

Kimberley Sustad stars in Hallmark Channel's 'Lights, Camera, Christmas!'

BEHIND THE SCREENS WITH JOSHUA MALONI

If it's 65 degrees in Buffalo, is it too early for a Hallmark Christmas movie?

Maybe. But the famous card company has become equally well known for its round-the-clock holiday film offerings, which, snow or no snow, now arrive a week before the first trick-or-treater shows up at your doorstep.

Hallmark's "Countdown to Christmas" has been so successful, in fact, that other networks have, um, "borrowed" the idea and ramped up their festive flicks pre-Halloween, too.

And who did they go to when casting? Former Hallmark Channel stars, of course.

You see, Hallmark has cemented its status as a holiday staple. It has keepsake ornaments, Balsam Hill partnerships, and more than 30 movies debuting between Oct. 21 and Dec. 18.

This is big business – but it's also an experience – both for those watching at home, and for those communities where a Hallmark movie is filmed.

Recognizing this, the network teamed with Lighthouse Pictures for a tongue-in-cheek, movie-in-a-movie appropriately titled, "Lights, Camera, Christmas!" One of the best Hallmark offerings you'll find this year, the film humorously and lovingly pokes fun at – and celebrates – the magic that comes from making (and watching) a "Countdown to Christmas" feature.

Equally inspiring was putting Kimberley Sustad in the lead role. No stranger to holiday films ("The Nine Lives of Christmas," "The Nine Kittens of Christmas," "Christmas by Starlight"), Sustad is the perfect counterbalance to the escapism often found in these pictures. The roles she's played are of real people, with real jobs, who are big-hearted and appropriately pessimistic. Perhaps a better way to say it is Sustad's characters are keenly aware of "This is too-good-to-be-true" moments. Still, they don't retreat when such opportunities are presented, but press on toward the goal – whether it's finding love, saving a family diner, or



Kimberley Sustad as Kerry in "Lights, Camera, Christmas!" (Credit: ©2022 Hallmark Media/photographer: David Astorga)

rescuing a batch of kittens.

In addition to having the best laugh of any Hallmark player, Sustad is – as her character is described in "Lights, Camera, Christmas!" – cool, smart, talented and authentic.

Her new film debuts this Saturday and, as the story goes, "When a movie shoot descends on a small town to film a Christmas movie, local boutique owner Kerry (Sustad) gets hired at the last minute to replace the film's costume designer. As if this unexpected turn of events isn't major enough, Kerry also finds herself falling for Brad Barton (John Brotherton), the movie's famous and charismatic leading man who is starting to pursue more challenging acting roles."

Sustad said, "You know what it's like? I described it as almost a 'Notting Hill' – except John Brotherton is Julia Roberts, and I'm Hugh Grant (laughs)."

"This big movie comes to this small town, and I own a retrofit, sort of vintage/select-finds thrift store – where I also have a few of my own designs. And this movie runs into some significant troubles while they're trying to get it off. And I ended up getting recruited to help, in this wildly unknown world of moviemaking. I start to work next to a Christmas movie star, which is what John Brotherton plays. And it's a lot of fun."

"You get to see a lot of how a

Christmas movie is made. But we're obviously making light of it, as well. So it's really fun. You'll be in a scene, and then they'll pull back and you'll see like the snow machines and the different things that kind of make that scene on screen, versus what it looks like actually standing there. That's sort of the premise.

"I end up somewhat saving this movie from disastrous wardrobe failures. And Kerry, my character, has a number of great ideas. As problems continue to consist throughout, they're trying to film this thing. One by one, she kind of brings this magic to the movie – and you'll have to see if she does fall in love with the movie star or not, or how that works out. But – hint, hint – it is a rom-com (laughs), so there's a good chance. There's a good chance she falls in love with the movie star."

That this film sort of gives a wink and a nod to Hallmark movies – and particularly Christmas or holiday movies – well, that was an added bonus.

"I didn't know how far they were going to let us go with it," Sustad said. "John gets to kind of poke fun at actors a little bit (laughs). We get to poke fun at making Christmas movies, and what they're all about. And Hallmark was just really up for that."

"It's very much still a movie. It's not exactly how it is to make

a Christmas movie. But there are some fun aspects of exploding Christmas over every room, and it having to be just perfect; and the snow machines having to blow a certain amount of snow in your face while you're doing this; or the scenes being extra special with Santa.

"It's a sneak peek of the making of, but not too much so people get lost in what it is to make a movie. It's mostly these two people's relationship, Kerry and Brad. He's sort of learning to become a little more relaxed and real, and I think there's a persona of him that he gets stuck playing all the time. He becomes a little more of a real person. And I come out of my shell. I've sort of resigned myself to this small town. And then she, sort

of through this movie, begins to bring back her dream of being a fashion designer, or a designer and really pursuing that dream, instead of just sort of hiding her designs away in her shop and not putting them forward.

"The magic of making this Christmas movie pushes everybody to kind of dream bigger, and we find ourselves, obviously, with an 'all is lost' moment. I won't tell you what that is, but love is found again."

•The new, original movie "Lights, Camera, Christmas!" premieres Saturday, Nov. 5 (8 p.m.), on the Hallmark Channel. It is part of the network's annual "Countdown to Christmas" programming event.

Read the full Q&A online at www.wnypapers.com.



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Native American Music Awards: Show to commemorate National Native American Heritage Month

Saturday, Nov. 19, Seneca Niagara Resort & Casino in Niagara Falls

The Native American Music Awards are back and ready to celebrate and honor their most powerful voices, while also commemorating National Native American Heritage Month, on Saturday, Nov. 19, at the Seneca Niagara Resort & Casino in Niagara Falls. This will be the organization's 20th awards event, and the first since the pandemic.

Hosting the ceremony will be actor Robert Mesa (Navajo/ Soboba), who most recently played the character James Chee, the first Indigenous doctor on "Grey's Anatomy."

A press release explained, "The awards will proudly recognize and honor Oren Lyons as a Living Legend. Oren, who is 92, is the Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, Onondaga Nation. He is an artist, speaker, author and environmental activist for Indigenous peoples worldwide, and holds the

title of Wisdom Keeper. He has advocated at the United Nations to recognize Indigenous rights and has addressed the United Nations General Assembly. He is also an All-American Lacrosse Hall of Famer and honorary chairman of the Haudenosaunee Nationals Lacrosse program.

"This year's Hall of Fame inductee is Micki Free, a Grammy Award-winner and multiple Native American Music Award-winner of Comanche and Cherokee descent. Originally discovered and managed by Gene Simmons of KISS, Micki was the guitarist in the R&B sensation Shalamar, who boasted mega Platinum hit songs like 'Dancing In The Sheets' from the movie soundtrack 'Footloose,' and won a Grammy for 'Don't Get Stopped In Beverly Hills' from the 'Beverly Hills Cop' soundtrack. Micki is currently on tour supporting his latest album, 'Turquoise Blue,' which features members of The Santana Band, Steve Stevens of Billy Idol and Gary Clark Jr.

"Lifetime Achievement Award recipients are Paul LaRoche of Brule/AIRO and Robert Tree Cody. Paul LaRoche is the founding member of Brulé, the epic Native American rock show. Brulé has won eight Native American Music awards, released 20 CDs and sold over 1 million CDs worldwide. Robert Tree Cody is a five-time Native American Music Award winner, and a multitalented flutist, singer, dancer, actor and educator. He has released 13 albums and is an adopted son of Hollywood actor Iron Eyes Cody.

This year's awards program celebrates and features an overwhelming amount of talent and full-length albums, single recordings and music video releases." Tickets for the awards ceremony are available on Ticketmaster.com. Voting for the Native American Music Awards remains open to the general public until midnight on Friday, Nov. 18, at www.NAMALIVE.com. All winners will be announced live at the event.

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