Colton Maurer, an 11-year-old actor, singer and dancer from New Jersey, has a lot in common with Ralphie Parker, the bespectacled character he portrays in a touring production of "A Christmas Story, The Musical."

"I see Ralphie as a very quirky, very outgoing person and when he sets his mind on something he won't quit until he gets what he thinks he needs," Colton said. "He's a little bit of a daydreamer and he just loves the person he is and doesn't try to do what other people tell him to do. And he's a really good friend. Overall, he's just a really good kid.

"He's a lot like me."

The cherished movie classic known for its kooky leg lamp, pink bunny pajamas, cranky department store Santa and a triple-dog-dare to lick a freezing flagpole, comes to life when "A Christmas Story: The Musical," opens a 55-city tour Tuesday at the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center in downtown Appleton. The show, part of the PAC's Broadway season, runs through Nov. 23.

Based on the 1983 film, which in 2012 was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress for being "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant," the show is a holiday classic, a sentiment not lost on the PAC.

"Attending a live performance during the holidays is a tradition for so many families in our community," said Tara Brzozowski, a PAC spokeswoman.

Set in the 1940s, Ralphie, 9, lives in the small town of Hohman, Indiana. With Christmas just weeks away, Ralphie, a few friends and his younger brother, Randy, are window-shopping at a local store when he spies an official Red Ryder carbine-action, 200-shot, range model BB rifle with a compass in the stock. Whew!

"The thread of the story is exactly the same as the movie," director Matt Lenz said. "I think the original writers did a really good job maintaining that really quirky, fun tone of (the movie) but also really kept the heart of it in tact.

"I've been a fan of the movie, as well, but what strikes me with the addition of music is how it enhances parts of the story, the real heart of it. There's some really funny, wacky songs in the show, but there are some really beautiful songs just about family. ... What I'm really appreciating about the show is it's really funny and really fun, quirky and offbeat, but it's also really touching. There's a real beating heart at the center of it. I think it will be fun for fans of the movie. I think there will be a layer of discovery."

Colton is one of 12 child actors, ages 9 to 13, in the production, said Lenz, who has extensive experience working with children through the Broadway Dreams Program, a nonprofit organization offering performing arts education, training, mentoring and career opportunities in musical theater for performing arts students from various economic backgrounds.

"This is the first time I've done a show that's so kid-centric and where they really have to carry entire scenes and the stories," said Lenz, an Illinois native who now lives in New York. "It's been fun. And the challenge, as any director will tell you in any medium, is that half the battle is casting it right. If you get the right people, you're halfway there."

Child actors are accompanied on the road by a family member, which makes their roles a family commitment. That's not lost on Colton's parents, Barbara and Mark Maurer, who alternate traveling with their son when he's on the road.

"It does require a very big commitment all the way around," Barbara Maurer said.

Tutors travel with the show so kids can complete homework sent to them from their respective schools. They'll also take field trips at each stop to learn something about the city they are in.

Colton's first stage performance in elementary school was in "Seussical the Musical." At age 6, he said he knew he'd found his life's passion. So did his mom, she said.

Now, at the ripe old age of 11, he's starring as Ralphie.

"It took me a lot of work," Colton said. "I definitely did many, many, many auditions. And I auditioned for this show a few times before (I got it). I was able to get it the third time. The reason I got most of my bigger parts was from all of my training."

He trained at the Helen Hayes Youth Theater in Nyack, New York, and the Paper Mill Playhouse in Milburn, New Jersey.

Colton, who became a professional actor last year, said he no longer gets butterflies before a performance.

"I've done this a long time and you get to a point you're just not nervous anymore," he said. "That's how I feel now."

— Cheryl Anderson: 920-993-1000, ext. 249, canderson@postcrescent.com; on Twitter @chermanderson

**If you go**

**What:** "A Christmas Story, The Musical"

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 2 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 1 and 6:30 p.m. Sunday

**Where:** Fox Cities Performing Arts Center, downtown Appleton

**Tickets:** Start at $43 at [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com/), foxcitiespac.com, calling 920-730-3760 and at the PAC box office.