

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
Presents

A  
Bob Clark  
Film

from the Works of  
Jean Shepherd

# A CHRISTMAS STORY

Starring

MELINDA DILLON

DARREN MCGAVIN

and

PETER BILLINGSLEY

Screenplay

by

JEAN SHEPHERD & LEIGH BROWN & BOB CLARK

Based Upon The Novel

IN GOD WE TRUST, ALL OTHERS PAY CASH

by

JEAN SHEPHERD

Produced

by

RENE DUPONT and BOB CLARK

Directed

by

BOB CLARK

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# A CHRISTMAS STORY

There are lots of important things in the life of a nine year old boy -- summer vacation, the World Series, comic books, Saturday matinees, autumn leaves, bicycles, Halloween, football, Thanksgiving turkey and the first snowball fight of the year all rank somewhere in the top Twenty. But Number One in the mind of every Real Guy is always the same: Christmas.

Ever so slowly in the Fall, a boy's mind turns to the dreams and fantasies which accompany the Holiday season. Filled at first with a burning desire to own Everything, he begins to formulate fantastic schemes to obtain his entire wish list of exotic devices. Gradually, however, he realizes that there is one thing in particular that he cannot live without, one object so magnificent that he must possess it, no matter what.

Today, guys like Ralphie Parker everywhere are plotting strategies carefully, their minds reeling with glorious images of arcade games, mini-computers and videotape recorders. But in the simpler world of 1940's Middle America to which Ralphie belongs, there was one gift worthy of absolute obsession: a Genuine Red Ryder Carbine Action Two Hundred Shot Lightning Loader Range Model Air Rifle, with a Shock-Proof High Adventure Combination Trail Compass and Sundial set right in the stock.

But between every boy and his dream stand his parents, alert and forearmed with irrefutable logic. And whenever the dream involved an air rifle, one devastating, insurmountable emotional reaction was a certainty: "NO! YOU'LL ONLY SHOOT YOUR EYE OUT!"

This is the challenge facing young Ralphie Parker in MGM's "A Christmas Story," a whimsical and slightly twisted comedy about a typical American family's Christmas from director Bob Clark. Set in an Indiana suburb during the 1940's, the film follows the adventures of Ralphie as he pursues the present of his dreams.

A Christmas Tree Films Production, it stars Melinda Dillon as Ralphie's Mother, Darren McGavin as Ralphie's Old Man, and eleven year-old Peter Billingsley as the one and only Ralphie Parker. Bob Clark directs, and produces with Rene Dupont, from a screenplay by Jean Shepherd, Leigh Brown and Bob Clark. The film is released by MGM/UA Entertainment Co.

Ostensibly, the film is about a child's quest to obtain a Christmas gift. Its underlying theme, however, is the quality of perseverance against unconquerable odds, reflecting the indomitable spirit of America during the Forties. It is an amusing and enriching film which will touch the hearts of audiences everywhere.

#### ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Director Bob Clark first became interested in creating a motion picture based upon award-winning humorist Jean Shepherd's work in 1973, when he read In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash. One of the stories from that book, entitled "The Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid," was eventually adapted to form the central theme of "A Christmas Story" by Shepherd, his wife Leigh Brown, and director Clark.

The film began production on January 14, 1983, nearly ten years after Clark had first entertained the idea of making it. And according to Clark, it was his earlier success with the

1982 comedy hit, "Porky's," which gave him the ability to bring "A Christmas Story" to the screen.

"This is what I've worked to achieve," explains Clark, "the opportunity to make the films I want to make. 'Porky's' has allowed me to make studio films without having to sacrifice any of the freedom and control I had as an independent."

"At an earlier stage of my career, I would have been forced to make unacceptable creative compromises -- but not now," Clark continues. "In the case of 'A Christmas Story,' I was at first attracted by the sense of time and place Jean Shepherd had created in the story. It was essential for the film to capture that eclectic atmosphere, which gives the story its veracity and integrity."

To find an American city resembling an Indiana town of the 1940's, director Clark sent his location scouts to twenty cities before selecting Cleveland, Ohio as the sight for filming. There they had discovered Higbee's, a family-owned department store built in the 1920's that sports a huge neon sign on its roof and many of its original fixtures inside, including brass doors with art deco designs, wood-trimmed display cases, a narrow wooden escalator and rows of sparkling crystal chandeliers which hang above the main aisle of the first floor.

The management agreed to rearrange its merchandise displays for the four days of shooting within the store, and permitted the construction of the huge Santa's Mountain set right on the Main Floor. An enormous combination of wood, paper, cotton batting and silver sparkles, Santa's Mountain attracted the attention of many puzzled shoppers who wondered aloud whether the store had forgotten that the

Christmas season was already over. The giant thirty-foot peak, complete with Santa's Perch on top, took twelve men three weeks to construct.

Outside the store the film-makers made use of a large Public Square, a feature which few cosmopolitan cities in America have retained, as the setting for the film's impressive Christmas parade sequence. Six thousand feet of emerald-green garlands were strung throughout the Square, along with 75,000 watts of twinkling lights and a variety of other hanging decorations. Each modern bus shelter was disguised to resemble the old-style kiosk, with the exception of one which became the sight of a Nativity scene.

The parade itself involved more than 850 extras, for whom the Wardrobe Department unearthed or created appropriate costumes. Floats were constructed and a half-dozen marching bands assembled for the parade, which was filmed during two bitterly cold nights. Many of the hardy Cleveland residents who gathered in the evening hours to watch disappeared long before filming was completed in the early morning hours.

The people of Cleveland were unusually cooperative during the filming of "A Christmas Story," donating antique vehicles from every corner of the city to help lend depth to the production design. Yet there was one essential ingredient that no local resident could help provide -- snow.

In the snow belt, 1982 went on record as the warmest winter of the 20th Century, which was terrific news for residents but more than a little challenging for the film-makers. The white, fluffy stuff was essential to every outdoor scene of the film -- and luckily, a light but steady snowfall began the day before exterior shooting

began with the parade sequence, and continued to provide enough to cover the ground. Unfortunately, it proved to be one of the only snowstorms of the season.

Special effects supervisor Martin Malivoire and assistant Neil Trifunovich spent days tracking down snow, assessing the cost of bringing in truckloads from as far away as Northern Michigan and Buffalo. In the end, they used three different types of artificial snow: potato flakes were used with wind machines to resemble flying snow; huge bales of shredded vinyl were used as set dressing; and firefighters' foam was used to simulate snow on the ground, trees and houses of an entire neighborhood in the Tremont area of Cleveland where the home chosen to represent the Parkers' was located.

A local resident, driving through the apparently snowbound neighborhood, registered a look of shocked surprise and disbelief as he viewed the scene in front of him. Director Bob Clark recalls with a smile, "All of a sudden, he rounds a corner, one he sees every day, and one half the street is covered with snow -- houses, trees, everything. He looked like he thought he'd just entered the Twilight Zone!"

The most challenging aspect of making "A Christmas Story" had little to do with locations or weather. Bob Clark is an actors' director, who believes "the actor is everything." And although it's often said by film-makers that working with children is very tough, Clark was able to draw tremendous performances from each of the kids he cast.

Clark's rapport with all of the children in the film, and with Peter Billingsley in particular, was tangible to everyone present on the set. They became great friends, as did Peter and dialogue

coach Charles Northcote.

Billingsley is blessed with an I.Q. of 150, yet had some difficulty memorizing the description of the air rifle with which his character is obsessed. Northcote spent more than an hour with Billingsley, helping him learn one word at a time. When they had finished, the eleven year-old actor looked at Northcote intensely and said, "Charlie, I don't mean to be a smartass, but what good does a sundial in a rifle do when you want to tell time at night?" Northcote's response required some acting, in the form of a straight face...and a very thoughtful explanation.

#### ABOUT THE FILM-MAKERS

DIRECTOR BOB CLARK first considered creating a film from Jean Shepherd's award-winning collection of short stories, In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash, in 1973. Six months later a screenplay was born through the collaboration of Shepherd, his wife Leigh Brown, and Clark. Yet ten years passed before Clark had earned enough recognition as a feature director to produce "A Christmas Story" without creative interference.

Clark, who is 42, financed and produced his first feature film, "The Emperor's New Clothes," at the age of twenty-four. In 1971, he directed "Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things," a thriller which starred many of his college friends and developed a widespread cult following. On the basis of its success, Clark was approached by a Canadian company to co-produce and direct "Dead of Night" starring John Marley and Lynn Carlin, a film with a powerful anti-Vietnam War stance that propelled it to critical and popular success in Europe.

Clark's next project was "Black Christmas," which starred

Margot Kidder, Olivia Hussey, Keir Dullea and John Saxon in a horror story set in a college sorority house. The film was a solid international hit, which led Clark to "Breaking Point" in 1976, starring Bo Svenson and Robert Culp.

In 1978, Clark teamed with producer Rene Dupont for the first time to make "Murder By Decree," which starred Christopher Plummer as Sherlock Holmes and James Mason as his associate, Dr. John Watson. Remembered by many as a superbly crafted mystery with impeccable performances from Plummer, Mason, Genevieve Bujold, Donald Sutherland, David Hemmings, John Gielgud, Anthony Quayle and Susan Clark, "Murder By Decree" won Clark the coveted Canadian "Genie" award as Best Director in 1979.

The director next brought Bernard Slade's hit Broadway play, "Tribute," to the screen with Jack Lemmon re-creating the role for which he had received a Tony nomination. The film starred Lemmon, Robbie Benson, Lee Remick, Colleen Dewhurst, John Marley, Gale Garnett and Kim Catrall.

With both ridicule and affection, Clark next set out to poke fun at teenage boys and their exploitation of and victimization by teenage girls in "Porky's," his most successful film to date and the unchallenged comedy hit of 1982. Its sequel, "Porky's II: The Next Day," was released earlier this year.

While both "Porky's" aimed their particular brand of adolescent humor toward the teen audience, the films surprised nearly everyone by "crossing over" to attract a much wider audience. Clark is certain that although vastly different in its outlook on life and the style of its humor, "A Christmas Story" has something for everyone -- like any good Christmas present should.



PRODUCER RENE DUPONT began his career in 1950 as a junior in the editing rooms of the English film industry. Part of his formative years were spent at Ealin Studios, where he worked on such classics as "The Lavender Hill Mob" and "The Man In The White Suit." He progressed as an assistant director until 1963, when he became a production manager for director Richard Brooks on the much acclaimed "Lord Jim" starring Peter O'Toole.

By 1971, Dupont's work experience included the roles of associate producer, production controller and production executive. He began to develop his own projects, the first of which he also co-produced -- "Alice's Adventures In Wonderland," starring Peter Sellers, Dudley Moore, Spike Milligan and Ralph Richardson. By 1974 he had formed his own production company with offices at world famous Pinewood Studios, from which he handled the English shooting of "Someone Is Killing The Great Chefs of Europe" starring Jacqueline Bisset and George Segal.

In 1977, Dupont produced "Murder By Decree" with director Bob Clark. He remembers Clark talking about producing a film from Jean Shepherd's best-selling novel at that time.

"I guess we all have dreams about what we're going to do," explains Dupont. "Bob has nurtured this project for a long time -- it's a lovely film that was well worth the effort."

Veteran cinematographer REG MORRIS has worked with Bob Clark on several films, including "Black Christmas," "Tribute" and "Murder By Decree." Morris has contributed his skills to the making of over three hundred films, including "Superman: The Movie," "The Paper Chase," "Middle Age Crazy," "The Class of '44," "Empire of the Ants," "Food of the Gods," "King of the Grizzlies" and the

television film "Grandpa and Frank," which starred Henry Fonda.

Production designer REUBEN FREED conceived and supervised the construction of the Santa's Mountain set within Higbee's Department Store in Cleveland, and designed the beautiful window displays where young Ralphie Parker first sees the object of his desire: a Genuine Red Ryder Air Rifle. Transforming contemporary Cleveland into a 1940's Indiana suburb was no small feat, but for a man who has worked on more than fifteen films over the past five years it was a fast yet expert artistic accomplishment. Freed's credits include "Tribute;" "The Changeling," which starred George C. Scott and Trish Van Devere; "Pajama Tops," a made-for-cable television film starring Susan George, Pia Zadora and Robert Klein; MTM's production of "In Defense of Kids;" and both "Porky's" and its sequel, "Porky's II: The Next Day."

Editor STAN COLE is also a member of the Bob Clark team, having cut "Murder By Decree," for which he won the Canadian "Genie" Award, "Porky's" and "Black Christmas." His other credits include "Why Shoot The Teacher?" and Roger Vadim's "The Hot Touch."

#### ABOUT THE CAST

DARREN MCGAVIN plays Ralphie's 'Old Man,' a father whose mastery of the profane expression is constantly evident. The Old Man spends a great deal of time swearing -- at the furnace, the car, Ralphie, Ralphie's little brother -- as he fights the great American battle to survive suburban existence.

McGavin began his professional life as a scenic designer, but soon switched to acting when he auditioned for and won a small role in a movie. He moved to New York for his training, where he

enrolled in Sanford Meisner's 'Neighborhood Playhouse' and later in Lee Strasberg's 'Actor's Studio' while supporting himself with a wide variety of jobs.

His success began in live television in New York, where he co-starred as Macduff with Charlton Heston in the "Studio One" presentation of "Macbeth." He went on to guest star in "The Kraft Theatre," "The U.S. Steel Hour," and in over one hundred original dramas on virtually every live series telecast from New York.

His first major film role was as the American painter in "Summertime," starring Katherine Hepburn and Rossano Brazzi. He achieved his widest early recognition, however, in the television series role of Mickey Spillane's detective hero, "Mike Hammer."

During the '60's, McGavin kept continually busy in theatre, motion pictures and television appearances. He also produced, directed and starred in a variety of plays prior to their Broadway engagements. Then, in 1971, McGavin starred as a Marine drill instructor in "Tribes," which also starred Jan-Micheal Vincent in an absorbing television film directed by Joseph Sargeant about a hippie drafted into the Marine Corps who refuses to submit to the system.

One of McGavin's most memorable roles was in ABC Television's "The Night Stalker," which drew the largest television movie audience in history when it aired in 1972. Playing an eccentric and nosy reporter named Kolshak, McGavin's portrayal was so popular that a successful television series was developed from the film.

During the 70's, McGavin formed his own company, Taurean

Films, and produced and directed the suspense drama "Run, Stranger, Run" which starred Patricia Neal and Cloris Leachman. Since then he has appeared in numerous television and theatrical film productions, including "Law and Order," a three-hour drama for NBC based on the best-selling book by Dorothy Uhnak; "Airport '77" with Jack Lemmon, James Stewart and an all-star cast; and a twelve-part series for PBS entitled "Freedom To Speak" which showcased some of history's greatest public speakers and their most memorable rhetorical presentations, as portrayed by many of America's most talented actors.

McGavin believes that "the actor's job is to stretch and bend the material, to bring it something more." And for Bob Clark in "A Christmas Story," he has brought the role of Ralphie's Old Man to life -- with a vengeance.

MELINDA DILLON launched her career in the original Broadway company of Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," and made her feature film debut in a small role in "The April Fools" in 1969. Her film appearances include "Bound For Glory," "Slap Shot," and "F.I.S.T.," but she is probably most well-remembered for her role as Jillian, the mother of a child kidnapped by visitors from the stars in Steven Spielberg's "Close Encounters of the Third Kind."

In 1982, Dillon was nominated by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences for the "Best Supporting Actress" Award, thanks to a brilliant performance alongside Paul Newman and Sally Field in "Absence of Malice." And in the role of Ralphie's Mother, Dillon adds another sensitive portrayal to her growing list of successful motion pictures.

An eleven year-old whirlwind named PETER BILLINGSLEY rounds out the principle cast of "A Christmas Story" as Ralpie Parker, a nine year old boy who wants nothing more from life at the moment than to save the world with his trusty "Old Blue" -- the Genuine Red Ryder Air Rifle he longs to receive for Christmas. Billingsley is a seasoned professional, with a face that has launched more than a hundred television commercials and the kind of talent required to star in five feature films before reaching his twelfth birthday.

Billingsley's theatrical film credits to date include "Paternity" with Burt Reynolds, "Honky Tonk Freeway" with Geraldine Page, "Death Valley" with Paul LeMat and Catherine Hicks, and "If Ever I See You Again" with Joe Brooks. His television work includes "Memories Never Die," a CBS television film with Lindsey Wagner, and the ABC Movie Special "Masserati and The Brain." He is a continuing guest host of NBC's popular "Real People," and has appeared as a guest on "The Tonight Show," "The Today Show," "PM Magazine" and "The Steve Martin Special."

Although an extremely bright boy with an I.Q. over 150, Billingsley's goals are similar to those of many children. "I want to be a football player and a doctor -- a doctor first, so I can heal my football injuries -- and I want to own a pizza parlor, because pizza is my favorite food," says Peter. He plans to continue acting until he reaches eighteen years of age, at which time he plans to embark on his other three careers.

#### A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Humorist, actor, best-selling author, successful screen writer -- Jean Shepherd is all of these and more. To add a

humorous adult perspective to "A Christmas Story," Shepherd was persuaded to narrate the film, taking the role of a grown-up Ralphie looking back over the years and describing his experiences and motivations as a child growing up in the simpler times of post-Depression America.

Adapted from his own best-selling novel, In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash, the screenplay was written by Shepherd, his wife Leigh Brown and director Bob Clark. Shepherd was awarded the Indiana University prize for "Best Creative Fiction" when the book was first published in 1967.

Shepherd is the only writer to have won the Playboy Humor/Satire Award four times, against such stiff competition as Woody Allen, Terry Southern, Shel Silverstein and Jules Feiffer. His stories have been published in seventeen major magazines throughout the world, and are included in most college-level writing textbooks. And according to the New York Times, there are only two authors to whom Shepherd can be compared: Twain and Thurber.

Shepherd's enormous contribution to popular culture reaches far beyond his books. His television series, "Jean Shepherd's America" was an award-winning PBS standard for three years, and three of his five novels have reached the small screen for the distinguished "American Playhouse" series on PBS: "The Phantom of the Open Hearth;" "The Great American Fourth of July and Other Disasters;" and "The Star-Crossed Romance of Josephine Cosnowski." For twelve years in the 1960's and 1970's, Shepherd hosted his own late-night radio program on WOR in New York. He

dreamed up some of the craziest schemes in the history of the medium to entertain his fervently loyal fans, one of which he dubbed "Hurling Invectives." He urged listeners to turn their radios up loud and put them on their window sills, while he called out to anyone listening, "Drop Your Weapons!"

As Shepherd recalls, "People were falling off their fire escapes that night." The trick sounds familiar, of course, because Paddy Chayefsky's insane network newscaster, Howard Beale, performed a similar public service in the darkly satirical motion picture, "Network."

According to Shepherd, "I saw the Old Man in 'A Christmas Story' as a guy who grew up hustling pool games at the age of twelve and was supporting himself by the age of fourteen. And Darren McGavin's sardonic attitude was exactly the sort of characterization I had in mind." He continues, "Ralphie's mother is the kind of woman I figure grew up in a family of four or five sisters and married young. She digs the Old Man, but also knows he's as dangerous as a snake. In a way, the movie is really about these people, not Christmas or Santa Claus."

MGM's "A Christmas Story" stars Melinda Dillon, Darren McGavin and Peter Billingsley. A whimsical and slightly twisted comedy about a typical American family's Christmas, the film is directed by Bob Clark and produced by Rene Dupont and Bob Clark. The screenplay is written by Jean Shepherd, Leigh Brown and Bob Clark, and adapted from the novel In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash by Jean Shepherd. The film is released by MGM/UA Entertainment Co.

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