

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

## THEATER

### VIEW / By Terry Teachout

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#### THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS

Theatre 315

315 W. 47th St., New York, N.Y.

212-868-4444

Closes April 10, 2006

*New York*  
CLOWNING ABOUT matters metaphysical is not the exclusive privilege of unbelievers. Fellowship for the Performing Arts, an organization that supports “the integration of faith and the arts,” is currently presenting an Off-Broadway stage version of C.S. Lewis’s “**The Screwtape Letters**,” the wickedly witty epistolary novel in which His Abysmal Sublimity Screwtape, Under Secretary of the Satanic Lowerarchy, instructs his nephew Wormwood, a doltish junior tempter, in the fine art of persuading unwitting humans to part with their souls. It is — if I may say so — one hell of a good show.

Adapted by Jeffrey Fiske and Max McLean, the production stars Mr. McLean, whose plummy, supercilious bass-baritone voice is ideally suited to Screwtape, who lounges around in a smoking jacket dictating snidely chatty letters to his amanuensis Toadpipe (Jenny Savage), a sexy flunky appropriately decked out in cherry-red fishnet stockings and way too much

makeup. Mr. McLean, who in costume looks a bit like Ernie Kovacs’s Percy Dovetonsils, is clearly having himself a time-and-a-half, and no wonder: Lewis’s topsy-turvy exercises in inverted moral theology were made to be read out loud, preferably with lip-smacking relish.

No doubt because the recent Disney film version of Lewis’s “Chronicles of Narnia” was a megahit, this “Screwtape” has been selling out pretty consistently. The New York press has mostly ignored it, though, and I can’t think why (well, I can, but there’s no point in beating that dead horse). The production isn’t perfect — I didn’t much care for the dance interludes by Ms. Savage that are interspersed among the letters to supply an unnecessary change of pace — but Mr. McLean is so delightfully repulsive that you won’t notice anything else.

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*Mr. Teachout, the Journal’s drama critic, blogs about theater and the other arts at [www.terryteachout.com](http://www.terryteachout.com). Write to him at [tteachout@wsj.com](mailto:tteachout@wsj.com).*