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FOUR CHRISTMASES

In the spirit of those magical pre-Thanksgiving treats *Fred Claus, Deck the Halls,* and *Christmas with the Kranks*, director Seth Gordon's *Four Christmases* is Hollywood's annual, star-filled affair that celebrates the joys of the holidays through wisecracks, gaudy colors, pummeling "comic" violence, and occasional projectile vomiting. It differs from its predecessors, though, in one notable regard: It doesn't suck. At least not completely.

Vince Vaughn and Reese Witherspoon are Brad and Kate, a contentedly childless couple whose three-year sabbatical from family obligations abruptly ends when they're forced, over the course of one day, to spend some seasonal time with each of their divorced parents, played by (in order of visitation) Robert Duvall, Mary Steenburgen, Sissy Spacek, and Jon Voight. Adding Reese, that's an awful lot of Oscar winners for one movie, and in a terrific surprise, not one of them treats *Four Christmases* like hack work. Witherspoon is sprightly and relaxed, delivering gags with such throwaway nonchalance that you often giggle two beats *after* the fact (Kate on her sister-in-law's infant: "I think it liked me"), and the more veteran actors are

so polished they sparkle; Voight, as he often
isn't
, is a particularly agreeable presence, and Spacek is a delightful hippie mom who can't comprehend the rules to Taboo. As Vaughn's mass popularity increases, his charm appears to be lessening - lately, he's just been a repetitive parody of his
Swingers
motor-mouth - but
Four Christmases
is brief (under 90 minutes), moderately snappy, and finds room for Kristen Chenoweth (ideally cast as Witherspoon's sister), Tim McGraw, Dwight Yoakam, the too-rarely-seen Carol Kane, and even
The King of Kong
's videogame champ Steve Wiebe. What's not to like?

Well, there are the lame jokes, and the odd narrative detours (the nativity-pageant scene is *really* strange), and the grueling soundtrack, and the unconvincing sentiment (exactly what about this trip sets off Kate's maternal instincts ... ?), and the bone-crushing sound effects when Brad's brothers attack him, and ... . Never mind. It's the season for giving thanks, and I'm just thankful that
Four Christmases
is the first yuletide comedy in ages that doesn't feel interchangeable with a fat lump of coal.

AUSTRALIA

The epically scaled outback adventure *Australia* runs 165 minutes, stars Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman, is directed by the prodigiously gifted Baz Luhrmann (whose last movie, 2001's *Moulin Rouge*
,
is firmly ensconced among my all-time favorites), boasts delirious vistas and stunning design, makes ample, enjoyable use of
Wizard of Oz
motifs ... and I truly wish I had more to say about

it. It's
fine
. The movie is visually distinctive, yet dramatically commonplace; the CGI cattle stampede is awesome, yet the slapstick is embarrassing; the scenery entices, yet the central romance doesn't. (Kidman emotes, yet Jackman strikes iconic poses). Like
Out of Africa
or
The Last Emperor
,
Australia
is the sort of big, square, modestly enjoyable, gratingly overlong cinematic postcard that mistakes grandeur for depth and that's frequently, and fawningly, described as "the kind of movie they don't make anymore," mostly because it's no longer 1985.

THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS

I've read reviews of the Holocaust-themed *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* so dismally brutal that they're less critiques than calls for writer/director Mark Herman's blood. And I'm certainly not blind to the potential insensitivity and outright immorality behind the employment of the Holocaust for a children's fable (based on John Boyne's novel) about the friendship between two eight-year-old boys. But while Herman's movie is contrived and simplistic, and can't help but soften the nightmare behind the 20th Century's most obscene horror - as if any fiction film
could
-
The Boy in the Striped Pajamas
isn't kitschy, and it isn't inept, and for young audiences, it should serve as a perfectly acceptable introduction to its subject.

Asa Butterfield's Bruno is the son of a loving mother (Vera Farmiga) and a stern, Nazi-commandant father (David Thewlis) whose family has been transplanted to an SS-run compound outside of Auschwitz; Jack Scanlon's Schmuel is the Jewish prisoner whom Bruno befriends from outside the camp. Much of the film is devoted to the pair's budding acquaintance, each on one side of an electrified fence, and you can understand why this setup

is so rankling, as a Jewish prisoner would *never* be allowed to while away his days, unguarded, playing checkers with a neighbor boy. (And tunneling out of the camp, or in this case *into* it, is seen as a remarkably easy feat.) Yet while it's factually offensive, the movie is performed with lovely naturalism by Butterfield and Scanlon, both of whom are refreshingly without child-actor affectation, and Herman provides haunting visuals and keeps the sentimentality in check; he doesn't give full weight to the Nazis' atrocities, but doesn't completely sidestep them, either. Despite its flaws, the film is strong and sobering, and I hope it gets seen by the youths for whom it was obviously designed. Grade- and middle-schoolers can, and should, work their way up to *Schindler's List* and any number of well-informed Holocaust documentaries. Let *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* be their primer.