

# 'Gift Rap' Places Giving Over Getting

by Tom Provenzano

**C**hildren have no trouble connecting with the idea of receiving gifts. So when they file into the Encino Playhouse and spot the gigantic, brightly wrapped present sitting center stage, their interest is immediately piqued.

*Gift Rap*, a musical parable, skillfully fills the youngsters with hopes and dreams of personal gain, while reminding adults that in the 30 years since John F. Kennedy exhorted Americans to ask what they can do for their country, our nation has gravitated toward a "give me" mentality. The play brilliantly pulls the rug of natural selfishness from beneath materialistic girls and boys by suggesting another way of thinking. The ultimate lesson, gently taught, is: "Ask not what the world can give to you, ask what you can do for the world."

Soon after the play opens with the shining present, the auditorium is filled with the sparkling voice of Sharon Thompson ("The Rapper"), who belts out the show's opening rap number. Liz Hewitt, Scott Guy and Erik Chorlton enter as three youngsters fascinated by the large present. The Rapper gives each a gift certificate for the new SuperMall, promising them all "the perfect gift."

As the kids travel to the mall, the huge gift begins to separate into several pieces of scenery, creating a trap door, windows and rooms. By the end of the play, the gift will be an intricate set, filling the stage. (The metamorphosing gift was originally designed for the South Coast Repertory Theatre's touring version of the play, which took it to local schools.)

At the mall, the kids each receive a box, but rather than being the "perfect present," the gift represents the key to finding the perfect gift. Ultimately, each character will learn that his or her gift is not something given to them, but something they can give.

The language is clear, with plenty of humor that neither condescends nor goes over the heads of children. The music fills the modern requirements of rap and rock, but composer/lyricist Michael Silversher gently sneaks in the originality

that has placed him in such

demand at Disney, where he writes music for several animated specials and series.

Hewitt portrays Vera, a spoiled girl who is content with her present of a Boopsie doll, her 43rd of the same model. But soon she comes face to face with the reflection of herself (played by Thompson). After singing a rock number about egocentricity, Vera is still unwilling to part with her doll and give it to someone less fortunate.

Chorton plays Chuck, an intellectual young man who finds his gift is teaching. This is expressed wonderfully through a rock song with a pirate motif, as Chuck sings a swash-buckling story to some kids who cannot read.

Perhaps the most poignant scene involves Dave, sensitively portrayed by Scott Guy. His present is simply a quarter. Twenty-five cents! "How can this possibly be my perfect gift?" he asks in a plaintive ballad. But the coin leads him to the most precious gift of all, when he meets a lonely girl who has just moved into town. She has also received a quarter, and together they buy a Popsicle. Ultimately Dave learns the perfect gift is the gift of himself, the gift of friendship.

The play closes with Vera experiencing a conversion and giving Boopsie number 43 to a doll-less child.

*Gift Rap* was an enormous success during South Coast Repertory's touring program. Peter Ellenstein, an actor on the tour, directs this version with the blessing of South Coast Repertory. Ellenstein says he enjoys this play because it speaks so clearly to its target audience—children 5 to 11. "What is too often emphasized is to accumulate possessions and wealth. That never seems to bring people happiness. The gifts we have to share with the world are the things that fulfill us."

*Gift Rap, appropriate for ages 4 through 14, plays at the Encino Playhouse Sat. and Sun. at 1 p.m. beginning Sept. 15. All tickets are \$5. 4935 Balboa Blvd, Encino. (818) 990-1613.*

*A benefit performance for the Encino Playhouse is staged Sept. 15 at 8 p.m. Gift Rap will be followed by William Windom*

*In Selections from Turber and Other Jokes. \$25 adults. \$10 children.*



Tormented by selfishness, these characters learn their lesson in *Gift Rap* at the Encino Playhouse.

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