

ARTSKNOXVILLE

Review: CBT's 'Santaland Diaries' – A Delicious Clash of Holiday Comedy and Reality

ALAN SHERROD | NOVEMBER 19, 2018

Two Christmas seasons working as an elf in Macy's flagship store on New York City's Herald Square was the inspiration for David Sedaris' essay Santaland Diaries. Read by Sedaris on National Public Radio's Morning Edition in 1992, the broadcast's popularity turned the piece into something of a holiday tradition, spurring a one-character, one-act stage adaptation by Joe Mantello in 1996. Since then, the author's cynical and hilarious observations have given the work a place in Christmastime theatre productions as a somewhat naughty, but accurate, counterpoint to the more heartwarming holiday entertainments involving jingle bells, spiced beverages, and good will.

The Clarence Brown Theatre first mounted Santaland Diaries three years ago with actor David Brian Alley as Crumpet, the elf. Alley, a long time artist-in-residence with CBT and currently a Lecturer in the Department of Theatre, now returns to the role for a new run of the play at CBT's Carousel Theatre. Redirected by Calvin MacLean from Jeff Stanley's original, this production focuses a bit more directly on well-delivered humorous shocks of language, yet still gives Alley the opportunity for hilarious physical comedy and site gags as Crumpet deals with the approach of Christmas Eve in Macy's Santa Land.

Also happily returning from the previous production is the deliciously cloying sweetness of the inventive Santa Land set by Stephen Brown and his costume for Crumpet: candy-cane tights, pumpkin-shaped skirt, and a Mr. Softee-esque hat.

No one is spared Sedaris' razor-sharp take on the whole operation, not even Crumpet himself. The multiple Santas, some with strange personal eccentricities, and the Santa Land managers are particular targets, as are the visitor/parents who seem oblivious to the pain and embarrassment they are forcing on 5-year olds for the sake of a "treasured" photo. Sedaris also deals with racial, social, and physical debilitation issues of Santa Land with a wink-wink attitude toward political correctness. Case in point:

"This afternoon we were given presentations and speeches in a windowless conference room crowded with desks and plastic chairs. We were told that during the second week of December, SantaLand is host to "Operation Special Children," at which time poor children receive free gifts donated by the store. There is another morning set aside for terribly sick and deformed children. On that day it is an elf's job to greet the child at the Magic Tree and jog back to the house to brace our Santa. 'The next one is missing a nose,' or 'Crystal has third-degree burns covering 90 percent of her body.' Missing a nose. With these children Santa has to be careful not to ask, "And what would you like for Christmas?"

If you attended a performance of Santaland Diaries in its previous 2015 production, you may want to schedule a re-visit. It's not that the play's material has changed, it's that we as an audience apparently have. In the last three years, the socio-political landscape has been irrevocably altered, including what it takes to shock us into laughter or tears. For this reason, Alley deserves substantial credit for brilliantly treading that thin line between the reality of comedy—and the black comedy of our current reality.



David Brian Alley; by Brynn Yeager