NOVEMBER 3 – 28

by Philip Grecian

based on the motion picture A Christmas Story ©1983
Turner Entertainment Co., distributed by Warner Bros.,
written by Jean Shepherd, Leigh Brown and Bob Clark,
and on the book In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash by
Jean Shepherd
directed by Sean Daniels

PLAY GUIDE
ABOUT THE A CHRISTMAS STORY PLAY GUIDE

This play guide is a resource designed to enhance your theatre experience. Its goal is twofold: to nurture the teaching and learning of theatre arts and to encourage essential questions that lead to enduring understandings of the play’s meaning and relevance. Inside you will find:

• **Contextual and historical information** including a list of characters, plot synopsis and information about the playwright.

• **Evocative, thought provoking articles** on topics surrounding the play, which are meant to incite conversation and analysis.

• **Bridgework activities** connecting themes and ideas from the play to your curriculum.

• **Oral discussion and writing prompts** encouraging your students to draw connections between the play and their own lives. These prompts can easily be adapted to fit most writing objectives.

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

3 Play Synopsis and Cast of Characters

4-5 Growing Up Ralphie

6 Shep’s World

7 Adapting A Christmas Story to the Stage

8-9 Spotlight: Casting

10-12 Bridgework, Writing Portfolio and Works Cited

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SYNOPSIS

Christmas is a big deal to young Ralphie Parker and his friends and family in Hohman, Indiana.

This year, there’s a gift that Ralphie wants more than anything in the world – a Red Ryder 200-Shot Carbine Action Range Model Air Rifle – but his parents don’t seem to think it’s such a good idea. His mother warns him, “You’ll shoot your eye out,” and his father is too busy tinkering with the family’s furnace and evading the dogs from next door to pay much attention. Ralphie decides to wage a three-pronged campaign for the Christmas gift of his dreams. On the home front, he bombards his parents’ mail and magazines with Red Ryder advertisements. On the school front, he toils over a particular assignment that he’s sure will convince his teacher, Miss Shields, to take up his cause. Finally, he visits the local department store, nervously hoping that Santa will endorse his wish. Ralphie and his friends make every effort to be on their very best behavior in order to impress the adults who wield power over their Christmas destinies, but staying out of trouble isn’t always as easy as it should be; sometimes it’s hard to avoid giving into a dare or uttering a curse word. As Christmas draws closer, Ralphie gets increasingly anxious about what surprises (either good or bad) the holiday season will bring.

- Zach Chotzen-Freund

CHARACTERS

Ralphie Parker is our young protagonist. Equal parts dreamer and schemer, Ralphie doesn’t just covet an air rifle, he also knows (or thinks he knows) exactly how to persuade the adults around him that his cause is a righteous one.

Ralph Parker, Ralphie’s older, wiser alter ego, functions as the story’s narrator and assumes the roles of the various townspeople who populate the landscape of the play.

Ralphie’s Mother is a patient parent with firm convictions – in particular, the conviction that her son should not own an air rifle. It takes a lot to ruffle her feathers, but the provocative leg lamp that Ralphie’s father wins in a send-away contest does seem to do the trick.

The Old Man, the Parker family’s beleaguered patriarch, is a grumpy, good-hearted father with a penchant for highly original (and to the audience’s ears profanity-free) invective and a deeply held desire to be a winner.

Randy, Ralphie’s little brother, sure is cute, but getting him to eat his breakfast or don his snowsuit can be a serious headache.

Schwartz and Flick are Ralphie’s two best friends. Flick is the unfortunate guinea pig in the infamous frozen-flagpole-licking experiment, while Schwartz becomes the scapegoat when Ralphie accidentally utters an unspeakable word.

Scut Farkas is the schoolyard bully who routinely torments Ralphie and his friends. He has yellow eyes!

Miss Shields is Ralphie’s teacher. She’s also an integral component of his campaign for the perfect Christmas gift.

Esther Jane and Helen are two of Ralphie’s classmates. Helen is something of a child prodigy, while Esther Jane seems to have a particular interest in our young protagonist.
This perennial holiday favorite is set in a fictional town that very closely resembles Hammond, Indiana. Jean Shepherd, the author whose tales inspired *A Christmas Story*, spent his childhood in Hammond and brought it to life through his depiction of Hohman, the town where Ralphie Parker grows up.

Set somewhere between the mid-1930s and mid-1940s, the story is meant to recall an era in American family life, rather than any specific year. The late 1930s were a rough period for the country. After the stock market crash in 1929 that led to the Great Depression, the country continued to struggle economically until World War II. The unemployment rate was still at 15% in 1940 as President Franklin D. Roosevelt attempted to rebuild a nation with his New Deal. Women usually stayed at home to take care of their families, while men went off to work. The Dust Bowl of 1933 devastated farmers in the Midwest, and Indiana was no exception. The small but growing town of Hammond, with a population that increased by 80% between 1920 and 1930, was hard hit by the Depression. Every bank in the city had failed by 1932 and the WPA (Works Progress Administration) helped to build a new civic center and employ Hammond residents, most of whom had been factory workers. By 1941 the United States had entered World War II, being drawn in because of the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th. The economy eventually began to pick up as new jobs were created making war supplies, and by the time it was over in 1945, the country’s financial struggles seemed over.

But despite all the hardships, the 1930s and 1940s were an exciting time to be growing up. The first feature-length Hollywood film with sound had been released only a decade earlier. In fact, this era has been labeled the Golden Age of Hollywood and many stars were seen on the silver screen for the first time, including John Wayne, Katharine Hepburn, Shirley Temple, and The Three Stooges. *Gone With The Wind* and *The Wizard Of Oz* both hit
theatres in 1939. Walt Disney introduced the famed character Donald Duck in the early 1930s, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* became the first feature-length animated film in 1937.

Although times were hard, America continued to launch innovative ideas and inventions including scotch tape, the ballpoint pen, radar and the helicopter. Pluto was discovered in 1930, and scientists split the atom in 1932. Socially, people were more connected than ever due to the prominent role radio played in everyday family life. By 1947, 82 out of every 100 Americans reported listening to the radio on a regular basis. Popular shows like *Little Orphan Annie*, *The Lone Ranger* and *Popeye the Sailor* had every ear tuning in. Parker Brothers captivated young people with games like Monopoly and Sorry! in the mid-1930s, and the famed Daisy Red Ryder BB Gun was introduced to young boys in 1938. Pages turned throughout the states as the first *Superman* comic hit shelves that same year, and certainly all children begged their parents to save up for a new TV set that went on sale May 1, 1939. These items and more could be purchased at Macy’s, founded in Ohio in 1929, and Santa was certainly as important a fixture then as he is in department stores today.

Life was hard, life was thrilling, and it seemed as though new things were being invented every day. But looking back, growing up would have been just as exciting and challenging for Ralphie 70 years ago as it is now.

- Rebecca Davis
“Now here’s an example of the kind of humor that’s in your life, you see. It’s always in your life all the time, all the time, all the time. It’s here—it’s absolutely inescapable. Every place you look. There’s an old photographers’ axiom that says, ‘There’s a prize-winning photo within five feet of you.’ This is true. There is all the humor in all of mankind, all the sadness, all the greatness, all the gladness, and all the idiocy—it’s within five feet of you. Just look around.”

So spoke Jean Shepherd, the master humorist and storyteller whose richly observed tales of growing up in Indiana found their way to the silver screen in the beloved 1983 film *A Christmas Story*, which Shepherd himself narrated. The enduring appeal of Shepherd’s young alter ego, Ralphie Parker, is a testament to the wisdom of his philosophy—that humor can be found everywhere in the everyday, in the carefully captured, seemingly small but defining moments that shape our adventures. In *A Christmas Story*, this sensibility suffuses the memories of a man looking back upon the shenanigans, triumphs and humiliations of his 1940s boyhood.

Shepherd’s worldview reminds us that we, too, managed to survive our childhoods, and that the obstacles of youth take on a more comical glow with time. “These are the scariest days of a guy’s life,” he once quipped. “I use childhood as a point of common communication.” A celebrated raconteur who worked in nearly every medium before his passing in 1999, Shepherd is often compared to Mark Twain and James Thurber for his ability to spin stories that tap into the American psyche. He wrote for publications such as *Playboy* and *The Village Voice*, and published many collections of stories: among them, *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash* and *Wanda Hickey’s Night of Golden Memories*, which contain the seeds for *A Christmas Story*.

Shepherd was also a radio personality in Cincinnati and New York from the 1950s to 1970s. “For many thousands of fans, for decades, ‘Shep’ talked on the radio late at night, keeping them up way past their bedtimes,” writes biographer Eugene Bergmann. “He entertained without a script, improvising like a jazz musician.” Shepherd was one of the inventors of talk radio; in fact, an NPR tribute claims that “his ability to spin a long story, five nights a week in a studio, and on Saturdays before a live audience, was unequalled.” He also performed for fans and made comedy albums, and created several original television series, most famously, *Jean Shepherd’s America* for PBS.

Shepherd’s narrative powers knew no bounds. But across media, a defining feature of his artistry was an ability to vividly capture the silliness he noticed all around him. “A comic looks inward and sees himself,” he once said. “A humorist looks outward and sees the world.”

- Amy Wegner
Ralph Parker all grown up:
Both in the film and in the play, the adventures of the young protagonist are narrated by an older version of himself. The adult Ralph steers the audience through the frenzy of Christmas time activity, introduces the key players and frames the action with a mixture of adult detachment and childlike enthusiasm. This is an adult voice that understands every subtlety of the story's child-centered landscape and doesn't judge the follies of his boyhood self. On screen, he's an unseen narrator (voiced by Jean Shepherd himself), but on the Pamela Brown stage he becomes a central character, observing the action and offering a continuous stream of wry commentary. We’ll actually be able to watch both Ralphs, big and small, side-by-side.

Fantasy Sequences
The audience is brought along on multiple trips into the frontiers of Ralphie's imagination. Here, his parents and teacher behave exactly as they should, praising Ralphie's heroism, reveling in his intellect and extolling the virtues of the Christmas gift he covets. Whether he's rescuing his family from the evil clutches of Black Bart and his Desperadoes, bringing his repentant parents to tears as he demonstrates the dangers of soap poisoning, or garnering an A++++++ on a groundbreaking essay, Ralphie transports us into a fantastical realm where everyone gets exactly what he thinks they deserve. In the film, editing allows for very clear distinctions between “real life” and Ralphie's fantasies. On stage, the distinction needs to be equally clear, but it will be up to the director, actors and designers to use techniques like lighting shifts, acting adjustments and perhaps some very quick costume changes to distinguish between what is real and what is fantastical.

Seeing Santa
No childhood Christmas is complete without a visit to a department store Santa Claus, and Ralphie and his friends are willing to endure long lines and ever-increasing nervousness just to experience that fleeting moment in the big man’s lap. How do you make Santa as thunderous, massive and intimidating onstage as he is in the film? The director and designers have come up with an elaborate plan to create Santa’s enormous presence.

The Pink Bunny Suit
A Christmas gift from Ralphie’s Aunt Clara (who seems to think that her nephew is a four-year-old girl), this classic costume is as humiliating for nine-year-old Ralphie as it is hilarious for the audience. One of the most indelible images from the film is the sullen Ralphie emerging atop the staircase in his outrageous new pajamas, and it promises to be equally memorable onstage. If there were a Hall of Fame for the worst gifts of all time, this bunny suit would surely be enshrined.

- Zach Chotzen-Freund

More than 25 years after the film A Christmas Story hit the big screen, Jean Shepherd’s warm-hearted vision of the yuletide season has woven itself into the fabric of our most beloved holiday traditions. Ralphie, his family, and their fellow inhabitants of Hohman, Indiana have become familiar wintertime guests in many families’ homes. Now, Actors Theatre is tackling the challenge of recreating some of the most memorable moments and iconic episodes from the film onstage, where the action and excitement will transpire in front of a live audience, night after night.

HERE ARE A FEW OF THE THINGS TO LOOK FOR WHEN A CHRISTMAS STORY HITS THE STAGE THIS FALL.

The Flagpole
In what is perhaps the most famous moment of the story, Ralphie’s friend Flick licks a frozen flagpole in the schoolyard to discover whether or not his tongue will actually stick. It does. The event causes quite a ruckus back in the classroom, but what really puzzles Ralphie is the breach of “dare” protocol that precedes the incident. Schwartz, while trying to persuade Flick to lick the flagpole, issues a “dare,” then a “double dare,” then a “double dog dare,” then jumps directly to a “triple dog dare,” skipping the “triple dare” altogether. Seeing this famous moment happen in real time, before our very eyes, will be one of the great treats of this stage version.
SPOTLIGHT: CASTING

MAKING IT ONTO THE SHORT LIST: CASTING THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

Multi-generational casts in Actors Theatre’s holiday plays allow any person to find him or herself somewhere in the world of the story, and to create and share holiday memories. Each season, Associate Director Zan Sawyer-Dailey and Artistic Manager Emily Ruddock have the unique pleasure of auditioning the talents who transform into our favorite holiday characters. Literary Intern Emily Feldman spoke with Zan and Emily to find out how they went about casting young actors in some particularly giant roles this year as A Christmas Story makes its debut at Actors Theatre.

EMILY FELDMAN
What special considerations do you make when casting kids?

ZAN SAWYER-DAILEY
We’re looking for kids who are confident, who are good storytellers, and who appear to be at ease in the company of adults. We’re thrilled about the nine young actors who will appear in our holiday plays this year.

EF
How does the casting process begin?

ZSD
This year we put out an open call notice for children between the ages of six and thirteen, and we auditioned kids for three days, in five-minute intervals. They each told us a story about themselves, performed a short monologue, and sang a Christmas hymn.

EMILY RUDDOCK
The only role we came up missing in the first round of auditions was Ralphie in A Christmas Story. If you think of the film, you see his face with his little hat on, but we were most interested in the kids who had the right attitude.

EF
What were the highlights of searching for Actors Theatre’s Ralphie in a contest that took place in various public places all over the greater Louisville area?

ER
Getting Actors Theatre out into the community and letting people know that there are opportunities for local young actors is very exciting for us. A few kids had to compete with loud announcements, or people walking through their audition spaces at Slugger Field, Bass Pro Shop and Oxmoor Center where we held auditions, and they really handled themselves like pros.
Did you have a favorite moment from this casting process?

Gabe Weibel (age 6) couldn’t quite snort like a pig in his auditions to play Ralphie’s little brother, Randy. I started to do it, and he would mimic me, just like the scene in the movie. It was adorable. [Note: Weibel was cast in the role, and audiences can see his snorting for themselves in November.]

What do you think will most engage audiences about seeing this story as a stage play?

A lot of the kids who auditioned had parents who were fans of the film. Grandparents introduced it to parents, and now we’re finding out that parents are introducing it to their kids. It becomes a real multi-generational event for people.

How can students get involved in Actors Theatre productions?

I think there’s a theme about the importance of family, friends, and community running through the play that reminds me a lot of Louisville as I’ve encountered it since I’ve lived here. I hope that that comes through strongly and that audiences are pleasantly surprised by it.

We generally audition student-aged actors in the late spring or early fall. We will post more information at www.actorstheatre.org when we’ve set a date for our next open casting call.

- Emily Feldman
You've Got Mail

Ralphie spends a lot of time going through the mail, waiting for his Little Orphan Annie decoder pin. He asks if there is anything in the mail for him, because getting mail is exciting! It's fun waiting to see if the mailman has remembered you too. In that spirit, write a letter to a family member or friend. It can be anyone. Tell them about how school is going, how your hockey team has won every game or about your plans for this weekend. Put it in the mail, and send it away, and wait for that overjoyed response from the person who loves getting mail as much as you!

Secret Agent Man

After Flick’s tongue gets stuck to the pole, of course the teacher wants to punish someone, but no one will “fess up.” Ralphie says later that “It’s always better not to get caught.” Create your own spy/ninja/pirate/hero that manages to save the day and never gets caught. You can make your own costumes, and make a mask that allows you to hide your true identity from the world. Act out a scene with your friends complete with flashlights and cool sound effects. Imagine how you’d do it if you were on a real stage. What kinds of lighting and sound would you need to bring your scene to life?

Re-Gifting

There are lots of examples of people giving and getting gifts they, or someone else, don’t love. Ralphie gets a bunny suit, and the Old Man gets a weird lamp that Mom doesn’t like. Have you ever received something you didn’t like? Find a new use for it. Think about ways it can be recycled or reused. Turn an old boot into an interesting vase. Don’t like a shirt? Get some fabric paint and make it cool. Arts and crafts are a fun and interesting way to spice up the less than thrilling items in your house.

Do You Dare?

Have you ever been “Triple-Dog Dared” like Flick was to lick the frozen telephone pole? First you must get a group of 5-20 people in a circle. The starting player must come up with a very simple dare such as “I dare you to tap one foot” to the person on their left. The next person must do the dare, say the same dare to the next person on their left, AND add a new dare like “I dare you to tap one foot and cluck like a chicken.” How many dares can you do?

You’re As Cold As Ice

“Icy wasteland.” “Howling wind.” These are a few descriptions of the vicious winter Ralphie was up against in Indiana. Congratulations! You got the job as director for A Christmas Story and must decide how you will use the technical elements of the theatre to help the audience feel like they are watching the characters in the dead of winter. What sound effects will you use? What lighting will help set the mood of the harsh cold? Will you use any props or scenery? Then pretend a critic reviewed the show and hated your choices. Write a newspaper editorial defending the choices you made and explaining why they worked.

Bridgework

Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire (Spoiler Alert!)

Ralphie is constantly told “You’ll shoot your eye out!” by his parents, teachers and even Santa Claus. What happens when he finally gets his treasured Red Ryder 200-Shot Carbine Action Range Model Air Rifle? He shoots his eye out. Well, actually the BB hit his glasses breaking them. Instead of confessing that his parents were right all along. Ralphie creates a big lie that an icicle fell and busted his glasses. Create a scene where the lie doesn’t work out. What would Ralphie do next? Would he confess? Would he create another lie to cover up the previous fib? Write a dialogue between Ralphie and his mother using at least ten lines.

AT YOUR DESK

ON YOUR FEET
CROSS-CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS
Ralphie is assigned in class to write a paper and decides to write about why he wants the Red Ryder Rifle for Christmas. He doesn’t do a very good job and gets a C+. Write a persuasive paper on a present you want and give three arguments on why you should receive this gift. Will it help you, do you deserve it? Also address a reason someone would think you shouldn’t have it. Why are they wrong? Finish with a strong conclusion.

GEOGRAPHY
A Christmas Story takes place in the fictional Hohman, Indiana. How would the weather be different in the play if the author chose to have it take place in Haiti? Ireland? Australia? Look up these different locations and decide where the best weather would be and why.

MATH
Figure out your budget of what you would want to spend on your family and friend’s Christmas presents. Then make a list of 2-4 different ideas of gifts for each of them. Research prices and sales on each of the gifts and decide which gifts you want to buy. Add them all up and see if they are in your budget. If not, how can you alter your gift decisions to work with your budget?

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
Most of us have heard the song “Feliz Navidad,” which means “Merry Christmas” in Spanish. Research how to say “Merry Christmas” in French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Swedish. Next, look up how to say “Happy Hanukkah” and “Happy Holidays”.

SCIENCE
Flick licked the frozen pole, and his tongue stuck. Is that scientifically possible? How cold would it have to be, and how long would it have to be that temperature, for someone’s tongue to get stuck to a metal pole? Would it have happened if the pole had been made of wood? Plastic? Why or why not?

HISTORY
Ralphie Parker was growing up in the mid-1930s and mid-1940s. What was going on at that time in the United States? In Europe? What about Asia? Try making a timeline of major historical events from 1935 until 1945. Don’t forget about other countries all around the globe. This was an interesting time for everyone, not just Americans.

GLOBAL AWARENESS
Many of Ralphie’s memories are centered around Christmas, but there are lots of other holidays that people observe besides Christmas. If Ralphie had been Jewish, what might his family have done for Hanukkah? Do people exchange gifts for Kwanzaa? When is Ramadan celebrated?
NEW VOICES TEN-MINUTE PLAY CONTEST

The clock is ticking. If you are a young person who fancies yourself a playwright, now is your time to act, or better yet, write! The deadline to enter the New Voices Ten-Minute Play Contest is drawing near. As the clock strikes 12 midnight on December 31, the reading will begin to determine which eight ten-minute plays will be fully produced and performed onstage at Actors Theatre in April. Playwrights must live in our region and be 18 or younger. For more information about the New Voices Ten-Minute Play Contest and the New Voices Young Playwright’s Festival, please visit ActorsTheatre.org.

DEADLINE: DECEMBER 31