

REVIEW

Tennessee Rep delivers nostalgic 'Christmas Story'

Written By: **Amy Stumpfl** | For The Tennessean

December 13, 2011

In this age of online shopping and overpriced game systems, the holidays seem to have lost some of their mystique. Gone are the days of carefully leafing through the old Sears and Roebuck catalog, urgently searching for just the right toy.

Perhaps that's why Jean Shepherd's 1983 comedy *A Christmas Story* became such a hit with audiences. Set in 1940 in the fictional town of Hohman, Ind., it's a wonderful slice of Americana that harkens back to the simple joys of childhood.

And Tennessee Repertory Theatre succeeds in capturing all that gentle humor with its current revival of *A Christmas Story* — playing through Dec. 22 in TPAC's Johnson Theater.

For the uninitiated (how could you miss the annual movie marathon on Turner Broadcasting?), *A Christmas Story* tells the story of 9-year-old Ralph Parker and his quest for that most coveted Christmas gift: "an official Red Ryder carbine-action 200-shot range model air rifle with a compass and this thing which tells time built right into the stock."

Make no mistake about it, the live show captures all the fun of the movie and then some. The hideous leg lamp, the pink bunny-footed pajamas and even the "triple dog dare you" scene with the poor kid sticking his tongue to the frozen flagpole.

Ralphie's rich imagination comes to life in some of the show's funniest bits, as he repeatedly saves the day with his trusty air rifle. I especially liked the one where he takes on three bumbling bandits armed with water pistols and rubber daggers.

There's also an element of audience participation, complete with some lucky folks being selected to pay a visit to Santa, and some carefully orchestrated sound effects. Such additions make the show feel a bit longer than you might expect. But true Ralphie devotees are not likely to mind.

Actors play multiple roles

Having one actor portray not only young Ralphie, but also present the show's narration as the adult Ralphie is quite an undertaking. But Samuel Whited carries it off with style, easily switching gears between the oh-so-dramatic voiceover and the fidgety exploits of his younger self.

Peter Vann and David Wilkerson are perfectly cast as Ralphie's friends Schwartz and Flick, and Eric D. Pasto-Crosby is terrific as the dreaded bully Scut Farkas (as well as Ralphie's flirtatious classmate, Esther Jane). All three gentlemen fill out the ensemble, playing various cowboys, bad guys and even the Bumpuses' dogs.

David Compton is hilarious as Ralphie's father (aka The Old Man), but gets some of the evening's biggest laughs as Ralphie's teacher, Miss Shields. Jamie Farmer is lovely as Ralphie's mother, and Andrew Kanies is excellent as kid brother Randy.

Director Lauren Shouse does a fine job of reviving this popular comedy, thanks in large part to Gary C. Hoff's efficient set design, Trish Clark's charming costumes and Michael Barnett's evocative lighting.

No holiday celebration would be complete without *A Christmas Story*, so catch it before it's gone.