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"Hell: Paradise Found" at 59E59 Theater B

"Hell: Paradise Found"
At 59E59 Theater B
Reviewed by David Roberts
Theatre Reviews Limited

What happens when God meets Lucifer on the Fallen Angel's turf to discuss the eternal resting place of an attorney whose last meal of Sushi put him in a coffin? That's the stuff of Seth Panitch's "Hell: Paradise Found" currently running at 59E59 Theater B in New York City.

This crafty re-telling of the biblical stories of creation, fall, and redemption is engaging, very funny, and often challenging to conventional understandings of the "rewards and punishments" of the good or not-so-good life on earth. Panitch directs his brilliant cast (of which he is a part) with such skill that the audience is unaware of anyone "calling the shots." Movement is fluid, the cast moves easily in and out of the various roles they play, and scene changes are flawless.

All of this allows the script to unfold with clarity and the conflicts of the characters drive a multi-layered plot into a frenzy of faithless foolery. But not faithless really. Just unconventional faith not found in organized religions of any description. "Hell: Paradise Found" explores the true faithfulness of integrity (which finally busts Simon Ackerman out of the throes of heaven's gate); creativity; and non-conformity. Hell's intake Interviewer (none other, it turns out, than the Dapper Devil himself) says it best: "Who do you suppose goes to Heaven, anyway? Anyone. Anyone goes to Heaven. Anyone who follows another lead, anyone who defers to another explanation, anyone who believes because they are told to believe."

Hell is the place to be with the likes of Shakespeare, Sinatra, Mother Maria Theresa, Vlad the Impaler, Don Juan, Elvis: a mixed bunch to be sure but a bunch bent of self-determination and non-conformity. Ackerman's attempt to decide where he should eternally reside is a brilliant extended metaphor for one's journey toward a personal and meaningful spiritual center.

The play's talented ensemble cast makes the journey pleasurable and fun. Matt Lewis's Simon Ackerman is as unsure about the benefits of Heaven as an attorney could be. Seth Panitch's Interviewer could cajole anyone into the gates of hell. Chip Persons's Vlad the Impaler shares a tale about how he came to drink blood with panache. Dianne Teague's God is the right mix of compassion and righteous anger and serves as the perfect foil for Panitch's Devil. Peyton Conley exhibits Gabriel's tomfoolery with such grace one begins to actually love the archangel. Lawson

Hangartner manages to give life to three very different characters: his disinterested-in-sex Don Juan is simply brilliant. Alexandra Ficken's Lizzie Borden successfully explains how her attorney failed to get her the hung-jury she needed. Stacy Panitch's portrayal of Mother Maria Theresa reeks with scrumptious disrespect. The competent creative team costumes and lights these actors and helps them move about in delicious dizzying dance.

Whoever said God and the Devil couldn't agree on the fate of a supplicant? Find out how they do before July 22 and you will be glad you did.

HELL: PARADISE FOUND

Written and directed by Seth Panitch. Scenic and Light Design by Brian Elliott. Costume Design by Tiffany N. Harris. Composer and Arranger, Raphael Crystal. Compser, Tom Wolfe. Dialect Coach, Allison Hetzel. Choreography by Stacy Alley.

WITH: Matt Lewis (Simon Ackerman); Seth Panitch (The Interviewer); Chip Persons (Lucifer/Vlad the Impaler); Dianne Teague (God); Peyton Conley (Gabriel/Sinatra/Shakespeare); Lawson Hangartner (Adam/Don Juan/Elvis); Alexandra Ficken (Eve/Lizzie Borden); and Stacy Panitch (Maria Teresa).

HELL: PARADISE FOUND is at 59E59 Theaters (59 East 59th Street, between Madison and Park Avenues).

HELL: PARADISE FOUND began performances on Tuesday, July 10 for a limited engagement through Sunday, July 22. The performance schedule is Tuesday – Thursday at 7:15 PM; Friday and Saturday at 8:15 PM; and Sunday at 3:15 PM. Tickets are \$18 (\$12.60 for 59E59 Members). To purchase tickets, call Ticket Central at (212) 279-4200 or go to www.59e59.org.

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