

You'll shoot your eye out!

A Christmas Story has become one of America's beloved holiday classics



The cast of the holiday classic film 'A Christmas Story,' from left, R.D. Robb (Scott), Ian Petrella (Randy), Peter Billingsley (Ralphie), director Bob Clark, Scott Schwartz (Flick), and Zack Ward (Scat Farkus).

By Anthony Breznican
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The phrase "You'll shoot your eye out" has become as synonymous with the Christmas season as Scrooge's "Bah, humbug" and Santa's "Ho, ho, ho!"

For 29 years, this warning has defined the holidays for droves of 5-year-old Ralphie Parker in the movie "A Christmas Story," as his mother, his teacher — and even Kim Krigbein — reject his plea for one particular Christmas present.

That would be, in his words, an official Red Ryder carbine-action, 200-shot, range-qualified air rifle with a compass in the stock and this thing that tells time.

"It catches the truth," said director Bob Clark, who spent 14 years trying to make the film. "It's about the American sense that there is something great in our destiny and Ralphie's to get that BB gun with a compass in the stock."

Over the years, the modest little movie has grown into a Yuletide perennial and is celebrating its 29th anniversary this year with a new DVD, featuring remembrances from the now 69-year-old Peter Billingsley.

Meanwhile, this year marks the sixth annual marathon broadcast of the movie on the TNT cable channel. (Starting today at 4 p.m. Hawaii time) TNT started its 12-around-the-clock showings as a stunt in 1988, but popular demand turned it into a tradition. An estimated 38.4 million tuned in at some point to watch it last year.

"Probably about 10 years ago, when it started getting mentioned in the same breath as 'A Wonderful Life' — and people weren't disagreeing with that — that's when I realized, 'Wow, this thing might be around for a really long while,'" Billingsley, now 52, said.

But how did "A Christmas Story" begin? What made it a seasonal phenomenon? And where does it fit from here?

The truth is: "A Christmas Story" didn't start out as a Christmas story. The series of vignettes in the 94-minute film — set with the polio-ridden school bully, The Old Man's gloating over a parish "leg lamp" in a fishbait stocking, the triple-digit date of sticking your tongue to a frozen flagpole — were short stories from radio storyteller Jean Shepherd's 1960 collection "In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash."

Among them was the tale about Ralphie wanting a BB gun for Christmas, which became the centerpiece of the movie.

While driving to a girlfriend's house in 1968, director Clark said he became enthralled with one of Shepherd's fireplace-covey radio narrations. Clark repeatedly drove around the block — leaving his subwoofers deafening — while Shepherd finished the story.

For the next 14 years, Clark tried to persuade a studio to finance a film based on the stories of Shepherd, who died in 1999 at 78.

But nobody in Hollywood was interested.

Clark made a series of home videos in the 1970s "Chadbourne" and "Shack Christmas" and wrote for "The Dukes of Hazzard" TV show before landing on a hit.

Where are the actors now?

Peter Billingsley

Character: Ralphie Parker

Best line: The obnoxious substitute: "Oooooo!"

Bio: The fat-bellied, bespectacled boy was Messy Marvin in the 1980s Hershey's Chocolate Syrup commercials and went on to be a producer of the TV comedy series "Dinner for Five." He also takes occasional acting roles, and played the help-wanted who manages Will Ferrell in "Zi." His return to holiday mooncaking "left good... just like riding a bike," Billingsley said.

Darren McGavin

Character: The Old Man

Best line: Mispronouncing the word "trickle" on a big wooden box: "Trick-EE-Lee... it must be better!"

Bio: The veteran of stage, screen and television is best known as the supernatural investigator in TV's "Kolchak: The Night Stalker" and had a recurring role on "Murphy Brown" as Candice Bergen's father. He played a hookie in "The Netans," and was a drug dealer opposite Frank Sinatra in "The Man With the Golden Arm." Daughter Gramem Bridget McGavin said he suffered a stroke a few years ago and still has trouble speaking. She is producing a documentary about his life.

Melinda Dillon

Character: Mother

Best line: The classic mother BB gun black — "No, you'll shoot your eye out."

Bio: She has a long history of playing worried moms in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," "Tary and the Handcuffs," and "Magdalen." She played a matriarch this year as Grandma in "A Painted House," the TV movie based on author John Grisham's novel.

Ian Petrella

Character: Randy, Ralphie's little brother

Best line: After mother bundles him in a too-tight snowsuit: "I can't put my arms down!"

Bio: Petrella quit acting after a small role in 1984's "Crimes of Passion" and a brief guest role on the TV sitcom "Diff'rent Strokes" in 1986. He now lives in San Francisco, where he works in local theater as a propmaker. As for "A Christmas Story," he remembers

R.D. Robb

Character: Scott

Best line: "I TRIP!E dog-dare you."

Bio: Robb has had small roles as Marcia's boyfriend in the spoof "The Brady Bunch Movie" and the 1990 kiddie-flick "Mastiff." He directed a movie, 2001's "Don's Plum," that featured Faber Maguire and Leonardo DiCaprio. The stars agreed to appear in the improvised, black-and-white film as a favor, then balked when he tried to release it and successfully sued to block its distribution in the United States. Robb recently served as a producer on the upcoming sci-fi thriller "The Post 11."

Zack Ward

Character: Scat Farkus

Best line: Taunting Ralphie before getting his comeuppance, "Come on, c'mon, cry for me!"

Bio: Ward played the trouble-prone brother on the sitcom "The '80s" and had roles in "Almost Famous," "Friday vs. Justin," "The upcoming 'Resident Evil: Apocalypse.'" Now full of pride over "A Christmas Story," he once found it embarrassing when his career was struggling. "I hated it," he said. "A fan would say, 'We love you, we watch it every single year... And I'd have to say, 'Thanka... Would you like french fries or salad with your burger?'"

Scott Schwartz

Character: Flick

Best line: With increasing panic — "Thuck, thuck! THUCKS! AAAAaaaaa!"

Bio: The kid who got his tongue stuck on a pole left mainstream acting for port films in the late 1990s. "I did what I did," he said of his X-rated past. "Now I'm married and gonna work on a family room. Did I break any laws? Did I go to jail? Nothing." He currently works with his father at Baseball Cards and Movie Collectibles Inc. in suburban Los Angeles. He said he's very proud of "A Christmas Story." "People say, 'If you could trade, would you make like, 'E.T.' or would you still make 'A Christmas Story?'" He takes "A Christmas Story."

Clark

Character: Director

Best line: "You'll shoot your eye out!"

Bio: Clark was a writer-director on the TV sitcom "Diff'rent Strokes" in 1986. He now lives in San Francisco, where he works in local theater as a propmaker. As for "A Christmas Story," he remembers

Clark

His rowdy 1981 sex comedy "Forky," which cost only \$4 million to make, collected a whopping \$105 million. Suddenly the writer-director had some industry clout.

"They didn't want to do the movie. Nobody did," he said. "But they said,

the three days it took to film the dinner scene where he had to eat like a piggy." "That was a lot of mashed potatoes... I think I got sick afterward."

known not as "Dad" but as "The Old Man."

The suddenly popular Clark shopped the part around to a few curious Hollywood bigshots — including Jack Nicholson. (Imagine that alternative version for a moment.)

Ultimately, the part went to Darren McGavin, a cult favorite for his TV role as a reporter who investigates the supernatural in "Kolchak: The Night Stalker."

Although he was not the first choice, McGavin proved he was the best choice — bringing a boyish musicality to the character, crossed with the grumpy scowling of a well-respected cinematographer.

McGavin, now 81, suffered a debilitating stroke several years ago and was unavailable for an interview.

At 61 when the film was made, he may have seemed a little old to have such young sons — but don't let that look much older than a child's perspective?

Billingsley, who was also the Messy Marvin kid from 1980s Hershey's chocolate syrup commercials, was a veteran child star but "A Christmas Story" presented him with new challenges.

The then-12-year-old Billingsley had to carry the whole movie, but had very little dialogue. Most scenes required him to look cute and thoughtful while Shepherd provided narration.

"A lot of it's instinctual. You just try to figure out how you can stay as real as possible without overdoing it," he said.

The film opened in 1983 the week before Thanksgiving, and collected about \$2 million from 600 theaters — solid business for the time. That tale doubled on Thanksgiving weekend and the movie was getting strong word-of-mouth support.

But MGM hadn't counted on much success — and didn't schedule any more screens for the lead-up to Dec. 25.

"I thought, 'Well, in the weeks before Christmas we're going to clean up,'" Clark said. "But I got a call from the head of distribution, who said, 'We got a surprise for you.'"

And the movie disappeared from theaters. Ultimately, it collected about \$19 million at the box office. Good, but not great.

The advent of home video and ubiquitous showings on television saved "A Christmas Story" a place as a holiday tradition alongside "Miracle on 34th Street" and "White Christmas."

In fact, a recent scientific survey of 2,200 people by the Internet Movie Database placed "A Christmas Story" as the most beloved holiday film of all time. It had 19.3 percent, while "It's a Wonderful Life" was second with 15 percent.

Warner Bros. now owns the film, and Clark is on a crusade. He wants the studio to reissue the movie on the big screen next Christmas season and is trying to rally fans to contact the studio.

In the meantime, with repeated showings on television, does the grown-up Ralphie ever sit down to watch the littlest Ralphie?

"Over Christmas, when the family gets together, it inevitably gets turned on," Billingsley said. "And yeah... I'm at dawn and watch."