



Saturday  
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# Teaching kids to be the best that they can be in 'Gift Rap'

## THE FACTS

- **What:** "Gift Rap."
- **Where:** Encino Playhouse, 4935 Balboa Blvd., Encino.
- **When:** 1 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; through Oct. 21.
- **Starring:** Liz Hewitt, Erik Chorlton, Scott Guy and Sharon Thompson.
- **Behind the scenes:** Written by Richard Helleesen. Music and lyrics by Michael Silversher. Directed by Peter Ellenstein. Choreography by Janet Eilber.
- **Running time:** One hour; no intermission.
- **Tickets:** \$5. For more information, call (818) 990-1613.
- **Our rating:** ★★★  
 ★★★★★ — don't miss it; ★★★ — worth your while; ★★ — has its moments; ★ — if you must; ○ — don't bother.

By Lawrence Enscoe  
*Special to the Daily News*

Judging by its clever title, you might think the children's musical "Gift Rap" is getting an early start on the Christmas audience.

But this is not a holiday show. Oh, it's about giving gifts, all right.

**REVIEW** But the gifts this show raps about are the ones that can be given and received year-round.

"Gift Rap," at the Encino Playhouse, is a catchy, punchy, cleverly written musical about what we do with what we have been given, whether it's brains, personality or

talent. The play's message has just as much power for adults as children — as any good kid's parable does.

In a story slightly reminiscent of Roald Dahl, three very different children are sent a gift certificate by the Rapper (Sharon Thompson), which they can redeem for the perfect present at the new Epic Supermall.

There is the spoiled brat Vera (Liz Hewitt); the creative, imaginative Chuck (Erik Chorlton); and the self-esteemless Dave (Scott Guy). The names are a laugh for the adults, since they're borrowed from the Beatles' "When I'm 64."

Each gift is not where this story lies — it's in what they do with their gifts. Do they keep them or share them? Some even find out the gifts they were given don't even come close to the gifts they already possess.

The play occasionally suffers from soft delivery and bad miking — a killer when you're performing rap. The musical track is cottony and distant.

Hewitt is a bundle of petulance, which the kids in the audience loved. Thompson has a soulful voice and gets a chance to show off a range of roles. Chorlton is affable, but hasn't quite clued in to the big style of children's theater. Guy is the most appealing, with a dead-on sense of sincerity, energy and crispness.

Richard Helleesen has come up with a multilayered book that is a notch above a lot of offerings for the preteen set. And the music by Disney composer Michael Silversher is infectious and swings from musical ballads to rap to pop. The colorful building-block set is creative, if not for its malleability, then for how many places you can hide Velcro.