

Front Row Center with Thaddeus Bristol

Trite Christmas: Scottsfield's young hams offer the blandest of holiday fare

The approach of Christmas signifies three things: bad movies, unforgivable television, and even worse theater. I'm talking bone-crushing theater, the type our ancient ancestors used to oppress their enemies before the invention of the stretching rack. We're talking torture on a par with the Scottsfield Dinner Theater's 1994 revival of *Come Blow Your Horn*, a production that violated every tenet of the Human Rights Accord. To those of you who enjoy the comfort of a nice set of thumbscrews, allow me to recommend any of the crucifying holiday plays and pageants currently eliciting screams of mercy from within the confines of our local elementary and middle schools. I will, no doubt, be taken to task for criticizing the work of children but, as any pathologist will agree, if there's a cancer it's best to treat it as early as possible.

If you happened to stand over four feet tall, the agony awaiting you at Sacred Heart Elementary began the moment you took your seat. These were mean little chairs corralled into a "theater" haunted by the lingering stench of industrial-strength lasagna. My question is not why they chose to stage the production in a poorly disguised cafeteria, but why they chose to stage it at all. "The Story of the First Christmas" is an overrated clunker of a holiday pageant, best left to those looking to cure their chronic insomnia. Although the program listed no director, the apathetic staging suggested the limp, partially paralyzed hand of Sister Mary Elizabeth Bronson, who should have been excommunicated after last season's disastrous Thanksgiving program. Here again the first-through third-grade actors graced the stage with an enthusiasm most children reserve for a smallpox vaccination. One could hardly blame them for their lack of vitality, as the stingy, uninspired script consists, not of springy dialogue, but rather of a deadening series of pronouncements.

Mary (to Joseph): "I am tired."

Joseph (to Mary): "We will rest here for the night."

There's no fire, no give and take, and the audience soon grows weary of this passionless relationship.

In the role of Mary, six-year-old Shannon Burke just barely manages to pass herself off as a virgin. A cloying, preening stage presence, her performance seemed based on nothing but an annoying proclivity toward lifting her skirt and, on rare occasions, opening her eyes. As Joseph, second-grade student Douglas Trazzare needed to be reminded that, although his character did not technically impregnate the virgin mother, he should behave as though he were capable of doing so. Thrown into the mix were a handful of inattentive shepherds and a trio of gift-bearing seven-year-olds who could probably give the Three Stooges a run for their money. As for the lighting, Sacred Heart Elementary chose to rely on nothing more than the flashbulbs ignited by the obnoxious stage mothers and fathers who had created those zombies staggering back and forth across the linoleum-floored dining hall. Under certain circumstances parental pride is understandable but it has no place in the theater, where it tends to encourage a child to believe in a talent that, more often than not, simply fails to exist. In order for a pageant to work, it needs to appeal to everyone, regardless of their relationship to the actors onstage. This production found me on the side of the yawning cafeteria workers.

Pointing to the oversized crate that served as a manger, one particularly insufficient wise man proclaimed, "A child is bored."

Yes, well, so was this adult.

Ten-year-old Charles St. Claire showed great promise with last year's "Silent Falls the Snow." Now he's returned to the holiday well and, finding it empty, presents us with the rusty bucket titled "A Reindeer's Gift," currently running at Scottsfield Elementary. The story's sentimentality is matched only by its predictability and the dialogue fills the auditorium like an unrefrigerated boxcar of month-old steaks. The plot, if I may use that word so loosely, involves a boy named Jeremy (Billy Squires) who waits beside the family hearth for. . . guess who! When Santa eventually arrives, he chows down a few cookies and

presents our hero with a stack of high-tech treasures. But Jeremy doesn't want gadgetry, he wants a reindeer. Strongarmed into submission, Santa agrees to leave behind his old warhorse Blitzen (played by a lumbering, disobedient Great Dane the program lists as "Marmaduke II"). Left alone with his rowdy charge, Jeremy struggles with his pea-sized conscience, finally realizing that "Maybe it's wrong to keep a reindeer cooped up in the storage space above my stepfather's den." What follows is a tearful good-bye lasting roughly the same length of time it takes a giant redwood to grow from seed to full maturity. By the time the boy returns the reindeer to Santa's custody, we no longer care whether the animal lives or dies. I was just happy he was hustled offstage before his digestive system could process and void the eighteen pounds of popcorn it took to keep the great beast from wandering off before his cue. At the risk of spoiling things for any of our retarded theatergoers, allow me to reveal that the entire Santa-reindeer encounter was nothing more than a dream. Our hero awakes full of Christmas spunk, a lesson is learned, blah, blah, blah.

The only bright spot in the entire evening was the presence of Kevin "Tubby" Matchwell, the eleven-year-old porker who tackled the role of Santa with a beguiling authenticity. The false beard tended to muffle his speech, but they could hear his chafing thighs all the way to the North Pole. Still, though, the overwrought production tended to mirror the typical holiday meal in that even the Butterball can't save the day when it's packed with too much stuffing.

Once again, the sadists at the Jane Snow-Hernandez Middle School have taken up their burning pokers in an attempt to prod *A Christmas Carol* into some form of submission. I might have overlooked the shoddy production values and dry, leaden pacing, but these are sixth-graders we're talking about and they should have known better. There's really no point in adapting this Dickensian stinker unless you're capable of looking beyond the novel's dime-store morality and getting to what little theatrical meat the story has to offer. The point is to eviscerate the gooey center but here it's served up as the entree, and a foul pudding it is. Most of the blame goes to the director, eleven-year-old Becky Micheals, who seems to have picked up her staging secrets from the school's crossing guard. She lends to

clump her actors, moving them only in groups of five or more. A strong proponent of trendy, racially mixed casting, Micheals gives us a black Tiny Tim, leaving the audience to wonder, "What, is this kid supposed to be adopted?" It's a distracting move, wrongheaded and pointless. The role was played by young Lamar Williams, who, if nothing else, managed to sustain a decent limp. The program notes that he recently lost his right foot to diabetes, but was that reason enough to cast him? As Tiny Tim, the boy spends his stage lime essentially trawling for sympathy, stealing focus from even the brightly lit Exit sign. Bob Cratchit, played here by the aptly named Benjamin Trite, seems to have picked up his Cockney accent from watching a few videotaped episodes of "Hee-Haw," and Hershel Fleishman's Scrooge was almost as lame as Tiny Tim.

The set was not without its charm but Jodi Lennon's abysmal costumes should hopefully mark the end of a short and unremarkable career. I was gagging from the smell of spray-painted sneakers and if I see one more top hat made from an oatmeal canister, I swear I'm going to pull out a gun.

The problem with all of these shows stems partially from their maddening eagerness to please. With smiles stretched tight as bungee cords, these hopeless amateurs pranced and gamboled across our local stages, hiding behind their youth and begging, practically demanding, we forgive their egregious mistakes. The English language was chewed into a paste, missed opportunities came and went, and the sets were changed so slowly you'd think the stagehands were encumbered by full-body casts. While billing themselves as holiday entertainment, none of these productions came close to capturing the spirit of Christmas. This glaring irony seemed to escape the throngs of ticketholders, who ate these undercooked turkeys right down to the bone. Here were audiences that chuckled at every technical snafu and applauded riotously each time a new character wandered out onto the stage. With the close of every curtain they leapt to their feet in one ovation after another, leaving me wedged into my doll-sized chair and wondering, "Is it just them, or am I missing something?"