

'The Polar Express' a holiday treat

David DiCerto/CNS

NEW YORK — In recent years, many Christmas-themed movies have displayed a lamentable Scrooge-like cynicism toward the holiday. Thankfully, director Robert Zemeckis has taken a different track with "The Polar Express," a visually captivating family fantasy about a young boy's journey of self-discovery aboard a magical train bound for the North Pole.

Based on the beloved children's novel of the same title by Chris Van Allsburg, the film is a Christmas present for the young and the young



Warner Bros./CNS

A scene from the animated movie "The Polar Express."

MISSION NEWS

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at heart; a beautifully told fairy tale whose heartwarming sentiment is as welcome as a mug of steaming hot chocolate on a cold winter's day.

The film utilizes a cutting-edge computer animation technique called "performance capture" that digitally translates the movements and facial expressions of live actors into pixilated characters, marrying them with the virtual world of the story. The imaginative end result looks somewhere between animation and live action. The process allows star Tom Hanks to play five separate roles in the movie.

The tale opens on Christmas Eve, with the story's unnamed hero (a young boy "performed" by Tom Hanks, but voiced by Daryl Sabara) lying awake in his bed, awaiting the arrival of Santa, whose existence he has begun to doubt. Drifting off to sleep, he is roused by the loud rumblings of a steam locomotive pulling up to his snow-blanketed front yard. Rushing outside, he is met by the enchanted train's conductor (performed and voiced by Hanks) who ushers him aboard, alerting him to a golden ticket in his bathrobe pocket stamped for passage to the North Pole.

Once on board he meets the other youthful passengers, including a kind-hearted girl (voiced and performed by Nona Gaye), a nerdy know-it-all (voiced and performed by Eddie Deezen) and a friendless boy (performed by Peter Scolari and voiced by Jimmy Bennett).

The train eventually pulls into the station at the North Pole just in time for Santa's annual send-off. But a mishap separates the three principal children from the rest of the rugrats, triggering a mad scramble through the labyrinthine industrial areas and abandoned factories of

MovieReview

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Christmas village, before they find their way back to the town square, mobbed for Santa's departure.

Old St. Nick (once again, Hanks) is greeted like a rock star as he descends from his residence to his waiting sleigh. The main boy is selected to receive the ceremonial first present. The gift he chooses underlines the movie's twin themes of childlike wonder and sorrow over its loss.

Noticeable by their absence are any religious symbols or mentions of the spiritual significance of Christmas, especially given that the story involves rediscovering the "true meaning" of the holiday. However, while the movie remains outwardly secular, its underlying message is profoundly faith-friendly, as illustrated by the conductor's counsel that "the most real things are the things you can't see." On one level it can be interpreted as a parable about struggling to have faith in a world where "seeing is believing."

For a holiday treat, jump aboard "The Polar Express."

The USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-I — general patronage. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is G — general audiences.

DiCerto is on the staff of the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.