

Holiday films offer mayhem, Muppets and Marines

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Director Barry Levinson may have uttered a self-fulfilling prophecy when he wondered if after seeing his movie *Toys* (20th Century Fox) people would say, "This is what he's spent 12 years on?"

The story opens delightfully at the Zevo Toy Factory, where pastedressed workers sing and dance while they assemble toys. Even the dying owner (Donald O'Connor) wears a beanie and a boyish grin as he explains to his career-military brother, Leland (Michael Gambon), that he will inherit total control of the factory, since child-like son Leslie (Robin Williams) and daughter Alsatia (Joan Cusack) aren't quite up to handling grown-up responsibilities yet.

Once General Zevo takes over, bringing in his equally militaristic son, Patrick (LL Cool J), Leslie and Alsatia become alarmed when they start producing military toys — always a Zevo toy factory no-no. The general agrees to stop in exchange for developing a new line of toys in absolute secrecy.

Levinson's movie tends to cancel itself out, starting as it does with a production design of imaginative visual delights but ending up in cacophonous, mirthless mayhem on the factory floor. It's a puzzle why this overproduced, absurd comedy-drama made it to the big screen.

Despite the title's appeal, the nastiness of the menace — and Leslie's casual dalliance with an employee — make it clear that *Toys* is not for kids.

Due to much menace, an off-screen sexual encounter and some suggestive remarks, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

Muppet Christmas Carol

Miss Piggy, Kermit the Frog and Rizzo the Rat starring in an English literary classic? Strange but true, for *The Muppet Christmas Carol* is one of Disney's holiday offerings, based on Charles Dickens' beloved story "A Christmas Carol."

Center stage, however, goes not to



Arthur Grace-20th Century Fox
Robin Williams stars in Barry Levinson's *Toys*, a comedy about a whimsical toy maker who must save his father's factory from the clutches of his demented uncle.

those crazy critters collectively known as the Muppets, but to a crusty Michael Caine, who plays miserable skinflint Ebenezer Scrooge. His gradual transformation into a loving person is the movie's real focus.

Along for the ride are Kermit as his long-suffering employee, Bob Cratchit, and an unusually subdued Miss Piggy as Mrs. Cratchit. Other familiar Muppets pop up here and there, too, to lend some bounce to what is mostly a somber story until its all-hands-on-deck finale.

Co-producer/director Brian Henson shot this fourth Muppet movie in England and can take bows for splendid production and art design and nifty special effects that enhance the story without calling attention away from the plot. The cheery musical numbers also capture the Muppets' madcap spirit.

There is still the heartwarming message for the kids, while some Muppet fans may be let down to see the critters play second bananas to a mere human. Not to say one would exit the theater muttering, "Bah, humbug!" *The Muppet Christmas Carol* still ends up as diverting and wholesome family fare.

The USCC classification is A-I — general patronage. The MPAA rating is G — general audiences.

A Few Good Men

Lives and careers hang in the balance when two Marines are accused of murdering a fellow recruit in *A Few Good Men* (Columbia).

Based on playwright Aaron Sorkin's Broadway hit of the same title, director

MOVIE REVIEWS

Rob Reiner has "opened up" the military courtroom drama for the big screen while not losing sight of the tautly constructed plot.

Tom Cruise has the plum role of second-generation Navy lawyer Lt. Daniel Kaffee, a recent Harvard law graduate so intimidated by his late father's unparalleled reputation he takes the easy way out, glibly plea bargaining every case and taking baseball more seriously than the law.

For this reason he is assigned a potentially embarrassing case for the Marines in which two recruits (James Marshall and Wolfgang Bodison) are accused of murdering an unpopular fellow recruit during an unauthorized disciplinary action called a "Code Red." Kaffee is expected to cop a plea for his clients, quickly and quietly settling out of court.

Kaffee, his co-counsel (Kevin Pollak) and a strong-willed internal affairs attorney, Lt. Joanne Galloway (Demi Moore), visit the site of the crime: Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where the unit's commanding officer, Col. Jessep (Jack Nicholson), assures them the recruits acted on their own and no Code Red was issued.

On the verge of accepting a relatively short jail sentence for his clients, Kaffee faces Galloway's challenge to take his job responsibilities seriously. This and lingering doubts about Col. Jessep tip the scale. Kaffee decides to go to trial in hopes of discovering if the two Marines were being sacrificed to a military code of honor that demanded their silence over the truth.

Reiner's seamless direction allows all the movie's elements to mesh with military precision. Sorkin's screenplay, while conventional, nevertheless marches inexorably along until the suspense is crackling.

Due to an off-screen suicide, a blatantly sexist remark and intermittent rough language, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

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★ ★ ★ ★ **MOVIE TRIVIA** ★ ★ ★ ★

Question: Who played the "tough-as-nails" trail boss in *City Slickers*?

Answer: _____
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Last month's winner: **Jeanne Stewart** of Fairport correctly identified *Cape Fear* as the Martin Scorsese remake which originally starred Robert Mitchum.

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