'Christmas Story': bah, humbug!

By ERNEST LEOGRANDE

★

JEAN SHEPHERD is a master storyteller when it comes to spinning free association yarns about childhood in the Midwest in the 1940s. "A Christmas Story," adapted from a Shepherd book of such stories, this one about a kid's campaign to get a Daisy air rifle for Christmas, is not charming and doesn't evoke true childhood. It's bizarre and boring.

The movie has a screenplay by Shepherd, his wife, Leigh Brown, and director Bob Clark. Maybe it's the old story of too many cooks spoiling the broth.

Peter Billingsley as the kid, Ralphie, a surrogate for Shepherd's young self, is a bright little actor directed to behave like an animated cartoon. Once in a while a real boy breaks through and we see what this movie might have been like if its creators had relied on affectionate realism instead of caricature.
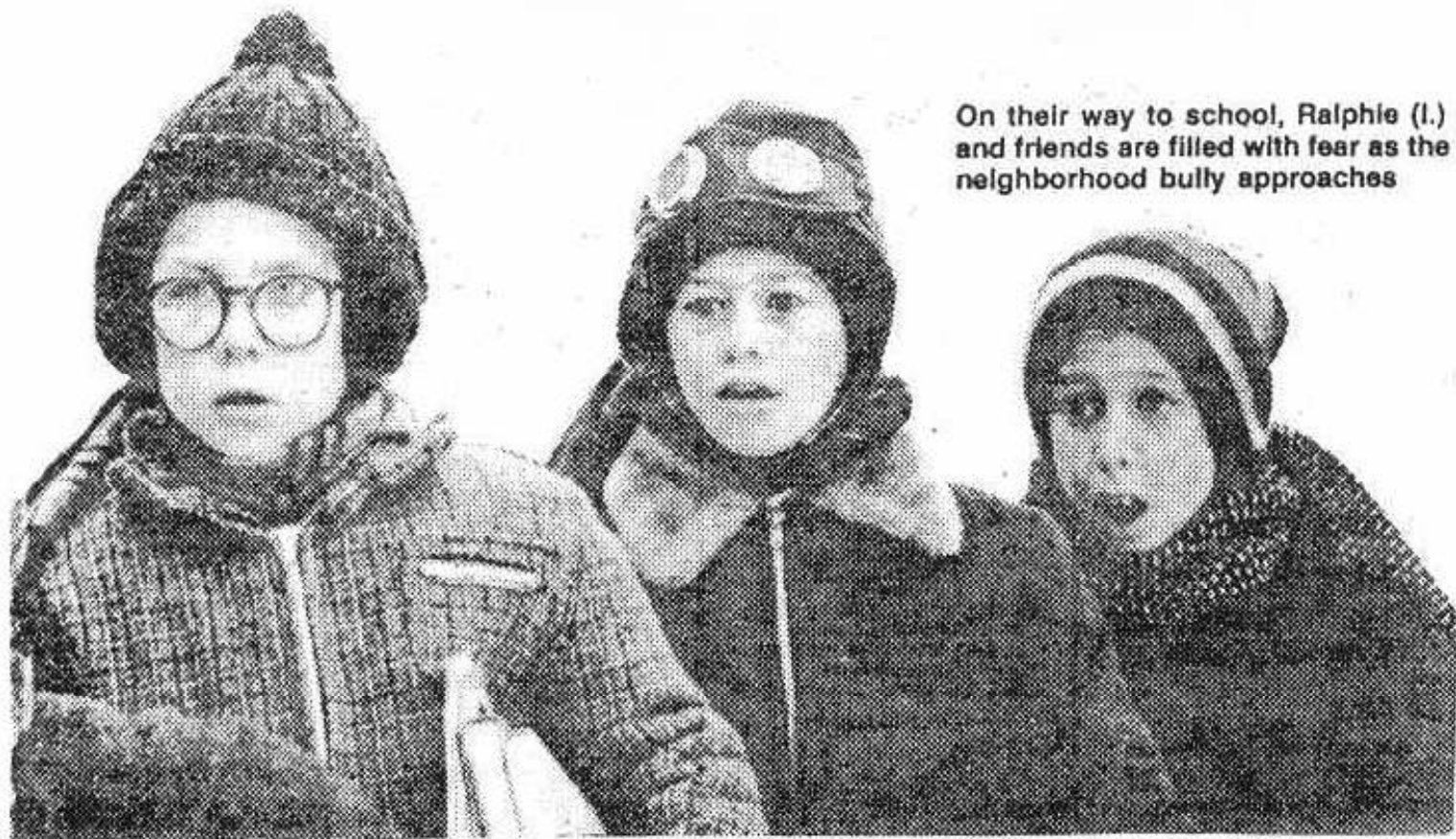
Billingsley, his father and mother, played by Darren McGavin and Melinda Dillon, and his younger brother, played by Ian Petrella, are presented as a house of loonies. Their personality traits aren't traits. They're manias.

Only once in the movie does this surrealistic attitude work for the benefit of a scene—in a department store where Santa Claus and his adult-size elves exude malevolence, browbeating kids into a fast on-and-off the knee before sending them down a terrifying exit slide.

Shepherd knows his territory. He speaks of Christmas as the date "around which the entire kid year revolves," the holiday that represents "the ecstasy of unbridled avarice." There is the feared neighborhood bully who blocks the path home from school, the inadvertently spoken dirty word that brings down the parental wrath, the privation of a single bathroom, the endless meat loaf for the evening meal.

It's all in "A Christmas Story," but it's as real as wax fruit.

On their way to school, Ralphie (l.) and friends are filled with fear as the neighborhood bully approaches