

### *It's a Bit Warm, but the Party's Down Here*

Mother Teresa, you may be surprised to learn, is in hell. And still bitter that a certain blond British princess died the same week she did, grabbing all the

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news media attention. But William Shakespeare is in a good mood, writing a new play for James Dean. Jesus visits now and then.

Such is the state of the underworld in "Hell: Paradise Found," a simultaneously nutty and witty one-act comedy by Seth Panitch that has landed at 59E59 Theaters with an underlying philosophical message that never gets in the way of the laughs.

Mr. Panitch, a drama professor at the University of Alabama

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*"Hell: Paradise Found" runs through Sunday at 59E59 Theaters, 59 East 59th Street, Manhattan; (212) 279-4200, 59e59.org.*

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#### **Hell: Paradise Found**

*59E59 Theaters*

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(most of the performers onstage are university alumni), has brought to life a frequently voiced opinion among everyday sinners: "Who wants to go to heaven? I'd hate everybody there."

Simon Ackerman (Matt Lewis), a young defense lawyer, has died after eating bad sushi. He finds himself opposite the Interviewer (Mr. Panitch, who also directed), a self-described demon-bureaucrat who is taken aback that Simon doesn't want to stay where he is: in hell. Doesn't he realize that heaven is boring? "Up there, there is only one reality," the Interviewer says. "And they love it. Like one big happy school of fish." Hell, it turns out, is for the innovators, the originals among us, from Frank Sina-

tra to Vlad the Impaler.

"Hell: Paradise Found" is sophisticated enough to make John Milton and E. E. Cummings jokes, but some of its one-liners are painfully sophomoric. In one example the Interviewer tells Simon: "You're a dead man. Live a little." Another character announces that "Elvis has left the building," simply because he just has.

Still, it's impossible not to like a show whose opening number includes Hitler and Einstein joining voices in the Arlen-Koehler standard "Let's Fall in Love."

The cast, with several members playing multiple roles, strikes a likable note of matter-of-fact absurdity. As God — who is image conscious, often distracted and a golfer — Dianne Teague comes off as the kind of older woman who ends up owning a baseball team. Somehow that makes perfect sense.