

It is the middle of June and the temperature is in the high 80s. The grass needs cutting, the family wants to go to a Cubs game, and the only thing I can think of is that today is the 50th anniversary of the release of *Miracle on 34th Street*.

The original film was released on June 19, 1947.

Why did 20th Century-Fox release a Christmas movie at the very beginning of summer?

Because even great movie moguls like Darryl F. Zanuck make bone-headed mistakes.

It all began in early 1946 when screenwriters George Seaton and Valentine Davies were having lunch at the 20th Century-Fox studio commissary. Their conversation drifted into movies that dealt with Christmas and the general lack of imagination that dominated that film genre. They decided they could conceive a fanciful film that would be fun to watch, yet challenge the belief and disbelief in Santa Claus.

They began work on an outline for a story that had a man, who believes he is

Santa Claus, getting a job as Macy's department store Santa during the Christmas season.

Their story fell into place easily and, within a short period of time, they had a completed screenplay.



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The next challenge was to have studio boss Darryl Zanuck grant them permission to film the story and, also, to give the directorial assignment to Seaton who had written and directed two other films, *Junior Miss* and *The Shocking Miss Pilgrim*.

Zanuck proved to be a hard sell. He felt that the script

was weak and the casting of Kris Kringle would be both difficult and critical to the film. He sent his writers back to reconsider the entire project.

But they returned with a stronger script and a candidate for Kringle.

The man they had in mind was Edmund Gwenn, a British actor who had appeared in dozens of films. And their stronger script included location filming of Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York.



NATALIE WOOD, JOHN PAYNE and EDMUND GWENN

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Zanuck was still unimpressed, but agreed on the condition that Seaton would accept his next assignment unconditionally. Seaton agreed, then flew to New York to negotiate with Macy's.

William Pearlberg was assigned to produce the film. His first task was to assemble the cast. He was able to secure John Payne and Maureen O'Hara as the two leads. They had previously appeared together in *To The Shores of Tripoli* (1941) and *Sentimental Journey* (1945), and were two of the best looking actors on the Fox lot.

The part of the pessimistic little girl was only a bit harder to cast. The studio had signed young Natalie Wood to a short term contract hoping they had another Margaret O'Brien. She proved to be perfect for the part and would eventually develop into a talented actress.

Dependable supporting players Gene Lockhart, William Frawley, Porter Hall and

Jerome Cowan would round out the cast.

After Seaton and studio representatives had secured the full cooperation of Macy's and Gimble's department stores, the cast flew East in early November and started shooting scenes at the stores and around the New York area. Finally, on Thanksgiving Day, well-placed cameras filmed the parade and a few scenes relating to the parade. Follow-up shooting was completed and everyone went back to Hollywood to complete filming at the studio.

When the film was completed, studio executives including Zanuck, were disappointed with the final product. Zanuck indifferently gave permission to release the film as soon as possible, hoping it would run for a couple of weeks and then disappear.

To the surprise of many all-knowing big-wigs at the studio and despite its untimely early summer release, the film slowly picked up momentum and drew large au-

## A MIRACLE FOR CHRISTMAS

diences wherever it played. It was re-released at Christmas, 1947 and became a must-see film that holiday season.

Even more astounding to Zanuck was the winning of the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor by Edmund Gwenn at the 1947 Oscar ceremony. George Seaton also won for Best Screenplay; Valentine Davies won for Best Original Idea; George Seaton won for Best Original Screenplay.

*Miracle on 34th Street*, made with a modest budget and very little studio support, simply charmed its way into the hearts of millions of movie fans.

And why not? It's a charming film that was a bright spot in a year of dark films. *Film noir* was the rage and Hollywood films were addressing hard issues. *Crossfire* and *Gentlemen's Agreement* criticized anti-Semitism while *Boomerang* questioned the American justice system. Filmgoers must have been relieved that *Miracle* had plenty of sunny scenes and a happy ending.

It is a highly watchable film today and one my family looks forward to seeing every Christmas (even though it is a black

and white movie!).

The charm of the film is the perfect blending of pleasing parts to create a satisfying whole. Edmund Gwenn is truly lovable as the man who believes he is the real Santa Claus. His controlled, low-key performance is the heart of the film and its success is directly related to his portrayal of Kris Kringle. The viewer wants to believe in him, as much as the characters in the story, and thus believe that there is something special about Christmas.

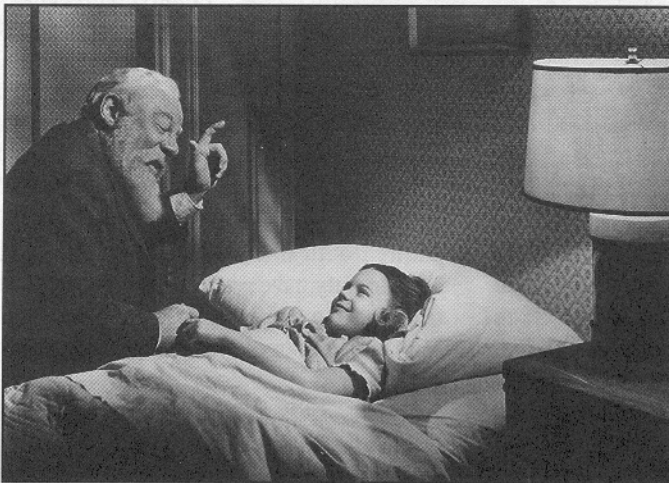
If there is a message in the film, it is *believe in good people and good ideals and good things will happen*.

The villain of the story, Mr. Sawyer, is a small man whose jealousy of Kringle becomes his downfall. By the final scene, the good people are happy and the villain has been disgraced and fired from his cushy job.

Over the past fifty years, *Miracle on 34th Street* has become a Christmas tradition. It has been shown on television for three decades.

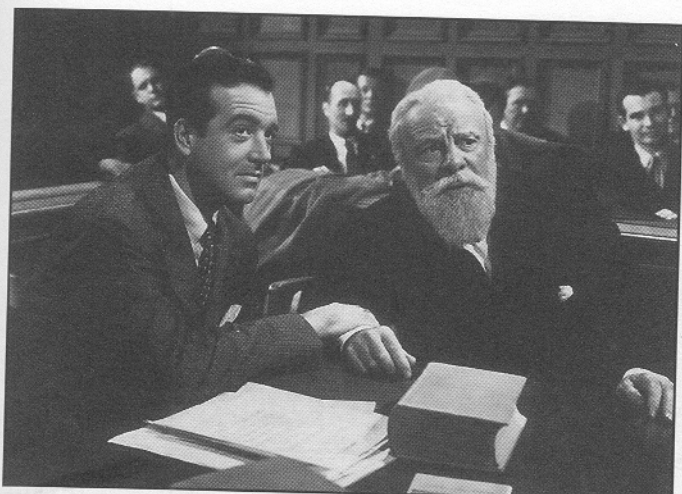
In 1973 a made-for-TV remake was produced with Sebastian Cabot as Kringle and David Hartman in the John Payne role. It was a nice try, but lacked the charm of the original; it was just a pale copy.

Several years ago super-producer John Hughes assembled a good cast and remodeled the screenplay to fit the 1990s. The story was changed to a fictitious entity named Kole's Department Store (one of the fascinating aspects of the original movie was a behind-the-scenes look at the real Macy's), and the vil-



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PHOTOFEST

ployes in all his films. His choice of Sir Richard Attenborough as Kringle was excellent because Attenborough is a talented actor, and one who obviously paid attention to Gwenn's performance. Attenborough hits the mark and saves the film from becoming an elaborate, but tasteless, Christmas ornament.

But the original *Miracle on 34th Street* will never be over-

laid was an entrepreneur who owns a trendy rival store named Shopper's World.

In this version Kringle has to convince everyone he is Santa and save Kole's from an unfriendly takeover. This, of course, is done in the slick style John Hughes em-

shadowed by any of the remakes.

This holiday family favorite has made a believer out of millions of viewers over the past 50 years.

(NOTE--Hear a radio version of "Miracle on 34th Street" on TWTD December 6.)



MAUREEN O'HARA, JOHN PAYNE and KRIS KRINGLE

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