

INSIDER | SPOTLIGHT

FEELING THE GRINCH

Actor Benedict Cumberbatch found a poignant — and timely — message in this Christmas favourite, writes **Kerry Parnell**



Benedict Cumberbatch with his wife Sophie Hunter earlier this year. Picture: AFP

It is one of America's most loved children's characters; he is one of Britain's most loved actors. So, it initially comes with some surprise that Benedict

Cumberbatch's latest role is as the Grinch.

The Sherlock star takes on the famous grouchy who tries to steal Christmas in a charming adaptation of Dr Seuss's novel by Illumination, of *Despicable Me* fame, alongside Pharrell Williams, Rashida Jones and Angela Lansbury.

And he does so in an American accent.

"It was one of the reasons I jumped at the chance," Cumberbatch says, as he relaxes on a sofa in a suite in London's Corinthia Hotel.

"I was like fantastic, you want me to play an American icon."

He says producers initially asked him to do the voice in an English accent, but he refused.

"It was the same with *Dr Strange*. I was like, no, this isn't Sherlock with a cloak or a green gun. They are, as you say, very iconic American characters."

As to whether The Grinch would have sounded even more miserable with an English accent, Benedict isn't speculating.

"We will never know. Why stereotype English accents just because they have consonants in them instead of warm vowels," he says.

But he says he was thrilled to play the legendary misanthrope who finally discovers the meaning of Christmas, and life.

"It's the only book I think of Seuss's where the villain is in the centre. It's about the potential for good in bad which is a very timely thing to be exploring," he says. "He's someone who is an outsider and is isolated in loneliness, cut off from a community and going mad. And there's a lot of that in the world."

"The fact that he realises what

Christmas is actually about — it's not about materialism, it's not about bling, it's not about stature or ego or hating something else, then, that's a very positive message to put out to the world."

It's also an interesting juxtaposition to his previous release — the searing drama *Patrick Melrose*, about a man coming to terms with his childhood abuse and addiction.

"Yes. I do like to mix it up in my work," he says. "I also think that in *Melrose*, despite some very serious issues, there's a great deal of levity and humour and wit to it. But also, a profoundly hopeful message. It's a story about someone speaking truth to power and seeking salvation and survival rather than being a victim of his abuse and that's again a very timely thing to chime with what's going on socially in our world."

"They both have elements of that. The Grinch is more a socially inept outsider who's enraged and isolated, so it's born out of different circumstances — but still a depravity. He's an orphan, so Christmas is an anathema to a child who doesn't have a family or loving or belonging to adhere to."

"Also, he gets it completely wrong, thinking that you can steal it because it's material, which of course you can't, which is the thing I love about Christmas," he says.

Cumberbatch, 42, is famously frank and funny and in person he is open and earnest.

Clad in green combat pants, sneakers and a sweater, he is sporting a thin moustache, as he is in the midst of filming the

Cold War spy thriller *Ironbark*. The actor lives in London with his wife Sophie and sons, Christopher, three and Hal, 18 months, with another baby on the way.

So how will his children cope with the fact Dad is playing a character who wants to steal Christmas?

"Well to any children watching, the message is he's got it really wrong," he says. "Not only is stealing wrong, but he's stolen something that doesn't matter in comparison to what you can't steal and that's a great thing to remind people of in a time where we're pushing each other into a place where we desire things we want but don't need."

"He gets it wrong and he realises that it's a mistake and he asks for forgiveness and lo and behold there is enough love in that town and in people in general I hope, that the message is to accept."

So is he more Grinch or a happy Who when it comes to Christmas?

"I have ruined other people's Christmases," he says with a laugh. "Once I woke up at 5am and ripped through the whole stocking on my own, which was not something we did as a family, it was a shared moment."

"It was so painfully early that when I got to the party poppers I decided to launch them point blank at my grandmother's ceiling and great chunks of plaster came off. Not only did the noise of the party poppers wake everyone up, they came in to see all the presents unwrapped and me covered in plaster as I'd ruined the ceiling as well."

"I was not very popular. I screwed up."



MOVIE

Cumberbatch with rapper and producer Tyler, the Creator at the New York premiere earlier this month. Picture: AFP

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 25 2018

105



The many faces of The Grinch, voiced by Benedict Cumberbatch in the latest movie outing for Dr Seuss's furry green villain: (right) Cumberbatch as Dr Strange and (below) in this year's acclaimed television drama Patrick Melrose.

Cumberbatch, who later pulls on a beanie to head out into the cold London air, says he loves the changes in seasons and the run-up to Christmas. And while he's never had an Australian Christmas, he has experienced a hot one.

"I have had a hot Christmas in Mozambique, with a friend of mine who was running a dive school there. I was in a Sherlock period of my life and had ridiculous long curly black hair and ended up on Christmas Day with this incredible memory of surfing with my old school friend and having a barbecue.

"It was fantastic," he says. "It was really special. It's not a tough life being in the sun at Christmas."

Cumberbatch, who previously admitted he began to take different roles after he became a father, is continuing the classic children's literature theme with his next role as the voice of Shere Khan in Mowgli. So are there other classic characters he's burning

to play? "My dance card is quite full at the moment," he says, explaining that his production company Sunny-March has some options, including Rogue Male, the 1939 Geoffrey

Household thriller, the first fugitive drama.

"That would be very exciting," he says. "Something tells us he'll be dancing to his own tune for years to come, selecting an eclectic mix of roles that speak to the cerebral actor."

After all, in the words of Dr Seuss: "You have brains in your head, you have feet in your shoes, you can steer yourself in any direction you choose."

THE GRINCH IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 29. VICKY ROACH'S REVIEW, PAGE 96



watch Christmas list

David Meddows unwraps the latest festive flicks and tracks down some old favourites

There's a funny thing about Christmas when it comes to movies: It doesn't matter how bad they are, how illogical they may be or how terrible the acting is, as long as there's a decorated tree, a bit of snow and a man dressed up in red and white, they're very hard to hate.

Netflix has cottoned on to this phenomenon and gone into overdrive with a feast of new movies popping up on the streaming service about the festive season. There is absolutely no threat any of these will win an Oscar, and you'll find yourself laughing when you're not meant to in a few of them, but strangely with the magic dust of Christmas sprinkled over them, they're all quite watchable.

THE CHRISTMAS CHRONICLES

Kurt Russell is Santa Claus. That's all many people will need to know before sitting back and giving this one a crack. Some reviews have already just focused on the fact that there's a "hot Santa" to give it the thumbs up and let's be honest, he's the perfect choice and it's kind of surprising he hasn't donned the suit before. The Christmas



The Christmas Chronicles.

Chronicles is so jam-packed with clichés, it's a work of art in itself. Two siblings, facing their first holiday season without their dad (a hero firefighter no less), are left at home on Christmas Eve when their nurse



A Christmas Prince: The Royal Wedding.

Five faves and where to stream them

DIE HARD

Now that we all agree this is a Christmas movie, we must agree it's the best one ever.

Bigpond Movies

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

This classic stands the test of time and will never get old.

Netflix

HOME ALONE

Kids still love this son-left-at-home-confronts-

baddies tale even though it will soon turn 30. Bigpond Movies

LOVE ACTUALLY

It's really not Christmas if you don't watch this movie at least once during the season.

Bigpond Movies

NATIONAL LAMPOON'S CHRISTMAS VACATION

Clark Griswold and Christmas — what more could you ask for? Foxtel On Demand

mum gets called into work. They set out to trap Santa, nearly ruining Christmas in the process but then help him... yada yada. This list is longer than Santa's but ... it works.

THE HOLIDAY CALENDAR

Abby's best friend Josh returns home just in time for Christmas and the games begin. Everyone in the world can see they should be together but they both insist they're "just friends". When Abby inherits an antique Advent calendar that appears to be able to predict the future with the ornaments that appear behind the windows, it begins a series of events that lead to the eventual conclusion that we won't write here, but you can guess without using a single brain cell.

THE PRINCESS SWITCH

Vanessa Hudgens stars in this royal-themed hat-tip to The Parent Trap. The High School Musical star plays both Chicago baker Stacy De Novo and Margaret Delacourt, Duchess of Montenegro and future princess of the Kingdom of Belgravia. When Stacy, who is dreading her first Christmas

since breaking up with her long-time boyfriend, is invited to Belgravia for the annual baking contest, she packs up her bags and travels to Europe with her business partner and (just) best friend and his daughter. The baker and the princess-in-waiting run into each other and devise a plan to switch for a few days so the royal can experience life as a pleb. No need to explain what happens next because

from start to finish you feel like you've already seen this movie but the kids will love it and it's covered in that magic dust.



The Princess Switch.

A CHRISTMAS PRINCE: THE ROYAL WEDDING

It seems the folk at Netflix sure do love a royal-themed Christmas story. This is a follow-up to last year's A Christmas Prince. It's likely we will see new chapters added to the franchise for the next 50 years until we reach A Christmas Prince: The Funeral. Just as Amber is about to marry her prince, she questions whether or not she actually wants to be a royal. At the same time the kingdom is hit by a political crisis that threatens to destroy ... CHRISTMAS! (and the kingdom).

V2 - TELE2018A