

# The Washington Times

Friday, April 25, 2008

WASHINGTON, D.C.

## Letters' from devil's helper

You gotta give the devil — and his minions — their due. Sure, they are a fiendish and craven lot, but terribly entertaining. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the Fellowship for the Performing Arts Theatre Company's sinfully first-rate production of "The Screwtape Letters," currently saving souls at the Lansburgh Theatre.

Christian writer C.S. Lewis, whom you might know from a modest enterprise called the "Narnia" books, wrote this epistolary novel about the damaging accretion of minor sins in 1942. He dedicated it to his chum J.R.R. Tolkien, a devout Catholic and creator of "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy.

The book (and two-person play adaptation) is a dapper, elegant affair — 31 letters penned by an upper-level demon named Screwtape (Max McLean) to his protegee Wormwood that boil over with wit and brimstone.



Screwtape has taken the young Wormwood under his dark wing and instructs him on how to lead the Patient — a mortal man living in wartime England — down the road to perdition.

Screwtape is unruffled when Wormwood reports that the Patient has converted to Christianity ("a moderate religion is as good as no religion at all") and coaches him

to undermine the man by preying on his uncertainties and seeking to divide him from himself.

To win one for Lucifer, Screwtape advises guiding the Patient toward current biographies, noting that the circles of hell are filled to bursting with "every film star and popular singer." Another tactic is to encourage the Patient to befriend amusing modern skeptics and cynics.

Screwtape's musings are taken down slavishly by his secretary, Toadpipe (Karen Eleanor Wight, displaying acrobatic grace and poise) a red-horned, scuttling demon who communicates with strangulated yelps and perches like a gargoyle on a stool or ladder when not taking dictation.

Toadpipe's postal method is dandy — a variation on e-mail that involves fireballs shot through a pneumatic tube. It's one of the fiendish delights of Cameron Anderson's set, a cozy study with two ladders (one leading heavenward and the other down below) all raked at a sinister angle.

Screwtape's correspondence is written with such stylish charm — and eloquently delivered by Mr. McLean, who whips himself up into a demonic froth by the end — that it does not seem remotely like a sanctimonious Sunday school lesson. That said, if you haven't read "The Screwtape Letters," you may be confounded by the play's epistolary structure and purplish prose.

No matter what your religion, "The Screwtape Letters" may set you to thinking about your own eternal soul, as Mr. Lewis' theme is that "the gentle, sliding slope of habitual small sins" leads to perdition as surely as, say, sexual exploitation, murder or rampant greed. Sneaky thoughts, pale transgressions — it all adds up.



WHAT: "The Screwtape Letters" by C.S. Lewis, adapted for the stage by Jeffrey Fiske and Max McLean

WHERE: Lansburgh Theatre, 450 Seventh St. NW, Washington

WHEN: 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays. Through May 18.

TICKETS: \$29 to \$49

PHONE: 202/547-1122

WEB SITE: [www.ScrewtapeOnStage.com](http://www.ScrewtapeOnStage.com)

MAXIMUM RATING: FOUR STARS