

THE CREATIVE TEAM

Artistic Associate Eric Ting (**ET**) posed a few questions via e-mail to the design team for *Santaland Diaries*. Scenic Designer Jessica Ford (**JF**), Costume Designer Olivera Gajic (**OG**) and Lighting Designer Joshua Epstein (**JE**) were able to carve a moment out of their crazy schedules to respond before Eric's looming deadline! Since electronic correspondence can be so impersonal, Eric imagined a meeting between the four of them at Santa's North Pole HQ. **DISCLAIMER:** All text in italics is UTTERLY fictional and the product of a strange mind.

(Three elves and a reindeer sit around a table sharing a bottle of scotch.)

ET: Thanks for joining me here tonight. Daniel [Baker, Sound Designer] sends his regrets – an inventory emergency in Prague – I think a bunch of Sony PS3s exploded in the warehouse – took out the whole lot of toy soldiers. Anyways, *(opens his notebook)* “The Santaland Diaries” has been produced all across the country. One might suggest that its popularity resides in three things: (a) it's a holiday show, (b) it's a one-man show, and (c) it's based on the irreverent stories of David Sedaris. *(A smattering of applause. The reindeer taps her hooves together.)* Each of these three elements presents its own challenges. Can you share some thoughts on your process as it relates to them? *(One of the elves takes a drag from her cigarette.)*

OG: *(exhaling a ring of smoke)* I can't relate to Western holidays – those beautiful tales that are often vulgarized, commercialized. Is it all manipulating people's emotions just to make money? I am Serbian. The only presents from Santa Claus came when we were kids, but once you're an adult the presents stop.

JE: *(polishing his jingle bell)* The play itself has no real movement from place to place – it is quite literally a man on stage telling a story – so that gives us a lot of freedom to build any world we want onstage. But, if you don't find a way to evolve the space throughout the play, then you just have a man on stage telling a story in front of a beautiful set.

(The reindeer's nose glows a soft pink.)

JF: *(staring vexedly at her nose)* The goal was not only to present the beautiful Christmas wonderland that the show requires, but also to present it in a way that could be distorted... its commercial underbelly exposed.

OG: I pulled all kinds of elves from the internet. But my first image was of this blind bunny bumping into these kids. In DC, I saw this Big Bunny – this costume – and someone had to hold his hand and walk him around so he could hand out candy. He kept bumping into the kids. I feel this sympathy for Macy's elves. *(The reindeer is trying to hide her nose.)*

OG: I LOVE to design beautiful costumes. I would like to make REAL elves. But this story has to not be romantic. I tried to make the costume look dangerous, not pathetically cute. He wears these tights and they're not comfortable. I can't allow myself to design ugly costumes, but I have to convey the mes-

sage that it's not pleasant to be in those particular pretty clothes. As opposed to a “real” elf, who's comfortable in his cute costume. *(Winks at the elf polishing his bell; blows a puff of smoke his way)*

JE: *(swallowing uncomfortably)* The thing that makes this story so great is that while David Sedaris obviously is able to laugh at the absurd environment and be completely irreverent, he isn't immune to the charms of the Macy's Christmas experience. *(The reindeer is glaring at the smoking elf.)*

OG: *(putting out her cigarette in her glass)* The story is contemporary, people can relate, they haven't seen it so much, it is thoughtful, it goes to the core of capitalism, it's something that is real: I try to put all that in my design.

ET: *(scribbling in the margin of his notebook)* I know one of the reasons Associate Artistic Director Kim Rubinstein was approached to direct this production was for her unique theatrical vision. How's the collaboration been?

JE: The story isn't the usual holiday-time schmaltz. It can be heart-warming, but it is also very cutting and quite absurd. I think Kim is pushing this production away from the expected to embrace all those things and it gives us a chance to really go somewhere new.

JF: *(rubbing furiously at her nose)* Kim has a rather unique aesthetic. She was interested in finding a way to approach the show from a visual art installation perspective. In the early phases of research we looked at contemporary photographers and installation artists.

ET: *(writing in his notebook)* What is your most embarrassing ‘holiday story’?

(The elves are suddenly blinded by the reindeer's nose – glowing with an intense red light. The reindeer curses. A moment of discomfort.)

JF: One of my first jobs – post fast food – was with a children's entertainment company in the small town where I grew up. I spent several Christmas seasons dressed as a reindeer at the local mall.

(downs her scotch)

There is nothing more humbling than crouching awkwardly in a furry costume to hug a small child only to have him plaster his little face against your mesh eyes... “I SEE YOU IN THERE! YOU'RE NOT A REINDEER, YOU'RE A **GIRL!**! THIS IS ALL A LIE!!”

SANTA CLAUS REVEALED

(CONTINUED FROM INSIDE)

upon those who disobeyed.

Santa Claus as we know him today is essentially an American creation, informed as most are by the lore and customs of various other cultures. The name Santa Claus originated as a mispronunciation of *Sinterklaas*, the contracted Dutch term for Saint Nicholas, by early English settlers in America. Over time, some European nations and much of Asia would embrace Santa as their own, while others would ascribe to their “Father Christmas” many—if not all—of Santa's prominent characteristics.

Most of Santa's defining features were determined by a collection of American artists over the course of the 19th century. In William Gilley's *The Children's Friend*, published in 1821, Santa dons a furry hat and travels “o'er chimneytops” on Christmas Eve with his reindeer, quietly leaving toys and sweets for good children and a “brichen rod” for the bad. As detailed in James K. Paulding's 1936 work *The Book of Saint Nicholas*, Santa is Dutch, old-fashioned, practices Protestantism and abstains from alcohol. A merrier sort of Santa Claus emerged from the pen of Clement Clarke Moore, writer of the famous “An Account of a Visit from Saint Nicholas,” or “'Twas the Night Before Christmas.” Published in 1822, his poem caught the imagination of the American public and depicts a jolly, well-meaning elfin Saint Nicholas who gives generously in the spirit of goodwill.

As the century wore on, Santa took on a multiplicity of names, appearances and attitudes. New Yorkers looked to Santa Claus or Saint Nicholas for their Christmas gifts, Philadelphians to Kriss Kringle or Belsnickle. His dress ranged from a red-and-white, fur-trimmed suit to an Arabian headdress and Elizabethan doublet; his attendants from reindeer to hummingbirds.

When Santa Claus finally emerged as a well-defined character in 20th-Century America, he did so as a product of numerous competing influences that had gradually converged over thousands of years. With him he brought his band of helper-elves (see previous page)—a contribution to Santa lore by Germans and Scandinavians—though Santa himself, once distinctly elfish, had since grown to human proportions. Throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries, American songwriters added further detail to the mythology of Santa Claus, and American corporations such as Coca-Cola and Macy's employed Santa and his entourage as spokespeople, spreading their fame in the process. Santa has also been used in political propaganda. (See image on center spread).

The next time you come upon an image of Santa—and given the season, that is likely to be soon—see if you can detect in his gleaming eye the loving mischief of a nun secretly delivering gifts to the poor, or in his white beard, the fuzzy guise of a medieval Pelznickel. Santa's journey from fourth-century saint to contemporary, secular icon may be strange and unlikely, but for an old man beloved for descending our chimneys to leave us gifts and visiting our stores to sell them, it is also a fitting one.

SOURCES: *Santa Claus: A Biography* by Garry Bowler, 2005. *The Santa Claus Book* by E. Willis Jones, 1976.

ABOVE: 1930s AD FOR FRENCH APERITIF “BYRRH.”



OUT-SIGHT

FLASHBACK

The Santaland Diaries premiered November 7, 1996 at the Atlantic Theater Company, New York City. Rehearsals started at Long Wharf Theatre exactly ten years later, on November 7, 2006.

FLASHFORWARD

According to NPR producer Ira Glass, David Sedaris' next book will be a collection of fables about animals, stories told from their perspective.

Tell us **YOUR** most embarrassing holiday story in 200 words or less by writing to: beatrice.basso@longwharf.org. The “winner” will be published in the next edition of *OFFSTAGE*.

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OFFSTAGE is compiled by the Long Wharf Theatre Artistic Staff. For questions, comments, or suggestions about the publication, please contact beatrice.basso@longwharf.org.
DESIGN: BARBARA KAGAN

“I see it's so.” Please me the truth a Santa Claus Virginia 115 W.O



“I AM A THIRTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD MAN APPLYING FOR A JOB AS AN ELF.”



AN AUDIENCE GUIDE TO



THE SANTALAND DIARIES

BY DAVID SEDARIS
ADAPTED BY JOE MANTELLO
DIRECTED BY KIM RUBINSTEIN

NOVEMBER 29 THRU
DECEMBER 31, 2006



THE PLAYWRIGHT



DAVID SEDARIS

BY BEATRICE BASSO

MANY OF US REMEMBER THE MOMENT WE DISCOVERED WRITER DAVID SEDARIS — or “typist” David Sedaris, as he calls himself. In my case, it was during a long airplane ride in the company of Sedaris’ *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000). His stories as an ex-pat, which resonated very closely to my own, were filled with both unapologetic humor that made me laugh out loud and a humanity that couldn’t be ignored. Sedaris’ European adventures have continued since then: he still mostly lives between Paris and London and travels frequently to the U.S. for reading tours. Sedaris has never come back to play the elf character in his *Santaland Diaries*, which has been a successful show for a decade in theatres around the country. A great deal of his artistic success, however, is due to that elf.

Fourteen years ago, NPR producer Ira Glass, who had heard Sedaris give a reading in Chicago, contacted him to see if he had anything “Christmassy” for *Morning Edition*. Sedaris sent him a story about working as an elf at Macy’s in New York during the holiday season, which aired as an eight minute monologue read by its author on the morning of December 23, 1992. Public Radio introduced Sedaris to the American audience at large, says Sedaris, “Ten million people listened to that show and my life changed from one day to the next. It was like a Cinderella thing. Once the story was on the radio my phone just started to ring and didn’t stop.” His biting look at Christmas through the eyes of an aspiring artist in New York City got Sedaris the attention of major publishing houses like Little Brown, which offered him a book deal. His first collection of short stories, *Barrel Fever*, was published in 1994 and became a best-seller.

Raised in Raleigh, North Carolina, by a set of parents whose idiosyncrasies are brilliantly captured in his prose, Sedaris didn’t always know he wanted to be a writer. At first, he aspired to a painter (he’s currently married to one — designer and painter Hugh Hamrick) but decided he lacked the talent and discipline for it. He didn’t even start reading seriously until his twenties. “I just turned into a reader one day after I dropped out of college,” Sedaris explains. “I would read stories and if there were passages that really struck me, I just copied them down in my diary. It felt so good to write these words. I thought if I just transcribed them then maybe I could have the same feeling of the person who wrote them.”

Sedaris’ flair for the short story stemmed from having short breaks at work when living in Oregon: “When apple-picking sea-

son ended, I got a job in a packing plant and gravitated toward short stories, which I could read during my break and reflect upon for the remainder of my shift. A good one would take me out of myself and stuff me back in, outsized, now, and uneasy with the fit.” The short story model served him well for his radio engagements, which in turn contributed to his penchant for non-fiction. “I imagine people will look back at this time as a period of rampant self-obsession, and I probably fit right in there comfortably. In my case, it’s not that I feel I’m so fascinating. I just sort of fell into it when I started working on the radio; they wanted stories that were true, or true enough, so I started writing about myself. [...] I’ve always liked reading nonfiction. I think there’s a little switch that gets flipped inside of me and I think ‘Oh, this person’s telling the truth.’ Maybe they’re not — it really doesn’t matter to me whether they are or not, but if I believe they are, I just read it in a different way.”

The printed word, reading tours and radio are favorite modes of expression for Sedaris, who has turned down all film and TV proposals. “It doesn’t make any sense for me, but I get these calls to audition for things,” he says. “They once described a character as a ‘David Sedaris type;’ it seemed so foreign to me. How could I be a type?”

If TV and movies are excluded from his wish-list, theatre is not. He and his sister Amy regularly write and produce Off-Broadway plays. By necessity (an actor fell sick the day before opening), he once accepted to be the last-minute replacement but vouched, after the experience, never to do it again, especially with his sister: “I was on-stage with my sister — who is the funniest girl in America — and she would fuck with me. You know, she started improvising. And I was terrified. I looked at the people around me, and they were having so much fun. They were just prepared for anything. All I was thinking was: ‘What should I do with my hands?’” Playing himself as the Elf in *The Santaland Diaries* has also never been high on the list. “No way was I going to stand up there in front of people in an elf costume. No way,” he said unequivocally the year after the premiere.

Thank God for actors.

SOURCES: www.chicklit.com/paperjam.paperjam1.html, Anna Carey. • Berkshire Eagle, April 24, 1998, Seth Rogovoy. • From *Children Playing Before a Statue of Hercules*, edited and introduced by David Sedaris, Simon & Schuster, 2005. • Boston Phoenix, February 2000, Robert David Sullivan.

IN-SIGHT



SANTA CLAUS ACCORDING TO PICASSO

BY ELIZABETH DUDGEON

SANTA CLAUS REVEALED

AT CHRISTMASTIME IN AMERICA—and months beforehand—Santa Claus appears everywhere. So ubiquitous is the presence of this jolly, round icon of Yuletide that people rarely reflect upon it. If they did, they might come to the conclusion that a bearded man in a red, fur-trimmed suit who flies through the air on a reindeer-driven sleigh delivering gifts makes for a rather peculiar cultural denominator. They might wonder just who this cookie-eating, ho-hoing harbinger of overspending really is, and how he came to be in our homes, department stores and collective lives.

The practice of gift-giving in the wintertime long predates the arrival of the figure known as Santa Claus. In the time of the Roman Empire, gifts were exchanged in late December during Saturnalia, a five-day festival honoring the agricultural pagan diety Saturn. Masters and servants temporarily reversed roles, decorated their homes in greenery and candles, and gave children small dolls as gifts. As the power of the Roman Empire declined in the fourth century, December 25 was established as the day upon which the birth of Jesus would be openly celebrated. To the consternation of the churchmen, Christmas festivities closely resembled those of Saturnalia and other late-winter celebrations. In time, officials managed to sway the masses from cross-dressing and other forms of debauchery, but the practice of gift-giving continued.

In the Middle Ages, gift-giving became the hallmark of the Christmas season. It helped strengthen feudal relationships, functioning as a calculated recognition of past service or a promise of future patron-

age. Children who hoped to receive gifts would travel in groups to each of their neighbors’ homes, asking outright, and often threatening those who seemed disinclined to give, much like today’s children do at Halloween.

A group of nuns are said to have altered the practice of gift-giving at Christmastime when they began secretly leaving presents at the homes of poor children on the eve of Saint Nicholas. The nuns attributed this sudden appearance of gifts to the Saint, sparking a legend. The famous fourth-century bishop, it seemed, traveled to each home by walking, flying or riding a donkey. He entered through a window or the chimney, leaving gifts in the stockings and shoes of those who lived there. Saint Nicholas, however, also had a dark side. In legend, he became not only a generous benefactor but a strict disciplinarian who would beat disobedient children with rods and whips, leaving them nothing at all in their shoes. For those with good children, Saint Nicholas markets soon sprung up in medieval towns, providing toys and sweets at the holidays as our malls do today.

During northern Europe’s Protestant Reformation, the medieval cult of saints came under attack, and with it, the figure of Saint Nicholas. He was replaced in many Christian circles by the Christ Child, who became the new giver of gifts in December. A beast-like assistant was conceived for the Christ Child, variations of which evolved as permutations of the forbidden Saint Nicholas. These included Ru-klaus (Rough Nicholas), Aschenklas (Nicholas in Ashes) and Pelznickel (Furry Nicholas). The assistant also served to frighten children into good behavior, threatening a whipping or kidnapping



Dear Editor,
I am eighty years old.
Some of my little friends
say there is no Santa
Claus. Papa says if
you see it in the sun
it's so. Please tell
me the truth, is there
a Santa Claus?
Virginia O'Hanlon
115 W. 95 St.



TOP TO BOTTOM:
FIRST APPEARANCE OF AMERICAN
SANTA IN 1821 POEM;
MISCHIEVOUS BELSNICKLE
(AKA PELZNICKEL),
COMPANION TO THE CHRIST CHILD;
VIRGINIA O'HANLON'S LETTER TO THE
NEW YORK SUN WHICH INSPIRED THE
FAMOUS REPLY: "YES, VIRGINIA,
THERE IS A SANTA CLAUS";
A TURN OF THE CENTURY
WILD-EYED SANTA;
WWII ANTI-NAZI AD.



CONTINUED ON BACK

REDEFINING CHILDHOOD: Consumerism's Effect on Young People

Based on “*Kinderculture in America: The Child as Consumer*” from the book *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism* by Richard H. Robbins. Edited by Jacob Stoebel.

FROM LITTLE ADULTS TO CHILDREN, from laborers to consumers, the role of little people has transformed radically in the last century. Before the 20th century, children of working and middle class families were seen as laborers, working alongside their parents to provide an extra source of income. This began to change at the beginning of the twentieth century as child labor laws were placed on the books. It was at this time, as anthropologist Richard H. Robbins records, that childhood as we understand it today first began to emerge. Young people, no longer expected to perform physical labor, were free to attend school and play. A child’s only job was to simply “be a kid.” Suddenly little people needed special clothes, special furniture, and of course toys.

Businesses sprang on this new-found market with much enthusiasm. Toy production increased monumentally, by 1,300% between 1905 and 1920. Psychologists recognized toys as intrinsic to a child’s social and mental development. America began to recognize the need for children to define their individuality, and the necessity of toys and other possessions to accomplish this. For the first time, children in America were seen not as little workers but as little consumers, with a never-ending need for toys, and an uncanny ability to influence their parents’ purchasing decisions.

Christmas, which also exploded as a commercial entity during the 1920s, played a leading role in the transformation of children. The holiday, which had always been a time of giving, became a prime sales opportunity for retailers as parents rushed to buy toys for their children, who decades earlier wouldn’t have demanded them. The character of Santa Claus was conscripted as a toy salesman. Department stores staged theatricals for children and “radio” Santas began to fill airwaves nation-wide. Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade also began at this time, featuring colorful floats for children and culminating with a live Santa Claus in front of Macy’s Herald Square. All of these events and more worked toward one goal: to attract children to consumerism, to the idea that who you are is defined by what you own.

Children are recognized as a prime force of consumerism, and are targeted as such through marketing. Robbins cites research conducted in the 1990s finding that “children ages 2-14 directly influence \$188 billion of parental spending, indirectly influence another \$300 billion, and themselves spend some \$25 billion.” So it seems that a huge role in our nation’s economy is filled by a group of rather little people.