

Cruel Yule: "The Santa Clause 3: The Escape Clause" and "Flushed Away"

Written by Mike Schulz

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THE SANTA CLAUSE 3: THE ESCAPE CLAUSE

Unless you have small children there to chaperone you - or are a small child yourself - you probably won't be caught dead at a screening of *The Santa Clause 3: The Escape Clause*. (Your only other excuses for seeing it, of course, are if you're a movie critic and/or a major Tim Allen fan, and please, God, let the "ands" be in the minority there.) So you certainly don't need me to recommend steering clear of this second sequel to the holiday hit of 1994. The jokes are as lame as could be imagined; the ultra-bright, hyper-chipper presentation - with its candy-colored gaudiness - could easily cause a toothache; and the plotting features less spirit, cleverness, and heart than you'll find in the 56 lines of "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." Can any of this be considered a *surprise* ?

Not only that, but the presentation itself is almost staggeringly amateurish. Given the static composition and the endless series of close-ups - the camera scooting in *extra* close during the actors' "sensitive" moments -

The Santa Clause 3

suggests nothing so much as one of those unbearable, Christmas-themed variety specials from the '70s. (Veteran TV director Michael Lembeck, who co-starred on

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One Day at a Time

, is the director.) And sometimes the movie is even weaker than
that

. A great number of cute little kids play Santa's helpers, yet despite the inherent challenges in wrangling a youthful cast of this size, it's not clear that Lembeck even shouted "Action!" when the tykes were around, at least based on how many of the pint-sized extras are caught staring directly into the camera. You'd almost be fooled into thinking one of

them

directed

The Santa Clause 3

.

But this is, after all, the season of giving. (Well, it isn't *yet*, but the movie theatres and malls seem pretty insistent on that notion.) Time for some holiday spirit. So instead of recounting

The Santa Clause 3

's many, many other offenses, let's focus on a few positives.

There are a whole slew of entertaining actors on hand, even if very few of them actually get to *d*
o

anything. Wendy Crewson, as Allen's ex-wife, and Judge Reinhold, as her touchy-feely therapist husband, bring some dry rhythms to the movie; too bad that, for a goodly portion of the film, they're frozen solid. Santa's North Pole council members include Aisha Tyler as Mother Nature, Jay Thomas as the Easter Bunny, Kevin Pollak as Cupid, Michael Dorn as the Sandman, and Peter Boyle - looking and sounding not at all well - as Father Time, and they provide some visual, if not verbal, enjoyment. (The only one of these performers who gets a sojourn outside of Santa's workshop is Dorn, and I'd rather not read into the producers' decision to cast the film's only African-American male as a character who screws up Santa's mission by falling asleep.)

Elizabeth Mitchell plays a no-nonsense Mrs. Claus - this time heavy with child - and, as in 2002's *The Santa Clause 2*, the lovely and sincere Mitchell brings necessary humanity to the movie; anyone who can convince audiences that Tim Allen is, in fact,

worthy

of devotion deserves a medal of some kind. (You do, though, have to feel a bit badly for the actress: Just as Mitchell is earning cool points for joining the cast of

Lost

- at least for the time being - she's stuck as the female lead in this cinematic treacle. Hollywood
is

a harsh mistress.) And Mitchell's parents are played by the game Ann-Margret and the marvelously grumpy Alan Arkin, who get the movie's one borderline-witty subplot - they're taken

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to the North Pole for a visit, and, not knowing the truth about their daughter's new identity as Mrs. Claus, are led to believe it's Canada. (Arkin's aghast reactions to the place - with its miniature delivery room and all those

small

people running around - yield relief from the film's incessant cheer.)

Depending on your tolerance for his comically egocentric antics, Martin Short, as the villainous Jack Frost, is incredibly welcome. The role doesn't let him release the full, demented madness he's capable of, but whenever Short gets a throwaway moment that cuts through the film's forced whimsy, he earns his laughs. (All of Short's best bits - including an invitation for an elf to join him "in his condo in Gstaad" for the holidays - feel improvised.) Short, bless the comic's hammy heart, is doing his best to spike the holiday punch.

And in addition to the supporting cast, there's an oddly subversive plot development here that rates a mention. Late in the film - because *The Santa Clause 3* hasn't stolen from *enough* yuletide classics - the movie briefly turns into

It's a Wonderful Life

, as Allen's Santa gets to see what Christmas would be like if Jack Frost became the holiday's patron saint instead. Part of his education involves a trip to the North Pole, where we are meant to be repelled by the glitzy pleasure palace Frost has created - a Christmas-based theme park in which visitors shove one another aside for toys, wait in long lines, bicker with their family members, and sit through a holiday-themed entertainment in which Frost, with aggressive show-biz razzmatazz, croons to the crowd.

Yet, as designed, this *faux* North Pole doesn't look the least bit different from the film's *actual* North Pole, and when watching Jack Frost's wintry lounge act, the audience doesn't look unhappy - they seem to be having the time of their lives. As the movie presents it, Christmas without Santa would be no more obnoxious than Christmas

with

Santa, albeit with a kitschily amusing stage show. Are the filmmakers smartly, shrewdly suggesting that the holidays have become so relentlessly materialistic that nothing - not even Santa - can save them now? That we might as well sit through embarrassing, secular entertainments such as

The Santa Clause 3

because they're the best we deserve? Probably not. But it's the holidays. I'm feeling charitable.

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FLUSHED AWAY

Flushed Away is the first computer-animated entertainment to come from Aardman Animations - they previously delivered dazzling, feature-length worlds of clay in *Chicken Run* and the peerless

Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit

- and for a debut offering in the genre, it's pretty good. It's even one of the more enjoyable works of its kind that I've seen in 2006 - not quite as funny as

Open Season

, but more visually inventive than

Ice Age: The Meltdown

. Its plotting isn't as clever as it is in

Hoodwinked

, but the sight gags are sharper than they are in

The Wild

, and

- with Hugh Jackman, Kate Winslet, Ian McKellen, and Jean Reno doing the honors - the voice-over cast is far more inspired than the one that performed for

Cars

. The film is probably too pop-culture dependent, like

Over the Hedge

, and a bit overly enamored of cartoon violence, as was

Barnyard

. But

Flushed Away

is certainly wittier than

The Ant Bully

, and I definitely appreciated it more than

Everyone's Hero

. And

Doogal

. Though not as much as

Monster House

. I hope this has been helpful.