



MAX LUCADO'S THE CHRISTMAS CANDLE is a December, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Following is Kino Ken's review of that dvd release.

United Kingdom 2013 color 100 minutes live action feature fantasy Echolight Studios / Impact Productions LLC / Pinewood Pictures / Big Book Media Producers: Tom Newman, Hannah Leader, Candace Lee, Robert Norris

10 of a possible 20 points

****1/2 of a possible *******

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: John Stephenson**
- 1 Editing: Emma Hickox**
- 1 Cinematography: Michael Brewster**
- 1 Lighting: Pat Sweeney, Steve Kitchen**
- 0 Screenplay: Candace Lee and Eric Newman based on the book by Max Lucado**
- 2 Music: Tim Atack* Music Editor: Robin Baynton***
Music Mixer: Jake Jackson* Music Supervisor: Amory Leader*
Orchestrator: Matt Dunkley* Score Recordist: Geoff Foster*
Song: "Miracle Hymn"

2 Production Designer: Tony Noble Art Director: Harry Pain
Costume Designer: Pam Downe
Make-Up: Marella Shearer (Make-Up Designer), Jemma Carballo
(Supervisor), Carolyn Cousins, Samantha Denyer,
Donna McCormick-Smith, Debbie Ormrod, Judy Lovell
1 Sound: Mark Heslop (Supervising Sound Editor), Colin Nicholson (Mixer)
Dialogue Editor: Ian Morgan
1 Acting
0 Creativity
10 total points

**Cast: Hans Matheson (David Richmond, minister), Samantha Barks
(Emily Barstow), Lesley Manville
(Bea Haddington, wife of candlemaker Edward Haddington), Sylvester McCoy
(Candlemaker Edward Haddington), John Hannah
(William Barstow, father of Emily), Barbara Flynn (Lady Camdon), James Cosmo
(Herbert Hopewell), Susan Boyle (Eleanor Hopewell, wife of Herbert),
Jude Wright (j) (Charlie), Emily Shewell (j) (Orphan Sarah), Victoria Bewick
(Ruth), Alice Bonifacio (Delilah Barber), Peter Brooks (j) (Orphan James),
Karen Cogan (Mrs. Bickerton), Emily Cook (Village Artist), Sam Crane
(Thomas Haddington), Beatrice Curnew (Agnes Chumley), Victoria Emslie
(Mrs. Haddington), Liam Evans-Ford (Hardy Collins) Anna Francolini (Mrs. Clem),
Dan Gregory (Old Man in Church), Elizabeth Kinnear (The Angel), Paul Leonard
(Abner), Adam Nowell (Homeless Man), Matthew Sampson, Jr. (j)
(Baby Edward Haddington), Rachael Swift (Miss Foster), Grace Vallorani
(Mrs. Finch)**

**In MAX LUCADO'S THE CHRISTMAS CANDLE, an agnostic preacher is
confronted with a congregation of credulous villagers who are dead set against
any innovations as being devil-inspired. This unfortunately pits science and
technology against religion, with no possibility for mediation. What filmmakers
hoped to achieve was reactivation of faith as an emotional rather than an
intellectual catalyst. Instead they denied any positive attributes of progress. All**

are deemed spiritually deadening. This may be a popular viewpoint, but it hardly conforms to reality. There are many contemporary scientists who resist being squeezed into such an inflexible dichotomy compelling artificial choice between religion and research. Any public entertainment proposing such polarity is socially irresponsible. It's possible to be both devout and investigative, as Isaac Newton and Rene Descartes clearly proved.

Nonetheless, *THE CHRISTMAS CANDLE* sets up what appears to be continuous conflict between secular progressives and spiritual traditionalists, with conventional depictions of cruelly uncaring city dwellers and charitable, devout country folk. Stereotypes abound, eliminating any requirement for character motivation or growth. When change occurs, it results from miracles. Or beliefs inspired by them. Conveniently, essential correctness of early sermons by a presumably hypocritical protagonist are undercut by planted suggestion his inspiration comes from spiritual despair and disbelief rather than dedication to piety or religious directives. David Richmond practices what he urges. So the script chastises him not for what he does, but rather for why he acts so selflessly. His crime appears to be chiding locals for superstition and self-centeredness, neither of which are identifiable virtues.

Leading traditional forces are candlemaker Edward Haddington, his wife Bea, and Lady Camdon, an aristocrat whose own contribution to Gladbury's improvement seems limited to inviting David to shepherd the local congregation. Her flattery prompts him to abandon a Salvation Army London soup kitchen and put on back burner his project to rehabilitate a pregnant, sacked factory worker whose plight recalls Fantine's in Victor Hugo's *LES MISERABLES*. There is no bedraggled Cosette, though, in *THE CHRISTMAS CANDLE*. Just an obtrusive infant boy born symbolically on Christmas Eve to an unwed, discarded victim of employer impregnation, scorn, and abandonment. Her Christmas baby is employed as an olive branch to insure continuation of Gladbury's holiday tradition despite its rejection by Thomas Haddington, spurner of both custom and parental responsibility. His adoption of a steam motor car in preference to outmoded horse-drawn carriage shows viewers how far from proper spiritual values he has wandered.

Mad pursuit of novelty is no substitute for loving family relationships and reverence for all things past, good or bad. So the screenplay asserts. Yet Thomas and David are neither insane nor evil. They are fallible humans, not lesser ones.

Lady Camdon, on the contrary, is a constantly unfazed fount of wisdom, never for an instant displaying doubt or hesitancy. She is too obviously mere plot mechanism, a symbolic angel with which no filmgoer can identify. Despite Barbara Flynn investing her with warmth and poise, she cannot overcome a restrictive script which all but bestows a permanent nimbus on the complacent aristocrat.

Consider another case, the boy Charlie. Due to being traumatized by unexpected parental deaths, he has not spoken for many months. Suddenly, on Christmas Day, he not only verbally emotes with perfect enunciation, but promises also to continue chattering irrepressibly. While timing is suspect, even more artificial is his instant elocutionary prowess.

Miracle gets piled on miracle, with everyone in the congregation claiming to be beneficiary of at least one. Nobody wants left behind in a group of simply ordinary people. Not only is everyone special: each is supernaturally gifted. Only in Gladbury, of course.

Using serendipities as plot triggers in the best Dickensian fashion, this old school inspirational drama suffers from a surfeit of coincidences and homilies. Neither is essential here. Revealing in flashback why David Richmond lost faith in prayer would have been signally more dramatic and involving. Why are screeners barred from seeing his former spouse and child? Budget limitations? Too great a danger of exceeding some permitted quota of consumptives onscreen?

An older parishioner's sight is restored in his final moments of life by "seeing" Jesus, according to reports from the deceased's family. This uncanny phenomenon is typical of the obtrusive manner in which director John Stephenson persistently dodges meaningful controversy in favor of undebatable clichés. Similarly, a visible angel is utilized for candle endowment. Seeing is believing. Sometimes. But blind faith is more estimable. Except when it's limited to technological advances. The script is riddled with these inconsistencies, making it both ridiculous and unpersuasive. David won't go to Gladbury. Oh, yes

he will. The senior Haddingtons will wait for their son to visit them in the village. No, they've done that long enough. They shall pay him a visit in London. He's not there when they arrive. So praying will bring him back. No, not to London. To Gladbury. But that unannounced house call is made pro forma while on a journey to see the junior Haddington's prospective bride. Is it really an outcome of Providence?

Though many mentions of miracles are offered by an array of speakers, only one actually occurs, that of an infant birth. William Barstow's tuberculosis may or may not be permanently cured. Charlie's coherency of speech might prove temporary fluke. Emily, William's daughter, could be more interested in the minister than theology. Bea and Edward are contented grandparents at present. Yet undisclosed actions or behaviors that drove their son away in the past are not necessarily banished from reappearance. Since no individual's value system has been demonstrably altered, there's complete absence of growth and maturity. A happy ending is enforced by writers rather than being won through conflict, choice, adaptation, and resolution. Beliefs remain anchored for everyone except Emily Barstow. Her partial transformation results from carnal aspiration, not spiritual enlightenment.

Given those defects, *THE CHRISTMAS CANDLE* does contain several redeeming qualities. As is expectable from a British costume drama, decors are convincingly authentic. One shot of a destitute London girl in a soup kitchen line is worthy of placement in a Dickens novel. Music throughout is commendably lofty, ethereal and delicate. Composer Tim Atack and orchestrator Matt Dunkley make an effective artistic team. Costuming also is exceptionally appropriate for the late Victorian setting.

Acting runs lamentably to stereotypes. Even Samantha Barks, so engaging as Eponine in *LES MISERABLES*, is here just an undeveloped love interest / caregiver. Susan Boyle's singing is superb. Her acting is that of a misdirected schoolgirl, being coy and silly when gravity is required. James Cosmo's Herbert Hopewell displays signs of vitality. A connect-the-dots script and early compulsory demise extinguish them. Commendably, John Hannah shows restraint and excellent diction. However, his lines are replete with boring commonplaces, doing neither actor nor audience any favor. Other performers

are likewise hobbled by an overly respectful, predictable story line with dialogue to match.

Lighting and sound are acceptable. Satisfactory editing and photography supply proper pacing and appropriate compositions.

THE CHRISTMAS CANDLE is suitable family fare for Advent. It's less so with respect to Christmas itself, when meatier drama is optimal. Two older films, MR. MAGOO'S CHRISTMAS CAROL and PRANCER, plumb emotional depths not even hinted at in this production. Both of these are also available to borrow from the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library and are more highly recommended.

Echolight Studios' dvd release includes three bonuses. One is a three-minute Behind the Scenes featurette with Max Lucado and cast members. A second is Susan Boyle's first live American performance of "Miracle Hymn." Third is a series of three minute-long Holiday Devotionals by Max Lucado.