

OFF-BROADWAY

Hell: Paradise Found

Bravo to *Hell: Paradise Found* playing at the 59E59 Theater through July 22nd. Writer/Director Seth Panitch and his cast, traveling all the way from the University of Alabama, surely deserve to go to Hell for this production-- to frolic with Lucifer and his quirky friends. After seeing this outrageously fun play, you'll be won over, and into believing the fiery zip code is the place to be—at least in how it is spiritually presented here.

Exuberant entertainment begins as soon as you sit yourself down in this cozy, intimate theater and meet frazzled Simon Ackerman (Matt Lewis) a lawyer who learns, frightfully, that he has passed on. As if that is not upsetting enough, he's being interviewed by a charming, well dressed demon (who dislikes that title) and explains when pressed that he lost his horns in a poker game, the leathery wings are in the dry cleaner, and Simon is very much in Hell. Some relief is given when, fed up with Simon's attitude over the whole thing, the interviewer (Seth Panitch) tells him he can, and probably should, relocate to Heaven. However, the choice is not to be made until Simon meets and interacts with some of Hell's most wacky characters, and here is where a mix of laughs, amusement and insight is poured straight from the cup of.....brilliance.

What is truly delightful about the 85 minute run time is the acting/synergy among the characters who breathe a flair of animated life into this powerful, jaunty script. The production is replete with lavish costumes, scattered dance numbers, a semi-prim God (yes she is a woman) played to perfection by Dianne Teague, and her fabulously kooky arch-angel Gabriel (Peyton Conley). There is little room for boredom here - or as likeable Lucifer (Chip Persons) would say-- it's certainly not Heaven, that's for sure.



L-R: Seth Panitch and Matt Lewis in HELL: PARADISE FOUND at 59E59 Theater. Photo by Chip Cooper

The majority of the cast takes on various roles and moves from scene to scene in rapid fire succession keeping the audience fully engaged throughout. Alexandra Ficken parades pure talent and range with impersonations of Lizzy Borden and Paradise's Eve that are mighty. Stacy Panitch tickles us with her waggish portrayal of a fashionista-version of Mother Teresa, who has arrived due to her non-conformist nature. She's used some bribery to finance, what Simon describes as, "feeding half the planet" and she's a tad miffed over Princess Diana stealing the thunder of her death.

Hell would not be complete without Vlad the Impaler (Chip Persons) and we learn some of Don Juan's (Lawson Hangartner) startling truths. But when it comes right down to it the

play screams, you have to be there to absorb what Simon experiences, to draw your own conclusions and partake in the naughty world of the sometimes defiant and sometimes saintly -- rather than the world of bland "sterilization." An added treat is the abundance of wise, clear-sighted lines that make you wish you had a photographic memory to keep them resonating long after the play ends. As God tries to clarify what Hell is all about to Simon, she recants: "If you have a drink with Moliere, you must also have one with Mussolini. Choose one, choose all."

And this is the message that carefully navigates the theme away from offending millions or landing itself in a quagmire of misunderstanding. More brightly, *Hell: Paradise Found* serves to almost kick start the purity of one's soul asking, through laughs and gags, just what you think of righteousness, playing it safe and idolizations all for the sake of the final prize, going to this place called Heaven.

At the shows end the residual feeling is akin to leaving a beautifully complex painting speaking to the individual, evoking interpretation and asking questions only the soul digested. Yet, the universal theme is a solid one: decide for yourself, draw your own conclusions, push the envelope, break the rules sometimes, but through it all, think through your most defining moments and keep an eye on your soul for the right reasons: and only you, God, and Lucifer know what they are.

Reviewed by Karen White

Baby Case

Turning the tragic 1932 Charles Lindbergh baby kidnapping-murder case into a musical may seem a fiasco in the making, awash with rousing dance numbers, such as, "Someone's Taken the Lindbergh Baby" and the "Ladder Song." The New York Musical Festival (NYMF) tells the sad story, which became an outlandish media sensation as mortifying as watching these performers shuffle in 1930's show-girl style. Yet, it's a wonderful balance of irony, elegance and big talent with choreography that is exceptional. Overall there is enough right about the musical to warrant buying a ticket, and enough needing to be cut to halt calling it a pure success.

The show flourishes with the talent of Patricia Noonan, who has the operatic gift to move you beyond words with the "Nurse's Song," asking and pleading if someone has the baby, over his empty bassinette. Will Reynolds and Anika Larsen play the double roles of the heartbroken Lindbergs and the accused (and ultimately executed) Bruno Hauptmann, and his wife who is left to raise their own child. This stark flip in character-performances seems off-putting at first but surprisingly works with the magic of adept acting.