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Adapted from David Sedaris' famed audio presentation and subsequent short story, *The Santaland Diaries* – the latest endeavor from My Verona Productions, currently playing at Rock Island's ComedySportz venue – is an acting triumph for its star, Adam Lewis. Playing an unmotivated 33-year-old who finds himself – to his abject shame – employed at Macy's as one of Santa's elves, Lewis is spectacular; as he enacts his character's grueling ordeals in a one-man show that's part monologue, part stand-up routine, and part performance-art piece, the actor is thrilling to watch, so brilliantly focused and ceaselessly inventive that he leaves you a bit in awe.

Lewis is so good, in fact, that he almost succeeds in making you ignore the fundamental problem with the show: Sedaris' voice has been all but eradicated. It's *The Santaland Diaries*, but it's no longer David *Sedaris' Santaland Diaries*, and I think even those unfamiliar with Sedaris' work will probably notice.

David Sedaris is an openly gay writer, but what's more germane in *The Santaland Diaries* is that he has a gay *sensibility*. When Sedaris describes the nightmares he endured with his Macy's co-workers – several of whom were also gay – and his anger at monstrous parents and shrieking children, Sedaris' exasperation and the *bon mots* he tosses out are rooted in his sexuality; Sedaris could be saying, "I may be a bitch, but these people are *beyond* bitchy." Sedaris' unapologetic candor *allows* his *Santaland* alter-ego to be impatient, and even pissed, with women and other gays, and when he makes snide comments about his *uber*-chipper fellow elves, or about mothers and their children, we laugh rather than recoil. Sedaris' discomfort is hilarious because the nasty jokes don't feel *hateful*; the author is laughing at himself and his situation as much as he is the eccentrics surrounding him.

In this production of *Santaland*, the Sedaris figure (named, appropriately enough, Adam Lewis) is not only straight but *defiantly* straight – lines have been changed or added to the script to underscore this point – which means Lewis spends much of the show working against the material. When, for instance, Sedaris/Lewis rails against the flirtations of a gay elf named Snowball, or even when he discusses the jokes he pulls on customers to relieve the workplace tedium, the gags have an unpleasant undercurrent of meanness that kills the punchlines. But what's more damaging is that the punchlines

themselves
are the product of a gay sensibility. Much of Sedaris's phraseology, with his clever, biting retorts, sounds awkward in this straight-man context; our protagonist here is like
All About Eve
's Addison DeWitt if he was played not by George Sanders, but by Gary Merrill.

A great deal of the *Santaland* material still works, though – gay or straight, who *hasn't* endured the tribulations of the Job from Hell? – and that the show succeeds as well as it does is a testament to the talents of both Lewis and his director, Michael Oberfield. Visually, Oberfield has done something rather remarkable – he's staged a one-person show that truly feels like a
play
, with tremendous variety within the individual monologues and movement that never feels extraneous. His attempts to include the audience in the production leave a few dead spots – when Lewis, at Friday night's production, pulled a family onstage for a photo-op, it broke the actor's (and the show's) performance rhythm – but those moments are few, and through it all, Lewis emerges unscathed.

Gloriously unscathed. Lewis, here, gives a staggeringly confident comedic performance. Whether describing his character's unbearable humiliation, imitating one of his ridiculous co-workers (Lewis's horny "Sports Bar Elf," whose laughter is accompanied by suggestive hip thrusts, is a classic caricature), or indulging in a rare, sublimely well-calibrated moment of sentiment, Lewis's portrayal is breathtaking. This isn't just the work of a first-rate comic, but a first-rate *actor*.

This *Santaland Diaries* might not much resemble its source material, but Lewis, even when impeded by his material, is sublime; his character's pain becomes an audience's rapture.