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## "Signaling Through the Flames": Hell House Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling

*Ann Pellegrini*

"Is Halloween the New Christmas?" This was the question posed by ABC News in a much-circulated online article from October 2006.<sup>1</sup> The article went on to trumpet Halloween as "now the second-biggest decorating holiday of the year—right behind Christmas." Halloween is indeed a multibillion-dollar business. A September 2006 report issued by the National Retail Federation estimated that American consumers would spend \$4.96 billion on Halloween in 2006, up from \$3.29 billion the previous year. From a strictly financial perspective, though, Christmas need not look over its shoulder for ghosts and goblins any time soon: the average consumer spends \$791.10 on Christmas-related purchases, but only \$59.06 for Halloween.<sup>2</sup>

But dollars and cents do not tell the whole story. ABC's rhetorical question—"Is Halloween the New Christmas?"—actually opens on to substantive issues regarding religious affect and the politics of feeling in the contemporary United States. Conservative U.S. Protestants have long worried that Halloween's associations with paganism and the occult leave young people susceptible to Satan's seductions. From this perspective, the worry is less that Halloween is the new Christmas than that it provides a route whereby the meaning of Christmas—*Christ*—will be denied altogether. These concerns have led some conservative Protestant churches, by which I mean evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal denominations, to offer alternative events to trick-or-treating, such as harvest celebrations and hayrides.<sup>3</sup> Others are taking it right to Satan and using Halloween as a platform for creative evangelizing—or "Hal-loWitnessing," in the words of self-proclaimed "anti-occult expert and Baptist demon exorcism specialist" Dr. Troy Franklin.<sup>4</sup> Even Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson is seizing the day. Where once he inveighed against Halloween on *The 700 Club*—in one notorious 1982 segment he called for Halloween to be closed down and equated dressing up as a witch to "acting out Satanic rituals and participating in it [Satanism]"—today the Web site

for his Christian Broadcasting Network offers concerned parents resources for turning Halloween into an evangelical opportunity.<sup>5</sup> (Suggestions include offering trick-or-treaters religious pamphlets along with their candy.)

Robertson's equation of Halloween with Satanic rituals continues to circulate in the eternal present of the World Wide Web and was quoted as recently as 2004 in a Knight-Ridder article on evangelical concerns about Halloween.<sup>6</sup> The recycling of this quotation, as if it represents Robertson's current approach to Halloween ("I think we ought to close Halloween down"), misses out on the ongoing negotiation many evangelical conservatives are making with secular popular culture in the service of missionizing to young people. These efforts attempt to utilize the vernaculars of youth culture and secular amusements.

One of the most innovative such responses to Halloween and its lurking dangers is the phenomenon of Hell Houses. Hell Houses are evangelical riffs on the haunted houses that dot the landscape of secular culture each Halloween. Some of these haunted houses are seasonal attractions mounted by for-profit amusement parks; others are low-tech fund-raisers run by local community groups. Where haunted houses promise to scare the bejeezus out of you, Hell Houses aim to scare you to Jesus. In a typical Hell House, demon tour guides take the audience through a series of bloody staged tableaux depicting sinners whose bad behavior—homosexuality, abortion, suicide, and, above all, rejection of Christ's saving grace—leads them straight to hell.

This essay discusses Hell Houses' use of theater as a medium of evangelization. I focus my analysis on the Hell House staged by the New Destiny Christian Center in the Denver suburb of Thornton, Colorado, in October 2006. I attended two performances over the course of their ten-day run, and also had an extended interview with Keenan Roberts, the senior pastor of New Destiny Christian Center. I will supplement this discussion with reference to the 2001 documentary *Hell House* and by comparing these performances to a Hell House staged by a "secular" theater group in Brooklyn, New York, in October 2006. My examination is in service of a larger set of questions about how religious feelings are lived, experienced, and communicated. Ultimately, I suggest that to understand how these performances do their evangelical work, cultural critics need to move beyond simply analyzing—and lambasting—the overt content or theology of Hell Houses (what Hell Houses *say*) and focus instead on the affectively rich worlds Hell House performances generate for their participants (what Hell Houses *do*). Such a methodological approach does not bracket political judgments or ethical critique, but lays the ground for them.

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Hell Houses first crossed the radar of secular popular culture with George Ratliff's 2001 documentary *Hell House*, a film festival favorite that was also featured on a memorable May 2002 episode of National Public Radio's *This American Life*, "Devil on My Shoulder." The documentary focused on the annual Hell House staged by Trinity Church of the Assemblies of God, in Cedar Hill, Texas. Each year, between 11,000 and 15,000 people flock to this suburb of Dallas to attend Trinity Church's Hell House. Although Ratliff and others have credited Trinity Church with inventing Hell Houses in 1990, in fact the phenomenon can be traced back to at least 1972, when Reverend Jerry Falwell first staged a "Scaremare" at his Thomas Road Baptist Church (TRBC), in Lynchburg, Virginia. Scaremare continues today, now mounted by the youth ministry at Falwell's Liberty University. The Scaremare Web site ([www.Scaremare.com](http://www.Scaremare.com)) describes the annual event as a "balance between a fun house and a house of death." Certainly, Scaremare, Hell Houses, and Judgment Houses (which date to the mid-1980s) all depend upon an audience's familiarity with the horror genre and with the haunted attractions at secular amusement parks.

This is a familiarity shared by the makers of Scaremare and its offshoots as well, who use their knowledge of secular popular culture as a way to connect with the unsaved. Indeed, in *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, anthropologist Susan Friend Harding quotes a TRBC youth minister as saying that Walt Disney World's Haunted Mansion was the immediate inspiration for Scaremare. With Harding, then, we could say that Christian haunted houses are "willfully hybrid" experiences, which combine secular culture and Christianity to extend a Christian message.<sup>7</sup>

Such hybridity has a long history. Notably, the eighteenth-century revivalist George Whitefield—who studied acting in his youth—used the conventions of the theater to win souls to Christ, drawing rapt audiences by the thousands in London and the United States. Whitefield's self-dramatizing sermons—tears rolling down his cheeks, passions on full display—were all the more striking in light of his forceful repudiation of the stage and his embrace of an explicitly antitheatrical theology. Harry S. Stout suggests there is something of mimetic rivalry in Whitefield's postconversion relation to his first passion, theater. Henceforth, Whitefield would do battle with theater as if it were a "*competing church*," but he would do so using his rival's tools.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes you have to traffic with the Devil to do the Lord's work. Engagement with popular culture pro-

vided an idiom and affective style that could transcend simple denominational divisions within Protestantism and compete for takers within an increasingly commercialized public square. Stylistically, Whitefield thus anticipated and set the pattern for later trends in American evangelical performance, from the illustrated sermons of Aimee Semple McPherson to the masculine tears of Ted Haggard and Jim Bakker as they testified to their own sinfulness.<sup>9</sup>

Hell Houses are an evangelical phenomenon, but they are hardly representative of evangelical Protestantism as a whole, which is theologically and politically diverse. And yet, I would argue, the religious sensibilities and styles of life that Hell Houses speak to and help to realize are shared across the wider evangelical world. It is these shared religious feelings I am exploring here.

The most prominent exponents of Hell Houses have been Assemblies of God churches, a Pentecostal group that dates to the Holiness movement of the late nineteenth century and to the Azusa Street revival of 1906. Today, the Assemblies of God is the largest Pentecostal denomination in the United States—and, indeed, in the world—with more than fifty million adherents globally. Despite the theological gulf between the dedicated Calvinism of a George Whitefield, for whom conversion was once for all, and the Arminian orientation of the Assemblies of God, who stress free will, progressive sanctification, and (because humans have free will) the possibility of religious “backsliding,” what joins them is a striking emphasis on the culture and cultivation of feeling. The appeal is to the heart, not the head. Assemblies, not unlike Whitefield, are willing—in the words of the Assemblies’ own mission statement—to use “every effective means to spiritually develop believers in [their] churches and to prepare continuing generations for service.”<sup>10</sup> (It is probably no accident that McPherson—a pioneer in the blending of showbiz and salvation—was an Assemblies of God minister early in her preaching career.) This twinned commitment—evangelism and discipleship—is epitomized in the outreach work of Hell Houses.

No one has done more to spread Hell Houses across the United States than New Destiny’s senior pastor, Keenan Roberts. He has also made canny use of the mass media, thereby helping to extend the Hell House message beyond the cultural margins. Pastor Keenan, as his congregants call him, has been mounting Hell Houses in the Denver area since 1995, first at the Abundant Life Christian Center in Arvada, and currently at New Destiny. Both are, like Trinity Church in Cedar Hill, Assemblies of God churches.

Pastor Keenan is a charismatic man, whose easy laugh and gift of story belie an intensity of purpose. He went to college on a basketball scholarship,

and, at 6' 5", he is a towering physical presence. He must have made quite an impression as a demon guide, a role he played every Hell House season until 2006, when he decided to take a year off from acting in the production. He himself describes his demon guide performance as "the best," and, somehow, I have no reason to doubt him.<sup>11</sup> He "had a great time doing it," he says. "Being big was fun."


Pastor Keenan had not even heard of Hell Houses until the early 1990s, when a fellow youth pastor told him about the basic concept. He was, he says, "immediately gripped" by their potential as an evangelizing tool. He went on to stage his first Hell House in 1993, at a church in Roswell, New Mexico. Pastor Keenan may have been late to the scene of Hell Houses, but he has capitalized on their potential as instruments of outreach and amplification. In 1996 he began selling "Hell House Outreach Kits" (the 2006 edition cost \$299), and says they have sold approximately eight hundred kits in the past ten years to churches across the United States and even to a few in Europe (figure 1). Hell House Outreach brilliantly joins marketing with missionizing.

Hell Houses try to tap into their audience's desire for a bounded, "safe" experience of being afraid. Audiences want to gasp and gape in company—and leave without a mark. They want the heart-pounding, stomach-churning catharsis of horror-as-entertainment: at the end of the ride or the film or the performance, you get to return to the world unscathed. The object of fear (a vampire, say) is revealed as unreal, or a terrifying experience (such as a roller coaster ride) is shown to be ephemeral, survivable. By contrast, Hell Houses are playing for keeps. They draw upon even as they move to recode experiences of "safety" and "fear," "reality" and "unreality," in the service of a fundamental spiritual transformation. They want their audiences to see the gruesome realities that await them if they do not live wisely: not just death in its pain and brutality (and, as Charles D'Ambrosio points out, Hell House can only imagine the most gruesome endings), but everlasting damnation.<sup>12</sup> The roller coaster eventually stops, but hell is for all eternity. What's more, within the worlds laid bare by Hell House performances the devil is neither allegory nor projection of the unconscious; he is real and he is coming for you. The relentlessness of this vision is tempered, however, by the promise of a safety more thoroughgoing than any this-worldly happy ending: the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

The primary targets of Hell Houses are teenagers, and this targeting is among the reasons Hell Houses have become so controversial. Detractors accuse them of preaching hate to an especially vulnerable population. In the run-up to the 2006 Halloween season, for example, the National Gay and Lesbian Task

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## Hell House Resources

Contained within this section of our site are numerous resources that will assist any church or ministry in the presentation of the Hell House Outreach. These items have been carefully developed over the course of many years and have been utilized with great success in outreaches that have impacted multiplied thousands in person in metro Denver and millions more across the country and around the world. Most of these resources have been uniquely created for the Hell House Outreach and are highly specialized and unavailable from any other source.



Each resource is listed with a brief description, as well as the price. (The price does not include shipping and handling. Shipping and handling charges will be added to your order based on current United States Postal Service mail rates.)

Note: the Hell House Outreach Kit contains different materials and accessories than the ones listed in the Resource Directory area of the site. If a particular church or ministry has not yet purchased the kit, it is the initial resource needed to begin building an outreach for your community. Read thoroughly about the [How-To Kit](#).

Also, the ministry of the Hell House Outreach has now gone entirely paperless both for your convenience as well as ours. All Hell House materials are now digital and sent on disc. This includes all video resource on DVD and all audio resource on compact disc. All textual documents are created in the standard Windows program, Microsoft Word and sent on CD.

We trust you find the following materials helpful in your efforts to reach your community and build the Kingdom of God through dramatic and theatrical means!

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Force (NGLTF) released a report accusing Hell Houses and their purveyors of spreading a message of bigotry and homophobia. The Hell House message “literally demonizes [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender] LGBT youth, fueling the harassment and violence many experience on a daily basis.” The reports’ authors, Sarah Kennedy and Jason Cianciotto, also criticize Hell Houses for perpetuating the “false notion that youth cannot be both LGBT and Christian.”<sup>13</sup> Hell Houses have come under criticism from Christian groups as well, such as the Colorado Council of Churches, for engaging in fear-based theology that distorts the Christian message.

**Figure 1.**

“Hell House Resources,” © The Hell House Outreach, Thornton, Colorado, [www.godestiny.org/hellhouse/HH\\_resources.cfm](http://www.godestiny.org/hellhouse/HH_resources.cfm), 2005–2007.

But the literally thousands of men, women, and teenagers across the country who take part in Hell House ministries each year do not think of themselves as spreading hate or intolerance; nor do they see themselves as *unreasonably* manipulating people’s fears. In any case, asks Pastor Keenan, “who decided that fear is not an effective teacher?” His rhetorical question here echoes the words of Tim Ferguson, Trinity Church’s youth pastor and Hell House coordinator, early in the documentary film: “A part of salvation is being afraid of going to hell.” As these exchanges suggest, a Hell House is supposed to scare you, but for a much higher purpose than the secular entertainments it so knowingly mimes. Certainly Pastor Keenan rejects accusations that he is trafficking in hate: “Just because someone doesn’t agree with the message, doesn’t mean it’s a hateful message. . . . We also believe that communicating to people what the Bible says doesn’t make this judgmental. We believe the Book to be the all-sufficient source for life direction.” The discordance between these ways of understanding the Hell House experience—hate/love, distortion/truth—is as much about affect as it is about ideology or theology. This is salvation as “structure of feeling.”

The term “structure of feeling” comes from Raymond Williams, of course.<sup>14</sup> In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams proposes this language as a way to describe “pre-emergent” phenomena, experiences that are “active and pressing but not yet fully articulated.”<sup>15</sup> He chose the word “feeling” to “emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’.”<sup>16</sup> He does not abandon these concepts and concerns so much as push us to take seriously how “formal or systematic beliefs” are embedded in, and arise out of, concrete relations and experiences:

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought



as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a “structure”: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its hierarchies.<sup>17</sup>

Although Hell House Outreach represents itself as presenting objective realities and Bible-based truth, at the end of the day, the ability to win over converts or spark spiritual rededication does not rise and fall on fact checking or biblical hermeneutics. It is a matter rather of affective congruences. Hell House performances witness to their audiences. The process of conviction may engage preexisting beliefs—such as the notion that homosexuality is wrong, abortion is evil, or Satan is real—but for conviction to take hold something more is required. The participant is invested (or reinvested) in a deeper structure of religious feeling that can tie together disparate, even contradictory, experiences, bodily sensations, feelings, and thoughts.

Perhaps one of the reasons accusations against Hell House—as fomenting bigotry or distorting the Christian message—gain so little traction with Hell House participants is that opponents are arguing “facts.” But, you cannot fight feelings with facts.<sup>18</sup> For its adherents, a Hell House sutures gaps, soothes contradictions, and produces resonance amid discord.<sup>19</sup> (As I will make clear below, Hell House’s reliance on theatricality means that gaps may reemerge elsewhere.) Pastor Keenan has welcomed the controversies generated by Hell House’s depiction of hell-bound homosexuals and blood-covered “abortion girl.” He considers such controversies an “incredible blessing.” The media storm has been a means of “amplifying the message” well beyond what the church could achieve on its own. And the message is about to get an even bigger staging ground: a fictional treatment of Hell House is in development with producers Adam Shulman and Julie Silverman-Yorn, of Firm Films. Scott Derrickson, a self-identified evangelical and director of the 2005 film *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, has been tapped to helm the project. The feature film will focus on the controversies that engulf a town when a Christian group stages a Hell House.<sup>20</sup>

This does not mean that Pastor Keenan is insensible to every criticism. During the course of my ninety-minute interview with him, he twice drew an explicit contrast between his own message and ministry and that of Reverend Fred Phelps. Phelps leads the Westboro Baptist Church, in Topeka, Kansas, and he gained widespread notoriety for organizing protests at the funeral of

murdered gay college student Matthew Shepard, in 1998. Phelps and his small band of followers (almost all of them family members) held up placards with slogans such as "God Hates Fags" and "Matt in Hell." Phelps and his church continue to court controversy. For example, Westboro Baptist runs an incendiary Web site, [Godhatesfags.com](http://Godhatesfags.com).<sup>21</sup> More recently, Phelps has led protests at the funerals of U.S. military personnel killed in Iraq, whose deaths he has interpreted as divine punishment for America's acceptance of homosexuality. "Thank God for Dead Soldiers," read one of the placards. (Phelps's actions have led several state legislatures to pass bills forbidding political protests from being held within five hundred feet of funerals or memorial services.)

Where Phelps is the measure of hateful extremism, it is not hard to come off as reasonable and compassionate. Pastor Keenan described Phelps as a "raving lunatic . . . Everything he says is so opposite of the Bible, in my opinion." In stark contrast, Pastor Keenan asserted, "I care about people in all walks of life and people that are dealing with all kinds of things in their life. I care about people whatever their particular issues might be. I can tell you, I don't hate people. I don't believe that it [Hell House's condemnation of homosexuality] is a hateful message." Pastor Keenan himself analogizes the work of his Hell House to the responsibilities of good parenting: "God's word is very explicit about where to play and where not to play. That doesn't make him or us judgmental for communicating, 'Play here or don't play there.' And good parents are the same way." Pastor Keenan is extremely sensitive to accusations of fomenting hatred and draws what is to him a clear distinction between being hateful and being painfully, even aggressively, honest.

Instead of seeing Pastor Keenan's denials as hypocritical or deluded, I want to take him at his word. Certainly, it is tempting to subsume the rhetorics of Hell House and Pastor Keenan fully under hate. But resisting this temptation can actually give us insight into the way Hell House's structures of religious feeling meet up with—find resonances with—the larger feeling culture not just of evangelicals but of the U.S. public square more broadly. How far is Pastor Keenan, really, from the attitude of "love the sinner, hate the sin" that animates so much public, *secular* discussion and debate over homosexuality? As Janet R. Jakobsen and I have argued elsewhere, "love the sinner, hate the sin" allows people to espouse punitive judgments and promote discriminatory policies against their neighbors and fellow citizens, all the while experiencing themselves as "tolerant" and "open-minded."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, professions of tolerance mixed with stern moral judgment are a routine feature of political life in the United States. Even the Southern Poverty Law Center, the group probably

most responsible for bringing hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan to justice, urges us to “teach tolerance” in order to battle hatred. But what does tolerance really offer—and to whom?

When President George W. Bush came out in favor of a federal constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, a move that would create a permanent constitutional underclass, he nonetheless concluded his remarks with a call for “kindness and goodwill and decency.”<sup>23</sup> Again, this is not a matter of personal hypocrisy or political opportunism *per se*. This is about larger structures of American political life in which invidious social distinctions are maintained in part by the way they hook into dominant feelings. Feelings of tolerance actually support hierarchy and social domination. Although tolerance is usually promoted as a response to violence and social division, in practice tolerance works to affirm existing social hierarchies by establishing an us-them relationship between a dominant center and those on the margins. To put the matter more starkly, tolerance might feel good—and like good faith—to those who mouth its words; but being tolerated might not always feel all that different from being hated.

I am thus deeply sympathetic to NGLTF’s concerns about the effect Hell Houses may have on GLBT and questioning youth. For such youth, witnessing a Hell House depiction of ghouls delighting over a gay man’s death from AIDS may well feel like a profound and profoundly alienating blow to the self. Nonetheless, are Hell House’s effects on “Christian youth who may be struggling with their sexual orientation or gender identity” as one-way or unidirectional as the NGLTF report worries?<sup>24</sup> For one thing, NGLTF may underestimate the resilience of many queer youth. For another, the uptake of a message is not fully determined by the sender’s intentions. Misfires happen all the time, especially when it comes to sexual representations. Can we rule out the possibility that for some young people—GLBT, questioning, or otherwise—just getting a glimpse of same-sex eroticism is a perverse pleasure, revealing possibilities they were not otherwise supposed to contemplate? In other words, what if the very medium Hell House uses to reach its audience, theater, queers the pitch of the message?

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One of the things that most interests me about Hell House is its faith in the power of theater to reach in and transform its audience. Pastor Keenan and his ministry understand that propelling the Word forward today requires engag-

ing with this-worldly forms, including contemporary media and technology. Starting with the 2006 version of the outreach kit, all the components are on disc, including a how-to guide to production, a DVD of a Hell House performance, and a compact disc soundtrack containing sound effects and music to amp up the scariness of specific scenes—“from the voice of Suicide to Lucifer’s bone-chilling introduction to Hell House to a myriad of others you absolutely cannot find anywhere else,” the Web site promises.<sup>25</sup>

Pastor Keenan’s script is included in every kit as a rewritable document, allowing individual churches to adapt it to their particular needs. His Hell House features seven scenes. The first five scenes of the basic kit depict what Pastor Keenan calls “social-sin issues,” addressing homosexuality, abortion, suicide, drunk driving, and Satanism. Pastor Keenan writes a new script every year for production by his own church group, always reserving two of the five “social-sin” scenes to cover homosexuality and abortion. He says he will continue prioritizing these two topics until God instructs him otherwise. This leaves three scenes whose topical focus can vary from year to year, as new issues present themselves. (For example, the 2006 production featured a brand-new scene on the evils of methamphetamine use. It ended—badly of course—with a fiery car crash, which had some overlap with the drunk-driving narrative of the standard script.)

Churches do not have to buy a new kit every year. Instead, to supplement a kit they have already purchased, they can buy updated and new scenes as stand-alone CDs. The Web site currently advertises sixteen individual scenes for purchase, complete with sound effects and any needed background music. Scene one in the standard script depicts “the funeral of a young homosexual male who believed the born gay lie and died of AIDS.” But, for an additional \$45, you can get the “Gay Wedding Scene Package”:

This energetic scene will give you another powerful weapon in your arsenal against the homosexual stronghold and the born-gay deception. The demon tour guide conducts the ceremony that actually involves a young married couple. (The wife dons masculine make-up for the necessary male look.) The tour guide pronounces them “husband and husband”. Then the scene utilizes a time warp to move several years into the future with one of the partners dying of AIDS as demon imps swarm into a hospital room. This package comes with the originally produced rock-n-roll wedding march CD, the air of evil background music CD and the death drum track also on compact disc.<sup>26</sup>

In the 2006 production, this scene opened the play, underscoring the way homosexuality and same-sex marriage in particular have come to function as *the* defining issue for many Christian conservatives. (A still of New Destiny’s gay

wedding scene is visible in the center of figure 1.) But there is such a thing as theater that succeeds too well. The “born-gay deception” is a trap set by Satan to ease the path to sin. Pastor Keenan’s insistence that the gay male couple be played by a married heterosexual one can be seen as an attempt to minimize risk to both audience and actors. Interestingly, similar precautions are not taken with respect to other, nonsexual scenes; that is, no special warnings are given about making sure to cast only males or only women over child-bearing age in the role of “abortion girl.”

Importantly, this is not just about so-called gay sex. One of the extra for-purchase packages in the Hell House kit depicts the “out-of-control sexual appetite” of contemporary youth. Pastor Keenan always casts a young married couple in the role of the teenagers who are about to have sex, the girl giving up “the pearl of her virginity” to the more experienced boyfriend. The stage directions, such as they are, say that the scene will be played in a “tasteful yet sizzling fashion.”<sup>27</sup>

Sexual scenes are thus understood to be especially volatile for both actors—and audience. This is a point brought home forcefully in the documentary as well. During an August script meeting, Tim Ferguson invites the Hell House youth leaders to suggest “new twists” on old themes for Trinity Church’s 2001 production. One young woman proposes that they include a gay bar scene, with “two girls hitting on one another.” Ferguson immediately nixes the idea: “I don’t want to do that. The way we do it, it’s almost bad enough just being at the hospital bed there for that moment.” He is referring to the way they have handled the issue of homosexuality in previous years’ productions. Equating homosexuality with AIDS, they typically depicted a gay man dying of AIDS who refuses to accept Jesus into his life, despite the pleas of a female friend at his deathbed. He is spirited off to hell by a demon at the moment of his death. (This is the scene they ended up performing in the 2001 production, too.)

It remains unclear to me just what is “bad enough” about this scene. That an audience member might sympathize with the young gay man’s bodily suffering, and thus lose sight of the eternal suffering that awaits? When the young woman persists with her proposal to do a gay bar scene, Ferguson elaborates his objection in another way: “The same reason we don’t do a boyfriend-girl-friend scene in Hell House is because you’re just together so much over this period of time that I just don’t want to go there.” Clearly, the concern here is that the intense intimacy of rehearsal will lead to other kinds of intimacies, in which life too much imitates art. In the documentary Ferguson will refer to his desire to use Hell House to “infect” and “infiltrate the culture.” He is able

to voice anxieties about the effect sexual scenes will have on the young actors, but stops short of recognizing the broader dangers of dallying with forms. And yet, mimesis cannot be so easily contained, no matter what Ferguson, Pastor Keenan, and the Hell House outreach kit may specify. "Tasteful yet sizzling." Can Hell Houses really have it both ways?

This worrisome porousness exists on the side of audiences, too, who bring to Hell Houses their own sets of expectations and vulnerabilities. The Hell House performances I attended in Thornton were small affairs; fewer than 150 people attended each night—total—with a large share of this made up of bussed-in youth groups, who were apparently there because they had to be. This wildly contradicted my own expectations. I was expecting the sort of crowds that show up in Cedar Hill each year. The scale of the Cedar Hill audience, at least as depicted in the documentary, generates surprising juxtapositions between, for example, the earnestness of the drunk-driving death scene and the rowdy anticipation of some obviously intoxicated youths waiting to take their tour of hell. At another moment we learn in a voiceover that after a previous year's production, a warlock contacted the Hell House ministry to tell them that their occult scene was not accurate. The warlock's desire for mimesis, to be given back whole, is a different mimetic desire than the ones Hell Houses' makers seek to activate, but the differences underscore, once again, the volatility of live performance.

The complex, unpredictable interactions among performer, performed, and audience—who must complete the performance—are among the reasons theater's emotional reach cannot be so easily micromanaged. The audience member who knows she is seeing a married couple just playing at being gay men but "really" kissing may find herself alongside another spectator who sees two men exchanging vows and a kiss and then witnesses one stretched in grief over his dying lover's body, a final embrace as his beloved passes from life. The emotional power of this scene exceeds, or potentially exceeds, theological straitjacketing. "Bad enough," indeed.

The final two stops on the Hell House tour are always hell and heaven, in that order. Although the script for these two scenes may vary from year to year, the basic plot points remain the same. In the production I saw, the actor portraying Lucifer spoke through a voice box, which distorted his voice and lent it a menacing quality. The scene as a whole was theatrically accomplished and well thought out. The audience was squeezed together in a claustrophobic basement hell. Condemned souls, young and old, threw themselves piteously against a chain-link fence, screaming for help, while black-garbed imps, their

faces completely covered, offered hissing punctuation to Lucifer's speech. The imps were the youngest members of the cast, and their smallness of size made them especially effective as they slithered among the crowd.

In a kind of Hell House 101, a gloating Lucifer neatly summarized the previous five scenes, underscoring the bad choices that were made in each: from the gay men who chose homosexuality but hid behind the excuse that God made them gay, to the young teen suicide whose worldly success could not hide the emptiness of his spiritual life. The sensory overload of this scene was interrupted by a blaze of bright light and a chorus of white-garbed winged angels, who brought Satan's speech to an end and escorted us into our final destination, heaven. Here, a beatific blond Jesus preached the Good News before leading the now-seated audience in a prayer of salvation. The two nights I saw Hell House, there was a low hum from the crowd. Some murmured along; others sat in silence.

In comparison to the pyrotechnics of hell, heaven was a let-down. On one level this is purely an aesthetic problem: sin makes for much more interesting spectacle and narrative than goodness. "Sin" is lush, sensual, readily theatrical. By comparison, "goodness" is generic, saccharine, and bland. Preachiness may be good for the soul, but it is not very fun. This is the open secret of Hell House. For Pastor Keenan and his congregation, though, "God's word does not return void." I may have sat silent and unmoved during the salvation prayer, but I was still listening, still being witnessed to.

The salvation prayer was followed by a brief address by one of New Destiny's associate pastors, who encouraged all of us to fill out an outreach response card. The card, along with information about the church, a clipboard, and pen, had been placed under every chair in "heaven." It had four boxes to check off:

- For the first time I have prayed the prayer of salvation and asked Jesus Christ into my life tonight.
- I rededicated my life to Jesus Christ tonight.
- I am looking for a church/youth group to be involved in.
- Please remember my prayer request on back of this card.

The two evenings I saw New Destiny's Hell House, people dutifully filled out the cards, though no one stayed behind for further prayer or conversation, as we were all invited to do. Everything about the associate pastor's final pitch was warmly and lightly done, in contrast to the hard sell of the preceding tour. As Pastor Keenan avers, Hell House is "very go-right-at-you. But that's the Hell House personality of what we do for a few nights a year . . . [and] that allows us to reach a lot of people in a different way."

The Hell House experience is not just in-your-face missionizing. It is an aggressive theater of transformation. Spreading the Word depends on theater as a kind of contagion passed from performer to audience. We are back to Ferguson's metaphor of "infection." However, this promise—that theater can be catching—is also the reason it has historically been at the center of so much moral hand wringing and outright condemnation. From Plato's tirade against mimesis in *The Republic*, to Tertullian's likening of theater to idolatry in *De Spectaculis* (*Of Spectacles*), to Puritan polemics linking theater to sexual depravity in Phillip Stubbes's 1583 treatise *The Anatomie of Abuses*, philosophers and theologians have worried over theater's capacity to "infect" audiences with the "wrong" sorts of ideas and practices.<sup>28</sup> The worry is not simply that seeing is believing, but that believing might beget doing.

This antitheatrical prejudice is not just yesterday's news, of course. It followed the Puritans to the "New World," and it continues to percolate in debates over "obscenity," public funding of the arts, and age-appropriate media content, just for starters. Nevertheless, as George Whitefield's own career testifies, these suspicions concerning theater's moral dangers have often gone hand in hand with a desire to harness its power for projects of political and/or spiritual renewal—for conversion, even. This too has a long history, from ancient Greek festivals of Dionysus, to the passion plays of medieval Catholicism, to the Ta'ziyeh dramas of Shiite Islam.

As a form, theater has no one political claim. Although political theater generally invokes images of the political Left—think of the work of Bertolt Brecht or of Clifford Odets and the Group Theatre—theatrical transformation does not point one way only. It has become a commonplace for scholars of theater and live performance to refer, in nearly reverential terms, to the world-making capacity of performance, its ability to conjure into view new horizons of the possible and to consolidate and reconsolidate oppositional publics or lifeworlds. I share this faith in performance's power to transform its audience into something more . . . into a public, perhaps? Or, even, a revolution? So do the hundreds, if not thousands, of evangelical communities that stage Hell Houses across the United States each year. Could Pastor Keenan and his flock be the face of theater's last true believers? Perhaps Hell House represents the new avant-garde.

Documentary filmmaker and performance studies scholar Debra Levine has elaborated this point, astutely placing Hell Houses within the tradition of Antonin Artaud's "theatre of cruelty."<sup>29</sup> In *The Theater and Its Double* (1938), Artaud called for a theater that, "overturning all our preconceptions, inspires



us with the fiery magnetism of its images and acts upon us like a spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten.”<sup>30</sup> Artaud’s theater of cruelty privileges feeling over plot and moves to break down artificial walls between spectator and spectacle by bombarding the audience from all sides with new sensations. This is theater as affective immersion and communal event, and its “therapeutics” are not gentle pats on the back. Conjuring a new theater adequate to its time, Artaud concludes the preface to *The Theater and Its Double* by linking theater to sacrifice and purification: “And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames.”<sup>31</sup>

These are heady metaphors. But so too is Pastor Keenan’s likening of attacks on Hell House to the Crucifixion: “The same will be true of this [criticisms of Hell House] as what was true of Jesus. That is, they tried to crucify him, and we all know how that worked out. People can try to crucify this [Hell House], and you can’t kill it because it is about the Good News message.” Pastor Keenan offered this comparison specifically in response to a 2004 parody version of Hell House that was performed in Hollywood and featured such celebrities as Sarah Silverman and Bill Maher, who played Satan—and not very well, Pastor Keenan hastens to add. Maher did not seem to know his lines, a sin against professionalism at the very least.

The experience with Hollywood Hell House made Pastor Keenan doubly suspicious when Les Frères Corbusier, an experimental theater company based in New York City, contacted him about staging Hell House in the Big Apple. They did not want to do a parody or a hatchet job. They wanted to do a “straight up” version of Hell House,<sup>32</sup> giving New York City audiences a glimpse into a social world that is otherwise completely foreign to them. (This is hardly an accurate picture of the religious diversity of New York City and the greater metropolitan area, of course, which is home, for instance, to the largest concentration of Pentecostals in the country.) Eventually, the company’s executive director, Aaron Lemon-Strauss, convinced Pastor Keenan that the company’s motives were sincere.

Les Frères went on to stage their Hell House in St. Ann’s Warehouse, in October 2006, in Brooklyn’s DUMBO neighborhood. DUMBO, an acronym for “Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass,” is an area of reclaimed warehouses, art galleries, hip watering holes and eateries, and increasing rents. St. Ann’s is known for its cutting-edge theater and performance events, and its typical audience member probably goes to more art openings than prayer services.

Certainly, the prospect of a "secular" Hell House was media catnip, landing coverage by *Newsweek* as well as articles and reviews in the *New York Times*, the *Denver Post*, the Associated Press, and even *Variety*. Uniformly, the media made much of the fact that the production was a "faithful" and "sincere" presentation of a "real" Hell House. For example, in his October 2006 review of the production, chief *New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley described it as an "irony-free facsimile" of the real thing and said the company managed to present "its visions of the fiery agonies that await non-believers with nary a wink or a roll of the eyes."<sup>33</sup>

Maybe so, but the sincerity of Les Frères's approach to Hell House may have been its undoing. To my eyes, the performance felt less sincere than "sincere." The quote marks here are not irony alerts. The cast was top notch, professional, filled with talent, and so on. The special effects were well considered, deliberately low-tech and sophisticated at the same time, as in the blood-spurting abortion scene (figure 2), or when Steve, whose marriage to another man we had witnessed just one scene before (figure 3), lies dying of AIDS and is dispatched to hell through a trapdoor in his hospital gurney (figure 4). Nonetheless, the performances came across as a kind of self-referential pointing at what they were not: "Look at me, I am not ironic" as well as "Look at me, I am not a Christian or, at least, not one of *those* Christians." To put the matter in theatrical terms, you could say that Les Frères was coolly Brechtian when it needed to be engaged and Aristotelian, let alone bloody red and Artaudian.

The program notes begin with a disclaimer "FROM LES FRERES AND ARTS AT ST. ANN'S: This authentic depiction of a Hell House is meant to educate and inform about a particular religious movement, not to endorse any specific ideology." Les Frères served up its *Hell House* as a kind of sociological artifact, not a living thing, and the company's anthropological approach proved theatrically limiting. This limitation is related to the company's assertion that it was offering an "authentic depiction of a Hell House." The language here is confusing. Les Frères's claim is smaller than it first appears. They are not putting on a Hell House, but a representation, a "depiction," of one. This sets them at remove—a safe distance, perhaps—from the "real" thing, where the "real" means "religion." The modifier "authentic" is puzzling in this context. What, exactly, is an "authentic depiction"? Is this their way of distinguishing good copies (good because sincere) from bad ones (think: *Hollywood Hell House*)? Staking out claims to authenticity even as they proclaimed their difference, Les Frères members wanted to have their evangelical cake, *without* having to eat it, too.



**Figure 2.**  
 "Abortion," scene from *Hell House*.  
 Photograph by Joan Marcus, © Les  
 Freres Corbusier, 2006.

It is interesting to speculate how Les Frères's *Hell House* would have changed if the company had done outreach to evangelical churches, in a kind of reverse missionizing. How would Les Frères's *Hell House* have appeared—felt—to them? But this would have required recognizing that the religious landscape of New York City already includes many people whose worldview evangelical *Hell Houses* *do* accurately capture. It would also have meant confronting some significant overlap between the truth-and-consequences theology of *Hell House* and the worldviews of many urban "hipsters." Les Frères's hipster audience surely included many people who profess pastoral notions of good, spiritually redeeming sex versus bad, corrupting sex or who ascribe to a watered-down version of karmic retribution. For whom, exactly, is a *Hell House* an otherworldly experience?

There were certainly numerous departures between the evangelical (the "authentic"?) *Hell House* put on by New Destiny and Les Frères's. Where Pastor Keenan's model recommends seven scenes, each with the dramatic arc of a "one-act play," Les Frères had nine rooms. Pastor Keenan's version suggests using two demon guides per tour; Les Frères's demons worked solo. For the gay wedding scene, Les Frères cast two men in the role of the gay grooms,



**Figure 3.**  
“Gay Wedding,” scene from *Hell House*. Photograph by Joan Marcus, © Les Freres Corbusier, 2006.



**Figure 4.** “Clinic—Steve to Hell,” scene from *Hell House*. Photograph by Joan Marcus, © Les Frères Corbusier, 2006.

stopping just short of having the two men kiss. As the grooms’ lips were about to touch, one man interposed his hand between their two mouths. Les Frères also freely adapted Pastor Keenan’s script. The version they performed combined elements from his script, scenes from the 2001 documentary, and additions by the company itself. The most notable addition was scene 6, which was set at a hipster cafe, or “Café Hell,” as the demon guide dubbed it. Three twenty-somethings—two men, one woman—excitedly discuss *The Onion*, Jon Stewart, and the possibility of putting on a show that will make fun of “religious people.” At this, a pack of lesser demons drags the trio of ironists away, as the demon guide growls his review: “Do you know what’s really hot right now? Sincerity. Painful Sincerity.”

Pastor Keenan attended the opening weekend of Les Frères’s production. His own verdict on it was not that it lacked sincerity, but that it needed more “intensity.” The intensity of an evangelical *Hell House* derives in part from the cast and crew’s belief that there are cosmic stakes involved in their performance. Ultimately, then, the numerous structural and textual differences between Les Frères’s *Hell House* and Pastor Keenan’s pale beside the question of affective sensibility.

*Hell House* is theater, but it is also something more than theater. As Pastor Keenan observes, “it’s not just a play, it’s not just a theatre thing, it is some-

thing that has tremendous spiritual significance for people’s lives.” This “not just”—this “excess,” let’s call it—returns us to the structure of religious feeling. On its Web site, the New Destiny Center claims “outreaches average a 33% salvation and rededication decision rate!”<sup>34</sup> Trinity Church Cedar Hill claims a more “modest,” but still significant conversion and recommitment rate of 20 percent. These statistics can be argued over: exactly what is being counted, and how? What does seem unmistakable, though, is the circuit of feeling that passes among the participants in New Destiny’s Hell House or Trinity Church’s, all of whom, young and old, cast and crew, are embedded in a larger community of meaning making and, as they see it, higher purpose. Conversion is never a finished process, and Hell House is as much about reconfirming the individual participants in their faith commitments as it is about spreading the Good News to others.

As theater, Hell House exceeds religious understanding or sectarian attempts to control its overflow of feeling and meaning making. Pastor Keenan is right: “Being big is fun.” So is getting to be other than who you are if only for a night, or maybe more. In “Devil on my Shoulder,” the 2002 segment of *This American Life* that focused on *Hell House*, director Ratliff reminds us—if we needed any reminding—that the plum roles in Hell House are the sinners; “nearly everyone wants to play [one].” He continues:

Not one person auditioned to play Jesus or an angel role. Maybe it’s just more fun to be evil on stage than good. Maybe playing a church-going, God-fearing Christian is just not that interesting if you are a church-going, God-fearing Christian. The organizers usually have to go out and recruit some hapless kids to play the good Christian roles.<sup>35</sup>

In the documentary, the filmmaker asks a group of performers what the best scene in Hell House is. One young girl unhesitatingly replies: “Rave scene’s the best, because you get to dance.” There is vocal assent from her peers.

The pleasures of putting on the theatrical mask are the pleasures of transgressing the everyday, being who you are not, and opening yourself—sometimes dangerously—to the leakiness between roles on stage and off. More than theater, more than religion: Hell House defies neat boundaries between audience and performer, secular culture and religious event. At its best, and sometimes even at its worst, theater can make you susceptible. To what, and whether that is a good thing, depends on who’s doing the accounting.

If we measure the success of Hell House in terms of how many people are saved for the first time, then Hell House seems a failure—even Trinity’s 20 percent statistic is inflated by the high numbers of spectators who “rededi-



cate.” But, there are some queer convergences here. In a jointly written essay “Preaching to the Converted,” performance studies scholar David Román and performance artist Tim Miller defend the value of performing for one’s “own.” Conversion, they argue, “demands a continual testing of identity,” not identity once for all, and this “implies vulnerability.”<sup>36</sup> Writing from a distinctly queer perspective, Román and Miller argue for community-based performance as an urgent and even life-saving experience of self and communal (re)constitution in the face of an often hostile world. If queer theater is “preaching to the converted,” as its critics sometimes sneer, this is precisely what Román and Miller want to valorize.

Evangelical Christians see themselves as marginal and in need of buffering, too, and Hell House offers one way to reconfirm belief in the face of what they feel to be a secular hegemony. Of course, it is important to distinguish here between a feeling of marginalization and the accuracy of such a feeling.<sup>37</sup> This feeling of marginalization remains active and galvanizing despite the undeniable impact conservative Christianity has had on electoral politics and policy-making in the United States over the past two decades. And this is what makes Hell House seem so politically scary to many of its progressive critics, both religious and secular: Hell House speaks for much larger political and cultural currents, and represents a politics of division.

This division even extends to Hell House’s fear factor. For evangelical proponents, Hell House uses fear in the service of a higher good. For critics, such as NGLTF or the Colorado Council of Churches, Hell House cruelly manipulates social stereotypes and phobias against vulnerable populations. For a secular critic like the writer Charles D’Ambrosio, Hell House’s problem is that it is not scary enough; it fails because it lacks the “anguish and torment . . . you expect a good haunted house to have.”<sup>38</sup> For myself, I was not “scared” by the Hell House performances I saw, though I could not be in greater disagreement with the cultural politics or theology of Hell House and its makers. Still, I remain impressed by their can-do theatrical spirit and the palpable sense of fun they seemed to be having. This was a fun that most squarely did not include me. At least not in any simple way. As a queer scholar of performance (not to mention, an atheist) I find my own pleasures—and challenges—in thinking seriously about Hell House, what it does, what it fails to accomplish.

By attending to “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt,”<sup>39</sup> to return to Raymond Williams’s language, progressive scholars might better understand not just Hell House’s appeal to its participants, but also the role emotions play in the constitution of conservative cultural politics. As Linda

Kintz argues, "academics and others who feel justifiably threatened by traditionalist conservatism are often unable to understand its appeal because we are not used to understanding beliefs that are not expressed according to our own scholarly expectations. By dismissing arguments that are not articulated in the terms with which we are familiar, we overlook the very places where politics comes to matter most: at the deepest levels of the unconscious, in our bodies, through faith, and in relation to the emotions."<sup>40</sup> This essay represents a modest attempt to listen for these other articulations.

## Notes

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1. "Is Halloween the New Christmas?" ABC News, October 31, 2006, [www.abcnews.go.com/GMA/Business/story?id=2617781&page=1](http://www.abcnews.go.com/GMA/Business/story?id=2617781&page=1) (accessed December 11, 2006).
2. Quoted in Chris Serres, "GHOUL DAYS; You Want Scary? There's a New Holiday Shopping Season," *Minnesota Star Tribune*, October 25, 2006, 1D.
3. It is not just conservative Protestants who have expressed religious concerns with Halloween. But conservative Protestants are distinguished by having developed an infrastructure to offer alternative Halloween events.
4. Troy Franklin, "Objective: Halloween Reclamation," [www.objectiveministries.org/antiocult/halloween.html](http://www.objectiveministries.org/antiocult/halloween.html) (accessed December 13, 2006).
5. See [www.cbn.com/special/halloween/](http://www.cbn.com/special/halloween/) (accessed March 18, 2007).
6. Robertson made his initial assertion on an October 29, 1982, segment of *The 700 Club*. For a recent citation, see Dahleen Glanton, "Halloween Bedevils Some U.S. Churches," Knight-Ridder Newspapers, October 29, 2004, National section. Archived at <http://media.www.pittnews.com/media/storage/paper879/news/2004/10/29/NationalNews/Halloween.Bedevils.Some.U.s.Churches-1788600.shtml> (accessed March 18, 2007).
7. For a discussion of Scaremare, see Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3–4.
8. Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 23; emphasis in original.
9. *Ibid.*, xviii, xxiii.
10. From the Assemblies of God Web site, [www.ag.org/top/about/mission\\_vision.cfm](http://www.ag.org/top/about/mission_vision.cfm) (accessed March 18, 2007).
11. Keenan Roberts, interview by Debra Levine and the author, digital recording, Thornton, Colorado, October 29, 2006. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations of Roberts are from this interview.
12. For more on the aesthetics of horror and the gruesome imagination of Hell Houses, see Charles D'Ambrosio, "Hell House," in *Orphans* (Astoria, Ore.: Clear Cut Press, 2004), 124–39. Brian Jackson



- notes the almost “pornographic fixation on the eternal suffering of others,” and places Hell Houses in the tradition of Jonathan Edwards’s hellfire rhetoric and “scare-for-salvation.” Although I think this approach is useful, as will become clear, I connect Hell Houses to the self-conscious theatricality of Edwards’s contemporary George Whitefield. See Jackson, “Jonathan Edwards Goes to Hell (House): Fear Appeals in American Evangelism,” *Rhetoric Review* 26.1 (2007): 42–59.
13. Sarah Kennedy and Jason Cianciotto, *Homophobia at “Hell House”: Literally Demonizing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth* (Washington, D.C.: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, 2006), 8, [www.thetaskforce.org/reslibrary/list.cfm?pubTypeID=2](http://www.thetaskforce.org/reslibrary/list.cfm?pubTypeID=2) (accessed December 13, 2006).
  14. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–35. In another place, I explore the cross-hatchings of religious and sexual identities as structures of feelings. See Ann Pellegrini, “Testimonial Sexuality; or, Queer Structures of Religious Feeling: Notes Towards an Investigation,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Fall 2005): 93–102.
  15. Williams, 126.
  16. *Ibid.*, 132.
  17. *Ibid.*; emphasis in original
  18. On this dilemma, see Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics,” in *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, ed. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 105–33.
  19. I borrow the term “resonance” from Linda Kintz’s important discussion of the emotional texture of right-wing Christian politics. See Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market: The Emotions That Matter in Right-Wing America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), esp. 6–7.
  20. In a 2005 interview with *Christianity Today*, to promote *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, Derrickson made an impassioned argument for horror as a Christian genre; he could as easily have been talking about Hell House. Calling horror the genre of “non-denial,” he said that horror “tackles issues of good and evil more than any other genre, it distinguishes and articulates the essence of good and evil better than any other genre, and my feeling is that a lot of Christians are wary of this genre simply because it’s unpleasant. The genre is not about making you feel good, it is about making you face your fears. And in my experience, that’s something a lot of Christians don’t want to do.” He went on to call upon evangelicals to reclaim the gothic from Catholic and secular aesthetics. Scott Derrickson, “Horror: The Perfect Christian Genre,” interview by Peter Chattaway, *Christianity Today*, August 30, 2005, [www.christianitytoday.com/movies/interviews/scottderrickson.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/interviews/scottderrickson.html) (accessed December 11, 2006).
  21. For a provocative discussion of Phelps and this Web site, see Michael Cobb, *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
  22. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004). The argument of this paragraph and the one that follows was developed jointly with Jakobsen and largely reproduces the language of our co-writing.
  23. Bush made these comments in the course of a February 2004 press conference. His call for “civil” dialogue was extensively reported. See, for example, “Bush calls for ban on same-sex marriages,” available at: [www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/02/24/elec04.prez.bush.marriage/](http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/02/24/elec04.prez.bush.marriage/) (accessed March 19, 2007).
  24. Kennedy and Ciancotto, 3.
  25. See [www.godestiny.org/hell\\_house/HH\\_kitInclude.cfm](http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_kitInclude.cfm) (accessed December 13, 2006).
  26. From [www.godestiny.org/hell\\_house/HH\\_resources\\_scenes.cfm?p\\_id=6](http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_resources_scenes.cfm?p_id=6) (accessed December 13, 2006).
  27. All the quoted sections in this paragraph come from “Hell House Resources—Sex Scene Package,” [www.godestiny.org/hell\\_house/HH\\_resources\\_scenes.cfm?p\\_id=14](http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_resources_scenes.cfm?p_id=14) (accessed April 23, 2007).
  28. For a now-classic discussion of the history and persistence of antimimeticism, see Jonas Barish, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
  29. Debra Levine, “Conceiving a Community Theatre of Cruelty,” paper presented at “Manhattan Hell House: A Roundtable,” the Center for Religion and Media, New York University, October 14, 2005.
  30. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 84–85.
  31. *Ibid.*, 13.
  32. Aaron Lemon-Strauss, quoted in “Visions of Hell,” by Matthew Philips and Lisa Miller, *Newsweek*, November 6, 2006, 52.
  33. Ben Brantley, “A Guided Tour of Hell, With an Appearance by Satan,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2006, B7.

34. See [www.godestiny.org/hell\\_house/HH\\_kitResults.cfm](http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_kitResults.cfm) (accessed December 13, 2006).
35. "Devil on My Shoulder," *This American Life*, host Ira Glass, Chicago Public Radio, May 24, 2002, archived at [www.thislife.org/Radio\\_Episode.aspx?sched=925](http://www.thislife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?sched=925) (accessed June 6, 2007).
36. David Román and Tim Miller, "Preaching to the Converted," *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater*, ed. Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 212.
37. On this point, see Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, 118–19.
38. D'Ambrosio, "Hell House," 126.
39. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132.
40. Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market*, 5.