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‘Every Christmas Story Ever Told’ destined to be a BHC

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When it comes to Christmas, there are three kinds of people: haters, traditionalists and folks so gaga about the holiday that they laud every Yuletide tale known to man. All three are on stage at Lab Theater beginning tonight when *Every Christmas Story Ever Told (and Then Some)* opens in the River District.

Director Lauren Redecker Miller likens *Every Christmas Story Ever Told* to a giant jigsaw puzzle because of the intricacy of all the entrances, exits, props, sound and light cues required by Michael



Carleton, James FitzGerald, John K. Alvarez & Will Knapp's spritely script. But from the audience's perspective, *Every Christmas Story* is more of a tapestry, with Heather McLemore Johnson, Dave Matthew Chesebro and Kayleigh O'Connell quilting together a veritable blizzard of references to BHCs – short for “beloved holiday classics.” And aside from the sheer joy of watching this all-in, high-energy Tinseltown Trio



act up and act out with each other on the Lab Theater stage, much of the fun associated with this frenetic three-actor tour de force is trying to identify the movies, television specials, books and magazines tumbling out like the irregular pieces an interlocking, tessellating Spilsbury dissected map.

If you're looking for an apt analogy, *Every Christmas Story Ever Told* is to the holiday season what *An Act of God* or *The Bible Unabridged* is to Judeo-Christian religion – an



affectionately irreverent lampoon of time-honored traditions that Western culture has installed over the centuries to celebrate (depending on your view) the winter solstice, the birth of Christ or unabashed and wonton commercialization. If you loved either of those shows, you're in for a figgy-pudding-caliber treat. Really, who among us hasn't poked fun at one or all of the bombastic BHCs that assault the



airwaves earlier and earlier each year?

Don't worry if you miss some of the references. There's no quiz following the show – although perhaps there should be a prize like on a cruise ship for the audience member who correctly identifies the most BHCs mentioned during the show!

For older audience members, *Every Christmas Story Ever Told* is a nostalgic trip down Santa Claus Lane. For Millennials, it's a rare opportunity to gain insight into the



insanity of the ever-expanding season in which the Hallmark Channels and Lifetime begin airing Christmas-themed movies 24/7 beginning in October (yes Stephen Colbert, they started more than a month ago) – and that's after a full month of holiday romances during Christmas in July.

By design, the acting in *Every Christmas Story Ever Told* is way, way over the rooftop, which pratfalls smack dab in Kayleigh O'Connell's wheelhouse as a comedic actor. For this show, O'Connell pulls out all the stops, stringing together a medley of slapstick, farce, blunder, irony,



melodrama and parody like multi-colored popcorn garland on a frocked Douglas fir Christmas tree. After scene-stealing performances in *Crimes of the Heart* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane – a Parody of the Horror*, O’Connell deserved to be featured in a much larger role. She’s Aces in this one, brimming with contagious enthusiasm and champagne effervescent throughout the two-hour show. It’s clear that Kayleigh was one of those kids growing up who had trouble falling asleep on Christmas Eve. In fact, she probably still does.



Dave Chesebro also gets to showcase his humorous side compliments of Carleton/FitzGerald/Alvarez/Knapp’s wonderful script. Chesebro is coming off the high of winning the Audience Choice Award for his one-act comedy, “Sunny with a Chance of Social Anxiety,” in mid-November in Lab Theater’s 24-Hour Playwriting Project. Like O’Connell and Heather McLemore Johnson, Chesebro plays dozens of characters. But overall,



he's that guy who believes in Santa – and correlatively, the innate goodness in people – in spite of all evidence to the contrary. It's a testament to his talent that Chesebro is able to so effectively convey that joyous, Pollyannish attitude we all possess before we're rendered jaded, cynical and (dare I say it?) bitter by life's experiences the other eleven months of the year.

There's something for everyone in *Every Christmas Story Ever Told*, including haters. If you're bah humbug and detest everything that Christmas is and has become, you are simply going to adore the myriad roles played by Heather McLemore Johnson in this



show. Johnson's characters vacillate between traditionalist (read, would rather hear ghost stories at Christmas like back in Victorian days) and denier. In either instance, she's the absolute epitome of that put-upon sales clerk who's besieged by annoying carolers in the food court while she's trying to wolf down some sustenance during her meager half-hour lunch break. Johnson speaks volumes with just "that look." She has so many



super scenes in *Every Christmas Story Ever Told* that it's almost unfair to single out just one, but she is at her absolute very best during a Dating-Game-style trivia show in which she quantifies how much Santa's sleigh would have to weigh, how fast it would have to travel, and the millions of cookies and gallons of milk he'd have to consume for the legend to be true.

Every Christmas Story Ever Told is billed as an BHC mash-up and nowhere is this more in evidence than in the play's fast-paced Act Two in which the playwrights juxtapose and



intermingle Dickens *A Christmas Carol* with *It's a Wonderful Life*. It's hysterical, particularly if you've watched either enough times that you can anticipate, if not recite lines of dialogue from these BHCs. While old Ebenezer would have undoubtedly scoffed, Charles Dickens, Frank Capra and Jimmy Stewart would have laughed their asses off.



No one is going to claim that *Every Christmas Story Ever Told* is great theater on the order of, say, *Anna in the Tropics*, but if it's sheer lighthearted entertainment you crave this holiday season, you'll be hard-pressed to find a better show or cast. And who knows, *Every Christmas Story Ever Told (and Then Some)* might very well become a BHC itself one day. You come and be the judge.



For more on the production, below.

follow the links provided

November 30, 2018.

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About the Author



Tom Hall is both an amateur artist and aspiring novelist who writes art quest thrillers. He is in the final stages of completing his debut novel titled "Art Detective," a story that fictionalizes the discovery of the fabled billion-dollar Impressionist collection of Parisian art dealer Josse Bernheim-Jeune, thought by many to have perished during World War II when the collection's hiding place, Castle de Rastignac in southern France, was destroyed by the Wehrmacht in reprisal for attacks made by members of the Resistance operating in the area. A former tax attorney, Tom holds a bachelor's degree as well as both a juris doctorate and masters of laws in taxation from the University of Florida. Tom lives in Estero, Florida with his fiancée, Connie, and their four cats.

