

The rush to be 'Ralphie'

By Jack Helbig | Daily Herald Correspondent

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Some people get the theater bug early.

Twelve-year-old Gabriel Harder, who plays the lead in Noble Fool's production of "A Christmas Story," opening Saturday in St. Charles, got bitten when he was 8.

"I had started at my church," says Harder, who lives near Elgin. "We did a lot of Christmas skits. Also, I am home schooled, and our home-school group did a play. I tried out for it and got the lead."

From that moment on, theater became Harder's major extracurricular interest. He performed in children's theater in Minnesota, where his family lived at the time. When his family moved to the Elgin area, he took his interest in theater with him.

It was while Harder was performing as the Artful Dodger in the Noble Fool Theater Youth Ensemble that he heard about the auditions for the lead in "A Christmas Story."

"The director of 'Oliver!,' Tracy Whiteside, encouraged me to try out for the show," Harder says. In addition to being Harder's director, Whiteside had taught an acting class Harder had taken. But stepping from a youth ensemble show to the Noble Fool main stage show was like stepping from the minor leagues into the majors. And getting into "A Christmas Story" was a longer and harder process than Harder had faced in the past.

The role Harder was trying for was that of Ralphie, the central character in the stage version of Jean Shepherd's classic 1983 film of the same name, itself adapted from Shepherd's writings about growing up in northern Indiana.

"Ralphie is a 9-year-old who really, really, really wants a BB gun for Christmas," Harder says. "And every time he turns around someone tells him he will shoot his eyes out. And all these things happen to him; his friend gets his tongue stuck to a flagpole in winter; and he has all these fantasies." Ralphie's memories and fantasies make up a good deal of the tale Shepherd tells in "A Christmas Story." So the folks at Noble Fool needed to be absolutely certain about the actor who plays Ralphie.

"They had us read portions of the script," Harder says. "They would switch us off in different roles. And then little by little they would tell people they could leave. Each time they told some actors to go home I was like, 'No, please please please don't say go home now.' And then it came down to three boys and I was like 'Please, please.' And then I was the last boy there and I was reading with a bunch of grown ups."

Shepherd's story involves memories of both children and adults from his childhood, including his father, who, for a time, was famously obsessed with a lamp in the shape of a showgirl's leg, and his mother, who despised that lamp.

Harder landed the role. And from that point on the real work began.

"Last night we practiced from 5 o'clock to 10 o'clock at night," Harder says. "We practice three hours on weekdays and five hours on Saturdays and Sundays." But Harder isn't complaining. "It has been a lot of work but it has been awesome," Harder says. "It is a lot of fun working with adults. Some of them have been acting for 20 years or more. You can learn a lot from them. There is a lot of joking around backstage and the older actors tell about their funny experiences in plays."

Does Harder have a favorite scene in the show?

Without blinking an eye Harder says, "I love the scene when Ralphie is daydreaming about his BB gun. I come out dressed as a cowboy and I have a shoot out with the desperado Black Bart."

That is just one of the many quirky, charming scenes from Jean Shepherd's charming holiday comedy.

"A Christmas Story" opens Saturday, Nov. 15, at the Pheasant Run Resort Main Stage Theater, 4051 E. Main, St. Charles. For tickets call the box office at (630) 584-6342 or visit ticketmaster.com.