

# KEEPING CHRISTMAS MUSICAL

Enjoy simple holiday pleasures at The Shedd's White Christmas

The yearly debate over Starbucks holiday cups and mid-October Christmas displays can make this season a tough pill to swallow — not to mention the stresses that unravel in the dead of winter.

Still, something undeniably contagious hangs in the air — something simply gentle. For holiday cheer check out The Shedd Institute's more or less annual stage production of a classic 1954 Irving Berlin movie musical.

*White Christmas* revolves around a duo of WWII veterans, Bob Wallace and Phil Davis (played by Ward Fairbairn and Eric Blanchard, respectively) who go from singing in a combat zone to becoming song-slinging celebrities after their return to the states. The boys quickly swoon over two blonde sisters and fellow performers, Betty and Judy Haynes (Lynnea Barry, Cyra Conforth). The plot ping pongs between a tale of young love, catching up with old war pals and singing for a snowy Christmas miracle. At times, it's a tad overbearing.

Between the show tunes and theatrical dance numbers, however, something like a sip of hot cider on a winter night seeps into your soul. Executive producer Jim Ralph says the show's simplicity is where the holiday magic truly unfolds. "I know in modern times, some people get bored of heart-warming and companionship," he explains. "There's a 1950s approach that really got its magic from a gentle, not a tragic, sense of life, but a chuckle with the world."

Ron Daum (director), Caitlin Christopher (choreographer) and Connie Hustin (scenic design and painter) worked with their staff to keep *White Christmas* nearly true to film, Ralph says, although the team has taken a more intimate creative approach in order to respect Berlin's talent of bringing awe to simplicity.

"The feeling we want here is much less in your face and really getting the nuance. We allow the magic of the lyric to come out. Irving Berlin was capable, for whatever reason, to express ideas or feelings that wound up being



extremely emotionally resonant for people. It requires an approach that's much less theatrically brash."

With soft ballads and catchy dance sequences, *White Christmas* can make the grouchiest of Grinches toe tap — and perhaps less glitz is what this holiday season needs. "We hope and believe that anyone who experiences this show will see a window into the past and into the heart and mind of Irving Berlin," Ralph says.

Let the ice melt off your shoulders and cozy up with an intimate, heartfelt rendition of holiday cheer. ■

*White Christmas* runs Friday, Nov. 30, through Sunday, Dec. 16, at The Shedd Institute; tickets \$28, \$34 and \$38.

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