





Let's Make a Christmas TV Movie!

(OR NOT?)

EW tasked its two in-house yuletide experts with the ultimate assignment: Write a holiday film, and pitch it to a network and a producer.

BY
DALTON ROSS &
DAN SNIERSON

ILLUSTRATION
BY JEFF HINCHEE

Every fall,
as the leaves turn
brilliant then dull,
and T-shirt time
yields to sweater
weather, we retreat
indoors to watch
the sackloads of
Christmas TV movies
that the networks
and streamers
start stuffing down
our chimneys.
(140-plus this year!)
As we witness every
variation on a
snowstorm stranding,
pretend boyfriend,
and gingerbread
competition, one
thought always
dances in our heads:

*Bet we could
write one of those.*

BUT COULD WE? As two EW veterans who've consumed more yuletide movies than is medically advised (and one of us is *Jewish!*), we set out to create the ideal Christmas flick while learning all the ingredients that make for the perfect holiday dish. We turned our thermostats down to 32 degrees, piled on the scarves, overindulged in some salted caramel pie, and whipped up a 10-page treatment for *Lights! Camera! Christmas!*, a cinematic-yet-tubular experience brimming with unlikely/forbidden romance, matchmaking kids, hot cocoa, and plenty of mangled mistletoe. We honored the tropes of this Emmy-allergic comfort-food genre while taking several calculated risks. (A male lead? In a movie about Christmas movies? That's set in summer?) All we needed now were a few powerful people to believe in the miracle of our Christmas.

We set up a pitch meeting with Lifetime's Tanya Lopez and Sapna Vyas—EVP and VP of scripted content, respectively—who sift through more than 300 yuletide pitches a year and oversee a slate that features 35 new Christmas movies in 2021. We also presented our idea to MadDog Productions president Maura Dunbar; a former ABC and Hallmark Channel programming exec, she has executive-produced 12 Christmas movies, including Hallmark Channel's 2018 film *Christmas at Pemberley Manor* and this year's *Nantucket Noel* (Nov. 19). Will we show this trio a holiday hit in waiting—or will they show us the door? Will their notes be naughty or nice? It's time for action on *Lights! Camera! Christmas!*

THE PITCH

Jaded journalist Trevor Rankin of *Hollywired* magazine is dispatched against his will to the Christmas-obsessed town of Kringleville to cover the July filming of the holiday TV movie *Chris Missed Christmas*. Trevor meets a cast and crew that include jolly security guard Freddie; Trudy, the giant-glasses-wearing script supervisor; two adorable kid actors, Kevin and Kayla; and leading lady Erika, who sees an opportunity to score a cover story on herself and cement her status as a Christmas Movie Queen.

While Trevor interviews the charming Christmas-loving director, Jessica Bass, a connection begins to form. Even though Trevor is not a fan of the genre, his hardened exterior starts to soften as he observes filming, and he brings

THE VERY MERRY RISE OF THE CHRISTMAS TV MOVIE

There was a time when Christmas was quaint. Back in the '90s, the broadcast networks would unveil a few yuletide movies and call it a year. But as industry economics changed, the Big Three uprooted their trees and cable networks including Hallmark Channel, Lifetime, and Freeform ancestor ABC Family moved in to reseed the territory. The genre truly blossomed in the 2010s: In 2016, there were about 40 new Christmas movies. Just five years later, the slate boasts more than 140, kicks off before Halloween, and brings much-needed diversity to the historically white genre. Hallmark networks lead the pack in ratings and volume, offering 41 new films this year. "The success has influenced the way we develop programming for the network and opened the door for us to create successful seasonal events throughout the year," says Hallmark's EVP of programming Lisa Hamilton Daly.

These movies make financial sense: They're cost-efficient, they juice ratings and build momentum, and they perform well in repeats. "Retaining your audience is harder and harder," says Lifetime EVP of scripted content Tanya Lopez, whose network is unleashing 35 new films, 30 of which are debuting on consecutive nights. "At Christmas, we have the opportunity to continue to drive that brand loyalty. Our goal is to give [viewers] enough variety of entertainment so that they stick with us through the entire season."

Streamers have seen the Christmas lights too: Netflix will drop 12 movies this year, and BET+ has eight. Meanwhile, UPTv, ION Television, OWN, and VH1 have become holiday players, along with newly rebranded GAC Family (led by former Hallmark chief Bill Abbott), which will uncork 12 new titles. Heck, even Food Network will serve up a holiday movie on Discovery+: *Candy Coated Christmas*. Binge responsibly, and beware of that sugar crash. —DAN SNIERSON



1. In 2002, Hallmark Channel unwrapped its first original holiday movie, *Santa Jr.*, featuring Lauren Holly and Judd Nelson 2. Melissa Joan Hart and Mario Lopez took the Christmas TV movie for a nutty ride in 2007's *Holiday in Handcuffs* on ABC Family 3. Netflix made a royal entrance into the genre with 2017's *A Christmas Prince*, which begat two sequels

Jessica a piece of lucky mistletoe every day. An even deeper bond develops when Trevor learns that Jessica lost her two sisters in a car crash, and he offers his condolences while sharing that his only sibling died a few years ago.

After several attempts to engineer magical moments between Trevor and Jessica backfire, pint-size cupids Kayla and Kevin arrange a dinner for the two at the town's Christmas-themed restaurant, Silent Bite. But when Jessica discovers what appears to be a draft of Trevor's scorched-earth article about the movie (it's actually an early version of the story he had discarded), she bars him from the set.

The action skips ahead five months to the Christmas Eve premiere for

Chris Missed Christmas back in Kringleville, where Jessica is handed a copy of Trevor's actual article in which he professes his newfound love of not just Christmas and the movies that celebrate it but the woman who helped open his heart. Jessica is speechless, but is whisked away to the red carpet for interviews, where she spots Trevor decked out in a red-and-green tuxedo. Jessica pulls out all the mistletoe that Trevor gave her, holding it above their heads, and the two kiss...which garners huge applause from the nearby cast, who all then file into the theater as a crane shot pulls away from the scene, giving us a bird's-eye view of the town, with "*Chris Missed Christmas* World Premiere" lit up on the marquee.

THE NAUGHTY

Turns out, our perfect Christmas movie is...less than perfect. Among the biggest concerns from our pitch meetings is that a yuletide film written by entertainment reporters about the making of a yuletide film starring an entertainment reporter might be too meta. (Go figure!) "It's very insidery, with the movie-inside-the-movie," says Lifetime's Lopez. "I don't know if it will work or not, to be completely candid."

In addition, our decision to wait until the very end of the film for the big dramatic kiss (a hallmark of many, well, Hallmark films) is a ho-ho-horrible idea. "It's a two-kiss movie!" insists

OUR DREAM CAST

Here's who we have in mind to star in the epic holiday extravaganza that is *Lights! Camera! Christmas!* —DALTON ROSS



Josh Groban

as **TREVOR**
The multiplatinum vocalist doesn't just have the pipes, he's got the acting chops to play our grinchy-yet-lovestruck entertainment journalist.



Amber Stevens West

as **JESSICA**
With charm to spare, the former *Greek* star (and Lifetime holiday-movie veteran of *Christmas Unwrapped*) is a perfect pick for the movie's yuletide-obsessed director.



Jameela Jamil

as **ERIKA**
Jamil would most certainly be in a very good place playing the hilariously self-absorbed Christmas Movie Queen obsessed with landing a *Holly-wired* cover story.



Donna Lynne Champlin

as **TRUDY**
We see the underrated *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* star sidekicking her way into viewers' hearts as *Chris Minded Christmas*' bespectacled script supervisor (and Jessica's on-set BFF).



Harvey Guillén

as **FREDDIE**
With his warmth and comedic charisma, *What We Do in the Shadows*' Guillén is a jolly good choice to lock down both the set and laughs as the jovial security guard.

producer Dunbar. "You got to have that first kiss, and *then* the second kiss!" They want to see romance early and often, and admonish us for dumping a mountain of coal in viewers' stockings with such grim backstories for both main characters. "Debbie Downer, man!" cries Dunbar while shaking her head. "The brother's dying, sisters are dying—Christmas is the ultimate feel-good time of year. Once you have that kind of trauma, you ain't coming back." Also, fewer sibling ghosts of Christmas past means space for family in the present—a notable absence in our pitch. "It felt like it missed an opportunity," points out Lifetime's Vyas.

And even where we did something right, there are problems—as evidenced when the execs get to dissecting our mini-matchmakers, Kevin and Kayla. "I loved your *Parent Trap* idea of these two kids, but it came out of nowhere," says Lopez. "I don't know what their investment is in her—why they all care. It just felt really forced."

The experts' notes are not always unanimous, though. The panel is split on the radical decision to stage the majority of *Lights! Camera! Christmas!* in less-than-wintery July. "The reality is we all make these movies in summer," admits Dunbar. "So there's gold to be had." While Vyas agrees that there is "something interesting" about leaning into the fun (and reality) of the summer-filming schedule, Lopez worries that it could be "jarring" and "take the magic" out of the holiday the film is celebrating.

Fair enough. But after carving up our Christmas film with all the exuberance of a Grinch slicing through Whoville's finest roast beast, is there anything these people *do* like about our movie?

THE NICE

While the issues with our script are as plentiful as December snowfall in Colorado, the lights in *Lights! Camera! Christmas!* are not out yet. For starters, our trio love both the title and the backdrop of nonstop Christmas in Kringleville. Lifetime's execs praise Trevor as a compelling protagonist on a clear journey of lesson-learning. "We really responded to the fish out of water," says Vyas. "The fact that he's had a transformation to go through, and the way he's going to achieve that transformation through this



GROBAN: THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES; WEST: MICHAEL KOVAC/GETTY IMAGES FOR STARZ ENTERTAINMENT; JAMIL: DIMITRIOS KAMBOURIS/GETTY IMAGES FOR DVE; CHAMPLIN: JEAN BAPTISTE LAUROUX/REXUS; GUILLÉN: MICHAEL KOVAC/GETTY IMAGES FOR ACURRA; BLENDING CHRISTMAS: LIFETIME; SISTER SWAP: A HOMETOWN HOLIDAY; FRED HAYS/CROWN MEDIA; SINGLE ALL THE WAY: PHILIPPE BOSSSE/NETFLIX

“Every girl wants to be swept away by romance—and if a guy shows up in a blinking suit, he’s dead.”

Producer Maura Dunbar

romantic story, resonates for our audience.” (Dunbar even suggests we make Trevor a sportswriter to yank this fish even further out of water.)

Lifetime and Dunbar are intrigued by our (much-labored-over) decision to go with a male lead (see: Mario Lopez in Lifetime’s *Feliz Navidad*). “The names of the guys who make it a greenlight movie are far fewer than the women,” notes Dunbar. While Vyas acknowledges the risk, she sees potential reward: “We are a women’s network and support women, but women want to watch men as well. So we have this conversation a lot. There’s an opportunity in Trevor.” In his casting, too. Lifetime approves of our suggestion of Josh Groban (see sidebar, left), the savvy baritone who moonlights in acting. “He taps into an audience that we want to come to our table,” says

Lopez, while noting that we’d need to find an organic opportunity for him to sing. (One yuletide karaoke session, coming up!)

Trevor’s co-lead, Jessica, also holds promise. “It’s very empowering to see a female director,” says Dunbar. However, the three do feel she needs to embark on a more meaningful journey. “While Jessica’s had tragedy, it’s a backstory moment,” says Lopez. “Her big victory is Trevor kinda likes Christmas too, which isn’t a huge arc for our female character.”

Our experts are in support of the supporting cast, especially diva actress Erika. “Erika popped out in her Gloria Swanson moment,” raves Lopez. “She’s got her own movie going on.” (She suggests Susan Lucci or Annie Potts for the role, while Dunbar envisions Elaine Hendrix.) Trudy rates highly, and not just because of her giant glasses. “Her relationship with Jessica is a really important one, if we’re not having her family or a best friend,” says Vyas, who also wants us to flesh out a romance plot for Freddie and his husband: “We love when there’s a couple for a B or C story.”

Which brings us to our Z story. Opinions are divided on a sartorial decision, when reformed scrooge Trevor pops up at Jessica’s premiere in a red-and-green suit. Dan suggests adding flashing lights to the tuxedo to jokingly reflect that Trevor had seen the light, while Dalton feels that Trevor should conserve energy and stay classy. Lopez joins Dan

on Team Blink, while Vyas and Dunbar support Dalton on Team Lights Out. “Every girl wants to be swept away by romance,” says Dunbar, “and if a guy shows up in a blinking suit, he’s dead.”

THE VERDICT

The moment of truth: Will these industry experts consider making our movie? “This would fall in the middle for me,” says Vyas. “There’s more to be discussed. There’s work to be done.” As for Lopez: “I would say if we had a relationship with you, if you’d written another Christmas movie before, if we knew the producers you were with, if you brought talent to it...we would probably take the time and work on the material.” Well, that sounds extremely positive—especially when we ignore the 518 uses of the word *if*.

We’re down to our last shot, with producer Dunbar holding the keys to our festive future: “I love so much about this idea.” Wait, *what?!* “I’m always looking for the diamond in the rough. And I think you do have a diamond in the rough. There’s something fresh here, but there’s some recalibration that needs to happen. I would love to work with you on it.”

Behold, a Christmas miracle! This absurd holiday fever dream might actually be coming to a TV near you in 2022. Someone get Groban an ugly sweater! EW

HOLIDAY MOVIE STARTER PACK

Not sure how to sift through all those new Christmas flicks? Hop on our sled for a highlights tour. —DAN SNIERSON

Blending Christmas

LIFETIME • DEC. 12

Haylie Duff’s Emma will receive a surprise wedding proposal from her boyfriend (Aaron O’Connell), who has secretly gathered both of their families at a resort. Chaos ensues, as do several *Brady Bunch* stars.

The Housewives of the North Pole

PEACOCK • DEC. 9

Decorating-competition champs (Betsy Brandt, *Real Housewives*’ Kyle Richards) have a falling-out right before Christmas, sending an ambitious magazine writer into tabloid action.

Sister Swap 1

HALLMARK CHANNEL
DEC. 5 AND DEC. 12

The Williams sisters (Kimberly Williams-Paisley and Ashley Williams, that is) play siblings in two connected movies (*A Hometown Holiday*, *Christmas in the City*) that share scenes.

Hot Mess Holiday

COMEDY CENTRAL
DEC. 11

After a banker (Melanie Chandra) is dumped by her fiancé during Diwali, her BFF (Surina Jindal) takes her on a cross-Chicago party adventure that tangles them in a diamond heist.

Zoey’s Extraordinary Christmas

ROKU CHANNEL • DEC. 1

She has risen! If all you want for Christmas is a little resolution, the cult musical drama that NBC canceled in June returns with its main cast and a few holiday heart songs.

A Christmas Proposal

CBS • DEC. 19

CBS offers up its first yuletide film in 11 years—one that features a Latin cast: A struggling chef (Jessica Camacho) agrees to pose as the girlfriend of a lawyer (Adam Rodriguez) visiting his family.

Single All the Way 2

NETFLIX • DEC. 2

Michael Urie heads home for the holidays with his best friend-turned-fake boyfriend (Philemon Chambers), but mom (Kathy Najimy) aims to set up her son with her spin instructor (Luke Macfarlane).

The Bitch Who Stole Christmas 3

VH1 • DEC. 2

RuPaul is a fashion-mag editor working with a journalist (Krysta Rodriguez) on assignment in a small town. Brace for a winter ball, plus Ginger Minj, Peppermint, and Latrice Royale!