

Review #49 : *Christmas in July* (1940)

Dick Powell and Ellen Drew

TRAILER

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPzSfSzRfW0>

Christmas in July is a trick and wryly titled film, about as **cunning and carefree** a comedy as anyone could possibly wish for — the perfect restorative, in fact, for battered humours and jangled nerves. As a post-election jog to national sanity, I recommend *Christmas in July*.



SYNOPSIS

Jimmy MacDonald (Dick Powell), a low-paid clerk at the Baxter Coffee Company in New York City, is a habitual **contest participant**, always trying his luck at lotteries, drawings, and

slogan contests. His favourite daydream is to one day win the top prize for his efforts so he can move out of his noisy tenement apartment on the East Side and marry his girlfriend, Betty (Ellen Drew). Suddenly, Jimmy's fortune changes drastically when he is informed his jingle has **won the \$25,000 grand prize** in his rival company's Maxford Coffee competition. Little does he realize that his sudden fame is completely bogus ; it was an elaborate joke engineered by three fellow office workers. But before he learns the truth, he goes on a massive buying spree for his neighbourhood, compounding the financial problems he will soon be facing.

Maybe you already know Preston Sturges from *Remember the Night* or *The Lady Eve* (1941). In many ways *Christmas in July* shares key similarities to other Sturges' films with its **sharp satire of American materialism** and its love for comic characters, but the tone is closer to the movies of Frank Capra and straddles a fine line between **sunny optimism and hopeless pessimism**. From his other productions, you may be also aware how he can take a thin idea and elaborate upon it with such fresh fun that it suddenly seems important. The whole story has to do with nothing more than the things the hero does when he is deluded into thinking he has won the contest, and yet you'll appreciate this delightful comedy.



How does he do it ? Well, through the creation of **solid comic characters**, for one. His hero — and inevitable heroine — are just **nice, honest youngsters**, that's all. They want a break, so they can get married. But against them are arrayed such a scatter-brained lot of practical jokers, business tycoons and slightly off-center store clerks that the attainment of the break becomes a gantlet. Then Mr. Sturges contrives some wholly bewitching surprises. Details are worked out with elaborate ingenuity. Things pop when you least expect them. He keeps you laughing with, not at, his youngsters.

And his performers are directed to perfection. As a creator of **rich and human comedy**, Mr. Sturges is closing fast on the heels of Frank Capra. He converted this **unpretentious plot** into a happy comedy with a Chaplinesque background of *pathos*. As every good dramatist, Sturges keeps his characters credible by the simple but neglected technique of letting them act like people. *Christmas in July* strikes a wonderful balance between the director's visual urban sophistication and his compassion for the 'common man'.



Christmas in July celebrates an American dream that is still popular today – that of winning a fortune and discovering overnight fame. But as experienced by the naive Jimmy MacDonald, the price of success is an ambiguous one. His excitement over winning the contest isn't simply about the money ; it's about **self-worth**, something a lot of people lacked in the demoralizing atmosphere of the Depression years. Even more important to Jimmy is the fact that he won the contest for his **originality**.

If you wish a really good way to spend some election winnings, we suggest that you take your friends — especially the loser — to see *Christmas in July*. Enjoy ! +++