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Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr.

**The Devil is an Ass: Radical Evil Redefined as Ridiculous Evil
from the English Renaissance to Contemporary Hollywood**

“Laugh at the Devil and he will flee you.”
Martin Luther

“Welcome to Heck House! You’re about to discover what a life of sin will get you!...Please, Lord, grant me the power to psychologically torment them into loving you.”

Ned Flanders
The Simpsons: Treehouse of Horror XVIII: “Heck House”

“He wasn’t thrown out of heaven, he was kicked out of community theatre.”
Crow T. Robot on Satan
Mystery Science Theatre 3000: The Undead

“The Devil can also be amusing. But when he turns himself into a clown, witty, humorous and even entertaining, he may well be at his most dangerous. He uses such tactics in order to distract those around him from more important tasks...Diabolical nonsense is dangerous.”

Adolf Rodewyk, S.J.
Possessed by Satan

In *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History*, Jeffrey Burton Russell explores “the Western world’s most powerful symbol of evil,” termed Satan, the Devil, Lucifer, or Mephistopheles. Burton, following common practice in philosophy, observes three kinds of evil: natural, moral, and metaphysical. The third is the abstract personification of an imperfect cosmos, the principle of evil, if you will (1-2). For Burton, professor of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, this being is pure symbol. But for much of human history, including today in virtually all Christian theologies, Satan is real, Satan is active and Satan is radical evil literally embodied and personified.

The term “radical evil” is used by Kant to describe a particular kind of malevolent sin. “Radical evil,” unlike Original Sin, is self-incurred, and represents a choice in moral life. Satan is radical evil embodied in the Christian tradition in that he chose to rebel

against God and has continually worked since then to tempt humankind, individually and collectively, to choose immoral acts over moral ones. Overcoming radical evil is an act of moral conversion – a “change of heart” in which one self-consciously chooses to act moral. The purpose of religion, thus, according to Kant, is to guide one to make morally correct choices and to move away from radical evil.

And yet the devil remains to tempt us, enslave us, and in extreme cases, possess us. Much literature throughout history involves the evil of Satan and locates in him the greatest threat to humankind. His very name is “adversary.” Fear of Satan is very real. So why is he a character in numerous contemporary narratives worthy mostly of laughter, especially laughter at not with? In such recent popular manifestations as *The Devil and Max Devlin* (Satan: Bill Cosby), *Bedazzled* (Satan: Elizabeth Hurley), *Reaper* (Satan: Ray Wise), and even *The Simpsons: Treehouse of Horror XVIII: “Heck House”* (Satan: Ned Flanders), Satan is not to be feared but mocked, ridiculed and laughed at. So how did the prince of darkness become a loser worthy only of scorn?

Apart from Luther’s advice on laughing at the devil, there is a theatrical tradition of ridiculing Satan and his minions extending back to medieval mystery plays. In such plays as The Chester Cycle *Fall of Lucifer* and *Creation*, the York and especially the Towneley *Harrowings of Hell*, the devil and his minions are presented as not particularly bright, surly children, full of comic and undignified byplay that demonstrates the stupidity of the diabolical and encourages the audience to laugh at them. In this case, the devil as comic figure becomes a means to reinforce the social status quo. The believer laughs at Satan for being wrong about the nature of reality. The devil does not understand the truth of what the Church teaches and what Christ is, and therefore is a fool. The devil rebelled, lost, and is now a target for laughter. The devil as clown serves to prove the believer right. The one who laughs at Satan for being wrong knows that the Church is right. This representation of radical evil as ridiculous evil is in perfect keeping with the didactic nature of the medieval mystery cycles, which, in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council, sought to maintain the supremacy of the church, to reinforce the recently promulgated doctrine of transubstantiation and the recently established Feast of

Corpus Christi, and to demonstrate the metahistorical narrative of Scripture in a manner interesting and acceptable to the entire population.

The religious schism in the English Renaissance begins to transform the comic nature of Satan. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1594), perhaps in a case more of laughing with than at, Mephistopheles at Faustus' request, dresses as a Franciscan friar (I, iii, 25), and together they play practical jokes on the pope and European nobility. The subplots featuring Wagner, Rafe, and Robin parody the magician/devil dynamic of the main plot, taking what for Faustus is serious and turning it to comic play (see III, iv, for example). We laugh at the devil, especially the devil as Catholic monk in an Anglican play. The Renaissance and the Reformation result in a new configuration of radical evil as ridiculous evil. Unlike the Mystery cycles, in which the believer laughs at Satan for not knowing the true nature of reality, in the new, multid denominational Christian Europe, the devil is a metaphor for those who believe differently. In England, Satan is a Catholic priest. Alternately, as witnessed at the end of *Everyman* (1495), only those who do good works go to Heaven, which means followers of Luther, promulgator of *sola scriptura*, are hell-bound. But Faustus is still dragged off to hell at the end. The devil is still a real and dangerous figure. His evil, however, is appropriated for religious partisan purposes. We laugh not at the devil, but we call those who believe differently than us the devil and we laugh at them.

By Ben Jonson's *The Devil Is an Ass* (1616), the tradition of comically defanging the devil reaches its height. A fiend named Pug leaves hell for a London much more sophisticated in its vices than a simple devil can handle. He fails utterly in his ability to tempt the already wicked or the too good to sin. In the end, the wicked are exposed, the virtuous rewarded and the witty revealed to be the best people in society. Yet despite its less-than-serious approach to Satan, the play still reinforces the status quo. The foul fiend is ultimately not to be feared, and it is through society that the virtuous are rewarded and the wicked punished. When Satan becomes a means to parody, satirize and mock society and individuals, he also loses his power to scare. Metaphysical evil becomes metaphoric evil.

After the Enlightenment, Satan was perceived far more as metaphor than actual radical evil personified. Maximilian Rudwin observes that the Devil was seen as a sophist, an intellectual, and even an artist (247-252). Goethe transformed Marlowe's tempting Catholic priest into a rebel and artist in his own right. The Romantics developed the Satan-as-rebel motif even further, finding in him a hero, rather than the adversary of humankind. While the devil remains "the best-known symbol of radical evil," in Jeffrey Burton Russell's words, "current relativism" makes him a less-than-frightening figure (*Mephistopheles* 1). By the nineteenth century, Satan found little room in discourse outside of fundamentalist groups. As Russell indicates, "Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud" contributed to the secularization of western society, and though to fundamentalist Christians these individuals and the growing secularization was proof that Satan was real and active in the world, to most others he simply lost his power to frighten (*Mephistopheles* 214). The art of the late nineteenth century "indicates the reduction of the Devil to a joke" (220). In the popular tradition, the devil had lost his aspect as radical evil and retained only the medieval clown caricature by our own time.

By the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, western society is now too sophisticated to believe in radical evil as real evil. We have experienced the holocaust, Hiroshima, countless wars, genocides, 9/11 and global warming. Radical evil, in the purest Kantian sense, is human choice, human-inflicted and human-controlled. This radical evil is reflected in the narratives we tell ourselves. And yet we still both fear and laugh at Satan.

The paradoxical schizophrenia of the American construction of Satan as both metaphysical and metaphorical evil manifests itself in theatre and film. For Hollywood after World War II, the diabolical is gone. In the fifties and sixties, human evil is the evil to be feared. And, of course, in 1968 and 1973 *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist*, respectively, bring Satan back to the movie screen as a real being. Radical evil is not metaphorical; it's metaphysical, and no one is safe. This reality of Satan continues to the present day not just in horror films but in the pop cultural products of evangelical

Christians. The reality of Satan is taken seriously in the *Left Behind* series and its many imitators. It is taken seriously in Pastor Keenan Roberts' *Hell House*. Our contemporary theatrical Satan is many things: real, metaphor, sometimes sympathetic, sometimes comic, but always a complex negotiation within contemporary American culture.

For the purposes of my essay, I want to look at three recent theatrical productions in Los Angeles that involve a comic Satan, ultimately narrowing in on *Hollywood Hell House* and its Prince (or Princess) of Darkness. I argue that while the devil is treated not as radical evil but ridiculous evil, a more sophisticated use of Satan is actually occurring which may reveal something about the complex place of religion and morality in the United States. While *Hollywood Hell House* came first, as it is the unique product of Los Angeles, I want to point out premieres of Satan-related plays that originated elsewhere first. In 2008 there were critically acclaimed productions of Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's *Say You Love Satan* and two productions of Stephen Aldy Guirgis's *Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, both of which present less-than-serious Satans.

Say You Love Satan originated in Atlanta in 2001. It received its first performance in the City of Angels, fallen and otherwise, by the Attic Theatre Ensemble in January and February of 2008. The play is a "gay occult comedy" whose Satan is Jack, a very hot gay man who owes as much to Gwen Verdon as Lola in *Damn Yankees* as to Marlowe's Mephistopheles. Jack has tempted Andrew, a Dostoyevsky scholar, away from his boyfriend Jarrod. Jack's real name is Abaddon, "Destroyer," and he claims to be the son of Satan. When introduced to Andrew's ex-boyfriend, Jack tells him, "My dad's an actor" (24). It is revealed, however, later in the play that Jack himself is actually Satan. The play is a parody of gay culture and Jack is as much a metaphor of temptation by anything that is ultimately bad for you as he is a true Satanic figure. Satan is ultimately defeated not by Christ's sacrifice in this play, but by the appearance of his own ex-boyfriend, the angel Rafael. The play features a "hot," gay Satan who is ultimately seen as shallow, self-involved and unable to protect himself from another angel he dated before the Fall. Satan is himself the parody of an actor: shallow, self-involved, claiming to be younger than he is and playing a role in life.

Originally played by Eric Bogosian in the New York production, the Satan of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* is a witness at the trial of Judas. Stephen Adly Guirgis' frequently produced play was first presented Off-Broadway in 2005. The play features Judas placed on trial in a courtroom in Purgatory, although he himself sits in Hell, and various witnesses, including Mother Teresa and Sigmund Freud, are brought forward to discuss the goodness of God and the guilt of Judas. At the end, Jesus himself confronts Judas and in turn is confronted by Judas for asking of him the impossible. The production took its religious questions seriously enough to employ a Jesuit, James Martin, S.J., as a theological advisor, who subsequently wrote a book about the experience: *A Jesuit Off-Broadway*.

In the course of the play, the audience (or reader) learns during the trial that Satan neither tempted nor helped Judas betray Christ, although Satan and Judas did meet by chance after the deed in a bar. Satan, called "Lou" by the judge, refers to Judas as "a gimme" (50). In the bar after the betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane has occurred, Satan tempts Judas not to betray but to despair: "It would have been better" for the man who betrays the messiah "if he had never been born" (55). He then asks Judas, "Who is this Jesus of Nazareth guy I've been hearing about?" (56). This Satan is a subtle adversary, but he also just might be clueless. Whereas Bogosian seems to imply an evil intelligence behind Satan's alleged ignorance, in the Los Angeles premiere by Theatre 68, directed by Robert Rothbard in January 2008 and set entirely in a New York subway station, Satan (played by Ronnie Marmo) was played as a clueless lounge lizard. With slicked back hair and a smarmy attitude, this Satan did not even understand what had truly transpired and dismissed any accusations of his own liability in the case of not only Judas but humankind. This Satan took no responsibility, claimed victim status himself, and ultimately was viewed as not evil but pathetic.

Similarly, at the Whitmore-Lindley Theatre Center production in Los Angeles in May 2008 directed by Aliah Whitmore, Moe Irvin played Satan in a performance *Backstage West* called "flawless" (O'Neal 18). But our understanding of the dark lord

was framed by the set: televisions in a cruciform. A cross made entirely of televisions was used to display certain scenes. This is Satan as Hollywood agent or Satan as television producer. The devil is not out to steal your soul—he’s looking for a nine-point share with a spike in the 18-to-34 demographic. This is Satan as Hollywood “Suit”; his malevolence is not in tempting us to do evil but in tempting us to watch substandard television programming, a Satan only interested in profit with no clue as to product. No sin is so great in Los Angeles as the sin of programming and producing poorly, thereby being cast out of executive Heaven. If, as Dostoyevsky surmises that if Satan did not exist we would have to invent him and would invent him in our own image, Los Angeles seems to create Satans that are very much the image of Hollywood and L.A.

Interestingly, it is also this type of Satan that is most present in *Hollywood Hell House*, the production that most reduces Satan to a ridiculous figure and that also provides a theological overlay to the sins of Hollywood. In 2004 Maggie Rowe, a Los Angeles-based producer/writer/director, posed as the director of a West Hollywood youth group. “I never lied,” she said. “But I had to carefully choose my words” (Rushfield B3). She told Pastor Keenan Roberts she was the director of “The Youth Group,” which is also the name of her production company. “Ms. Rowe was able to persuade Mr. Roberts that she was a kindred spirit, she said, through her facility with the language of evangelical Christianity, something she learned as a child in evangelical schools and Christian youth groups. The experiences, she added, left her embittered enough to feel compelled to mock the belief system on a grand scale” (Rushfield B3). Thus was *Hollywood Hell House* born.

Utilizing Roberts’ script and guidebook, Rowe, along with co-director Jill Soloway, a writer on HBO’s *Six Feet Under* who won acclaim with a 1993 theatrical restaging of episodes of *The Brady Bunch*, and Amit Itelman, artistic director of the Steve Allen Theatre in Hollywood on Hollywood Boulevard, staged “a play in one act,” as it was termed. It ran from 28 August to 31 October 2004. And like every other drama taken over by Hollywood, rewrites, celebrity casting, and state-of-the-art special effects resulted in a transformation of text and context from a judgment house designed to make

converts to a campy satire, not of religion, but of what Rowe terms “fundamentalist terrorists” (qtd. in Rushfield B3).

Bill Maher played Satan for the first week of the run. Dressed in a tuxedo with a red bow tie and red gloves, he also had prosthetic horns “growing” from the sides of his head. It was clear from both costume and demeanor that Maher was playing “Bill Maher” as much as he was Satan, relying upon audience knowledge of his public persona to inform his performance as “the Devil.” He read his lines from cue cards taped up on the wall above the audience's heads. But, as he put it: “I'm evil; I'm not off-book!” Maher's deadpan delivery of Roberts' lines, combined with eye-rolling, his own reputation for his libertarian political and moral positions made Satan less of the threat that Roberts' script implies he should be and more of a polite but snarky greeter at the Playboy Mansion. Andy Richter played Jesus on the nights that Maher played Satan, wearing an obviously fake beard and reclining against a baby blue fur-covered cross. His cherubic face was just as funny as Maher's mock serious Satanic visage. After Maher left, Richter became the new Satan, so to speak. The first incarnation of *Hollywood Hell House* offered Satan-as-celebrity and, conversely, celebrity-as-Satan, with tongue firmly planted in cheek the entire time.

In 2007, the production was remounted in a former restaurant in Hollywood. Satan was played in some performances by Maggie Rowe herself, and by other women on other nights. Apart from the interesting if hardly original approach to the Adversary as female (again, see *Damn Yankees* and *Bedazzled*), Satan was reduced to glamorous and clueless, played as a drunken party girl. The attending demons had to help her with her lines, which were also (again) on cue cards right next to her. She was dressed in a red leotard, with cape and hair-comb horns, holding a plastic pitchfork. She wore trendy makeup and looked very much like a sorority girl on Halloween. Using Keenan Roberts' script, what is meant to be a warning to accept Christ becomes a playful flirtation with the audience that subverts the script and the Princess of Darkness as radical evil. This Satan does not want your soul; she wants you to do body shots while blasting Lil' Wayne. Temptation here is not to give up your soul to the Prince of Darkness, it is to

waste your life with empty sybaritic, hedonistic parties. This Satan is one of the Hollywood club set, and the worst thing you can do is not give her your soul but go home with her for the night. Still, considering the construction of other Hollywood Satans, there is a rejection of the idea of radical evil in favor of a shallow Satan, regardless of who is in the role.

On one level, this construction of ridiculous Satan is a reversal of the medieval one: virtue is not rewarded, and the supposed punishment is not very scary. Unlike in the Medieval Mystery plays, Satan is not silly to prove the believer right; Satan is silly to prove the believer wrong. The things taken most seriously in Roberts' script are the very things used to subvert that script. For example, the advertising for *Hollywood Hell House* warned: "Witness a bloody abortion! Find out what happens if you read too much about a young wizard and why it's not cool to gang rape people you just met." The very advertising, while utilizing the language of fundamentalists, clearly is meant ironically. Abortions, Harry Potter and rape at raves are things cautioned against in the kit from Pastor Roberts, but the language used in the brochure and posters is clearly meant to be a knowing gloss on how ridiculous such fears and beliefs are. Hell is not the threat cautioned against in *Hollywood Hell House*; believing in hell in a manner that requires you to believe, think and act in a premodern way is the threat presented. Satan, in this case, becomes not radical evil but the heart of what is critiqued in fundamentalist Christianity. Belief without questioning in *Hollywood Hell House* is the biggest sin.

Yet there is also a more complex satire present in this performance. The original Hell House featured tour guides who were cloaked and masked as demons. Hollywood could never follow something so bland and traditional. The guides for *Hollywood Hell House* did not hide their faces behind masks but rather used makeup applications to imply that they were demonic. My guides, for example, were two young men carrying martini glasses. One wore country club tennis whites and carried a racket and the other wore a club-kid suit, with both also having horns and makeup indicating violent death. The marks of wealth and privilege are presented as demonic. These children of privilege were the kings of hell as well—*Beverly Hills 90210* meets Dante.

As much as the earnest believers of Pastor Roberts' productions, the other target of *Hollywood Hell House* is Hollywood and its environs and the people who make it up. The costumes and makeup that mark the privileged in Hollywood (including sorority Satan herself) mock the shallowness and pretense of Hollywood and Los Angeles as much as the other elements mock the overearnestness and simplistic, fundamentalistic thinking of the original *Hell House*.

This mockery is perhaps best manifested in *Hollywood Hell House*'s version of the "Heavenly" after-room. Rather than sitting with prayer counselors and signing a card dedicating one's life to Christ, everyone is brought to the after room for free fruit punch and donut holes (along with a cash bar for those who want something harder). Every time a new group entered, all those present would applaud and welcome them. They then enter a room filled with "youth counselors" from The Youth Group, wearing T-shirts that say "Jesus [hearts] *Hollywood Hell House*." Those who entered were encouraged to "drink the punch"; in fact, real punch and donut holes were provided, "a real-life memory from Rowe's Baptist youth group" (Rushfield B3), and a band played covers of Christian rock with new lyrics. The overall idea was to simulate not just the experience of the Hell House, but the experience of the people behind the scenes. This additional level of performance cites and sites the target of *Hollywood Hell House*: those who use hell house performances and other theatricals to frighten individuals to commit to a belief system that the producers of *Hollywood Hell House* find problematic at best and abhorrent at worst. The reference to drinking the punch is both an invitation to enjoy a children's beverage (implying the infantilization of the audience) and simultaneously a reference to the contemporary idiom "drink the Kool-Aid," a reference to someone mindlessly accepting a particular dogma and referring to the 1978 Jonestown Massacre. In order to accept the belief system posited in the script for *Hollywood Hell House*, one must blindly accept what is seen as a highly questionable dogma.

Also available was a large bulletin board cutout in the shape of Jesus where one could play "Pin the Sin on Jesus." Pens, blank pieces of paper and thumbtacks were on a table next to Jesus so that one might "confess" and leave the sin behind. I must confess,

for me this interactive aspect of *Hollywood Hell House* was the most interesting part, as this was an opportunity for those who attended the production were able to participate and engage the pseudo-Christian world of the play. The sins posted went from the banal to the absurd to the truly Hollywood:

“I slept with my roommate’s boyfriend.”
“I’m secretly racist”
“I stole a candy bar, oh – and a car.”
“I punched a bunny in the face”
and “I greenlit *The Simple Life*”

This last one truly demonstrates the understanding of sin in Hollywood as represented at *Hollywood Hell House*—in Hollywood, artistic “sins” need forgiving more than mortal or venial ones. Los Angeles audiences go to *Hollywood Hell House* to laugh at the silly Christians, but below the subversion of Pastor Roberts’ vision of radical evil a further subversion occurs: there is Kant’s moral right and wrong—self-incurred evil that represents a turning away from the right and the good. While the joke sins allude to Hollywood’s “sins,” we might note some genuine confessions were also posted. Furthermore, the welcoming of the new groups to the after-room was a parody of community in the authentic hell houses that inadvertently became a real community, united by having fun at the expense of the original. The various radical evils are considered and, perhaps, one is given cause to think about right and wrong.

Satan might no longer be the metaphysical embodiment of radical evil, but he (she) is a figure that represents very real temptation away from the right and the good—whether it be church law or quality television programming. Yet we might also note that there is one thing that the Christians in the 2001 film *Hell House* and the creators of *Hollywood Hell House* have in common and that is a mutual ignorance of (yet attraction to) each other. In George Ratliff’s film *Hell House*, the ignorance of the cultures the church production team depicts in the production is apparent. The “rave expert” does not know any date rape drugs. Furthermore, when told to paint a pentagram, he paints a Star of David and writes “666” next to it. The audition process is fraught with anxiety as the various Christian teenagers hope they get to play a rape victim, a raver, a drug user or a

demon. In *Hell House*, Evangelical Christians are depicting a culture they do not know firsthand but one that fascinates them.

Intriguingly, *Hollywood Hell House* does the same exact thing. While the actors played out the lines from Roberts' script, it is clear they did not always understand what it is they were performing. They played the surface of "Evangelical/Fundamentalist Christian." And yet there remained, below the crude dramaturgy and camp performing, a tempting message. One reviewer, a self-confessed Jewish woman who observed a character calling out to Jesus and thus was saved, responded, "Shit, I want to be saved" (Pauline 17). By attending the *Hollywood Hell House*, even the ardent nonbeliever can experience the desire underneath the text to be saved and separated from the common masses. Experiencing the performance is more compelling than other forms of evangelization, even as one understands and knows what is being presented, and knows it is a mockery of the surface lines.

In a sense, I am reminded of the initial theatrical contacts between Asia and the west, where each culture attempted to represent the newly encountered cultures, but could only do so on their own terms. As such, for evangelicals, the medieval model still holds; Satan is a scary reality, but one we can also laugh at because we know how the story ends and he is foolish enough to think he can win. For Hollywood, it is perhaps more complex. Satan is not a scary reality; she is a drunk sorority girl hanging out with the wrong crowd. But there is a scary reality: it is comprised of the threat of Evangelical Christians, whose world view is perceived and presented as dangerous, combined with an admission of the shallowness, self-centeredness and aesthetically unsatisfactory products of the industry and the community. I return, therefore, to the quotation from Adolf Rodewyk, Jesuit exorcist, with which I began: "The Devil can also be amusing. But when he turns himself into a clown, witty, humorous and even entertaining, he may well be at his most dangerous. He uses such tactics in order to distract those around him from more important tasks...Diabolical nonsense is dangerous." We can be amused by a ridiculous devil. But the fact that the devil is ridiculous does not remove the threat of radical evil, regardless of belief system or lack thereof.

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