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## Theater: Holiday Treats *Sound of Music* and *A Christmas Story*

Posted: 11/27/2012 1:22 am

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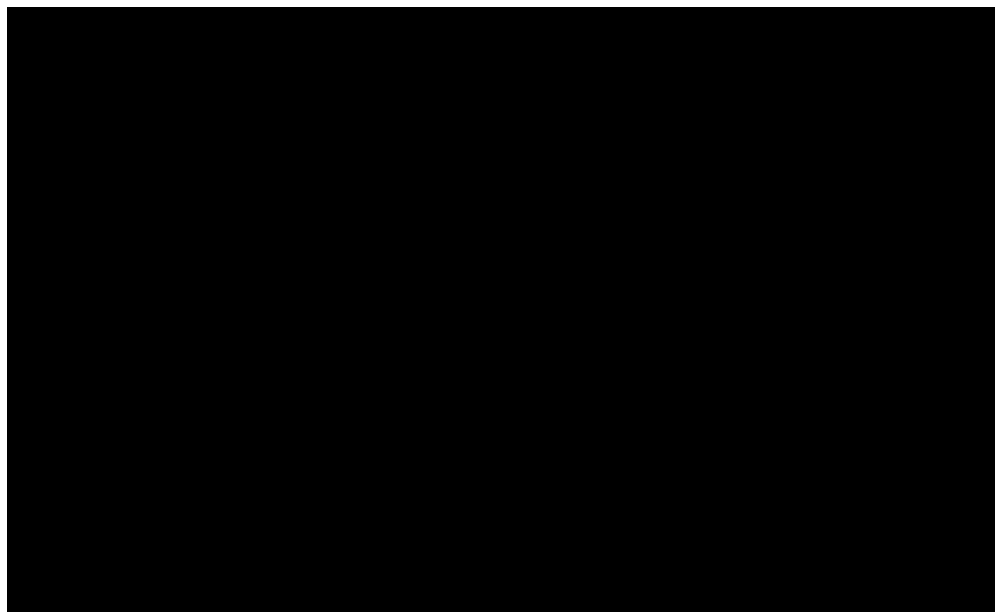
THE SOUND OF MUSIC \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
A CHRISTMAS STORY \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

THE SOUND OF MUSIC \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
PAPERMILL PLAYHOUSE

I know *The Sound Of Music* about as well as I know any movie musical but somehow I'd never seen it performed onstage before. So Papermill's solid holiday production is a welcome opportunity to see this final Rodgers & Hammerstein classic essentially in its original form. They've added the one song written by Richard Rodgers for the movie -- "I Have Confidence" -- but everything else seems to be akin to the original stage conception. So for me it was a modest surprise to hear "My Favorite Things" performed for Mother Superior and "The Lonely Goatherd" used to cheer up the children when they're scared by a thunderstorm.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Maria (Elena Shaddow) is a young woman raised in a convent and ready -- she thinks -- to become a nun. But Maria has never really experienced life and doesn't know what she would be leaving behind. She's also very distracting, always late to chapel (but never late to meals), singing in the hallways, losing track of time while she wanders the hills and so on. She's lovably frustrating and high-spirited and eager to be good but what exactly should she be good at? Quiet contemplation isn't exactly her forte.

So when a governess is needed for the seven children of the stern widow Captain Von Trapp (Ben Davis), Maria is plunged into the real world. She soon wins over the children, melts the heart of the Captain, brings music back into his lavish but sad mansion and by gosh if the Nazis could hear her sing they'd probably turn around and go home.



That's the very simple plot of this disarming musical, a show so deft in its book and so

rock solid in its score that it's easy to dismiss as family friendly entertainment. But on a closer examination, these are not just catchy tunes. The title tune "The Sound Of Music" reveals character as well as any song when you hear Maria exclaiming her joy with life (music is of course essential to the storyline), while subtly suggesting there are other ways to pray than donning the habit (that lark is learning to pray, too). "Maria" fills in the characters of both our heroine and the nuns who are singing about her, a nice trick, that. "Sixteen Going On Seventeen" sketches in young love, "How Can Love Survive" and "No Way To Stop It" both cynically suggest the dangers of collaboration and the seduction of going along with evil and so on. By the end, "Edelweiss" may not reveal character or move the plot forward on an obvious level, but it does several remarkable things in the context of the show. It reveals a man's love for his country in a way the reserved Captain Von Trapp would be embarrassed to do in words, it allows he and his family to say goodbye to their home forever and it does this in a tune so artful in its simplicity that most people assume it actually is some old folk song used in the show rather than an original tune.

This production does the show justice with an overall presentation of a grounded simplicity by director and choreographer James Brennan. The tech credits all around are strong, whether it's the scenic design by James Fouchard that always keeps the beauty of the hills nearby, the costumes by Amanda Seymour and hair and wigs by Leah J. Loukas that allow the period to come through and garner some laughs (the singing troupes at the finale and the children's play clothes) without ever distracting or the lighting of F. Mitchell Dana that softens and charms.

Essentially, the show is sweet without cloying, thanks to Brennan drawing strong performances from the seven children throughout; kudos to all -- the show wouldn't work if they weren't restrained and believable. Edward Hibbert as the impresario Max and Donna English as Elsa are light relief, though Elsa (as in the film) never seems remotely like competition for Maria. Some broadness creeps in with the Nazis (such as Osborn Focht's Herr Zeller) and Rolf (Anthony Federov, whom I fondly remember from *American Idol* season four). Federov ably delivers his duet with the appealing Chelsea Morgan Stock as Liesl. As with the show in general, they don't try too hard. But in the second act, Rolf's transformation is too vicious and one-note in his brief turn. Suzanne Ishee doesn't quite fill out "Climb Every Mountain" (few but the grandest of operatic voices would, frankly) but her performance overall is winning.

Of course it's the leads that matter the most. Shaddow sings very nicely as Maria, a high compliment since she is essaying a role captured for posterity by Julie Andrews, arguably the greatest actress in musical theater history. Happily for us, we don't spend the show worrying about Shaddow filling those shoes. She doesn't foolishly try and put some remarkably new spin on the role or those songs. Her acting is stronger in the first act when Maria has one clear, sunny disposition. When she must tackle more complex feelings in the second (like love mixed with embarrassment or shyness), Shaddow is less steady on her feet but always appealing.

Luckily for her she's paired with Ben Davis, who scores very strongly as the Captain. He embodies this lonely man with ease, bringing a warmth and passion to his singing and his growing love for Maria that makes us like her more. He elevates the show and gives it a strong, beating, patriotic heart -- appropriate since the stage version is slightly more politically minded than the movie.

I was surprised by two differences between the show and the movie. The stage production goes easier on Rolf and gives him a redeeming moment. (I've always been annoyed by the Captain taunting Rolf in the movie so it's nice to see him smarter here; personally, I would have invited Rolf along.) Another difference would be one I think stage productions might adapt. In the movie, Elsa and Max don't sing any songs at all. But in the stage show, they perform two songs, including "How Can Love Survive." That robs the story of one of its most powerful moments as seen in the film. Right after that song, the Captain hears the children singing. In the movie, it's the first time he has heard music in his home for years; it's angelic and beautiful, enough to warm even his heart. On stage, however, he's just been chiming in with Max and Elsa, so the impact of the children singing is lessened considerably. He can hardly be astonished about hearing any music in his home since he's just been warbling away himself. Why not switch those two numbers? Coming after the children performing in such a lovely manner, "How Can Love Survive" would sound even more distasteful and discordant to the Captain than it already is and make clear what a losing battle Elsa is waging. Just a thought.

So this essentially faithful stage production is well sung all around and delivers a show that can easily descend into cutesy schmaltz with just the right dash of maturity to keep such tendencies at bay. And that score? Thanks to the fine-voiced cast, music director Tom Helm and his orchestra, it sounds as rich and fresh as ever.

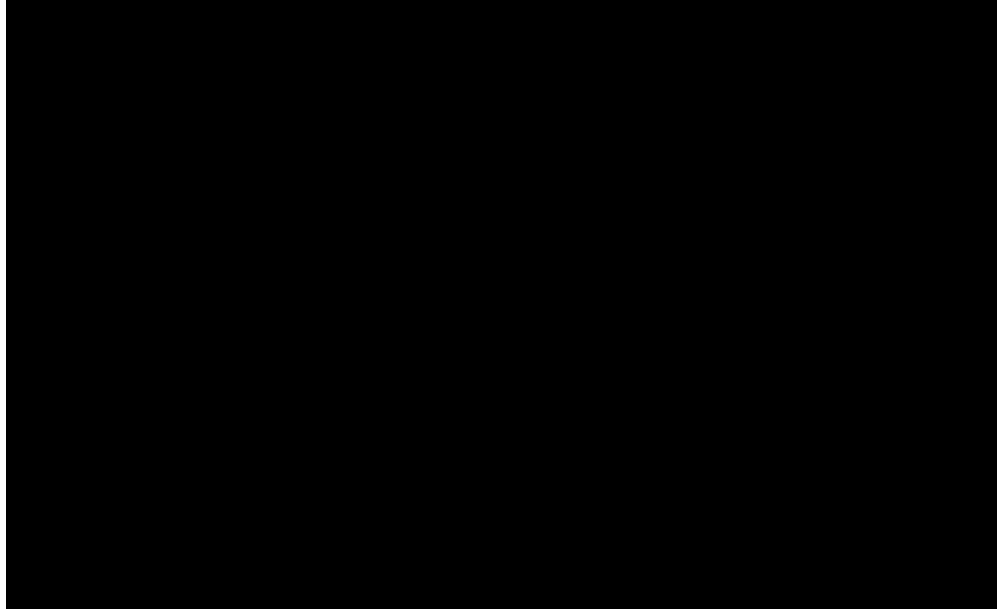
**A CHRISTMAS STORY \*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
LUNT-FONTANNE THEATRE**

It seems like almost every possible Christmas-themed show has already been turned into a holiday musical hoping to become an annual perennial on the road or in local

community theater. I suppose we can't keep doing *A Christmas Carol* over and over but *Elf* and *The Grinch* and other Broadway spectacles sure make you wish they would. Because most of the new stabs at a classic fall miserably short.

Compared to them, *A Christmas Story: The Musical* feels positively charming. The 1983 movie was made by director Bob Clark as a labor of love after he struck it rich with the raunchy teen sex comedy *Porky's*. Who could have imagined *Porky's* would lead to a film based on the nostalgic memoirs of radio personality Jean Shepherd? In a gentle manner, it told about the best Christmas ever, the one where young Ralphie yearns for a BB gun and against all odds actually receives it on Christmas Day.

If you're worried whether the musical is faithful to the film, fear not. The dependable Dan Lauria is here to narrate as Shepherd aka the adult Ralphie and most every scene and joke in the film appears in the musical. If you treasure the moment where Ralphie uses a decoder ring to figure out the secret message in his favorite radio drama, you're in for a disappointment. But most everything else is here: sticking a tongue to a frozen flagpole, the triple dog dare, bullies, hungry dogs and that hideous lamp.



You remember the lamp, don't you? Dad (John Bolton) loves to enter contests and one day he finally wins a prize, an award really, which turns out to be a table lamp made from the leg of a mannequin with fishnet stockings. It's frightful but the Old Man loves it and puts it in the window. In one of the show's few imaginative touches, a chorus line is all stocked with their own copy of the table lamp and they do high kicks with the lamp instead of their own legs. A few other nice touches can be found: Mom (Erin Dilly) hums a song from the previous scene at the start of a new one as if she's just heard the tune on the radio. And Lauria says a blizzard is coming and puffs on a small pile of snow in his hand to indicate it.

That's about it for imaginative touches, I fear. The show simply works its way through the plot of the movie -- visiting Santa at the mall, the fantasies about actually having the BB gun and all the wonderful uses Ralphie will make of it and so on -- with stops for forgettable songs. The book is by Joseph Robinette and the music and lyrics are by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul. Maybe the strongest tune is "Ralphie To The Rescue!"; most everything else fades almost before they're over. The set design by Walt Spangler could have been more daring in using less rather than more: for example, we stare at Ralphie's bedroom for most of the show even though it's barely used until the last moment. The slide at the mall when kids see Santa, on the other hand, needed more, not less. It's barely bigger than a slide in a playground so Ralphie's determined charge back up it feels anti-climactic.

Luckily, the tale itself retains its charm and the cast is appealing, so the routine songs and surroundings can be easily dismissed. Johnny Rabe is front and center throughout as Ralphie and acquits himself nicely in his Broadway debut. Lauria is a solid stage actor looking for a truly great part (Lombardi wasn't it; he deserves better) while Bolton and Dilly easily convince as the parents, both in their love for each other and their kids. Caroline O'Connor also has fun in her big number as Miss Shields, Ralphie's teacher at school. Thanks to their skill and the words of Jean Shepherd (which endure their leap from radio to page to film to stage with humor intact), you can say it's not great but at least it's not as bad as so many other holiday hopefuls.

It's curious they didn't put a twist on the Chinese restaurant scene. (The lone off-putting moment in the film and play, it has fun at the expense of the singing of Christmas carols by Chinese employees in mangled diction. "Fa-wa-wa-wa-wa" and

so on instead of "Fa-la-la-la-la.") All they needed to do to soften the moment was add a line or two to take some of the sting out of it. Why not have the young Chinese waitress say to the manager/owner, "Why are you talking like that? You were born in Kansas!" and he respond knowingly by saying in perfect English, "Give the customer what they want" and then turning back to the family and talking in broken English again. Or some such thing. Or *anything* other than the scene as it is.

A special mention of one remarkable moment: during the song "You'll Shoot Your Eye Out," nine year old Luke Spring suddenly steps out of the chorus and starts tapping his heart out. And not in a oh-isn't-that-good-for-a-nine-year-old way but in a remarkably good way for just about anyone. My guest at the show was a theater professional who knows his stuff and as Spring kept upping the ante in his tapping alongside O'Connor, he murmured under his breath in astonishment, "Jesus Christ!" Okay, not the most holy of sentiments at a Christmas show, but said with such admiration and pleasure, it's the happiest memory I'll take away from the show. If you see it, you may not remember much of anything other than how much you like the movie, but it certainly won't create any bad memories and given the competition (I'm looking at you, *Elf*) that's no small thing.

#### **THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)**

*As You Like it* (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) \*\*\*\*  
*Chimichangas And Zolof* \*  
*Closer Than Ever* \*\*\*  
*Cock* \*\* 1/2  
*Harvey with Jim Parsons* \*  
*My Children! My Africa!* \*\*\*  
*Once On This Island* \*\*\*  
*Potted Potter* \*  
*Storefront Church* \*\* 1/2  
*Title And Deed* \*\*\*  
*Picture Incomplete* (NYMF) \*\*  
*Flambe Dreams* (NYMF) \*\*  
*Rio* (NYMF) \*\*  
*The Two Month Rule* (NYMF) \*  
*Trouble* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*Stealing Time* (NYMF) \*\*  
*Requiem For A Lost Girl* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*Re-Animator The Musical* (NYMF) \*\*\*  
*Baby Case* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*How Deep Is The Ocean* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*Central Avenue Breakdown* (NYMF) \*\*\*  
*Foreverman* (NYMF) \* 1/2  
*Swing State* (NYMF) \* 1/2  
*Stand Tall: A Rock Musical* (NYMF) \* 1/2  
*Living With Henry* (NYMF) \*  
*A Letter To Harvey Milk* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*The Last Smoker In America* \*\*  
*Gore Vidal's The Best Man* (w new cast) \*\*\*  
*Into The Woods at Delacorte* \*\* 1/2  
*Bring It On: The Musical* \*\*  
*Bullet For Adolf* \*  
*Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc.* \*\*  
*Harrison, TX* \*\*\*  
*Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck"* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2  
*Pink Milk* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2  
*Who Murdered Love* (FringeNYC) no stars  
*Storytime With Mr. Buttermen* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*#MormonInChief* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*An Interrogation Primer* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*An Evening With Kirk Douglas* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Sheherizade* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*The Great Pie Robbery* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Independents* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Dick and The Rose* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*Magdalen* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Bombsheltered* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Paper Plane* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Rated M For Murder* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Mallory/Valerie* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Non-Equity: The Musical!* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2  
*City Of Shadows* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking* \*\*\*  
*Salamander Starts Over* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Pieces* (FringeNYC) \*  
*The Train Driver* \*\*\*

Chaplin *The Musical* \* 1/2  
Detroit \*\* 1/2  
Heartless at Signature \*\*  
Einstein On The Beach at BAM \*\*\*\*  
Red-Handed Otter \*\* 1/2  
Marry Me A Little \*\*  
An Enemy Of The People \*\* 1/2  
The Old Man And The Old Moon \*\*\* 1/2  
A Chorus Line at Papermill \*\*\*  
Helen & Edgar \*\*\*  
Grace \* 1/2  
Cyrano de Bergerac \*\*  
Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? \*\*\*  
Disgraced \*\*  
Annie \*\* 1/2  
The Heiress \*\*  
Checkers \*\* 1/2  
Ivanov \*\*\*  
Golden Child at Signature \*\* 1/2  
Giant at the Public \*\*\* 1/2  
Scandalous \* 1/2  
Forever Dusty \*\*  
The Performers \*\*  
The Piano Lesson at Signature \*\*\* 1/2  
Un Ballo In Maschera at the Met \*\*\* 1/2 (singing) \* (production) so call it \*\* 1/2  
A Christmas Story: The Musical \*\*  
The Sound Of Music at Papermill \*\*\*  
My Name Is Asher Lev \*\*\* 1/2  
Golden Boy \*\*  
A Civil War Christmas \*\* 1/2  
Dead Accounts \*\*  
The Anarchist \*  
Glengarry Glen Ross \*\*  
Bare \*\*  
The Mystery Of Edwin Drood \*\* 1/2  
The Great God Pan \*\* 1/2

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**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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