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Wicked Good

The Screwtape Letters

By John J. Miller

C. S. Lewis once complained that writing *The Screwtape Letters* brought him no pleasure. “I never wrote with less enjoyment,” he said. “The strain produced a spiritual cramp.” That’s because Screwtape is a devil, and his letters are pieces of fiendish instruction sent to Wormwood, an apprentice demon who is trying to tempt a soul into Hell. “The world in which I had to project myself while I spoke through Screwtape was all dust, grit, thirst, and itch,” said Lewis. “Every trace of beauty, freshness, and geniality had to be excluded.”

And yet *The Screwtape Letters*, published in 1942, is one of Lewis’s best-loved books—it is probably more widely read than any of his titles, with the exception of *Mere Christianity* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It might even be said that in certain respects it was the most important book he ever wrote, if only because it “made Lewis a household name,” according to biographer A. N. Wilson. Would we know Lewis if he had never written *Screwtape*? Probably. But it’s a little like asking whether we’d know Shakespeare if he had never written Hamlet—removing it from his opus diminishes him.

Anybody who has dipped into the book can sense its power. The concept of a devil writing letters to his subordinate is pure genius, and *The Screwtape Letters* is full of crackling-good prose.

I have often wondered how *The Screwtape Letters* might be dramatized, especially in the wake of last year’s Narnia movie. A splendid audio version of the

book is available, performed by John Cleese of Monty Python fame. It is at bottom a recitation of the letters. Turning the letters into an actual story that might be made into a film would require an enormous amount of invention—the creation of characters and situations that are only dimly hinted at in the words Lewis actually wrote. Anybody who attempted it would be accused of deviating from the script.

Last month, I did watch an excellent stage performance of *The Screwtape Letters* in New York, put on by the Fellowship for the Performing Arts. It opened in January and closed earlier this month. “We have sold out for the vast majority of the performances,” says Jeffrey Fiske, the FPA’s artistic director. The production may move to a larger venue off-Broadway venue in New York, and there is also a hope for shows in other cities.

The presentation is simple enough: Screwtape, played in a bronze smoking jacket by a Robert De Niro-ish Max McLean, recites his letters to Toadpipe, a demonic scribe and dancer played by Jenny Savage. Yet McLean so dominates the stage that *The Screwtape Letters* seems almost a one-man show. He is both charming and gruesome, which is exactly how theatergoers who are familiar with the book would want him to be. The show is essentially an edited version of the book plus a snippet from “Screwtape Proposes a Toast,” a short essay that Lewis wrote in 1962—it clocks in at roughly an hour and 45 minutes (compared to about six hours for the unabridged recording by Cleese). There are a handful of embellishments, such as Toadpipe chanting “Om,” like a 1960s hippie, when Screwtape urges Wormwood to produce “a vague devotional mood” in his patient. At another point, Screwtape, seated in a high-backed brown leather chair, flips through a book about Madonna (i.e., the singer). Between the letters, Toadpipe dances to music—this is a bit distracting, but at least it serves the purpose of breaking up what otherwise would be an extended monologue. All in all, *The Screwtape Letters*, as produced by the FPA, is an outstanding piece of work.
