

Blu-Ray Review: 'A Christmas Tale' Offers French Take on Family Dysfunction

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on December 14, 2009 - 12:23pm

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CHICAGO – When American filmmakers throw a colorful familial ensemble under one roof for the holidays, the result often feels like a forced sitcom. Consider 2005's "The Family Stone," an ungainly fusion of slapstick laughs, scathing satire and feel good fuzziness.

The family members and their significant others each came equipped with their own specially designed quirks, including a matriarch battling cancer, and a deaf son with a black male lover (they're portrayed as the only "normal" people in the film). French filmmaker Arnaud Desplechin's "A Christmas Tale," has the same basic outline, yet its style is more evocative of the New Wave than bad television.



Blu-Ray Rating: **4.5/5.0**

Not since Ingmar Bergman's "Fanny and Alexander" has a film so enchantingly merged jubilant holiday magic with melancholy family drama. It's an exhilaratingly off-kilter picture, with a story both sprawling and simple. The film opens with a man, Abel Vuillard (Jean-Paul Roussillon), expressing his lack of sorrow over the death of his eldest son, Joseph. "The loss is my foundation," Abel declares. This leads to a whimsically designed puppet show that illustrates the Vuillard family tree, unfolding the narrative with a pace and invention reminiscent of "Jules and Jim." Abel's wife, Junon (Catherine Deneuve), gave birth to three more children: the self-righteously angry Elizabeth (Anne Consigny), troubled buffoon Henri (Mathieu Amalric) and aspiring peacemaker Ivan (Melvil Poupad). The children are at odds with each other well into adulthood, as Elizabeth pays off Henri's debts, before banishing him from the family.

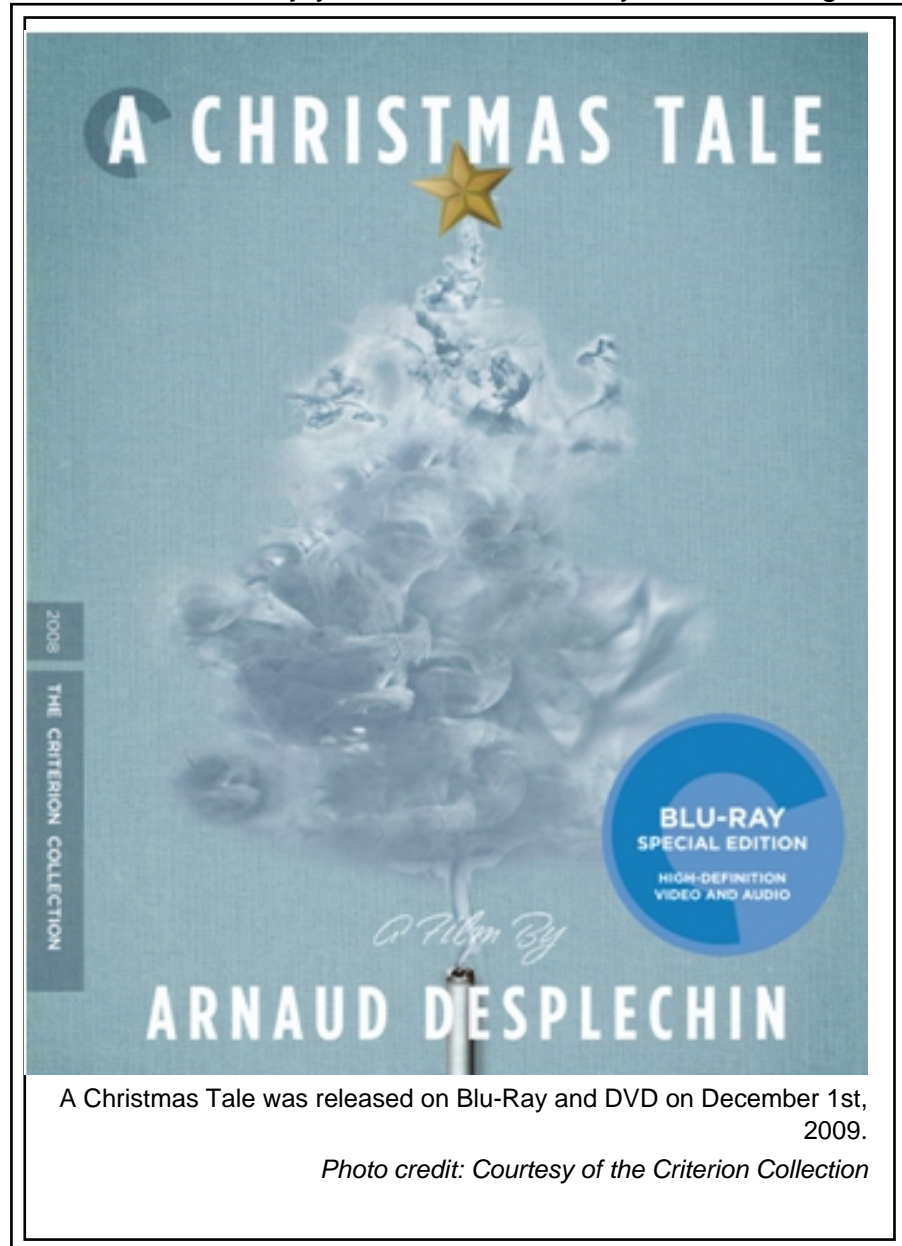


Mathieu Amalric falls from grace in Arnaud Desplechin's A Christmas Tale.

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Criterion Collection

Six years pass until the siblings finally reunite at the family home, as Junon prepares for a bone marrow transplant. She's facing a degenerative form of cancer, and is in need of a donor. Guess who's compatible. This plot could easily be soap opera fodder, but Desplechin

keeps the audience on their toes at every turn. The gorgeous cinematography by Eric Gautier is both crisp and lush, blurring the line between reality and the character's fantasies. Desplechin utilizes a variety of self-conscious filmmaking techniques that heighten the emotion of a given scenario, allowing the onscreen "magic" to emanate from within the characters. When Henri's girlfriend Faunia (Emmanuelle Devos) becomes filled with joy, the screen suddenly bursts with light.



The cast is absolutely second-to-none. Deneuve has lost none of her radiance, and brilliantly captures the measured warmth of a woman with a limited ability to love. Consigny is electrifying, as she consistently makes Amalric the scapegoat for her despair. It's great to see both actors together onscreen, after their previous pairing in one of the decade's best pictures, "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly." The wild-eyed Amalric is a regular of Desplechin's films, and masterfully embodies the reckless bipolar nature of his character. Deneuve's real-life daughter, Chiara Mastroianni, is utterly beguiling as Ivan's wife, whose caregiving compulsion is perhaps even greater than her husband's.

In its own way, "A Christmas Tale" is as tonally jumbled and manipulative as "The Family Stone." Yet while the latter film's characters were constructed out of recycled cardboard, Desplechin's film is populated with characters so complicated and confused, that they are quite literally "unknown to themselves." Their bare-boned authenticity is what gives the film its innate warmth.

"A Christmas Tale" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), and includes English subtitles. The disc offers two superb documentaries that greatly enrich the film itself. "Arnaud's Tale" features interviews with Deneuve, Amalric and the director, who admits that his original idea was to expand on the family chapter in his 2004 film, "Kings & Queen." The hour-long "L'aimeé" is a 2007 documentary that seems to have also provided the groundwork for "A Christmas Tale." As Desplechin chronicles the sale of his family home, he conducts haunting conversations with his father, who speaks candidly about the mother he never knew. "I knew her through her absence," his father replies. Perhaps the loss was his foundation.

'A Christmas Tale' is released by the Criterion Collection and stars Catherine Deneuve, Jean-Paul Roussillon, Anne Consigny, Mathieu Amalric, Melvil Poupaud, Chiara Mastroianni, Laurent Capelluto and Emmanuelle Devos. It was written by Arnaud Desplechin & Emmanuel Bourdieu and directed by Arnaud Desplechin. It was released on December 1st, 2009. It is not rated.



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