

REVIEW

Chiorini again unwraps hilarious fun in acerbic 'Santaland Diaries'

By: **Amy Stumpfl**, *The Tennessean*

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There's just something about a man in candy-striped tights. And Matt Chiorini — marking his much-anticipated return to Tennessee Rep in *The Santaland Diaries* — is just the man to wear them.

Based on a 1992 essay by National Public Radio humorist and best-selling author David Sedaris, *The Santaland Diaries* was adapted for the stage by Joe Mantello in 1996. Since then, it has become a holiday staple among regional theater companies and remains one of Tennessee Rep's most requested productions. The hilarious one-man show offers an acerbic account of Sedaris' bizarre — and often bitter — experiences working as an elf in Macy's Santaland during the holiday crunch.

As Crumpet the Elf, Chiorini remains remarkably fresh in the role he's performed twice before for Nashville audiences, most recently in 2008. He takes great glee in giving us the scoop behind "one of the most frightening career opportunities I had ever come across." His sharp-tongued observations of human nature are still spot on, and Chiorini makes the role his own with a great slacker sensibility and an uncanny ability to ad-lib with the audience.

Along with Crumpet, of course, Chiorini also embodies the various folks he encounters in Santaland — the puzzled foreigner who has unknowingly stepped into the wrong line at Macy's, the pushy father with the New Jersey accent and the overly perky co-worker elf known as Ginger Snap.

Yes, the script sometimes feels a bit dated. But never fear, Chiorini is not about to lose potential laughs to the casualties of pop culture. He is perfectly happy to backtrack, explaining antiquated references to his rapt audience, including everything from the cast of *One Life to Live* to the chart-topping songs of Phil Collins ("Su-Su-Sussudio").

Under the sure-handed guidance of director David Alford (who has been known to don the elf ears himself a time or two for Tennessee Rep), Chiorini works his magic with ease. Gary C. Hoff's gloriously tacky set is decked out in full holiday regalia and Lane Fragomeli's elf costume design is a splendid exercise in spangles and velvet.

Make no mistake: *The Santaland Diaries* is not meant for little ones. Crumpet minces no words as he delivers his salty, sardonic take on the holidays. But there's something oddly uplifting to the piece as well. A great alternative to traditional Christmas fare, it's a devilishly good way to kick off the holiday season.