



The Main Feature

Season 44 – Issue 7 – Screening 12 December 2024

The Holdovers

USA, 2023, 133mins, Cert 15

Director	Alexander Payne
Screenplay	David Hemingson
Cinematography	Eigil Bryld
Art Direction	Jeremy Woolsey
Film Editing	Kevin Tent
Set Decoration	Markus Wittmann

Cast

Paul Giamatti	Paul Hunham
Dominic Sessa	Angus Tully
Da'Vine Joy Randolph	Mary Lamb
Andrew Garman	Dr Hardy Woodrup (Headmaster)
Carrie Preston	Miss Lydia Crane (Headmaster's secretary)
Juanita Pearl	Peggy (Mary's sister)
Naheem Garcia	Danny (school caretaker)



Our film for Christmas is a bittersweet character study set over the 1970/71 holidays at Barton, a venerable all-male boarding school in New England.

Paul Hunman (Giamatti) is an uninspiring teacher of Ancient Civilisations. He is a cranky, ocularly-challenged curmudgeon, a cold fish who happens to suffer from trimethylaminuria (more descriptively known as “fish odour syndrome”). He loathes his entitled, wealthy students (“rancid little philistines”) and is unpopular with the other staff, including the headmaster Dr Woodrup (who is one of his former pupils). Overly fond of pompously quoting Cicero, just be grateful he doesn’t give you his standard Christmas present!

Angus Tully (played by newcomer Sessa) is an abrasive 15-year-old, bright but angry. He has been expelled from three schools and his mother has warned him that his next posting will be to a Military Academy. Tully is looking forward to spending the holidays in St Kitts with his mother and her new husband (until she calls just as the school is breaking up to tell him that he’s no longer invited). He does not take the news well.

Mary Lamb (Randolph) is the school's no-nonsense head cook. She is wearily dignified, but long-widowed and grieving for her recently-deceased son, an ex-Barton pupil she could not afford to send to college and who was subsequently drafted to Vietnam.

Hunman is volunteered by the headmaster to supervise the handful of pupils who have to remain on campus over Christmas: no "comfort and joy" here as the heat is turned off in most of the facility, the Christmas tree is re-possessed and Hunham forces his charges to study and exercise. After six days, the wealthy father of one of the students flies in and offers to take the boys on the family's ski trip subject to their parents' permission. Tully, unable to reach his mother, is left alone at Barton with Hunham and Mary. The three bond (falteringly), with Mary chiding Hunman over his lack of empathy for Tully's predicament. Hunman eventually takes Tully on a "field trip" to Boston, where their respective backstories and sad, painful secrets are revealed. They agree to keep them "entre nous." Meantime Mary spends time with her pregnant younger sister, trying to come to terms with her own grief.



As the new term starts, Hunman's holiday kindness towards Tully backfires and he faces a dilemma.

The director Alexander Payne is said to loathe the "Christmas film" label, hoping that the movie will stand on its own, and not just be considered a Christmas film. This possibly explains why the film's UK release was (ahem) "held over" until January this year.

That did not stop a snowstorm of critical praise. The Guardian feted it as "a masterclass in melancholy" adding "there's a bracingly astringent bleakness under its surface layer of humour; a biting, sharp edge that counters the occasional lurch towards sentimentality." The Telegraph described it as "a profoundly and nourishingly funny film [with a] lingering glow of wisdom and warmth." The Times said it was "a great big warm hug of a movie, immaculately executed and worthy of awards" and Empire summarised the film as "hilarious and heartfelt, a tale to be treasured."

The performances are all fully-rounded and captivating. Though her character has the least screen-time (and is thus the least explored) Da'Vine Joy Randolph deservedly received the Golden Globe, Oscar and BAFTA for Best Supporting Actress. The screenplay received an Oscar nomination (it lost to *Anatomy of a Fall*, which incidentally we are showing in February).

There was some controversy however just before the Oscar ceremony, with Variety magazine reporting accusations of plagiarism. Simon Stephenson (whose screen credits include *Paddington 2* and Pixar's *Luca*) made a formal complaint to the Writers Guild of America. Stephenson had penned and circulated a script in 2012 about a doctor reluctantly tasked with looking after a 15-year-old patient. Though this was never produced, he maintains that of 148 scenes in *The Holdovers*, there were at most 20 dialogue-containing scenes that were not lifted from his script. *The Holdovers'* director and writer declined to answer the allegations and the row (and one presumes potential litigation) rumbles on.

But come on - Christmas is not a time for lawyers or forensic writing disputes. *The Holdovers* is a warm-hearted but serious film, with finely observed characters allowed the space to develop and containing just the right amount of sentiment.

And as Cicero said – "life is nothing without friendship."

Eugene Smith

Club website: www.wncc.org.uk. Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to reactions@wncc.org.uk by Wednesday 18 December 2024
Discs of previous shows are available to hire for a modest fee.

Eugene Smith reflects on The Christmas Film

Your committee always tries to find an appropriate film for the Christmas season: it's not easy! The ideal choice could be feelgood but not too sentimental, thoughtful but not too serious. Here are the last five presentations with an extract from the notes plus member scores and selected comments.

2023 – *Downton Abbey – a New Era* (UK/2022/Dir Simon Curtis/PG/125 mins)

In watching the film, don't look for searing social comment, political insights, surprising characters or a car chase. Just sit back, relax, and be entertained by what seems like a group of old friends.

Score 7.58 from 26 reactions

"The perfect Christmas film: entertaining, funny, feel-good" "Good natured but sickly sweet and overindulgent. A perfect Christmas confection!"

2022 – *Guardians of the Galaxy* (USA/2014/James Gunn/PG-13/122 mins)

As this is the Christmas showing I know you're all thinking what's this film got to do with Christmas? Well, nothing really, except it's just the type of film you might watch on Boxing Day afternoon slumped on the sofa after having too many mince pies and find you quite enjoyed it even if you didn't quite understand it. Happy Christmas.

Score 5.53 from 15 reactions

"Very watchable, brilliantly made and acted nonsense" "Pure hokum. Some charm – and impressive effects – but the mindless repetitive violence was overdone"

2021 – *The Crimson Pirate* (USA/1952/Robert Sidomak/PG/105 mins)

What you are going to see tonight has been described as "silly, action packed, but... great fun" and "visually gorgeous." So, sit

back and enjoy some good old-fashioned swashbuckling action.

Score 6.42 from 19 responses

"Good entertaining film. Great choice!"

"Camp as Butlin's but with some clever set pieces"

2019 – *Green Book* (USA/2019/ Peter Farrelly/12A/130 mins)

Viggo Mortensen put on twenty pounds for the role of Tony Lip. He gorged on Italian cuisine, mostly pizza and pasta. His technique - which he does not recommend because (surprise) it is bad for your health - consisted of rich dinners followed by at least one dessert just before going to bed. He admits that losing those pounds was much more difficult and less fun than gaining them. Merry Christmas!

Score 8.43 from 40 responses

"Just the right film for Christmas. Well done the committee" "A feel-good film, funny but with serious undertones – excellent acting"

2018 – *The Death of Stalin* (Various/2017/Armando Iannucci/15/107 mins)

This may seem a strange choice for a Christmas film but many of the performances are worthy of (and, for some, the closest they are likely to come to) pantomime. The mood ranges from frenetic to chilling, contrasting psychopathic violence with the desire of ordinary citizens just to get on with their lives and avoid being noticed.

Score 6.26 from 43 responses

"Sorry didn't enjoy the film at all. Funny in parts but mostly distasteful." "Very powerful! Humour highlighted the true terror. Keep laughing!!"

Suggestions for future films from members are always welcome – just write down on your response form and the

Committee will see what's available come selection time next Summer!

Comments and reactions to: **Past Lives**

No of reaction slips received = 27

Average score = 6.33

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	~	3	7	6	2	7	2	~

Beautiful

Slow but worthwhile with believable characters and situations

Loved the cosmopolitan feel. Liked the real-life complexity which was philosophically resolved so they could both move on. Enjoyed hearing the Korean

Well-observed story of childhood friends. Very touching. Very enjoyable

Good acting [but] an acquired taste

Beautiful, deeply touching and tender movie

Surprisingly enjoyable

Very slow and very thin plot

Atmospheric and enjoyable

Good descriptive subtitles. Thought-provoking

Sub-titles moved too fast

Very, very slow – wouldn't recommend

Poignant. I will be lying awake about the in-jun in my life tonight – life's "what-ifs" and "might-have-beens"!

Position	Film	Average score
1	The Great Escaper	8.00
2	The Taste of Things	7.04
3	The Color Purple	6.77
4	Past Lives	6.33
5	Winners	6.00
6	Barbie	5.59

Forthcoming attraction: 9 January 2025 – **Wicked Little Letters**



Swearing can be comic, but it might also be the way that a highly pressurised, repressive and patriarchal postwar society lets off a bit of steam. Observer

The camera looks up to Colman and Buckley in adulation, often allowing their features to seize the entire frame. Here's a film that understands perfectly well that the two of them are all we need to enjoy ourselves. Independent

In Sharrock's hands, "Wicked Little Letters" is an entertaining account of what feels like a primitive form of today's online flame wars, where people take sides as commenters openly disparage one another. Variety