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Features Editor Erick Bengel.

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE



ON THE COVER

The Trail Band will perform at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 30 at the Coaster Theatre in Cannon Beach for a holiday concert.

KEITH BUCKLEY PHOTO

See story on Page 8

4

THE ARTS

O Holy Night

Marco Panuccio brings audiences feel-food experience

7

BOOK

Survivor

Former Surfside resident writes book on battling illnesses

8

FEATURE

The Trail Band

Musical group plays last-ever concert in Cannon Beach

FURTHER ENJOYMENT

MUSIC CALENDAR5

CROSSWORD6

SEE + DO 10, 11

CW MARKETPLACE..... 15, 16

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SCRATCHPAD

'The Muppet Christmas Carol' is an unsung holiday classic

By ERICK BENDEL

COAST WEEKEND

Christmas confession: "The Muppet Christmas Carol" is my favorite holiday movie.

Yes, there are better Christmas movies, and even better "Christmas Carols" (Alastair Sim's 1951 version is the unsurpassed adaptation). There are Christmas movies with more laughs ("Elf") and Christmas movies with more machine guns ("Lethal Weapon," "Die Hard").

But "Muppet Christmas Carol" (1992) has secretly held my heart since Santa dropped the VHS down my chimney when I was 7. And I'm not the only one: In recent years, I've met several millennials who consider the film one of our generation's unsung holiday classics.

For starters, Michael Caine's performance as Scrooge is more powerful than Muppet fans have any right to expect. His Scrooge seems entirely unaware he's in a children's film. The actor doesn't just stand around as a straight man for wisecracking hand puppets; he creates a tragic wretch worthy of the BBC.

Caine reportedly told director Brian Henson (son of Jim): "I'm going to play this movie like I'm working with the Royal Shakespeare Company. I will never wink, I will never do anything Muppet. I am going to play Scrooge as if it is an utterly dramatic role and there are no puppets around me."

Sir Michael doesn't condescend to the Muppets. He elevates them. The Muppetry rises to his level.

And the music ...

The songs were composed by Paul Williams, who wrote the Oscar-nominated "Rainbow Connection" — and who, while working on "Muppet Christmas Carol," was recovering from a decade lost to coke and booze. (When Scrooge sings, "With a thankful heart that is wide awake / I do make this promise, every breath I take / Will be used now to sing your praise," Williams is describing his own salvaged soul.) Has there ever been a tune that trumpets the Yuletide quite like "It Feels Like Christmas"?

I do wonder, though ... if the film were made today, would I find it so funny, fleet-footed and spiritually satisfying? Is my enjoyment the result of childhood overexposure to the Muppets? Am I merely programmed to love "Muppet Christmas Carol"?

Truth be told, I never much cared for "The Muppet Show" growing up. "Muppet Treasure Island," which is all zany action and no heart, thoroughly bored me, though perhaps I'd outgrown the Muppetverse by then.

"Muppet Christmas Carol" is simply special — and contains some pretty poignant stuff for a kiddie flick.

At one point, Scrooge slams the door in a caroler's face. We later see the singer shivering in the street, wrapped in newspapers, alone on Christmas Eve.

When Scrooge tours his youth with the Ghost of Christmas Past, he beholds himself as a friendless, cheerless boy. "Good heavens ... it's me," Scrooge whispers, realizing it's *still* him.

And of course there's the death of Tiny Tim, and the climactic graveyard scene when Scrooge faces his own meaningless end, and the meaningless life that preceded it.

When the fuzzy antics get mildly irritating (I'm looking at you, Gonzo and Rizzo), they're kept in check by Charles Dickens' story, which gives the Muppets some unexpected depth and darkness, but not too much. Meanwhile, these sweet-souled characters — Kermit the Frog, Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear, et al. — are right at home in scenes of warmth and Christmas cheer. It's the perfect marriage of the weighty and the whimsical.

Dickens, frankly, is as responsible for the film's success as the Jim Henson Company. From a filmmaking standpoint, "A Christmas Carol" is virtually foolproof, a dependable allegory that forces us to reckon with our own sins and shortcomings, while reminding us it's never too late to redeem our lives.

It's a message that rarely fails to inspire, even — or perhaps especially — when it's delivered by a felted, gentle-hearted frog. **CW**