

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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REVIEW: A SURPRISE TWIST TO SECRET SANTA'S PLOT FLOP

By Wanda Sue Parrott

The rain-delayed debut of Homeless Secret Santa happened in Sand City five days before the *real* Santa's anticipated arrival on Christmas Eve.

I learned of Secret Santa's show from Ernie outside the Salvation Army's chapel on Fri., Dec. 19. "Santa's flying tomorrow," Ernie announced with exuberant relief. Exuberant because, at last, money would come in and net proceeds would be split three ways: Ernie, as entrepreneurial director would get a 1/3 cut; Santa would get 1/3; the remaining 1/3 would be given out among needy homeless people. Relief because Ernie, aka The Gay Gourmet, was excited about his creative street-performance show biz scheme expected to produce donations with which to buy a car.

As all theatrical producers do, Ernie hoped the Santa act would draw rave reviews because this was an investment. "I paid for the costume and props."

Ernie transported Secret Santa's purple hat, black boots and fluorescent-toned pajama bottoms with zigzag patterns in a shopping cart for nearly three weeks. They survived dozens of gully washer days.

Among props were a thousand candy canes to give to those who donated cash, and the sign Santa would fly (hold up) with STARVATION ARMY emblazoned across its face.

These and a stand-up plastic candy cane were in the shopping cart Ernie was pushing. "I even went to the police and got permission for Santa to stand there for five hours."

When I arrived on the scene at 3 p.m. the next day, there was no sign of Secret Santa standing outside McDonald's. A dapper Ernie, clad in royal blue and a black beret, stood out of sight near the railroad tracks near the stop sign, where a hoodie-clad man was busily darting back and forth among traffic, carrying bunches of fresh cut flowers which he hawked to drivers both coming and going.

If Secret Santa were anywhere in the vicinity, the flower vendor had him so upstaged he was practically invisible. I tried, but could not see any sign of a colorfully attired, white-bearded man in his sixties who was approaching cars and offering candy canes in exchange for dollars.

I drove around and around, and was about to give up when, suddenly, I spotted zigzag-patterned pants on a scrawny young man with black hair and beard. He was sprawled low on a bus bench. A sign lay on his lap.

His legs were akimbo, and his pant legs were pulled around his ankles, revealing hairy legs wearing jogging shoes. Secret Santa looked stoned. I drove away.

Three days later, I saw Ernie parking a car, so decided to give him my honest opinion.

“I saw your Secret Santa on Saturday. He was an absolute flop, a complete disaster.”

“I know.”

“He wasn’t your dumpster-diving white-bearded sixtyish hero you cast for the role.”

Ernie said his Santa let him down. “He didn’t show, so I asked a young kid to be a stand-in.”

“So, how did you get this car?” I asked.

“Borrowed it,” Ernie said.

“You didn’t buy it with proceeds from your Secret Santa gig?”

“No, it belongs to my cousin.”

“Well, I am curious. How much in exact dollars and cents did your investment in Secret Santa produce? How much did Secret Santa distribute to the homeless?”

“I don’t know if the homeless got anything.”

“How much did Secret Santa get?”

“I don’t know.”

“How much did you get?”

“He paid me three dollars.”

“Three dollars? What a crock! Ernie, you don’t belong in this homeless business!”

Ernie smiled and assured me his Secret Santa gig was not a total disaster because the show did go on. “I wore the Santa Claus costume myself. It was at a Christmas party the Salvation Army gave for kids.”

“You gave away money?”

“No. I was a server.”

“Christmas lunch?”

“They got the candy canes.”

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