

Everyone forgets that the holidays are the darkest days of the year—literally. Even in sunny California, the days grow shorter, leaving everyone with less time. Those families on TV are smiling, gleefully chirping about the hap-happy holidays, and you're sitting next to the aluminum Christmas tree with a stack of presents, fist clenched around a pair of scissors, curling ribbons that'll just be ignored.

No one appreciates your hard work. You bring warm milk to your ailing husband, and he waves you away. The gall! Thinking about everything you've sacrificed for him—for those kids!—you could just scream. Or stab someone. Or tip poison into their drink. Or maybe spike their tea with LSD, sending them on the trip of a lifetime. Oh, the sweet, psychedelic possibilities!

After the success of last year's production of *The SantaLand Diaries*, David Sedaris' sardonic unveiling of what it's *really* like to be Santa's helper, Stray Dog Theatre artistic director Gary Bell knew he'd tapped into a deep, dark vein. People practically demanded a release amid the madness of the holidays.

"All the people on South Grand were like, 'We're buying tickets *forever* to your winter show, 'cause we just can't deal with it anymore, all the jingle bell jingle bells and all the kids and the crying.' It's just too much. Many people—I would say a good 70 percent—said do it again next year," says Bell. "And I said, 'Well, that's a little easy. I'll do something *else*. Not to say we won't bring *SantaLand* back, but let's try something else and see what happens.'"

That something else is playwright Charles Busch's *Die! Mommie! Die!*, a twisted, gender-bending comedy sendup of the family life of a classic,



Sunshine, Lollipops and ... Revenge?

Stray Dog's devilish holiday romp brings light to the darker side of the '60s By Margaret Bauer

under mysterious circumstances, Angela announces her intentions to start a new life—only to be cornered by those pesky kids, who, in a turn reminiscent of Greek tragedy, demand vengeance for their father's demise.

What happens next is anyone's game. "People aren't going to have any idea what's really going to happen until they see it," says Crain. "When I first sat down and read it through, I knew what she was, I knew that character. But I had no idea where I was headed. And as I'm reading, I'm thinking, 'Ohhh my God.' People won't see it comin'."

1960s-style leading lady. Aging pop singer Angela Arden is trapped in a loveless marriage to Hollywood producer Sol Sussman (Will Ledbetter), and can't handle her two teenage children, the devious Edith (Megan Rodd) and witless Lance (Zack Huels). The big twist—one of many—being that mother Angela is played by a male actor (Thom Crain).

"I have been in drag before, but I've never played a person in drag onstage," says Crain. "For any actor, this is a role of a lifetime. Because I don't have anything to look up to except for Charles Busch, who's amazing, but you know what? It's going to be *me*. And this is not just getting up on a stage and doing a little show-tunes Broadway number. This is a challenge as an actor."

That role's real-life duality, baked into the piece by Busch, a career female illusionist who played Angela in the original production, underpins the fundamental unreality of the Sussmans' picture-perfect life. *Die! Mommie! Die!* is at base a kind of delightful, campy shedding of layers, a delayed series of revelations involving sexuality, dreams deferred, death and betrayal—and not a little *schadenfreude*. When hubby Sol kicks the bucket

Stray Dog Theatre's Die! Mommie! Die! runs December 4 to 20 at Tower Grove Abbey, 2336 Tennessee. Tickets are \$20 for adults, \$18 for seniors and students. Call 314-865-1995 or visit straydogtheatre.com for reservations. For mature audiences only.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ASHLEY GIESEKING