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VW Review: MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET at Roxy Regional Theatre is Beautifully Wrapped

by Jeffrey Ellis Nov. 27, 2018

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"Black Friday" is a phrase sure to strike terror in the hearts of anyone who has ever worked retail on the Friday after Thanksgiving - particularly if you've toiled in the shopping jungle of a major department store like, say, Macy's. Even writing those words sends a shiver up my spine (for almost a decade, I sold tailored clothing for the retail behemoth) and so it should come as no surprise that a musical that celebrates all that - plus efforts to prove that one seemingly daft old man is the real **Santa Claus** - doesn't prove to be the uplifting holiday season experience one might expect, no matter how well intentioned the effort might be.

Now onstage at the Roxy Regional Theatre in Clarksville through December 22, *Miracle on 34th Street* is among a small number of titles available to theater companies all over the United States looking for seasonal entertainment options for their loyal fans and season ticket holders. In fact, there's another production of the show opening at Murfreesboro's Center for the Arts this weekend and Chaffin's Barn Dinner Theatre in Nashville has announced the show as its holiday offering in 2019.

Based on the 1947 film classic of the same name, *Miracle on 34th Street* - the 1963 stage musicalization with book, lyrics and music by **Meredith Willson**, the man behind Broadway hits *The Music Man* and *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* - tells the story of a young girl who has been raised to not believe in fairy tales by her no-nonsense, career-driven mother, who just so happens to be the Macy's executive in charge of its annual Thanksgiving Day parade.

Miracle on 34th Street - the film - is a fondly remembered holiday classic, as much a part of Christmastime revelries as caroling, gift-wrapping and retellings of "The Night Before Christmas." The musical? Not so much. In fact, upon reflection, the musical stage version of *Miracle of 34th Street* seems rather leaden, its ponderous book is dated and sexist, the score largely unmemorable and unmelodic (save for Willson's 1951 song, "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas," which is sung in counterpoint to "Pinecones and Holly Berries," written expressly for the musical). Even a name change from *Here's Love* (the show's title for its Broadway debut in 1963 - under which it ran a respectable 300+ performances) to *Miracle on 34th Street*, a decision we can heartily endorse, doesn't help matters.

Even the best efforts of director [Ryan Bowie](#), musical director Matthew McNeil and their appealing and talented cast can't save *Miracle on 34th Street* - and that is truly unfortunate, for they deserve to be seen and to be appreciated by their audiences. Granted, perhaps my retail background has colored my perceptions and responses to the show (which is *critical speak* for softening the blow).

But much like a beautifully wrapped package under the tree that disguises the toaster oven mom never knew she wanted or needed, the creativity can't compensate for a badly written show and score. The set design, which is credited to the multi-talented Bowie and Emily Rourke (as talented a team of theater artists as you could find anywhere on the planet), is gorgeous and the actors are clothed in period-perfect fashion. Noel Rennerfeldt's lighting illuminates each scene for maximum impact, smartly directing the audience's attention where it needs to be focused.

As Doris Walker, Mia Bergstrom shows off her lovely voice and her stage presence and there is enough onstage chemistry between her and [Stephen Shore](#) (cast as lawyer Fred Gaily) to keep the action moving, but they simply can't overcome the weight of the burdensome script. Likewise, [Brian Best](#) is terrific as Kris Kringle, creating a wholly believable character who is charmingly self-assured and sincere.

Members of the ensemble - many of whom are making their Roxy Regional Theatre debut - work tirelessly to show off their versatility and showbiz acumen in bringing the show to life. [Kyle Smith](#) (as loyal Macy's toady Marvin Shellhammer) displays his laudable ability to play physical comedy, while [David Graham](#) is blustery and bombastic as R.H. Macy, himself. So seamlessly do the members of the ensemble morph from one character to the next, then back again and on to another portrayal, that you'll likely be surprised there are only 15 cast members instead of a much larger number of actors assaying all the roles.

Miracle on 34th Street. Book, music and lyrics by [Meredith Willson](#). Based on the [20th Century Fox](#) Picture, with story by [Valentine Davies](#) and screenplay by [George Seaton](#). Directed by [Ryan Bowie](#). Musical direction by Matthew McNeil. Presented by the Roxy Regional Theatre, 100 Franklin Street, Clarksville. Through December 22. For tickets and other information, go to www.roxyregionaltheatre.org or call (931) 645-7699.

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