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'Santaland Diaries' takes Center Stage

Laughter comes easy from stage show based on David Sedaris' radio essay

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In 1992, David Sedaris rose - almost elf-like, you might say - into the spotlight by reading from his essay "The Santaland Diaries" on NPR's Morning Edition.

With his soft-grained voice and disarmingly understated style of delivery, Sedaris broke a lot of people up recounting his experiences at Macy's in New York, dressed as one of Santa's helpers, guiding kids and their control-freaky parents toward the place where Christmas gift wishes could be expressed and, at least theoretically, granted.

Within a few short years, actor Joe Mantello adapted "The Santaland Diaries" into a one-man show that has enjoyed considerable success in various incarnations across the country. It's entertaining folks now in a production at Center Stage's intimate Head Theater, starring the personable Robert Dorfman and directed with an effective flow by Irene Lewis.

By his own admission, Dorfman, a Center Stage associate artist, is "a little bit older and a lot more Jewish" than your average department store elf. He's also quite different from Sedaris in timbre and demeanor, which may disconcert anyone expecting a mere imitation.

Speaking of imitation, I must rather Scroogily point out that Dorfman doesn't come close to a convincing impression of **Billie Holiday** singing a Christmas song - perhaps the single most hilarious idea in "Santaland," and one that Sedaris can carry off with uncanny accuracy. But that's a small reservation in light of how engagingly, even endearingly Dorfman inhabits this role of the ever-so-slightly-cynical, out-of-work New Yorker who responds to an ad for holiday employment.

Judging by Tuesday's preview performance (opening night was Wednesday), the actor has immersed himself so thoroughly into the Sedaris mind-set that the keen observations on human and elfin behavior register with great naturalness and spontaneity. The embarrassed-and-resigned way he dons his Santaland outfit (David Burdick's costume design is perfect) speaks volumes.

Moving about the festive stage (Jennifer Stearns did the scenic design, Lesley Boeckman the effective lighting) and through the audience, Dorfman has a knack for drawing people into the picture of mirth, mayhem and monotony at Santaland, where over-excited children contribute to what staffers call Vomit Corner and where those who make it onto Santa's lap are typically "art-directed by the parents."

Those seeking a fuzzy holiday show may be put off by the darker, politically-incorrect-with-a-capital-'I' streaks in Sedaris' humor, but the rest of us are likely to soak it all up with relish. It's hard not to root for this elf - he takes the delicious name "Crumpet" - when he confronts pushy mothers who threaten to have him fired ("I want to lean over



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and say, 'I'm going to have you killed').

Dorfman makes it easy to picture the scenes unfolding in the training sessions for would-be elves, the dressing rooms and the artificial wonderland where all that holiday magic is dispensed to the willing and unsuspecting foreign tourists alike. His conversational manner also allows him to slip in the story of Crumpet's crush on a seemingly flirtatious elf self-named "Snowball" without ever making it seem at all lurid or silly.

In the space of little more than an hour, "The Santaland Diaries" gets a lot of points across. Although much of the material tilts toward the wry or the campy, with some snide on the side, this is not a cold, anti-Christmas stand-up routine. It's just a colorful, novel slice of life at holiday time, the fun and the not-so-fun (other than my mother, bless her, I don't know anyone who hasn't had a humbug moment at some point).

Sedaris seizes on all those annoying, fake and oddball things that can happen at this time of year - you can well imagine how many more of them occur in a specially constructed commercial space called Santaland - and gets very amusing mileage out of them.

There are more serious, sensitive moments, too, and they prove just as effective. Describing how determined some people are to get the perfect picture of the child on Santa's lap, whether the poor, dragged-around tot is willing or not, this wise, old elf wistfully says, "It's not about the child or Santa or Christmas or anything."

Dorfman captures the spirit of Sedaris in telling fashion, while putting his own distinctive stamp on the story of the unlikely elf who saw the holidays from the inside out.

If you go

"The Santaland Diaries" runs through Dec. 20 at Center Stage, 700 N. Calvert St. Tickets are \$25 and \$35. Call 410-332-0033 or go to centerstage.org for showtimes.

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