



Santa's Little Helper

Author and NPR-radio personality David Sedaris possesses one of the most immediately recognizable voices in the country. His dry, deadpan delivery – a combination of your smart, depressed gay uncle and that squirrely drama club geek from high school – is so honed in cadence and tone it should be trademarked. Whether sharing a tale of hard-earned wisdom or recounting a bit of family history, Sedaris' voice, like William Burroughs' before him, is inextricable from his writing; only he can truly bring his words to life.

Sedaris has become a member of the literary establishment since publishing *The SantaLand Diaries* in 1994, but this acerbic little gift of holiday anti-cheer remains one of his best pieces. It's been adapted for the stage many times, many ways, and Lord Leebrick's production, based on Joe Mantello's 1996 adaptation, is an idiosyncratic, even risky, interpretation. Directed by Bobby Vrtis, the play – the hilariously grouchy true story of a young Sedaris working as a Macy's elf – veers significantly in tone from the mordant, excoriating rant of the original. Colin Lawrence plays Crumpet (Sedaris' elf name), a florid, hyperactive kid given to bouts of fitful joy and flailing anger; Lawrence, antic and athletic, is a strange choice for Crumpet, like casting Jim Carey as Stanley Kowalski.

Only two other actors comprise the cast, Jonathan Knight and Caitlin Winkenbach, as the elves Frosty and Jingle, respectively. Their roles are largely unspoken; they serve mostly as comic filler, flirting and frolicking with a blend of physical humor and elfish pantomime. They're fun to watch, but their schtick points to an aspect of the production that might prove jarring to some, especially audience members familiar with Sedaris' work.

It would be unfair to expect Leebrick's production to mimic Sedaris' take on his own material; in fact, Vrtis and his talented crew should be commended for going their own way. The thing is, *The SantaLand Diaries* is autobiography as satire, told by a wannabe artist who is humiliated by his uniform and disgusted by the manufactured jollity of a commercialized Christmas gig run like a corporate boot camp. It's not a nice story, and it's told in a boozy, sexed-up patter that is crude and curmudgeonly.

Leebrick turns *SantaLand* into an episode of *Glee*. Lawrence is an appealing comic actor, but his Crumpet is far too chipper to be mouthing the nasty diatribes of a malcontent – a pissed-off gay guy who takes slugs from a flask during breaks and calls people "retards." This cognitive dissonance makes *The SantaLand Diaries* a perfect candidate for exile to the Island of Misfit Plays, where it could be sandwiched between *Waiting for Godot: The Musical* and *The Iceman Leaveth*. It's not a bad production. It is well executed and briskly paced. But like egnog, it might not be to everybody's taste.

The SantaLand Diaries runs through Dec. 18 at Lord Leebrick Theatre; info and tickets at lordleebrick.org and 465-1506. – Rick Levin

Same Hills, Different Sound

What's not to love about *The Sound of Music*? Wonderful songs, romance, bravery in the face of adversity; it's so good most folks have seen it countless times. The Oregon Festival of American Music is asking us to see it yet again, and have tried to shake up the show to make it fresh, with mixed results.

The stars of *The Sound of Music* are unquestionably the seven youngsters who play the von Trapp children. From Anna Haugen's cheeky Louisa to Emily Westlund's hawk-eyed Brigitta, the kids are excellent. Zoe Muellner plays the 16-going-on-17 Liesl with an innocence overlaid with mischievousness. Thomas Grigsby is earnest and thoughtful as Kurt; Nicholas Hubbard is a delightful Friedrich. Piper Matson and Lauren Raabe couldn't be more adorable as Marta and Gretl. Each young actor creates a believable character that grows and changes as the plot progresses, the result of hard work and good direction.

Director Richard H. Jessup faces huge expectations with this show. "It was an act of chutzpah to take (*The Sound of Music*) on in some ways," says James Ralph, executive director at The Shedd. "For the most part, people have the film and high school productions burnt into their minds, so it is hard."

Jessup pulls out a number of subtle tricks to distance this production from the film. The Nazi sympathizers are a little more snarky, and being a nun is made a more exclusive business. Maria is played by a significantly older woman, consummate performer Shirley Andress. Andress has that mind-boggling talent of being able to act and sing with complete believability throughout, and to make it appear effortless. Her Maria, however, is no wild departure from the script. She is charming, fun and brave in the face of danger as well as in her dealings with Captain von Trapp. She plays the same sweet and willful Maria, only older.

Jessup's big departure from the film comes with the use of Austrian accents. Most of us are used to seeing these characters speak with British accents, which is not authentic; in reality, they'd be speaking German with an Austrian accent. Ultimately, these accents served to distance me not only from the familiar original version, but from this production as well. Jessup's bold move is admirable, but inherent to any act of theatrical bravery is the possibility of failure.

Yet with all the audacious choices – some inspired, some flawed – the heart of the script and music shines through. Fun choreography, golden voices and those wonderful kids swept me up, again, into *The Sound of Music*.

The Sound Of Music runs through Dec. 18 at The Shedd; info at theshedd.org or 434-7000. – Anna Grace

A Gathering of Pronouns

Writing fiction is incredibly difficult, which explains why so many failed novelists fill newspaper offices. Putting together a decent sentence is hard enough, but to transform your ideas into a seamless drama populated by three-dimensional characters instead of automatons, and then to have the whole shebang come across believably as opposed to a dance of marionettes, strings in full view ... it's a bitch. A primary rule of writing: Show, don't tell.

Regretfully, this explains the gnawing glitch in Eugene playwright Steve Mandell's *Family Reunion*, running through Dec. 11 at the Very Little Theatre. "I had to write this play," Mandell notes, hinting at artistic passion fueled by a certain persistence of memory. All unhappy families are unhappy in their own way, Tolstoy observed, and the family in *Family Reunion* – "based on real people living and dead," Mandell writes – is made miserable by a laundry list of dysfunctions: addiction, divorce, philandering, depression, to name a few.

In the opening scene, Martin Smith (Paul Rhoden), a scowling malcontent, appears ready to blow his head off. But soon arrive the ghosts, some literal (i.e. dead), some metaphorical: Drunk, caterwauling Mom (Kim Donahey); womanizing, ne'er-do-well Dad (Chris Pinto), brother David (Johnny Rogers, filling in for Bruce McArthur), a suicide; Martin's belittling, oversexed former wife (Jennifer Sellers); his volutuous mistress Sweet Thing (Chanda Littlefield). Arun Storrs plays M (Mystery Woman), a beacon of calm in this filial storm.

Like an inverted, otherworldly version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Family Reunion* is a domestic festival of ulterior motives and bad feelings – grudges nourished, grievances aired, sins recounted, blame assigned, histories closeted. But unlike Tennessee Williams, playwright Mandell forgoes the complex architecture of plot, opting to portray this get-together as a round robin of reprimand and rebuke. Rather than talking, his characters utter countless grand pronouncements about life ("We're all dead anyway," David says. "Time kills everything"), but lacking texture and context, these abstract platitudes sound like stoned ramblings. When everything is profound, nothing is profound.

Sure, there are the bare bones of a story, but they lack the blood-and-flesh details that engage an audience, and the narrative itself is more of a forum than a progression through a series of conflicts and resolutions. Director Darlene Morton does her best with an unfamiliar work, and there are some very funny moments.

Mandell's intent is clear and admirable: to unpack a history of broken family dynamics. But he aims immediately for the universal, and that's a killer. Our most enduring works of art – *Madame Bovary*, *The Iliad*, *Annie Hall* – are firmly rooted in time and place. The timelessness of *Hamlet* resides not in its overt profundity, which is only a side effect. First and foremost, it's one hell of a story.

Family Reunion runs through Dec. 11 at Very Little Theatre; for info & tickets, visit www.TheVLT.com or call 344-7751.

– Rick Levin