

# THE DAILY TIMES

## Crumpet's Christmas commentary makes 'Santaland Diaries' darkly fun

By Steve Wildsmith | wildsmithsteve@gmail.com | Nov 22, 2018

For David Brian Alley, the role of Crumpet the Elf in the Clarence Brown Theatre production of David Sedaris' "The Santaland Diaries" is one to which he can apply some personal experience.

Sedaris, widely known as an American humorist and essay writer, catapulted into the national spotlight on Dec. 23, 1992, when he recorded the essay — which details his time working as an elf during the holiday season at the Macy's department store — for National Public Radio's "Morning Edition." That original broadcast prompted more requests for a tape than any other "Morning Edition" segment except one dedicated to the late commentator Red Barber, and Sedaris suddenly was a beloved part of the American humor landscape.



David Brian Alley; by Brynn Yeager

He went on to publish numerous bestselling books, including "Barrel Fever" and "Me Talk Pretty One Day," continues to contribute to NPR and tours the country reading from his original works. But it's "The Santaland Diaries," adapted for the stage by Joe Mantello in 1996, with which Alley most closely identifies, he told The Daily Times recently. The essay tells the story of a struggling actor in New York who goes to work at Macy's Santaland, and "the comic holiday adventure chronicles Sedaris' humiliation, frustrations and ultimately his hopefulness all told through his masterful sardonic wit," according to a Clarence Brown press release.

It also captures the insanity of the consumer-driven holiday season, something Alley remembers keenly from his own time in retail, he said.

"In college, I worked at Children's Palace, the toy store across from Downtown West (in West Knoxville) during the Cabbage Patch Dolls craze," he said. "I sold Commodore 64s over in the electronics section, but I can identify with what a madhouse Santaland might have been with people coming in, fighting over Cabbage Patch Dolls. There would literally be a stampede.

"Word would get out that we had a new shipment of Cabbage Patch Dolls in, then all these crowds had to come by my department. Most of the time, they were situated on the wall on the other side of electronics, and I remember once I heard screaming and yelling, and there was pushing and a tug-of-war going on. The line from the play where Crumpet says, 'I started at the Magic Tree, and I witness a fist fight between two mothers?' It actually happened to me. I saw that."

Now in his 19th season as a Clarence Brown Theatre company member, Alley first acted the role of Crumpet during the playhouse's 2015 production of "The Santaland Diaries." He's a University of Tennessee Department of Theatre lecturer, and he's been in a number of CBT works over the past nearly two decades, including "Peter and the Starcatcher," "Kiss Me Kate," "The Trip to Bountiful" and more. The current run, which takes place through Dec. 9, is billed as being for "mature elves only." There's a reason that the foul-mouthed Billy Bob Thornton comedy "Bad Santa" draws on similar appeal, Alley pointed out: During the stress of the holidays, folks need to be able to laugh at themselves.

"We can't take ourselves too, too seriously," he said. "In 2015, (then-director) Jeff Stanley and I found a lot of fun things in the script, but in revisiting it, Cal (MacLean, the show's current director) and I talked about what we saw on the archival video of that show and what we might do with it. And part of that has to do with a connection between an experience that Crumpet has on his last day of work and the beginning of the story.

"We wanted to look at how this is a guy who's got a dream. He wants to be in soap operas on 'One Life to Live,' and then he finds himself in the middle of this chaos, just trying to pay his rent. But we also wanted to look at the dark side of this as it goes into the light, and there's a little twist at the end that speaks to exactly that."

In some ways, he added, the central character shares a similar transformative journey as Ebenezer Scrooge from "A Christmas Carol," also being staged at the Clarence Brown this holiday season. And despite his own Christmas traditions with family and his feelings of tranquility around the holiday itself, Alley finds that playing the role can often take him on his own journey.

"In my older years, I've tried to temper it, but I certainly have my cynical side," Alley said. "I tend to be more cynical when I'm behind the wheel of a car, particularly during the holidays, but I think maybe that this time of year, just having retouched this character, I might carry a little of that away with me every night. There's a tiny bit of warmth in it, a la 'A Christmas Carol,' especially when Crumpet is first taken on a tour of Santaland and gets to see this amazing place they've crafted that he gets into before he starts his downward spiral.

"And of course, in a role like this, you get to purge all the other demons during the run of the show, and that's fun, too. But I think my favorite part of the show itself is the fellowship with the audience from night to night. It's me and 300-something people sharing an experience, and it's always different — frightening and a blast, at the same time."

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