

### **The Best Christmas Pageant Ever**

Based on a 1971 children's book, and starring a young Fairuza Balk and a *M.A.S.H.*-era Loretta Swit, this special is basically perfect. When church busybody and pageant director Helen Armstrong ends up in the hospital with a broken leg, mom and fellow churchgoer Grace Bradley steps up to make sure the show goes on as planned. However, this year the Herdman kids, a gaggle of soot-faced neighborhood ne'er-do-wells, have decided that they want to be in the show. It's certainly not the Christian thing to turn anyone away, especially on Christmas, so Grace casts them in the play. Mixing gossipy comedy, light slapstick, and a truly kindhearted center, this is the Christmas special that tries to have it all—and succeeds.

### **A Charlie Brown Christmas**

The sad little Christmas tree! The Vince Guaraldi jazz score! Linus' impromptu recitation of a long section of scripture! This special has everything—most of all, a huge heart. Lovable sad sack Charlie Brown is depressed about the commercialization of Christmas and spends the entire special trying to connect with anyone who shares his understanding of the reason for the season. Charlie Brown is the perfect vehicle for this rather boldly traditional network special—he crabbily castigates his friends for laughing at his tree or prizing possessions over people. He's like a reverse Scrooge. It really shouldn't work, but it does every time.

This Emmy-winning holiday favorite is as traditional to the season as mistletoe and greeting cards. Charles Schulz's Peanuts characters come alive with the help of pianist Vince Guaraldi's jazz soundtrack. From Snoopy decorating his doghouse to Sally writing to Santa Claus to Charlie Brown disappointing everyone by choosing a tiny, bedraggled Christmas tree for the school Nativity production, this heart-warming classic can still entertain both kids and grown-ups alike.

### **A Christmas Carol (1999)**

There are roughly 10,000 adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*—each slightly different, but most following the same Charles Dickens–penned plot: miserly penny-pincher reckons with his past; becomes a better boss; enjoys Christmas. What makes this one exceptional? Captain Picard, of course! Patrick Stewart, a classically trained thespian, is phenomenal as Scrooge and makes this special must-see viewing. Hewing closer to the Dickens story than most adaptations, this iteration has a dark and slightly cynical core that will please anyone who thinks Scrooge ought to suffer a little more for his life of antisocial behavior. It all ends happily, of course,

but this is a rare Christmas tale that isn't afraid to get a little dark.

### **Elmo Saves Christmas**

The first thing you need to know is that this special was narrated by Maya Angelou, which already makes it better than 90 percent of all things ever created. Elmo, lovable Sesame Street monster, likes Christmas so much that he wishes Christmas could be every day. He gets his wish, but it has disastrous consequences for his friends on Sesame Street. This is a lovely parable about moderation, and yet another pop culture example of someone being granted three wishes and completely screwing it up.

### **Emmet Otter's Jug-Band Christmas**

Sure, the puppets in this early Jim Henson special show their strings a bit, but that's all part of the fun of this naive and earnest retelling of *The Gift of the Magi*. Cuddly Emmet Otter and his rhythm-loving pals put together a jug-band for the local talent show, in hopes of grabbing that big-money prize to help Emmet by his mom a gift. Battling slimy funk band the Riverbottom Gang, they all get a lesson in the true value of gift-giving.

### **Frosty the Snowman**

Rather wonderfully, this special tells the story of a snowman who is brought to life by a magician's hat and his mischievous rabbit. Nothing says "holidays" like an enchanted top hat, right? Frosty, the eponymous magic snowman, teaches a group of kids the value of being good to others. Plus, you know the song.

A spirited snowman is brought to life by a magician's hat, winning over little Karen as well as the audience. After discovering that it has actual magic powers, the bumbling Professor Hinkle demands his hat back, and Karen, Frosty and Hocus Pocus, Hinkle's rabbit, attempt to outrun the warming weather by traveling to the North Pole.

### **How the Grinch Stole Christmas**

Directed by Chuck Jones and featuring the voice of Boris Karloff, the animated special tells the story of a sourpuss Grinch (sort of a cat-ferret creature with green fur) who disguises himself as Santa so that he can steal the Christmas decorations of his joyful Whoville neighbors. Of course, as is literally always the case in these stories, he's won over by the magic of the season and the innocence of a child, and joins the Whos in celebration. The songs in this special are great, particularly "You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch," which

should be on everyone's karaoke list. Also, its not-so-sly anti-materialism message is a welcome tonic to much of the messaging around the holidays.

He's a mean one, all right. This Boris Karloff-narrated Dr. Seuss classic is a timeless gem. Though the Grinch is about as cuddly as a cactus as he plots to steal Christmas from the folks in Whoville, the singing and celebrating Whos eventually melt his cold heart and teach him the true meaning of Christmas. An annual must.

### **The Little Drummer Boy**

This old-school, stop-motion 1960s production about the little orphan boy who didn't have anything to give to the infant Jesus except his drumming ability teaches children that the best things we offer each other have nothing to do with money or "stuff".

### **Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol**

Call it a history-maker. It was the first-ever animated Christmas special produced for TV, according to IMDB.com. The cartoon was created to give the feel of a Broadway production – a feel that was enhanced by the musical work of two Broadway show writers, Jule Styne and Bob Merrill.

### **Olive the Other Reindeer**

This Drew Barrymore–voiced film is perhaps the first Christmas special based on a misheard lyric. Instead of "all of the other reindeer," who laughed and called Rudolph names, we have Olive, a Jack Russell terrier. Olive, like most Christmas special heroines, is plucky, intrepid, and fueled by the seemingly limitless goodwill of the holiday season. This computer-animated treat is full of twists and turns (*so much* happens to Olive!) and winning vocal performances that will keep the young and the young-at-heart delighted.

### **Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer**

There's no denying that this special about the power of inclusion is one of the greatest ever made. This stop-motion tale of a reindeer whose shiny red nose saves Christmas at a clutch moment has been aired every year since 1964, making it the longest-running Christmas special in history. No holiday season is complete without Rudolph.

Fundamentally a cheerful parable about accepting and celebrating each others' differences, this is the sweet saga of Rudolph, a reindeer who's sensitive about his shiny nose, and his friend Hermey, an elf who'd rather become a dentist than a toy maker. But when Santa is

fogged in on Christmas, he turns to Rudolph for help, and suddenly that bright red nose saves the day. This tale is one that never loses its charm.

### **Santa Claus Is Comin' To Town**

Ever wonder how Santa came to be his jovial, gift-giving self? This special tells the tale of an orphaned Kris Kringle who longs to bring joy to the children of Sombertown by giving them toys that mayor Burgermeister Meisterburger has made illegal. With the help of his adopted elf family, Kris builds a toy workshop and spreads joy to the good children of the world. Featuring the beloved titular Christmas song, this is sure to please the whole family.

### **The Snowman**

A mostly dialogue-free British import. This hand drawn enchantment is painted in soft pastels, reinforcing its buoyant delicacy. A color scheme more similar to a snowfall at sunrise than a gregarious Christmas tree, the story follows a young boy whose frosty creation magically comes to life like another snowman we'll find on this list — and meets a similar end. Though silent, *The Snowman* dazzles as it soars to fantastic heights on a journey that includes an unexpected stop at The North Pole.

### **Star Wars Holiday Special**

This is the Holy Grail of Christmas specials: so absurd, so random, and so bad that after its initial airing it wasn't released for decades. Explorers perished searching for this special. Here's what you're in for if you get your hands on this hot property: The main action centers around Han Solo and Chewbacca traveling to Chewy's home world to celebrate Life Day. All of the original cast members appear, as well as Bea Arthur (later of *Golden Girls* fame), Diahann Carroll (*Dynasty*), and Jefferson Starship. Interspersing a heartwarming plot, with weird musical numbers and a cartoon segment introducing bounty hunter Boba Fett for the first time, this special literally tries to do everything all at once. It's a wild ride.