

## CULTURE

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE BRIGHT LIGHTS OF BROADWAY AND BEYOND FOR 2018

BY JOE WESTERFIELD ON 1/1/19 AT 12:47 PM EST

New York theater-goers were treated to a variety of quality shows, a surprising number of which were plays. You can revisit a movie or download a song, but you usually have to see a play. (You can sometimes see a filmed play, but that is just not the same.) The following is a list of some of the shows and trends that comprised the best of 2018. It is personal and certainly not definitive nor even exhaustive. If one wonders why there is no mention of shows like *Three Tall Women*, *Network* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the answer is simple: I haven't seen those shows (yet).

## THE DEVIL'S GOING ON

Satan and his surrogates paid a visit to New York. *The Screwtape Letters* made for a tempting look at temptation. Humorist Jean Kerr once noted that "the snake has all the lines." In theater, he usually has all the good ones.



From left, Brett Harris as Screwtape holds court in a tempting "The Screwtape Letters," playing at New York's Acorn Theatre.

## Review

## 'THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS' MAKES FOR A GOOD DAMNED TIME ON STAGE

BY JOE WESTERFIELD ON 12/21/18 AT 9:16 PM EST

The holiday season can be rough on everyone, and this season even a devil's disciple is not immune. In *The Screwtape Letters*, a theatrical adaption by Jeffrey Fiske and Max McLean, of the C.S. Lewis epistolary novel of the same name, Screwtape, a middle- to upper-level manager in the career counseling department for Tempters Training College, exchanges missives with his "dear nephew Wormwood," a recent and seemingly promising graduate. (Things are not always what they seem.)

Wormwood is charged with tempting someone we know only as "the patient," who has no idea that Beelzebub has a devil set aside for him. (Go figure.) The patient has a loving wife, but he is on the cusp of falling away from "the enemy"—God help him if he dare mention the deity by name—as he is susceptible to sins of the flesh, which of course are the worst kind.

At first, things are looking good for Wormwood—not so good for the patient: From his offices in the depths of hell, Screwtape guides Wormwood in his assignment. Souls are to Satan what blood is to Dracula or live brains are to a zombie or half-truths to a politician. Freshly secured souls are the lifeblood of a devil's existence. And Screwtape did not get to where he was without being more than a little obsessive about the details.

People don't just go straight to hell on a whim or at someone's request. It takes hard work. Oh, they might have a dalliance or two. But a life (or afterlife as it were) of eternal hell and damnation takes some cultivating, lots of it. And Wormwood is a neophyte. He needs help, lots of it. He is prone to mistakes, and so, occasionally, is Screwtape.

While this sounds like it could be preachy, it actually makes for a fun evening. Screwtape, as played by Brent Harris, is deliciously evil. I would like to see Screwtape lock horns with George Bernard Shaw's Mendoza (in the "Don Juan in Hell" sequence of *Man and Superman*) another lower deity of the highest order, and George Spiggott (as played by Peter Cook) in *Bedazzled*. Screwtape is joined by Toadpipe a lower-level demon-Friday, clearly not one who has earned her horns, and she is covered with something like feathers and has claws the size of a convenience store cashier's nails. Toadpipe is played by Tamala Bakkensen, who, while executing her official duties, manages to convey a range of emotions—all depraved—with no words, just guttural sounds that I imagine only a Gollum or some of the lesser Irgors can accurately translate.

This diabolical soul retrieval plays out on Cameron Anderson's very eerie set, which is quite skeletal, literally: Hundreds of bones and skulls of lost souls adorn the back wall. And everything on it is just a little off, a cross between Doctor Seuss and Shirley Jackson's Hill House. And it features a pneumatic tube messaging system that looks at once antiquated and futuristic.

One of the more interesting, if uneasy things about *Screwtape* is that for a while it actually gets you to root for the devil. A well-drawn villain will do that to you. And while we are satisfied with the patient's ultimate decision, the effect it has on Screwtape (and Toadpipe) evokes mixed feelings.

Finally, while this is a serious play at heart, there are lots of humorous moments. Harris and Bakkensen depict evil with such relish and charm—and haven't we always been warned that the devil is a charmer?—that much of the play, especially early on, is genuinely funny, and the pair seems quite capable of leading anyone, even a jaded New York audience into temptation, and delivering them into evil. Then things take a turn for the worse for them—and for everyone else that is all for the best.