

A new book about 'A Christmas Story' by Hackensack author Caseen Gaines

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The Rockefeller Center tree, the Balanchine "Nutcracker," Macy's Santa Claus may be your idea of a Christmas pilgrimage.

But a happy few make their way, each December, to a less likely holiday shrine.

In Cleveland, Ohio, on West 11th Street, there is a yellow house in an ordinary blue-collar neighborhood that sports an old-fashioned 1930s washing machine

and wringer, a large cake of Lifebuoy in the bathroom sink and a kitchen cabinet just big enough for a small boy with a congenital hatred of mashed potatoes to hide in.

Oh — and a lady's-leg lamp in the window.

The Christmas Story House, where the exteriors of the 1983 holiday cult favorite "A Christmas Story" were shot, was purchased by mega-fan Brian Jones, extensively renovated and opened as a museum in 2006. It's just one of the places that Caseen Gaines, in the research phase of his new book, "A Christmas Story: Behind the Scenes of a Holiday Classic" (ECW press, 197 pages, \$29.95), made a point of checking out.

"I watched all these adult people become children," says Gaines, a Hackensack resident. "It's a fun thing. I watched people put Lifebuoy soap in their mouths, and put on the headpiece to Ralphie's bunny suit. People get into the house and they play. It's like an adult Disneyland."

The Christmas Story House was a labor of love by a fan, not a top-down project by a studio looking to exploit its property. And that speaks to the special affection people have for this odd holiday classic, which did middling business to middling reviews — and got minimal attention from its studio, MGM — when it opened 30 years ago.

But the film, based on the late radio personality Jean Shepherd's sardonic stories about his boyhood in 1940s Indiana, has mushroomed in popularity, until it now stands beside "It's a Wonderful Life" as the iconic holiday film.

"The movie is unique in that it depicts a realistic view of the holidays, warts and all," Gaines says. "It's not an idealized Christmas, but who has the perfect Christmas?"

A stage musical version is now playing its second holiday season, on a limited run, in New York. "Christmas Story" collectibles — pink bunny suits, lady's-leg lamps — are big business. The annual 24-hour "Christmas Story" marathon on TBS, a staple since 1997, has replaced the Yule Log as a standard TV backdrop in many people's living

rooms on Dec. 25. The episodic film is so familiar that people can drop in anywhere, savoring once again all the cherished lines: "It was ... soap poisoning!" "Frag-ee-lay – must be Italian." "I double-dog dare you!" And "Ho! Ho! Ho! You'll shoot your eye out, kid!"

"I can't think of another film, where they broadcast it over a 24-hour period," Gaines says. "I think the marathon is immensely important to the success of the film."

He was 8, Gaines says, when he first encountered "A Christmas Story" on VHS – prompted by his mom. "When I watched it, I don't think it was even during the Christmas season," he recalls. "But I loved it."

As an adult – more, as a pop culture historian ("Inside Pee-wee's Playhouse"), co-founder of the Hackensack Theatre Company and professor of film at Rutgers University in New Brunswick – Gaines was curious to know why this low-budget film about a little boy who desperately wants a Red Ryder BB gun for Christmas, should have such long cultural legs.

Here's some of what he found out:

* This archetypal American film was made largely in Canada (the Cleveland house exterior was an exception). "Probably about 75 to 80 percent was made in Canada," Gaines says. "That was a big surprise to me."

* The late director Bob Clark ("Porky's") was a huge fan of Jean Shepherd, and actively wooed the cranky cult writer until he gave permission for the film.

* The effect of the tongue stuck to the frozen flagpole was done with a vacuum pump. "There was a hole at the base [of the pole], so they could suck the air out," he says.

* Most of the surviving "Christmas Story" cast (Darren McGavin, who played "The Old Man," died in 2006) have remained friends, and are still actively promoting the film to this day. Two exceptions: Peter Billingsley (Ralphie), now a successful producer, and Melinda Dillon, who played the mother.

* An elaborate Flash Gordon fantasy sequence was deleted before the film's release; it's now believed lost.

* The "politically incorrect" fa-ra-ra Chinese restaurant sequence became a huge bone of contention when the stage musical was being written. But Daniel Mah, who played one of the waiters in the film sequence, loved it, according to his widow.

* Ian Petrella, the actor who played Randy, Ralphie's whiny little brother — he also supplied original artwork for Gaines' book — actually spent time as a guest host at the Christmas Story House, living there at night and giving guided tours by day. At one point, a visitor knocked him to the ground — apparently expecting him to lay there "like a slug," as his character did. "I wanted to see if you had trouble getting up," the woman told the furious Petrella.

"A lot of people have difficulty separating the actors, now all adults, from the characters they played 30 years ago," Gaines says. "Probably because of the marathon, they feel the Parker family is a part of their own family."

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