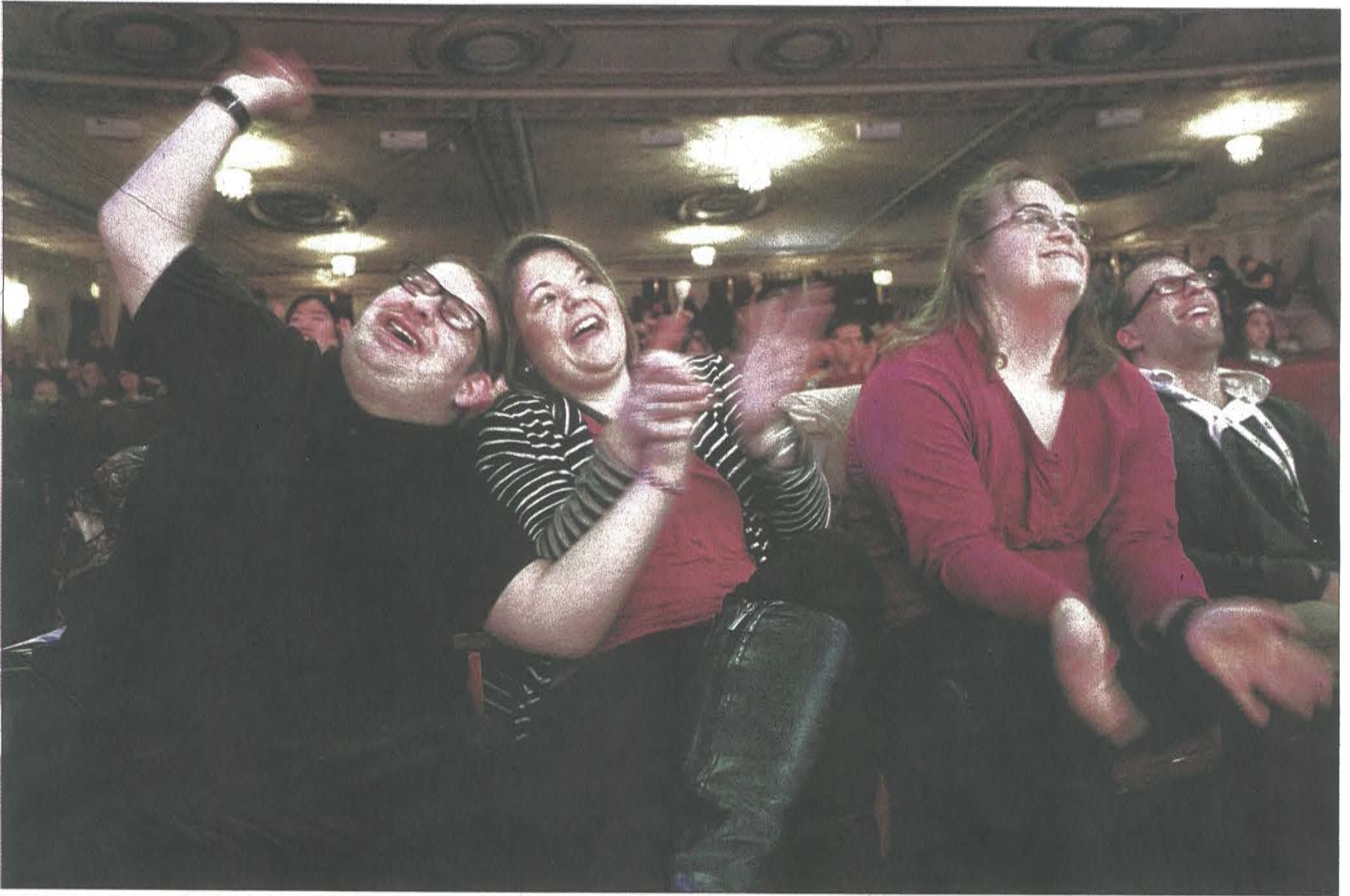


North Coast

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2014 | SECTION C | CLEVELAND.COM/LIVING



God bless them, every one

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNN ISCHAY | lischay@plaind.com

Every year, excited children gaze, wide-eyed, at the lights of Playhouse Square as parents lead them into the Ohio Theatre for a holiday tradition: a performance of the Great Lakes Theater's "A Christmas Carol."

Actors bring to life Dickens' classic story of miserly Scrooge's redemption, helping families remember that love of money doesn't compare to love of family.

But in the theater the day before Thanksgiving, 6-year-old Ian Regovich grew tired of watching ghosts torture Scrooge with visions of the past, present and future. He pestered his dad, Dan, to take him out to the lobby, to the "relaxation area" so he could calm down a bit. Ian has been diagnosed on the autism spectrum.



Top: from left, Nate Narowitz, Melissa Alewine, Kim Herman and Ricky Ross clasp hands and cheer the actors after Great Lake Theater's sensory-friendly performance of "A Christmas Carol" at Playhouse Square's Ohio Theatre. Above: Patrick John Kiernan plays the ghost of Christmas past in the Great Lakes Theater's 25th anniversary production of "A Christmas Carol."

The dark-haired boy climbed into one of the small tents, set there as an escape for those who need it, and sat quietly. With the tent flap closed, the theater crowd disappeared and Ian grew calm. He soon crawled out and found a "fidget basket" full of toys. He blew some bubbles, played with squishy balls and stretched out on a couple of nearby beanbag chairs, all provided by Great Lakes Theater to help special-needs children have a little fun if they had trouble sitting still.

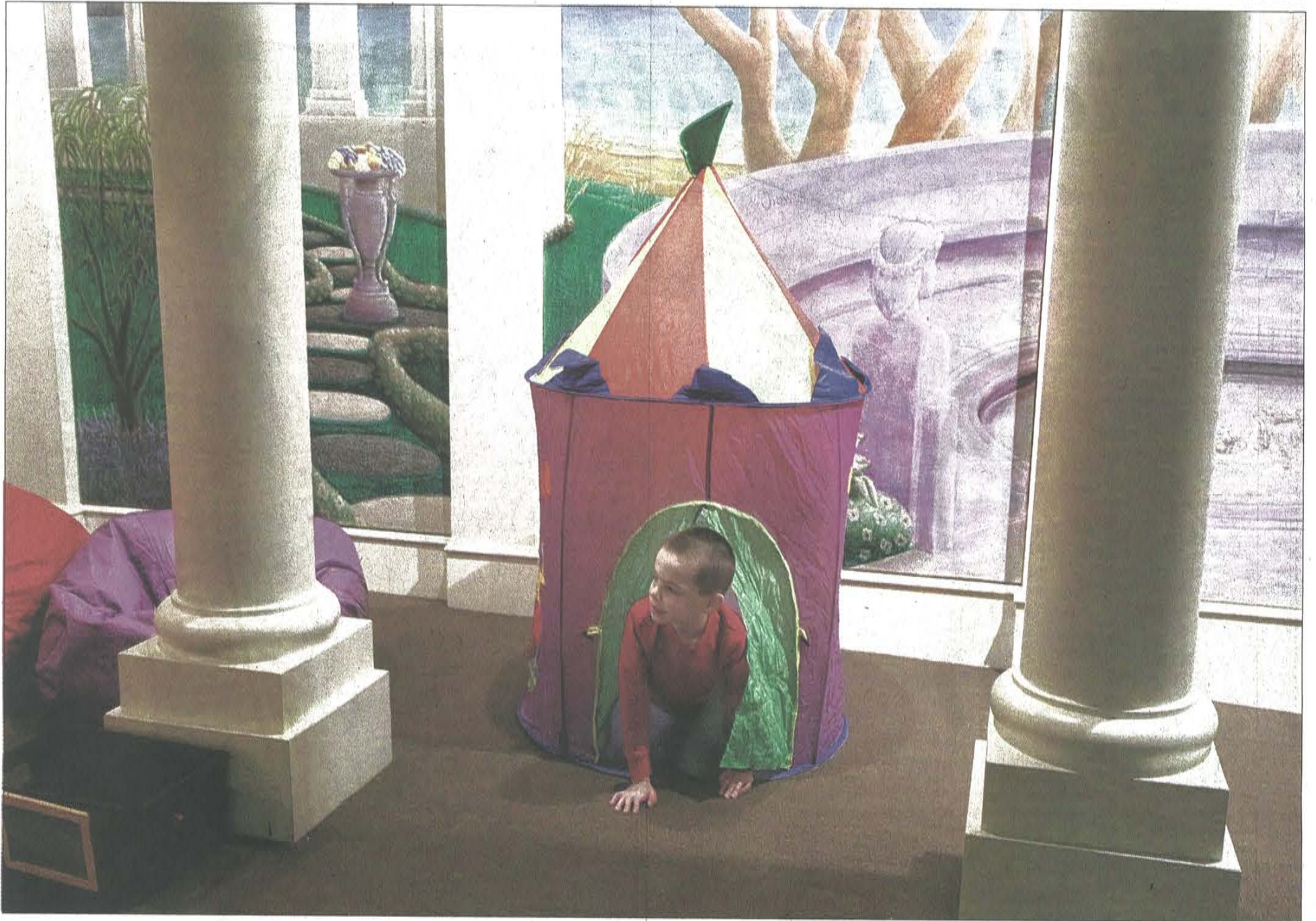
This is the second year the Great Lakes Theater at Playhouse Square has invited families of challenged children and adults to start their own "Carol" tradition and enjoy the type of outing other families take for granted.

SEE CAROL | C4

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CAROL

FROM C1

Theater doors are kept open during these special performances so that guests feel free to leave the theater and return when as they please. House lights stay up throughout the show, and the cast dials down the volume of the play. Quiet rooms are available upstairs, as well as relaxation stations, such as the one Ian found in the lobby.

Ian popped back inside the tent, then burst out and wandered quickly down a hall, closely followed by his dad.

Dan tried to coax Ian back down the hall toward the theater.

"Come on, Ian, Mom and Cydney want us to go back inside. They miss us," he said.

But Ian got busy in the lobby again, and Dan just shrugged.

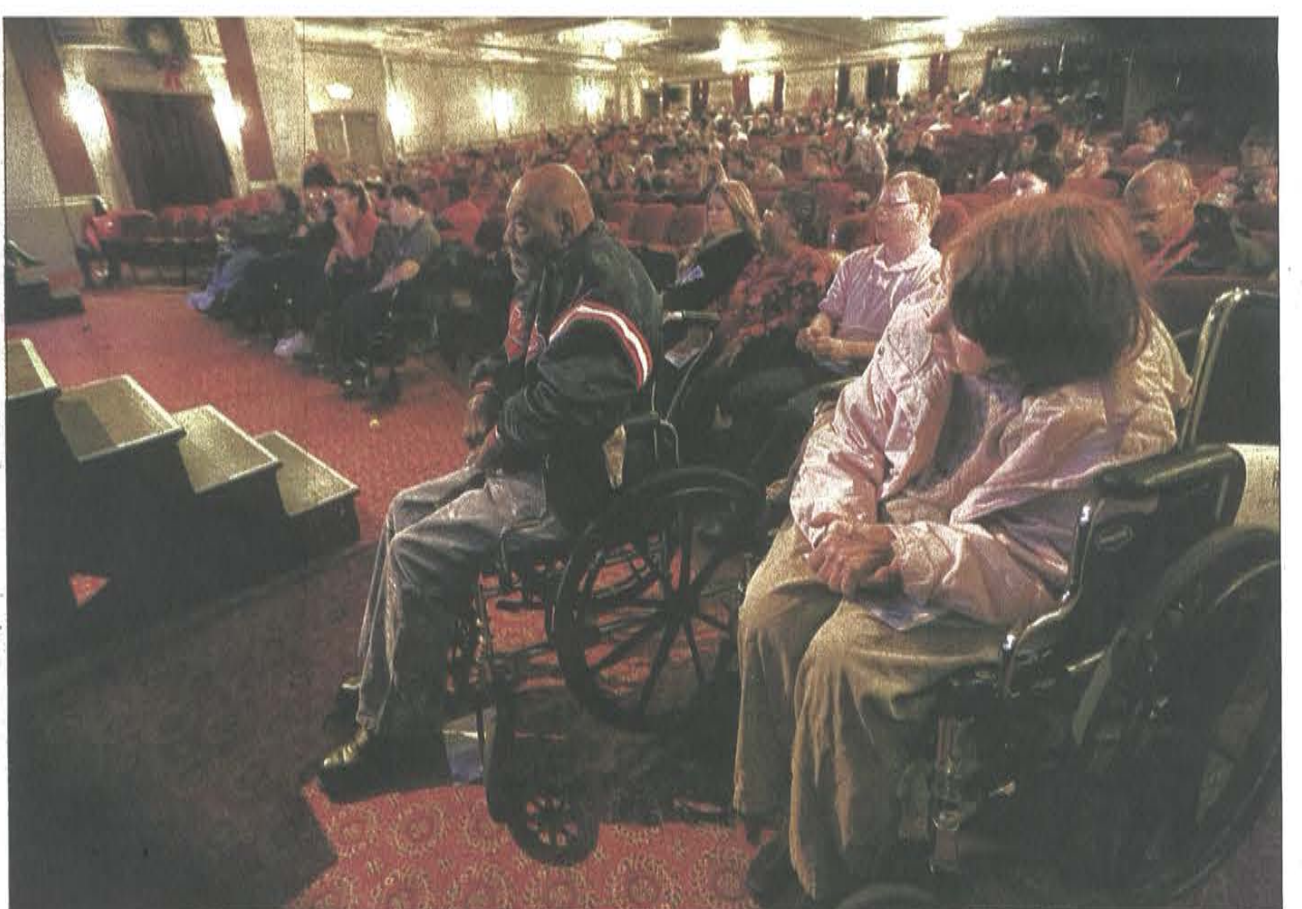
"This is perfect," he said. "We don't usually go to movies, and certainly not to plays," he said as other children came out of the theater to play or have a snack in the lobby.

"It's nice to be around other people with the same issues," he said. "They know what you

ABOVE LEFT: Dan Calloway, 45, (at left) and Zachary Evans, 41, applaud at the finale. They came to see "A Christmas Carol" last year, and enjoyed it every bit as much the second time around.

Above middle: As Marley's ghost, Lynn Robert Berg gets pulled back into the mist, leaving Scrooge to be visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. For this performance, the actors tone down the volume.

Above right: Melissa O'Grady, left, and Jocelyn McCullough-Brindo of the Theatrical Interpretation Services of Cleveland sign for the audience during the production. O'Grady has been interpreting for audiences for 20 years, McCullough-Brindo for 10 years.



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go through. Lots of people who have kids on the autism spectrum can't go out as a family. Your child might get too active, or make noise, and most people just think you're a bad parent. They don't understand."

Ian is in regular classes in the Mentor school system.

"His teachers tell us he's one of the smartest kids in class," Dan said of his son. "He just can't sit still.

"Ever since he was little he has been fascinated by how things work. He watches videos on how to make engines. Once, when we were on vacation in Myrtle Beach, we had these things on the door-knobs so he couldn't get out. Next thing we knew, he had used a screwdriver to dismantle the device. He was just 3 years old."

Dan took Ian by the hand and they walked back into the theater.

Top: Six-year-old Ian Regovich retreats to the quiet of a tent in the lobby of the Ohio Theatre. His dad, Dan, said they were in the theater watching "A Christmas Carol" for 40 minutes, but that Ian spent the last 20 wanting to leave and take a break.

Above: Great Lakes Theater does not sell out the house when they host the annual sensory-friendly performance of "A Christmas Carol." That way, if families need buffer seats or a little room to stretch out, it is available.

Renee Ciavarella's eyes were full of tears, but she had a big smile on her face as she and her son headed upstairs to their seats in the balcony. While she and her 10-year-old son, Brenden, were taking a break in the lobby, Ciavarella ran into an old friend. As they parted to return to the play,

Ciavarella's friend turned and said to her, "Don't be afraid of the future."

"My son is 10, her son is an adult," Ciavarella explained. "Her son is out of school, has a job and is doing well. I always worry about what happens when the school bus stops," she said, her eyes following her son as he headed for the theater door.

"It is different when your child is small, you can just pick him up or put him in a stroller. But now, I can't pick him up. He's only 10 and I can barely handle him. So that was a truly beautiful thing for her to say," she said.

She and Brenden entered the dimly lit theater as a transformed Scrooge was sending a young boy to buy the prize turkey as a gift for the Cratchits.

In the front row, people in wheelchairs grinned and clapped as the full cast took the stage, Tiny Tim on Bob Cratchit's shoulder, for the final song.

Melissa Alewine asked her friends, Nate Narowitz, Kim Herman and Ricky Ross if they liked the play.

"We loved it," they shouted.

"I had a blast," Narowitz signed.

Alewine said they are already looking forward to next year.