Review

A Christmas Story from Tennessee Repertory Theatre

By: Jeffrey Ellis, *Broadway World*

November 25, 2010

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Theater-goers in Nashville have a new holiday tradition to embrace this season with Tennessee Repertory Theatre's wonderfully staged and acted revival of last season's critically acclaimed stage adaptation of *A Christmas Story.* Adapted by Philip Grecian and based on the iconic 1983 movie script by Jean Shepherd, Leigh Brown and Bob Clark, all the beloved characters and their wacky situations (yep, that famous fishnet-stocking-clad lamp *aka* "a major award" is onstage) are brought to life – and, rest assured, you'll have even more fun than you would hunkered down in front of the TV.

A Christmas Story is now a time-honored holiday classic, and you are certain to leave the theater happier, your spirits lighter, after spending a couple of hours in the company of young, bespectacled Ralphie Parker (played with warmth and sincerity by Samuel Whited, the only 40-something-year-old man in town who could believably pull off the character) and his friends and family. The Old Man, Mother, Randy, Schwartz, Flick, Miss Shields and even neighborhood bully Scut Farkas, are all on hand for the fun and frivolity - even the Bumpases' 785 hounds are brought to life by director Lauren Shouse's seven-member ensemble, which features some of Nashville's most accomplished actors.

The plot of the Christmas-themed comedy closely follows the film version of Shepherd's tale of his boyhood in 1940s Hammond, Indiana and his universal tale of dreaming of the perfect gift: "an official Red Ryder carbine-action 200-shot range model air rife with a compass in the stock, and this thing which tells time." Despite the constant and seemingly ceaseless warnings to Ralphie (from just about everyone) that "you'll shoot your eye out, kid!" the boy shows grit and determination as he works to make sure he'll find the gift under the Christmas tree.

Designed by Tennessee Rep's Gary C. Hoff, the brilliantly conceived and executed set features all of the settings from the film, and the production's design aesthetic is made all the more authentic by Trish Clark's impressive costume design and Michael Barnett's evocative lighting design. Shouse's direction is seamless and moves the plot along at a quick clip as the story is told in an almost cinematic manner. While there's not a lot to distinguish Shouse's direction from that of Rene Dunshee Copeland's original direction of Tennessee Rep's production, she delivers a show that is nonetheless appealing and entertaining and certain to delight audiences throughout the run at TPAC's Andrew Johnson Theatre.

Save for one actor, all of the members of last year's acting ensemble are on-hand for the revival and they all give genuinely funny and heartfelt performances. Andrew Kanies, playing younger brother Randy, may well take top acting honors in this year's production with his effortless and altogether wonderful performance, but everyone in the show gives a performance that is his equal. Eric D. Pasto-Crosy, as Schwartz, again proves his versatility with a wonderfully nuanced performance that perfectly captures the boy's charm and wonder. David Wilkerson, as Flick (yes, that Flick: the one whose tongue gets stuck to a freezing flagpole in the schoolyard), is winningly engaging as the inept boy who more often than not is the recipient of bully Scut Farkas' beatings. And Shane Bridges is terrific as Scut (and in the cross-dressing role of Esther Jean), just as menacing and threatening as any 10-year-old boy could possibly be.

Jamie Farmer is delightfully cast once again as the mother, exuding warmth and maternal concern for her boys throughout her performance, and showing her versatility with a bevy of other roles in the piece. She's paired this year with the always charming David Compton, cast as The Old Man (the role originally assayed by Jeff Boyet in the 2009 production). Farmer and Compton work well together and Compton effectively portrays The Old Man's temper tantrums with well-timed humor. And Whited is simply ideal as Ralphie, capturing the boy's temperament with an easy grace that is to be expected given his sterling acting resume.