

Four Holidays

A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor

As we light Advent candles, so does Hollywood, trying to dazzle us, not with hope, peace, joy and love, but with *Bad Santa* (2003), *Polar Express* (2004), *Deck the Halls* (2006) or *Fred Claus* (2007). This year's Christmas cracker, *Four Holidays*, gave little bang for its buck.

Brad (Vince Vaughan) and Kate (Reese Witherspoon) are an upscale San Francisco couple. Foot loose and fancy free, they concoct a uniquely selfish holiday ritual, that of avoiding their families, parents both divorced, come Christmas. The plan is based on pretense, the lie that they are undertaking charity work in some exotic overseas locale.

Plans precede a pace, until Christmas Day, when San Francisco International Airport finds itself becalmed by fog. One live to air TV news crew later, and Kate's cell phone is ringing, four families demanding four Christmases, complete with four "Please explains."

Brad and Kate commence a torturous cinematic journey, from Brad's working class father to Kate's fervently religious mother, from Brad's game playing mother to Kate's well-heeled family dinner party. History forces them to unwrap their relationship, only to discover that pretense, lies and avoidance are actually habits deeply ingrained in them both.

Director Seth Gordon directs a plot that celebrates caricatures and comes laden with inconsistencies. A star-studded cast, including Reese Witherspoon, Vince Vaughn, Jon Favreau, Jon Voight, Robert Duvall, Mary Steenburgen and Sissy Spacek, add little Christmas glitter. Reese Witherspoon does master the innocent double-take, Vince Vaughn the verbosely banal patter and Robert Duvall a wicked laugh sure to set your two front Christmas teeth on edge. Despite their reputation, including five Oscar's, their is simply too little to like, much less care about, in any of these four families.

Some moments of genuine humour are mixed with flashes of excruciatingly selfish human behaviour. *Four Holidays* becomes a window onto a selfish and isolated existence, in which personal pleasure trumps community responsibility. Boxing Day can not come quickly enough, both for them and for the watching audience.

Surely a New Year will offer some new resolution. Sadly, the ending, some 12 months later, shows that little has been learnt. Brad and Kate remain just as selfish and just as isolated. *Four Holidays* is a depressing reflection on a depressing society, set to dampen the Christmas cheer of all save society's most cynical. The Grinch might award it four stars, but I will stick with two.

Which, come to think of it, is perhaps why so many people actually do light those four Advent candles. They become tiny flickers of prayerful hope for the habitual avoiders, peace for the relationally separated, joy for all those lacking Christmas cheer and love for the isolated.

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