

**'A Christmas Story' newest holiday treat**

*Fort Worth Star-Telegram (TX) - December 2, 2001*

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- Edition: FINAL
- Section: NEWS
- Page: 27
- Readability: 7-9 grade level (Lexile: 1060)

Move over, Best Christmas Pageant Ever and Miracle on 34th Street. There's another awww-inspiring holiday play under the tree.

Theatre Arlington has unwrapped the regional premiere of A Christmas Story, a warm and witty slice of mid-America based on humorist Jean Shepherd's memories of his ninth Christmas in a small Indiana town. With more familiar holiday fare becoming a bit shopworn, this is a breath of fresh air.

The time is 1938 - a year before Hitler invaded Poland and three years before Pearl Harbor. No television, no Internet, no video games. A fun evening is journeying to the A&P to pick out a turkey. Shepherd's autobiographical character, Ralphie, yearns to have a Red Ryder BB gun, and he mounts an elaborate campaign to persuade his parents to give him one for Christmas. But Mom, Dad and every other adult on the planet offer the same response: "You'll put your eye out."

Ralphie's 9-year-old imagination concocts various fantasies about how he will fight off bandits with the longed-for air rifle. These figments obviously captured the fancy of Philip Grecian, who adapted the Shepherd memoir to the stage with an eye on the 1983 movie version that starred Darren McGavin and Melinda Dillon as Ralphie's parents.

Theatre Arlington director B.J. Cleveland also warms to the fantasy scenes, which are choice moments in this production.

Cleveland scored his first coup when he found a nucleus of fine juvenile players. Pearson Browne anchors that contingent as Ralphie. He gets solid support from Christian Genco and Garrett Greene as his school chums and from Courtney Greene as a girl in pursuit of Ralphie, who couldn't be less interested. Zachary Soliz, one of the youngest cast members, is charming as Ralphie's bladder-challenged kid brother.

The common device of using the adult "Ralph" to narrate the action is exploited uncommonly well here. Adapter Grecian deserves applause, as does actor Steven Morris, who turns in a splendid performance despite tripping over one tongue-twister line during Friday's opening show.

As Ralphie's parents, Richard Chiarello and Melanie Mason accomplish the difficult task of portraying stereotypes without making them cartoons. Chiarello has boisterous fun with a running gag involving the neighbor's dogs, while Mason opts for droll reactions throughout. It's a nice balance.

Similar symmetry exists on Jorge Lopez-Aguado's living room-kitchen set, which converts to a classroom via the handy device of rolling out a desk, a chair and a teacher.

Perry Stewart, (817) 390-7712

A Christmas Story

Through Dec. 22; 7:30 p.m.

Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays, 2 and

8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 5:30

p.m. Sundays; at Theatre Arlington,

305 W. Main St., Arlington

Tickets: \$16-\$18

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- Index terms: THEATER; THEATER REVIEW
- Record: 11067413
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