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Treading the Soft Path to Hell: *The Screwtape Letters*

Though I had never written anything more easily, I never wrote with less enjoyment . . . though it was easy to twist one's mind into the diabolical attitude, it was not fun, or not for long. The work into which I had to project myself while I spoke through Screwtape was all dust, grit, thirst, and itch. Every trace of beauty, freshness, and geniality had to be excluded.

— C.S. Lewis, from his preface to *The Screwtape Letters* (paperback ed.), 1959

Man, if the Vast Right Wing Conspiracy had C. S. Lewis on the payroll these days, we'd all be in trouble — er, worse trouble. Lewis, the World War I vet, Oxford and Cambridge academic, uber-prolific author, and all-around intellectual heavyweight, converted to Christianity in his early 30s. He's probably most remembered for the hugely popular evangelical Chronicles of Narnia novels he penned chiefly for young readers, but he was equally adept at proselytizing to adults. A clear and elegant thinker who played the English language like a fine instrument, Lewis was and is so good, you'd hardly know you were being preached to.

Exhibit A would be *The Screwtape Letters*, his epistolic novella wherein one of Hell's senior demons advises a novice devil, Slubgob, who's here on Earth among us mortals, making a play for a "patient's" soul. Originally published in The Guardian beginning in 1941, when German bombs rained on London with numbing regularity, the letters are — depending on your point of view — a brilliant work of fiction or a brilliant work of theology. Either way, the B-word stands. In cataloging precisely (but not, of course, exhaustively) the 1,001 means by which a human endowed with free will might become corrupted, Screwtape elucidates Lewis's key theme that "the best road to hell is the gradual one." Or, as Screwtape observes later, "A murder is no better than cards, if cards will do the trick."

The New Jersey-based Fellowship of the Performing Arts — a group devoted to producing "theater from a Christian worldview that is engaging to a diverse audience," as their mission statement goes — has hit the bullseye, making a Screwtape for the stage that's nearly as incisive and funny as it is on the page, and one that should appeal to the aesthetically-discerning atheist as well as to a wide swath of religious folks. (The production premiered in New York in 2006.)

Max McLean, who co-wrote the script with director Jeffrey Fiske, is the titular devil. There's only one other actor in the cast, Karen Elenor Wight as Toadpipe, Screwtape's feline secretary. While hers is an fine non-verbal performance, feral and lithe and abetted by designer Michael Bevins's superb costume, the show belongs to the barrel-chested and bellicose McLean, who brings Screwtape's correspondence to life by speaking to us as he's dictating his epistles to Toadpipe. (The show opens with Screwtape addressing a ceremonial dinner of the Tempter's Training College, a bit taken not from the original novella, but from Screwtape Proposes a Toast, a sequel of sorts that Lewis penned for the Saturday Evening Post in 1959.) McLean's seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of ways to spin his sign off ("Your affectionate uncle, Screeeeeeewwwwwwwwwwtape") is but one of the guilt-free pleasures that await you.

This all might sound like a thin nail on which to hang an unbroken hour-and-a-half of theater. As in the prose version, we never get an objective look at Wormwood's progress on his mission; the "plot" advances only through Screwtape's replies to Wormwood's periodic reports. But so entrancing is the spectacle of one illusionist sharing the tricks of the trade with another that you never notice the time.

Cameron Anderson's rake-stage set of Screwtape's infernal study, equipped with a crooked ladder, one of those pneumatic-tube messenger systems (why does it just seem right that Hell would have those?), and a rear wall, the grotesque composition of which is withheld until late in the show, is visually arresting. Better still, it condenses the space of the Landsburgh in a manner befitting a story that's meant to work on each of us individually. The lighting and sound design, by Tyler Micoleau and Bare Fasbender, respectively, preserves a steady menace even in Screwtape's most uproarious tirades. Still, you get the sense McLean could pull this off in a basement, without all the pricey help.

There's a cheap and obvious Madonna joke that would have been better targeted at Oprah -- and indeed, could be redirected thusly without changing a word of the script. But other than that, this is a show — if you'll pardon the expression — without sin.

The Screwtape Letters (90 minutes, no intermission) is at the Landsburgh Theatre through May 18. Tickets are available here. Tonight's performance will include a post-show discussion with the cast and director Jeffrey Fiske.