



# A Perennial Miracle for the Holidays!



Director George Seaton's 1947 classic, *A Miracle on 34th Street* is an effervescent bon-bon packed full of holiday cheer. Ironically, the film debuted in May of 1947 – hardly the height of the Christmas season. Still, producer Darryl F. Zanuck insisted that more people go to the movies in the summer. Evidently he was right. Even ill-timing could not stop the film from becoming an instant box office smash and one of the best beloved seasonal treats since.



Character actress Thelma Ritter began her long career with a bit part in this film, playing a harried housewife. And although the cast included such luminous performances from the likes of Maureen O'Hara and John Payne – ideally cast as the romantic leads – the film's overwhelming success really belongs to its two supporting players; the precociously winsome Natalie Wood (then a mere nine years old), and the inspired and delightful Edmund Gwenn as Kris Kringle. Gwenn took home the Oscar as Best Supporting Actor for playing the guy who may or may not, in fact, be the mythologized Santa Claus.



New York's Macys Department Store allowed Seaton and 20th Century-Fox unprecedented access to shoot in and around their vast and elegant shopping venue, adding an air of authenticity to the production that greatly lent to the believability of the story.

**PLOT:** Our tale begins on a New York street. Kris Kringle (Edmund Gwenn) encounters a drunken man about to play Santa Claus on a float in Macys Thanksgiving Day Parade. Disgusted by what he sees, Kris approaches the parade coordinator Doris Walker (Maureen O'Hara) with his concerns. Frustrated, exhausted and in need of a replacement, Kris's similarities to the jolly

man in the red suit are not lost on Doris. She convinces Kris to fill in for Santa and thereafter hires him for the permanent holiday post in the store's toy department.

However, when Kris attempts to tell Doris' skeptical daughter, Susan (Natalie Wood) that he actually believes that he is Santa Claus – Doris becomes concerned. Is Kris crazy? Is he



dangerous? Researching Kris' profile, Doris is reassured that Kris is harmless and she begins to fall under the old man's benevolent spell. Her complete submission is stunted by a deep-rooted cynicism to believe in anything; a barrier that Doris' new beau, attorney Fred Gailey (John Payne) is attempting to break through. However, when staff psychologist, Granville Sawyer (Porter Hall) takes a dislike to Kris, he plots to have him committed to the state mental facility – a move that infuriates R.H. Macy (Harry Antrim) and all but shatters Kris' faith in humanity.



That faith is restored when Doris and Susan both write Kris a letter to confess that they too now believe in his identity. Fred goes to trial to defend Kris. But he is hampered by his inability to offer 'definitive proof' that Kris is who he claims to be. The inspired whim of fate that turns everything in their favor comes by happy accident when a mail employee forwards all the dead letters addressed to Santa Claus to the New York County Court House – thereby establishing proof from an official branch of the federal government that Kris Kringle is indeed the one and only man of the holiday season.



Restored to his former life, Kris invites Doris, Fred and Susan to the retirement home where he is staying for a Christmas day celebration. But Susan is disheartened. Earlier, she had confided to Kris her desire for a home where she, her mother and Fred could become a family. Seemingly denied that request, Susan is shocked when on the way home, with instructions given to them by Kris, she sees the house she had asked for. Fred stops the car and Susan rushes into the vacant structure, ironically for sale. Fred and Doris reconcile their differences before acknowledging the presence of a walking cane propped up in the corner of the room. Is it the same one Kris carries with him always? It certainly looks like it.



**The DVD transfer for A Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street is not as miraculous as its subject matter. Although the gray scale has been very nicely balanced and age related artifacts and film grain are generally kept to a bare minimum, there is some annoying shimmering of fine details spread throughout the transfer that are rather distracting. Background information on paneling, bricks, tiles and other sharp vertical or horizontal lines tends to vibrate, for an image that is not very stable. There are many scenes free from this digital anomaly. The audio is mono but nicely balanced. Save a theatrical trailer there are no extra features.**

