

## Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

SUBJECT: Movie Review: ***Deck the Halls*** - A misguided holiday comedy – December 2006

In keeping with the spirit of the season, this month I'll review the new holiday comedy ***Deck the Halls***. This PG-rated affair is the story of two families in a small New England town dealing with different issues around the Christmas holiday. Primarily it focuses on Steve Finch (Matthew Broderick), a mild-mannered, uptight optometrist who is intent on keeping his well-planned Christmas traditions alive in his household, and Buddy Hall (Danny DeVito), an often crude-talking, but effective car salesman who wants to make something big happen in his life. When Buddy and his family move in across the street from Steve's family, it's obvious that things are going to be stirred up in the once quiet neighborhood. After Buddy finds out on the internet that some houses can actually be seen via satellite from space, he becomes intent on making his home one of them. He begins plastering the outside of his house with increasing numbers of lights and other decorations, much to the chagrin of his bothered neighbor Steve. A good deal of the movie then focuses on Buddy's ever-consuming quest and Steve's increasing protests and attempts to stop his neighbor, while the other family members cope with the escalating feud between the two men as well as with their own problems.

The thing that struck me the most about ***Deck the Halls*** is how unfocused the film is. This is a movie that really never decides exactly what direction to go in. \* When the movie starts out introducing us to Steve and his family it initially seems like it's going to be the story of a conservative, straight-laced guy and his quest to orchestrate the perfect Christmas while at the same time trying to help out with the issues of his wife and children. This direction seems inevitable when Steve brings out the Christmas calendar, talks about his precise plans for the days leading up to the holiday, and elicits groans from his family. It also seems inevitable when we find out his daughter is an unhappy loner and his ten year-old son a depressed underachiever. With his sensible, but more

relaxed wife rounding out the group, it would seem the story would go more in-depth with the characters and follow the family through their days leading up to Christmas, with group dynamics accounting for many of the laughs. But this turns out not to be the case, as the movie shifts focus...

When the new neighbors move in, the first meeting between the two families immediately lets us know they're total opposites. As mentioned earlier, Buddy is loud and obnoxious while Steve is not. Buddy's wife Tia (Kristin Chenoweth) looks and acts like a sexpot, and his twin daughters Ashley and Emily (Sabrina and Kelly Aldridge) are popular cheerleader types, everything Steve's daughter Madison (Alia Shawkat) is not. Surprisingly enough however, the wives and kids quickly bond, leaving only the two men at odds. It would seem then the story would spend time with these new characters, and on these new relationships between the members of the two families. But such is not the case as the movie again shifts focus...

It turns out that while Buddy is somewhat crude and obnoxious, he's also at heart just a guy who longs to have that one big accomplishment in life, leading to the crazy scheme to have his house seen from space. As the lights go up and Buddy gains more attention, Steve becomes more and more perturbed. He is upset both by the disturbance and because Buddy is quickly stealing Steve's throne of "Christmas guy" around town. This leads to some clumsy comedic set pieces involving Steve trying to put the lights out for good on Buddy's house. His attempts involve such things as sneaking around like a burglar at night to cut the power at his neighbor's house, and buying firecrackers to launch off his rooftop. These scenes generally fall flat and bring to mind other movies like *Home Alone* and *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, where such antics were done to better effect. And even for anyone just looking to see outrageousness and things blowing up the movie falls flat, because the "battle" never escalates to huge proportions, beyond a few Christmas trees catching on fire. Also, it never really works because the two main characters are not compelling or easy to identify with. Broderick's character is hard to root for because he's such a dull bore, despite being a good-hearted family man. And DeVito's character is hard to root against because he's ambiguous to say the least. Buddy is at times a loudmouth, at times almost a criminal, but underneath a beaten-down-by-life average Joe. I really didn't know just what to think of him (even at the end). This dulls the escalating battle between them almost as much as the lame comic antics. A climactic ice skating race between the two towards the end doesn't add much excitement either.

Relating to the fact that Buddy is supposedly good-natured at heart are the underlying themes involving family, finding the meaning of Christmas, and the meaning of what's really important in life. These themes are all thrust upon us almost as an afterthought towards the end of the story when, after both guys families have moved into a motel out of frustration, the men finally see how stupid they've been behaving. This is about the point it hit me just how much stupidity I'd had to wade through to get to this predictable, clichéd conclusion. However in defense of the film I will admit that before this my attention was thoroughly maintained simply in waiting to see if the movie would ever find a focus. Also, here and there *Deck the Halls* does contain some scenes and sight gags that are pretty humorous. My guess is that it was hoped this film could become the kind of memorable and heartfelt holiday classic that *Christmas Vacation* has become. While I don't believe that is going to be the case, it was at least interesting to watch just how far short of that goal *Deck the Halls* fell on all levels.

\* Although I didn't want to focus on it too much in the review, I have to say that ***Deck the Halls*** prompted me to compare it to ***National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*** early on. ***Christmas Vacation***, as it's commonly known, happens to have become one of my favorite holiday movies. Knowing it so well, I immediately thought of it when Steve began talking about keeping family Christmas traditions alive and intricately planning out the details. This is very much like Chevy Chase's Clark Griswold character, right down to both husbands using a Christmas calendar to count down the days. And of course, one can't help but notice the similarity in both movies of the men covering the house with an outrageous number of lights. Additionally, an early slapstick-type scene involving Steve accidentally being caught on a runaway sleigh purchased by Buddy recalls similar zaniness in ***Christmas Vacation***. Of course, as noted earlier, these types of devices all work to much better effect in the Chevy Chase film.