

Contra devils & ghouls



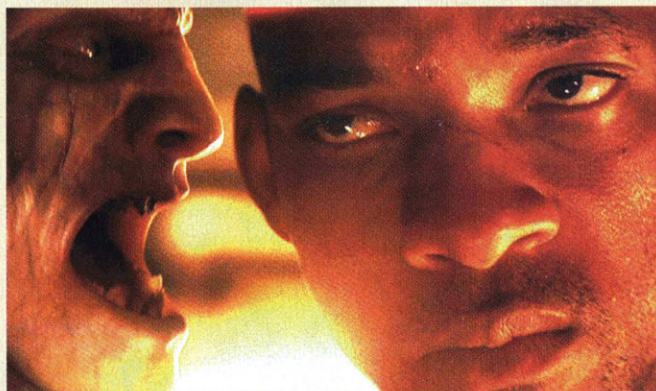
WANT TO BE IN SHOW BUSINESS? HOW MUCH money do you have?

With \$100 million, you can make the newly opened *I Am Legend* (PG-13 for violence and intense action). It stars Will Smith (expensive, but worth it) plus a computer-altered portrait of a decaying, grassy New York City populated only by Smith, animals, and hairless, pale ex-humans turned bloodthirsty by a cancer cure gone horribly wrong.

But poor Christians in an age of theatrical extravagance need not give up. Exhibit A: a New York performance of *The Screwtape Letters*, a two-actor version of the great book by C.S. Lewis that features a senior devil instructing an apprentice on how to bring a young man to hell.

Behind this low-budget but high-energy presentation is the New Jersey-based Fellowship for the Performing Arts, which aims "to produce theater from a Christian worldview that is engaging to a diverse audience." FPA had playwrights Jeffrey Fiske and Max McLean transform Lewis' letters into gripping drama, with McLean cast as an urbane Screwtape in a plush smoking jacket.

McLean does all the speaking for 85 minutes without intermission, and real sweat puddles his face by performance's end. But Karen Wright as Screwtape's secretary, Toadpipe, keeps the show from being just a talking head. A mix of Gollum and puppy, she squeaks and grunts appreciation of



PARALLELS: Wright and McLean in *Screwtape*; Smith in *Legend*.

her boss, then mimes wonderfully the human behavior *Screwtape* describes in words.

The Screwtape Letters is on stage at a close-to-Broadway church that doubles as a theater, but it does not merely preach to the choir: Reviewers in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Post*, *NYTheatre.com*, and *CurtainUp.com* have praised it. Christians across the United States can evangelize in their own cities by putting on tiny-cast, relatively inexpensive plays of this kind.

I Am Legend, the expensive action flick, might seem the opposite of *Screwtape*, but some parallels emerge. Robert Neville (Will Smith) is in a hell of a sort, all alone by day and besieged by ghouls at night. His Robinson Crusoe position on the newly grassy island of Manhattan is intriguing enough to carry the first half of the film, but after an hour it's time for the plot to move.

And move it does. Neville, a scientist, is trying to find the cure for the virus that kills humans or turns them into residents of the ghoulag. But science by itself is not the hero here; it turns out that faith is essential. Early in the movie Neville drives past a truck displaying a poster, "God still loves us." Later, trying to comprehend the physical or spiritual demise of 6 billion people, he declares, "There is no God."

Rumor has it that the filmmakers tried several endings and settled on one suggesting that there is a God. That's what a mysterious woman who shows up with her son tells Neville: "He has a plan. He sent me here for a reason." She even thinks the end of civilization has some benefits: "The world is quieter now. It's easier to hear God."

Neville for three years has been weighed down with the belief that only he can save mankind. In a penultimate scene Neville shouts at the attacking ghouls, "You are sick and I can save you! Let me save you!" It turns out that he can't, all by himself, but he becomes Christ-like in one sense, and a combination of science plus faith eventually makes the difference.

The summary just given might give the wrong impression of *I Am Legend*. It's an action flick, not a dramatic theological tract like *The Screwtape Letters*. Its bottom line is not hearts changed but \$76.5 million grabbed at the box office on opening weekend. But the separation of church and screen has never been complete, so note well: Hollywood producers and presidential candidates both know that a little bit of religion helps an audience feel satisfied. —Marvin Olasky