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## **CHRISTMAS WITH THE KRANKS**

*Christmas with the Kranks* is terrible. (Big surprise, huh?) What more needs to be said? As it turns out, a *lot* more.

It would be one thing for the movie to be *merely* terrible, which it most certainly is; wretchedly acted and directed, *Kranks* is your typically overscaled "blockbuster" comedy, featuring lame pratfalls and an unbearably sappy side, and it elicits about as many laughs as

*The Passion of the Christ*

. (In this holiday-themed film, however, Jesus plays no part whatsoever.) So what?

*Surviving Christmas*

was almost as badly made, and we poor saps who actually sat through it have easily shrugged that film off by now. Yet

*Christmas with the Kranks*

is something special. This is a movie

so

hateful, in both its concept and its execution, that, quite frankly, it gave me the chills.

I don't think it's necessary to regurgitate the storyline, since promos for *Kranks* have been running nonstop for the better part of a month. We know that when Tim Allen's and Jamie Lee

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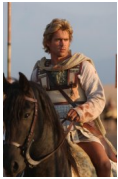
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Curtis' plans for skipping Christmas are discovered by their neighbors, the whole block begins to make life miserable for the pair. But did you know that the filmmakers wind up empathizing with the *neighbor*  
s ? It  
turns out that Tim's and Jamie's plan to save a little money and treat themselves to a luxury cruise wasn't just misguided ... it was un-  
*American*  
, damn it.

This amazing reversal of audience expectation, I must admit, actually made some elements of the film clearer – I was wondering why the moviemakers were making a shrieking harridan out of the usually beguiling Jamie Lee Curtis, whose character comes off as so frighteningly dependent on her daughter and fearful of the neighbors that, were this not a Hollywood blockbuster, I'd have thought her completely insane. *Now* I get it. We're not *supposed* to like her (in the first half, at least), because she and her hubby are *wrong* to spend less dough and enjoy a vacation together. Instead, what they should do, and – hope I'm not giving anything away here – wind up doing, is have all their nightmarish "friends" over for the annual Big Christmas Party where the Kranks spend a bundle wining and dining them. By the finale, the same neighbors who were going to outlandish extremes to punish the Kranks for their hubris turn out to be lovably goofy, and we in the audience are supposed to think, "Oh, look at the way the neighbors are helping with the party plans! *That's* the Christmas spirit!" Do the filmmakers think we're all brain-damaged, and have forgotten how freakin' *awful* these neighbors were to the Kranks in the film's first half?

The movie is a paean to conformity, so relentless in its "go with the herd" philosophy that the experience of watching it started to feel cultish, as if the audience was being programmed to go shopping immediately afterward. (Product-placement abounds.) *Christmas with the Kranks* is like a satanic version of last year's holiday hit *Cheaper by the Dozen*; its dual messages of be-suspicious-of-anyone-who's-*different* and buy-*buy* -BUY!!! form a loathsome diatribe that's masquerading as a wholesome salute to Family Values. I'll bet the movie will significantly divide audiences, with 51 percent loving it and 48 percent loathing it. And it'll still be considered a hit.



## ALEXANDER

Oliver Stone's *Alexander* is such a laborious snooze that to write a lengthy screed about it would take more energy than I care to expend. (Stone's already wasted three hours of my time; he ain't getting' much more ... .) Many of us suspected the movie was going to be a drag – when Stone's reverential, he's deadly dull – so the film's heavy-handedness and excessive symbolism come as no shock, nor does the graceless, brutish screenplay or Stone's thuddingly banal compositions ( *outside* the battlefronts, anyway). It's not even a shock that Colin Farrell, as Alexander the Great, is so passive and forgettable; he just did his doe-eyed-bisexual number in *A Home at the End of the World*

, so maybe he wasn't fully conscious that this role required a little more spark. As for the film's gay angle itself, Stone vacillates between presenting it as something unbearably noble (the relationship with Jared Leto) and something to be feared (Alexander's only sexual congress with men happens when he's roaring drunk).

None of this is surprising. What *is* surprising is that *Alexander looks* so crummy. The film is criminally short on memorable images, and the sets seem unusually tacky, especially in the sequences where Anthony Hopkins (endlessly) recollects Alexander's tale – it's like a multi-million-dollar historical epic shot in a hotel lobby. If it weren't for the deeply enjoyable overacting of Angelina Jolie and Rosario Dawson,

*Alexander*

would be nearly impossible to sit through; viewing it is like receiving, as a gift, the world's dullest historical novel ... wrapped in a brown paper bag.



## ***NATIONAL TREASURE***

Producer Jerry Bruckheimer's blockbusters are always less repellant when they're family-oriented, à la *Pirates of the Caribbean*; for some reason, Bruckheimer's noisy, mindless, giggling-and-kissing-through-calamity style is less offensive when the crudeness is kept to an occasional leer or double entendre. So while I didn't care for

*National Treasure*

, wherein Nicolas Cage and his light-comic entourage attempt to find hidden fortune within several national monuments, I certainly didn't hate it, and based on the laughter of the others in the audience, this dopey, suitable-for-the-kiddies action-comedy pulls off its shtick well enough. I found it clunky and rhythmless, and it elicits another regrettable action-stud portrayal by Cage, whose recent performances in

*Adaptation*

and

*Matchstick Men*

were starting to give us hope that he'd abandoned them once and for all. But the film, for all its faults, isn't dull, and there are even a few flashes of wit to be found – I especially enjoyed the scene where Cage, who is stealing the Declaration of Independence, is forced to

buy

the Declaration of Independence for \$35. (Cage has \$32 and change.) There are enough grace notes in

*National Treasure*

to carry you through its doldrums, and you can barely begrudge the movie its hit status; for the tykes, it might even be the tiniest bit educational. (Here's hoping the kids will be able to separate fact from the movie's fiction.) It's not-bad Bruckheimer, which is practically a compliment.



## ***THE SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS MOVIE***

Before watching *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*, I had not seen one second of the TV series it stems from, which might make me the movie's ideal viewer, because I thought it was just terrific. Of course, even without much knowledge of its TV forbear, it feels a little padded, like a funny 15-minute skit puffed up to nearly 90. Yet the dialogue is often hilarious, the

## "Christmas" Leaves This Critic Kranky: "Christmas with the Kranks," "Alexander," "National Treasure," and

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voiceover work is quite amusing (I particularly loved Jeffrey Tambor as the quick-to-anger merman king, though Alec Baldwin has a fine cameo as a baddie), and it's all so refreshingly *bizarre*

– a near-deathbed scene with our titular sponge and his starfish pal dying in the “real” world rivals Kumar-marrying-his-bag-of-weed for 2004's most delightfully Dadaist sequence. The film's extreme close-ups of a few of David Hasselhoff's body parts – don't even ask – might be reason enough to stay away from

*SpongeBob*

, but if you do wind up at the movie, you should have a hell of a good time.