

HOME THEATER

Away from home for the holidays



'Last Holiday' (2006)

Wayne Wang's "Last Holiday" is akin to a Hallmark Channel movie — albeit, amped up with star power and a bigger budget. Queen Latifah stars as Georgia, a sweet soul living in New Orleans who dabbles in cooking, sings in the church choir and works at a department store, where she happily does cooking demonstrations for elderly customers and crushes on fellow employee Sean (LL Cool Jay).

Just before Christmas, Georgia learns she has only weeks to live. She then does what *anyone* in a movie would do — cash out her retirement holdings and embark on a spending spree at a ridiculously expensive hotel in Prague. There, down-to-Earth Georgia is the hit of the filthy-rich set, and becomes endeared to the hotel's internationally famous chef (Gerard Depardieu). Giancarlo Esposito is a slippery politician and Timothy Hutton plays a Scrooge-like tycoon.



'Planes, Trains and Automobiles' (1987)

Steve Martin plays Neal Page, an aloof advertising executive who is accustomed to the finer things: He has a McMansion, a beautiful wife, three perfect kids, nice duds and an expensive watch. His polar opposite is Del Griffith (John Candy), a plus-size traveling shower-ring salesman who seems to know a motel proprietor, cabbie or trucker in every city. While not intentionally obnoxious, Del would grate on the nerves of the most saintly travelers among us.

A series of mishaps puts this unlikely duo on an odyssey that traverses many teeming interstates and seedy back roads, in several modes of (usually unreliable) transportation. The comedy springs from the contrast between the two men, which Martin and Candy play to perfection.

Schmaltz alert: It's a John Hughes movie, so a tear or two may slip while watching "Planes, Trains and Automobiles."



'Joyeux Noel' (2005)

Amid bloodshed and death in muddy, freezing trenches during World War I, a miracle occurs: a temporary Christmas Eve cease-fire. It is tacitly agreed upon among German, French and Scottish forces. The cease-fire is arrived at by degrees; it starts with a bagpipe performance by a Scottish chaplain (Gary Lewis) that is overheard by the Germans.

When German trenches are visited by an opera-star couple (Benno Fürmann and Diane Kruger), they too sing loudly enough to be detected by the opposition. Then Fürmann ventures into shooting range singing "O Come All Ye Faithful" (in German) bearing a small Christmas tree.

Based on a true story, the multi-lingual "Joyeux Noel" (from French writer-director Christian Carion) is heart-breaking and beautiful in its depictions of both the horrors of war and the blessings of Christmas.



'White Christmas' (1954)

World War II buddies Bob Wallace (Bing Crosby) and Phil Davis (Danny Kaye) become Broadway sensations in civilian life. To get workaholic Bob to take a breather — and get a little break himself — Phil plays Cupid, attempting to set up Bob with a lady friend. The boys catch the act of the singing Haynes Sisters, Betty (Rosemary Clooney) and Judy (Vera-Ellen). There's a spark between Bob and Betty, which is fine with Phil and Judy, who form an alliance, scheming to nudge the flicker into a full-fledged fire.

The girls get a booking at a Vermont resort that happens to be owned by Bob and Phil's old general (Dean Jagger). The problem: Vermont is having a freak dearth of snow — at Christmastime, yet — which puts a hurt on reservations.

Michael Curtiz's glossy, colorful, VistaVision movie musical extravaganza is all about World War II nostalgia.



'Elf' (2003)

In Jon Favreau's crowd-pleasing comedy, Will Ferrell plays Buddy, an exuberant elf who, for reasons that elude him, is suspiciously taller than his fellow elves. With the blessing of his papa elf (Bob Newhart), Buddy leaves the North Pole on a journey of self-discovery.

Buddy lands in Manhattan, where he finds employment in a field for which he is eminently suitable: as a department-store elf. Awkward Buddy falls in love with a fellow employee (Zoey Deschanel) and finds his birth father in a no-nonsense publishing executive (James Caan) who, upon meeting Buddy, would clearly prefer to deny paternity.

Look for a nod to Rankin/Bass (the production company behind the TV special "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer") via animated animals. Hankie moment: When Caan finally, unreservedly acknowledges Ferrell as his son.



'Christmas in Connecticut' (1945)

Imperious publisher Alexander Yardley (Sydney Greenstreet) compels his lifestyle columnist, Mrs. Elizabeth Lane (Barbara Stanwyck), to prepare Christmas dinner for returning war hero Jefferson Jones (Dennis Morgan). And she's to do so at the fabulous Connecticut farmhouse she writes about so vividly in her columns. Trouble is, there is no farmhouse, no husband ... and Elizabeth can't cook.

But she *does* have a well-to-do suitor (Reginald Gardiner) who owns such a farmhouse, and a restaurateur friend (S.K. Sakall) willing to pose as her uncle — and do all the cooking. With that twist-happy setup, is it any wonder that once Elizabeth and Jefferson lay eyes on each other, they are both smitten? Peter Godfrey's "Christmas in Connecticut" is a romcom with subtle hints of bedroom farce.

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