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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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Theater: "White Christmas" Early Present For Holidays

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IRVING BERLIN'S WHITE CHRISTMAS *** out of ****

PAPER MILL PLAYHOUSE

Almost any Christmas-themed property you can name is being turned into a musical with an eye to touring it year after year. It's rather depressing to see *Elf* and *A Christmas Story* get musicalized whether they need to or not. But the breezy, confident musical *Irving Berlin's White Christmas* has enough old school pizzazz to chase away any cynicism and let you enjoy this crowd-pleaser on its own terms.

The show began in 2004 and has toured the country (and even overseas) while stopping on Broadway twice. But this is my first time, which surely helps in enjoying this trifle, based on the Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye and Rosemary Clooney film (itself spun off from *Holiday Inn*, the original source of the Irving Berlin classic song).

It begins with a glimpse of soldiers in the trenches in 1944, where two guys are entertaining their pals with that tune, a nice way to remind people of the standard's original impact. (Soldiers overseas and their families back home could only dream of a white Christmas together because they were separated by thousands of miles; this knowledge gives the tune a yearning, sad context modern listeners might otherwise overlook.)

Those two guys quickly become Broadway stars, with Bob (James Clow) a romantic and Phil (Tony

Yazbeck) the lady killer. Before you know it, they're looking for new talent, spot a sister act and darned if each guy doesn't seem perfect for a sister, with Phil eyeing Judy (Meredith Patterson) and Bob clashing with Betty (Jill Paice). The guys follow the gals to an inn in Vermont and -- what do ya' know? -- their beloved General from the war owns the place, though not for long if the bills keep piling up.

Before you can say "hey kids, let's put on a show," they really are putting on a show (in the barn, no less) and inviting all their old Army buddies to drop everything and come on by. Mild misunderstandings will arise and be dismissed with a song and a dance before the happy finale on Christmas Eve. If you're wondering whether snow will fall, you've never seen a Hollywood movie.

Paper Mill continues its run of Broadway quality shows with the sets and costumes and choreography and especially cast more than up to snuff. It's easy to overlook the professionalism of the four leads, but they smoothly make this fluff work nicely. Clow and Paice are the stars, with Paice shining in her big solo number and Clow making decency affably charming (no simple task). Yazbeck (a charmer) and Patterson have even more fun, especially on their tap-crazy act two opener "I Love A Piano," where Patterson reminds us what a presence she was on Broadway in the revival of *42nd Street*.

Lorna Luft handles the larger than life comedy with aplomb as the inn's concierge and belts out "Let Me Sing And I'm Happy" with convincing gusto. Perhaps the only surprise in the show is that she and the General (a solid Edward James Hyland) don't make it official before the curtain falls. Jacob Ben Widmar is first among equals in the strong chorus of singers and dancers, but everyone is solid.

The choreography gets stronger as the show goes on (especially the second act opener) and the costumes amusingly silly (like the aggressive holiday sweaters in the finale). Director Marc Bruni knows the show inside and out, but doesn't let it sink into a rut, from an amusing train scene to smoothly engineered set changes right up to the finale.

The only awkward fit among the songs is the act one finale "Blue Skies." Bob has just been angrily dismissed by Betty and he doesn't know why but it obviously upsets him. So to follow that by breaking into a song of pure joy (including a chorus of backup singers and dancers) makes no emotional sense in the otherwise smooth book by David Ives and Paul Blake. He could start off singing the song sadly and then segue into a full production as they rehearse the number, delivering it with gusto by the end though we know deep down he's worried. Or he might blithely dismiss the fight because he's crazy about the gal and certain he'll fix whatever is wrong, leading into a buoyant version. In either case, it would only take a few lines to set it up properly. As it is the tune makes no sense.

None of *White Christmas* is earth-shaking. It's just a pleasant diversion delivered with professionalism by a solid cast happy to be working and singing great songs by Irving Berlin. You wouldn't want to revisit it every year the way you do *Miracle On 34th Street* or *It's A Wonderful Life*, but it's a happy change of pace from the umpteenth edition of *A Christmas Carol* and a reminder of when Hollywood turned out fluff like this with regularity. It's not so easy, as countless Broadway shows hoping "merely" to entertain can attest. The show finishes with a sing-along on "I've Got My Love To Keep Me Warm," but we can go to the original, Bing Crosby.

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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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