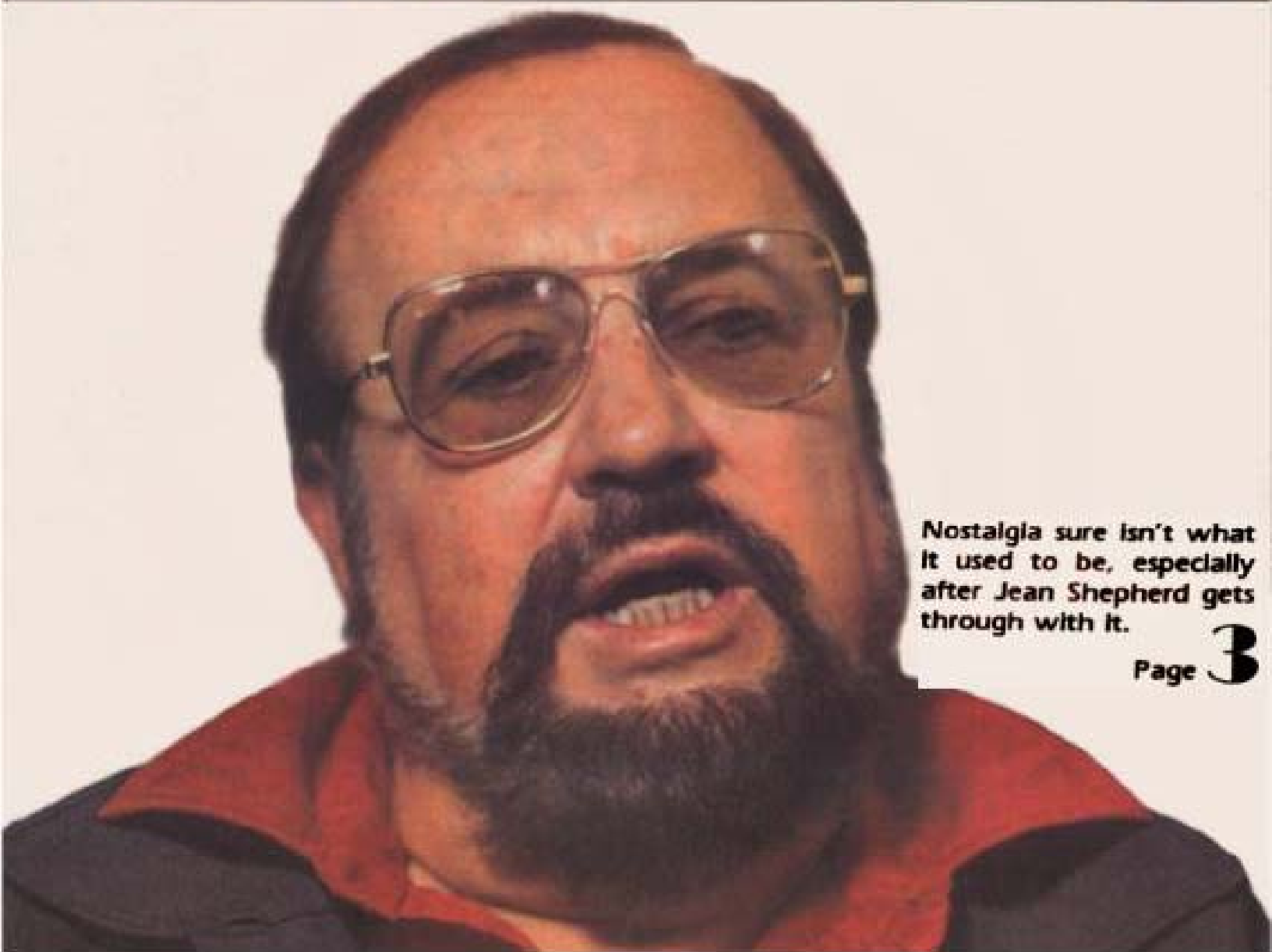


The Record Previews

*Bill -
from me,
Paul F.*

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Nostalgia sure isn't what it used to be, especially after Jean Shepherd gets through with it.

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Shepherd, man in the ironic mask

By Lou Lumenick
Movie Critic

Humorist Jean Shepherd has written six best-selling novels about growing up sardonic in the Midwest. His short stories have long distracted Playboy readers from the magazine's more prurient features. He's turned three of his tales into public television specials with titles like "The Great American Fourth of July and Other Disasters." He's delivered monologues on two PBS series ("Jean Shepherd's America" and "Shepherd's Pie"). And now, one of his middle-American yarns has been turned into "A Christmas Story," a movie that's currently the nation's top box-office attraction.

But Shepherd, whose wry wit has been compared to that of Mark Twain and James Thurber, complains that folks who live in the metropolitan area identify him with one thing: his late-night radio show on WOR. Every night from 1959 to 1978, he hypnotized a fanatically loyal band of listeners with the adventures of Ralph Parker, the disaster-prone Indiana youngster who figures in most of his stories and the new movie.

"You're never a hero in your hometown, and I made the mistake of being successful in New York," says Shepherd, filling his suite at the St. Regis with the kind of explosive laugh that crackled over the airwaves for 19 years. "Do you know what Johnny Carson told me? I'm not just name dropping, this really happened. He told me that when he goes home to Nebraska, people ask him, 'When are you going to give up all this nonsense you're doing on TV and come back to that great disc jockey show on radio?' There's an old show business axiom: God protect you from your fans. They never want you to do anything new or different."

On promotional tour

Shepherd, a stocky, bearded fellow, was not promoting something completely new or different (at least to his fans) during his recent publicity tour. "A Christmas Story," which he co-wrote and narrates, is adapted from a short story in his first (1967) novel, "In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash." The movie concerns, among other things, Ralph Parker's efforts to persuade his parents to buy him a Red Ryder B-B gun for Christmas during World War II. The atypical, apple-pie title is completely at odds with Shepherd's somewhat warped, hyperbolic humor, and he admits unhappiness over the choice.

"I fought it all the way down the line," Shepherd said. "It was based on a story called 'Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid' and I could accept that was too long for a marquee. My original title was 'Santa's Revenge.' We argued over dozens of choices, then finally settled on 'Boys' Life,' after the magazine. It turned out that Steven Spielberg owned it — it was the original title for 'E.T.' — and refused to give it up. Finally, by osmosis — and this is what causes Watergates — you settle on the one that nobody can get mad at but nobody likes."

Shepherd had already turned down several offers to film the story, including one from the Disney studio ("Can you imagine it with Dean Jones and a talking Volkswagen?") when he was approached by a then-unknown Canadian movie director named Bob Clark in 1973. The humorist was impressed by a stylish horror film that Clark had directed (the title was "Black Christmas," oddly enough), but it took 10 years to line up the financing for the project. MGM-UA finally agreed to back "A Christmas Story" after Clark directed "Porky's," a teen-age sex comedy that grossed millions (financially and otherwise).

Some schmaltzy touches

While Clark has injected some schmaltzy touches that are uncharacteristic of Shepherd's work, the movie remains true to Shepherd's rather unsentimental vision of the Forties. As usual, Shepherd plays the adult Ralph, who is never seen but continuously delivers his typically over-



A scene from "A Christmas Story."

blown reminiscences of the mishaps that befall his perpetually bullied 10-year-old self (Peter Billingsley), his father (Darren McGavin), and his mother (Melinda Dillon) during one particularly memorable holiday season. At one point, a mildly sadistic Santa Claus kicks Ralph down a chute from the top of a three-story mountain that the film's makers actually erected in a Cleveland department store. "Miracle on 34th Street" it isn't.

"I think nostalgia is one of the great sicknesses of America," Shepherd declares. "What my work says is: If you think it's bad now, you should have seen it then. You'll notice that nothing works out for the kid. He gets hit with

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— Jean Shepherd

the gun, the furnace blows up, the dogs go wild, and the family winds up having to go to a Chinese restaurant for Christmas."

Which brings up the inevitable question of exactly how autobiographical Shepherd's work is. He admits that — like Ralph Parker — he grew up in Hammond, Ind., an industrial city abutting Chicago, worked in a steel mill as a teen-ager, and served in the Army. But Shepherd is evasive to the point of being intentionally misleading about the actual details of his personal life. For instance, he says that he taught for a time at New York University and that his father was a cartoonist for the Chicago Tribune — red herrings that are disputed by both institutions.

Deceptively realistic writing

Shepherd rather incredibly asserts that he first came to New York to appear in the Broadway revue "New Faces of 1961," though a 1955 interview with The Record has him already working for WOR and residing in New Milford. ("I never lived in New Jersey," the sixtyish humorist flatly states, dismissing his three-acre farm in Warren County as an investment and repository for old records and tapes that overflowed his Greenwich Village apartment.)

Given his penchant for invention, Shepherd may very well be telling the truth when he insists that his first-person stories are mostly fictional.

"Though it's a very different kind of writing, my style is a lot like J. D. Salinger's," said Shepherd, who is not exactly given to modesty. "When you read Salinger, you'd swear it was all about him. His stuff is so realistic that you

assume that it really happened. That's good fiction. You take Harold Robbins. You can't believe a word. All writers are autobiographical to some extent, but fiction is taking your knowledge of life and putting it through a filter and turning it into something entirely different. My mother, reading my stories, often said, 'I don't know where you get all this stuff.' She was nothing like the mother in the movie, nor was my father."

According to Shepherd, Salinger would probably be accused of writing about himself if he had a radio show.

"I think the guys who have heard me on the radio are at a very bad disadvantage. Outside of New York, they just assume I was writing fiction. People are used to radio as a factual medium that provides the time and weather, but I just used it as a nightclub stage. But because you didn't hear people laughing in the background, people took it seriously. That's why they put laugh tracks on TV comedies."

Shepherd actually attempted a situation comedy a few years ago, a new version of "The Phantom of the Open Hearth," a story from his best-selling book, "Wanda Hickney's Night of Golden Memories and Other Disasters." The story had earlier been adapted into a PBS special.

"ABC still owns it, but it was far too advanced for them. The network executives took one look at it and said, 'Holy God, the average crowd won't understand that.' They must have a warehouse half the size of Manhattan filled with unsold pilots. Occasionally, they trot them out disguised as made-for-TV movies."

Movie's doing surprisingly well

Shepherd thinks the pilot may be dusted off if "A Christmas Story" hits pay dirt at the box office. Despite mixed reviews, the movie is doing surprisingly well, apparently aided by strong word-of-mouth. The movie sold \$3.93 million in tickets last weekend, a 90-percent increase in business over its opening three-day total. That made it the weekend's top-grossing film, though the No. 2 film ("Terms of Endearment") is a much bigger hit, making nearly as much money though playing in only a third as many theaters.

Shepherd has plenty of other irons in the fire, however. He's still in demand as a stand-up comic, recently doing a gig at The Improvisation in Los Angeles. His latest collection of stories, "Banjo Butt Meets Julia Child," is due out next month. His third film for PBS's American Playhouse — "The Star-Crossed Romance of Josephine Cosnowski" — will air sometime next year. And he's filming new episodes of "Jean Shepherd's America," the critically lauded travelogue-monologue series that ran on public television back in 1971.

"I just got back from the Okefenokee Swamp in Florida," said Shepherd, who has homes in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and Portland, Maine, as well as in Manhattan and New Jersey. "That's one of the advantages of modern show biz — you can live anywhere you like. It doesn't matter; your next job is always 2,000 miles away."