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Review: 'The Screwtape Letters'

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NEW YORK – What do they eat in hell, anyway?

This and much weightier theological questions were the subject of C.S. Lewis' satiric book, "The Screwtape Letters," originally published in 1941 London as a series of newspaper articles.

The struggle between good and evil remains as relevant and compelling in the 21st century as it was in World War II England.

"The Screwtape Letters" was first adapted for the stage in 2006 by Max McLean and Jeffrey Fiske for the Fellowship for the Performing Arts in New York. It now has been revived in a compelling new production, again starring McLean and again directed by Fiske, at off-Broadway's Theatre at St. Clement's.

McLean enthusiastically portrays a senior bureaucrat in the "lowerarchy" of hell, an ominously unctuous and increasingly uncivil servant, whose official title is His Abysmal Sublimity Screwtape. A self-satisfied demon, Screwtape is aided by his reptilian secretary, the nimble imp Toadpipe, amusingly pantomimed by Karen Eleanor Wight.

Elegantly dressed, Screwtape dictates bombastic instructional correspondence to his nephew Wormwood, a recent graduate of Tempters Training College for Young Devils, advising him on the best strategies for procuring the soul of a young Englishman, referred to only as "the Patient."

Screwtape seems quite sure that he has all the answers to aid "My dear Wormwood" into tricking the Patient away from "the Enemy," which is soon revealed to be Christianity.

Wormwood, the humans and the agents of the Enemy are never seen, but Screwtape dramatically describes their struggles as he tries to correct his nephew's naive miscalculations in the age-old battle for human spirits.

A cleverly tilted stage, designed by Cameron Anderson, puts the audience at the feet of Screwtape in his gray, foggy office, and traps them there in hell with him for the entire play.

McLean has all the dialogue, although Wight provides an amusing, non-speaking stage presence throughout. She relieves the endless wordiness of her master, entertaining the audience with her physical antics and odd noises.

McLean pops his P's and smacks his lips with relish as he sibilantly declaims Screwtape's smug advice to Wormwood. He spits out his signature signoff - "Your af-feck-shunate uncle, Screwwwwta-puh!" - with gusto as he completes each letter.

Screwtape supplies endless suggestions to Wormwood about how to weaken the Patient's faith and lead him to sin, coupled with his own occasionally distorted observations about humanity and Christian doctrine. He believes that humans have no patience for reading the "very small print" of the Bible or for having to congregate with their neighbors each week in church.

When Wormwood's Patient falls in love with a young Christian woman, Screwtape says dismissively that she is "nauseating" in her purity of spirit, and suggests hopefully to his nephew that "courtship sows seeds that will grow into domestic hatred."

As war breaks out, and Wormwood has to battle both the Enemy and the unfortunate tendency for wartime to bring out the nobility in humans, Screwtape becomes ever more disheveled. While he rages around his office, the audience gradually sees that the wall behind him is embedded with human skulls. His veneer of manners and polish evaporates under the strain of Wormwood's apparent failure to capture the Englishman's soul, and he snarls to Wormwood at one point to "bring us back food or be food yourself."

Lewis' insights into human nature still resonate nearly seven decades later. The premise that it's the small things in daily life that lead people astray is still timely and accurate, and cleverly conveyed by McLean's sly, deceptively charming performance.