Miracle on 34th Street:
The Making of a Christmas Classic



Released in 1947, *Miracle on 34th Street* would go on to join the ranks of the best Christmas movies ever made. The enduring quality of the film is largely due to the inspired performances by Edmund Gwenn as Kris Kringle and Natalie Wood as Susan Walker. (Photofest)

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This half-sheet poster contains a still of a deleted scene in which Kris is offered venison but politely refuses: "I–just–couldn't," he explains. (Photofest)

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Despite having been adapted into a book, at least seven radio dramas, three television movies, a Broadway musical, amateur stage plays, a colorized version, and a feature film remake, it is the original 1947 black-and-white film of *Miracle on 34th Street* (hereafter, *Miracle*) that still remains the favorite version of this modern Christmas classic.* One of the mysteries of the Hollywood studio system during the mid-twentieth century is how so many great films were created from an assembly-line production factory (though, admittedly, there were a lot of failures, as well). There might not be a good explanation, but it happened with *Miracle*—somehow the perfect story, the perfect cast, and the perfect direction came together to create an endearing and enduring Christmas film. The American public's love of the original film seems to echo what Macy's stated when it declined to participate in the 1994 remake: "We feel the original stands on its own and there was nothing to be improved upon."[1]

From the 1930s to the 1950s, the popular culture of Christmas went through a dramatic metamorphosis in America. Perhaps no other period before or since has had so many lasting contributions. Popular Christmas music came into its own with the introduction in 1934 of "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town" and "Winter Wonderland." A flurry of weather-related tunes followed, such as "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm," "Winter Weather," "Let It Snow!" "Baby, It's Cold Outside," and, of course, "White Christmas." Cozy songs evoking home, hearth, and family togetherness surfaced, including "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," "I'll Be Home for

* *Miracle on 34th Street* went through several title changes from the original story until its final release as a film. This is discussed in detail in chapter 5. To be consistent and avoid confusion, the final title will be used throughout the book instead of the various other titles.

Christmas," and "The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire)." The period also introduced us to the story—and later the song—of "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" (thanks to national retailer Montgomery Ward), and "Frosty the Snowman" would thumpity-thump-thump onto the scene in 1950. Many of these tunes have consistently dominated the ranks of the most recorded and performed Christmas songs ever since.[2] Some of them, such as "White Christmas" and "The Christmas Song," have practically become required repertoire for any singer who does a Christmas album.



"Santa Claus Is Comin' to Town," introduced in 1934, ushered in the golden era of popular Christmas music. (Author's collection)

The era also turned out a surprising number of movies that are perennial favorites and have come to define the holiday. Prior to the late 1930s, there really wasn't a "Christmas movie" genre. Of course, Christmas wasn't absent from the cinema. There were dozens of Christmas-themed shorts during the silent era, including several of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Christmas scenes were frequently featured in movies such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and in Shirley Temple films such as *Bright Eyes* (1934) and *Stowaway* (1936), for example. But, in general, the Christmas scenes were isolated and not necessarily central to the plot.

Beginning in the late 1930s, this seemed to change dramatically. *A Christmas Carol* certainly got its most lavish treatment to date when MGM did its version starring Reginald Owen and Gene Lockhart, in 1938. Christmas became an integral part of the storylines in big and small productions, such as in romantic comedies like *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) and *Remember the Night* (1940), and in more dramatic fare illustrating social inequalities, such as *Miracle on Main Street* (1939) and *Beyond Tomorrow* (1940).



Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* got a lavish treatment in the 1938 adaptation. Gene Lockhart played Bob Cratchit and Reginald Owen played Ebenezer Scrooge. (Photofest)

As America entered World War II, Hollywood began offering more nostalgic fare. Nothing could help a war-weary nation forget its present woes like movies about Christmas that were "just like the ones [we] used to know," such as *Irving Berlin's Holiday Inn*, which introduced the song "White



The romantic comedy *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) with James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan takes place in a retail setting during the holiday season, with love conquering all on Christmas Eve. (Photofest)

Christmas" in 1942. The ensuing years brought the turn-of-the-century period musical *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), with Judy Garland singing the wistful "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas"; *I'll Be Seeing You* (1944), with war veteran Joseph Cotten and Ginger Rogers adjusting to normal life during the holiday season; and *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945), featuring Barbara Stanwyck trying to create the perfect holiday setting. *It's a Wonderful Life*, which made Jimmy Stewart a Christmas icon, came out the following year. *Miracle on 34th Street*, of course, would soon join the pantheon of great Christmas films, and, perhaps, is the epitome of the new genre. Not patently nostalgic—it's a modern story in a modern setting—but it certainly encourages and emphasizes the importance of family, faith, the magic of childhood, and, well, Santa Claus, all of which had been distorted by the modern world, and especially the recent war.

Ever since the merger of the fledgling Twentieth Century Pictures with the faltering Fox Film Corporation in 1935, and the appointment of Darryl F. Zanuck as vice president in charge of production, Twentieth Century-Fox (hereafter, "TCF") had succeeded in becoming one of Hollywood's top studios—if not *the* top studio, especially during war years. Zanuck had developed lovable child actresses Shirley Temple and Jane Withers into some of the industry's biggest stars; launched the careers of matinee idols like Tyrone Power and Henry Fonda; discovered legendary beauties like Gene Tierney and Linda Darnell; created extravagant musicals to showcase the sparkling talents of Betty Grable, Alice Faye, and Carmen Miranda; and kept a handful of well-produced serials going for the fans of the Cisco Kid, Michael Shayne, Charlie Chan, and Mr. Moto. The studio would win its second Academy Award for Best Picture for *How*



A scene from *Remember the Night* (1940), in which big-city prosecutor (Fred MacMurray) takes a shoplifter (Barbara Stanwyck) with him back to his hometown so she doesn't have to spend Christmas in jail. From left to right, Barbara Stanwyck, Beulah Bondi, Fred MacMurray, Sterling Holloway, and Elizabeth Patterson. (Photofest)

Green Was My Valley (1941) (the first was for 1933's *Cavalcade*), and would consistently be nominated for Oscars under Zanuck's leadership thereafter.

By the early 1940s, the studio had developed a robust production schedule of releasing about fifty films per year. About 40 percent of those films were higher-end productions utilizing the studio's best talent, while the other 60 percent consisted of lower-budget films for the serials. Color films were expensive to make because the studio had to license the cameras from Technicolor, so the process was reserved for extravagant musicals like *That Night in Rio* (1941) and *The Gang's All Here* (1943), or highbrow dramas like *Blood and Sand* (1941). Most of the studio's films were released in black-and-white. The production schedule remained the same until 1943, when the economies of war cut the number of films almost in half, down to thirty. All of the popular serials made by the "B" film production unit over at the studio's Western Avenue lot were eliminated during the war and would never be revived.* Other than some cheap crime thrillers that longtime studio producer Sol Wurtzel was churning out, TCF ceased making low-budget movies and concentrated on higher-end fare. This philosophy and reduced release schedule would remain in effect for the rest of the decade.



Bing Crosby and Marjorie Reynolds introduced the most famous Christmas song of the twentieth century, "White Christmas," in *Irving Berlin's Holiday Inn* (1942). (Photofest)



Judy Garland introduced the wistful (and somewhat melancholy) "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" in the 1944 film *Meet Me in St. Louis* as Margaret O'Brien, who played her younger sister, listened. (Photofest)

The 1947 lineup that included *Miracle* was fairly typical during that period. At the first national sales conference following the war, the president of TCF, Spyros Skouras, announced that the company would continue to follow its "established policy" of focusing on four genres of films: 1) adaptations of

* The Western Avenue lot was located on the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Western Avenue in Los Angeles. It became the secondary lot when the new lot opened on Pico Boulevard in 1928.



A film that would go on to become a Christmas classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*, came out just six months before *Miracle on 34th Street*. (Photofes)t



One of the major additions to midcentury Christmas culture was Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. He was introduced in a coloring book by the Montgomery Ward department store in 1939 and then got his own song in 1949. (Author's Collection)

best-selling books; 2) musicals filmed in Technicolor; 3) outdoor pictures filmed in Technicolor; and 4) dramas filmed on location.[3] A total of twenty-five films were released that year, and, other than the Wurtzel titles, they were all "A" list productions, even though only eight were filmed in Technicolor. Contrary to later statements made by some members of the cast and crew, *Miracle* was not a "B" picture. It featured a top producer and director, major stars, and was filmed on location, all of which were not characteristic of low-budget movies.

FILMS RELEASED BY TWENTIETH CENTURY-FOX IN 1947

ADAPTATIONS OF BEST-SELLING BOOKS:

The Brasher Doubloon
Daisy Kenyon
*Forever Amber**
The Foxes of Harrow
Gentleman's Agreement
The Ghost and Mrs. Muir
The Late George Apley
Moss Rose
Nightmare Alley





MUSICALS FILMED IN TECHNICOLOR:

Carnival in Costa Rica
I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now
Mother Wore Tights
*The Shocking Miss Pilgrim***





OUTDOOR PICTURES FILMED IN TECHNICOLOR:

The Homestretch
Bob, Son of Battle

*ALSO FILMED IN TECHNICOLOR

DRAMAS FILMED ON LOCATION:

Boomerang!
*Captain from Castile**
Kiss of Death
Miracle on 34th Street
13 Rue Madeleine





SOL WURTZEL PRODUCTIONS:

Crimson Key
Invisible Wall
Jewels of Brandenburg
Roses Are Red
Second Chance







****Released December 31, 1946**