

Review: 'Christmas Story the Musical' laughs and loves in Aurora



By **Chris Jones** · Contact Reporter

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A metallic flagpole has been set up in the lobby of the [Paramount Theatre](#) in Aurora and at Sunday night's opening of "A Christmas Story — The Musical" it was quite the magnet for tongues.

I stood and watched for a while, wondering if this savvy, lickable display had been cleared with the local health department, but mostly pondering what people will do these days in public when someone always has a camera. Had there been pink bunny suits on the floor, people would readily have stepped into them. Had there been a lamp composed of one shapely leg, it would have been caressed and recorded. And had there been a few Red Ryder carbine-action air rifles? Well, we don't want to go there. Let us just note that the 1940s, as remembered by writer Jean Shepherd, were saner times when it comes to youth and weaponry.

Prescient, nonetheless.

What the line for a sticking-your-tongue-out-on-a-pole selfie really proved, of course, was the level of advance knowledge of what transpires in "A Christmas Story." That's thanks to the back-to-back TBS and TNT exposure of the 1983 movie, as based on the autobiographical musings of Shepherd, the scion of a small Indiana town not unlike Hammond, and the son of working-class parents who were too busy raising him and his kid brother to worry about telling the boys they were loved, love being something you demonstrated rather than articulated.

The Bob Clark movie, which starred Peter Billingsley, has a very distinctive tone — one part Shepherd's nostalgia for a vanished small-town America, one part quirky cynicism, as manifest most deliciously by the child-hating Santa. The movie thus appeals to traditionalists and those sick and tired of George Bailey, and thus has become the most golden of cable Christmas geese, never fully cooked.

This newish musical version, directed in Aurora by Nick Bowling, has its origins in Chicago in 2011. I loved this exceptionally well-constructed show when I first saw it at the Chicago Theatre, admiring both the score (which is by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, a terrific pair of young songwriters) and the emotional honesty of the piece, even though it closely tracks the film. There is one particular song, "Somewhere Hovering Over Indiana," wherein a chorus of kids wait for their Hoosier Santa, that is a really fabulous lyrical composition, not least because it catches the specificity of our notions of Santa — if you live in northwest Indiana, you think of Santa flying up from Evansville. The NORAD Santa tracker is one thing; your own state — your own place and time — is what really matters.

I'm also partial to "What a Mother Does," a beautiful ballad in tribute to 1940s moms — heck, all moms of all decades.

Thereafter, the original Chicago production moved to Broadway and now has become more widely available to theaters across the country. Unsurprisingly, the Paramount snapped up the title.

Regular readers will know by now that the Paramount stages Broadway-scaled productions with full orchestras — here, designer Jeffrey D. Kmiec has created an emotionally resonant two-story house for Ralphie and his family and you see them go for a drive around town in a full-size automobile. The production values are, in fact, more expansive than those of the original staging. At one point, a huge neon sign flies in for the final scene in the Chop Suey House, and you'd have thought the audience was about to go crazy with sheer delight. Mercifully, Bowling dials back on the "Fa-ra-ra-ras," wisely pointing the scene more to one family taking care of another family. As far as one can.

In other places, I found the new production a bit shticky, a tad too broadly played. It's a tricky line — the characters are drawn as comedic types and people expect to laugh at the set-pieces, but "A Christmas Story" always needs one leg (with or without a lampshade) planted in the realm of people who actually could and did exist. Even the fantasy sequences like "Ralphie to the Rescue!" need grounding in the limits of a kid's imagination. Ralphie's Old Man is a comic buffoon, as are all our old men, but he can't go too far.

In some spots, especially the big production numbers choreographed by Rhett Guter and whenever anyone does a take at the audience on a potential laugh line, the show pushes too hard and tries too much, forgetting that "A Christmas Story" is at its heart a small story about an ordinary Indiana street and a 9-year-old whose aspirations are not much different from other kids down the block.

Still, none of this much mattered to the audience of a thousand or more Sunday, all clearly loving the show on view. Young Michael Harp delivers an ebullient Ralphie, Danni Smith sings beautifully as his mom (the music, directed by Tom Vendrafreddo, is superbly performed throughout) and Michael Accardo embraces the laughs as his Old Man. The most successful performance flows from Philip Earl Johnson, who plays Jean Shepherd himself, the frame of the show.

People think "A Christmas Story" is a family show. Now that I've seen it three times, I've become convinced that kids don't fully get it. This is a show about a Christmas memory, told with the understanding of how fast kids grow and parents decline, and how we never know in the moment how precious time together will turn out to be.

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Review: 'Christmas Story The Musical'

3 STARS

When: Through Jan. 3

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd.

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$41-\$56 at 630-896-6666 or paramountaurora.com

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