

Too much holiday spirit nips laughs in 'Four Christmases'

Contributed by Tim Riley
Saturday, 29 November 2008

FOUR CHRISTMASSES

(Rated PG-13)

Vince Vaughn is a funny guy, particularly when he's sarcastic and aggravated, as was the case in "Dodgeball" and "Wedding Crashers," to name some of his recent films.

More recently, during last season's holiday time to be precise, Vaughn starred in the Christmas-themed flop "Fred Claus." His track record for holiday cheer takes another hit with "Four Christmases," not the worst of holiday comedies. Nevertheless, it's not likely to be fondly remembered one year hence, and we can only hope that he's not in search of a yuletide trifecta.

More than anything, "Four Christmases" appears to be derailed by a lack of chemistry between Vaughn and Reese Witherspoon, playing respectively the unmarried yuppie couple of Brad and Kate.

Supposedly, Brad and Kate are this happy San Francisco couple who so abjure any relations with their dysfunctional immediate families that they go out of their way to avoid them during the holidays. The reason for such negative feelings becomes apparent only too well on one fateful Christmas day.

According to custom, they ditch their families on Christmas by slipping out of town to some exotic beach locale, on the pretext that they are devoted to an altruistic mission in a far-flung Third World country.

Things go horribly wrong when they are trapped at the San Francisco airport by a fog bank so thick that every outbound flight is canceled indefinitely. Through another unfortunate circumstance, their ploy for a getaway falls apart, and they have no choice but to redeem themselves by visiting all families in one day.

As they are both the children of divorced parents, Brad and Kate are now expected to show up at four households in a single day. Bracing themselves for a marathon of homecomings, they expect the worst, and that's the way it turns out.

The first encounter, and certainly the most physically taxing one, is with Brad's crotchety redneck father Howard (Robert Duvall) and his older brothers, Denver (Jon Favreau) and Dallas (Tim McGraw). Brad's siblings have not matured emotionally, and since they are aspiring cage fighters, Brad becomes the brunt of their impromptu demonstration of an Ultimate Fighting Championship smackdown.

A visit to Kate's mother Marilyn (Mary Steenburgen) entails its own set of embarrassments. First, Kate's sexpot sister Courtney (Kristin Chenoweth), whose cleavage suggests a Playboy model, divulges secrets about Kate's childhood. A couple of Kate's aunts cast lascivious stares in Brad's direction, while Kate's mom reveals she's dating the pastor (Dwight Yoakum) of her church. Then, they all head off to the church for an awkward Christmas pageant where Brad and Kate are pressed into service as Joseph and Mary.

The next stop to visit Brad's mother Paula (Sissy Spacek) hardly fares any better. An aging hippie flower-child type, Paula causes a great deal of consternation when it is revealed she is now living with one of Brad's childhood buddies. Not only is this discomfiting, it threatens to erupt in some sort of unwelcome confrontation. Topping off the visit is the playing of a board game that turns ugly when Brad and Kate blurt out responses that expose hidden feelings.

By the time Brad and Kate reach the final destination of the Lake Tahoe retreat of Kate's father Creighton (Jon Voight), their relationship has not survived the uncomfortable road trip.

For his part, Creighton tries to explain some of the mistakes he made in his life and as a father. He's so thoughtful and sincere that he seems out of place with all the other dysfunctional characters.

The unavoidable conclusion is that "Four Christmases" seeks to end on an emotionally satisfying note, hoping to find redemption.

In terms of style and substance, "Four Christmases" is as impaired and out of sync as the odd sort of characters it lampoons. Veering from slapstick comedy to heartfelt emotion, this is a film in search of a cohesive theme, which in itself is a challenge because the screenplay is the product of four writers.

On the plus side, Vince Vaughn has more than a few funny moments, and the cast consists of an all-star lineup who performs well enough despite the obvious handicaps.

"Four Christmases" is not a complete fiasco, but it certainly doesn't need to be on anyone's must-see holiday list.

DVD RELEASE UPDATE

Last week, I shared with you my desire to obtain the "Pink Panther Ultimate Collection" box set. Now, I must add to my Christmas list a vintage TV series.

"The Man From U.N.C.L.E.: The Complete Series," which aired on NBC from 1964 through 1968, was recently issued in a nifty attaché case. The funny thing is, though, this whole set was first released a year ago, but could only have been purchased through Time Life's mail order. Now the spy spoof adventures of Robert Vaughn's Napoleon Solo and David McCallum's Illya Kuryakin may be bought, I presume, at Wal-Mart or Circuit City.

I don't know about you, dear reader, but I have this quaint old-fashioned notion of purchasing something I can hold in my hands, perusing its packaging and reading the promotional advertisements on the outside. Besides, when this set was advertised by Time Life, it had a list price of around \$250, a steep price for a mail order item.

Tim Riley writes film and television reviews for Lake County News.

{mos_sb_discuss:5}

