

C.S. Lewis' 'Screwtape on Stage' Wins Critical Acclaim

C.S. Lewis' unique  take on the demonic underworld is experiencing a revival of sorts in theaters across the country. Based on *The Screwtape Letters*—the 1942 fiction work that elevated the Oxford University professor to celebrity status—*Screwtape on Stage* features the talents of Max McLean, who portrays the demon Screwtape teaching the novice tempter, Wormwood, by means of letter writing.

Adapted and directed by Jeff Fiske and Max McLean, the presentation from the classic novel by Lewis—also author of “The Chronicles of Narnia” and *Mere Christianity*—has sold out in multiple cities and was performed more than 300 times at New York City's West Side Theatre. Told from the senior demon's point of view, the play features McLean corresponding with Wormwood, a demon in training learning to tempt his “patient” on Earth. God is known as “the enemy” and Satan as “our Father below.”

Douglas Gresham, Lewis' stepson and the executor of his estate, approved the show's script and called it “a breathtaking performance.” *The Wall Street Journal*

called it “wickedly witty,” and *The New York Times*

said: “The devil has rarely been given his due more perceptively and eruditely.”

When published, the book brought Lewis considerable media attention, leading to three years of BBC radio talks, and five years later he graced the cover of *Time* magazine. *Screwtape on Stage* remains true to Lewis’ spiritual warfare classic with “97-98 percent” of what was on stage directly from the book, said McLean, adding that Lewis’ purpose was to “expose the darkness.”

Screwtape is accompanied on stage by Toadpipe, a grotesque character who acts as his assistant by taking dictation and delivering *Screwtape*’s letters by way of something that looks like a bank delivery tube ascending to earth. Played by either Tamala Bakkensen or Beckley Andrews, Toadpipe skillfully assumes various postures or characters in response to *Screwtape*’s dictation.

Screwtape wears a fanciful red jacket throughout most of the show, though at the end he dons a more military-style jacket and white gloves. In his dictation, he covers topics such as pride, “the painful subject of prayer,” church-going, courtship and fashion, and speaks of the failure of hell’s intelligence department to “find out what he [God] is up to.”

With few props, the set has a backdrop of skulls and bones, the designer having visited and been inspired by the Catacombs, McLean said to his Orlando, Fla., audience in a post-show Q-and-A session. Music plays a role, too, once with pop star Madonna's "Material Girl" among the tunes heard in the background.

Just as the Scriptures refer to Satan as a prowling lion seeking to devour, "human souls are the nourishment for demons in hell; we're part of their food chain," McLean said. But when Wormwood's "patient" opts to follow Christ, Screwtape prepares, alternatively, to consume his novice demon.

Asked in the after-session about his ability to memorize 90 minutes of material, McLean said he learned it "one line at a time," noting that is the "minimal requirement for the [actor's] job" He has also performed the Gospel of Mark and Genesis live on stage.

As president and artistic director of Fellowship for the Performing Arts, McLean aims to produce theater from a Christian worldview that engages a diverse audience, believing that "the canon of Christian literature has been relatively unexplored." The Fellowship is also planning a performance adapted from Lewis' *The Great Divorce*.

For more information on Screwtape, visit .