

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Film : Two showings by Martha's Vineyard film organizations

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Island filmgoers have a choice of two film events this weekend. The Martha's Vineyard Independent Film Festival (MVFF) will present a program of short films for children on Saturday, Dec. 4, at the Chilmark Community Center. Also on Saturday, the Martha's Vineyard Film Society (MVFS) will offer French filmmaker Arnaud Desplechin's family drama, "A Christmas Tale" ("Un Conte de Noel").



Photo courtesy of TMVFF

The first Family.Film.Feast. of the 2010-2011 season is this Saturday at 5 pm.



Family. Film. Feast. in Chilmark

For the Chilmark event, MVFF Cinema Circus launches its winter series, Family. Film. Feast. with seven short animated films for children aged 3 to 10, in addition to food and music. Director of Children's Programming Lindsey Scott has put together the program from more than 100 films.

"I love the creativity they have," she says. Ms. Scott has chosen films on the basis of moral message, language, level of scariness, and ability to engage children.

Innovation, both in technique and storyline, distinguishes all seven. "Orange" uses the unusual device of animating parts of a filmed cityscape, while "Crank Balls" creates a non-traditional story about three grumpy blobs with large, human-looking eyes and teeth who are transformed by color to cheerfulness.

"Christmas Tree" depicts a hand sketching in sequence the ingredients for a holiday scene. Others, such as "Sylvester and the Magic Stone" and "The Man Who Walked Between the Towers" are based on popular children's books.

A British entry, "The Great White Man-Eating Shark," approaches traditional narration with a twist by creating a protagonist who is greedy and relatively unattractive, at the same time charming the viewer. "Mind the Gap" transforms buttons into an imaginative tale about taking the metro with a subway made from a zipper.

Selected from the Chicago and New York international children's festivals as well as blogs, film school, and emerging filmmaker websites, the line-up consists of movies parents might have trouble finding on their own. With that in mind, MVIFF has established a lending library of films shown at previous Cinema Circus events. They are available to members at the organization's 9 State Road office in Chilmark.

Daniele Dominick of the Scottish Bakehouse will offer for sale a menu of entrees and à la carte items, made with local ingredients, starting at 5 pm, and the band Goodnight Louise will play before the 6 pm screening.

To encourage Island families to come, Ms. Scott says the winter programs have been scheduled on non-holiday weekends. Two more are slated for Saturday, Jan. 8 and Saturday, Feb. 5.

"A Christmas Tale" in Vineyard Haven

Catherine Deneuve headlines the estimable cast of a large, dysfunctional French family in "A Christmas Tale." As the matriarch Junon Vuillard, she has just learned she suffers from the same form of leukemia that killed her first son, Joseph, at age six.

Guess again if you think this narrative premise makes for a gloomy and un-festive movie. The Vuillard family is far too full of life, sophistication, and neurotic glitches to slide into an abyss of holiday despair.

Junon's husband Abel (Jean-Paul Rousillon), a music-lover who runs a dye factory in

Roubaix, dotes on his wife, children, and grandchildren. Daughter Elizabeth, a Paris playwright, struggles with melancholy, but in such a cerebral way that she makes that state of mind intriguing. This is so in particular, because of her visceral dislike of her brother Henri (Mathieu Almaric), who was conceived in hopes of saving his cancer-ridden brother Joseph. Elizabeth's son Paul (Emile Berling) adds to her woe with mental issues serious enough to warrant the antipsychotic, Haldol.

Brother Henri functions as the family's black sheep, periodically getting drunk, jailed, or drugged but usually adding a bracing, if sometimes painfully blunt, honesty to the family dialogue. He brings a new girlfriend whom no one has met before, named Faunia (Emmanuelle Devos), to the family Christmas gathering.

As the youngest member of the Vuillard family, Ivan (Melvil Poupaud) might seem like a minor character, except for his wife Sylvie (Chiara Mastroianni, Ms. Deneuve's daughter by the legendary Italian actor Marcello Mastroianni), who may or may not have eyes for her husband's cousin Simon (Laurent Capelluto), a painter.

Junon's health provides the crisis that activates the plot. Little Joseph died because no one could provide a blood match for a bone marrow transplant. Both her son Henri and her grandson Paul, however, can donate the bone marrow needed for her survival.

This dizzying circus of individuals offers director Desplechin the opportunity to meander with flamboyant self-indulgence into one subplot and cinematic technique after another.

Whether Abel is quoting Nietzsche to his daughter Elizabeth, or Henri is getting bailed out of bankruptcy by her, "A Christmas Tale" has the viewer scrambling to keep up. Cinematic homages, from Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo" to Junon's cigarettes (the vintage brand Ms. Deneuve actually smokes), abound. So do technical flourishes.

Sometimes Mr. Desplechin enlivens the byzantine family stew with voiceovers or characters addressing the camera directly. Other times he uses silhouette puppet shows or iris shots where the image is round.

"A Christmas Tale" is a virtuoso work that was nominated for or has won too many international awards to list. Go to it prepared to have your mind — and heart — challenged. Then watch it again. And again.

Film.Family.Feast., Saturday, Dec. 4, 6 pm (food and music, 5 pm), Chilmark Community Center. \$12; \$6 for MVFF members. Family membership \$95; \$75 with Island Club Card; Individual membership \$50; \$40 with card. For information, visit tmvff.org

"A Christmas Tale," Saturday, Dec. 4, 7:30 pm, Katharine Cornell Theatre, Vineyard Haven. \$8; \$5 for MVFS members. Doors open at 7 pm. For information, visit mvfilmsociety.com.

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