

GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

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MOVIES

'Preacher's Wife' full of holiday cheer

BY CHRIS GRYGIEL ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER



Heartwarming: Whitney Houston (left) stars as the wife of Rev. Henry Biggs (Courtney B. Vance, center) and daughter of Marguerite Coleman (Jennifer Lewis, right). Justin Pierre Edmund (front, left) stars as Biggs' son Jeremiah, and Darvel Davis Jr. (right) is his best friend Hakim in 'The Preacher's Wife.'

The feel-good Christmas movie is a holiday staple, like egg nog and mistletoe. This year, Penny Marshall chimes in with "The Preacher's Wife," a familiar story about an angel sent to help a troubled family. The film — a remake of the 1947 movie "The Bishop's Wife," starring Cary Grant, Loretta Young and David Niven — is enjoyable enough as a holiday diversion, but won't resonate past the New Year. As the film opens, preacher Henry Biggs (Courtney B. Vance) has a major case of the December blues. He feels he's stretched too thin trying to serve his congregation of mostly poor folks facing the urban life of crime and dislocated families. Henry is growing more distant from his wife, Julia (Whitney Houston), and worst of all, believes he's not doing a very good job tending his flock. Henry asks God for help. Help arrives in a more material way than Henry imagined. Dudley (Angel Denzel Washington) appears, and tells a disbelieving Henry that he is the answer to his prayers. Help arrives in a more material way than Henry imagined. Dudley (Angel Denzel Washington) appears, and tells a disbelieving Henry that he is the answer to his prayers.

Along the way, the Biggs rediscover the happiness they never really lost. Henry regains his passion for work and Julia falls in love all over again with her preacher husband (after a few innocent flirtatious moments with Dudley). "The Preacher's Wife" isn't at all bad. It's just not very good. This remake of a nice, but uninspired film fails to transcend the original. The story is timeless (angel saves family during Christmas), the plot twists predictable. There's even the greedy businessman amusingly played by Gregory Hines, who is overcome with the Christmas spirit at the last moment and agrees not to demolish the preacher's church to make way for tennis courts. And the performances are credible, but "The Preacher's Wife" lacks the spark that separated such earlier hits as "Big" and "A League of Their Own" from more standard fare. The screenplay by Nat Mauldin and Allan Scott has some funny moments.

Houston was cast for her incredible voice. There's nothing wrong with that, but her character seems to be perpetually in a situation where she'll have the opportunity to break (impressively) into song. She leads the church choir, joins a bar band for an impromptu love ballad and fills in as Mary during the Christmas pageant. Vance, recently seen in "Dangerous Minds," turns in a nice performance as the troubled preacher. Marshall does a workman-like job directing the competent cast, but "The Preacher's Wife" lacks the spark that separated such earlier hits as "Big" and "A League of Their Own" from more standard fare. The screenplay by Nat Mauldin and Allan Scott has some funny moments.

Advertisement for the Jaguar XJ6. The top part features the text 'Irrefutable proof that not all CEOs believe in downsizing.' Below this is a photograph of a Jaguar XJ6 sedan. The bottom part of the ad contains the Jaguar logo and the text 'JAGUAR A new breed of Jaguar.' At the very bottom, it provides the contact information: 'JAGUAR OF TROY 1815 Maplelawn Drive, Troy, MI (810) 643-6900'.