

Elf (2003) stars Will Ferrell as a human raised by Santa's elves journeying to the big city in search of his human roots. With a premise that hokey, *Elf* doesn't deserve to be funny, but in the deftly comedic hands of Ferrell it most certainly is.

Buddy Elf (Ferrell) may be human, but no one has had the heart to tell him. Raised on a North Pole that looks hilariously like the set of "A Gumby Christmas" (complete with stop motion characters and a pimped out snowman), Buddy can't understand why he's so different. When Papa Elf (Bob Newhart doing his best work in years) clues him in on his lineage, suddenly things start making sense. Determined to find out more about his father, whom Santa informs him is on the naughty list, Buddy sets off for New York with a heart full of Elf-typical Christmas cheer. After the wackiness of *Elf*'s North Pole setting, the rest of the movie plays pretty traditionally by comparison and might have fallen completely flat if not for the gut-busting and sometimes twisted innocence drenching every inch of big Will Ferrell.

For instance, encounters with Buddy's father play out with predictable holiday failure. James Caan, who plays Ferrell's long lost dad, is a generic Scrooge caricature with no time for family or Christmas joy. Of course Buddy works his magic on him, and well you can figure out the rest. Along the way of course Christmas is in trouble. Taking a cue from a guy named Earnest, Buddy saves it, bringing sappy love and happiness to all the world in a scene which in any other movie might have been sickening, but in *Elf* turns out to be wonderfully genuine and heartwarming.

However, Ferrell's aw shucks attitude throughout all of this is completely convincing. He's outrageously silly when he needs to be, but there's some sincerity behind him too that inexplicably makes you really care about this elfman. Will believes in Buddy and that translates into instant empathy for what is otherwise a completely unrealistic character. With anyone else in this role, *Elf* would undoubtedly have fallen right on its face. With Ferrell, it wholly succeeds not only as an instant Christmas classic but also as one of the best pure comedies to bare itself this year. Ferrell proves himself an absolute comedic genius, capable not just of cracking folks up in supporting roles as he did earlier this year in *Old School*, but fully ready to take on any and every leading comedic role Hollywood can throw at him. Give this man all your screen time! Doesn't matter what the subject is, he'll put it to good use.

Like Will Ferrell, Director Jon Favreau is another one of those guys you just have to love. He even had something to offer when pigeonholed into some particularly bad episodes of "Friends". As *Elf*'s director, he has the sense to give his movie just the right irreverent air, while backing up to let Ferrell do his thing. *Elf* still does its share of spreading traditional holiday cheer, but saves most of it for a climatic action-oriented ending, featuring among other things, a hilarious homage to Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*. The rest of the movie smartly focuses on a series of all out funny and sometimes warped comedy bits in which to entangle Ferrell's Buddy Elf. The result is brilliant. That contrast of weird insanity and traditional Christmas charm is somehow mixed with absolute perfection to make *Elf* a refreshing and unforgettable family comedy hit.