

Dysfunctional family drama from France due on DVD

Written by Kam Williams



Don't be tricked by director Arnaud Desplechin's deceptively benign title, this flick doesn't spin a heartwarming yarn in the manner of such seasonal classics as *It's a Wonderful Life* or *A Christmas Story*

. No miracles lay in wait for any unfortunate orphans in this relatively sobering saga set in France.

If Jerry Springer ever decided to shoot his TV show in Paris, the protagonists of this picture, the Vuillards, would make excellent guests. For this dysfunctional family is filled with more drama than you can shake a stick of French bread at. At the point of departure we find the clan convening at the family manse in advance of the Christmas holidays for a reunion guaranteed to stir up trouble.

The ringmaster of the three-ring circus is matriarch Junon (Catherine Deneuve), a cancer patient suffering from the same strain of leukemia which took the life of one of her sons at the age of 7. Today, she and her husband, Abel (Jean-Paul Roussillon), have three adult children, Henri (Mathieu Amalric), Elizabeth (Ann Consigny) and Ivan (Melvil Poupaud) who arrive burdened by considerable emotional baggage as well as unresolved sibling rivalry.

For example, playwright Elizabeth has little patience for ne'er-do-well Henri, because she once had to bail him out of a bad investment for which their father had cosigned. The two haven't spoken to each other since, so this occasion offers an opportunity for long-simmering fireworks to explode. Ivan, on the other hand, has issues with Simon (Laurent Capuletto), an orphaned cousin raised under the same roof.

It seems that Simon has been hiding a secret crush on Ivan's wife, Sylvia (Chiara Mastroianni) since they were teenagers, so what better time to let the cat out of the bag than Christmas. All of the above is just the tip of the iceberg, as Junon is urgently in need of a bone marrow transplant. Thus, the burning question which permeates the air at the gathering is whether any of her relatives might be a suitable match.

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Despite its relentlessly-grim overarching theme, A Christmas Tale's absorbing array of richly-developed characters invariably embroiled in incestuous folderol easily outweighs the unpleasant tone of this otherwise depressing escapade. All that's missing is Jerry Springer refereeing the play-by-play.

How do you say, "Don't even go there, girlfriend!" in French?

Excellent (3.5 stars)

Unrated

In French with subtitles.

Running time: 152 minutes

Studio: Criterion Collection

DVD Extras: Interview with the director and co-stars Catherine Deneuve and Mathieu Amalric, a documentary, 2 theatrical trailers and a booklet containing stills and production notes.

To order a copy of A Christmas Tale on DVD, visit:

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B002M36R28?ie=UTF8&tag=thslfofire-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B002M36R28>

To see a trailer for A Christmas Tale, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1yPhab421Q>