

Elf the Musical at the Chemainus Theatre Festival. A review.

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Christmas classics have a long and rich history in the North American canon. From time to time, a relative newcomer takes everyone by surprise. The 2003 film *Elf* (featuring Will Ferrell in the title role) is much-loved for its gangly central character who never seems to quite fit in. Adapting the film for Broadway, veterans Bob Martin and Thomas Meehan wrote the book (with score by Matthew Sklar and Chad Beguelin) and *Elf, the Musical* premiered in 2010. Contrasting light, bright and happy versus gloomy and cynical), *Elf The Musical* contains magical elements of childishness and sincerity pitted against a growing spirit of “bah-humbug” that make it a perfect story for children (of all ages) and grown-ups alike.

Orphaned at a young age, Buddy (**Andrew Cohen**) manages to crawl into Santa’s (**Hal Kerbes**) toy bag one Christmas night and is transported to the North Pole where he remains for 30 years, until his size becomes an issue in the work room. Discouraged and disheartened after learning the true story of his origins, he strikes out on his own to find his real father in New York.



Hal Kerbes as Santa and Andrew Cohen as Buddy. Photo: Cim MacDonald

Cohen’s height makes the illusion of an over-grown and naïve adult elf even more powerful, particularly in Santa’s workshop, while his expressive face and cute antics inspire chuckles. Right from the opening number (*Happy All the*

Time) with a light-footed and effervescent company (choreography **Jessica Hickman**) the feel-good tone is set. Despite whatever challenges may come, ultimately the audience knows in its heart that Buddy will prevail. Inspired by the snow globe of New York (a gift from Santa as Buddy begins his journey), set designer **Drew Facey** has created rounded rolling screens for the story's settings—the North Pole, toy workshop, Macy's, Greenway Press, the Hobbs' apartment, Rockefeller Centre and a Chinese Restaurant on Christmas Eve—scene of the memorable and bluesy *Nobody Cares About Santa*, featuring a jaded kick-line of Santas. Costumes (also Facey) range from the holiday atmosphere of Santa's workshop where bright blues, reds and yellows predominate to the work-a-day world of Buddy's dad Walter, a curmudgeonly and over-worked **Timothy E Brummund**, with sweater vests and suits in subdued tones.



Back Row Left to Right: Sarina Sorensen, Sarah Carlé, Scott Carmichael, Scott Walters, Erik Gow, Timothy E.

Brummund

Front Left to Right: Kate Blackburn, Andrew Cohen, Ben Williams, Richard McBride

Photo by Cim MacDonald

Music director **Brad L'Écuyer** (keys) helms a tight trio of talented musicians (**Nico Rhodes**-woodwinds and keys- and **Alicia Murray**-drums) who produce a lush sound (designer **Paul Tedeschi**) typically associated with much larger bands or orchestras. Ensemble members add a razz-a-ma-tazz touch to one of the final numbers *A Christmas Song* with additional brass instruments.

Part of the enduring appeal of a story like *Elf* is a silly (and simple) premise that gives adults permission to revel, once again, in child-like goofiness. Despite Buddy's natural misunderstandings and missteps, sarcastic employees like Deb (**Kate Blackburn** in a marvellous cameo) and the manager (**Scott Walters**) can't stand-up to his unrelenting

cheerfulness. In any good story of adversity, there is a love interest; **Alison MacDonald** perfectly captures Jovie's disillusionment and her conflicted feelings—about Christmas, and about Buddy (*Never Fall in Love With an Elf*). Brummund is both bombastic and curmudgeonly as Walter Hobbs, Buddy's dad, his splendid deep bass rounding out songs like *In the Way*. **Sarah Carlé** as Emily Hobbs, Walter's wife, and **Ben Williams** as younger son Michael, bear the brunt of his work-a-holic lifestyle. Carlé and Williams (alternating with **Reuben Broadway** in the role) make a tender mother-son duo on two of the show's most heart-felt songs (*I'll Believe in You* and *There is A Santa Claus*). Lighting (**Rebekah Johnson**) sparkles, twinkles and softens delightfully as snow falls. Director **Mark DuMez** captures the essence of the holidays; *Elf the Musical* is endearing, with plenty of movement, action and catchy songs to keep even young children rapt throughout two hours of performance. It's a perfect way for multi-generational families to spend time together, get in the Christmas spirit and introduce youngsters to musical theatre.



About @lacouvee

Community Builder. Catalyst. Speaker. Writer. Arts Advocate.

Passionate about bridging online and offline communities to effect positive change.

I truly believe that one person can make a difference and that we all have our own lives to live, creatively, while respecting the unique nature of others.