

REVIEW | 'Letters' cleverly spells out the state of man

A hot and wicked descent into hell

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By HEDY WEISS Theater Critic

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Screwtape (a.k.a. Satan) lives a rather comfortable life, all things considered. It is not a restful existence, to be sure, but it's pleasant enough -- even if the supply of truly tasty human souls on



Max McLean is Screwtape (the devil) and Yvonne Gougelet is his cat Toadpipe in "The Screwtape Letters."

which he prefers to dine proves disappointing much of the time.

True, the devil's address is not in the most fashionable part of town, but rather at the center of the Underworld -- a steeply raked, sewerlike place whose mailbox has an almost

radioactive glow. Nevertheless, he spends much of his time dressed in a handsome brocade smoking jacket, ensconced in a big leather easy chair. And he has a hopelessly devoted companion in sin, Toadpipe -- a self-possessed feline with special talents for sealing a deal and morphing into every possible type of temptress.

You will find both the devil (Max McLean, supremely larger than life in his portrayal of a character who is part bristling ham actor, part self-styled psychologist and part shrewdly calculating anarchist) and his talented cat (Yvonne Gougelet, a phenomenal actress whose physical eloquence speaks volumes) in "The Screwtape Letters," the stage adaptation

of British writer and Christian philosopher C.S. Lewis' wonderfully clever and wicked meditation on what makes man tick.

This dense but superbly orchestrated 90-minute show -- previously seen in Washington and New York -- opened Sunday at the Mercury Theater, where the intellectual temperature surely has shot up, even if the revelations about the state of man's soul (and Satan's machinations) are enough to cause a big chill.

Adapted by Jeffrey Fiske and McLean, and directed with enormous panache by Fiske -- with sensational design work by Cameron Anderson (set), Michael Bevins (costumes), Tyler Micoletau (lights) and Bart Fasbender (heart-stopping sound) -- the show is a twisted sensualist's delight.

But be forewarned: This is one of those prose texts that demands absolute attention. Happily, its adapters and performers have deployed a slew of theatrical tricks to enhance the work's brainy delights, and the whole thing grows more lucid and perversely delicious as it unfolds.

McLean never flags in his sweaty, tongue-twisting, stomach-turning, lip-smacking performance. He does all the verbal heavy-lifting -- explaining in the acid-tinged letters he dictates to Toadpipe (and sends off to his agents

of darkness on the ground) just how a human soul can be corrupted -- through a combination of pride, temptation, denial, boredom and even the selflessness that frequently accompanies combat.

Meanwhile, Gougelet not only brilliantly suggests

Everywoman (from Bible-clutching priggish wife to runway model), but also supplies the stinging punctuation for each and every letter in this smart, sizzingly hellish entertainment.

**"PHENOMENAL!
Sizzling Entertainment...
Wonderfully Clever.
SENSATIONAL!"**