

Play review: Save us from the fires of hell

C. S. Lewis' 'The Screwtape Letters' comes to life on stage in Washington.

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Crackling of hellish fires, smoke billowing from below, morbid walls of skulls and a wretched demon often crawling on all fours give the impression that you're within the confines of Satan's dominion — a bleak, haunting place of isolation and perpetual despair, the place where the brilliant work of C.S. Lewis comes to life in a condensed adaptation presented by the Fellowship for the Performing Arts at the Lansburgh Theatre in Washington.

An office in hell is where the visible action takes place in the theatrical presentation of "The Screwtape Letters," based on a series of missives between Screwtape (Max McLean), a senior devil, and his nephew Wormwood, a junior tempter assigned to secure eternal damnation for his "patient," a new Christian seeking a virtuous life.

While Wormwood is an unseen character, the content of his letters are revealed through Screwtape's reaction. They often provoke frustration and warnings from Screwtape, who tries to teach him the subtle ways of luring one to hell by undermining faith, and preventing prayer and the formation of virtue.

"The safest road to hell is the gradual one — the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts," Screwtape dictates as his secretary demon, Toadpipe (Karen Eleanor Wight) snarls in agreement and takes note.

The rendering of the Christian satire, published in 1942, with profound themes of the sins of commission and omission that transcend time, eloquently portrays the human condition and temptation. The witty and engaging prose is thought-provoking and reveals the reality of sin and its weight on the soul.

As the minions of the evil one, who is referred to as "our father below," are ceaselessly at work for our demise in the state of sin, the presentation brings to light the presence of spiritual warfare. Humans are simply cattle for the demons. "Bring us back food or be food yourself," Screwtape warns Wormwood not to fail in his mission.

Screwtape's sinister ideas often develop while he lounges around in an oversized comfy chair. A ladder in the back leads to a box, where Toadpipe places the letters to be delivered and retrieves the responses from Wormwood.

The evil Screwtape is deceptively charming and fun to watch. His delivery is flawless and believable. While the yapping and barking of the often bone-gnawing Toadpipe is sometimes over the top and annoying, her mysterious impish smile makes up for it.

While the drama is a summarized rendering of the original work, it is nonetheless fascinating and entertaining and true to themes of the book, mostly using original script. A few creative add-ins are a bonus including Toadpipe's amusing dramatization of people on earth referred to by Screwtape. Toadpipe is right on cue and snaps back into her role as the slave pet of her devilish master. Nothing could quite possibly reach the level of Lewis' written masterpiece, however, this 90-minute stage adaptation is a close rendition.

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See it

'The Screwtape Letters' plays at the Lansburgh through May 18. For tickets call 202-547-1122.