GENERAL

steve martin planes trains and automobiles

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Steve Martin in the Classic Holiday Comedy: Planes, Trains and Automobiles

When the holiday season rolls around, one of the first films that often pops up on the streaming shelves is *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*. Released in 1987, this beloved comedy blends humor, heart, and a touch of chaos into a story about a man's desperate attempt to get home for Thanksgiving. At the center of this cinematic adventure is Steve Martin, who not only co written the script but also delivered a performance that remains iconic in the annals of American comedy. This article dives deep into the film's creation, its cultural impact, and why Steve Martin's portrayal of the hapless salesman has resonated with audiences for decades.

1. The Genesis of a Holiday Classic

1.1. From Idea to Screen

Steve Martin and writer-director John Hughes had a shared vision: a story about two strangers who must endure a series of mishaps to reach their destination. The idea was simple yet powerful—a man in a hurry to return home, paired with an over enthusiastic sidekick. The film's title, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, encapsulates the three modes of transportation that become the narrative's backbone.

1.2. The Writing Process

Martin and Hughes co wrote the screenplay, drawing inspiration from their own travel experiences. The script's humor is grounded in realistic situations—lost luggage, overbooked flights, and the unpredictable nature of the travel industry. By focusing on the mundane, they crafted a story that felt relatable to anyone who's ever been stuck in a terminal or endured a long layover.

1.3. Casting the Perfect Duo

While Steve Martin was the obvious choice for the lead role of Neal Page, the search for a suitable sidekick was more challenging. Hughes initially considered various actors before settling on John Candy, whose exuberant energy and genuine warmth made him the perfect foil for Martin's character. The chemistry between the two was palpable from the first rehearsal, setting the tone for the film's dynamic.

2. The Characters That Define the Film

2.1. Neal Page – The Reluctant Traveler

Neal Page, played by Steve Martin, is a successful advertising executive who finds himself trapped in a series of travel catastrophes. His character is a study in frustration—his impatience is matched only by his determination to get home for Thanksgiving. Martin's portrayal blends dry wit with a subtle vulnerability, making Neal both a source of comedy and a sympathetic protagonist.

2.2. Del Griffith – The Enthusiastic Companion

John Candy's Del Griffith is the polar opposite of Neal. He is a small town, college educated man who has a penchant for optimism and a love for people. Del's enthusiasm often turns into a source of chaos, but his genuine kindness ultimately helps Neal navigate the obstacles they face.

2.3. Supporting Cast

- Kevin Bacon as a flight attendant who adds a layer of comedic tension.
- Paul Reiser as the eccentric “Bobby” who becomes a memorable side character.
- Richard Jenkins in a brief but memorable role as a taxi driver.

3. Production Highlights

3.1. Filming Locations and Logistics

The film was shot in various locations, including Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport, the bustling streets of New York City, and the quiet suburbs of Illinois. The production team had to coordinate complex logistics to recreate the chaos of travel—especially during the infamous “train scene” where the characters board a freight train in a desperate bid to reach their destination.

3.2. Challenges on Set

One of the most notable challenges was the “train scene” itself. The production team built a full train set, complete with moving cars, to simulate a realistic freight train experience. The scene required careful choreography to maintain safety while delivering the comedic timing that the film demands.

3.3. Soundtrack and Music

Composer John Williams, who would later become famous for his work on the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* franchises, scored the film. His music underscores the emotional beats of the film, from the comedic mishaps to the heartfelt moments when Neal and Del begin to bond.

4. Themes and Cultural Impact

4.1. The Human Need for Connection

At its core, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* is a story about connection. Despite the initial friction between Neal and Del, the two characters learn to understand each other’s perspectives. This theme resonates with audiences, especially during the holiday season when the importance of family and community is amplified.

4.2. The Irony of Modern Travel

The film’s portrayal of modern travel—long lines, lost luggage, and flight delays—predicted the chaos that would become even more prevalent in the 21st century. It’s a comedic critique of the airline and transportation industries that still feels relevant today.

4.3. Steve Martin’s Legacy

Steve Martin’s performance solidified his reputation as a versatile actor capable of blending comedy with genuine emotion. The film showcased his ability to play a character who is both hilarious and relatable, a skill that would define his career in the years that followed.

5. Behind the Scenes: Fun Facts

1. Steve Martin wrote the screenplay with a handwritten draft that included a note: “This is about a guy who’s on his way to his mother’s house for Thanksgiving.”
2. John Candy’s character, Del, was originally named “Delbert” in early drafts, but the name was shortened for comedic effect.
3. The iconic “train scene” was filmed on a set that cost over $500,000 to build.
4. Steve Martin’s signature “smile” was captured in a single take during the “airport scene” that many thought

would have required multiple shots.

5. Kevin Bacon's brief appearance as a flight attendant was originally a larger role, but the script was tightened for pacing.

6. The Film's Enduring Appeal

6.1. Holiday Season Staple

Every year, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* finds its way onto family movie nights. Its blend of humor and heartfelt moments makes it a perfect choice for viewers looking to celebrate the spirit of Thanksgiving.

6.2. Influence on Modern Comedies

Many contemporary comedies credit the film as a major influence. The dynamic of two mismatched characters traveling together has become a staple plot device in modern storytelling.

6.3. Academic Discussions

Film studies courses often analyze the film for its narrative structure and character development. The movie's ability to balance comedy with emotional depth has made it a frequent subject in discussions about the evolution of American cinema.

7. How to Watch Planes, Trains and Automobiles Today

- Streaming services such as Amazon Prime Video and Hulu often carry the film as part of their library.
- Digital purchase or rental is available on Apple iTunes, Google Play, and Vudu.
- Physical copies can be found on DVD and Blu ray, often with bonus features such as behind the scenes footage and director commentary.

Conclusion

Steve Martin's contribution to *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* is more than just a memorable performance; it's a testament to his creative vision and comedic mastery. The film's enduring popularity speaks to its universal themes of travel chaos, human connection, and holiday nostalgia. Whether you're revisiting the movie for the first time or watching it for the last time, the journey of Neal Page and Del Griffith remains a timeless reminder that sometimes, the best stories happen when you're stuck in a cramped airport lounge or a rattling freight train. Happy viewing, and may your own travels be as adventurous—and as heartwarming—as the ones in this classic film.

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