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### Hell: Paradise Found

By: *Eugene Paul*

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Stacy Panitch and Matt Lewis in a scene from *Hell: Paradise Found* (Photo credit: Chip Cooper)

The bustling 59E59 theater complex is bustling more than ever with its rush of summer invitationals filling all the presentation spaces, often more than once an evening. Such a bustle is *Hell: Paradise Found*, a broadly etched, swiftly stroked satire on that most fecund of subjects, Heaven as a destination, or Hell, a dilemma deeply occupying the University of Alabama, the play’s producer. University professor, as well as writer, director and lead protagonist, Seth Panitch, gives a sparkling, richly informed performance as the chief persona welcoming the incoming to Hell but reluctant to give his sacred – or profane – name because it’s so unpronounceable.

And into his office in Hell, startled, confused, overwrought Simon Ackerman (overwrought Matt Lewis) staggers, fresh off the descending elevator, aghast to discover he has not gone to Heaven. All this would be pretty standard stuff were it not for the wit and charm of the talent trinity that is Panitch, writer, director, actor. And thank Heaven – or maybe Hell – he peoples his play with a full roster of Hell’s better angels – or devils? – we’ve always wanted to meet: Vlad the Impaler, Don Juan, Elvis, Adam, Eve, Mother Teresa, Hitler, Shakespeare, Lizzie Borden, Einstein, Sinatra. It’s a satisfyingly full blown group and Simon is seriously considering not pressing to go to what he considers his rightful reward in Heaven. As if he had any choice in the matter.

Well, enter God (satisfyingly satisfied Dianne Teague), of course. In other premises, of course. And she’s, well, what do you expect? Smugly pleased with herself. After all, she can do no wrong. (Hang on to that big tidbit because writer Panitch conceals an Agatha Christie joker up his playwright’s sleeve.) This confusion about Simon Ackerman has to be nipped in the bud. He’s hers. After all, didn’t she rescue him from the knife at his throat wielded by a disgruntled client? (I have to tell you, Simon is – was – a lawyer. The rest of the ugly details you have to discover for yourself.)

Simon had believed he was awandering about not alive because of bad sushi. Don’t we all have misgivings about that misapprehension. That’s why we relate so well to this play and appreciate getting to know these characters. Well, not so much the virginal Adam (Lawson Hangartner) as the devastated Mother Teresa (Stacy Panitch) who finds more suitable dress as well as face and figure here in Hell than she ever sashayed in while sin India. But don’t ever, ever mention Princess Diana

in her hearing. Or you'll get a tirade, with good reason. That will have you rolling on the floor.

I also admired Alexandra Ficken as a tremulous Eve and a rampaging Lizzie, and Chip Persons, among whose characterizations there is a very lit up Lucifer, as well as Peyton Conley in five wiggled and unwiggled characters. There is also something appropriately sweaty in Lawson Hangartner's Don Juan. Each of these characters we've known and loved – or, admired? – well, known – enjoys his or her revelatory moment playwright Panitch offers them and for the most part, so do we. It's quite an achievement when you think about it. Another cutesy play about Heaven and Hell? Not bloody likely. Yes, bloody likely. Panitch and company make you like it, over their dead bodies. Go. Have fun.

*Hell: Paradise Found* (through July 22)

The University of Alabama, at 59E59 Theaters, 59 East 59<sup>th</sup> Street, in Manhattan  
For tickets, call 212-279-4200 or <http://www.59e59.org>

