

Why Dolly Parton's 'Coat of Many Colors' Is a Gift

Honing in on Hallmark Channel's territory, "Dolly Parton's Coat of Many Colors" is a TV movie like mama used to make—a relentlessly faith-based holiday confection geared toward an audience that (before Mark Burnett copyrighted the Bible) had reason to feel underserved by network television. Introduced and narrated by Parton—from Dollywood, no less—NBC's movie focuses on a narrow slice of the singer's early biography, defined by the power of love and religion. Unabashedly schmaltzy and handsomely done, this "Little House on the Prairie"-like effort should deliver a different audience from last week's "The Wiz," but a sizable one nevertheless.

The movie picks up in 1955 in Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains, where a then-9-year-old Dolly, portrayed by Alyvia Alyn Lind ("Revenge," "A Deadly Adoption") is being raised as part of a TLC-like brood of eight kids, with a ninth on the way. Mom (country star Jennifer Nettles) is a preacher's daughter, while dad (Ricky Schroder) won't set foot inside the church, much to the chagrin of his father-in-law (Gerald McRaney, who somehow seems to be everywhere at once these days).

The family's tradition is that the older kids help mom tend to the new ones, and the rambunctious Dolly—already an aspiring singing star, who colorfully quotes her dad by telling her mom, "You may be brown-headed, but you was born with a red-headed temper"—is beyond enthusiastic about the prospect of the new addition. But when mom loses the baby, her faith is tested, as well as the bond between her parents, who, before then, had always had more love than money.

Written by Pamela K. Long, and directed by Stephen Herek, "Coat of Many Colors" (the title of an early Parton song)

does, indeed, feature said coat, the garment mom stitched together out of colorful rags. And while the movie concocts various subplots out of necessity—about a friendship and a feud with a neighboring clan—that’s mostly filler, as the conversation keeps returning to Dolly’s abundant talent and the importance of faith and promise of an afterlife, with mom telling Dolly her voice is “a gift, from Him that made you.”

Granted, these themes are hit so frequently, and bluntly, as to become a trifle repetitive, to the point where it’s a wonder anyone has time left to tend the crops or sing. But there’s an earnestness here—ably delivered by the cast, starting with Lind—that should play well with the target audience, particularly those prone to lament the dearth of faith-based programming and Hollywood’s perceived hostility toward their values.

Hallmark, of course, gradually squandered its regular broadcast platform—yielding shrinking ratings for its movies, in part due to creative neglect—but the combination of holiday scheduling and the country connection should drum up solid numbers. If not, it would likely be a setback to those clamoring for such fare. And if so, then “Coat of Many Colors” can be considered a sort-of dual gift—both from, and to, NBC.

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