

‘A Christmas Story’ is a wonderful gift from Sierra Madre Playhouse



Photo by Gina Long

Andrea Stradling, Julian Moser, Richard Van Slyke and Marshall Gluck, from left, star in “A Christmas Story” by Sierra Madre Playhouse.

By **FRANCES BAUM NICHOLSON** |

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Since 1983 the film “A Christmas Story” has been a part of many a family’s holiday traditions.

Based on the writings of Jean Shepherd, it offered nostalgia for a simpler time in small-town America. There, a boy in the midst of the usual drama of growing up, focuses on convincing either Santa or his parents to bring him the one thing he wants most for Christmas: a Red Ryder Carbine Action 200-shot Range Model air rifle with a compass in the stock and “this thing which tells time.”

More recently the tale has become a play, based not just on the film but on other nostalgic Shepherd's writings. Done right, it can have the same charm as the film in a more immediate format.

Now at Sierra Madre Playhouse comes a chance to see it done right. From gifted child performers to solid and artful direction, through a remarkable-for-SMP set (considering the size of their stage) and a unified sense of ensemble, there is much to enjoy in what even the theater's artistic director pegs as "one of the most ambitious plays" they have ever mounted.

The children in the production, and there are seven strong character parts for young people in the play, are double-cast. In the version I attended, Ralphie was played by Julian Moser, whose earnestness and subtlety of character carried the production in impressive fashion. Myles Hutchinson and Jude Gomez were equally convincing as Ralphie's two pals, Daisy Koprowski, as the class brain, and particularly Xochitl Gomez-Deines, as the girl with eyes for Ralphie, provided that intriguing underlay of pending adolescence. Gideon Cooney Lobano, required mostly to be menacing, proved imposing as the school bully. Marshall Gluck makes nice work of Ralphie's somewhat odd little brother.

But to lay the success of this production entirely at the feet of its talented youth would be to miss several other performances of note. As Ralphie's imposing, world-weary teacher, and as the store employee serving as Santa's definitely disenchanted elf, Danon Dastugue finds the neat balance between humor and bitterness which makes both characters highly entertaining.

Richard Van Slyke makes Ralphie's father's obsessions and character quirks as naturally warm as the tale permits, while Andrea Stradling proves the epitome of the Midwestern, midcentury mom. Jackson Kendall gives the adult Ralph looking back on this storyline a lot more character than that of simple narrator, providing the glue which holds the piece together.

All these fine folks operate in this episodic tale on Charles Erven's remarkable, and impressively flexible set, which lighting designer Derek Jones transforms, along with portions of SMP's audience space, into something bigger than one thought could fit into this size of theater.

The costumes courtesy of Shon LeBlanc, long known for his sense of period, round out the visuals in important ways. Still, the ensemble, the flow and movement of the piece, and the unified spark which push this show to its potential land solidly at the feet of director Christian Lobano. His affection for this show and his understanding of the need to pacing tight make the whole enterprise work.

So, if you are looking for something to watch to get you into the holiday mood, but have had enough of "A Christmas Carol" to last you awhile, why not try this show? It's a change of pace, it's very well done, and it will leave you thinking warm thoughts about the spirit, and the silliness, of this time of year. Children are more than welcome, though very young ones may find its humor goes over their heads.

Frances Baum Nicholson has been reporting on the Los Angeles area theater scene for more than 35 years. To read more of her reviews, go to www.stagestruckreview.com.

A Christmas Story

Rating: 4 stars

When: Through Dec. 31, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2:30 p.m. Sundays, with added performances at 8 p.m. Dec. 14, 19-21.

Where: Sierra Madre Playhouse, 87 W. Sierra Madre Blvd., Sierra Madre.

Tickets: \$36 general, \$33 seniors (65+), \$21 youth to age 21

Suitability: Family friendly, but a lot of dialogue for little ones

Running time: 2 1/2 hrs., with a 15-min. intermission

Information: 626-355-4318 or www.sierramadreplayhouse.org

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