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**Michael Giltz**

Freelance writer

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## Theater: Radio City Christmas Spectacular Freshens Up

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[RADIO CITY CHRISTMAS SPECTACULAR](#) \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

[RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL](#)

The *Radio City Christmas Spectacular* is an annual tradition, so it's always a balancing act to include the elements that must remain with new routines. This year's edition was conceived, directed and choreographed by Linda Halberman and it feels freshened up quite nicely to eyes that haven't seen this event in years, well before Halberman revamped it substantially in 2007.

They waste no time in getting the Rockettes out front and center, high kicking it with their usual precision. The opening number includes the dancers in reindeer outfits complete with antlers that light up, cute enough though it's a shame to have those great legs covered even for just one routine.

The first of two 3-D shorts -- "Santa Flies To New York" -- follows. The animation here is rudimentary for any kid used to Pixar and the like, but the 3-D effects do a good job of having Santa's sleigh and presents and the like float out over the crowd.

"The Twelve Days Of Christmas" is happily presented as a dance number so you needn't hear most of the lyrics until close to the finale. However, it has an odd arrangement for the first few verses that is almost

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dirge-like, though the orchestrations perk up by the time we get to "five gold rings" and is brighter after that.

Two perennials follow, with the stuffed toys and a little girl doing "The Nutcracker" followed by "The Parade Of The Wooden Soldiers." It's easy to just glide by these pieces but they're key to the show. "Wooden Soldiers" in particular is a pleasure. They feature the precision dancing of the Rockettes, who work hard at making this seem easy for the four or five shows a day they perform. The choreography even adds in a soldier in the back scurrying into place to give the automaton nature of the piece a human touch so you can appreciate all the more what they're doing.

A bus tour of New York City for the Rockettes follows, with people ice skating and the like on display. The choreography fades a bit here; surely more could be done with the Rockettes on a tour bus than we see. Or perhaps I was distracted by the constant stream of product placements which began during Santa's 3-D ride and proved overwhelming here, from New York Life and Madison Square Gardens to seeing a Chase bank on seemingly every street corner. (Come to think of it, maybe that's just done for the sake of realism.)

A modest storyline is introduced with a mother frantic to find a "Jumping Jasmine" doll for her daughter. Santa (a solid Charles Edward Hall) knows what they really need is quality time and whisks the two off to the North Pole. This set piece is busy and confusing with no real focus as mother and daughter help the elves load presents for the big holiday. The costumes and choreography and busy set get in the way of each other here.

This is unfortunately followed by the show's newest attraction and its low-point: "Santa's Video Game." Instead of say, baking cookies or doing some charity work or caroling or some other low-tech enterprise, Santa gets the two to play a video game. OK, that's sharing time with your kid, so it's not such a bad idea. But few things are as dull as watching other people play a video game. This one involves rescuing presents from the castle of the Humbugs, not that you'd care. The animation is more detailed and convincing than in the first short, but creatively it's a flop. In a deadly dull segment, we don 3-D glasses and watch the two work their way up level after level. Because the game presumably features the Rockettes battling the Humbugs, they're placed onstage between the players and the screen. That means that the 3-D is downplayed so as not to spoil the effect of thinking the Rockettes are actually in the video game. But of course that makes you wonder why the heck you're wearing the 3-D glasses in the first place. Plus, the desired effect of making it look like the Rockettes have entered the game a la *Tron* simply doesn't come off in the least, not that the segment would be improved creatively if it had. Then the mother steps aside to sing a patented generic holiday tune called "Closer Than You Know/I Knew." In all, this probably takes 10 minutes; it stalls the energy of the show -- though not fatally -- and really should be removed as soon as possible.

Happily, things barrel towards the climax with a big sing-along celebrating the holiday followed by "The Living Nativity" framed as the mother reading the Gospel story to her daughter, which makes it feel



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**Dr. Peggy Drexler**  
**We Can Be Thankful for Each**

much more intimate and natural than the booming voice of God intro of the Nativity I remember from years ago. A clap-along for "Joy To The World" follows and we're done.

Overall, this edition was polished and more entertaining than my last visit and the perennials are presented with care. The Rockettes and their costumes look as fresh and precise as ever; those dancers must be exhausted by the time January rolls around but you'd never know it. Families will undoubtedly be pleased. It's a mystery why a show like this with its large budget can't find some original holiday songs worthy of it. Perhaps they've introduced some such number in the past, but every new tune presented here feels written by committee, though Mark Waldrop is given sole credit for the original tunes. Happily, the vast majority performed in the show are holiday standards.

A live theatrical experience doesn't need gizmos like 3-D. That's precisely the sort of thing a \$200 million movie will always be able to do better than a stage show like this. But what a stage show can offer is the live experience. Much of the demanding dance routines means they must de-emphasize live singing, but sticking to traditionals and giving a little more emphasis to a showcased singer or two at key points would place the focus precisely on what a show like this can deliver that TV and movies can't. Attempts to be contemporary and hip are always misplaced -- God help me, I still remember the horrors of a rapping Santa from my last visit. When the Rockettes are front and center, dancing with precision, no special 3-D glasses are needed to enjoy yourself.

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**Note:** Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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