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NY Review: 'Hell: Paradise Found'

The University of Alabama at 59E59 Theaters

Reviewed by Mitch Montgomery

JULY 13, 2012



Photo by Chip Cooper

We've all heard Jean Paul Sartre's line about hell being other people, but what the existentialist playwright apparently neglected to tell us is that hell is also all the interesting people. Shakespeare, Frank Sinatra, even Mother Teresa are condemned to eternal perdition if we are to believe Seth Panitch's perhaps too clever play "Hell: Paradise Found." At times corny and predictable, Panitch's screwball metaphysical comedy has an undeniable huckster charm, as well as crackling performances and a handful of wickedly funny punch lines.

Simon Ackerman just wanted some sushi. But the nebbishy lawyer, played with a furrowed brow and much "kvetching" by Matt Lewis, soon found himself on the receiving end of some bad Hamachi and then in the midst of an awkward entry interview for the underworld. His

unnamed interrogator is all business as played by the delightfully dapper Panitch and has a few things to tell Simon about the true nature of hell. Nobody gets there through sin, he explains; peopley are chosen for strength of character and originality. Simon is scarcely able to believe this, so his interviewer introduces him to God via an introductory video that dramatizes the major beats of Milton's "Paradise Lost." She's a flighty, somewhat addled broad, as played by Dianne Teague, but she knows what she likes: obedience. Naturally, she's populated heaven with all the boring and unadventurous types who play by the rules.

The notion that hell isn't such a bad place certainly isn't new, but Panitch, who also directed, retreads the material with occasional pizzazz. The hapless Simon eventually turns up in a kind of lounge—think "après vie"—where each damned denizen gets a chance to rail on, not about his or her place in hell but about having had a miserable time on earth. Stacy Panitch delivers a rowdy monologue as Mother Teresa, who adopted a sultrier persona in the afterlife after her death was overshadowed by Princess Diana's (they occurred in the same week).

The production's greatest asset is Chip Barons, a nimble performer who plays a droll Lucifer



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The production's greatest asset is Chip Persons, a nimble performer who plays a droll Lucifer in flashback and a melancholy Vlad the Impaler in the lounge sequence, in which he laments having his dastardly legacy and accent co-opted by Bela Lugosi's fictional Dracula.

Presented by the University of Alabama at 59E59 Theaters, 59 E. 59th St., NYC. July 13-22. Tue.-Thu., 7:15 p.m.; Fri. and Sat., 8:15 p.m.; Sun., 3:15 p.m. (212) 279-4200 or www.ticketcentral.com.

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