Arts & Humanities

11 Holiday Movies with Columbia Connections

From musical rom-coms to nostalgic TV specials, Columbia graduates (and dropouts) have worked on a variety of Christmas classics.

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Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine in "The Apartment." (IMDb / The Mirisch Company)

The Apartment

I.A.L Diamond ’41CC, a Romanian-born screenwriter who once served as editor of the *Columbia Jester*, cowrote several films with writer-director Billy Wilder, including

the 1959 classic *Some Like it Hot*. Their follow-up comedy *The Apartment*, which takes place over Christmas and New Year's Eve, is about a corporate drudge (Jack Lemmon) who lets senior managers use his Upper West Side bachelor pad for their extramarital romps. The film garnered five 1960 Oscars, including best picture, best director, and best original screenplay.



Reginald Owen in "A Christmas Carol." (MGM / IMDb)

A Christmas Carol* and *Carol for Another Christmas

The 1938 version of *A Christmas Carol* (one of many adaptations of Charles Dickens' popular 1843 novella) stars Reginald Owen as Ebeneezer Scrooge, a selfish curmudgeon who encounters a series of ghosts on Christmas Eve. Joseph Mankiewicz '28CC, who later directed acclaimed films such as *All About Eve* and *The Barefoot Contessa*, produced the movie while working for MGM.

Decades later, after a career setback directing the exorbitantly expensive 1963 epic *Cleopatra*, Mankiewicz returned to the holiday genre, this time for television. His *Carol for Another Christmas*, a modern retelling of the Dickens story starring Rod Serling, aired in 1964 as a Cold War-era promotion for the United Nations.



Gene Kelly and Deanna Durbin in "Christmas Holiday." (Universal Pictures / IMDb)

Christmas Holiday

Christmas Holiday, written by Herman Mankiewicz 1917CC (older brother of Joseph), might sound like a festive movie, but the 1941 noir film is far from merry. Based on W. Somerset Maugham's 1939 novel of the same name, the movie stars Deanna Durbin as a New Orleans bar singer who, on Christmas Eve, tells the bleak story of a miserable past marriage. Gene Kelly, normally associated with lighter musical fare, plays her criminal husband.



Zach Galligan in "Gremlins." (Warner Bros. / Amblin / IMDb)

Gremlins

In the 1984 holiday horror-comedy *Gremlins*, Zach Galligan ’96CC plays Billy, a teenager who receives a mischievous pet for Christmas. Galligan, who went on to graduate from Columbia College with a degree in history, also starred in the 1990 sequel *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* and appeared as a voice actor in the 2023 animated series *Gremlins: Secrets of the Mogwai*.



Walter Abel, Fred Astaire, Bing Crosby, and Virginia Dale in "Holiday Inn." (Paramount / IMDb)

Holiday Inn

Mark Sandrich was studying engineering at Columbia when he got a job as a prop man on a Hollywood set. He never finished his academic studies, instead becoming a prolific director best known for making films with dance duo Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Sandrich's 1942 musical *Holiday Inn*, about a singer (Bing Crosby) who opens a Connecticut inn, introduced Irving Berlin's song "White Christmas" to the world.



James Stewart and Donna Reed in "It's a Wonderful Life." (© AMPAS / IMDb)

It's a Wonderful Life

Frances Goodrich, who studied at the New York School of Social Work (later renamed the Columbia University School of School Work) before becoming an actress and writer, cowrote the *It's a Wonderful Life* screenplay with her husband, Albert Hackett, and director Frank Capra. The 1946 drama, about a struggling small-town banker (James Stewart) who has a supernatural encounter on Christmas Eve, is based on "The Greatest Gift," a *Christmas Carol*-inspired short story by Philip Van Doren Stern.



Harry Davenport and Judy Garland in "Meet Me in Saint Louis." (MGM / IMDb)

Meet Me in Saint Louis

Starring Judy Garland in one of her most famous roles, this 1944 musical introduced the song “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane. William Ludwig ’32CC, ’34LAW, who later won a screenwriting Oscar for the 1955 film *Interrupted Melody*, worked on an early version of the movie’s script.



Allison Rutledge-Parisi and Edward Clements in "Metropolitan." (Westerly Films / Allagash Films / IMDb)

Metropolitan

Before graduating from Columbia Law School, Allison Rutledge-Parisi ’96LAW costarred in *Metropolitan*. Whit Stillman’s witty 1990 indie film follows a group of young Manhattan socialites who spend a chunk of the holiday season in luxurious drawing rooms discussing their love-hate relationships with the customs and conventions of upper-class life.



Kate McKinnon in "Office Christmas Party." (Glen Wilson / © 2016 Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved. / IMDb)

Office Christmas Party

In *Office Christmas Party*, a 2016 comedy about a debauched holiday gathering at a floundering tech company, former *Saturday Night Live* star Kate McKinnon ’06CC plays Mary Winetoss, an uptight human-resources representative desperately trying to keep everyone in check.



Rankin/Bass Productions / Videocraft International / NBC / IMDb

Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer

Jewish songwriter Johnny Marks, who studied music at Columbia in the 1930s, found massive success writing Christmas songs. His “Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer” inspired the popular 1964 animated TV special, which includes other cheery tunes like “A Holly Jolly Christmas” and “Silver and Gold.” Outside of his Rudolph oeuvre, Marks is known for writing the holiday staple “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree.”



Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney in "White Christmas." (Paramount / IMDb)

White Christmas

Like *Holiday Inn*, its 1942 predecessor*, White Christmas* also features Irving Berlin's iconic song and stars Bing Crosby. Norman Krasna, who attended Columbia before becoming a journalist and screenwriter, cowrote the 1954 musical, and Robert E. Dolan, who later served on the faculty of Columbia's music department, is credited as the producer.

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