

## REVIEW

## Sketch Antics, Smart Lines Get the Laughs

■ In 'Hell: Paradise Found,' the comedy is reminiscent of Steve Allen, George Bernard Shaw.

By ROBERT KOEHLER  
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**T**hink of George Bernard Shaw's "Don Juan in Hell" starring Sid Caesar and you might get a sense of the sharp-minded goofiness of Seth Panitch's comedy, "Hell: Paradise Found," at the Ventura Court Theatre. With its heart in the kind of smart, irreverent sketch comedy Steve Allen used to do, and its head in a struggle for the soul of a good man, "Hell" is a bona fide entertainment with ideas.

And like Caesar and Allen, a little of this comedy goes a long way—inevitably, things get a little too shticky. But Panitch has a graceful touch reminiscent of Marivaux. And that, combined with his and director Fred Sander's clever post-modern sensibility, the play nudges us along to find out the fate of poor Simon Ackerman (Panitch), a lawyer who's sure he belongs in Heaven, not Hell.

The Interviewer (Christopher Coddington) cheekily insists to Simon that he's better off in Hell, where all the interesting people are, than in Heaven, where, as he puts it, "it's soooo boorrring!"

■ "Hell: Paradise Found," Ventura Court Theatre, 12147 Ventura Court, Studio City. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Ends Nov. 17. \$10-\$15. (213) 658-4002.

Simon doesn't believe it, thinking himself virtuous enough for going Upstairs. But first he has to go through The Interviewer, a snobby paper-pusher (Coddington's comic approach instantly brings to mind Kelsey Grammer's Frasier) who says that "in Hell, all demons are bureaucrats; on Earth, all bureaucrats are demons."

Panitch's writing sparkles with this kind of word play, and becomes brilliant during a "video" The Interviewer plays back for Simon (but which we see played out on stage) pitting Adam and Eve and Lucifer against God.

Stephanie Erb's Eve won't be pushed around, while Neil Larson's Adam is putty in her fingers. The real matchup is Lucifer (Panitch, in a terrific role reversal), deliver-

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ing his case against God (a droll Gregory White) dressed as a European king.

Here, and elsewhere, the play comically has its characters present arguments the way Shaw did. And Panitch later tips his cap to Shaw when he has Simon hanging out in a bar with, among others, Don Juan (a smashing Larson). Simon realizes that the people Down Here, like Don Juan, Lizzie Borden (Erb) and Vlad the Impaler (George Almond)—and William Shakespeare (Chuck LaFont, who also doubles as a funny angel Gabriel), have all done unique things. It's just that Simon never

had his defining moment in life, and God (dropping in from a round of golf) and The Interviewer realize that he must experience one in order to get on with his Afterlife.

Director Sanders seems to equally love the shtick and smarts in this nutty fantasy, and like a good vaudeville taskmaster, never allows a breath between laughs. Panitch, surrounded by actors playing over the top and getting away with it, keeps his Everyman low-key and likable, but never as boring as Heaven seems to be.

Larry Watts' costumes are a funny mishmash of period styles, funnier than Aubree Cedillo's Romanesque set with images of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting. The only thing missing is a lounge-act drummer crashing his cymbals.