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Michael Giltz

Posted December 16, 2008 | 05:01 PM (EST)

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DVDs: Holiday DVD Roundup

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For many of us, our holiday traditions include things like caroling, parties, opening one gift on Christmas Eve and other perennials done in a certain way probably because our parents and grandparents did it that way too. But new traditions arrive: a CD that's always placed on repeat and often a TV special or movie we watch yet again. You used to have to wait for your local TV station to rerun *It's A Wonderful Life* or *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Now you can catch it online or buy your own copy on DVD. Some people stick to those genuine holiday-themed

shows while others like to roam far and wide by making unlikely titles like *Die Hard* and *Fanny & Alexander* part of their unconventional holiday must-dos. This column isn't a rundown of all the classics: it's a collection of the titles that have been repackaged and reissued or put out for the first time in the last few months. So here are some old friends and some new ones that hope to join them as part of your holiday tradition.

YOU'LL POKE YOUR EYE OUT -- Like the Jimmy Stewart gem *It's A Wonderful Life*, the sweet comedy *A Christmas Story* has drilled its way into our holiday memory thanks to marathon showings on TV. The fact that it's from the director of *Porky's* gives this gentle film a racy edge it otherwise happily avoids. Actually, this modest 1983 hit was made on a shoestring and it shows. But the narration is so witty and the cast led by Peter Billingsley so spot-on it doesn't matter. The bb gun, the visit to Santa at the mall, the scandalous table lamp, the bunny pajamas -- they can't help but make you smile. This *Ultimate Collector's Edition* (\$39.98; Warner Bros.) includes a widescreen and chopped up pan and scan version (though why anyone would want the inferior full-screen version in this day and age is beyond me), lots of extras including author Jean Shepherd reading some of his work, a chef's apron, cookie cutters inspired by the movie and it all comes in a cookie tin. For many of us, an essential.

THE MAN IN BLACK -- Johnny Cash hosted four holiday TV specials from 1976-1979, and all of them are collected in *The Johnny Cash Christmas Specials* (\$49.98; Shout). You get 66 musical numbers by Cash and his family and friends on four discs. The styles range from downhome

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intimacy the first year to a Los Angeles soundstage the third year complete with then rising comic Steve Martin doing variations on his biggest routines. Whenever Cash is centerstage with a guitar, nothing could be better and lots of guest stars keep this lively if somewhat dated in a charming, 70s variety hour way. Chris Isaak's shiny white suit gives the Man in Black a run for his money and *Chris Isaak Christmas* (\$19.99; Koch) is a pure winner. I loved his TV show on Showtime and Isaak's droll humor and ironic sincerity (is that even possible) make him an ideal host as he rocks his way through holiday gems with his band and guests like Michael Buble and Stevie Nicks.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH -- If you've watched those holiday favorites once too often and want to give 'em a rest, the blandly packaged *Classic Holiday DVD Collection Volume 2* (\$29.98; Warner Bros.) is a great bargain with four little known flicks from the 40s and 50s. *All Mine To Give* is about th eldest sibling of six orphans who finds a home for each of his brothers and sisters during pioneer days. *It Happened On 5th Avenue* is about a bum who takes over a rich man's mansion and invites his friends along. *Blossoms in the Dust* is a three hankie affair about Greer Garson as a woman who founds an orphanage after she loses her own child. And best of the lot is Robert Mitchum in *Holiday Affair*-- he plays an unemployed clerk who splurges on a train set for a little boy he hardly knows. The big softie!

CLASSIC TV, SMARTLY PACKAGED -- Special Christmas episodes are a tradition on TV, especially for sitcoms. *TV Sets: Holiday Treats* (\$12.98; Paramount) has an ugly cover but don't let bad wrapping fool you into missing out on this bargain. It collects eight holiday-themed episodes of hit shows from the 60s to the 90s, ranging from *The Andy Griffith Show* (Andy and Barney throw a Christmas party for a prisoner) to *The Honeymooners* (Ralph sells his bowling ball to get Alice a nice gift) to *The Brady Bunch* (mom gets laryngitis. Other shows include *I Love Lucy*, *Taxi*, *Family Ties*, *Wings* and *Frasier*. *Doris Day: Christmas Memories* (\$14.98; MPI) contains three holiday episodes from her sitcom but what really won me over were the extras: commentary from Day herself (who is LONG overdue for an honorary Oscar), newsreels of Day, and holiday episodes of her radio show. *A Shari Lewis Christmas* (\$9.98; S'More) also is generous. You get her three holiday shows (best for old folks looking to get nostalgic and the very young), plus another one from her local New York show *Hi Mom*, and a theatrical trailer offering a Christmas greeting from Lewis and Lamb Chop. Finally, if the relatives are getting on your nerves, you can fantasize about murder and escape America with *Lovejoy Christmas Specials* ((\$24.98; BBC Video). It contains two 90 minute movies set during the holidays -- one in Prague and the other in North Carolina and if spending Christmas with Ian McShane seems odd, you've been watching too much *Deadwood*.

WOULD-BE TV CLASSICS MAKE THEIR CASE -- Five new specials hope to get lodged in your brain and at least two of them might just do it. *A Colbert Christmas: The Greatest Gift Of All* (\$19.99; Paramount) pretended to mock those Bing Crosby specials from the 70s but in fact loved them and did its best to recreate their silly charm, thanks to some fine original songs and musical guests like Elvis Costello, Feist, Willie Nelson and even a singing Jon Stewart. *Wonder Pets: Save The Nutcracker!* (\$16.99; Paramount) is a clever way to introduce that classic ballet's music to a toddler and the three other episodes included ain't holiday themed but will surprise adults who haven't sampled this silly, musically sophisticated show yet. I love *Sesame Street* and Dora The Explorer is better than GPS in my book, but *Elmo's Christmas Countdown* (\$14.93; Genius) and *Dora Celebrates Three Kings Day* (\$16.99; Paramount) are both DVDs the kids can watch while I'm in the next room cooking or playing video poker or something. And while I've never been a big fan of the *Shrek* movie franchise, I was very pleasantly surprised by the TV special *Shrek The Halls* (\$19.99; Dreamworks). It's priced too high for a 22 minute TV episode but it cut back on the incessant pop cultural references and created a genuinely delightful holiday gem.

OLD VS. NEW AND BLACK/WHITE VS. COLOR -- Why anyone would watch the live action Jim Carrey version of *Dr. Seuss' How The Grinch Stole Christmas* when the animated TV special is so perfect is beyond me. But if you don't own it and want it, this *Limited Edition Collectible Gift Set* (\$34.98; Universal) contains loads of extras and a snow globe to boot. Similarly, why anyone would want a colorized version of *Holiday Inn* (the Bing Crosby flick that introduced "White Christmas") is also a head-scratcher but this new edition (\$26.98; Universal) has a lovely new black and white print, a colorized version you can hand off to someone you don't like and a CD with 12 songs from the soundtrack including "Happy Holidays."

MORE HOLIDAY HOPEFULS -- Among the other titles with holiday themes that strove for classic status (but fell short) are *Thomas Kinkade's Christmas Cottage* (\$19.98; Lionsgate); *Jim Henson's The Christmas Toy* (\$14.98; Lionsgate/Hit) which is minus the Kermit bookend; Rankin

"Washington Unplugged"

Arianna was on CBS' "Washington..."

Alex Leo The "Real Housewives Of New York City" Flowchart Of Hate

I'm a little embarrassed to love this show as much as...

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John Oliver was upset enough to drop his monocle when he...

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Obama held a conference packed with press from around the world on Thursday. He called...

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On Thursday's episode of "Mad Money" host Jim Cramer declared that the depression...

Scientists Find Rocket Fuel Chemical In Infant Formula

ATLANTA — Traces of a chemical used in rocket fuel were found in samples of...

Least Wasteful Cities In America (SLIDESHOW)

It's great to love the city you live in, and better to

Bass's 1979 *Jack Frost* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.); the crusty priest in a new town fable *Noelle* (\$29.98; Paramount); Vince Vaughn's clever concept but poorly executed comedy *Fred Claus* (\$28.98; Warner Bros.) and the so-so animation and storytelling of *Christmas Is Here Again* (\$14.98; Screen Media). *The Flight Before Christmas* (\$19.98; Genius/Weinstein), *My Little Pony's A Very Minty Christmas* (\$16.99; Paramount) and *Strawberry Shortcake's Holiday Dreams* (\$26.98; Fox).

THE BEST OF THE BEST -- And then of course, there are the stone cold classics, which any decent soul should own because why should you have to wait til December to watch them? *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.) is the gold standard, of course. This edition includes *It's Christmastime Again*, *Charlie Brown* and a making-of featurette. Then there's *Classic Christmas Favorites* (\$39.98; Warner Bros.) which contains a generous 10 specials on four discs including the Chuck Jones TV masterpiece *Dr. Seuss' How The Grinch Stole Christmas*, the Rankin Bass gem *The Year Without A Santa Claus* and eight more.

So what's the one movie or TV special you can't miss every year?

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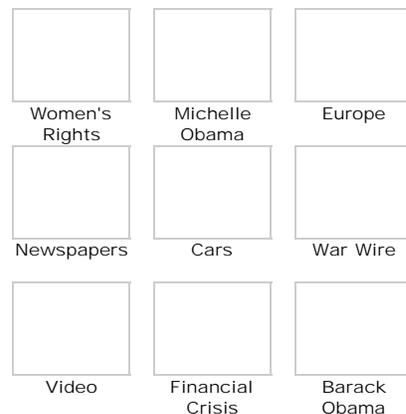
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Oops. I just noticed "Scrooge" was discussed in a previous comment. Well, add me to the list of

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Affairs to remember: Farley Granger bedded Ava Gardner, Shelley Winters, and Leonard Bernstein. In his autobiography, Include Me Out, Hitchcock's muse ... (The national gay & lesbian newsmagazine)
by Michael Giltz

admirers.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 02:40 PM on 12/18/2008

BigCheese [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of BigCheese](#) [permalink](#)

I'm surprised no one has mentioned "A Christmas Carol."

The 1951 British film "Scrooge" starring Alistair Sim is essential viewing in our house at Christmas. He was definitely the best Scrooge to ever grace the big screen -- a real mean bastard at the beginning, but barely able to contain his own joyous compassion by the film's end. The rest of the movie holds up very well -- even the primitive special effects. And hardcore fans of classic British cinema & TV will enjoy seeing some familiar faces in the supporting cast like Michael Hordern and a very young Patrick MacNee (aka "John Steed" of The Avengers).

"Scrooge" was finally given a proper DVD release a few years ago. The film itself looks great, but the DVD extras are pretty much worthless. There is a second disc with a colorized version of the film (gag!) and an awkward commentary with the actor who played the "young" Ebenezer Scrooge which isn't particularly informative or entertaining. But the movie is so good, I still consider this disc a "must-own."

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 02:38 PM on 12/18/2008

BlackJAC [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of BlackJAC](#) [permalink](#)

We watch the Jim Carrey GRINCH because it fleshes out Dr. Seuss' original intent: a protest of the commercialization of Christmas. In the cartoon, the Grinch was simply a generic villain who acted like a jerk simply to be a jerk; in the live-action one, the Whos brought it upon themselves by mocking him for no reason. And ya gotta love how the Grinch calls them out on their mindless, self-righteous greed before going Delta-House-at-the-homecoming-parade on them.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 11:58 AM on 12/17/2008

Michael Giltz [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Good defense. Ron Howard and Jim Carrey should send you at least a Happy Holidays card!

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 12:14 PM on 12/17/2008

ecunning [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of ecunning](#) [permalink](#)

Another good one you may not have heard of is "Bernard and the Genie," starring Lenny Henry and Alan Cumming. British, hysterical, and heartwarming.

Alan plays Bernard, a schlubby little guy whose holiday goes terribly wrong: he gets fired from his job, his girlfriend leaves him for his best friend, and his apartment is emptied in the process.

Then, he picks up the one thing she left behind--an old lamp--and polishes it...

Enter Lenny Henry, a wild and crazy genie who has a little trouble adjusting to the loss of 3000 years. But Bernie, Big Macs, ice cream, soul music, and movies help.

Crises ensue, but it all works out wonderfully in the end.

You'll LOVE it.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 10:09 AM on 12/17/2008

Michael Giltz [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Nope, hadn't heard of that one either, though Alan Cumming has a genie is easy to believe. I'll look for it. Thx.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 12:15 PM on 12/17/2008

ecunning [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of ecunning](#) [permalink](#)

A Muppet Family Christmas. My absolute favorite.

If you like the Muppets, this has Sesame Street, Fraggle Rock, and the Muppets all as one big crazy family getting together for the holidays. All the original performers, full of that zany Muppet humor, and a cameo by Jim Henson at the end. Best thing they ever did. I think it was Jim's favorite, too.

(The original uncut version from TV is the very best--they had to edit out some of the songs for VHS/DVD release due to licensing issues.)

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 10:02 AM on 12/17/2008

 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

The trimmed DVD version is the only one I know, unfortunately. Hopefully, they'll all wise up and relent and let it come out properly some day.

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 **shn525** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of shn525](#) [permalink](#)

Rankin-Bass claymation specials!

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 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

My favorite genre, definitely!

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 **servicepap** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of servicepap](#) [permalink](#)

Miracle on 34th street. The original. Can't be beat!

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 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

A charmer and one I haven't seen in a while. I actually avoid watching the same movies every single year so I don't dim the pleasure of It's A Wonderful Life, Christmas Story, Charlie Brown Pee-wee et al. But Miracle on 34 St has rested for a few years and I need to see it again.

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 **3fingerbrown** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of 3fingerbrown](#) [permalink](#)

A wonderful Christmas DVD is the 1963 Judy Garland Christmas show--with Mel Tome, Jack Jones, and Liza, Lorna, and Joey--the grandmama of all Christmas specials, and a fascinating snapshot of its fragile star and her era. It's a camp classic, of course, but there's something poignant about this obviously troubled person playing out a fantasy version of her life.

<http://www.tvparty.com/xmasjudy.html>

And us "A Christmas Carol" fans will get our annual Alastair Sim fix, but a good alternative is the George C. Scott TV version from the '80s. Nice production values, impeccably cast, smart script, and Scott is magnificent. It recalls a pre-cable, pre-Internet time when the big-three networks had lots of money to spend on their prestige shows. Hard to imagine CBS mounting such a lavish production today.

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 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

I might watch Scott again just to give Sims a rest, but Sims is absolutely the one to beat when it comes to A Christmas Carol. (On DVD, mind you. I'd go see Patrick Stewart do his one-man show every year if I could and don't ever miss the chance if you can see him either.) I actually own that Judy garland episode but have never watched it. I'll give it a whirl this year. Thx.

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 **GEE** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of GEE](#) [permalink](#)

Capote's "A Christmas Memory" is one of my favorites--a PBS B&W classic with the great Geraldine Page and Capote's narration. I was surprised by how affecting it was.

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 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

I've read the story (along with Dylan Thomas' A Child's Christmas in Wales it's my favorite) but never seen that film. I'll keep a look out for it.

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 **MagisterLudi** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of MagisterLudi](#) [permalink](#)

Now for real alternatives:

The German "Die Feuerzangenbowle" from 1944!
It's a delightful little comedy. Shot during pretty dark times. A tradition for older Germans.
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036818/>

And of course the Russian: The Irony of Fate, or "Enjoy Your Bath"

<http://www.russiandvd.com/store/product.asp?sku=30442&aid=7359&lang=eng>

This one is especially poignant. The bit where the main heroine walks through the night Leningrad is worth the price of the DVD alone.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 03:51 AM on 12/17/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

OK, you win for most obscure picks of all. I'll keep an eye out for both of them and hopefully they'll get released on DVD in US in the years to come.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:21 PM on 12/17/2008

MagisterLudi See Profile I'm a Fan of MagisterLudi permalink

No need to be so ethnocentric:-)

The Irony of Fate DVD is widely available in NTSC Zone 1 format with English subtitles.

<http://www.amazon.com/Irony-Fate-Enjoy-Your-Bath/dp/B0000714AW>

http://www.netflix.com/Movie/The_Irony_of_Fate_or_Enjoy_Your_Bath/70030328?Inkctr=srchrd-sr&strkid=750857409_0_0

<http://www.russiandvd.com/store/product.asp?sku=30442&aid=7359&lang=eng>

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 04:50 PM on 12/17/2008

MagisterLudi See Profile I'm a Fan of MagisterLudi permalink

True enough for Americans.
But for us these two movies are as common as Apfelstrudel and pirogi :-)

O.K. an East European intellectual joke.
Three-headed dragon calls a doctor during the night and asks to cut one of its heads off.

-Why? asks the doctor.

Head1: "You see, I like to watch soccer on TV. Head 2 loves Kung Fu movies. But this one (points at the sleeping head3) as soon as he wakes up, puts on his bifocals and right away, Tarkovsky, Tarkovsky..."

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 03:27 PM on 12/17/2008

LMPE See Profile I'm a Fan of LMPE permalink

"Gremlins". You can't deny that one.

When I watched "White Christmas" (starring Bing Crosby), I heckled it like on "Mystery Science Theater 3000".

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:29 AM on 12/17/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Gremlins is a great non-traditional holiday pick! Well done.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 01:04 AM on 12/17/2008

daffey See Profile I'm a Fan of daffey permalink

We start every season with A Charlie Brown Christmas. The animated Grinch comes in a close second. The old Rankin/Bass animated ones are OK (though as an adult, I can't miss the counter-culture themes, especially in the later ones). Little Drummer Boy is a notable exception, and I tend to enjoy it better as the years go on. Of course, Year Without A Santa Clause, if only for the show stopping Miser Brothers. And for me, I also watch Spies Like Us. Sounds silly, but I have a beer and watch that in memory of a very fun time in life when my best friend and I saw it right before the first Christmas break our first year of college. Though you never know when a new one will come along and add itself to the

list. I saw an old theatrical production called House Without A Christmas Tree, and every so many years like to watch it. It's a Wonderful Life is nice every so many years. And of course, A Christmas Story 24 hours on Christmas Eve. Nice post. Thanks for the memories.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 12:20 AM on 12/17/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

The Miser Brothers can't be beat. Did you watch the new sequel that just aired on ABC Family with them? I've never seen House Without A Christmas Tree -- I'll have to keep a watch out for it.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 01:06 AM on 12/17/2008

daffey See Profile I'm a Fan of daffey permalink

No, I didn't see the new one. I was taken by the change in their appearance. And without Dick Shaun, I wondered if it would have that same 'zing' that the original did.

As for House without a Christmas tree, it starred the late, great Jason Robards as a man embittered by the loss of his wife who won't allow his daughter to have a Christmas tree because of the memories it brings. It was a TV movie, much like a filmed play. My parents bought me the VCR tape, so I don't know if it is DVD or not. I think my Dad liked it because his Dad was never overly sentimental when it came to letting his kids celebrate Christmas (one year their ironing board doubled as the 'Christmas Tree'). So good luck finding it, it's quaint, believable, and a hidden little gem in the army of specials that are out there.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 10:57 AM on 12/17/2008

LameDuckHunting See Profile I'm a Fan of LameDuckHunting permalink

"The Ref" is my personal holiday favorite.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 04:20 PM on 12/16/2008

JimmyD See Profile I'm a Fan of JimmyD permalink

Oh yeah. I just watched it last weekend!

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 11:05 AM on 12/17/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Denis Leary's best movie -- and clearly we know a little bit more about your family life :) Thanks for reading.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 01:06 AM on 12/17/2008

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