

# Catholic Standard

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## The Screwtape Letters' offers witty theatrical adaptation of classic C. S. Lewis story

By Tracy Dowling

Special to the Standard

After nearly a week of the perfect weather that provided the idyllic backdrop for experiencing the pope's visit, I found myself driving down 7th street in an exploding downpour. Arriving at the Lansburgh Theatre just in time for the 3 p.m. performance, I was ushered into a darkened theatrical dungeon, its mood matching the angry overcast skies outside. For the next hour and a half, I found myself in hell where his Abysmal Sublimity Screwtape, a senior assistant of Satan himself, was lecturing the latest graduates of the Tempter's Training College for Young Devils.

"The Screwtape Letters" is a novella written by the young Oxford don C.S. Lewis at the beginning of World War II - indeed, his offstage hero (known as "the Patient") dies in that conflict. Screwtape was an instant success, making its author famous at a time when England was hungering for its religious roots. Some 60 years later, it remains a classic on the nature of temptation.

Several years ago, director Jeffrey Fiske and actor Max McLean adapted the work for the stage. "The Screwtape Letters" has had two successful runs in New York City and has now come to the Harman Center for the Performing Arts (in the Lansburgh Theatre) where it

will be running through Sunday May 18.

"Screwtape" is essentially a one-man play. Its very earnest protagonist as played by McLean, is a teacher of the art of tempting the sinner. The potential dangers of this genre are alleviated considerably by the play's length - one long well-crafted act - and the cavorting reactions of Screwtape's personal secretary Toadpipe, superbly played by Karen Eleanor Wright, who is both a dancer and a talented mime. She does not have a single line - but she is the perfect foil to Screwtape's rantings. These are basically his dictations of letters to his nephew Wormwood, a young devil, just beginning his career of destroying souls.

The lines delivered by Screwtape are priceless, each and every one providing food for thought, and most genuinely funny. Hell's business is to undermine faith and prevent virtue, and Uncle Screwtape has lots of advice for his nephew Wormwood.

Although this is essentially a play of one-liners that are both clever and astute, the character Screwtape does develop and change, thanks in a large part to McLean's superb acting. The scathingly cynical lines that he must deliver are softened ultimately by the fact that in the end his nephew fails as a tempter. The "patient" dies, presumably in the

blitz, in the act of helping another person, and has gone to...heaven, where else? Horrors!

"The Screwtape Letters" is a production of The Fellowship for the Performing Arts, founded in 1991 by McLean and Fiske with the mission of producing "theatre from a Christian worldview that is engaging to a diverse audience." The Fellowship has presented professional theatrical productions in New York City, Chicago, and Stratford, Ontario, among other venues.

Their current production of The Screwtape Letters is an artistic success on all levels - costumes, acting, and set design are perfect. I left the dungeon, leaving an exhausted and exasperated Screwtape crying at the bottom of a pit in Hell. Not only had I left the young object of Screwtape's and Wormwood's evil designs in heaven, I stepped outside to find that the rain had stopped!

(The Screwtape Letters, by C.S. Lewis, adapted for the stage by Jeffrey Fiske and Max McLean, runs through May 18 at the Lansburgh Theatre, 450 7th Street, N.W. Performances are on Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 4 and 8 p.m., and Sundays at 3 p.m. For ticket information, call 202-547-1122 or check the website [ScrewtapeOnStage.com](http://ScrewtapeOnStage.com).)