

Classic 1970s Christmas Movie about the Depression Hits the Stage with a Holiday ‘Bang Bang’ Flourish from Red Ryder

Culture Watch

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by **Bruce Chadwick**

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Unless you have been living in a cave in the Andes Mountains for the last thirty years, you must have seen the classic holiday movie *A Christmas*

Story on television. In it, precocious kid Ralphie dreams for a Red Ryder BB gun for Christmas and will do just about anything to get it. Ralphie belongs to a family headed by a cantankerous dad, a loving mom and a younger brother who does whatever Ralphie tells him to do. Their neighbors are two loud and obnoxious hound dogs. Ralphie goes to a nice school with a nice teacher and some nice classmates. On the way home each day, he is bullied by a rough, tough street kid named Farkus and his sidekick. People adore this hilarious movie that, in the end, as the snow falls on Christmas eve, is really just about people in a family living in the Mid-West who love each other deeply.

The movie, set in 1940, was turned into a musical several years ago and opened last night at the Paper Mill Playhouse, in Millburn, N.J. It is terrific, wonderful, fabulous. It is more fun (dare I say it) than a Red Ryder automatic BB rifle itself.

Humorist Jean Shepherd, with Leigh Brown and Bob Clark, wrote the movie. It was based on his story *In God We Trust; All Others Pay Cash*. Warner Bros. distributed the NEED movie. It was turned into a musical with book by Joseph Robinette and music and lyrics by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul. The stage play, nicely directed by Brandon Ivie, is true to the movie, minute by minute, right down to the nasty Santa at Higbee's department store and his devilish elves.

The story is simple. Adorable Little Ralphie, who is somewhere between eight and twelve years old, wants a Red Ryder rifle in the worst way but does not think Santa will bring it to him because, as everybody he knows tells him, again and again "You'll shoot your eye out, kid!" There is even a musical number with that title, set in a 1930s speakeasy and it is impressive.

The musical, like the movie, takes us through typical days in Ralphie's life in 1940. He copes with his father, who curses about everything,

especially his furnace, which is always breaking down. He constantly tries to outwit his overly protective mother, browbeat his little brother and avoid being torn apart by the dogs that live next door. He is careful not to break his eyeglasses, eats his meals to please his parents, avoids family fights when he can and goes to sleep each night dreaming about his Red Ryder rifle.

There are several differences between the play and the movie. The film has numerous voiceovers to describe the story, but the play uses an actor to do so. At first, he seems too much a part of the play, walking through the scenes, but after five minutes you do not even notice him. The narration helps inject a lot of humor.

If you have seen the *A Christmas Story* movie, you will adore the musical, but the play is so well done that you will like it even if you have not seen the movie. The musical numbers are pretty good and staged nicely. They help to move along the story and build the characters.

The bits you never expect to work on stage do, and wondrously so. The theater brought in two hound dogs who, on cue, race about the stage, barking and raising hell. Somehow, somehow, they managed to get a flagpole up in the middle of the stage surrounded by snow drifts, for the classic scene where the kid gets his tongue frozen to the pole. They managed to get the famous 'leg lamp' onto the stage, too, and broke it apart smartly when necessary. The attack on Ralphie by the two bullies in the snow covered street, next to the famous fence, are out there, too, with a marvelous scene of Ralphie beating the daylights out of the bully.

What is so tender and glorious about the musical is that, just like the movie, it reminds all of us that our families are weird, strange – pick a name – but we all love each other. This family goes through every catastrophe you can think of and comes out stronger and more loving

than ever. Even the old man, between furnace breakdowns and Chinese Christmas dinners, turns out OK in the end – as most of us do.

Director Ivie gets some solid performances in the play, led by the enormously talented and very funny Colton Maurer as Ralphie. Other stellar work is turned in by Ted Koch as the narrator, Elena Shaddow as the mom, Hudson Loverro as the kid brother, Chris Hoch as the dad, Ryan McInnis as Farkus, Danette Holden as Miss Shields, the school teacher, and Pete and Lily as the hounds.

A Christmas Story is an All American play about an All-American family, warts and all, at Christmas, when dreams come true and Red Ryder BB gun shoot like BB guns never did before.

See this play! Get a Red Ryder rifle! Beat up a bully!

Oh, you can buy one of those zany 'leg lamp' yourself at the Paper mill gift shop (\$60, stocking included).

PRODUCTION: The play is produced by the Paper Mill Playhouse. Sets; Walt Spangler, Costumes: Elizabeth Hope Clancy, Lighting: E. Mitchell Dana, Sound: Randy Hansen. Choreography is by Mara Newbery Greer. The play is directed by Brandon Ivie. **It runs through January 3, 2016.**

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