THEATER REVIEWS

A Christmas Story

Through Dec 27, Wed to Fri
8 p.m., Sat 5 & 8:30 p.m., and Sun 2:30 p.m. | 3 STARS
Noble Fool Theatricals, Pheasant Run Resort & Spa, 4051 E Main St., St. Charles,
630 584-6342 or noblefool.org
Tickets: $27-$38

By **Christopher Richard**
Contributing writer

Chinese food. BB guns. Scandalous appliances. If all this somehow adds up to holiday cheer, it can only mean one thing — *A Christmas Story* is on stage in St. Charles.

The classic story centers around the exploits of Ralphie, a 9-year-old boy growing up in 1940s Indiana, who wants nothing more for Christmas than an Official Red Ryder Carbine-Action Two-Hundred-Shot Range Model Air Rifle. He and his kid brother Randy find themselves in all sorts of predicaments, fittingly exacerbated through the eyes of a child. Most people are familiar with the story of Ralphie and his almighty quest for a BB gun from the 1983 movie, adapted by Jean Shepherd from his short stories. (Though, if you're not well acquainted, TBS runs it 24 hours straight every Christmas...and it's not to be missed). Through Saturday, Dec. 27, Noble Fool Theatricals at Pheasant Run Resort presents the stage adaptation.

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For any screen-to-stage leaps, directors have to contend with the memories (sometimes iron-clad) that audiences have of the film, and therefore must find ways to make the story seem both familiar and new at the same time. John Gawlik's production alternately hits and misses this mark.

As on the screen, an adult Ralphie (John Gray) narrates the events as they unfold. Gray carries a likeable presence as he presides over the many escapades of his younger self. What he lacks, however, is the irony-free tone Sheperd so famously gave the cinematic treatment. Gray seems to be amused by himself as a child, whereas Sheperd put himself back in the life-or-death frame-of-mind of a 9-year-old.

For audiences to take heart to the story, we need to experience the events through Raphie's eyes, not those a grown-up looking back and chuckling on his youthful misadventures. Unfortunately, this keeps audiences at a polite distance.

Faring better are Julie Ganey and Tom McElroy as Ralphie's parents, finding honest but exaggerated portrayals that fit comfortably into a 9-year-old's view of his folks.

The true stars of the show are child actors Gabriel Harder and Michael Etzkorn as Ralphie and Randy, respectively. With no airs of pretention or over-wrought precision, these two boys are the real thing — honest little actors that you genuinely care about watching. Frankly, Etzkorn is hilarious, and Harder makes for a thoroughly spirited, young protagonist.

Gawlik and scene designer John Stark help move the action nicely when it's kept inside the family's delightful cozy bungalow. Movie sequences from Ralphie's imagination and a game of cat-and-mouse between the parents are especially delightful to watch.

Yet some of the actual film's more iconic scenes — in Ralphie's classroom, in the car, or in the department store, for instance — seem relegated off to the sides here, almost like an after-thought, and they don't carry the weight or the humor they might otherwise.

Still, the poignancy and wit of Shepherd's writing carries the show and makes for an entertaining evening, even if this stage adaptation doesn't quite live up to its full potential.

Mame

Through Dec 21, Wed 1:30 p.m., Thur 1:30 & 8 p.m., Fri 8:30 p.m., Sat 5 & 8:30 p.m., and Sun 2 & 6 p.m. | 3 STARS
Drury Lane Theatre, 100 Drury Ln., Oakbrook Terrace,
630 530-0111 or drurylaneoakbrook.com
Tickets: $22-$42

By **Christopher Richard**
Contributing writer

From the first bold and brash trumpet call of the overture, it's clear that Drury Lane

Theatre's new production of *Mame* promises to be delightful and extravagant.

Starting with the largest orchestra at the theatre in recent history, Drury Lane has pulled out all the stops for this classic from the golden age of musical theatre, never once lagging in energy through the final note of William Osetek's spirited revival.

Chronicling the adventures of a young orphaned boy and his eccentric aunt, the story started as a 1955 novel by Patrick Dennis, *Auntie Mame*. The novel was turned into a play and movie of the same name by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee (*Inherit the Wind*), and Jerry Herman (*Hello, Dolly!*) was later brought in to score this musical version.

Despite being seldom produced in recent years, the show boasts a score that even non-theatre aficionados will recognize. Murmurs rippled through the crowd at a recent matinee as theatre-goers enjoyed classic numbers like "Open a New Window," "We Need a Little Christmas," "If He Walked Into My Life" and, of course, the infectious title number.

Starring in the title role is Barbara Robertson, a staple of Chicago theatre. Her Mame is impulsive, bawdy, and yet effortlessly enduring — a woman you can be exasperated by and in love with at the same time. Not only does she land Mame's flamboyant moments, but she also infuses the 11 o'clock number, "…Life," with a deep sense of passion and regret. It is hard to imagine a more compelling leading lady.

Opposite Robertson is fellow Chicago stalwart, Alene Robertson, as best friend Vera Charles. Imagine a mature Karen Walker of *Will & Grace* with a killer belt and you'll have a sense of the comedic timing Robertson brings to the role.

Together, their "Bosom Buddies" brings down the house, so much so that it could be even more delightful if they rotated roles every once in a while.

The show's third star is Brian Sidney Bembridge's dazzling and ever-changing scene design. Just when you think Drury Lane has run out of space backstage — it is one of the oldest theatres in the western suburbs — another gorgeous and perfect period piece appears as if out of thin air.

Other performances by Ryan Reilly as an adult Patrick and David Kortemeier as Beauregard Burnside are enchanting, both developing a rich relationship with Mame.

Since the show lands the big moments with style and confidence, it's unfortunate the quieter moments aren't as solid. Director Osetek finds the rhythm of the light-hearted scenes nicely, but never lets the more sentimental ones register as fully. If the more tender dialogue was given some breathing room, it would help to let the audience become more emotionally invested in the story.

Still, this is one qualm in an otherwise bright and breezy production. Those heading to Drury Lane for an elaborate and engaging musical classic will not find themselves disappointed. More likely than not, they'll find themselves humming all the way home.

Fall Follies

Theatre in the western suburbs is changing with the seasons. From Oak Park to the Fox Valley, theaters around town have readied new fall schedules—and they're looking for an audience.

When it comes to live theatre in the western suburbs, your options are seemingly endless. More than two dozen professional and community theaters have spent years — some have spent 60 and then some — establishing themselves as premier entertainment venues in our neck of the woods.From musical theatre to gripping dramas to slaptick comedies and children's shows, west suburban theaters offer something for everyone in the family, and one very special aspect all of those theaters in the city can't offer—proximity. These theatrical wells are right in your backyard. All you have to do is pick one and enjoy the show.

Of course, west suburban theater-owners know how wide the selection and easy the decision is for theater-goers. That's where the shows come in. Seasonal line-ups are the lifeblood of area theaters, letting audiences know who's staging the latest Broadway smash and who's reviving a Shakespearean tragedy. And fall is arguably the busiest time of year, when theaters unveil their newest schedules and look forward to the coming season of big audiences and record ticket sales. In an effort to steer you towards your next ticket purchase, the Insider offers its annual guide to Fall Theatre, breaking down which west suburban theaters are showing the shows you want to see.

Check out the following listings for spotlights on more than 25 area venues and their corresponding fall line-ups.

WEST SUBURBAN THEATERS

BIG NOISE THEATRE COMPANY
In the colorful and candy-coated tradition of Hairspray, this division of the Winnetka Theatre kicks off its new season with Beehive, a throwback to girl groups and soloists of the 1960s. The schedule hits a bit more tender note with the funny On Golden Pondand a Stephen Sondheim musical based on the work of Georges Seurat.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
On Golden Pond, Jan 16 to Feb 8
Sunday in the Park, April 24 to May 17

CIRCLE THEATRE
This fall, catch Jeff Daniels in Turn of the Centuryat the Goodman Theatre (See Page 24) or see one of the hit plays he penned, Escanaba In Love, at Circle Theatre. This light-hearted comedy is succeeded by some heavier fare, including The Who's Tommy.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, Through Feb 1
A Perfect Wedding, March 18 to May 3
Tommy, May 13 to July 19
Cat On A Hot TinRoof, Aug 5 to Oct 4
The Pajama Game, Nov 11 to Jan 24, 2010

DRURY LANE THEATRE

Several classics of Broadway are taking up residence from September to March at Drury Lane, beginning with a comedy of errors set in the frolicking 40s. Auntie Mame raises her nephew unconventionally in a musical smash and a love story ultimately finds life in wartorn Saigon, 1975.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
Mame, Through Dec 21
Miss Saigon, Dec 31 to March 8

FIRST FOLIO THEATRE
Officially changing its name this season from First FolioShakespeare Festival, this Oak Brook favorite has not lost sight of its roots with the Bard. Look for the year's caper next summer when Macbeth comes to the Mayslake Mansion.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
Design For Living, Jan 28 to March 1
A Moon For the Misbegotten, April 1 to May 3
Macbeth, July 8 to Aug 9

GROVE PLAYERS
Comedy takes centerstage for the Grove Players with its new schedule.Composed of a bawdy musical comedy, a hilarious glimpse into anItalian-American family and an amusing look at family values in the 50s, this season is designed for the family that laughs together.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
Over the River and Through the Woods, Feb 8 to 17
Come Blow Your Horn, April 24 to May 3

MARRIOTT THEATRE
In addition to Drury Lane and Noble Fool, Marriott is one of the places to go in the suburbs for musical theatre. This year, songs are bursting at the seams with The Full Monty. Two kids' shows follow.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
All Shook Up, Through Dec 7
Disney's Aladdin, Through Dec 30
The Bowery Boys, Dec 10 to Feb 15

NEW WORLD REPERTORY THEATER
Fall into comedy in December as the New World Rep welcomes families of all ages and sizes out toDowners Grove for a little interactive improv. Formal productions are to follow, with an intriguing love triangle and a mish-mash of children's fables.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
Extreme Holiday Makeover, Dec 5 to 28
Betrayal By Harold Pinter, Feb 21 to March 21
The Fabled Forest, April 4 & 11

NOBLE FOOL THEATRICALS
Every month this fall, theatergoers can see something dramatically different at Noble Fool. Two mystical and haunting shows begins a season to feature a handful of plays that will keep you rolling through the holidays.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
Put the Nuns In Charge, Through Jan 11
A Christmas Story, Through Dec 27
Godspell, Nov 29 to Dec 20
The Second City: Dysfunctional Holiday Revue, Dec 19, 26 & 31

OVERSHADOWED PRODUCTIONS
With principles dedicated to providing drama that's overshadowed by the power of God, this young theater presents The Hiding Place, a gripping tale of persecuted Jews in Nazi-occupied Holland. A season of diverse performances continues with an adaptation of O. Henry's tale of giving and receiving, as well as a timeless Broadway musical.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
Gift of the Magi, Through Dec 13

Unshaken Love: The Story of Ruth, Feb 19 to March 7
Hello,Dolly!, July 17 to Aug 1
Sunday In Manhattan, Sept 18 to Oct 3

PLAYHOUSE 111
Dramas of love and death at the end of the season artistically anchor the comedic pratfalls at its beginning. Start your fall off lightly with Felix and Oscar and Frog and Toad.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
A Year With Frog and Toad, Through Dec 14
Deathtrap, Jan 30 to Feb 22
A Streetcar Named Desire, April 3 to 26
City of Angels, June 5 to 28

STEEL BEAM THEATRE
For every play and musical staged for the adult crowd atSteel Beam, the kids get one of their own. This year, it's Forbidden Broadway for The Little Mermaid, and so on.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
A Christmas Carol, Nov 28 to Dec 21
Sing-Along With Santa, Dec 6 & 13
Doubt, Jan 9 to Feb 8
Tale of Beauty and the Beast, Jan 10 to Feb 7
Greater Tuna, Feb 20 to March 22
Stuart Little, Feb 21 to March 21
Thumbelina, April 4 to May 9
Glengarry Glen Ross, April 10 to May 3
Wild Goat, May 15 to June 28

THEATRE OF WESTERN SPRINGS
Agathe Christie is the go-to girl to kick off Theatre of Western Springs' fall affair, an iconic storyteller fit for a venerable theater now celebrating its 80th season. Fiction, The Enchanted Apriland exciting work from David Mamet fill out the year, with a bevy of kids' shows at one of the area's best and most historic children's theaters.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
Scrooge: The Musical, Dec 3 to 14
The Enchanted April, Jan 22 to Feb 1
Book of Days, Feb 12 to 22
Tales of Fourth Grade Nothing,March 6 to 15
Hotel Paradiso, April 16 to 26
Revenge of the Space Pandas, Or Binky
Rudich and the Two-Speed Clock, May 1 to 3
The Foreigner, May 28 to June 7

VILLAGE PLAYERS THEATRE
Billed as "the Dating Game for all those over 40," Village Players first show of the season follows Jennifer as she finds many single people from her parents' generation struggling with the same problems she does today. It's a refreshingly funny start to a promising and busy new season in Oak Park.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
Amadeus, Feb 13 to March 15
Bat Boy: The Musical, May 29 to June 28
Sunday In the Park With George, Aug 14 to Sept 20

VILLAGE THEATRE GUILD
See four contemporary dramas performed in a one-room schoolhouse. In this intimate and converted theatre space, the Village Theatre Guild has primed your theatrical fix.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
The House of Blue Leaves, Jan 16 to Feb 7
Fiction, March 20 to April 11
Visiting Mr. Green, May 22 to June 13

PERFORMING ARTS CENTERS

PARAMOUNT ARTS CENTRE

23 E Galena Blvd., Aurora, 630 896-6666, paramountarts.com
Like most other arts centers in the western suburbs, Paramount Arts Centre doesn't stage its own original productions each year. But touring theatrical companies and other performers journey through each month. These are some of the year's best.
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
Stomp, Nov 28 to 30
The Nutcracker, Dec 6
A Christmas Carol, Dec 7 & 8
Barrage, Jan 25 & 26
Junie B. Jones, Jan 31
The Color of Justice, Feb 12
The New Shanghai Circus, Feb 22
Footloose, March 21 & 22
James and the Giant Peach, April 9
Movin' Out, April 17 & 18
Cirque Dreams Jungle Fantasy, May 8 & 9

RIALTO SQUARE THEATRE

15 E Van Buren St., Joliet, 815 726-7171
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
The Nutcracker, Nov 30
Movin' Out, Dec 5
It's A Wonderful Life, Dec 19
The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, March 15
Annie, April 9

CENTER FOR PERFORMING ARTS

Governors State University, 1 University Pkwy., University Park, 708 235-2222
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
If You Give A Pig A Pancake, Dec 1
A Christmas Carol, Dec 7 & 8
The Nutcracker, Dec 13
The Three Little Pigs, Or "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?", Jan 29 to 30
The Mikado, Feb 22
James and the Giant Peach, March 9
Hairspray, March 13 & 14
A Midsummer Night's Dream, April 8
To Kill A Mockingbird, May 9 & 11

HEMMENS CULTURAL CENTER

45 Symphony Way, Elgin, 847 931-5900
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
A Christmas Carol, Dec 9
The Plant That Ate Dirty Socks, Dec 11
Junie B. Jones, Jan 25
Seussical, Jan 29
Nate the Great, Feb 24 & 25

METROPOLIS PERFORMING ARTS CENTRE

111 W Campbell St., Arlington Heights, 847 577-2121
UPCOMING SCHEDULE:
A Christmas Carol, Through Dec 24
Anna In the Tropics, Jan 15 to Feb 21
Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, Feb 17 to 24
Defending the Caveman, Feb 27 & 28
Flanagan's Wake, March 17
Cinderella, April 2 to 10

The Diary of Anne Frank, April 13 to 21
Baby, May 14 to June 20
Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, July 20 to 25

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