

MOVING PICTURES



Clark Griswold (Chevy Chase) carves the Christmas turkey in a scene from "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation."

This 'Vacation' is trite, but still fun

Movies may not be better than ever, but 1989 box office receipts continue to rise as America's love affair with the silver screen heads for another record year.

Through Nov. 19, U.S. box office sales totaled \$4.26 billion, just short of 1988's total, a record-setting pace. Last year at this time, the take was only \$3.76 billion so with the Christmas season yet to be recorded, there's still a chance for a \$5 billion year. That's a lot of tickets.

But it's not that many movies that are dragging customers off the streets. As a matter of fact, 12 films playing in mid-November accounted for more than 30 percent of those box office dollars. Led by "Batman" and its \$251 million, all 12 grossed more than \$50 million.

Interestingly enough, however, while only number two on the domestic list, "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" (\$195.4 million) outdid "Batman" overseas (\$220 million to \$42 million). There sure are gold in them celluloid hills.

With all that money in the till, distributors could afford to relax their release schedule for the Thanksgiving holiday. The full continues this week with only one new film debuting. Appropriately enough ("National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation" (B-, PG-13, 90 minutes) kicks off the year-end movie season.

Clark W. Griswold Jr. (Chevy Chase) is at it again, this time his dream is to create "The most-fun-filled old-fashioned family Christmas ever." But the road to hell, as they say, is paved with good intentions.

"National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation," as with the entire series, is a bit absurd and a lot overdone, but fun and good-spirited, despite profane language and the usual run of toilet jokes. (Reviewed Kathy Guyer)

"The Fortune Cookie" (1966) also has this dark quality. In the former, screening Dec. 12, Lemmon plays a naive Paris gendarme who falls for a prostitute (again Shirley MacLaine). He goes to unusual lengths to keep her away from other men.

"The Fortune Cookie" is playing Dec. 19, pokes fun at the legal profession. TV cameraman Lemmon, injured at a football game, is preyed upon by shyster Walter Matthau.

The first Wilder-Lemmon pairing remains the most famous, "Some Like It Hot" (1959), screening Dec. 26, was penned by Wilder some years earlier as a vehicle for Danny Kaye and Bob Hope. Here, Lemmon and Tony Curtis play jazz-age musicians on the lam after witnessing the St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

DISGUISED AS women, they join an all-girl band, led by Marilyn Monroe. The gender bending leads to Lemmon's complications with adoring millionaire Joe E. Brown. When released, it ranked as the highest grossing screen comedy of all time.

Lemmon and Wilder teamed up again (with Matthau) in "The Front Page" (1974) and "Buddy Buddy" (1980). Though not as bad as the critics claimed, these films only rarely hinted at the on-target satire of their earlier outings.

MOST STRIKING on the big screen are the shots — composed in Panavision — of Lemmon arriving to work amidst endless rows of desks. It contrasts with his claustrophobic apartment, where he nurses



the movies
Dan Greenberg

If you're a National Lampoon's fan, you'll be pleased because the old crowd is back. Mrs. Ellen Griswold (Beverly D'Angelo) returns with all the patience required to put up with Clark and his antics. Handy Quaid is Eddie, the bumbling husband of Ellen's cousin. Johnny Galecki is son Rusty while Juliette Lewis is daughter Audrey.

In keeping with the Christmas spirit, father Clark is a little more appealing and a little less obnoxious on this vacation. But he does drag them out into the country to cut their own Christmas trees—"oops, forgot the axe, kids." Typical.

Twenty-five thousand Christmas lights on the Griswold house almost wreck the yuppie neighbor's home and then there's a host of strange relatives. The turkey is so dry it explodes, a squirrel gets in the house, the in-laws are fighting, the kids complaining — everything you've come to expect from the Griswolds on vacation.

"Back to the Future Part II" (B+) (PG) 90 minutes.

All your favorite time-travelers are in other dimensions once again.

"The Bear" (D-) (R) 120 minutes.

"The Apartment" (1960) ranks as one of the nastiest, most cynical comedies ever made. The mixture of dark and light elements couldn't have been pulled off by a less likable actor.

Wilder effectively tapped into the nation's lust for executive success and treated it with disarming humor.

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Grading the movies

A+	Top marks - sure to please
A	Close behind - excellent
A-	Still in running for top honors
B+	Pretty good stuff, not perfect
B	Good
B-	Good but notable deficiencies
C+	Just a cut above average
C	Mediocre
C-	Not so hot and slipping fast
D+	The very best of the poor stuff
D	Poor
D-	It doesn't get much worse
F	Truly awful
Z	Reserved for the colossally bad
*	No advanced screening

STILL PLAYING:
"All Dogs Go To Heaven" (B+) (G) 90 minutes.

Well-known voices back this animated story about Charlie the German Shepherd and Itchy the Dachshund.

"Back to the Future Part II" (B+) (PG) 90 minutes.

All your favorite time-travelers are in other dimensions once again.

"The Bear" (D-) (R) 120 minutes.

Excellent nature photography but film often lacks continuity and gets pretty sloppy at times.

"Black Rain" (D-) (R) 120 minutes.

Unpleasant, trite detective story stars Michael Douglas.

"Communion" (C) (R).

Whitley Strieber's tale of being grabbed by aliens.

"Crimes and Misdemeanors" (A+) (PG-13) 100 minutes.

Woody Allen at his best in this romantic comedy about family life with all its joy and sadness.

"Dad" (B) (PG) 119 minutes.

Excellent acting by Jack Lemmon, Ted Danson, Zakes Mokae and Olympia Dukakis marred by clichés.

"Drugstore Cowboy" (Z) (R) 100 minutes.

About as unpleasant as it gets. Four young folks steal and use drugs.

"The Fabulous Baker Boys" (R).

Two brothers — Jeff and Beau Bridges — add Michelle Pfeiffer to their cocktail lounge piano playing act.

"Gross Anatomy" (C-) (PG-13) 105 minutes.

Bland, slow, weakly structured romantic comedy about five, first-year med students.

"Harlem Nights" (D) (R) 110 minutes.

Nice cars and nifty suits but all that comic talent — Eddie Murphy, Richard Pryor, Red Fox, Arsenio Hall and Della Reese — can't save this slow-paced 1930s Harlem gangster story.

"The Little Mermaid" (A) (G) 80 minutes.

Disney animation of Hans Christian Andersen tale of mermaid in love with human.

VIDEO VIEWING

New releases good for a few chuckles

By Dan Greenberg
special writer

Whether you looked for laughs last week, or you're going to next time at the video store, there's comedy to-night — and every night — on the video cassette release schedule. HBO Video is taking the lead this season with comedy originally taped for their cable channel.

Nov. 22 was the release date for "Whoopi Goldberg: Fontaine . . . Why Am I Straight?" (51 minutes, rated R). "Bob Goldthwait: Is He Like That All the Time?" (54 minutes). The latter was taped live during Goldthwait's San Francisco appearance at The Great American Music Hall on Aug. 30, 1988. Both are very definitely hard-hit, nightclub performances recommended for screening after the kids (and the grandparents) are in bed.

The same applies to "Richard Lewis: I'm Exhausted" (60 minutes), taped at Chicago's Park West Theatre, and the "Uptown Comedy Express," an hour's worth of laughter produced by Eddie Murphy Television Enterprises in 1987 with Eddie Murphy, Magic Johnson and Sammy Davis Jr. in the audience. These two are due out Dec. 13.

Lewis' discussion of his hysterical hypochondria repeatedly is very funny around and talking personally to different segments of the audience.

"Uptown Comedy Express" is hosted by Uncle Ray Murphy (as in Eddie Murphy's uncle) and was taped at L.A.'s Ebony Showcase Theatre. The five comedies — Chris Rock, Arsenio Hall, Barry Sobel, Robert Townsend and Marsha Warfield — are indeed very funny, folks. Musical backing is by "The Bus Boys."

THE CUTSEY nightclub setting, however, detracts from their comedy routines. It's all very forced with waiters, cooks and the gal selling tickets interrupting performances with an occasional bit. Even when these roles are played by the principals, little or nothing is added to the tape by such alleged comedy thickets. The same silliness is at the head of

the Whoopi Goldberg and Bob Goldthwait tapes. Fast forward to the good stuff.

In the case of "Uptown Comedy Express," that means Chris Rock, billed as a young protégé of Eddie Murphy. Rock's humor is black self-deprecation at its best, the sly commentary on white America via reflection on black behavior.

His most pointed observation has to do with white teenage suicides when black teenagers live in so much greater poverty and despair. Finding laughter in that is quite some accomplishment.

Arsenio Hall does a pretty good stand-up routine as does Robert Townsend, best noted for his film, "Hollywood Shuffle." Both deal with black issues although not so sharply as Rock does.

Marsha Warfield ("Night Court") is one tough lady who talks less about racial issues and more about men. She sounds like an expert.

Finally, there's one white comic, Barry Sobel, who claims he was booked in by mistake but finally goes on and caricatures black performance in some fairly funny routines.

ALL THREE tapes screened (and presumably the Lewis one as well) suffer from a nightclub performance technique which involves moving around and talking personally to different segments of the audience. That's OK in person but on tape it comes across as nervous pacing. After a while, it gets pretty annoying.

With Whoopi Goldberg, that technique's irritation is compounded by her hand waving delivery and, after a while, despite some very funny material, her mugging — while she's positioned in an ungainly slouch — just doesn't do it for these tired old eyes.

Even worse is Goldthwait's shrill, tinny, almost incomprehensible delivery. Some may think it's funny, but I find it difficult to understand — so difficult in fact that many of his very funny reflections on society were lost in delivery.

SCREEN SCENE

CENTER FOR JAPANESE STUDIES, Lorch Hall, 909 Monroe, Ann Arbor. Call 764-6307 for information. (Free)

"Street of Shame" (Japan — 1956), 7 p.m. Dec. 8. The final film by Kenji Mizoguchi is the story of prostitutes who inhabit the red light district of Tokyo. As part of the center's excellent series of rare Japanese cinema.

CINEMA GUILD, various locations on the University of Michigan campus, Ann Arbor, 994-0027.

Frank Capra — "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (USA — 1939), 7 p.m. Dec. 8, in Modern Language Building Auditorium 3. Jimmy Stewart plays a naive man who enters politics.

ends up in the Senate, then confronts the crooked forces that put him there. With Jean Arthur and Claude Rains. Followed by "It's a Wonderful Life" (USA — 1946) at 7:30 p.m., the holiday chestnut about a man (Stewart) who discovers what life would be like if he was never born.

"Batman" (USA — 1966), 7 and 9:05 p.m. Dec. 9, in Modern Language Building Auditorium 4. The quirky feature made during the popularity of the '60s TV show, with Adam West, Burt Ward and villains galore.

Film Noir — "Detour" (USA — 1945), 7 p.m. Dec. 10, in Lorch Hall, 909 Monroe. Edgar Ulmer's legendary B-feature has become a seminal title in the catalog of dark, dark mystery films (or "film noir"). Tom Neal and Ann Savage play a miserable couple hurled into a life of blackmail and murder. With "Double Indemnity" (USA — 1944) at 8:15 p.m. Billy Wilder's cynical story stars Fred MacMurray as an insurance salesman who plots a murder scheme with a client's sexy wife (Barbara Stanwyck). With Edward G. Robinson as a tenacious insurance investigator. (Free admission these films only.)

DETROIT FILM SOCIETY, Detroit Public Library, 5201 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Call 833-4048 for information (\$25 series membership, \$23 students and senior citizens)

Bing Crosby — "High Society" (USA — 1956), 7 p.m. Dec. 8-9. A musical remake of "The Philadelphia Story" with Bing, Frank Sinatra and Grace Kelly, about a society wedding disrupted by the fickle bride. Music by Cole Porter. Followed by "White Christmas" (USA — 1954), the overrated holiday staple. Bing and Danny Kaye play a couple nuts trying to boost the popularity of a winter resort. Music by Irving Berlin.

DETROIT FILM THEATRE, Detroit Institute of Arts, 5200 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Call 832-2730 for information (\$3)

"Jan Svankmajer: Alchemist of the Surreal," 7 and 9:30 p.m. Dec. 8. Eight shorts from the great Czech filmmaker who animates unusual objects with bizarre results.

"Solaris" (USSR — 1975), 7 p.m. Dec. 9. Demanding science fiction feature from Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky, where astronauts on an alien planet face illusions from their subconscious. From a novel by Stanislaw Lem. As part of the festival of wide screen films.

"Once Upon a Time in the West" (Italy — 1969), 5 p.m. Dec. 10. Sergio Leone's operatic western has become a DFT staple — and for good reason. Charles Bronson and Jason Robards both find themselves at odds with blue-eyed killer Henry Fonda. Partially scripted by Bernardo Bertolucci and with the haunting harmonica of composer Ennio Morricone. Shown in the usual wide screen version.

HENRY FORD CENTENNIAL LIBRARY, 16301 Michigan Ave., Dearborn. Call 943-2330 for information. (Free)

"The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad" (USA — 1958), 7 p.m. Dec. 4. An imaginative score and Ray Harryhausen's animated special effects underscore a well-written tale of Sinbad's encounter with an evil magician.

LIVONIA MALL CINEMA, 29415 Seven Mile, Livonia. Call 476-1166 for information. (Free)

"The Apartment" (USA — 1960), 8 a.m. Dec. 5. Billy Wilder's biting comedy of office politics is enhanced by Jack Lemmon's likeable performance. He plays bachelor C.C. Baxter, who discovers he can get places in the office by loaning his apartment key to philandering higher-ups. With Shirley MacLaine and Fred MacMurray. In CinemaScope.

SOUTHLIFF PUBLIC LIBRARY, 2600 Evergreen, Southfield. Call 354-9100 for information. (\$5 series membership, \$2.50 students and senior citizens)

"Broadway Melody of 1940" (USA — 1940), 7:30 p.m. Dec. 7. Featuring Cole Porter music and an amusing story about rivalry between dance partners Fred Astaire and George Murphy. With Astaire and Eleanor Powell performing "Begin the Beguine." Shown on big screen video.

— John Monaghan

Mail honors Lemmon-Wilder

Films mark best work

By John Monaghan
special writer

Jack Lemmon continues to bring the persona of likable, nervous everyman to both stage and screen. His most recent film, "Dad," succeeds not so much because of its story (which is rather maudlin), but for the actor's welcome return to movies.

It's in his early films that Lemmon showed his brilliance. He made his most successful and unusual films for writer/director Billy Wilder in the late '50s and early '60s. These titles comprise the December of vintage films at the Livonia Mall.

Wilder, who fled Hitler's Germany, made some of Hollywood's blackest dramas — "Double Indemnity" (1945) and "Sunset Boulevard" (1951) — along with hilarious and biting comedies. He pulled Lemmon from a string of mediocre movies for a choice part in "Some Like It Hot" in 1959.

The director tested Lemmon's likability factor a year later in "The Apartment," which opens the four-film series this Thursday. Lemmon plays C.C. Baxter, a bachelor executive in a large New York insurance company who soars to the top by loaning his apartment to philandering higher-ups.

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 ANORE PREVIN
 TECHNICOLOR PANAVISION