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Dramatic Publishing

A CHRISTMAS STORY

A Play in Two Acts by
PHILIP GRECIAN

Based upon the motion picture
A Christmas Story

©1983 Turner Entertainment Co.,

Distributed by Warner Bros.

Written by

JEAN SHEPHERD,

LEIGH BROWN

and

BOB CLARK

and

In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash

by

JEAN SHEPHERD



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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“Play by Philip Grecian, based upon *A Christmas Story*,
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and *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*
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The names of Philip Grecian, Jean Shepherd, Leigh Brown and Bob Clark *must* also appear on a separate line, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and *must* appear in size of type not less than fifty percent the size of the title type.

For Roxane

In the early 1970s *Playboy* magazine published Jean Shepherd's short stories about his Indiana childhood. I loved them, but even better than that, my children loved them, and insisted upon them as bedtime stories. Shepherd's stories did not appear in every issue, and so when one did (after months of waiting and disappointment), it was a family event.

One evening, during the Christmas season of 1983, we decided to take the children to a film. There was a new one at the mall theatre about which we knew nothing; it was called *A Christmas Story*. We sat in the darkness as the coming attractions ended. The feature began, and these words appeared: "A film from the works of Jean Shepherd." We jumped. *Our* Jean Shepherd? Yes! *Our* Jean Shepherd! There on the screen were some of the stories we'd loved, woven together into a cinematic whole, narrated by Jean Shepherd! *Our* Jean Shepherd!

As it turned out, *everybody's* Jean Shepherd. *A Christmas Story* was an instant American Christmas classic.

Sixteen years later Dana Wolworth, my editor at Dramatic Publishing, asked me, "Have you ever seen the movie, *A Christmas Story*? I think it'd make a great play." By this time I owned the book, *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*, which collected the stories that had been so much a part of our lives.

I didn't wait for the contracts to be signed, I began writing. I was three-quarters of the way through the first draft when all signatures were on the dotted lines. I could hardly wait for Shep (by this time I was referring to him by the nickname he preferred) to read the play.

Two days later, Jean Shepherd died.

I mourned his loss. We had never met, but he had helped me raise my children. He was an unbilled family member,

a favorite uncle. He never got to read the play. That weighed heavily on me. But as I finished the first draft and moved on to the second, polished draft, I found myself asking more and more, "Would Shep do it this way? What would he think of this?" I read the original stories over and over again, trying to capture Jean Shepherd's rhythms, the way he put his words together. Sometimes, writing dialogue, I fancied that he stood over my shoulder, giving me pointers. Often, in my imagination, I heard that wonderful laugh of his when I made a scene work particularly well.

So thank you to Dramatic Publishing, thank you, Dana, my friend and editor, and thank you, Jean Shepherd, the dear friend I never met. Ralphie Parker will ever continue in his quest for that Red Ryder 200-Shot Carbine Action Range Model Air Rifle, on the printed page, on the screen and on countless stages.

And you will live on.

— Philip Grecian

A CHRISTMAS STORY

A Play in Two Acts

For 2 men, 2 women, 5 boys, 2 girls*
playing 19 roles and some recorded voices

CHARACTERS

RALPH as an adult a storyteller
also plays: THE COWBOY
THE TREE LOT OWNER
THE DELIVERY MAN
THE VOICE OF A NEIGHBOR

RALPHIE PARKER Ralph at 9 years old
MOTHER his mother
THE OLD MAN his father
RANDY his little brother
MISS SHIELDS his teacher
FLICK his friend and classmate
also plays: DESPERADO ONE

SCHWARTZ a friend and classmate
also plays: DESPERADO TWO

ESTHER JANE ALBERRY a classmate
HELEN WEATHERS a classmate
SCUT FARKAS a bully
also plays: BLACK BART

SANTA CLAUS a jolly old elf; heard, never seen
(played by the same actor who plays The Old Man)

*The opportunity exists to cast the 19 roles with 19 actors,
plus extras, including children walking to school, on the
playground, in the classroom.

Schwartz's mother's voice is doubled by the actor playing Miss Shields.

Voices that may be done live or pre-recorded are:

The Radio Announcer

The Goldblatt's Public Address Voice

The Cruising Adolescents who cheer and honk

Extra children in the classroom; heard, never seen

PLACE: Hohman, Indiana.

TIME: 1938.

ACT ONE

(The stage is dark. "Deck the Halls" plays over the sound system. Down the aisle of the theatre comes RALPH, a pleasant-looking middle-aged man in a jacket and hat. As he speaks, the music drops in volume, but remains under his voice.)

RALPH. 'Tis the holiday season and Christmas fever is upon us. Windows are garlanded in red and green, yards are alight with plastic reindeer and milling crowds of shoppers fill the streets, stores and malls. I put up my tree last week. Had to assemble it first. Then I threw an artificial yule log on the propane-augmented fire and began to reminisce about Christmases past. The holidays tend to do that. I found myself remembering another Christmas in another time...another place.

(As RALPH starts up the steps to the stage, lights come up to reveal Hohman, Indiana, in a winter past. The stage is dominated by a cutaway two-story house located L and angled toward UC. The living room, L, is 8 inches up from the stage floor, and the kitchen, C, is 24 inches up. An inset step links the two rooms. A plant on a small table sits DL in the window alcove. The front door is on the L wall U of the window, a coat rack near it. U of the door is a staircase. Three steps lead to a landing, five

more steps rise U to another landing and a turn out of sight. In the living room, at the foot of the stairs and U, a hall takes a turn out of sight to the rest of the house. R of the hall, and angled D to the R sits a couch with a floor lamp behind it and a floor model 1940s radio on the D end. Just left of the center of the room sits an easy chair. There is a window D, indicated with a low cut-away or with a gobo. Over the living room, U of the back wall, is Ralphie's room, with a bed, desk and bureau. A table sits in the center of the kitchen. The corner of the kitchen is directly U. A refrigerator sits against the angled UL wall. L of the refrigerator a door opens to the basement. L of the door a short hall leads U to the rest of the house. A built-in counter travels along the wall, UR of the refrigerator, turns the corner and continues down the R kitchen wall. Above the sink is a window, flanked by cabinets. A stove sits R of the sink. The counter continues into a greenery niche with windows set at right angles overlooking the backyard. Steps lead down into the backyard where a fence begins at the corner of the house, angles D, then turns and continues straight offstage.

In the kitchen of the cutaway, two-story house, MOTHER, in a red chenille bathrobe, stands at the stove, dishing up bowls of oatmeal. RANDY sits at the table, breaking up breakfast rolls and stuffing them into his milk glass.)

RALPH. And there it is. The house on Cleveland Street in Hohman, Indiana, where I spent the festering years of my childhood. Yes sir, Hohman, Indiana—ragged vacant lots, American Legion halls and bowling alleys woven

together with a compact web of high tension wires, telephone lines and sewer pipe. This time every year the wind would come screaming over frozen Lake Michigan, laying down great drifts of snow. The air would crack and sing and power lines would creak under caked ice. Christmas was on its way. Lovely, beautiful, glorious Christmas, around which the entire kid year revolved.

(Light in kitchen dims. Light comes up R, D of the wooden fence. SCHWARTZ enters from DR, carrying, rather than wearing, a canvas backpack. Music slowly fades out.)

FLICK *(offstage)*. Hey! Schwartz! Wait up!

(FLICK enters at a run, stops.)

RALPH. Flick and Schwartz, my two best friends.

FLICK. Hey, you started any Christmas shopping yet?

SCHWARTZ. Got most of it finished.

FLICK. Man! You're done early! Whadja get?

SCHWARTZ *(looking over his shoulder)*. Come over here.

(FLICK and SCHWARTZ move away DC.)

RALPH. To us kids, the most important thing, next to "What am I getting for Christmas?" was "What am I getting my parents for Christmas?" The selection of presents was always done with greater secrecy than a State Department spy operation.

SCHWARTZ *(confidentially)*. I haven't figured out what to get for my mother yet, but for my father...

(HELEN WEATHERS and ESTHER JANE ALBERRY, the same age as FLICK and SCHWARTZ, enter from DL, talking and giggling. SCHWARTZ clams up.)

FLICK. What? Whadja get? *(SCHWARTZ gives him a quick poke.)* Hey, that's my sore arm!

(SCHWARTZ indicates GIRLS. FLICK takes the hint. The BOYS overdo nonchalance. The GIRLS size up the situation, giggle and move toward their exit DR. Once they are gone:)

SCHWARTZ. ...for my father I got... *(Takes a quick look around, reaches into his canvas backpack and pulls forth an old-fashioned, pump-style bug-spray gun.)*

FLICK. Oh, man!

RALPH *(leaning against the proscenium, L)*. A new Flit gun! The sheer creative brilliance of it was staggering. In the land of the rolled newspaper and wire fly swatter, the man with a Flit gun was king!

FLICK. Know what I'm gonna get *my* father?

SCHWARTZ. What?

FLICK. A rose that squirts!

SCHWARTZ. Wow!

RALPH. We'd all seen these magnificent appliances at Pulasaki's candy store...bright red celluloid, with a rubber bulb for pocket use. A gift anyone would treasure.

(FLICK and SCHWARTZ exit. Lights go down DR and come up full in kitchen.)

MOTHER. Ralphie! Come down to breakfast! You'll be late for school!

(Light comes up in RALPHIE's room. He sits at his desk, writing.)

RALPHIE. I'm coming!

RALPH. That's me, up in my room, planning my own Christmas purchases.

MOTHER. I'm serving up the oatmeal!

RALPH. I hadn't yet settled on my mother's gift. It would be either a perfume atomizer with golden lion's feet or a string of plastic beads the size of walnuts. It wasn't an easy choice.

MOTHER *(bringing RANDY's bowl to the table)*. Here's your oatmeal, Randy. *(She sees the mess he's made.)* Oh, Randy ...! *(With a sigh, she takes his milk away and he begins playing with his oatmeal as if it were modeling clay. MOTHER dumps the contents of his milk glass into the sink, then moves to the refrigerator for more milk.)*

RALPH. For my kid brother, Randy, I'd narrowed it down to a plastic water pistol, a rubber dagger or a tin zeppelin with little wheels and a friction motor. You've gotta be careful picking out a gift for your kid brother; if you get him something you've always wanted, it could lead to bad blood. I, myself, was lukewarm on water pistols, rubber daggers and tin zeppelins, so whichever one I finally chose was safe. *(Now the air is cleft with the sounds of countless large dogs, barking, baying and snarling, and THE OLD MAN shouting, "Go away! Get outta here! Lemme alone!" etc.)* Our hillbilly neighbors, the Bumpuses, had at least 785 smelly hound dogs, and

they ignored every other human being on earth but my old man. Every time The Old Man showed his face outside, the Bumpus hounds would come after him.

(Enter THE OLD MAN, RALPHIE's father, quickly through the front door, still shouting and out of breath. He crosses into the kitchen carrying a handful of envelopes.)

THE OLD MAN. Did you see what those lousy hounds did to the hedge? *(MOTHER shrugs and takes RANDY's fresh glass of milk to the table.)* I got the morning mail. *(He pulls forth a wad of tattered paper that has been well chewed by the Bumpus hounds.)* Most of it, anyway.

MOTHER *(back at the stove)*. Anything for me?

THE OLD MAN *(sorting through mail; with a grin)*. Sure, here you go: bill, bill, bill...

MOTHER. Very funny. Did you scrape the ice off the new car?

THE OLD MAN. Yeah. Engine's warming up.

(RALPHIE moves to the door of his room, listens for a moment, crosses to his bed, fishes around underneath and brings forth a can of Simoniz. He sits on the bed to examine it.)

RALPH. For my father I had recently made the final payment on a family-size can of Simoniz. The Old Man was a dedicated hood-shiner; an Oldsmobile man the way others were Baptists, Methodists or Catholics. I could hardly wait to see him unwrap the Simoniz on Christmas morning, with the red, yellow and blue tree lights mak-

ing that magnificent can glow like the deep flush of frankincense and myrrh. One of The Old Man's favorite proverbs, one he never tired of quoting was...

THE OLD MAN. Motorists wise, Simoniz!

MOTHER. What?

THE OLD MAN (*displaying a piece of mail*). Ad from the hardware store.

MOTHER. Oh.

THE OLD MAN. ...bill, bill, bill... "Occupant." Hm! (*He puts the rest of the mail on the table and opens the "Occupant" letter.*)

RALPH. Some days it was all I could do to keep myself from spilling the beans and telling him what I'd gotten him, thus destroying the magnificent Christmas morning moment of stunned surprise when he unwrapped that family-size can of Simoniz.

(*RALPHIE puts the can back under bed, grabs his school books and heads downstairs. The lights go down in his room as he leaves it.*)

THE OLD MAN (*reading*). "Do you have money troubles? Could you use a loan?" I can't figure that out.

MOTHER (*bringing RALPHIE's bowl to the table*). What?

THE OLD MAN. Somehow they *know* enough about me to know I have money troubles, but they still call me "Occupant."

RALPHIE (*entering*). Anything for me?

THE OLD MAN. Like what?

RALPHIE. My Little Orphan Annie decoder pin?

RALPH. I listened religiously to the Little Orphan Annie radio show. Annie and Sandy were always out chasing
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pirates or trapping smugglers. Best of all, whenever Annie got into a really tight spot, this friend of hers named Punjab would show up and cut the bad guys' heads off. What a great friend to have!

THE OLD MAN. Sorry, nothing today from Little Orphan Annie. (*RALPHIE goes through the discarded mail.*)

RALPH. At the end of each broadcast the announcer called out a string of numbers. Kids all over the country translated those numbers into the secret message, getting the *real truth* straight from Orphan Annie. Every day without a decoder pin postponed my spiritual and intellectual growth.

MOTHER. Come eat your oatmeal.

(*RALPHIE moves toward his chair.*)

RALPH. To a kid, the time it takes to get something you've sent for in the mail is longer than the time it would take to build the Pyramids singlehanded using the number three Erector set. (*Pause.*) The one without the motor.

(*RALPHIE sits next to RANDY who has congealed globs of oatmeal on his face, in his hair and distributed over the table top, islands of goo in a sea of spilled milk. His spoon sticks straight up in the oatmeal bowl.*)

MOTHER. Oh, Randy, don't play with your food, eat it!
(*RANDY begins to pout, cry and whimper.*)

RALPH. Most mornings my kid brother wore more oatmeal than he ate. He was a notoriously picky eater who had been known to go for years without taking on provisions.

THE OLD MAN. Stop that noise! Eat that food or I'll give you somethin' to cry about!

RALPH. My mother was more subtle. She'd invented a game to get the little runt to eat.

MOTHER. Randy, how does the little piggy go?

RANDY (*suddenly full of life, grunts twice*). Snort! Snort!

MOTHER. That's right! That's right! How does the little piggy go? (*RANDY grunts again. MOTHER laughs and claps her hands. She turns back to the countertop, picks up another bowl and conceals it behind her back, moving toward RANDY.*) How does the little piggy go? (*RANDY grunts again. MOTHER laughs and, in one smooth balletic movement, replaces his oatmeal bowl with a new one.*) Now show me how the piggies eat! Here's a new trough! Go on, show me!

RANDY. Snort! (*He buries his nose in the fresh bowl and makes pig noises.*)

MOTHER. Mommy's little piggy! Good piggy! Eat it all up!

OLD MAN (*sorting through mail*). ...bill, bill, neckties by mail ...bill ... Ha! Look at this! (*Turns the envelope over, opens it.*)

MOTHER. What is it?

THE OLD MAN. Another contest! Fifty Thousand Dollar Giant Jackpot Puzzle! (*He sits at the table, takes a pencil from his pocket and begins writing.*)

RALPH. The Old Man was hooked on contests. He entered them all. Match the Baby Pictures. Find the Hidden Objects. And sports? The Old Man knew sports.

THE OLD MAN. "What National League team won the World Series in 1907?" Easy. Chicago Cubs. (*He writes.*)

RALPH. The Old Man never lost hope. He believed that awards would come to him who was faithful, persevering and mailed by deadline.

THE OLD MAN. What's the name of the Lone Ranger's nephew's horse? The Lone Ranger's *nephew*? His *horse*? Who could...

MOTHER. Victor. His name is Victor.

THE OLD MAN (*surprised*). How'd you know that?

MOTHER. Everybody knows that.

(THE OLD MAN turns to look quizzically at RANDY, who nods solemnly.)

THE OLD MAN (*mocking under his breath*). Oh! Everybody knows that!

MOTHER. Victor belongs to Dan Reid, the Lone Ranger's nephew. You see, when the Texas Rangers rode into Bryant's Gap, they...

THE OLD MAN. Never mind. (*Buries his nose in the contest form.*)

RALPH. On and on the contests marched, all judged for Originality, Neatness and Aptness of Thought. All decisions, of course, were final.

(Blue smoke seeps out of a vent in the wall and around the basement door as MOTHER circles the table.)

THE OLD MAN (*reading*). "Where there's blank there's fire." (*Looks up, considering.*) "Where there's... *blank*... there's fire. (*Grunts.*) "Where there's..."

MOTHER (*now she sees it*). Smoke!

THE OLD MAN (*pleased*). Smoke! (*He writes it in.*)

MOTHER (*pointing*). Smoke! Smoke!

THE OLD MAN. I heard you. Where there's... (*He sees the smoke.*) Smoke! Ha! It's a clinker! (*He jumps up, grabs a furnace poker from a hook on the wall and throws open the basement door. Smoke pours out into the kitchen as he goes through the door, slams it, and descends noisily into the basement.*)

RALPH. The furnace was always producing something called "clinkers," which clogged the vents and filled the house with smoke. Whenever this happened, The Old Man would rush to the basement with his trusty poker to do battle. The Old Man fought winter tooth and claw, and there was never a letup. (*He exits. From the basement: Clank! K-Boom! Clank! K-Boom! CLANK! and under.*)

THE OLD MAN (*offstage, with a slight echo: a loud string of thoroughly incomprehensible invective*). Rassa frassa fram bassal frassa! *Summoning bench!*

MOTHER (*trying to cover both boys' ears*). Little pitchers have big ears!

(*RALPHIE stands, points up toward his room. MOTHER nods her agreement. RALPHIE exits out the back hall. lights come up in RALPHIE's room as grown-up RALPH enters it.*)

RALPH. The Old Man was just warming up his vocabulary. What he lacked in finesse he more than made up for in sheer ferocity.

THE OLD MAN. The sad oven *mitt's* gone out again! That dog *mad* clanky sunny *impinge!!*