

DISCOVERY GUIDE



# A CHRISTMAS STORY

*The Musical*

BOOK BY  
Joseph Robinette

MUSIC & LYRICS BY  
Benj Pasek and Justin Paul

ORIGINAL DIRECTION ON BROADWAY BY  
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CHOREOGRAPHY BY  
Warren Carlyle

DIRECTED BY  
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EXECUTIVE PRODUCER  
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CENTER  
THEATRE  
GROUP



“There’s a gift I gotta  
get and it all comes down  
to Christmas”

—Ralphie

With just 24 more days until Christmas, 9-year-old Ralphie Parker is obsessing over the ultimate gift: an official Red Ryder Carbine-Action BB Gun. Despite the adults’ warnings of “You’ll shoot your eye out!” Ralphie does all that a young boy can to get his Christmas wish. Based on the popular holiday film, *A Christmas Story*, *The Musical* invites audiences to delight in Ralphie’s vivid imagination and childhood adventures.



“I only had twenty-three days left. How could I make the case that  
the Red Ryder wasn’t just a Christmas present—it was a necessity!?”

—Jean

“I take you back to the exotic city of— Hohman, Indiana—where the state line ends abruptly in the icy, detergent-filled waters of Lake Michigan.”

— Jean

This story begins on Christmas Eve at a New York City radio station many years ago. There, the show’s narrator, Jean Shepherd, begins recounting his “most important Yuletide season.” He takes us back to “the house on Cleveland Street” and a time nestled between the end of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the beginnings of World War II.

**Time: December 1940**

**Place: Hohman, Indiana, USA**



**LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT** The main setting of *A Christmas Story, The Musical* is a small Midwestern town that is loosely based on Jean Shepherd’s childhood town of Hammond, Indiana— home to several Native American peoples including the Kaskaskia, Kickapoo, Myaamia, Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, Peoria, and Potawatomi. Center Theatre Group’s production of *A Christmas Story, The Musical* will take place at the Ahmanson Theatre—home to the Tongva and Chumash peoples. Center Theatre Group acknowledges, with deep respect, their memories, their lives, their descendants, and their continued and ancestral stewardship of this land.

A *Christmas Story, The Musical* features an ensemble of over 20 performers. Many of them play numerous characters from Ralphie's neighborhood and imagination—from Santa to elves to bank robbers. Here are just a few of the folks you will meet:



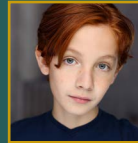
## THE KIDS



**Ralphie Parker:**  
the elder Parker child, 9, going on 10, bright and mischievous



**Randy Parker:**  
Ralphie's younger brother, cute and cuddly, whiny and loveable



**Schwartz:**  
Ralphie's classmate and friend, a target of bullying and a convenient scapegoat



**Flick:**  
Ralphie's classmate and friend, a target of bullying who won't back down from a dare



**Scut Farkus:**  
a loud, obnoxious, and intimidating teenager who bullies younger kids



**Grover Dill:**  
Farkus' younger sidekick who joins in the bullying behavior

## THE ADULTS



**Jean Shepherd/  
Narrator**  
a good-natured, all-knowing storyteller who sometimes plays other characters; an older version of Ralphie



**The Old Man:**  
Ralphie's dad, a gruff guy with a good heart who loves his family but doesn't overtly show it



**Mother:**  
Ralphie's mom, vibrant and warm and the secret engine that keeps the family running



**Miss Shields:**  
Ralphie's prim and proper elementary school teacher who is warm but stern when necessary

“In a way, [A Christmas Story] the movie is about these people, not Christmas or Santa Claus.”

— Jean Shepherd



# A CHRISTMAS STORY THROUGH THE AGES

The movie itself is based on short stories from Jean Shepherd's novels. These original stories were first told on a radio show by Shepherd himself over 50 years ago. Here is a brief summary of the origins of *A Christmas Story, The Musical*:



1955-1977 1966 1983 1985 1988 1997 2004 2009 2010 2011 2012 2012-2013 2017 2022 2023 2023



**1955-1977**  
Jean Shepherd broadcasts semi-autobiographical stories on WOR radio station

**1983** The movie *A Christmas Story* premieres in theaters and ultimately earns \$19M total at the box office



**1988** The film is released on VHS, and its popularity grows over the next several years; TNT airs its first 24-hour *A Christmas Story* marathon as a stunt

**2004** TBS begins broadcasting the marathon "24 Hours of *A Christmas Story*"



**2010** *A Christmas Story, The Musical* plays at Seattle's 5th Avenue Theatre in December

**2012** The Library of Congress selects *A Christmas Story* for preservation in the US National Film Registry for being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant"



**2017** *A Christmas Story Live!* special airs on Fox



**2023** *A Christmas Story* continues to air on loop on TBS on Christmas Eve, making it one of the most watched holiday movies of all time

**1966** Shepherd's collection of short stories are published in the books *In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash* and *Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories*

**1985**  
The motion picture debuts on HBO



**1997** TNT begins playing *A Christmas Story* on 24-hour loop during the holiday season, and the movie becomes a holiday ritual for audiences

**2009** Kansas City Repertory Theatre presents the world premiere of *A Christmas Story, The Musical* in Missouri with an original score by Scott Davenport Richards



**2011** The first national tour of the musical, scored by Pasek and Paul, kicks off in November and runs through the holidays



**2012-2013**  
*A Christmas Story, The Musical* runs on Broadway and is nominated for three 2013 Tony Awards including Best Musical

**2022** HBO Max debuts *A Christmas Story Christmas*, a sequel that features Ralphie all grown up



**2023**  
*A Christmas Story, The Musical* plays at the Ahmanson at Center Theatre Group

# SIMPLER TIMES

## MIDWESTERN LIFE IN 1940

*A Christmas Story, The Musical* is told from the perspective of young Ralphie as he experiences life in Indiana in December 1940. It is also told from the perspective of the narrator, Jean, as he recounts his childhood memories.

Some people refer to their past experiences fondly as “simpler times”; however, sometimes we humans remember the past as better, easier, or more fun than it actually was.



“Now when I say the word “I,” I don’t mean me, necessarily. It’s a universal “I.”  
And the “I” in this particular story is Ralphie Parker.”

— Jean

# 1940s: A NEW DECADE

Set in December 1940, the musical takes place at a unique time in United States history. The good times of the roaring 1920s were long gone, and the famous gangsters of the 1930s were dead or in prison. The country was still recovering from The Great Depression, a time when many people did not have work, shelter, or food. World War II had begun in Europe but had yet to directly affect most Americans.

Schools were still racially segregated. Most adults had not finished high school, only a small percentage of folks completed college, and most workers at the time did manual labor. Many households aspired to a middle-class lifestyle.

**“The Depression days were the golden age of the crossword puzzle. And my old man was hooked.”**

— Jean



# GENDER ROLES



In general, Americans in 1940 held a conventional understanding of gender. This included the different ways that men and women (as well as boys and girls) should look and behave and what roles each should play at home and in the workplace.

Society expected men to be strong, get a job, and provide for their families. It expected women to be gentle, find a good husband, and take care of the house and children. In the US in 1940, pink was for girls, and blue was for boys.

**“Well, get over here  
and hold this hubcap.  
No, not like that.  
Hold it like a man.”**

— The Old Man

**“And we’re steady and stable, a meal on the table each evening because that’s what a mother does.”**

— Mother





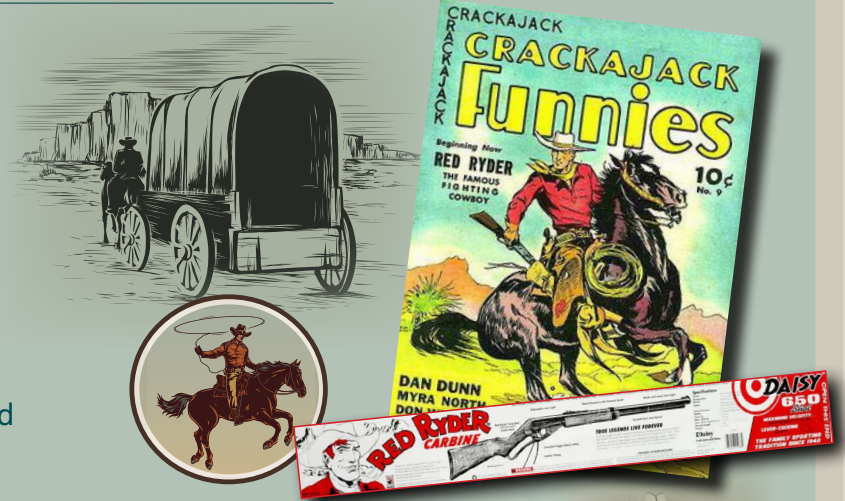
SIMPLER  
TIMES

# THE COWBOY MYTH

Throughout the show, Ralphie's boyish fantasies come to life onstage. These daydreams reflect his feelings and desires, many of which are shaped by the world around him. One very strong influence on Ralphie is the myth of the Old West.

Ralphie idolizes Red Ryder, a popular Western comic strip character. Red Ryder is a tough cowboy who rides across the American frontier upon his trusty horse Thunder. He battles bad guys with his Native American sidekick Little Beaver (a character that would be considered an offensive caricature today). In this simplistic view, Red Ryder is a hero. And what do all heroes of the Old West have? A gun.

In 1940, a licensed product known as the "Daisy Red Ryder BB Gun" really did exist. It topped many children's wish lists.



**“You don’t need a steed to be a cowboy...what you really need to be a cowboy fearless, keepin bandits tremblin’ on the run is a Red Ryder carbine-action BB gun.”**

— Ralphie



# THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE RADIO

In 1940, there was no internet. There were no smart phones. There were not even televisions (well, just a few hundred). The point is, radio was king. In fact, televisions would not take the place of the radio in most American households until the 1950s.

During the old-time radio era, families would gather around their home radios in the evenings to listen to their favorite programs. Children's shows, soap operas, comedies, radio plays, game shows, concerts, sports events— they all provided hours of entertainment via live broadcast radio. Of course, the advertising agencies that controlled much of radio programming made sure that audiences also heard their commercials.



**“Hi, gang! Are you ready to play radio on this blustery, blizzardy Christmas Eve? I am if you are. Yes, once again, right here on WOR in the heart of Manhattan, it’s “The Jean Shepherd Show.”**

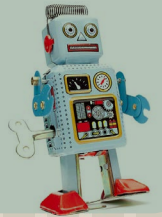
— Jean

# CONSUMERISM

The 1940s mark the beginning of the Consumer Era in the United States. Consumers are people who buy goods and services. Consumerism can be described as the desire to buy and own things and to define who you are by the things you own. After the Great Depression, more Americans began purchasing material items beyond necessities.

Advertisers marketed toy guns to boys and baby dolls to girls. They pitched beauty products to women and sportswear to men. People could shop at large department stores that displayed goods from toys to furniture to clothes. They could also browse products in their favorite magazines and receive items by mail. Companies made profits thanks to consumers young and old.

“The high-water mark of the pre-Christmas season was the corner window at Higbee’s Department Store. The window was now packed with gifts galore.” —Jean



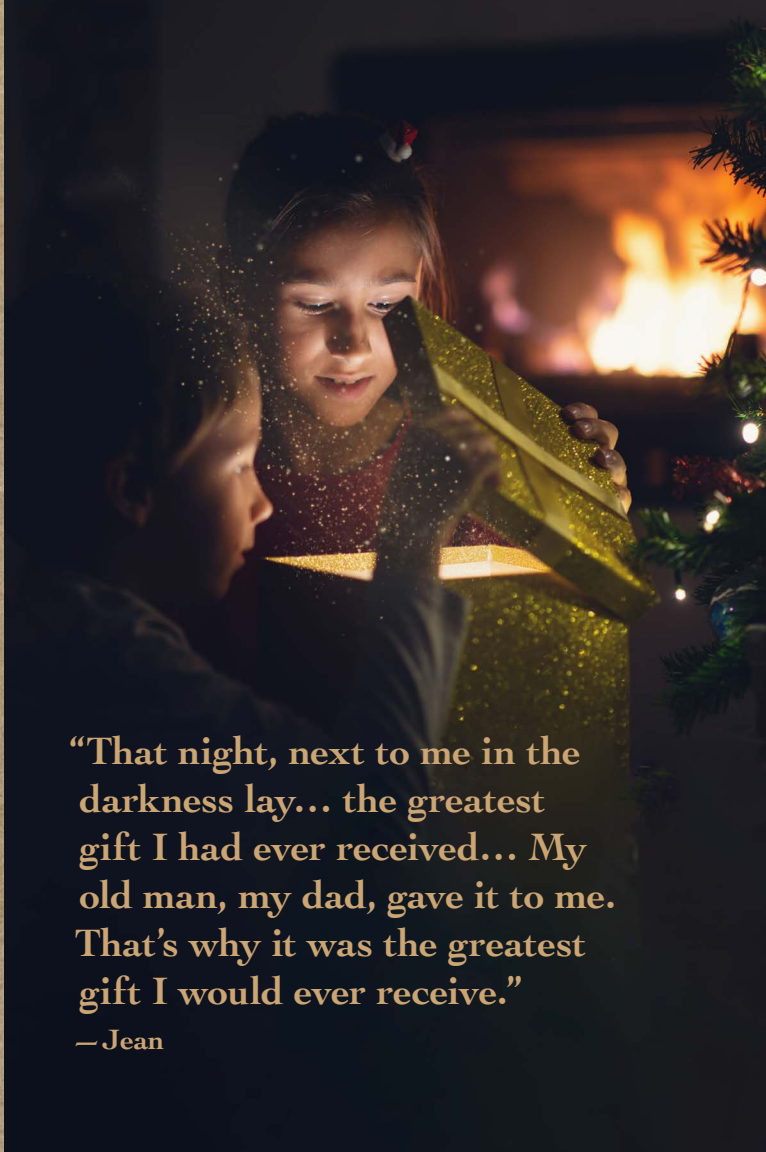
# Childhood Memories

In the musical, the narrator revisits his childhood memories of Christmas in 1940, and these memories evoke feelings of nostalgia. "Nostalgia" can be described as lovingly recalling and longing for your past. It can give you a bittersweet sense of warmth, fondness, and belonging.

What is the gift that you recall most wanting as a child?

What images, scents, tastes, sounds, or textures remind you of pleasant moments of your childhood?

What is a holiday, special occasion, or tradition that brought you joy or wonder as a child?

A young girl and a boy are looking at a large, wrapped gift box in a dimly lit room. The girl is holding the box, and the boy is looking at it with interest. In the background, a fireplace is lit, and a Christmas tree is visible on the right side of the frame.

**"That night, next to me in the darkness lay... the greatest gift I had ever received... My old man, my dad, gave it to me. That's why it was the greatest gift I would ever receive."**

— Jean

# Family

Ralphie lives with his mother, the Old Man, and little brother Randy. However, unlike some other classic holiday stories, *A Christmas Story*, *The Musical* shows all the ways that Ralphie's family is far from perfect. Although they never say, "I love you" out loud, they reveal their love in other ways.

What are some less obvious ways that you express your love for people you care about?

What are some less obvious ways that people who care about you express their love?

Is there someone in your life whose love and approval mean a lot to you?



**"Back in those days you never asked yourself, 'Do my parents love me?' It never crossed your mind. You were there. They took care of you. Their job was to raise you. Your job was to let them."**

— Jean

# There and Then, Here and Now

*A Christmas Story, The Musical* is a recollection of what life was like for certain people in the US at a specific time and place. Many Americans still celebrate Christmas, but fewer are shopping at department stores. Over the years, American society has changed in some ways but not in others.

How is your household similar to Ralphie's?  
How is it different?

How is bullying in schools the same or different?

What else from Ralphie's life still rings true today?

“Years may pass but still we will remember,  
wonder where we'll be, being here together this  
December all around our tree.”

— Ensemble



# Americana

*A Christmas Story, The Musical* features nostalgic Americana and can itself be considered a piece of Americana. "Americana" refers to things that are considered typical of United States culture, history, and geography. Common examples include apple pie, jazz, and baseball—all of which are considered characteristically "American".

Who gets to determine what is considered Americana and what is not?

Ralphie's obsession with the Red Ryder BB gun reflects US gun culture. Do you think guns are Americana? Why or why not?

What parts of your culture might you include to create a broader, more inclusive Americana?

**SCHWARTZ.** "I double dog dare you."

**JEAN.** "Now it was serious. A double dog dare."



# Creative ARTISTS

Numerous artists and artisans worked together to create this production of *A Christmas Story, The Musical*. Over the years, many folks have shaped the work you will see onstage. Here are some of those involved:

STORY BY

## Jean Shepherd

Radio host and humorist Jean Shepherd was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1921 and raised in Hammond, Indiana. Over the years, he worked at radio stations in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and New York. His often-unscripted on-air storytelling delighted fans. He wrote a series of short stories —inspired by his experiences growing up in the Midwest— for the books *In God We Trust*, *All Others Pay Cash* and *Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories: and Other Disasters*. From those stories, Shepherd co-wrote the screenplay for the 1983 movie *A Christmas Story*, which he also narrated. Shepherd died in Florida in 1999.

“The reality of what we really are is often times found in the small snips way down at the bottom of things.”

—Jean

“Our goal was always, if we could just write songs and tell stories, and get to do that every day, that’s our dream.”

—Justin Paul

MUSIC AND LYRICS BY

## Benji Pasek and Justin Paul

Songwriters/composers Benji Pasek and Justin Paul are best known for their work on the Tony-Award winning musical *Dear Evan Hansen* and the films *La La Land* and *The Greatest Showman*. Other projects include the musical *James and the Giant Peach* and the movie *Trolls*. More recently, they earned co-producer credits on Broadway’s *A Strange Loop*.

They both studied musical theatre at the University of Michigan and wrote their first musical together while still in college. Their breakthrough stage adaptation, *A Christmas Story, The Musical*, debuted on Broadway in 2012. As a team, Pasek often writes the lyrics and Paul the music, although they share creative credits.



# Creative ARTISTS

BOOK BY

## Joseph Robinette

Librettist Joseph Robinette has written and co-written the texts for more than 55 published plays and musicals. The Children's Theatre Foundation of America awarded him a medallion for his "body of dramatic works for family audiences in the United States and beyond." His work includes stage adaptations of *Charlotte's Web*; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; *Stuart Little*; and *Anne of Green Gables*. Robinette received Tony and DramaDesk Award nominations for the libretto of *A Christmas Story, The Musical*. In addition to writing plays and musicals, Robinette also teaches theatre arts.

**"I find that students often learn from each other more than they do from the instructor."**

—Joseph Robinette

DIRECTED BY

## Matt Lenz

Matt Lenz is a New York City-based director from Rockford, Illinois. He earned his BA in Speech and Theater at Wagner College and then worked as a professional actor and theatre publicist. On Broadway, he worked as Resident Director of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* before associate directing the musicals *Hairspray*, *Catch Me If You Can*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. In 2014, he directed the current national touring production of *A Christmas Story, The Musical*. In 2018, he directed the US premiere of *Grumpy Old Men: The Musical*, which later debuted on the West Coast in 2019 at La Mirada Theatre.

**"The stories we tell in the theatre matter—they have the power to heal, to change hearts and minds—and at their best they reflect our humanity."**

—Matt Lenz

CHOREOGRAPY BY

## Warren Carlyle

British director/choreographer Warren Carlyle's dream to dance began at age 10 when he saw the movie musical *Top Hat*. He trained in dance in England, and his US career began when he assisted director Susan Stroman on *The Producers* on Broadway. In 2000, Carlyle moved to New York, where he later directed and choreographed the Broadway revival of *Finnian's Rainbow*. Since then, Carlyle has choreographed Broadway productions such as *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Chaplin*, *Kiss Me Kate*, and *The Music Man*. He won the Tony Award for Best Choreography for his work on *After Midnight*. You may also recognize Carlyle from his many appearances on FOX's *So You Think You Can Dance*.

**"I spend lots of time thinking about what I'm going to do before I do it. I work for hours..."**

—Warren Carlyle

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## FURTHER RESOURCES

[A Christmas Story: The Musical](#) videos from Broadway and across the country

Backstage Tour of [A Christmas Story: The Musical](#) on Broadway

NYT's [Anatomy of A Number: A Christmas Story](#)

Radio episodes of [The Jean Shepherd Show](#)

[Dramatic Publishing by Joseph Robinette](#)

[A Christmas Story](#) House and Museum

[Debunking the Myth of the American West](#) Unit Guide

American Enterprise Exhibition: [The Consumer Era, 1940s-1970s](#)

Library of Congress US History Primary Source Timeline: [Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945](#)

Pew Research Center Report: [America's Complex Relationship With Guns](#).

*“Ralphie—you’ll shoot your eye out!”—Mother*