



THE POLAR EXPRESS dvd was voted into the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library as a Christmas special. Here is Kino Ken's review of that dvd, which is now available to borrow from the library.

7 of a possible 20 points

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

United States 2004 color 100 minutes feature fantasy animation
Castle Rock Entertainment / Shangri-La Entertainment / Playtone / Imagemovers
/ Golden Mean Productions Producers: Steven Boyd, Steve Starkey,
Robert Zemeckis

Points

- 1 Direction: Robert Zemeckis 2nd Unit Direction: Steve Starkey
- 0 Editing: Jeremiah O'Driscoll, R. Orlando Duenas
- 1 Directors of Photography: Don Burgess, Robert Presley
- 1 Lighting: Steven McGee, Carmen Mazarro

0 Screenplay: Robert Zemeckis, William Broyles, Jr. based on the book by
Chris Van Allsburg
2 Production Design / Art Direction: Rick Carter, Doug Chiang / Tony Fanning,
Alicia Maccarone, Norman Newberry, James Hegedus
1 Music: Alan Silvestri
0 Sound: Randy Thom, Ronald Roumas, Brian Magerkurth, Tom Johnson,
Dennis Sands
1 Acting
0 Creativity
7 total points

Narrator: Tom Hanks

Cast: Tom Hanks (Conductor / Scrooge / Santa Claus / Hero Boy / Father / Hobo),
Nona Gaye (Hero Girl), Peter Scolari (Lonely Boy), Eddie Deezen (Know-It-All),
Leslie Zemeckis (Sister Sarah / Mother), Michael Jeter (Smokey / Steamer),
Steven Tyler (Elf Lieutenant / Elf Singer), Julene Renee (Redhead Girl),
Chris Coppola (Toothless Boy), Charles Fleischer (Elf General),
Brendan King, Andy Pellick (Pastry Chefs), Dante Pastula (Little Boy)

Voice Performers: Daryl Sabara (Voice of Hero Boy), Andre Sogliuzzo (Voices of
Smokey and Steamer), Jimmy Bennett (Voice of Lonely Boy), Isabella Peregrina
(Voice of Sister Sarah)

Child Performers: Josh Hutcherson (Hero Boy), Ashly Holloway (Sister Sarah),
Jimmy "Jax" Pinchak (Know-It-All), Chantel Valdivieso (Hero Girl),
Connor Mathews (Toothless Boy), Evan Sabara (Young Boy)

A completely unnecessary Christmas-themed movie, the point of which seems to be that whatever you believe is going to happen will happen, THE POLAR EXPRESS offers neither originality of story nor credible character evolution. Determined to be politically correct, the titular train carries an ethnic mix of relentlessly bland children to the North Pole and back, supposedly in the interest of keeping childhood credulity alive for one more Christmas season. Hardly a top priority for youngsters bombarded by violent video game images and cynical cartoon characters. The director apparently doesn't want to involve viewers

sympathetically with his actors, for the majority of them are not even provided with names. Generic stereotypes abound, from a presumably Latino or Native American girl who's the only genuinely unselfish kid on the train, to the disbelieving "Hero Boy" dragged along into Fantasyland by curiosity. There he receives nothing more wondrous than a jingling bell as reward and education. This musical gift is supposed to embody the spirit of Christmas, but it really has nothing to do with either Christ or religion, more frequently serving simply as a reminder that gift-bearing Santa is in the neighborhood.

On Christmas Eve, the film's designated "Hero Boy" is shown assuring himself through textual research that Santa Claus is fictional, a necessary myth children must discredit before plunging into adolescence. The makers of this animation apparently believe immersion in reality ought to be indefinitely postponed, with youngsters being cocooned in Neverland for as long as possible, thereby making them potentially lifelong viewers of films like *THE POLAR EXPRESS*. Of course, the notion that all things are possible is what drives zealots to the destructive anarchy of September 11th. A socially constructive notion? Guess again.

The hard case protagonist's slumber is disturbed by clamorous arrival of an express train outside his residence. Its blinding headlight leaves no alternative but investigation. Disdaining to take even the most elementary precaution against cold weather, the boy exits his cozy home in pajamas and slippers, following a beam of light emanating from a handheld lantern. When the conductor holding it urges prompt ascent up the steps into the waiting train, his unbeliever prospective passenger initially refuses the offer. But viewers are certain from the movie title that he will change his mind. Who could pass up an opportunity to completely liberate himself from parental control? If life is going to be an adventure, he better accept its invitations. Which this youngster ultimately does, predictably acting in accordance with the collective will of viewers. In fact, the filmmakers seem determined not to violate any expectation of youthful audiences which might impede massive ticket sales, their unstated primary goal.

Unless the spectator is a devotee of actor Tom Hanks, who surfaces periodically in a half-dozen different guises, this expedition to a North Pole considerably less thrilling than the journey to get there is a tiresome sequence of visceral chase scenes involving impossibly steep gradients, fracturing ice, caribou

herds averse to off-pitch human singing, and similar fantastic obstacles of a sort only ever spotted on theater screens. Need a replacement engineer in a pinch? Just press into service a child who's never handled anything more complicated than a bicycle. Safety concerns? Not on this rail line, despite chronic ongoing struggles in the locomotive cab between fireman and engineer.

On board are tiresome clichés, specially rounded up for kid amusement. There is the requisite data-spouting boy, an exclamatory girl, obviously only along for the ride, a shy lad from some hitherto unsuspected pocket of poverty in the hero's home town, and a passel of completely forgettable supporting players that fill up space, but do and say nothing of consequence. Once arrived at its destination, the eponymous transport is overshadowed by various chutes, a crane, helicopter, Santa's sleigh, and overtaxed reindeer who could well be deployed in the before segment of a vitamin commercial.

There's considerable din and frantic activity, signifying nothing of substance. Whether this is due more to the source picture book, a textless piece of eye candy, or the absurdity of inflating such a thin tale into a feature-length motion picture, is difficult to ascertain. Uninspirational dialogue invented by screenwriters is neither colorful nor instructive. Why even bother with words? They only distract from the real show, a flashy exhibition of early twenty-first century state-of-the-art kinetic animation.

The only category in which this movie excels is its production design, albeit that no one seemed inclined to integrate arctic environment with elfin architecture. Zemeckis' vision of Santa's metropolis looks more like the layout around London's Victoria Station, perhaps mingled with a bit of Florentine campanelle, than anything appropriate to polar surroundings. Yet there's plenty of detail present. Indeed, too much so, considering its incongruity. Trying to harmonize creative visions of four different art directors is no simple task and, at least with regard to color conformity and character design, THE POLAR EXPRESS displays satisfying unity.

Though Alan Silvestri's music provides some mostly subdued melodic charm, its fusion with Mexican jumping-bean style choreography is obtrusively violent, further damaging an already unbalanced narrative long on visual effects and short on insightfulness. An inclination to appease diverse tastes in pop music simply

compromises every attempt by the composer to generate overarching sonic ambience. There are lovely bits of connective motifs scattered throughout the movie, but no central one, causing dispersal, rather than cohesion, of music cues.

With regard to vocal performances, the cast is afflicted with overmodest restraint. Tom Hanks delivers colorful, occasionally hyperdramatic, enigmas with a wide range of expressive intonations and vocal quirks. Eddie Deezen's obnoxiously browbeating trivia rat is impressive, as is the gently invitational considerateness of Nona Gaye as designated "Hero Girl."

Among child performers who seem to have served as models for animated counterparts, standouts are Jimmy "Jax" Pinchak, as the intrusively overbearing Know-It-All character, and Chantel Valdivieso, whose effectively unaccented gestures mesh perfectly with Miss Gaye's quiet voicings for "Hero Girl."

THE POLAR EXPRESS is a mildly entertaining bagatelle suitable for tweens. Just don't expect any profundity of expression from it.

Bonuses on the digital video disk are subtitles and a one-minute theatrical trailer.