

Toasty-warm yule chestnut

`A CHRISTMAS STORY' WACKY AND WISTFUL, AND FRESH AS A FIR

By Glenn Lovell
Mercury News

Every kid's dream of that one perfect Christmas gift receives just the right mix of crankiness and charm at the hands of the San Jose Repertory Theatre, which sleds into the holiday season with the ideal accompaniment to the downtown's winter carnival.

The Rep's ``A Christmas Story'' -- taken from the 1983 movie and expanded with additional fantasies and an ``Our Town''-like narrator -- is, as it should be, at once nostalgic and a tad nasty. Humorist Jean Shepherd, whose collection of stories in ``In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash'' inspired the movie and play, was essentially writing about his own childhood. He'd be pleased, I think, with the Rep's cockeyed rendition.

Once again we're in the make-believe town of Hohman, Ind., sometime in the late 1940s. The portrait of the Parker family that emerges owes as much to Mad Magazine as the Saturday Evening Post covers by Norman Rockwell. They're scattered and lovable, juggling bills, home repairs and a couple of marginally willful kids.

Nine-year-old Ralphie (Zachary Freier-Harrison) wants a Red Ryder air rifle with a compass in the stock for Christmas. Well, ``wants'' may be too mild. The BB gun is an all-consuming passion. Like a junior G-man, the kid plots and schemes to make the carbine a Christmas morning reality, planting magazine ads, posting anonymous fliers. The Old Man (Howard Swain), meanwhile, battles the basement furnace and neighbor's hounds, and dreams his own dream: to win a major magazine contest and become the talk of the town.

The family is rounded out by Mother (Nancy Carlin), who's patient and a whiz at trivia, and little Randy (Evan Coleman), who wets his pants in the presence of the Big Guy, a.k.a. Santa. The world beyond the house on Cleveland Street comes with a town bully (Ty Doughty), a meek punching bag (Nick Perry), a new admirer (Noel Witcosky) and a disapproving English teacher (Carlin again), who obsesses over composition margins and, in one of the show's funniest fantasies, reveals her Wicked Witch of the West side.

Because many theatergoers will be familiar enough with ``A Christmas Story'' to recite lines verbatim, the stage adaptation is most entertaining when it departs from the movie, which has joined ``It's a Wonderful Life'' as a holiday-TV staple. The movie was narrated in mock wonderment by Shepherd. The play goes that one better by making the adult Ralph a principal player who both narrates the action and doubles for various townspeople, including a neighbor who ogles the Old Man's treasured leg lamp, stamped -- all together now! -- frag-jill-ee.

Dan Hiatt, last seen in the Rep's ``The Immigrant,'' handles these chores with an ease that not only sets the snarky tone of the piece but also ensures a measure of wistfulness. The grown Ralph, in the end, is as much a con artist as Ralphie: He misses those long-ago triumphs and humiliations, even the Santa's knee anxiety attack.

Another pleasant surprise: Swain's Old Man isn't a lazy knockoff of Darren McGavin's father in the movie. He's lovably bumptious rather than the sputtering blowhard.

Former Rep associate artistic director John McCluggage, now with the Seacoast Repertory Theatre in New Hampshire, has returned to direct this holiday flashback with his usual light touch. The cozy Parker place, inside and out, was designed by Robert Mark Morgan, and the fun sound effects and snowflake lighting are compliments of Jeff Mockus and Lap-Chi Chu, respectively.

``A Christmas Story''

Upshot: Familiar, but so what -- like the Old Man, it's cranky and lovable.

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday; 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays; 3 p.m. Saturdays; 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays.
Through Dec. 30.

Tickets: \$28-\$56

Information: (408) 367-7255 or www.sjrep.com.

Contact Glenn Lovell at glovell@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5639.