

Next Projection

A Short Christmas Wish List

2

BY DENNIS SEULING ON NOVEMBER 30, 2015 SPECIAL FEATURE



From left to right: Vincenzo Faruolo (Schwartz), Cotton Maurer (Ralphie) and Gabriel Reis (Flick)

“A Christmas Story: The Musical,” the current production at Millburn’s Paper Mill Playhouse, is based on the 1983 motion picture that has become an annual round-the-clock TV marathon. The musical had a brief Broadway run at the end of 2012. The Paper Mill production will run through January 3.

Narrated by Jean Shepard (Ted Koch), the action takes place in the winter of 1940. Nine-year-old Ralphie (Cotton Maurer) desperately wants a Red Ryder BB rifle for Christmas. But it takes a good bit of psychology to plant the idea in his parents’ mind, as almost every adult he encounters warns, “You’ll shoot your eye out.”



From left to right: Chris Hoch (The Old Man), Cotton Maurer (Raphie), Elena Shadow (Mother), and Hudson Loverro (Randy)

As the days lead up to Christmas, we meet Ralphie’s brother, Randy (Hudson Loverro); their dad, referred to as “The Old Man” (Chris Hoch), ever-patient mom (Elena Shaddow); neighborhood bully Scut Farkus (Ryan McInnes); Ralph’s teacher, Miss Shields (Danette Holden); and pals Schwartz (Vincenzo Rafuolo) and Flick (Gabriel Reis).

Like the movie, the play is episodic, with several well-remembered gags from the movie: Ralphie’s father’s frequent tirades of off-color language (rendered on stage, as in the movie, by nonsense syllables), a neighbor’s dogs’ instinctive dislike of the Old Man, Mom’s clever way of getting Randy to eat, the coonskin-capped nine-

year-old villain, a cantankerous department store Santa, a double dog dare that results in a sticky situation, an aunt's questionable Christmas gift, and a most unique lamp, won in a crossword puzzle mail-in competition.

The songs by Benj Pasek and Juston Paul are serviceable devices to relate characters' thoughts or comment on the action. They're tuneful and upbeat, if unmemorable. Mara Newbery Greer's choreography livens up many numbers and includes a fantasy sequence featuring a rousing tap ensemble.

The two young leads are exceptional and contribute considerably to the show's energy and sense of fun. Mr. Maurer's Ralphie comes across as a real kid, rather than a show biz version, though he sure knows how to belt out a song and carry a scene. Mr. Loverro is a triple threat; his acting is laced with knowing bits of humor, as required, and he is very funny wailing as he does battle with a snow suit. The ensemble of youngsters is also first-rate, as they dance, sing, and play assorted characters.

Mr. Hoch as the Old Man has the biggest adult role, a lovable blowhard with a bark far worse than his bite. It's hard to keep the right balance with this character, since much of the play's comedy either emanates from him or bounces off him. When the furnace acts up for the umpteenth time, the Old Man takes it personally and, tools in hand, heads down to the basement resolute and determined, the way a soldier would advance on the enemy.

Ms. Shaddow is a sympathetic Mother managing two young boys and a husband who often acts like a child. In her one solo number, "What a Mother Does," she enumerates her duties. This is a woman who loves her family and doesn't regard her role as anything but what is expected of her. Remember, the play takes place over 70 years ago, well before women in large numbers pursued careers and thought of a life beyond their family.

Audience members of all ages will enjoy two special cast members — Pete and Lily, who play the neighbor's bloodhounds that bedevil the Old Man at every opportunity. Their trainer, William Berloni, adopted them from a rescue group and trained them on a Connecticut farm. They even have a specially staged curtain call.

Under Brandon Ivie's direction, "A Christmas Story: The Musical" is a pleasant show for families at holiday time. The caliber of the production ranks with many Broadway musicals. Walt Spangler's scenic design and Elizabeth Hope Clancy's costumes recreate a nostalgic, bygone era.

"A Christmas Story: The Musical" will run through January 3. Performances are Wednesday at 7 P.M., Thursday at 1:30 and 7 P.M., Friday at 7 P.M., Saturday at 1:30 and 7 P.M., and Sunday at 1:30 and 7 P.M. Tickets start at \$29 and may be purchased by calling (973) 376-4343, at the Paper Mill Playhouse box office at 22 Brookside Drive in Millburn, New Jersey, or online at www.PaperMill.org.
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