

Ralphie's 'Christmas Story' hits target at Pheasant Run



By Photos courtesy of Trademan Photography

Mother (Julie Ganey), Randy (Michael Etkorn), Ralphie (Gabriel Harder) and The Old Man (Tom McElroy) gather around the infamous Leg Lamp Award. "A Christmas Story" is presented by Noble Fool Theatricals at Pheasant Run Resort in St. Charles through Dec. 27.

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By Renee Tomell

St. Charles Republican

NEW! Tue Nov 25, 2008, 04:19 PM CST

St. Charles, IL -

A winning family show is playing at Pheasant Run this holiday season, where Noble Fool Theatricals pays loving tribute to "A Christmas Story" and the quest of 9-year-old Ralphie for an official Red Ryder Carbine-Action 200-Shot Range Model Air Rifle.

Artistic director John Gawlik brings a sure directorial hand to a cast that smoothly blends veteran actors with young charmers, most drawn from Noble Fool's Performing Arts Academy.

The show is faithful to the 1983 film favorite that captured a holiday season in Ralphie's circa 1940s childhood, in which he fought for his heart's desire against a world warning him, "You'll shoot your eye out."

"We hadn't used any children yet," Gawlik said about previous Mainstage shows, noting the youth are a centerpiece of the play. "The talent of these children never ceases to amaze me."

Planning started this summer to accommodate family and school schedules given the hefty commitment of weeks of rehearsal and shows five days a week through the end of the year. Some of the children's roles are shared, said Gawlik, a Wheaton native.

"It's really awesome," said 11-year-old Rebecca Roy of Geneva, who plays Ester Jane, the classmate who takes an interest in the young hero. "There's a pretty big difference between community theater and professional theater. Ester really rocks. She is so much fun to play and she's really funny."

Capturing a bygone era when children's mouths were washed out with soap for using profanity is John Stark's versatile set depicting a multilevel living room and bedroom. Scenes shift from Christmas tree lot to schoolroom to the back alley where Ralphie and his friends are bullied by Scut Farkus, to the schoolyard where Flick gets his tongue stuck to the flagpole. The vignettes, including a disastrous encounter with Santa, have become iconic, including the Leg Lamp, a proudly displayed favorite of Ralphie's father, much to the dismay of his wife.

Instead of voice-over exposition, the audience is treated to on-stage narration by the grown-up Ralphie, well played by John Gray (think Penn Jillette), a good complement to skilled performances by Julie Ganey as Mother and Tom McElroy as Ralphie's Old Man. Holding their own in a big way on opening night were Gabriel Harder, 12, of Elgin as Ralphie, and Michael Etkorn, 10, of Lisle, gifted at physical humor as the quirky little brother, Randy. Mary Hollis Inboden has wonderful

moments as the teacher.

The hilarious Jean Shepherd memoir hits a bulls eye about childhood, especially for audiences nudged by nostalgia — no decoder rings required.

Kids' thoughts

Getting into the spirit of the play, kids in the cast submitted some of their own Christmas memories and favorite moments in the show. Garrett Lee Weaver, 13, of Darien (Flick) comically recalls his great-grandma's dentures falling out of her mouth onto the floor and his dog running away with them. Charlie Zimmer, 9, of Geneva (Schwartz) remembers the Christmas his family got a new puppy. And Rebecca calls a surprise trip to Florida her best Christmas ever.

While Gabriel looks forward to the fight scene with real-life best friend Stirling Joyner, 13, of Plano (Scut Farkus), Sam Schumacher, 11, of Itasca (alternate Randy) relishes "spending quality time with his oatmeal" in his role (think scene stealer).

Most of the kids have theater experience and shared the stage in the NFT Youth Ensemble's "Oliver!" this year, while others, including Charlie and Max Lauser, 10, of Naperville (alternate Scut and Schwartz), are making their stage debut. Among the featured youth is Kelsey Pettrone, 10, of La Grange as Helen.

"I cannot believe they are actually paying me, at 10, to perform with people I love at my favorite place on Earth (NFT Mainstage)," said Maddy Donatelli of Geneva. "This is a dream come true."

If you go

What: "A Christmas Story" presented by Noble Fool Theatricals

Where: The Mainstage at Pheasant Run Resort, 4051 E. Main St. (Route 64), St. Charles

When: Through Saturday, Dec. 27, with curtain at 8 p.m. Wednesday through Friday; 5 and 8:30 p.m. Saturdays; and 2 p.m. Sundays. Matinees begin at 2 p.m. Thursdays, Dec. 4 and 18, and Friday, Dec. 26; and at 10 a.m. Thursday, Dec. 11, and Friday, Dec. 19, with no show on Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve or Christmas Day

Tickets: They start at \$27, and at \$49 for dinner-show packages. Call the box office at (630) 584-6342 or visit www.ticketmaster.com.

More events

- The resort presents comedian Jeff Foxworthy and his Kickin' Country Road Show on Friday, Dec. 12, in the Mega Center.
- Sister from "Late Nite Catechism" is back in the comic sequel, "Put the Nuns in Charge!," playing in the Studio Theater through Jan. 11.
- The NFT Youth Ensemble performs the musical "Godspell" at 10:30 a.m. Saturdays, Nov. 29, Dec. 6, 13 and 20, and at 7 p.m. Sundays, Dec. 7 and 14, at Mainstage.

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