

Film: 'Christmas Story.' Indiana Tale

THERE are a number of small, unexpectedly funny moments in "A Christmas Story," but you have to possess the stamina of a pearl diver to find them.

The film, which opens today at the Guild and other theaters, is about growing up in the early 1940's in a middle-size city in Indiana. In particular it's about 9-year-old Ralphie Parker (Peter Billingsley) who, more than anything else in the world, wants to own a genuine Red Ryder air rifle, one that comes complete with a shockproof compass and a sundial set into its stock.

"A Christmas Story" tells how Ralphie fares in his campaign to win such a Christmas present from his father and mother (Darren McGavin and Melinda Dillon) and a good deal of what it was like to be young in pre-World War II Indiana.

Just about everything that is good about "A Christmas Story" can be attributed to Jean Shepherd, the novelist and radio-television humorist who wrote the book "In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash," from which the screenplay was adapted by him, by his wife, Leigh Brown, and by Bob Clark, the director. The best thing to be said about Mr. Clark as a director is that he admires Mr. Shepherd's wildly hyperbolic humor, though he doesn't have much of a gift for translating it to film.

Mr. Shepherd is a most engaging raconteur who transforms small stories of everyday life into tall tales of fantastic adventure. In his words, an after-school encounter between Ralphie and a neighborhood bully named Scot Farkus becomes a collision of Olympian deities. Mr. Shepherd himself reads the sometimes very funny voice-over commentaries on the screen action and, you may be sure, is responsible for the bits and pieces of 1940s trivia we see. These include the sight of Ralphie's younger brother so bundled up in a pre-miracle-fabric snowsuit that he can't even move his arms. Those were the days.

Mr. Clark, the director of "Porky's" and "Tribute," does not have a light touch. However, his heavy touch is not quite the same thing as Mr. Shepherd's habit of finding humor through the exaggeration of language. The movie's big comic pieces tend only to be exceedingly busy. Though Mr. Billingsley, Mr. Gavin, Miss Dillon and the actress who plays Ralphie's school teacher (Tedde Moore) are all very able, they are less funny than actors in a television situation comedy that one has chosen to watch with the sound turned off.

Most of the period details are good and accurate. However, I'm not at all sure that the curriculum at the Warren G. Harding Public School, which Ralphie attends, would require that 9-year-olds read "Silas Marner."

"A Christmas Story," which has been rated PG ("parental guidance suggested"), contains some vulgar language, though not one particular word that Mr. Shepherd, talking on the soundtrack, describes as "the queen-mother of dirty words."

Vincent Canby

Home in Indiana

A CHRISTMAS STORY, directed by Bob Clark; screenplay by Jean Shepherd and Leigh Brown and Bob Clark, based on the novel "In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash" by Mr. Shepherd; director of photography, Reginald H. Morris; film editor, Stan Cole; music by Carl Ziffre and Paul Zaza; produced by Rene Dupont and Mr. Clark; released by M-G-M/U.A. At the Guild, 56th Street between Madison and Fifth Avenues; Loews 83d Street, at Broadway; Greenwich Twin, Greenwich Avenue and 12th Street, and other theaters. Running time: 98 minutes. This film is rated PG.

Mother	Melinda Dillon
The Old Man	Darren McGavin
Ralphie	Peter Billingsley
Randy	Ian Petrella
Flick	Scott Schwartz
Schwartz	R.D. Robb
Miss Shields	Tedde Moore
Grover Dill	Yano Anaya
Scot Farkus	Zack Ward
Senia Claus	Jeff Gillen
Ming the Merciless	Colin Fox
Flash Gordon	Paul Hubbard