

# Theater review: 'A Christmas Story: The Musical'

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BILLY BUSTAMANTE

Chris Hoch, left, as the Old Man; Colton Maurer as Ralphie.

## THEATER REVIEW

### A CHRISTMAS STORY: THE MUSICAL

Presented by the Paper Mill Playhouse, 22 Brookside Drive, Millburn, through Jan. 3. Directed by Brandon Ivie and choreographed by Mara Newbery Greer. Music and lyrics by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul. Book by Joseph Robinette. With Colton Maurer, Judah Immanuel, Hudson Loverro, Elena Shaddow, Ted Koch, Danette Holden, and Chris Hoch.

Schedule: 7 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, with 1:30 p.m. matinees Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Tickets: \$29 and up. 973-376-4343 or papermill.org

One might argue that "A Christmas Story" needed songs as much as Ralphie needed a fluffy pink bunny costume from Aunt Clara.

But since Ralph Parker and his BB gun have now become part of the Christmas repertoire, along with Scrooge and his ghosts and George Bailey and his guardian angel, you and the family may not mind spending some more time with him over the holidays – even with some throwaway musical garnish added.

Kids, at least, will be happy to know that the main points of the 1983 movie, based on the late Jean Shepherd's stories about growing up in 1940s Indiana, are all present and accounted for in this elaborate production at Paper Mill Playhouse (the 2009 show had a brief Broadway run in 2012).

Lifebuoy soap, check. Chinese restaurant, check. Tongue on flagpole, check.

There's not only a ladies leg lamp, but a whole stageful of them – which light up alluringly during a first act dance routine. Grumpy Santa is here, along with his retinue of department store elves. There are even two live Bumpus hounds.

There are also songs – which are functional, never less than competent, but for the most part strictly exercises from the How to Write a Musical handbook. Mother has a song about being a mother. Ralphie has a song about wanting a Red Ryder B.B. Gun. The Old Man has a song about his Major Award. And on and on. Dutifully, all the plot points get ticked off in number after number, but few of them add anything to the story except length.

Miss Shields, of all people, has the best song. You remember Miss Shields – Ralphie's long-suffering grade-school teacher, who has the thankless task of correcting Christmas themes. In the show's furthest – and best – departure from the movie, she reappears in a second act fantasy sequence as a slinky chanteuse in a speakeasy, wearing a sparkly red and silver dress, surrounded by a chorus of tap-dancing child mobsters in fedoras and pinstripes.

It has barely anything to do with the plot, which is kind of refreshing. Danette Holden has so much evident fun cutting loose in this scene, and delivers her song "You'll Shoot Your Eye Out" with such gusto, aided by kids who are so energetic (this is the best music and dancing in the

show) that you may almost wish you had the option of spending the rest of the second act in The C+ Lounge, with the fast crowd.

Not that most of the other actors here aren't good company. Colton Maurer, as Ralphie (the Mahwah resident alternates with Judah Immanuel on some matinees), is an appealing young actor with a rangy voice, and he does a good job with what he's given to do, most memorably in his big "Ralphie to the Rescue!" number.

Elena Shaddow of Ho-Ho-Kus, last seen at Paper Mill in "The Sound of Music," is nurturing and motherly, and Chris Hoch is a blustery Old Man with a bottomless supply of faux-profanity. His world-weary pain under the bravado is so endearing that he gets the biggest laugh of the evening with a simple three-word line: "Well, that's life." Hudson Loverro is whiny perfection as Randy, the snow-suited kid brother who can't get his arms down (though that particular gag might work better with a more padded snow suit; those who haven't seen the movie might not understand why he keeps holding his arms out).

The play, like the film, has a narrator. Unfortunately, Ted Koch, while perfectly pleasant, is no more like Jean Shepherd than a Chihuahua is like a Bumpus hound. That's a problem, not only because the character happens to be named Jean Shepherd — still a familiar voice to many of us, both from the movie and from his WOR radio days — but because it was Shepherd's droll, confidential, laid-back delivery that made those lines funny in the first place.

While the "Christmas Story" musical does an OK job of re-creating most of the major plot points from the movie, the actual Shepherd flavor turns out to be more elusive.

Part of the charm of the movie "A Christmas Story" was that it seems so casual. Nobody who made it was aware they were making a Christmas classic (in fact, the movie was pretty much ignored when it was released, and only found an audience later). "A Christmas Story: The Musical," on the other hand, is engineered to be a big holiday event and nothing else: Perfect for the Whole Family, Put It On Your Christmas List.

That kind commercial calculation was precisely what Shepherd, the hipster who cut an album with Charles Mingus, was not about. For all the professionalism of this production, "A Christmas Story: The Musical" is a little like the ladies leg lamps that you can buy in novelty stores. It's all too obviously a cash-in enterprise.