

'Miracle' has a great Santa

Performances of "Miracle on 34th Street," presented by the Actors Alliance Theatre Company, continue Fridays-Sundays through Saturday, Jan. 4, in Southfield. For ticket information, call 642-1326.

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer

Kris Kringle is alive and well and championing the spirit of Christmas in the Actors Alliance Theatre Company's production, "Miracle on 34th Street." Jonathon Round plays Kris as a right jolly Santa, the kind any kid could believe in. The beard and white hair seem like the real thing, even from the front row, and Round comes with his own honest padding. Best of all is his delightful giggle. Not for him the false cheer of rowdy Santas who "Ho, Ho, Ho!" so loudly they blast any kiddies out of their laps.

This Kris Kringle is a gentle, elderly fellow who knows miracles happen, and he really listens to what the children say when they sit on his lap at Macy's department store where he works as resident Santa.

Unfortunately, nobody listens to him when he maintains he really, truly is Santa Claus. Instead they say he's crazy, and they subject him to tests given by a nasty psychologist who's part Grinch and the other part Scrooge.

EVENTUALLY the prevailing powers of common sense put Kris' sanity on trial before a magistrate of the State of New York. Given the time of year and the charm of the children who testify on his behalf, can there be any doubt how the trial comes out?

Of course, Kris does have a crack-jack lawyer, Fred Gayley, played as a square, stiff good guy by Randy Swansey. And Fred is in love with Doris Walker, a 1940s-style Yuppie with a daughter she's determined to raise in total honesty. That means no evasions and no Santa Claus.

Kelly Boczek is an unselfconscious delight as Susan. She comes to know and love Kris Kringle and to believe he is Santa despite her sensible upbringing. Even her uptight mother, played by Dorry Pelyon, begins to thaw under the combined spell of Kris Kringle and the persuasive lawyer.

Director Jeff Nahan adapted the stage version of "Miracle on 34th Street" from the book and movie scripts. He uses narrator voices to clarify plot complexities. The narration is a good idea that generally works well, except when he overworks it toward the end of the first act. Then it's distracting to have the storyteller lines jump rapidly from character to character and to have individual sentences chopped up and narrated by as many as three different people.

The level of acting in "Miracle" is



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top-notch, making it redundant when the narrators tell the audience what the characters are showing. Just by looking at Round's slumped shoulders and weary eyes as he's driven off to the psychiatric hospital, any kid can see very well that Kris feels depressed and withdrawn, yet the narrators feel the need to tell us. One 10-year-old sitting next to me said the narrators overdid it then, but all in all, she said she loved the show.

DIRECTOR Nahan has put together a worthy ensemble cast to carry the

multiple roles in the tale. Eight adult players and four children appear and reappear in different parts. It's a pleasure to see good actors and actresses transform themselves from one character to another with just the addition of a hat or a pair of glasses or a switch in accent. When it comes to communicating with body English, Maggie Wysocki is an all-out comic master.

A Christmas play wouldn't be complete without some cute kids. "Miracle" has five, including the delightful Kelly, and they handle themselves like professionals on stage.



In congress

Producer-director Philip Handleman of Birmingham (right) prepares to tape an interview with U.S. Rep. Sander Levin for the Handleman Filmworks television documentary "Brothers in Congress." The short film is about Sander Levin and U.S. Sen. Carl Levin, the only brother team in the U.S. Congress. No date has been set yet for TV broadcast.

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