

'You'll shoot your eye out': 'A Christmas Story' at Paper Mill is a mixed gift bag



Colton Maurer (center) is one of two young actors alternating in the role of Ralphie in "A Christmas Story: The Musical," playing through Jan. 3 at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn. *(Joan Marcus)*

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By Patrick Maley | For NJ Advance Media

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Adaptations cannot escape comparisons to their source material, and when that source material is as beloved as the 1983 classic holiday film ["A Christmas Story,"](#) the comparison can be daunting.

["A Christmas Story: The Musical"](#) by Joseph Robinette (book), Benj Pasek, and Justin Paul (music and lyrics), now running at The Paper Mill Playhouse, takes on the task of retelling a cultural icon and strains under the weight of its cinematic predecessor. The familiar story retains its charm, but the songs are unmemorable and the sentimentality proves overbearing. The result is an uneven, often unwieldy show.

Most know the show's story well enough (or if they don't, they can catch themselves up during the movie's annual 24-hour Christmas marathon on television): all Ralphie wants for Christmas is Official Red Ryder Carbine-Action 200-shot Range Model Air Rifle. But our hero finds himself beset by adults' conviction that he'll only end up shooting his eye out. As Christmas approaches, his increasingly desperate appeals to his mother, teacher, and the department store Santa Claus meet the same backlash.



The musical [opened to warm reviews on Broadway](#) in the fall of 2012 and went on to garner a Tony nomination for Best Musical before heading out for a national tour. There have since been frequent stagings at regional theaters — the Paper Mill's production runs concurrently with [another one at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre](#). The show's success as a holiday staple is sure to continue; not only does it have a recognizable name, but it is also consistently heartfelt and funny. (It can't be hurting box office receipts that the show also features an ensemble full of ultra-adorable young performers.)

And for those in the market for some jingle-belled razzle-dazzle, "A Christmas Story: The Musical" has much to recommend. Most of the song and dance numbers are accompanied by frenetic choreography (by Mara Newberry Greer) or fun, tongue-in-cheek haminess (see, for instance, Ralphie's dad doing a triumphantly jazzed-up romp celebrating his major award).



The adults are all convinced Ralphie is going to shoot his eye out in "A Christmas Story: The Musical" at the Paper Mill Playhouse. *Joan Marcus*

Yet the songs in "A Christmas Story" seem shoehorned uncomfortably into an already cohesive story. Rather than working organically within the narrative, the musical numbers appear as a kind of jarring commentary on the plot. When Ralphie and his friends meet the school bully, we pause for "When You're a Wimp." When that same crew dares one of their own to lick the frozen flagpole we get "Sticky Situation." In neither instance do the songs enrich the drama or give us a greater sense of the characters.

The actors fare best when not taking themselves too seriously. Chris Hoch gives us an enjoyable blowhard of a father, and Danette Holden is impressive as Miss Shields, taking her overdramatic cues from Ralphie's biased memories. Colton Maurer, who played Ralphie on opening night (he splits the role with Judah Immanuel), confidently carried the proceedings.

Far less successful is the frame story concocted by the creators to justify the film's unseen narrator. Here he's onstage, functioning more as a chorus than a narrator. In the role, Ted Koch does well to express the desires of a young Ralphie. But too often his function is to make the sentimentality — which runs as a steady undercurrent in the film — unmistakably explicit and

cloying. The songs for Ralphie's overworked and underappreciated mother (Elena Shaddow) operate in much the same vein.

In adapting a classic movie, the musical's creators have show too little faith in the emotional integrity of the source material.

A Christmas Story the Musical

★ ★ 1/2

The Paper Mill Playhouse, 22 Brookside Drive, Millburn, through Jan. 3

Tickets: \$37 - \$120. Available [online](#) or by phone, (973) 376-4343