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The Devil May Care: 'Screwtape Letters'



WE'RE TAUGHT HELL IS AWFUL and we should do everything we can to avoid it. But if there are demons there as fabulously entertaining as C.S. Lewis' Screwtape, damnation might be downright illuminating.

New York City's Fellowship for the Performing Arts' staging of "The Screwtape Letters" adapts Lewis' satirical Christian apologetic, in the original version told entirely as a one-sided correspondence from senior demon Screwtape to his nephew. Frankly, the book doesn't have a whole lot to watch, which makes Max McLean's casting as Screwtape essential to why the production works.

As Screwtape guides his nephew through turning his "patient" toward sin, McLean progresses from a slightly ornery professor-type to a slickly evil powder-keg of rage. It's a thoroughly engrossing transformation, humorous and a little frightening. And the more exasperated Screwtape becomes, the more McLean shines.

Meanwhile, Screwtape's impish assistant, Toadpipe (Karen Eleanor Wright) is made into a sort of court jester, chirping incoherently and scrambling around like a frazzled cat.

As a snarky comment on morality, or one religious definition of morality, "The Screwtape Letters" unleashes a nonstop barrage of barbs against gluttony, weak faith, sexual temptation, intellectualism, skepticism, affluence and numerous other affronts to Christian doctrine. Believers in hell will find great poignancy in Screwtape's quips about the absolution of sin: "Murder is no better than cards, if cards do the trick!"

Regardless of one's theological ideology, "The Screwtape Letters" (which includes an adaptation of Lewis' sequel essay, "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," as an intro) is a worthwhile show, if only to experience McLean's wickedly engaging title character. It's a performance one could watch ... for eternity.

» Lansburgh Theater, 450 7th St. NW; through May 18, \$29-\$49; 877-487-8849. (Archives-Navy Memorial)