

The Guide

A Theatergoer's Resource

Edited by Collin Lawson & Ryan Mooney for the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

A Christmas Story

by Philip Grecian
based on the motion picture written by
Jean Shepherd, Leigh Brown & Bob Clark

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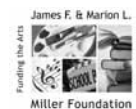
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Synopsis

photography
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In the midst of the holidays, middle-aged Ralph Parker finds himself reminiscing about the Christmas of 1938. Ralphie, as he was known then, wants just one thing for Christmas: the Red Ryder 200-Shot Carbine Action Range Model Air Rifle. Throughout the play, he fantasizes about rescuing his family and friends with his trusty gun, but when he mentions the gun to his mother, she insists, “You’ll shoot your eye out.” Nonetheless, Ralphie is determined he will receive the BB gun for Christmas.

As Ralphie, his younger brother Randy, and his friends Flick and Schwartz walk to school, they encounter the gruesome neighborhood bully, Scut Farkas, who gives Flick a painful arm-twist. Flick’s bad luck continues at recess when he accepts Schwartz’s “double dog dare” challenge to press his tongue against a frozen lamppost, and Flick is immediately glued to the pole. A huge crowd of adults gather to help free him.

Later, after the Parker family makes a trip to buy a Christmas tree, their car gets a flat tire. While Ralphie helps his father, “The Old Man,” change the tire, Ralphie accidentally says a curse word, and his mother sticks soap in his mouth when they arrive home. Ralphie lies in bed that night fantasizing about showing his guilt-ridden parents that he has gone blind from soap poisoning.

The next day, Ralphie concocts a plan. First, he will collect dozens of Red Ryder Air Rifle advertisements and sneak them into the mailbox for his parents to see. Second, he will write a theme paper about the gun to convince his teacher, Miss Shields, to take his side. To clinch his master plan, Ralphie will ask Santa Claus at Goldblatt’s department store for the BB gun. However, Ralphie’s plan doesn’t appear to work. His parents throw away the daily barrage of ads. He receives a C-plus on the theme, and both Miss Shields and the department store Santa say, “You’ll shoot your eye out.”



Meanwhile, The Old Man finally wins “a major award” from one of his many contest entries: a lamp shaped like a woman’s leg. The Old Man is excited about his prize, insisting the lamp be displayed in their front window, much to his wife’s embarrassment. Eventually, she breaks the lamp while vacuuming, leaving The Old Man fuming. Ralphie later receives a long-awaited Little Orphan Annie decoder pin, only to discover that the secret message at the end of the Little Orphan Annie radio program is just a commercial for Ovaltine.

As Ralphie walks home from school with his friends, Farkas throws a snowball at Ralphie’s face. Already upset about the decoder pin and the low-prospects of receiving the air rifle, something inside Ralphie snaps. He beats Farkas until his nose bleeds and Ralphie’s mother drags away her crying son. Much to Ralphie’s relief, she kindly glosses over the incident during dinner with The Old Man, and he escapes punishment.

Christmas Day arrives, and Ralphie is disappointed about the air rifle... until The Old Man tells him he has one more present to unwrap. The Old Man, as it turns out, had a BB gun when he was young, so he decided Ralphie would be perfectly safe. Ralphie excitedly rushes outside to try it out. With his very first shot, the BB ricochets and hits his glasses, just barely missing his eye. Although the eye is unharmed, he breaks his glasses by stepping on them. Quickly coming up with a story, he wails and tells his mother that an icicle hit him in the eye. Much to Ralphie’s surprise, she believes him, and he escapes punishment again. Unfortunately, the dogs from next door break into the Parker kitchen and take the Christmas turkey, forcing the family to leave the house for dinner at a Chinese restaurant. Blissfully, the spirit of Christmas prevails as night comes. The Old Man and Ralphie’s mother snuggle while watching the falling snow outside their window, and Ralphie snuggles in bed with his Red Ryder Air Rifle. ■

About the Artists

Philip Grecian

Philip Grecian began his show business career by hiring out as a ventriloquist and magician at the age of four. By 15 he had written a three-act comedy which was produced at a local theater. At the age of 16 he was



founding director for a city-funded community theater. Two years later he was asked, without audition, to be a part of the Creede Colorado Repertory Theatre, where he spent a season acting and writing. He continues to maintain a connection with Creede

Repertory, where his plays have been produced and where he has returned as a guest performer. After touring the Midwest as Androcles in *Androcles and the Lion*, he returned to the community theater he had founded, remaining there as artistic/managing director and resident playwright for six years; he resigned in 1976 in order to create a professional dinner theater where he served as producer and artistic director. After establishing a strong financial base for the new theater, he left to work as a writer/director in film, video and audio production. In 1994, Grecian became the founding director/playwright for a theater company which mounts an annual production of his adaptation of *In His Steps*, based upon Charles Sheldon's best-selling 19th-century novel. His adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* has become an annual tradition in many communities around the United States, and his radio dramatization of *Dracula!*, based on his stage play, and syndicated for a time on radio stations across the country, has come full circle and is now a staged radio production, complete with an onstage sound effects crew. It is the first of several staged radio dramas he has written. Other plays include his widely popular *The Velveteen Rabbit* and the official stage adaptation of the motion picture *A Christmas Story* ("You'll shoot your eye out"), which is produced annually by scores of professional, educational and community theater companies throughout the English-speaking world. His plays *The Dragon of Nitt* and *Lion and the Lyre* have been translated and performed in Russia.

Jean Shepherd

Jean Shepherd was a writer, humorist, satirist, actor, radio raconteur and television and film personality. A master storyteller, he took bits and pieces from his own life to weave tales of the joy, humor, intrigue and angst growing up. His youth in Hammond, Indiana, his adventures in the Army Signal Corps and stories of the obscure and infamous were all fertile sources for his tales. For almost three decades, he told these stories to eager radio audiences, in Cincinnati from 1950 to 1954 and on WOR in New York from 1956 to 1977. His other radio enterprise was live broadcasts on Saturday night from *The Limelight*, a nightclub in Greenwich Village. Shepherd began his entertainment career in Chicago as a performer at the Goodman Theatre. He did nightclub acts on Rush Street, appeared on Broadway in Leonard Sillman's revue, *New Faces* (1962) and in *Voices of the Turtle*, and played a dance instructor in the film *The Light Fantastic* (1963). He was also a sportscaster and did baseball broadcasts for the Toledo Mudhens and Armed Forces Radio. In the seventies, he took his talents to television in a series of humorous narratives for PBS called "Jean Shepherd's America," later continued on the PBS New Jersey Network as "Shepherd's Pie." Here he was able to show us the more offbeat aspects of America, particularly his own home state, which he loved to ridicule. This led to a series of teleplays for PBS/WGBH's American Playhouse: "The



Phantom of the Open Hearth," "The Great American Fourth of July and Other Disasters," "Ollie Hopnoodle's Haven of Bliss" and "The Star-Crossed Romance of Josephine Cosnowski."

His most popular and well-known work is the film *A Christmas Story* (1983) which he co-wrote and narrated. In 1994 he did a sequel, *My Summer Story* (aka *It Runs in the Family*). Shepherd wrote articles for several magazines, including *Playboy* and *Omni*, and was an early contributor *The Village Voice*, most notably in his "Night People" column. His books include *The America of George Ade*; *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*; *Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories and Other Disasters*; *The Ferrari in the Bedroom*; and *A Fistful of Fig Newtons*. Shepherd passed away on October 16, 1999, at the age of 78. 🏠

The Creation of *A Christmas Story*

by Kirsten Brandt
of the San Jose
Repertory Theatre

Twenty-six years ago, *A Christmas Story* opened in movie theatres across the country to mixed reviews. MGM never wanted to release the film in the first place. So although it was the number one by its second weekend, MGM pulled it out of theatres in its third week. What MGM didn't bargain on was that over the next couple years the movie would become a cult hit. Television station TNT even runs the film for 24 hours straight beginning Christmas Eve. If you're like the almost 40 million viewers this annual event draws, then the TV is turned on to the appropriate channel and left there while you pursue your own holiday rituals, allowing you to always catch your favorite parts.

But why has this story captured the heart of America? Some say it's the humor of the piece, some say everyone can relate to the characters, some say it's because we have all had something we have so desperately wanted. Others pontificate on its social message as an attack against consumerism. Perhaps film critic Roger Ebert sums it up best, "There is real knowledge of human nature beneath the comedy."



"I write about American rituals," Jean Shepherd said in 1983. "Things you'll find nowhere else in the world. The Senior Prom. The Christmas Present. The Fourth of July. Our holidays have nothing to do with the event they're allegedly celebrating – they're pure rituals." Hailed as the modern day equivalent of Mark Twain, Jean Shepherd gained national attention with *A Christmas Story* in 1983. Known to East Coast audiences for his WOR radio program (1959-1978), Jean Shepherd enticed his listeners with fictitious stories of disaster-prone Ralph Parker and his friends Flick and Schwartz. It wasn't long before Shepherd began turning his late night yarns into articles for various publications like *The Village Voice*, *Car and Driver* and *Playboy*. Shepherd also published several books. It was his collection of short stories, *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Taxes* (1966) that attracted film director Bob Clark. Bob Clark loved what he called, a "sardonic different twist on the idea of Christmas."

Clark, with the help of Shepherd and his wife, Leigh Brown, would spend the next 10 years trying to get *A Christmas Story* made into a film. It wasn't until Clark directed the teen comedy *Porkey's* that he would have enough leverage to get a green light.

The play is set in Hohman, Indiana, a fictional town inspired by Shepherd's true hometown of Hammond, Indiana. However, Shepherd says it is an amorphous time period set anywhere from the 1930s to the 1940s. "I think nostalgia is one of the great sicknesses of America. What my work says is: if you think it's bad now, you should have seen it then." This is what *A Christmas Story* is for most people, a reminder of humanity through comedy. 🍷

The Transformation

How the Different Productions of *A Christmas Story* Compare

by Ingrid Van
Valkenburg

The differences between the play and movie versions of *A Christmas Story* are few and far between. Philip Grecian, the adaptor of *A Christmas Story*, resisted changing much of the script from the movie to the play and kept many of the same scenes. There are, however, a few noteworthy changes.

1. One of the biggest differences between the play and the movie is Grecian's decision to give Ralph, the adult-version of Ralphie and narrator of the movie, an actual role in the play. Instead of simply voicing Ralphie's thoughts, Ralph acts with all the other characters on

PCS production
2010 (right)
Owen Carey

movie still (left)



the stage and plays other minor roles like the Christmas tree salesman and the department store Santa Claus. He also shows up in the shadows during scenes in the Parker house and moves about the Parker family during the scenes in their home. In giving Ralph an actual role in the play, Grecian allows the audience to understand Ralph and Ralphie's relationship better.

2. In the movie, Esther Jane does not have a major role. We only hear from her once when she answers a question in Miss Shield's class. In the play production of *A Christmas Story*, Esther Jane is a much more prominent character: she lets Miss Shields know the reason for Flick's absence after recess; she coyly flirts with Ralphie in class and in the line to meet Santa Claus; we learn that Ralphie has a crush on Esther Jane from Helen (Helen is another character who does not exist in the movie production); she plays a role in Ralphie's fantasy adventures; Ralphie draws her name for the gift exchange and gives her a spider pin; and finally, she returns Ralphie's glasses to his mother after Ralphie gets in the fight with Farkas. None of these events are included in the screenplay, rendering Esther Jane a very minor character. Phillip Grecian expressed in an interview that even though he limited the size of the play's cast, he felt it was important to increase the roles of a few of the girls in Ralphie's class.

3. Adapting a screenplay into a script for a live play is no easy task. When shooting a movie, the director has freedom to film in a variety of environments, from outdoor to indoor and from large-scale to intimate. With a play, however, the scenes are restricted to the size of the stage. In the film version of *A Christmas Story*, the story focuses on Ralphie's home but also takes place in other locations such as the school, Higbee's Department Store, back alleys where the bullies chase Ralphie and his friends, and even the Chinese Restaurant where the Parkers have Christmas dinner. Grecian suggests a set that focuses on Ralphie's home, while other areas like the classroom, backyard, and Santa's Mountain are side sets to the main set. While we miss out on some of the great scenes in the movie, Grecian offers some direction on how to design the stage so that the play still captures the different worlds of the original movie set.

It was Grecian's goal to write the play in the same form as Jean Shepherd himself would have written it. In adding a role for adult Ralph, writing in a little puppy love from Esther Jane and limiting the number of different scenes, Grecian has accomplished his objective and has successfully transformed one of America's favorite Christmas movies into a fabulous play production. 🏠

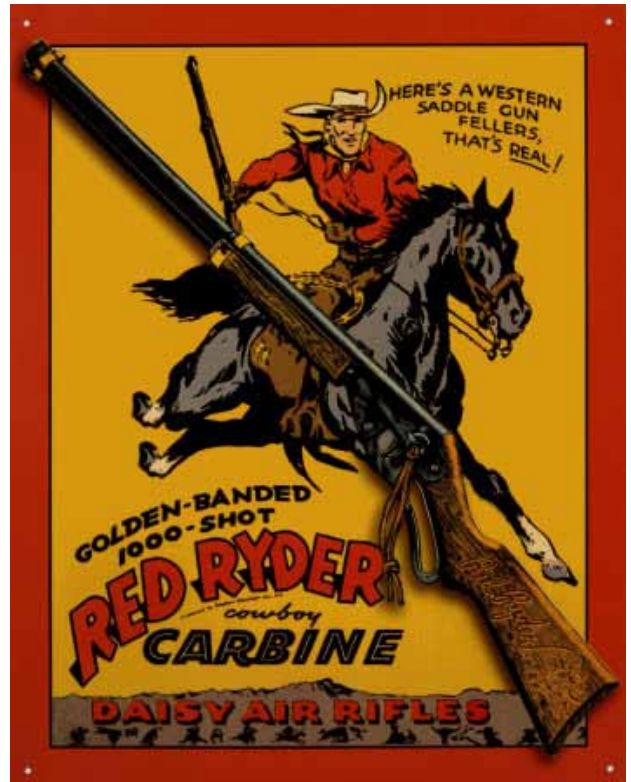
Who Was Red Ryder?

Red Ryder was a popular long-run Western comic strip created by Stephen Slesinger and artist Fred Harman. In 1938, *Red Ryder* was syndicated by Newspaper Enterprise Association, expanding over the following decade to 750 newspapers, translations into ten languages and a readership in the United States of 14 million. The 26-year run of the comic strip came to an end in 1964.

Riding his mighty steed, Thunder, Red was a tough cowboy who lived in Painted Valley Ranch in the Blanco Basin of the San Juan Mountain Range with his aunt, the Duchess, and his juvenile sidekick, Little Beaver. Little Beaver spoke in the sort of Pidgin English that is now considered to be an offensive caricature (e.g. “Spinach heap good. Me like’m!”). Other notable characters in the comic were ranch-hand Buckskin Blodgett, Red’s gal-pal, Beth, and bad-guy Ace Hanlon.

The *Red Ryder* radio series began in February 1942 and was broadcasted three times a week on the Blue Network. The series continued on the West Coast Don Lee Network through the 1940s. The continuing characters of the comic strip were also found in the radio series.

Although billed as “American’s famous fighting cowboy,” Red Ryder was notable because he



did not usually kill his enemies, but instead aimed for the hand to disarm them. 🏠

The Leg Lamp

The Leg Lamp from *A Christmas Story* is one of the most iconic and recognizable movie props of all time. Replicas of the leg lamp have become prized “Major Awards” for fans everywhere. *A Christmas Story* author, Jean Shepherd, was inspired to create the leg lamp after seeing an illuminated Nehi Soda advertisement. The design of the leg lamp for *A Christmas Story* is the work of production designer Reuben Freed. Unsure of exactly what a leg lamp was or what it should look like, Freed presented a couple of sketches to Shepherd who said, “Yep, that’s it!” Freed then produced three leg lamps for the movie and went through several shade styles before settling on the large golden bell shape with black fringe seen in the movie. None of the three original leg lamps survived the production of the movie; all three props were



broken on set during the filming. Although the original lamps are now long gone, the leg lamp will forever be remembered as the “soft glow of electric sex.” 🏠

1955 Indiana Vocabulary

Triple Dog Dare the most serious playground taunt that absolutely could not be ignored

Major Award a said-to-be “valuable” prize from a Sweepstakes or mail-in contest

Simoniz spray-on product for shining up the paint job of a car

Oldsmobile or “Olds” a type of car the Old Man especially liked (i.e. Chevrolet or Ford)

Department Store (i.e. Goldblatt’s) a store that arranges its merchandise in departments such

as clothes, jewelry, kitchenware, furniture

Lifebuoy a type of soap that comes in a bar; used for punishing kids who said “dirty” words

Little Orphan Annie a comic strip and radio show very popular in the 1930s through 1950s

Ovaltine a chocolate powder used for mixing with milk, advertised on the *Little Orphan Annie* radio show

A & P the grocery store

Will Your Tongue Really Stick to a Frozen Flagpole?

by George Frederick

photography Owen Carey

The next time someone triple-dog dares you to stick your tongue to a frozen metal pole—don’t. Your tongue will be joined to the pole, and you’ll have plenty of time to ponder the thermal conductivity of metal while you await the rescue squad.

Your tongue is covered with moisture, which begins to freeze if its temperature drops below 32°F. Your body then counteracts the freezing by pumping warm blood to your tongue.

Heat from your blood warms the moisture through a process called conduction. Heat energy from the blood excites atoms in your tongue. The atoms absorb the energy and vibrate. The more they vibrate, the more their temperatures increase. This incites vibrations in neighboring atoms, which take the energy and pass it

up the line like a hot potato and eventually warm the surface moisture.

So why is the Fire Department on its way?

“It’s because of the high thermal conductivity

of the pole,” explains Frank J. DiSalvo, director of the Cornell Center for a Sustainable Future and co-director of the Cornell Full Cell Institute. “The metal is a much better conductor than your tongue (up to 400 times more powerful). The metal takes heat faster than your body can replenish it.”

The atoms in solid metal are packed tightly and transfer thermal energy more readily. They also have free electrons that boost conductivity. Free electrons are free to move from atom to atom. The electrons absorb heat and energy and more through the flagpole, stirring up other atoms.

As your tongue touches the flagpole, the moisture in your tongue is robbed of heat. The temperature of the moisture drops. Water freezes inside tiny pores and surface irregularities on your tongue and the pole. You’re stuck.

So now you’re thinking, “Maybe if I just pull hard it will come off.” Yes, it will – a piece of your tongue, that is.

Kent Sperry is a 911 dispatcher at a place where people know about cold and snow—Boulder, Colorado. He offers a less painful alternative, assuming you happen to have the necessary remedy at hand: “Pour warm water on the area where the tongue meets the pole, and the tongue should come free.” 🍷



Top 10 Things To Do in Portland This Holiday Season

by Ingrid Van
Valkenburg &
Zanny Allport

photography
Patrick Weishampel

1. Sit on Santa's lap at Macy's downtown. This is one tradition you'll never be too old for.
2. See the bright lights shine on Peacock Lane. Lighting up SE Portland since the 1920s, the street is adorned with sparkling lights, nativity scenes, Christmas trees and life-like replicas of Santa and Frosty. You can even see the street by way of a horse-drawn carriage! It's a popular Portland tradition not to be missed.
3. Sip smooth, rich hot cocoa at Portland's fine chocolate shop Cacao. Just two and a half blocks west of Powell's, you can pick up a steaming cup on your way to go browse the shelves, or just stop in on a particularly frosty day to warm up.
4. Board the Polar Express on the Mount Hood Railroad. Passengers are encouraged to wear their



- pajamas as this magical train ride takes them to the North Pole to meet Santa, sing Christmas carols, drink hot cocoa and receive a special gift. Tickets go fast, so don't wait to sign up for this special holiday adventure.
5. Wander where you've never wandered before. Portland's own "premier year-round Christmas plush animal store," Christmas at the Zoo. You have to admit their relentless Christmas spirit, alive even in August, is endearing. So go on, meander in this holiday season and see what it's all about. But don't worry too much if you miss it -- they'll be there all year.
 6. Marvel at the great Christmas tree in Portland's living room, Pioneer Courthouse Square. For the tree-huggers out there, the Christmas tree is one of the greenest around! Grown in a sustainable forestland near Gaston, the lights on last year's tree used 91% less energy and lasted 50% longer than standard Christmas tree lights, and it will continue to uphold the same standards this year.
 7. Watch the Oregon Zoo transform into a sparkling winter wonderland when ZooLights comes to town. Hop on the Zoo Train, meet all your holiday friends and gaze at more than two hundred animated animals leaping, flying and diving through the great backdrop of the zoo.
 8. Gander up at Rudolph's lit-up nose atop the infamous "Made in Oregon" sign. The lighting of the nose is a classic Portland tradition, not to be underappreciated during the holiday season.
 9. Follow an advent calendar. Whether it's filled with chocolates, pictures or toy figurines, waking up to a little present is always a great way to start your day.
 10. Explore the historic Pittock Mansion during their holiday exhibition, A Northwest Christmas: The Natural Beauty and Bounty of Oregon. Dozens of volunteers, professional designers, and local charities lend their time and talents to transform Pittock Mansion into a holiday wonderland of bows, ribbons, lights, poinsettias, and over 15 Christmas trees. Come early and often between November 22 and Jan 2nd (closed on Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day).

Discussion Questions/ Group Activities

1. *A Christmas Story* takes place during the late 1930s and early 1940s in Hohman, Indiana (inspired by the author's true hometown of Hammond, Indiana). What do you know about this era? What was going on in Indiana during this time? What kind of struggles were people experiencing and how did those struggles affect family relationships?
1. The play is based on a movie and a series of short stories by Jean Shepherd. Because it wasn't first written as a play, what kind of challenges do you think the adaptor faced when changing the medium of production? If you have seen the movie version of *A Christmas Story*, how do you think it compared to the play?
1. Despite the number of times Ralphie hears "no" or "you'll shoot your eye out," he refuses to let go of his dream of owning a Red Ryder 200-Shot Carbine Action Range Model Air Rifle. Have you ever wanted something so badly that you refused to give up on the dream of having it? If so, talk about that experience. If not, do you think Ralphie is being unreasonable, or are his pleas for the gun justifiable?
2. Spend the next couple of minutes thinking back on different Christmas memories. After you have thought for a little bit, pick your favorite one and close your eyes. What smells do you associate with the memory? Do you remember any distinctive tastes? What do you hear when you think back on this time? Think and write down as many sensory details as you can and then share the memory with a peer or the whole class.

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The Leg Lamp

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