

## THEATER

Christmas means many things to many people, and two views of the holiday are coming to town this month as Portland Center Stage presents a double bill of David Sedaris' *The SantaLand Diaries* and Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory*.

The one-acts are autobiographical episodes in the lives of two of the most famous and celebrated out gay authors of the 20th century. Yet, while Capote's is a poignant recollection of celebration, Sedaris' proves that not everybody's holiday experience is merry and bright.

If you lived in New York City during the early 1990s, humorist Sedaris might have cleaned your apartment or washed your windows or greeted you in an elf outfit at Macy's. He first performed *Diaries*, a first-person account of his two Christmases spent as an elf in the giant department store's SantaLand, on National Public Radio in December 1992.

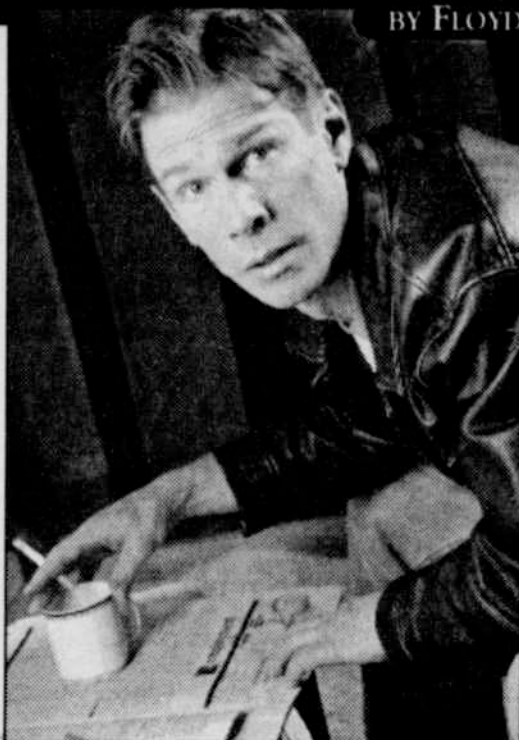
His 8 1/2-minute introduction to the world began with the words "I wear green velvet knickers, a forest green velvet smock and a perky little hat decorated with spangles. This is my work uniform." The monologue—read in his distinctive nasal whine—was so well received it generated the second-most requests for tapes of any story in the history of *Morning Edition*.

After this bout of popularity, Sedaris expanded *Diaries* and included it in his first collection of essays, *Barrel Fever*. A few years later Joe Mantello (who originally directed Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*) adapted it into a one-man show, which opened Nov. 7, 1996, in New York. The expanded version was broadcast on NPR at Christmas in 1997 with Sedaris once again reading it himself.

At the time *Diaries* was broadcast in '92, it was considered risqué because Sedaris admits

## Two of a kind Portland Center Stage presents a theatrical holiday dream team

BY FLOYD SKLAVER



PHOTOS BY OWEN CAREY

Steve Wilkerson has his hands full as David Sedaris in *The SantaLand Diaries* (left) and as Truman Capote in *A Christmas Memory*

his attraction for another male elf, Snowball. Like many of his stories, though, being gay is not the subject so much as an adjunct. It's there, and then the story goes on. Despite this, radio stations still received nasty letters, including one from a listener who complained about "that pederast who worked at Macy's." (Sedaris' response: "Pederast? What story? I'd love to hear a story about a pederast at Macy's.")

Sedaris' bitter and sardonic view of the holidays is the polar opposite of Capote's in *A Christmas Memory*. Written in 1956, the

sweet and sentimental tale of a single Christmas in his childhood is a departure for the famously acerbic raconteur.

The scene is the quaint 1930s community of Monroeville, Ala. Seven-year-old Buddy (Capote) is being raised by a family of elderly cousins who have no experience with children, nor are they particularly accommodating to the lonely child. Sook, the eldest cousin, is the exception, being rather simple, with all the excitement and wonder of a child about her.

Sook and Buddy become best friends. The pair are very poor, yet very happy, and Capote's

description of the use of meager earnings to buy the ingredients for their annual fruitcake gifts will soften even Scrooge's heart.

His idyllic remembrance, however, is marred by the realization that this was their last Christmas together. Much to his dismay, Buddy is sent to military school to further his education and provide him with better role models. Through the years, Sook becomes ill and confused until one "leafless birdless coming of winter morning, when she cannot rouse herself to exclaim, 'Oh, my, it's fruitcake weather!'"

In 1966 *Memory* was filmed for television starring Geraldine Page and narrated by the author. He adapted it for the stage as a one-man show in 1980, four years before his death.

"There was nobody like me before, and there ain't gonna be anybody like me after I'm gone," Capote said. But the similarities between him and Sedaris are striking. Both are small, Southern, lispng gay men who also happen to be very, very funny. Both use autobiographical material in their work, and both are as famous for their unusual personalities as they are for their literary gifts.

Portland gay actor Steve Wilkerson plays all the characters in both pieces, and the decision to cast one performer for the entire evening strengthens the link between these two fascinating writers. Portland Center Stage's December production promises to be both hilarious and touching. **JM**

PORTLAND CENTER STAGE presents *The SantaLand Diaries* and *A Christmas Memory* through Dec. 23 at Newmark Theatre, 1111 S.W. Broadway. Gay and lesbian audience night is Dec. 10. Tickets are \$12-\$47 from the box office or 503-274-6588.

FLOYD SKLAVER is a Portland free-lance writer.

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