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The ultimate Hallmark film is not about finding love. It is about finding relief from the demanding work of Christmas.David Dolsen / Comedy CentralPhylis Mitchell is a woman who is transformed, through the magic of the holidays, into a drill sergeant. Early on in The Christmas House, an already classic Hallmark rom-com, she enlists her husband and two adult sons in her mission to revive an old family tradition: creating the aggressively festive home that gives the movie its title. Phylis (played by Sharon Lawrence) devotes herself to the cause with comic zeal. At one point, a whistle around her neck and a clipboard in her hand, she reminds one of her conscripts that “that garland’s not gonna fluff itself.” At another, she yells at her nearest and dearest: “Now get out there and make Christmas happen!”The Christmas House is in most ways typical of the holiday movies churned out by the Hallmark Channel and many (many!) other networks this time of year. It is set in a mostly white and vaguely upper-class town; it is by turns campy and self-serious; its plot is propelled by the notion that a skewed world might be righted—estranged couples reconciled, professional setbacks overcome, joys reclaimed—through the magic of Christmas. But The Christmas House is also notably different from its fellow films in its outspoken concern for garlands that need fluffing and trees that need trimming. The Christmas House is a story, fundamentally, about anti-magic. It is about all the work that is required to make Christmas happen.Holiday rom-coms are popular for many reasons. They layer their cheese with more skill than a Neapolitan pizzaiolo. Their plots are soothingly predictable. But I’d argue for another explanation. The films’ core audience is women. And for many women, the holidays may involve joy and togetherness—but also a lot of work. Cooking. Cleaning. Baking. Hosting. Card sending. Gift buying. Gift wrapping. All of it on top of life’s more evergreen demands. Holiday rom-coms, by contrast, are distinctly effort-free zones. Their sets sparkle with lights hung by unseen hands; their mugs of whipped-cream-crowned cocoa are not made so much as they materialize; their lush trees shed no needles. The presence of a vacuum in these movies would be a betrayal of trust. Work, in their worlds, is studiously expunged. The Christmas House, which treats the holiday season as a labor of love, is an exception that highlights the rule: The ultimate fantasy these rom-coms are selling is not the possibility of romance. It is the possibility of relief from the man-made magic of Christmas.Read: The cheesy endurance of the made-for-TV holiday moviePhylis, at the outset of The Christmas House, provides her family with a detailed checklist of all they must accomplish before they can alchemize architecture into holiday cheer. The work involves the installation of animatronics, multiroom trains, outdoor lighting, and indoor snow. She illustrates her plans with the help of 3-D renderings streamed to the TV. On-screen, digital snowmen emerge in the yard. Ornaments drop from the ceiling. Trees—several of them—spring, fully formed, from the floor.Her sons, Mike (Robert Buckley) and Brandon (Jonathan Bennett), nod along, amused and resigned. Jake (Brad Harder), Brandon’s husband, is eager to help but dubious about the projected complexity of it all. “You really think it’s gonna take all of us two weeks to put this together?” he asks earlier. Phylis’s sons smile. He has no idea. Soon, the cartons and crates and ladders appear. The house looks like a construction zone. Movers are called. Trucks are involved. Phylis was not messing around. “We’ve got a heck of a task ahead of us,” she tells her familial foremen—and it’s gonna take a strong will and a mighty heart to get it all done. “Compare all that with ... pretty much any other holiday rom-com on offer right now. Among all the tropes at play in these films—big-city career women who have lost their way; protagonists with names like Holly and Carol; princes set to inherit the throne of a small European nation—one tends to be a constant among them: magic. Not the magic of Santa or elves, but the more generalized enchantments of what Umberto Eco called hyperreality. Everything in these movies is brighter than bright, warmer than warm, merrier than merry.Read: Hallmark holiday movies: the quizThe films’ props, from the decorations that swathe park gazebos to the plattered cookies set on gleaming counters, serve all the festive fauvism. Those items, for one thing, are almost never discussed in terms of financial expense: Money, when it doesn’t involve the purchasing of bookstores or bakeries, is a spectral presence in these worlds. And rarely do you see the aesthetic evidence of Christmas—the trees, the wreaths—being installed. The holidays, instead, are simply there. In a scene in Hallmark’s Christmas Everlasting, Peter (Dondré Whitfield) surprises Lucy (Tatyana Ali) by bringing her a Christmas tree. Luckily for them both, there’s an empty tree stand in the living room, conveniently present for an effortless setup.Who puts those objects in place? When? The real answer is “production assistants,” but the broader answer, for the films’ purposes, is that you don’t need to be asking at all. The point is the opulent doneness that permeates every setting: the cookies already made, the mixing bowls washed and dried, the errant flour long ago wiped away. All that remains is the manufactured magic—and the reassurance that comes with it. Just sit back and relax. Everything’s been taken care of.The Christmas House is the rare holiday rom-com to recognize that creating seasonal “magic” is actually work. (Crown Media Family Networks)Even the parodies of holiday rom-coms highlight the films’ magical irrealism. In A Clüsterfünke Christmas, which premiered earlier this month on Comedy Central, Holly (Crazy Ex-Girlfriend’s Vella Lovell) is an overworked, overambitious careerist who facilitates the conversion of small-town hotels into soulless luxury resorts. Her work leads her to Yuletown, the home of a quaintly Teutonic inn and a place where Christmas is not just a day on the calendar, but a feeling in the heart. She meets a handsome lumberjack. Sparks, and wood splinters, fly. Written by and starring Rachel Dratch and Ana Gasteyer, A Clüsterfünke Christmas sends up many of the tropes that give holiday rom-coms their cheer: bad puns, clunky exposition, inartful product placement, scenes very obviously shot in Canada, “meaningful snowfall.” (“If it’s a drinking game of tropes,” Gasteyer told me, “I want people drunk by Act III.”)But Clüsterfünke also pokes fun at those films’ production value. “Christmas in every shot”—that’s the rule Dratch and Gasteyer abided by. It’s the same rule that earnest entries in the genre follow: Christmas that seems to be everywhere, both omnipresent and maybe even omnipotent. (“When her holidays take a wrong turn,” an ad for Discovery’s Candy Coated Christmas says, “she has one mission in mind. But the spirit of Christmas has other plans.”) Clüsterfünke winks at the hyperbole. It spoofs holiday rom-coms’ realer-than-real imagery. The citizens of Yuletown carry cups of “coffee” that are clearly empty, with the actors making little effort to create the illusion of heft. People wait for Holly to drink a cup of hot chocolate, and she hesitates: The “whipped cream” that tops her treat is very clearly made of plastic.The fakery, in Clüsterfünke and in the films it parodies, makes for good comedy. It also makes for a comforting message. Clüsterfünke’s Holly falls in love despite her film’s shoddy sets. Some things, these movies remind us, matter more than production value. Likewise: You may not have a lush holiday tablescape, or a well-trimmed tree, or a tree at all. You may not have the exploded-onto-everything Christmas decor that seasonal ads treat as standard and that Phylis Mitchell wants so desperately to manifest. You may have burned the cookies. It’s fine. If Hallmark can spin fables of American Christmas out of scenes shot in Vancouver in July, you can spin your own kind of gold. And in the meantime, you can outsource the stress of it all to Netflix, or Lifetime, or OWN, or Crown Media Family Networks. Their holiday movies, Dratch told me, can provide “a feeling that you’re somehow in the holiday spirit with no effort whatsoever.”Read: The most beloved Christmas specials are (almost) all terribleThey’re able to do that anytime. This year, though, the movies might offer an even deeper kind of catharsis. Many women have spent it doing not only their day job, if they have one, but also serving, at home, as teachers and cooks and therapists and schedulers and dishwashers and laundry-doers and entertainers and home cleaners, all at the same time. Many have been collapsing under the weight of a culture that sees caring for others not as a job in itself, but as a matter of default feminine obligation. Many have been failing. So much work, and so little help. “Other countries have social safety nets,” the sociologist Jessica Calarco put it. “The U.S. has women.”The holidays bring all that to a head. This time of year brings ever more work. Some of it will be credited not to the women who get it done, but to elves who derive their efficiency from magic. That’s all part of the season’s allure (please keep me on your Nice List, Santa!), but it amounts to more labor that goes unacknowledged. It amounts to more exhaustion when the world expects your joy. “Christmas time is great,” goes a widely circulated joke, “because you can shout ‘Don’t come in here’ and people assume you’re wrapping their presents, instead of just wanting to be left alone.”No wonder holiday movies appeal. They do the work for you. And no wonder The Christmas House has been given the ultimate honor for a Hallmark holiday property: a sequel. The Christmas House 2: Deck Those Halls premieres on the Hallmark Channel tomorrow. The original film is charming and wacky and, at moments, very funny. But it is also just a little bit radical. It acknowledges Phylis’s efforts. It celebrates those efforts. And, crucially, it gives her help with those efforts. It portrays the ultimate holiday fantasy: a family who sees all the work that needs to be done and asks, “How can we help?”

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