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## THE MIX

## THEY SAID IT

**EBENEZER SCROOGE:** "What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money?"

# Dreaming of Dickens



PHOTO COURTESY OF KRT CAMPUS

The timeless tale of Ebenezer Scrooge's yuletide transformation still lives on in the hearts and minds of the young and old, both on the page and the big screen.

## Film adaptations of Charles Dickens' classic 'A Christmas Carol' shine during the holidays

BY AARON MEHAFFEY  
THE GAMECOCK

Christmastime is upon us. And like every season, it has its own accompanying assortment of movies. However, while each Christmas brings new movies to the theater, this time of year is usually celebrated with old classics.

And what Christmas story could possibly be more classic than Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol"? The unforgettable tale of Ebenezer Scrooge's ghostly enlightenment and absolution is one that will never be absent from our minds and hearts during the winter holidays. Naturally, the adaptation of this book into a big-screen feature is sure to be on almost everyone's list of top Christmas tales.

However, considering that it is such a legendary piece of literature, did Hollywood assume that a single film version would suffice? Hardly. Beginning in 1908, Dickens' masterpiece has been getting year after year of screen time. Many popular TV series also have adapted the story of Scrooge as their own — television versions have featured Mickey Mouse, the

Looney Tunes, the Flintstones and the Jetsons, among others. And, almost inevitably, comedic parodies followed, such as Bill Murray's "Scrooged." But truly, nothing beats the original. There are three adaptations of the classic tale that stand out.

The first of these is the version starring such talented thespians as Michael Caine and the inimitable Kermit the Frog. "The Muppet Christmas Carol" (1992) is arguably the most successful musical version of the story. Borrowing heavily from the 1970 adaptation starring Albert Finney and Alec Guinness, the Muppets' version was far more faithful to the book itself, capturing some of the most memorable moments in all their dramatic glory. The acting on the part of Scrooge himself, portrayed by Michael Caine, is of undeniably high quality. He delivers what is possibly the greatest performance of Scrooge's breakdown scene — Scrooge sees his own headstone in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

Also, the Ghost of Christmas Present's musical sequence perfectly captures the book's depiction of the spirit's infectious hap-

piness. And, of course, there is the wonderfully comedic twist of including Charles Dickens, the omniscient narrator himself, in the cast as portrayed by the great Gonzo. A wonderfully dramatic and perfectly humorous version of the story, this musical adaptation is a Christmas must-see for any family.

Another notable film version of Dickens' book is the 1984 TV version starring George C. Scott, one of Hollywood's finest. Frank Finlay's portrayal of Jacob Marley's ghost is utterly haunting. Unlike Alec Guinness or Stadler and Waldorf — the Marley Bros. from the Muppet version — Finlay plays the part with the pain of dire frustration, sobbing between lines and yelling through clenched teeth. The on-screen depiction of the spirit of Christmas Yet to Come is equally frightening, drawing on atmospheric effects such as lightning and music.

The cast includes Roger Rees and David Warner as Fred Holywell and Bob Cratchit, respectively. Their parts truthfully capture the nature of Dickens' characters, and they act with enough honesty — despite some

exaggerated sequences — that they are believably real people. Warner is relatable to any loving father, and Rees could be the treasured friend we all know. This version is probably the most intense adaptation as well as the most frightening — and, ironically, the one with the happiest ending.

Still, quite possibly the best version of the story comes to us from Great Britain and was released in 1951. Simply entitled "Scrooge" and starring Alastair Sim, this version, while lacking the visual effects of modern films, is arguably the most dramatic and touching of all the film adaptations. Filmed in black and white, the movie makes remarkable use of shadow to increase the eeriness of both the arrival of Marley's Ghost and the scenes involving the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Furthermore, there is an appreciable use of classic Christmas carols in the musical score itself, such as a soft instrumental rendition of "Silent Night" heralding the appearance of the Ghost of Christmas Past. This version also added to the original story but not without due cause. The added parts, each taken from lines in the book, define Scrooge's char-

acter more definitely.

The film's emotional atmosphere is what makes it a standout. The most touching scene in the movie is at the end during Scrooge's revelation. When he goes to his nephew Fred's Christmas party, he quietly creeps in. He hears the party in the next room, but he hesitates before he goes in until he is nodded on by the servant girl. He is not ashamed that he is there but rather that he has never been there before. Unlike every other version, Fred is surprised to see his uncle but not confused. He acts as though he has made the invitation every year without fail (as he says he has) and has expected to see his uncle accept the invitation every year. It remains an intensely heartwarming sequence.

All in all, "A Christmas Carol" is a timeless story that is best enjoyed on page. But these film adaptations offer their own wonderful spins on the tale's magic. All three of the above titles are now available on DVD and would make great stocking stuffers for holiday movie-lovers.

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## MOVIE REVIEW

## 'Santa' holds hatred, heart

**"BAD SANTA"**  
★★★★ out of ★★★★★

BY STEVEN VAN HAREN  
THE GAMECOCK

Anyone who has ever been dragged into a late-night movie with less-than-optimistic expectations knows what it feels like to cling to the outside possibility that the acting will be decent. With the recently released "Bad Santa," that chance lies with "Slingblade" whiz Billy Bob Thornton, who maybe — just maybe — can lift holiday spirits in spite of a seemingly ill-conceived film.

He does just that, tugging on viewers' twisted funny bones and heartstrings at exactly the same time.

Thornton plays Willie, an alcoholic curmudgeon with a charred cinder for a heart. He makes his money by posing as a department-store Santa in order to rip stores off. Willie's only "friend" is a hostile midget named Marcus (Tony Cox) who acts as his elf and partner in crime.

Willie draws the attention of an inquisitive 8-year-old named Thurman (a wonderfully odd Brett Kelly) who naively allows the soulless St. Nick to stay with him and his caretaker grandma in their huge house. Sue (Lauren Graham), a bubbly bartender that is drawn to Willie in a very curious way, drops by occasionally. The three begin to morph into an ad-hoc family unit.

On some perverse level, we would all love to see a hung-over Santa donning a fake beard and kicking over Christmas displays in front of kids. "Bad Santa" lets us indulge this fantasy. Thornton hilariously spits at, swears at and swindles everyone he sees, providing much of the physical comedy. Tony Cox lends to the film's verbal comedy as he chides Willie to get his act together for the big heist.

The film features a motley supporting cast, including two great characters played by Bernie Mac and, in his last big-screen performance, John Ritter. However, Thornton, Graham and Kelly completely draw the viewer in.

One of the most touching aspects of the film is that these imperfect characters are allowed to be sincere. Even though Graham gets it on with Thornton 20 minutes after they meet, she still develops feelings for him. When she meets Thurman, she tells Willie how much she loves kids.

Don't get me wrong — "Bad Santa" is a vulgar comedy. The

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# Holiday season storms the big screen

BY PAT CAULEY  
THE GAMECOCK

It's the time of year again when studios try to pack movie theaters across the country for the holiday season. The trick is finding out which films are worth seeing. Four big films came out this past weekend that all seem to be worth a look. "Bad Santa" is the newest film from director Terry Zwigoff, and it stars Billy Bob Thornton, Bernie Mac and the late John Ritter.

The film is about two con men that work in a department store as Santa and an elf, all the while making plans to rob the store. Willie (Thornton) is almost always drunk throughout the film and uses profanity as freely as the alcohol. This drunken Santa heist tale makes for a dark comedy at best and is only suitable for

teenagers and adults.

Also out this weekend is Ron Howard's "The Missing," starring Cate Blanchett and Tommy Lee Jones. The film takes place in New Mexico in 1885, where Maggie (Blanchett) is a single mother whose daughter is kidnapped. The film is an exciting, well-crafted thriller from director Ron Howard. Howard uses striking cinematography to bring out the "mise-en-scene" beauty of the landscape. This extremely violent film seems to be one not to miss.

The other two big films that came out this weekend were "Timeline" and "The Haunted Mansion." "Timeline," based on the best-selling novel by Michael Crichton, is a film about time travel starring Paul Walker. Early buzz indicates this is one of those situations where the

book is immensely better than the film. Walker's acting apparently goes flat and hurts the whole project, which comes as somewhat of a letdown since Crichton is the mind behind such novels-turned-movies as "Jurassic Park" and "The Lost World" — but then again, everyone can remember how awful "Congo" was.

On the other hand, "The Haunted Mansion" is a children's film based on the ride of the same name at Disney World. The film stars Eddie Murphy, and although it ignites a few laughs and scares, the whole family would be better off venturing to see other projects currently in theaters such as those from various "Saturday Night Live" veterans.

Those other projects include

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PHOTO COURTESY OF KRT CAMPUS

Will Ferrell stars in "Elf," one of the latest crop of holiday films to jingle its way into theaters.