



BWW REVIEWS: Green Velvet; The SantaLand Diaries

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by Daniel Collins



Robert Dorfman in "Green Velvet: The Landlord's Elves at CENTERSTAGE" (Photo by Lee Weinstock, directed by Tommie Lee)

It's been said that for the media, there are three "never fails"-kids, seniors and animals. If there are three "never fails" in the realm of theatrical comedy, they might be guys in drag, anything featuring [Will Ferrell](#) (okay, *Land of the Lost* might be the exception) and full-grown men dressed as elves.

There's something about a dignified, graying, self-proclaimed 46-year-old in candy-cane leggings, poofy green velvet shorts and a cap and shoes with jingly little bells on the ends that just make audiences smile. Now toss in the clever words of American humorist [David Sedaris](#), delivered with aplomb by actor, Center Stage Associate Artist and elf-in-question, [Robert Dorfman](#), and you've got 70 solid minutes of hilarity called "The Santaland Diaries" now at Baltimore's Center Stage..

Of course, you've got to build up to the elf costume. Dorfman first appears in street clothes--jeans, jacket, a glass of wine in his hand--musing on his dreams of stardom on "One Life to Live" (didn't happen) as he rambles about a stage equipped with a running electric train, a miniature snowman and Rudolf-the-Red-Nosed-Reindeer rocker-toy.

Now how and why a middle-aged man finds himself in Macy's applying for a job as an "elf" for the holiday shopping season -- "the most frightening career opportunity I've come across" he says -- we never fully learn, but it's immaterial. It would be like interrupting a comic who begins a joke, "A rabbi, a priest and a Republican enter a bar," to ask "why"? Were they friends? How did these three people come to meet? Who cares, it's a laugh, you go with it.

Dorfman does not confine himself to the stage, but moves amongst the crowd, sipping someone's drink, inexplicably kissing a male audience member on the head, perhaps expressing the enthusiasm his "store elf" is supposed to exude after two-plus weeks of Macy "elf training."

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As delightful as Dorfman is as "Crumpet," his self-chosen "elf name," his manner relaxed, his delivery conversational, sprinkled with timely pauses, adding to the verisimilitude of his performance, it is Sedaris' script, adapted for the stage by [Joe Mantello](#), that is the true star. Sedaris creates such vivid tableaux in the audience's mind that one can't help but laugh...even if it may seem politically incorrect to do so. Dorfman relates how one of the Macy elf instructors insists, with gritted teeth, that all the female elves WILL be wearing panties as she's "cleaned out enough blood from the crotch of elf costumes to last a lifetime"--now there's a holiday image that's hard to forget.

But beyond the laughs, there are lessons to be learned. We've all witnessed at some time or other "bad parenting," in this case, the mother who bellows at her crying toddler daughter that she'll "have something to cry about" if she doesn't give her best "take my photo" smile as she sits on Santa's lap. For people who are hurt, unhappy, or just plain damaged, the best they can aspire to is the illusion of happiness...that "happy photo with Santa" represents, as Dorfman says, "a world they can't make work for them."

Of course, Crumpet is similarly afflicted, forced for sake of a check to do a job where "all I do all day is lie," telling the world's ugliest child that "My, don't you look nice!" or "Santa just can't WAIT to see you!", a world where everything ends in an exuberant exclamation mark, when in reality, things aren't so holly jolly.

But breaking through the sarcasm (Crumpet serenades Santa and a youngster with "Away in a Manager" as though sung by [Billie Holiday](#)), Crumpet finds, perhaps surprisingly, that there is still something tender and wonderful about this Americanized, commercialized, assembly-line celebration. Dorfman relays a story of a Santa who understands that the message of Christmas isn't about giving toys, it's just about giving, the sincere expression of love for another. Stop, take a moment, and FEEL.

Don't get me wrong, the play is never preachy. These moments have a way of sneaking up on Crumpet as they sneak up on the audience which goes from bellowing laughter to nodding, appreciative silence...a comedy that gives you something to think about. How's that for a Christmas present?

The Santaland Diaries runs through Sunday, December 20th in the Head Theater at Center Stage, located at 700 North Calvert Street. Weekday tickets are \$25, \$35 on weekends and are available online at www.centerstage.org or by calling the box office at 410-332-0033.