as an actress in Los Angeles. But their parents Anna (Peña) and Edy (Molina) have a bombshell of their own—they're getting divorced.

This charming ensemble comedy vividly brings Chicago's Puerto Rican neighborhood of Humboldt Park to life and includes lots of great local color, including the *parranda*, an annual parade where revelers go from house to house singing Christmas carols, with the group of singers getting larger at each stop. The main strength of *Nothing Like the Holidays* lies with the extraordinary cast, which also includes Luís Guzman, Jay Hernandez, and Manny Sosa. The movie also perfectly nails the noisy dynamic of Spanish-speaking

families—during a loud, squabbly dinner, Sarah asks why everyone is fighting, and Mauricio assures her that they’re “just conversating.” From the way the siblings rib each other and relive old rivalries to the tension between Sarah and Anna about potential grandkids, the relationships come off as smart and credible. Some of the plot twists may feel familiar, but like *This Christmas* (p. 80), this one’s a must for viewers looking for a not-so-white Christmas movie.

FUN FACTS

- Molina is British-born but has used his fluent Spanish to good effect in films like this one and *Frida* (2002). Ferlito is Italian American.
- Despite the fact that Peña plays Leguizamo’s mother, offscreen she’s just three years older than he is.
- Messing and Freddy Rodriguez made their film debuts together in the 1995 melodrama *A Walk in the Clouds*.

Remember the Night (1940)

Unrated; 94 min. Written by Preston Sturges. Directed by Mitchell Leisen. Starring Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray, Beulah Bondi. (Turner Classic Movies/Universal Studios Home Entertainment)

Just before Christmas, shoplifter Lee (Stanwyck) gets nabbed stealing a bracelet. New York City D.A. John (MacMurray), in a hurry to get out of town and attempting to outmaneuver Lee’s attorney, demands that the trial be postponed until January so he’ll have time to get an expert witness. Feeling bad that Lee will be stuck in jail over the holidays, John gets shady character Fat Mike (Tom Kennedy) to bail her out; misunderstanding John’s intentions, Fat Mike hauls Lee up to John’s apartment. An apologetic John takes her to dinner and discovers that they’re both from Indiana, so he offers Lee a ride home to spend Christmas with her family. After a very

chilly reception from Lee's mother (Georgia Caine), John takes her home with him to spend Christmas with his mother (Bondi). John and Lee grow close and discover they're fond of each other—but what's going to happen when they have to return to the courtroom on opposite sides?

It's weird to see Stanwyck and MacMurray playing such a sweet and loving couple after their immortal turn as murderous grifters in the classic *Double Indemnity* (1944), but this time around, they positively sparkle. Their road trip to Indiana has them grappling with everything from cantankerous sheriffs to overly friendly cows, and Lee blossoms with the warm reception she gets at John's house, revealing the woman she might have become under better circumstances. The snappy patter and eccentricity of the best Sturges scripts meshes perfectly with the romance and wit of Leisen (1939's *Midnight*, among many others), resulting in a holiday delight. Long unavailable on home video, the 2009 DVD release of *Remember the Night* will, with any luck, revive its status as a classic.

FUN FACTS

- Trees were stripped of their leaves for the farm sequence; the film is set at Christmastime, but shooting took place in July.
- MacMurray was so tall that he was forced to stand in a hole during the nightclub scene so that the camera could shoot over his shoulder when he introduces Stanwyck to the judge.
- Director Leisen made it a point to cast specific “types” in the supporting roles, since most of them have only a moment to make an impression while Stanwyck and MacMurray dominate throughout.
- This was the last screenplay written but not directed by Sturges; never completely satisfied with what other filmmakers did with his work, Sturges insisted on directing, beginning with *The Great McGinty* (1940). Not that Leisen did badly by him here; according to David Chierichetti's *Hollywood Director*, Leisen trimmed

Sturges' original 130-page screenplay to a more amenable length, excising unnecessary plot points and letting story emerge from character and dialogue. Sturges was presumably happy with Leisen's edits: Of all the films he wrote but didn't direct at Paramount, *Easy Living* (1937) and *Remember the Night* were the only ones he liked enough to purchase 16mm prints.

***Starstruck* (1982)**

PG; 94 min. Written by Stephen MacLean. Directed by Gillian Armstrong. Starring Jo Kennedy, Ross O'Donovan, Margo Lee. (Blue Underground)

Eighteen-year-old Jackie Mullins (Kennedy) dreams of being a singing star, but she's stuck working as a barmaid in a ramshackle Sydney hotel run by her mother Pearl (Lee). Angus (O'Donovan), Jackie's fast-taking 14-year-old cousin, becomes her manager, booking her to sing at an amateur night where she wows both the crowd and guitarist Robbie (Ned Lander), who falls for her. Through Angus' perseverance—which includes him convincing his cousin to do a tightrope walk between two downtown skyscrapers—Jackie gets booked on a popular teen show hosted by Terry (John O'May), whom she hopes to seduce, but it's a double fiasco: Jackie bombs singing a hackneyed ballad that Terry chooses for her, and she belatedly discovers that Terry is gay. Jackie's family celebrates Christmas at the hotel even though it looks like creditors will foreclose on them . . . unless Jackie and Robbie's band can crash Terry's live New Year's Eve talent show at the Sydney Opera House and win the big \$10,000 prize.

Nobody expected Armstrong's follow-up to her international smash hit *My Brilliant Career* (1979)—a literary period piece—to be a candy-colored New Wave musical, but *Starstruck*, like Armstrong's previous feature, follows a strong-willed woman who

overcomes family poverty in order to pursue her artistic dreams. There's a very Mickey-and-Judy "let's put on a show" vibe to the film, and the young performers carry it off charmingly. The songs are terrific as well, from O'Donovan's "I Want to Live in a House" to Kennedy's "The Monkey in Me" to the title tune performed by the Swingers to Kennedy and O'May's "Tough." (The latter number resembles a Busby Berkeley fantasia, complete with a chorus line of Speedo-clad lifeguards swimming with rubber sharks.) North American audiences may find it unusual to see a movie where the sun is shining in December, but no matter what the weather, the Australian *Starstruck* is joyously daffy and toe-tappingly tuneful.

FUN FACTS

- The actor playing the floor manager at the big New Year's Eve broadcast is none other than Geoffrey Rush, a future Oscar winner for *Shine* (1996).
- Phil Judd (whose band the Swingers perform several songs in the film) and Tim Finn of Split Enz wrote the bulk of the music for *Starstruck*.
- Jackie's bit with the kangaroo suit at the amateur night is a shout-out to Marlene Dietrich stripping off a gorilla costume in *Blonde Venus* (1932).
- The stunt double who performed the actual skyscraper high-wire walk fell and had to be hospitalized.
- Kennedy went on to become a director, working in television as well as making several acclaimed short films.

The Sure Thing (1985)

PG-13; 100 min. Written by Steve Bloom and Jonathan Roberts. Directed by Rob Reiner. Starring John Cusack, Daphne Zuniga, Viveca Lindfors, Anthony Edwards. (MGM Home Entertainment)

The closest thing frustrated freshman Walter “Gib” Gibson (Cusack) has had to a date during his first semester of college is a disastrous flirtation with his uptight classmate Alison Bradbury (Zuniga). So when his high school pal Lance (Edwards) calls from California to tell Gib about a “sure thing” waiting for him in L.A., Gib immediately plans to travel cross-country over Christmas break to get lucky. He finds transportation from the ride board on campus, but there are two immediate drawbacks—the drivers (Tim Robbins and Lisa Jane Persky) love to warble showtunes off-key in full volume, and his fellow passenger is Alison, who’s traveling west to spend the holidays with her equally anal-retentive law student boyfriend (Boyd Gaines). The squabbling between Gib and Alison grows so intense that they get thrown out of the car and are forced to hitchhike the rest of the way to California. Through hardships, the two grow very affectionate toward one another, but when Alison discovers the reason behind Gib’s trek, she’s infuriated. When Gib and Alison arrive at their destination, will they separately pursue what they think they want, or will they discover that together they can find what they really need?

The Sure Thing travels in the deeply embedded grooves of Frank Capra’s classic *It Happened One Night* (1934), but this updated spin on the material proves winning and funny enough in its own right. Director Reiner, coming off his smash debut feature *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), gets two exceedingly charismatic performances from his young romantic leads while also peppering the film with great supporting players like Persky, Robbins, and Lindfors (as Gib and Alison’s free-spirited creative writing teacher). While it’s ostensibly a movie about sex—Gib will climb mountains and ford streams for a night with the never-named title character played by the babelicious Nicolette Sheridan—*The Sure Thing* winds up being a love story about two opposites who fall in love not simply because the script dictates it but because, through their misadventures, they discover they’re not quite so opposite after all.

FUN FACTS

- Reiner nods to himself by placing a *Spinal Tap* poster in Gib's dorm room; the director also dubs the voice of the cowboy singing "The Christmas Song" as well as Hercules in the cheesy movie showing on TV at the bus station. ("Stand back! Give Hercules some room!")
- While a student at Brown, co-screenwriter Roberts was one of the authors of the legendary *Official Preppy Handbook*.
- Reiner's fellow '70s sitcom veteran Henry Winkler was *The Sure Thing's* executive producer.
- Steve Pink, who would go on to collaborate with Cusack as a writer and producer of *Grosse Pointe Blank* (1997) and *High Fidelity* (2000) and director of *Hot Tub Time Machine* (2010), makes his acting debut as "Football Player."
- Cusack had to be legally emancipated to make the film, because he hadn't yet turned 18 or graduated high school. Producer Roger Birnbaum became his legal guardian.

***This Christmas* (2007)**

PG-13; 117 min. Written and directed by Preston A. Whitmore II. Starring Loretta Devine, Delroy Lindo, Idris Elba, Regina King. (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment)

For propriety's sake, matriarch Shirley Ann "Ma'Dere" Whitfield (Devine) asks her longtime boyfriend Joe (Lindo) to move out of her bedroom and her house before her kids come home for Christmas, but the Whitfield children all have distractions of their own. Lisa (King), who gave up college to help run the family dry cleaning business, knows something's amiss with her husband Malcolm (Laz Alonso), but doesn't realize that he's cheating on her and cooking up a shady real estate deal on the sly with his mistress. Musician Quentin (Elba) hadn't planned to come home,

but when Chicago mobsters start shaking him down to repay his debt, a trip to L.A. suddenly sounds like a great idea. Jarhead Claude (Columbus Short) has a secret or two of his own; Kelli (Sharon Leal) hopes to find a man; “professional college student” Mel (Lauren London) shows up with Devean (Keith Robinson), one in a series of new boyfriends; and Baby (Chris Brown), the youngest, wants to pursue his dream of being a singer, even though Ma’Dere—having been abandoned by the children’s musician father—forbids it.

There’s a whole lot of plot going on in *This Christmas*, but this breezy comedy never feels overly bogged down by the many characters and mini-dramas coursing through it. Whitmore has a feel for family dynamics, from Lisa and Kelli’s squabbles (which have clearly been going on for years) to the way everyone dotes on Baby to Quentin’s assumption that, as the oldest, he can still lay down the law even though no one’s seen him in four years. Whitmore shares Tyler Perry’s leanings toward melodrama and broad comedy—Lisa’s revenge upon Malcolm is particularly memorable—but while Perry is the bigger box-office draw, Whitmore has a more assured hand as a filmmaker here; *This Christmas* has a lovely glow to it, and the performances are uniformly excellent. There’s a disappointing paucity of African-American Christmas movies—unless you count *Friday After Next* (2002), an exceedingly inferior sequel in the weed-fueled comedy franchise—but here’s a charmer with universal appeal.

FUN FACTS

- Short, Brown, and Alonso had all previously co-starred in the dance movie *Stomp the Yard* (2007)—that film and *This Christmas* were both produced by Will Packer—while Robinson, Leal, and Devine appeared together in the 2006 screen adaptation of *Dreamgirls*.
- *This Christmas* was shot in Victoria Park, a neighborhood in Los Angeles known for its stately and beautiful homes.

- Executive producer Mekhi Phifer turns in a cameo appearance as Gerald, the firefighter with eyes for Kelli.

***29th Street* (1991)**

R; 101 min. Written by George Gallo; story by Frank Pesce and James Franciscus. Directed by George Gallo. Starring Danny Aiello, Anthony LaPaglia, Lainie Kazan. (Anchor Bay Entertainment)

It's Christmas Eve, and Frank Pesce Jr. (LaPaglia) has just won \$6.2 million in the very first New York State Lottery. So why is he furious, pelting snowballs at a church and lamenting his lot in life? That's what the police would like to know, so Frank tells his story: He's been lucky his entire life, ever since the night his mother gave birth to him at a hospital that wasn't the one from their neighborhood, which burned down that night. Frank Sr. (Aiello) doesn't share his son's luck, leaving him frequently in debt to the neighborhood mafiosi because of his gambling habit. After Frank Jr. becomes one of the six jackpot finalists, one of those mobsters offers to buy his lottery ticket in exchange for Frank Sr.'s debts: Will Frank Jr.'s biggest stroke of luck wind up being the one that ruins his life, or will he be able to gamble on a Christmas miracle?

Critics called *29th Street* a mix of *It's a Wonderful Life* (p. 202) and *Goodfellas* (1990), which is as good a description as any—for all its wiseguys and Little Italy color, the movie maintains a consistent sense of family ties, neighborhood togetherness, and holiday charm. You won't find much plot here, but there's a wonderfully odd (and heartwarming) sense of humor that permeates the proceedings. Frank Jr.'s luck is truly something to behold—his earnest attempts to answer the questions at his draft-board physical are so loopy that he winds up getting a psychiatric dispensation, and when he gets stabbed, the wound points doctors to a tumor in his ribs they

probably would have otherwise missed. Craziest of all, this is a true story—the real Frank Jr. even co-stars in the film as his own brother.

FUN FACTS

- Despite the film's New York setting, much of the shooting took place in Wilmington, N.C. Many of the real-life neighborhood characters who grew up with Pesce flew down to appear in the film.
- After Gallo made a deal to make a movie telling Pesce's story, actor James Franciscus (star of TV's *Mr. Novak* and *Naked City*) came up to Gallo at a party and informed him that, because of money Franciscus had loaned to Pesce years earlier, he owned 51% of Pesce's life story. And so Franciscus received co-story and associate producer credits. Pesce had apparently also sold his life story to producers Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer (*The Ref*, p. 46), who also get credits in the film.
- The project was born when Pesce played a supporting role in *Midnight Run* (1988), which Gallo wrote. He entertained cast and crew between takes telling the story of his life, and Gallo decided it was a tale worth filming.