

ABSTRACT

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CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY-BASED
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Directed By:

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Theatre

This dissertation project examines contemporary North American conservative Christian performance practices. The study is in part ethnographic, taking into account the local context of these performances and attempting to situate their practices and techniques in relation to previous practices of religious performance, as well as within the field of community-based performance.

Through contextualizing the performances discussed as part of ongoing theatrical/aesthetic conversations, interviewing participants, examining local and national press coverage, and in reading these events as locally rooted community-based performances, I explore why and how, when community-based and identity performance is often associated with the left and liberal concerns, it is thriving in communities that could, arguably, be understood as right and/or conservative. This study investigates how the elision of social and spiritual identity within the space of performance speaks to complex interactions between “American” identity and “American” spirituality.

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CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICA

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Foreword

... There must be some common ground already existing in both of them, something they can either dismiss in one gesture or jointly worship. Therefore the theatre must attack what might be called the collective complexes of society, the core of the collective subconscious or perhaps superconscious, the myths which are... inherited – through one’s blood, religion, culture, and climate...¹

As this dissertation progresses I wish to emphasize that I strive to present *my* process of seeing these events. I, as an individual, do not condone the overt deployment of “scare tactics” as a way of imparting artistic or social principles; however, I, like many of the individuals and church groups involved in these projects, do believe in letting others express their views and values free from my judgment about their merit. I also believe that people with different beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad – people I disagree with – still have a lot to teach me about my world, the beliefs inherent in it, and the ways that art can shape those beliefs. Tolerance is not a one-way street; I cannot only claim that diversity of opinion is good solely when people think like me. I admire the courage that it takes to believe something so strongly in this day and age and to share that belief with the knowledge that you will be mocked, attacked, and dismissed; as this work unfolds I hope that the reader can recognize the value in these works beyond the controversies, disagreements, and the belief systems portrayed.

Words like fear, God, identity, American, Christian are all too often lightning rods of division in the contemporary world. Their contentious nature extends beyond the religious purview of this study. Fear preaches inside and outside of church walls;

¹ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Eugenio Barba (London: Methuen, 1968), 42.

it culls up issues of violence and difference, and the battles that roil over “tradition” and “change” which permeate the contemporary world. The performance works discussed in the upcoming pages engage different perspectives on how to address these concerns. If community-based performance represents the “struggles, goals, values and dreams of a community, usually one that has been marginalized, ignored, or silenced...”² it is my hope that it can also represent those who are well spoken for, whose voices are not at all silenced, but which are often drowned out in the shouting match that is the contemporary world.

² Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus, eds., *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 18.

Dedication

To all those who shared their beliefs and their performances with me

To my husband, Paul, who has supported me all the many years it has taken
me to get here

To my daughter Clara (who has not yet arrived), but who inspired me to finish

To my grandmother Clara whose desire to accept, to understand, and to value
all people has always guided me

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Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the faculty members I have worked with over the years. They have each showed me new ways to think about the world. Dr. Nathans, Dr. Schuler, Dr. Carpenter, Dr. Haedicke, and Dr. Caughey thank you for being such excellent teachers.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Rationale and Major Issues

There are, in my view, four sets of opposing categories that currently frame much of our thinking about the nature of the world and the role of faith: individual and community, diversity and uniformity, liberalism and conservatism, and public and private. Each of these pairs creates a kind of space in which we can think about the present. Each one also provides a framework that, for better or for worse, raises certain questions as we think about the future.³

In the chapters that follow I consider a selection of community-based performances enacted by conservative Christian communities in the United States of America.⁴ This examination is carried out through a combination of critical analysis of the performances discussed in the following pages, analysis of local and national press coverage surrounding the performances themselves, and an analysis of these performances as community-based arts within their performed contexts. This study's main focus is to present research on the tactics, structure, and dynamics of a branch of contemporary Christian performance that grows from community-based efforts.

To that end, this introductory Chapter identifies the major threads operating within the larger work: notions of community and communal identity, fear and violence as a medium for efficacious results, the debate around the deployment of

³ Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century: Reflections on the Challenge Ahead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 13.

⁴ These events happen throughout the United States, but the specific events I focus on in this dissertation are primarily in the southeastern United States, with the exception of the Nightmare events which are in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Marshfield, Wisconsin. I chose the events I did through conducting preliminary interviews with coordinators, learning who was interested in speaking with me, as well as by looking at which events I could feasibly travel to, to both interview organizers and see the events themselves within my time frame and budget.

fear and violence in evangelizing, and the discourse of the “real” in the works discussed. I also discuss “transgressive” versus “reactionary” performance in this introductory Chapter to help lay out one of the major issues that often serves as an obstacle to understanding and/or evaluating the performances that this dissertation engages. In addition, this introductory Chapter provides a broad historical and cultural context for the faith communities that perform these works,⁵ discusses reasoning behind the inclusion of the specific works selected,⁶ maps out the trajectory of the project, and offers an introduction to key terms deployed throughout the work.

What follows here will provide insights into the relationship between community-based performance practices and the “...ever changing social alliances”⁷ of the North American conservative Christian communities studied. This project utilizes methodologies from ethnographic practice, as well as an engagement in the concepts of the body, identity, and community. Throughout this work I rely on information gathered in interviews with individual performers, audience members, organizational leaders, event planners, and church members, information gathered from following blogs, web rings and social networking sites, as well as information reported in local and national press coverage.

For each of the performances discussed I have attended the performances and spoken with community participants and audience members. Many interviews were

⁵ In this Introduction I briefly discuss the rise of the Christian Right (broadly) and the general elision of that term with evangelical Christianity – rightly or not. As Smith points out in the study *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want*, conservative Protestants hold, like any other group of individuals, a broad range of beliefs; however, it is often the beliefs that are most polarizing which are held up as representative of the entire group.

⁶ In the body of each chapter I explain further the specific reasoning behind my choices for inclusion.

⁷ Haedicke and Nellhaus, eds., 12.

conducted over the course of the last three years and represent an ongoing relationship with a performing community and the members of that community. Much of this dissertation has been shared with those whose words appear in the following pages.

I originally contacted by mail, email, and phone as many churches and event organizers as I could find through internet and newspaper research. After preliminary email and phone correspondences I was able to set up a series of in person interviews. I spent the summer (2007) travelling the southeastern United States interviewing the organizers of events such as: *Tribulation Trail*, *Revelation Walk*, and various Hell and Judgement Houses. On this trip I was able to see preparations and planning for the events that would take place in the fall of 2007. After these preliminary in person interviews I stayed in contact with many of the individuals and I returned to their performance events as an audience member and to conduct other interviews with organizers and other willing participants in October of 2007.

I have also fostered relationships with the Judgement House organization in Clearwater, Florida and attended various Judgement Houses and *Scaremare* in Virginia starting in 2004. Due to the relative proximity of the Judgement Houses in Virginia I was able to see multiple performances and attend rehearsals and event planning and strategy meetings. As I move forward in this work I hope to be able to bolster these ongoing relationships with more extensive audience interviewing, as well as with the gathering of more precise demographic data, and with continued and strengthened participant observation.

In my conversations with the members of the communities discussed, as well as by participating in these performances as an observer/audience member, I have gained a better understanding of their performance goals, strategies, practices, and aesthetics. This dissertation is an attempt to share, investigate, and offer a preliminary analysis of these experiences.

1.2 Transgressing the Knee Jerk Reaction

Community-based performance, by necessity, engages with the formation and enacting of identity and what follows in the pages of this project is an inquiry into the ways in which the performances selected for inclusion complicate, as well as reinforce monolithic notions of North American conservative Christian identity. In highlighting some of the methods of these community-based performances I present alternate models for community engagement that utilize communities of geography, culture, and spirituality in what I argue are socially necessary and often constructive, though sometimes controversial, ways.

Above all, this work examines the performances discussed as community-based performance works to gain insight into how they function, the choices and strategies they employ, their successes and their stumblings, and in the Conclusion to apply the observations made throughout the following pages to the broader study of community-based performance. In the concluding pages, I offer suggestions for future inquiry into the field of Christian performance in the United States – a field which is vast in the range of the performances it contains and rich in the compelling questions raised by the myriad forms of Christian performances.

In the following pages I assert the necessity of recognizing, and thus putting aside, a bias against performances that are often viewed as “reactionary” or non-liberalizing. Performance itself is, by and large, discussed as a libratory medium, due to its oft celebrated transitory nature; however, as discussed here and throughout this work, the true effect of performance on an individual or community can be difficult to pin-point. Privileging social change in one direction (“progress”) as opposed to social change that occurs when “the real is no longer what it used to be,” and, “nostalgia assumes its full meaning,” obscures a vital examination into the “proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality.”⁸ Large sectors of the American public believe, freely, that their world should change, or change “back”; they work actively to make those changes.

KM: What’s community to you? How would you describe community?

CR: It used to be a place where you knew everyone. When I grew up you knew people on your street, what was happening in their lives, in their families...You could knock on their doors...get help if you needed or help other people. People had problems with each other, but we knew each other. Now you could live somewhere your whole life and not know your neighbor really at all...People move in and out all the time...That was community... Community was knowing the people around you; now, now, you have to find it for yourself....church is more family, community than the people I live around.

KM: What about *The Trail*? How does that fit in?

CR: It brought us closer, so in the church group it made us more family like...It doesn’t show community really, except in the Christians who band together, you know, after the Rapture...*The Trail* is like to [sic] what happens if things keep going the way they are...Wake up...This is what’s about to happen.⁹

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss (New York: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 1983), 12.

⁹ Carla Reeves, telephone interview by author, July 12, 2007, Tape Recording. Reeves was co-director of *Tribulation Trail* for four years before she joined another congregation.

And as discussed above, these performances serve as footholds for engaging the creation of nostalgic meaning, seeking to create social change while opening doors between communities of faith and communities of geography in insightful ways.

Is the desire, expressed by participants in these performances to reclaim a world perceived to have, “just gotten more and more liberal,”¹⁰ somehow wrong? Who am I to say? People are free to work for the change they believe in; others may choose to work for different beliefs. Are they intolerant? No more than those who dismiss their beliefs because they disagree with them, while performing an open attitude toward anything *except* conservative religious belief. As Reinelt asserts, “the permanent presence of conflict is indispensable...because it is through the articulation and negotiation of plural notions of citizenry that democracy does its work.”¹¹

One of the most pressing insights of cultural and social theory in recent decades has been a move away from apprehending individuals as fully coherent, cohesive, and logically consistent social agents; instead, the individual is recognized as having multiple social and cultural alliances; negotiations among these alliances are often complex, and very often these alliances are neither reasonable nor explicable. This insight affords the individual operating socially as a constituent part within mass blocks of people motivations distinct from the way they are socially defined and prevents comfortable generalizations among and between different social groups. In short, it allows one to recognize individual agency outside of pre-adjudged

¹⁰ Stacy Remus, interview by author, Believer’s Church, Marshfield, Wisconsin, October 7, 2007, Tape Recording.

¹¹ Janelle Reinelt, “Notes for a Radical Democratic Theatre: Productive Crises and the Challenge Indeterminacy,” in *Staging Resistance. Essays on Political Theater*, eds. Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 288.

group dynamics. Too often, however, the communities discussed in this dissertation are not treated to this emergent understanding and are instead viewed as a block of like-minded, non-nuanced, and single-minded religious zealots whose aims are clear, cogent, identifiable, and most of all dangerous.

...The tricks of drama work well and they work cheaply. Our emotions are conditioned to respond certain ways to certain lighting cues, etc. In and of itself, that's not necessarily bad; throughout the history of Christianity imagery has been considered very important in the cultivation of the heart. However, there's a difference between using imagery to help someone reflect more deeply on Christ's humanity or His love (and, as was the case with medieval Passion Plays, on one's own sin), and between using imagery to convince someone to make a snap one time decision...Ultimately this cheap grace is detrimental.¹²

Judgement Houses, Hell Houses, *Scaremare*, *Nightmare*, Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames¹³ and similar performances are happening in church communities throughout the world and they can open doors for discussion about links between religion and communal engagement and the responses to a myriad of social challenges that face those living in the twenty-first century. They are not deserving of derision simply because they often assert a "traditional" value structure; these performances, much like performances that many would term "good" community-based performance create adhesion, test community bonds, affirm and expand belief systems, and go a long way towards launching active conversations between

¹² J. Roberts, Judgement House, Open Discussion Room, "Suspicious," comment on "Thoughts on Judgement House. Good, bad, ugly, are all welcomed," Christian Classics Ethereal Library Discussion Board, comments posted on November 11, 2007, <http://www.ccel.org/node/3947> (accessed on November 14, 2007).

¹³ *Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames* is part of larger organization (Reality Outreach Ministries) that among other performances brings the *Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames* performance to church communities across the country. I do not discuss it in detail in this study because, while some actors from the local church are used, the production, which is in residence with the community for a week, brings their own performers for the larger roles and does not alter the script or format of the event for the community. It is also performed in a traditional proscenium setting with pre-arranged effects, etc. I do, however, think that it offers a viable trajectory for future research in touring and franchise based productions.

communities of geography and belief. They do this while addressing issues that are of grave concern to all involved such as: drug use, drunk driving, domestic violence, school violence, war, terrorism, abortion, gay rights, rape, and suicide.

Even so, the performances examined in this study are often read as offering no valid insight because of their perceived lack of “transgressive,” artistic, or libratory intents. Often, they are merely studied for their sensationalism;¹⁴ they are set out of reach and obscured by knee-jerk reactions to the, “in-your-face, high-flyin’, no denyin’, death-defyin’, Satan-be-cryin’, keep-ya-from-fryin’, theatrical stylin’, no holds barred, cutting-edge...”¹⁵ of Keenan Robert’s Hell House Outreach and the media coverage and artistic adaptations it has received. A glance at the field of conservative Christian performance only affords the viewer a glimpse of the Hell House Outreach phenomena; judgment is made and other performances that have little to do with the work of Keenan Roberts¹⁶ are deemed not worthy of the type of serious study accorded to “Community-based theatre,” that, “leans toward liberation.”¹⁷

¹⁴ The Hell House Outreach phenomena and the articles, documentaries, news stories, and adaptations of it provide good examples of how these works are often discussed for the political issues they engage, and not necessarily the strategies they employ.

¹⁵ New Destiny Christian Center, “Hell House Outreach Kit,” http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_kit.cfm (accessed on September 1, 2007).

¹⁶ I refer to Pastor Keenan Roberts because he is the one who set up the distribution of Hell House Outreach kits and has worked with, and gained notoriety through secular theatre companies and the media. I have spoken with an individual whose has press coverage that shows that his brother was operating a Hell House in Texas far before Pastor Keenan Roberts did. However, the Hell House Outreach I refer to throughout should be understood to be the organization designed and headed by Pastor Keenan Roberts.

¹⁷ Haedicke and Nellhaus, eds., 18.

As Conquergood notes "...threshold-crossing, shape-shifting, and boundary-violating figures, such as shamans, tricksters and jokesters, who value...the transformative over the normative, and the mobile over the monumental..."¹⁸ are the predominant means of "performance;" in this view performance asserts mutability and undermines dominant meanings in its articulation. Strategies of "mimicry," of "slippage," provide gaps in which understandings are questioned through juxtaposing the object as one *should* know it with the object as one encounters it in a new "performed" context. Certainly, this notion of performance as encouraging new understandings need not be applied solely to those understandings that fit within a specific "liberal" agenda. This performed context is formal; slippage occurs and perceptions change, whether the content is "liberal" or "conservative." Performance itself can be a site in which questions about the contemporary world are examined through negotiation, personal experience, and emotional and aesthetic response. "People choose to participate in an event that recognizes the marginality of some members of the society and strengthens that group by force of taking place."¹⁹ Within the context of the communities studied here the performances ask the church members performing to transgress their comfortable and normative social boundaries within the performance frame, as they present and represent that which they view as transgressive in mainstream culture – abortion, violence, gay marriage, etc.

¹⁸ Dwight C. Conquergood, "Of Caravans and Carnivals: Performance Studies in Motion," *The Drama Review* 39, no. 2 (1995): 139. The Devil (and the presence of the demonic and Halloween oriented imagery) at work in many Hell scenes can be read, on some level, as a shape shifter, a boundary violator, mutable, able to take on multiple forms to persuade one toward s action. These performances work to point up the ways the Devil performs in day-to-day life, calling out the Devil's trickery within the spectacle.

¹⁹ Reinelt, 291.

The relationship between “transgressive” performance and “reactionary” performance is highly subject to one’s location within the structures of society; social change – dependant on variables such as gender, race, economics, religious belief, sexual orientation, cultural heritage, personal preference or any combination of these and many other forces not mentioned here – can be apprehended as “liberalizing” and “transgressive” or “conservative” and “reactionary.” However, adjudging these effects is complex and should not be the basis of evaluating “good,” study worthy, or successful community-based art. Labeling a performance “liberalizing” and “transgressive” or “conservative” and “reactionary” becomes difficult to negotiate, as it depends on the individuals performing, the audience the performance is intended for, and the goal of the performance itself. Depending on where one’s ideological and political commitments are housed “transgression” and “reaction” becomes relative. As Wuthnow asserts,

“Liberalism” and “Conservatism” (or related concepts such as “fundamentalism”) suggest another polarity. Much of our thinking about religion at present can be organized in terms of this polarity. But with what consequences...our thinking is framed by these concepts, but remains free to roam over a rather wide territory...But what constitutes this territory?...it is constituted primarily by stories.²⁰

Transgression, as traditionally understood, seeks to create new understanding and reactionary beliefs seek to enforce or re-instate previously held models of understanding; however, the old can look new and the new old, depending on perspective. Intent, execution, and reception play a large role in the potential efficacy of performance and in the way people read the stories that inhabit Wuthnow’s

²⁰ Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century*, 13.

territory. There can be gaps between intent and reception that create new understandings in some participants and that enforce previous convictions in others.

Complicating the circumstances more, it would seem that performances in interacting with a world of myriad images, structures, people, spaces, and conditions can be understood as counter to the dominant (if one can agree on where domination lies) in one regard, while remaining supportive of the current social order in other ways. The power in hegemony lies in the fact that one can active in healing one arm of the “beast” all the while struggling to chop off others without even knowing it (i.e. recycling religiously while shopping at Wal-Mart). There is no discourse that is “pure” and no way to adopt a position counter to the entire social structure aside from removing oneself from the world; thus, I argue that performances are neither “reactionary” nor “transgressive,” “libratory” or “conservative” except in relation to their audiences and participants.

Performance can be most usefully described as an ideological transaction between...performers and the community of their audience...performance is ‘about’ the transaction of meaning...²¹

As Conquergood points out in his larger argument against the propensity of the academic world to privilege knowledge, even metaphorically, as *written* text in his article “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,”

...the state of emergency in which many people live demands that we pay attention to messages that are coded and encrypted; to indirect nonverbal and extra linguistic modes of communication...where subversive meanings...can be...sheltered from surveillance.²²

²¹ Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 16-17.

²² Dwight C. Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” *The Drama Review* 46, no. 2 (2002): 148.

When reading this in light of Kershaw's view of the audience-performer exchange, the complexity of a performance's subversive nature becomes more apparent. Depending on the audience's interest in, or sensitivity to, these "extra-linguistic" communications, as well as the performance's intent vis-à-vis those communications – whether they occur by design or are manifest in the individual performer and received by those sensitive to that message – a performance that was "reactionary" can become "transgressive" and vice versa. It thus becomes difficult to classify a performance as one or the other. "Any attempt to *prove* that this kind of performance efficacy is possible, let alone probable, is plagued by analytical difficulties and dangers."²³

It is useful to view performance as a text that can be read equally through its "extra-linguistic" qualities (visual, aural, spatial, and commercial). "The text *works*, it shifts in its texture; and it is transformed, it is through the very face that the body itself has meaning..."²⁴ Our attempts to encounter performative text can seek to find the "implied audience" for the performance text, but in an effort relying on the contributions of two-hundred or more volunteers the "ideal audience" member can be quite diverse. It is useful to examine the productions' stated intent in publicity and training materials and from those sources begin to construct "implied" and "ideal" participants and examine the differences between those groups; however, getting at any actuality of meaning cannot be done with certainty, thus, I think it best to

²³ Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, 20.

²⁴ Pierre Fedida as quoted in Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance and Film*, trans. David Williams (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 216.

understand participants (audience and volunteers alike) as agents capable of interpreting a performance within the context of their circumstances, certainly able to apprehend and accept or reject the “implied” and/ or “ideal” role offered them.

1.3 Faith and Context: “Yes I’ve gotta have faith.”²⁵

Evangelicals throughout the United States are placing their opinions in the forefront of public debate over social issues. However, despite this oppositional positioning evangelical culture has, in many instances, successfully endeavored to merge with mainstream cultural practices. These beliefs flow through mainstream television, as well as through films like *Saved* and *Religulous* that mock, yet still present evangelical values. Even while claiming their self-labeled conservative Protestant identity evangelicals have chosen not to cloister themselves from the world. It is easy to observe quite the opposite reaction to mainstream culture in many sectors of evangelical America; evangelicals have worked to generate a large demographic appeal with products that may be consumed by evangelical and non-Christian consumers alike; this type of crossover purpose is apparent in works like *Nightmare*, *Scaremare*, *Revelation Walk* and *Tribulation Trail*, which all draw huge numbers of excited non-Christian audiences each year.

As much as evangelicals have permeated and shaped their own market, the market and the contemporary world have shaped them as well and defining contemporary evangelicalism is not a straightforward task; there are a myriad of different denominations and groups that identify themselves as evangelical. It becomes difficult to establish a precise estimate of just how many evangelicals there are in the

²⁵ George Michal, *Faith*.

United States; there is no single entity that can possibly serve as a representative for all evangelicals in the United States. “The people I am writing about call themselves by many names: traditional Christians, conservative Christians, orthodox Christians, Bible believing Christians, or even the saints.”²⁶

For many who study evangelicalism and fundamentalism in the contemporary world, division and distinction from the mainstream have been central to grasping the ways in which conservative religious practitioners form a sense of identity, which allows them to not only survive, but to continue to succeed in the contemporary social world.²⁷ The popular argument is that religious groups maintain a distinctive identity by demarcating a stringent border between themselves and others. However, Smith, according to Johnson in *Rapture Culture*, suggests that while evangelicalism posits clear boundaries of belief and these demarcations supply the confining borders of community, and an attitude perceived as hostility – not only from the secular, but from other religions as well – it is this sub-cultural, self-claimed identity, which allows evangelicalism to blossom. To be successful and distinctive the evangelical identity needs both boundaries and outsider status to define themselves in relation to.²⁸

So, in less time than it took me to finish my Coca-Cola I was presented with many of the key issues in a nutshell. Evangelicals often feel excluded, marginalized, or

²⁶ Daniel Radosh, *Rapture Ready! Adventures in the Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 8.

²⁷ See Julie Carpenter’s *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, James Davison Hunter’s *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity*, Amy Johnson Frykholm’s *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*, and Christian Smith’s *American Evangelicalism Embattled and Thriving*.

²⁸ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 26.

discriminated against by secular institutions and elites. And many non-evangelicals view evangelical Christians with deep suspicions, as enemies of freedom and liberal democracy.²⁹

The porous nature of these boundaries speaks to how evangelical beliefs, symbols, and products have seeped into American culture, extending beyond those who claim the identity of evangelical for themselves.

American religion has long been known for its dynamism and fluidity, its responsiveness to grassroots opinions and sentiments, its creative capacity in relation to the cultural environment...encouraged by a democratic, highly individual ethos.³⁰

The Gallup organization since 1976 began has asked one thousand adults the question: “Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian?” In the 1976 survey thirty-four percent of the people being surveyed responded: “Yes.” In the years since 1976 the numbers have shifted in tandem with the nation’s social and religious climate. In 2005 approximately forty-two percent of survey participants described themselves as evangelicals, with forty-six percent responding “Yes” in 2004. The Gallup polls usually see around forty-two percent of the thousand surveyed take the label born-again or evangelical.

George Barna, of The Barna Group, an organization which conducts primary research on the American Christian landscape defines evangelicals as people who have organized their life around seven different spiritual principles – thus narrowing the numbers: “people who have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as still important in their life today and also indicated they believe that when they die they

²⁹ Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 4.

³⁰ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

will go to heaven because they had confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior,” in addition to believing “that Satan exists; believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; believing that the Bible is accurate in all its teachings; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today.”³¹ Often evangelicals also believe that they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians.

There are two divergent belief systems operating under the evangelical umbrella: those who belong to Protestant denominations, but do not read the Bible literally and the literalists who are also divided into two major groups the fundamentalists and Pentecostals.³² While many in the public, as well as the media often see the two as compatible, in actuality, the two viewpoints are riddled with differences, rather than wed by their similarities.³³

³¹ George Barna, The Barna Group, “Welcome to The Barna Group,” posted on October 21, 2003, www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=150 (accessed on June 24, 2007).

³² Fundamentalism as understood in a North American context was a term coined by Baptist Minister Curtis Lee Laws in 1920. Laws used the term to advocate for a return to Fundamental principles in response to modernizing forces such as evolution. Pentecostalism, as understood in an American context, became a well known term in 1906 after the Azusa Street Revival. The communities examined in this study label themselves primarily evangelical communities.

³³For instance, fundamentalists are usually associated with Baptist Church, which teaches that the ability to perform miracles and speaking in tongues ended in New Testament times. Pentecostals on the other hand believe that the supernatural abilities described in the second chapter of the Book of Acts are meant to be practiced by modern day Christians. For a deeper discussion of the history and distinctions between fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and evangelicals please see George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 1991. The performances discussed in this project take place in mostly evangelical communities; however, those performance practices that are franchise based do occur in congregations ranging from communities identified as Pentecostal to Catholic. Over time fundamentalism has become more narrowly interpreted and fundamentalists are by many no longer understood linked to mainstream Protestant denominations. The term evangelical, however, has

Evangelicalism's stance toward the wider world has changed considerably in the late twentieth century. Rather than maintaining strict boundaries, evangelicals began to use these boundaries strategically and rhetorically. As Harding explains,

In the case of movies and television, there were manuals on how to watch secular programs from a Christian point of view...Christian 'cultural criticism' was emerging...The cultural walls of separation were torn down...They were miniaturized, multiplied and internalized.³⁴

The day-to-day practices of believers are part of an ever more fluid relationship with mainstream popular culture. For example, the religious subjectivity of participants in the performances discussed here is linked to religious faith, while taking recourse in the tools of a secular culture through deploying contemporary social issues and relying, often, on referents such as demons and gore.

How do the performances discussed in this work speak to this linking of mainstream culture and conservative Christian belief? Are the "culture wars" a sign that religious believers are more at home in the public, more vocal about their beliefs, fired with urgency about the state of world decency, as well as better able to put those fears and concerns into public attention through efficient deployment of media technologies?

blossomed across denominations and has, in many views, come to stand for a more socially and culturally engaged faith. Under this broad evangelical blanket one can include certain Presbyterians, Pentecostals, holiness churches, Baptists and others. James Davidson Hunter in *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* distinguishes between fundamentalism and evangelicalism on the basis of the relationships each group forges with the broader culture. According to Hunter, fundamentalists separate from what they might view as a corrupt cultural environment while evangelicals work to negotiate, influence, and flourish despite a corrupt culture.

³⁴ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 152.

Current upsurges of evangelicalism have resulted largely from the insistent marketing of belief, a campaign that has stretched throughout American history, and which has reached a fever pitch in today's mass media saturated world.

A personal agency oriented view of spirituality also coincides nicely with many American's images of themselves as forgers of the new Utopia. Revivalism during the second great awakening became a well-oiled, yet fiercely local performance event designed to compel young men and women to accept God's plan for America and work towards preparing the world for the coming of Christ through the reformation of American society. Membership in the evangelical community and the project of social improvement became, for many Americans, a remedy for the isolation and turmoil of a speedily transforming world; this active faith provided, and to this day provides, the committed with a sense of purpose, power, and agency, as well as the comfort of meaning, belonging in and relief from a world gone wrong.

Well, when you don't believe in God you have to believe in you...Everything falls on your shoulders...if you mess up you have no place to go...Sounds like a pretty heavy load. Do you want to lose it? Believe in God! When you believe in God...Now he calls the shots...What have you got to lose by believing in God instead of yourself? Confusion. Discouragement. Even rage and hating everyone. Feeling unloved and like you never really belong anywhere.³⁵

Following World War I, the circumstances that had led to the strength of traditional Protestant religion began to fall off. This slippage of social values was apparent in women's growing employment rates, the loosening of sexual codes, the modernist predilection for science and technology, and American's increasingly large investment in a value structure that emphasized material consumption and acquisition rather than spiritual understanding. Tenets of conservative Christianity were

³⁵ Bill Scheer, *What Have You Got to Lose? 9 Truths to Consider* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Harrison House Publishers, 2006), 5-6.

increasingly linked to the image of backwards small-town life; ironically, this backward looking world – this small town utopia – is what many Americans now look forward to.

A number of religious studies scholars argue that the United States is in midst of its fourth great awakening.³⁶ This latest religious revival is said to be spurred by perceived corruptions in contemporary society, financial, social, and familial. Forward from the 1960s, the figureheads of the fourth great awakening, if one subscribes to the concept, include: Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Tim LaHaye.

An equally distinctive feature of the religious scene in modern America is the presence of a remarkable set of popular leaders, persons who derive their authority not from their education or stature within major denominations, but from the democratic art of persuasion. These gospel ministers, remarkably attuned to popular opinion, continue to rise from obscurity to command significant audiences and to organize churches and movements around them.³⁷

This dynamism not only suffuses the major leaders of the movement but Pastors such as Keenan Roberts (Hell House Outreach), Tom Hudgins (Judgement House) and Bill Scheer (Nightmare) whose personal charisma has done much to market their respective events. The constant recourse to the popular and the larger than life appeal to believers inherent in American values, and consequently American religion, is also part of the reason for the electrifying and persuasiveness of the events discussed in the following pages.

³⁶ See Robert William Fogel's *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* and Jim Wallis' *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith & Politics in a Post-Religious Right America*.

³⁷ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989), 211.

The Christian Right recognizable in contemporary politics emerged as a corollary to considerable cultural changes that came to a head in the 1960s. Recognizing that they were increasingly marginalized within a changing social structure that openly acknowledged and sought to correct inequities for women and minorities – a culture that they perceived as derisive to the values of sanctity of life and family – the conservative Christian community rallied around dynamic leaders. These leaders worked to re-affirm the conservative values that they believe are the cornerstones of “American” life. In order to resist Satan’s temptations, believers dedicate themselves to God, committing to an ongoing struggle for self purification and to the effort to spread the evangelical good news to new believers throughout the world. Through the major televangelists evangelical perspectives gained exposure and legitimacy in the public.³⁸

In the 1980s Reagan’s courting of conservative Christian leadership placed the Christian Right firmly within the American landscape. By the end of the 1980s evangelical denominations claimed about sixty million believers representing about one third of the electorate. With rise, however, comes decline. Many events over the next decade sullied the reputation of the Christian Right and its strength on the political scene. The cachet of the Right declined as it became clear that many televangelists were corrupt, a Democratic Senate was elected, Robertson was

³⁸ For a deeper discussion of televangelism in late twentieth century America please see Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson D. Shupe’s *Televangelism, Power, and Politics on God’s Frontier*, John Cord’s *The Christian Right—or Wrong? Exposing the Corrupt Teachings of Corporate Christianity and Its Leading Media Evangelists*, and Steve Bruce’s *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America, 1978-1988*.

unsuccessful in his presidential bid, the Moral Majority ended, and finally Clinton was elected.

With Clinton's victory many thought the Right had waned in influence. However, the Christian Right was strengthened and invigorated by Clinton's victory. In fact during this time, as Smith notes in *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, conservative religious groups reached out to Republican political forces while simultaneously cultivating a rhetorical position which Smith terms, "subcultural identity."

For some, religion is primarily a private matter having to do with family and local congregation. For others, it is private in one sense but also a primary vehicle for the expression of national and even global concerns. Though Americans overwhelmingly accept the doctrine of separation of church and state, most of them believe, as they always have, that religion has an important role to play on the public realm.³⁹

As a cultural construct, the United States of America – more often than not – has been articulated as a faith-based nation and our understandings of ourselves as *Sinners in the Hands of Angry God* as The City on a Hill, as God's Country, With God on Our Side suffuses our cultural understanding of concepts such as hard work, leisure time, success, and our position in the world.

In the nineteenth century, evangelical Christianity was a driving force in American political life. There are undoubtedly connections between the intense physicality and community adhesion of religious gatherings such as camp meetings and the performances addressed in this work, not the least being that physical

³⁹ Robert N. Bellah and others, eds., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, With a New Preface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 219.

engagement is linked to spiritual engagement in the form of conversions.⁴⁰ This connection is apparent to supporters and detractors of the events alike, “It seems the fire-and-brimstone sermon of the tent-revival days has been modernized into the nightmare of today.”⁴¹

Conservative Christian organizations, when under scrutiny in the 1980s and 1990s, “thrive[d] on distinction, engagement, conflict and threat;”⁴² they retreated, restructured and retooled their means of action by choosing to concentrate on local politics, social institutions, and a broad range of media outlets. Through an increase in income and education many conservatives moved from lower class rural roots to become suburban, middle-class, well-educated leaders. Christian rock bands, radio stations, universities, schools, sports teams, news networks, cartoons, and clothing lines brought – and bring in – recruits with the promise of community, a future, and maybe even a house in the suburbs. The Christian Coalition became a major factor in shaping the Right’s new strategy by employing the tools of its liberal opponents. The rhetoric of rights and equality have become cornerstones in conservative Christian arguments regarding abortion and school prayer.

With the September 11, 2001 attacks on American soil many conservative fears were brought from the sidelines into the light. The perceived conservative

⁴⁰ A conversion experience is a path of commonly articulated stages such as: spiritual anxiety regarding Hell and the afterlife followed by the realization of one’s damnation and the final epiphany – the recognition that salvation is only wrought by surrendering to God’s Will. This is quite similar to the experience the performances included in this study hope to engender in their audiences.

⁴¹ Kevin Weaver (also signed by Ashley Dugan and Lynann Gavin), “Nightmare Evangelism,” *Tulsa World*, November 11, 2003. This quotation is from a signed letter in which three teachers at a Christian school in Tulsa take issue with the *Tulsa Nightmare’s* advertising and performance strategies.

⁴² Christian Smith and Michael Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 89.

Christian desire to steer America “right” combined with a healthy dose of fear and confusion about the state of world affairs re-affirmed in many the desire to save souls and to right the world before the end of times. One Judgement House in Lynchburg has performed their version of a terror attack entitled, *Judgement House: Operation Homeland Security*. Additionally, a Hell House in Georgia showed American soldiers executed by “fanatics” for refusing to denounce Christ even after hearing the promise seventy-two virgins and being threatened with nuclear deployment.⁴³ While some performances, such as those mentioned above, focus on these issues in volatile ways; these are not the most common types of these performances, nor are they always ideologically consistent with the beliefs of all the participants or the larger beliefs of conservative Christianity. The nuances of both politics and belief make any type of absolute and polarized assumptions seem absurd.

The Christian tradition is richly multi-vocal when it comes to ethical standpoints on social and economic issues...it is comprised as set of elemental moral “building blocks” of faith that Christians “assemble” in various combinations...This creates conditions for tremendous complexity...the usual labels of “conservative” or “liberal” were [are] overly simplistic categories...⁴⁴

It is simply incorrect and naive to assert that all evangelicals support the mission of the Religious Right’s leadership (just as all Catholics do not support every Papal decree) consistently and thoroughly, in theory and/or practice, as Smith notes in his study of “ordinary” evangelicals. Despite the nuances that occur in the application of theory to practice, a large percentage of media coverage, and thus popular perception of evangelical Christians blurs the distinction between outspoken individuals,

⁴³ Hell House website in Marietta, Georgia, <http://www.hellhouse.4t.com/INTERROGATION.htm> (accessed on November 14, 2005).

⁴⁴ Smith, *Christian America?*, 11.

agencies and organizations and the millions of day-to-day people who identify themselves as evangelical, fostering a sense of fear towards the packaged “evangelical message” that is most oft purveyed in media coverage. “The statements of religious elites, especially controversial political ones, attract more public attention than those of less flashy ordinary believers.”⁴⁵

The term evangelical, is understood and utilized in a range of ways in the contemporary world based on its history and its practice by believers. One of the most common usages, which I draw on in this study, is a conception of evangelical faith as a faith that places emphasis on a set of essential beliefs and practices: a desire to alter lives through conversion, a belief in biblical truth, actively living life through the lens of this biblical truth, and a focus on the suffering of Christ.

1.4 Christianity and Performance: Back to the Future

Historically, Christianity and the theatre have had a complex relationship; theatricality in religious worship gave rise to theatrical performance outside the liturgical structure and eventually off church grounds. This liaison between performance and faith illuminates many of the ideas discussed in this project: the witnessing of personal suffering as a tool for spiritual transformation, the community structured nature of the performances included here, the elision of Church property and performance space, the desire to powerfully affect both congregation and outside audience alike, and the necessity of following church teachings to attain salvation.

Discomfort with the fraudulence and perceived immorality inherent in the theatrical act can be traced from Plato to the writings of early Church fathers and can

⁴⁵ Ibid., 9.

be observed in the contemporary performances discussed in this dissertation; this discomfort can be apprehended clearly in many performers' hesitations about representing God, sinners, and demons, as well as in the ways that events themselves are structured to support performers who take on such demanding roles.

These contemporary events, like their ancestors, perform faith in a live relationship with the spectator. They do this by making concrete the reasons why one should have faith; the crucifixion is no longer an account in which one must place faith but a first-hand participatory experience in events such as *Nightmare* and *Scaremare*.

1.5 Why Performance?

What he said to me was this: You can't have an impact without a collision. And we are intentionally colliding with a lot of the nonsense that young people are fed...⁴⁶

Tracing a line forward from the electrifying performativity of tent revivals to the days of the major televangelists it becomes clear that while a well orchestrated and rousing delivery is central to engagement in the message of the Church, the media saturation of the contemporary world now lends powerful significance to the live nature of the performance exchange. A human form holds power if only because personal exchange is rare. The local nature of performance events such as Judgement Houses, Hell House Outreaches, *Nightmare*, *Tribulation Trail*, and *Revelation Walk* strengthen the connection between lived day-to-day experience and the spiritual decisions one makes.

⁴⁶ Keenan Roberts as quoted in Mike Carney, "Have You Heard About 'Hell Houses'?" On Deadline Segment, *USA Today*, Posted on October 10, 2006, http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/2006/10/have_you_heard_.html (accessed on November 18, 2007).

In discussing the place of Christianity in the twenty-first century Wuthnow asserts that local identity, physical proximity to a church, comfort with the members of the congregation and clergy at the church, and the variety of church programming will become the deciding factors for Christians seeking the specialized and the personal in their faith choices. In a world in which people are increasingly transitory and generational geographies are less commonplace individuals look more and more to church families that can offer the connections that are most fitted to their needs: a single's group, an active youth ministry, daycare, a compelling Pastor. In short, it's a buyer's market. As faith becomes less and less a matter of lineage locality, Wuthnow argues begins to trump – for the laity – denominational concerns. “Christians realize their fellow kinship with Christians around the world. This global identity will be significantly enriched and strengthened, though, if it is accompanied by a local identity.”⁴⁷

In a global world one scrutinizes disaster in pixilated form; when in a position of everyday isolation, physical communion with the Church's message can be a powerful device. In evangelical worship physical experience is often paramount. Performance, as a physical medium, fills several needs of church and community: the desire for God and Christian to be present in the event, a live proof or testimony of God's work, a recognition of the community's pro-activity in transforming the world through simultaneous engagement in the social and the spiritual, and for some a sensation of escape from restrictive social roles. “The Devils never want to change;

⁴⁷ Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century*, 50.

Hell is the most fun room.”⁴⁸ Echoing Wuthnow’s sentiments about global and local Christianity, in discussing community-based art, Cocke states that,

The audience is not consumer of, but participant in the performance...theater grows out of a commitment to place. It is grounded in the local and specific, which, when rendered faithfully and creatively, can affect people anywhere.⁴⁹

The performances discussed in the following pages entail complex negotiations of identity, both communal and individual. And they do this by attempting to reach an audience through performances aimed at all the senses, “...about the only thing we don’t go for is taste, it actually snows in there, in the car accident scene, you’re outside...”⁵⁰ The following performance studies display the techniques through which these performances successfully indoctrinate new members, as well as how the ways in which they strengthen the resolve of those already committed. To better understand these methods one must look at the types of community formed by these performances, the relationship between community and identity, as well as how those terms are used in this study.

1.6 Community

Judgement House not only effects [sic] our community but also surrounding counties. It’s an amazing experience that once you have been thru can’t help but make your walk with Christ a closer walk, as for our church, you can’t believe how it brings your church together feeling like a family. It also includes people that don’t normally get involved in church activities. A sense of accomplishment as you complete the months of preparation.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Medrith Woody, interview by author, North Roanoke, Virginia, April 22, 2006, Tape Recording.

⁴⁹ Dudley Cocke, “A Matrix Articulating the Principles of Grassroots Theater,” CAN website http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2000/02/a_question_of_v.php (Accessed on January 7, 2008).

⁵⁰ Remus, interview.

⁵¹ Heidi Cade, “Judgement House Questionnaire” designed by author. A questionnaire is attached as Appendix B.

Community, as understood in this study, draws from three intersecting notions: the local – territory or geography, interest – belief or club-oriented communities, and communities of social communion. Community is a complex,

... *polymorphic* concept precisely because it is the product of ever changing social alliances, community based theater itself is an agent of social change capable of strengthening alliances and forging new ones...consequently it must consider all types of alliances—and so should not hold out false hopes for a singular fixed concept of community.⁵²

In this dissertation I employ the notion of *polymorphic* community while distinguishing categories of “social alliances” that that can be formed through geography, spirituality, beliefs, and habits. Each performance work discussed engages geography, belief and “communion” with distinctive variations. Each chapter takes into account the ways in which participants recognize, delineate, and describe their concepts of community. Treatment of community as a *polymorphic* concept stems from the myriad of ways that participants articulate their views of what community means and the relationships they have with the communities they are a part of.

In *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century* Wuthnow sets apart the importance of community; it is, in fact, through community “that the Church gets things done.”⁵³ He observes that a church community works through its cultural circumstances, memories, stories, locale – all of which are manifested through, “these meanings of community—support, residence, service.”⁵⁴ The concepts of community, as articulated in Wuthnow, Haedicke and Nellhaus, and by the participants

⁵² Haedicke and Nellhaus, eds., 12.

⁵³ Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century*, 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

themselves will remain the basic foundation for the discussion of community in this work.

Fundamentally, I employ “a practical definition of community”⁵⁵ structuring this definition on the understanding of participants, while maintaining the framing tools of geography, belief, and communion. In this study community is understood in its most distilled articulation as, “a group of people who recognize that they are attending to their ongoing social arrangements,” and that can “accommodate wide divergence (or even social antagonisms)...”⁵⁶ allowing for a fuller spectrum of interaction between geography, spirituality, and event.

1.7 Fear and Violence

Critics of dramas such as these accuse churches of trying to “scare the hell out of people.” Those who have seen the results differ with that assessment. “We’re a new church and this has been great for us,” says Holbrooke. “In the three years we’ve had *Heaven’s Gates Hell’s Flames* there have been about 1,000 decisions made. I’ve heard the criticism that it is a scare tactic. I remind them that Scripture has addressed [the reality of Heaven and Hell]. All we’re doing is bringing it to life. People don’t realize that they aren’t questioning the drama, they’re questioning the Scripture.”⁵⁷

At times engaging performances that represent the “reality”⁵⁸ of death and images of damnation leads to disquieting reflections on violent, repressive, dangerous, and aggressive expressions of identity. This is of interest because the

⁵⁵ Reinelt, 288.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁵⁷ Scott Barkeley, “Dramas bring churches together for autumn evangelism,” Posted on October 13, 2005, *The Christian Index*, <http://www.christianindex.org/1643.article>, (accessed on November 14, 2007).

⁵⁸ I realize that this is a problematic term. However, I cannot ignore that every performance I discuss purports to display “reality” either the reality of Hell, the reality of daily life (car accidents, etc.) or some confluence of both.

performances discussed in the following chapters assert models of identity that aim to, “provide role models, and turn these role models into the characters in the stories we all tell ourselves;”⁵⁹ however, these works cannot separate the role models they create from the violence they enact or are victim to. This connection to characters (or role models) is enacted through a dramaturgy of the ideologically tangible in which, “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”⁶⁰ These connections are also made physically through the sites of these performances, which continually reference the relationship (communal, spatial, and social) between the audience and the performance site.

Connectivity as a tool ratchets up the volume of empathy and identification and plays into the discussion of one of the crucial elements in the debate around performances such as *Scaremare*, *Hell House*, *Nightmare*, *Judgement House*, *Revelation Walk*, and *Tribulation Trail*. This crucial and ever present tactic is FEAR.

“CHRISTIANITY CAN BE MORE EFFECTIV WITH LOVE, NOT BY SCARING. L E S S R E L I G I O N - M O R E L O V E !!!!!”⁶¹

Fear – and the debate around the legitimacy of promoting, through performance, the fear of a literal Hell – as a tactic in winning souls is central to the discussion of any of the performances examined in the following chapters, as well as to most contemporary American lives. This debate is prevalent throughout the

⁵⁹ Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century*, 54.

⁶⁰ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 109.

⁶¹ User Stsv99 [pseud.], “God Tube Comments Section on *The Letter From Hell*,” http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=1b5bd6e3e034d00b4f73&allcomments=yes#comments (accessed on January 20, 2008).

Christian community; while many commentators, non-Christians, Christians, and church-goers see bullying and an attempt to work on the delicate sensibilities of the young in these tactics – scaring young people straight toward Christ – others see these performances as part of their responsibility to their social world. Participants, as we will see in the coming pages, argue that they are not presenting a set of circumstances meant to engender fear with no rhyme or reason, but that they are presenting events that *do* happen in the contemporary world; and it is simply a scary world.

For example, *Nightmare* in Marshfield, Wisconsin and in Tulsa, Oklahoma both present scenes that deal with the top killers of teens in the United States. While some might view the display as “frightening,” the performance – though stylized – represents *tangible* possibilities, with clear local referents in car crashes, drunk driving, violence and drug use. This connection of spectacle to teen “reality” is also supported in the Marshfield community in secular arenas through mock car crashes used in public schools to prevent drunken driving and in Tulsa in the YMCA’s portrayal of a Haunted Crack House, both of which are secular corollaries to these religious performance phenomena.

“Education doesn’t take its best root through fear and intimidation,” the Rev. Eileen Lindner, deputy general secretary of the National Council of Churches USA, told *The Washington Post* for a story Saturday. “That’s not only not the best way to teach the Gospel’s lesson of love; it’s incompatible with the Gospel’s lesson of love.”⁶²

While fear may be incompatible with some individual’s views on how to spread the gospel, an important point to note about fear within the works discussed is that while it operates as a medium for conversion (cheap or not), it is also a link to the

⁶² The Associated Press, State and Local Wire, “Falwell’s University Uses Houses of Horrors to Lead People to God,” Lynchburg, Virginia, October 30, 2004.

performances' participation in the Halloween season and the Christian communities performing these works' connections to the broader culture, and as such it is great fun for audience and performers alike. In this context, people like to scare others and they enjoy being scared.

The debate around fear as a tool for evangelism is played out on the internet with the advent of GodTube,⁶³ Christian blogs, and chat rooms. In *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want*, Smith surveys “ordinary” evangelicals about their belief systems and their often contradictory beliefs about the policies that many non-evangelical Americans equate with evangelical Christian identity. In his interviews he found an “almost unanimous” set of eight beliefs articulating how evangelicals believe they should treat the beliefs of non-evangelicals that challenge their worldview:

1. Focus first on being faithful in their own lives,
2. Always be loving and confident, not defensive or angry,
3. Show tolerance and respect,
4. Allow adversaries and antagonists to have their own opinion,
5. Never force Christian beliefs on others,
6. Avoid disruptive protests and hostile confrontations,
7. Rely on the power of individual good examples and shared faith through personal relationships,
8. To influence others rely on voluntary persuasion through positive dialogue and communication.⁶⁴

Employing tactics labeled as “scare tactics” many Christians (and non-Christians) believe serves to further a pop-culture notion of conservative Christians as reticent to change, aggressive about their beliefs, and willing to frighten and strong arm converts

⁶³ GodTube was re-named Tangle and has expanded its social networking services as of March 2009. I continue to refer to it as GodTube throughout this dissertation, as this was how it is referred to in the posts utilized here and how it was known at the time this research was conducted.

⁶⁴ Smith, *Christian America?*, 37.

into their churches. This fear strategy, they would argue, is against each of the eight “almost unanimous” descriptors identified by Smith. It too often creates weak converts with little grounding in the Christian faith. These individuals who were originally influenced by the tactics of fear, once removed from the environment of fear are not given the support to or do not have the inclination to continue with a commitment to the Christian faith.

The issue of deploying fear is not only seen in relation to the performance events here, or reactions to them online or in press coverage, which the reader will find discussed more fully in the chapters ahead, but throughout the Christian and national media as well. The range and scope of this debate is quite aptly represented in discussions over *The Letter from Hell* one of the most viewed and most discussed videos in the Drama section of GodTube and the fifth most viewed video on GodTube as a whole (as of May 2008). *The Letter from Hell* shares a story common to and engaging with many of the issues brought up in the performances discussed in this dissertation: fear of Hell, literal descriptions of Hell, and Christian responsibility for the salvation of others. “...this is an amazing video and if that don’t scare you i [sic] don’t know what will.”⁶⁵

In *The Letter from Hell* a young man, Josh, who has consumed “a few too many beers,” and fallen to victim to, “a tragic drive home, a crash, a death, a funeral” has the opportunity to write, “a letter...a letter from Hell,”⁶⁶ to a Christian friend

⁶⁵ User Sweet 14 [pseud.], “GodTube Comments Section on *The Letter From Hell*,” http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=1b5bd6e3e034d00b4f73&allcomments=yes#comments (accessed on January 20, 2008).

⁶⁶ Tbfyouth [pseud.], *The Letter From Hell*, GodTube, http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=1b5bd6e3e034d00b4f73&allcomments=yes#comments (accessed on January 20, 2008).

admonishing the friend for not sharing his faith; because of his friend Zach's lack of commitment to evangelizing Josh is going to Hell. As the damned Josh reads, words flash up on the screen in red font. In the background we hear demons, torture, and creepy instrumentals, as the doomed boy's voice cracks, swells and screams in agony as he is taken into the bowels of Hell.

The rampant postings on GodTube, it is the second most discussed video on the entire GodTube site, regarding *The Letter from Hell* showcase the active desire for discussion about, as well as the wide range of attitudes towards the video's tactics. Some deplore the message of the video because is not biblically accurate; however they would accept the tactics themselves if they felt they were carried out correctly. Others are conflicted about the video's means while supportive of its ends,

You know, i [sic] have alot [sic] of mixed emotions about this tape. On the positive side, eternal torment in Hell is beyond all comprehension. This video gets it instilled in you just how important it is to save souls. On the negative, it seems to go about it the wrong way. Even though the "disclaimer" says that isn't scare tactics, it really seems like it is. We already have seen the atheists reactions here....this video does no good to them. As Christians, we should already know The Great Calling, and shouldn't have to have these kinds of videos out as reminders. And that p.s.? Jeez. It basically says, "thanks for not telling me about Jesus, go to Hell." Intent was good, delivery a bit shaky.⁶⁷

Some support the message of the video and have repeatedly used it in youth groups. Still others elide the video itself with incidents that are outside the scope of its message, or intent responding with language that would earn any conservative Christian some unsavory labels,

Which parts of the bible are we supposed to take literally again?
<http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/01/09/hand.cut.off.ap/index.html> Don't you

⁶⁷ User CheeriosRule [pseud.], "GodTube Comments Section on *The Letter From Hell*," http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=1b5bd6e3e034d00b4f73&allcomments=yes#comments (accessed on January 20, 2008).

jesus [sic] freaks feel any responsibility for this whatsoever? And if so, why not pray really hard for him to grow back his hand (of course, we know this won't happen), but maybe it will if you really, really pray, really hard?⁶⁸

While still others support the video and connect its message to a desire to perform a witness for Christ that is public, a witness that seeks to create “an oppositional popular culture,”⁶⁹

I EVEN WENT SO FAR AS TO EMBED IT ON MY MYSPACE PAGE. MY BEST FRIEND SHOWED IT TO ME AT SCHOOL AND I FELT LIKE STANDING UP AND WITNESSING TO PEOPLE. UNFORTUNATLEY [sic] I ATTEND A PUBLIC SCHOOL AND AM NOT ALLOWED TO PREACH TO PEOPLE. OTHERWISE I WOULD BE PUNISHED SEVERELY.⁷⁰

These attitudes in reaction to *The Letter from Hell* are representative of the many positions that influence church and community anxieties about the performances discussed in this work, and serve as markers for the range of responses to the methods these performances utilize. Reactions range from support to outright rage:

It's despicable...The very people who most firmly believe in this contemptible twaddle are the very ones who are most likely to turn round and claim that evolution can be dismissed because it is “just a theory.” The day you have even a thousandth of the evidence for the existence of hell that science has for the reality of evolution, is the day you may consider yourselves justified...(but I mean EVIDENCE, not Iron Age horror stories). Until then, how DARE you do it? Aren't you thoroughly ashamed of yourselves for inflicting this evil madness on your CHILDREN? You certainly should be. No doubt you claim to love God with all your hearts, souls and mind...Respectfully, your sense of morality has been deranged by your faith.⁷¹

⁶⁸ User PersonMan [pseud.], “GodTube Comments Section on *The Letter From Hell*,” http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=1b5bd6e3e034d00b4f73&allcomments=yes#comments (accessed on January 20, 2008).

⁶⁹ Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, 18.

⁷⁰ User BORNTOLIVE [pseud.], “GodTube Comments Section on *The Letter From Hell*,” http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=1b5bd6e3e034d00b4f73&allcomments=yes#comments (accessed on January 20, 2008.)

⁷¹ User Celestialteapot [pseud.], “GodTube Comments Section on *The Letter From Hell*,” http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=1b5bd6e3e034d00b4f73&allcomments=yes#comments (accessed on January 20, 2008.)

While certainly there are conservative Christians with might, power, and influence in the American political landscape eliding all Christian expression with what is perceived as the party-line message obscures the larger cultural forces that make wide-spread fear, violence, and intolerance important topics for discussion.

A community-based performance that places its worst fears on the bodies of its performers offers multiple avenues for understanding a particular community's values as they relate to the characters and events within the performance.⁷² School shooting scenes, rape scenes, murder scenes, car accidents, domestic violence, and scenes of terrorist attack raise grave concerns about attitudes towards violence in the contemporary world. Disquieting questions emerge: Why is this violence done and to whom is it done? Why is it “dangerous” for young people to enact a gay marriage scene⁷³ when it is not “dangerous” for them to perform the murder of a young woman – point blank; for a young man to drug and rape a young woman on stage, to show horrific scenes of domestic violence, car-crashes and school shooting, identifying them as “reality”? What is the relationship between fantasy and possibility, utopia and dystopia? How does the conflation of the spiritual and the social in a “real” space

⁷² Characters in these performances run the gamut and by performing “whores,” homosexuals, terrorists, rape victims, domestic aggressors, rapists, virgins, martyrs, soldiers, Christians, and murderers. The performers must negotiate their identities in relation to their character, literally putting on sin. Many Hell and Judgement Houses require those who play demons and sinners to pray before they leave rehearsals and performances to exorcise the demons they have performed.

⁷³ For discussion on this issue see Ratliff's documentary *Hell House* in scenes that deals with topics to be addressed in Trinity Church's Hell House event. One can also look to Stacey Capps' account of a gay marriage scene as enacted at the Abundant Life Hell House in 1999, “He urges them to ‘kiss the groom.’ And when they do, he further urges them to try it with ‘a little more tongue.’ The two really go at it, sticking out their tongues and licking each other's faces in a nasty parody of a kiss. It is at this point that I notice that one of the ‘men’ is actually played by a woman with a fake beard applied to make her look male. The scene lingers over the kiss, and the demon praises its disgusting nature as the evil music surges. The crowd experiences titillation at this point, giggling and going ewww!” <http://www.du.edu/~scapps/documentary/main.htm> (accessed on March 8, 2006).

of worship, community life, and performance raise the stakes of the performance? What does this type of performance say about who the performer (and audience member) should strive to be (or strive to be different from)? Concerns around these questions inextricably intertwine with the admittedly loaded concept of “reality.”

1.8 “Reality” or “hyper” “reality”

Others say they are only showing reality, which can be scary.⁷⁴

Be careful not to confuse reality with FEAR. This video was not created or broadcasted with the sole purpose to control anyone by fear, but to make a point to the believers. That it is our responsibility to share the love of Jesus. Pure and simple. By the way, I love to see all the self proclaimed atheists on GODTUBE! Keep searching guys the truth is within.⁷⁵

According to Baudrillard we live in a world that is either partially or entirely simulated. This “hyperreality” is brought about by explosions of technology and information and the unbridled consumption of that information. The “hyperreal” claims that the performance of social relations is an instantaneously reproducing copy; a virus, a plague that once viewed spawns and is thus performed and reproduced by all it comes into contact with. Agency, in this equation, relies on the ability of those performing and re-creating the action to re-inscribe it with distinction. This re-inscribed imaginary is what lends force to the creation of reality. Several of the performances discussed in these pages engage in representing what participants would term the “real.” Not agreeing with Baudrillard’s contention that there is an

⁷⁴ The Associated Press, State & Local Wire, “Falwell’s University Uses House of Horrors to Lead People to God,” Lynchburg, Virginia, October 30, 2004.

⁷⁵ User plan 9 outerspace [pseud.], “GodTube Comments Section on *The Letter From Hell*,” http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=1b5bd6e3e034d00b4f73&allcomments=yes#comments (accessed on January 20, 2008).

inability to reference a “real” because there is no “real,” they would argue that the inability to recognize what is “real” is a symptom of many of the concerns that prove that our culture is in need of some serious saving. What most people in these communities perceive as “reality” is not in question; it is true; “reality” is tied notions of truth making. And furthermore,

Truth = Truth Right = Right Wrong = Wrong There is no what you feel is Truth and what I feel is Truth there is only Truth. There is no what you feel is Right and what I feel is Right there is only Right. There is no what you feel is Wrong and what I feel is Wrong there is only Wrong. No opinion involved. No grey areas.⁷⁶

While individual notions of what is invested in “reality” may be divergent what the groups discussed hope to present, by and large, is a spectacle representative of possible – and even probable – circumstances. They do this in a fashion that, for the most part, is not abstract though it can be symbolic. Hell is hot, it snows “outside” (while inside), car accidents use actual cars on actual streets, blood is graphic, drinking scenes smell like beer. And “despite the different ‘cultural’ meanings attached to them, such symbols still promote ‘social’ solidarity.”⁷⁷ This type of aesthetic display is resultant from the ethos of, “Real People. Real Choices. Real Consequences.”⁷⁸ As Stacy Remus, a team captain for *Nightmare* in Marshfield,

⁷⁶ Hayden, Blogspot, “Truth Is Not Relative,” <http://www.notrelative.blogspot.com/> (accessed on January 23, 2008).

⁷⁷ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory/Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 183.

⁷⁸ This is the Judgement House slogan. It can be found on their website and all their promotional material.

Wisconsin asserts in discussing why their church chose to pursue a dramatic outreach like *Nightmare*, it is, “like *Survivor*, you know how, I mean reality, come on reality TV, that’s it, what we have to be about...that’s what there is, what we all watch...”⁷⁹

Engaging the notion of the “real” and the force it bears on representation is essential because, the performances (process, text, and representation) become, “...an essential modification, almost a reversal of the ontological relationship of original and copy...an element of ‘representation’ and thus has its own ontological status. The picture then has an independence that also affects the original...”⁸⁰ Baudrillard’s point rests on the inability to distinguish between the artificial and the natural, the simulacra and the simulation, the real and the imaginary. This ambiguity lends force to experiences, such as the performances discussed here, which blend notions of the “real” with notions of the spiritual through the employment of multiple physical and dramaturgical tools.

Concepts of “reality” cut to the core of many of the issues people have with these performances, as well as the issues that many of the performance groups have with their critics. What is tangible, what is “real,” how is a “real” spectacle crafted? Whose “reality” is it? What a group chooses to represent as “real” also speaks to the

⁷⁹ Remus, interview.

⁸⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 125.

belief, identity, and community of the group, whether or not one views the representative choices as “real” they represent, and thus purvey, the dystopian and utopian notions of a large sector of American society. In these performances one clearly sees an, “...escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative...”⁸¹

1.9 Community-based Performance

In using Community-based art as a platform for grappling with and gaining a better understanding of the performances and communities surveyed in this work I have largely tried to answer, to the best of my ability, the following questions articulated in the “Introduction” to the Community Arts Networks (CAN) *Performing Democracy* study:

- What does theater rooted in community (or grassroots theater) mean to the participants? [The term “participants” includes everyone involved in the theater experience from conception through performance and subsequent community events.]
- What tangible and intangible results happen in the community as a result of the group’s work?
- What do the participants describe as successful practices?⁸²

The questions posed above by the CAN study and their answers, examined in light of these performances, are not simply relevant to Christian community-based

⁸¹ Ibid., 12-13.

⁸² CAN, “Introduction to ‘Performing Communities: An inquiry into ensemble theater deeply rooted in eight U.S. communities.’ Community Arts Network website, CAN Original CAN/API publication: November 2002
http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/11/performing_comm_1.php (accessed on July 19, 2008).

performance but to performances of locality and community, no matter what their convictions. Performances,

...transform...spaces into the site of public debate through the controversies they provoke, questions of (in)access, (lack of) privilege, and social memory becomes visible...an attempt to ground (but not simplify) human experiences...⁸³

In Haedicke and Nellhaus' *Performing Democracy* the editors aver that tactics that change the audience/performer relationship and shake up audience passivity to push the participants off balance are central to community-based performance as a medium. These are often the very tactics criticized in the emergent genre of American conservative Christian performance; and while they do bring up debate when utilized in the secular realm, by and large, the outcome they provoke in audience members makes them accepted and celebrated. Why are these practices ethical when they deal the environment or poverty but not when they deal with religion?

Community-based performance, Haedicke and Nellhaus observe, is reasonably "new" as a field of study and thus resists codification as of yet; however, any study of it must take into account the complex and local meanings of community as displayed in the art that a community *chooses* to create. Despite the recent emergence of the field as worthy of serious study the editors of *Performing Democracy* do point out certain key attributes that are found in most community-based work,

Community-based performance seems to us best understood as a range of activities bearing certain family resemblances. Among the most common traits, community-based performance often redefines text, initiates unique script development strategies that challenge time tested techniques for

⁸³ María Teresa Marrero, "Public Art, Performance Art, and the Politics of Site" in Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas Morales, *Negotiating Performance : Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/O America* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995), 103.

playwriting, and introduces participatory performance techniques that blur the boundaries between actor and spectator in order to maximize the participant's agency. The last is probably the most striking strategy of community-based performance—perhaps the feature distinguishing it most frequently...⁸⁴

These are some of the features that I look to in categorizing these works and I will return to them in later chapters.

However, at this stage in the discussion of community-based performance I would like to note another attribute that remains implicit in the above description: the notion of process over product. Certainly, in events geared at affecting social change in a community – “saving” fellow citizens let us say – the product is important; however, it is often the process of coming together as a unit in the act of creation and all of the negotiation which that entails that participants cite over and over again as the catalytic moment of transformation. How does this catalytic moment come about and through what performance and community building strategies is a balance struck between process and product?

In the Introduction to their volume Haedicke and Nellhaus discuss the major issues that community-based performances grapple with as: Defining Community, Authoring, and Audience Empowerment. The mission of “liberation” discussed earlier is defined as the desire to “to promote social change at more and more levels. That desire for social transformation is what keeps community-based performance alive...”⁸⁵ Some of the questions woven through the following pages address both the empowerment of the audience and performers in this catalytic moment which wed process and product, as well as notions of how one reads and understands “social

⁸⁴ Haedicke and Nellhaus, eds., 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 8.

transformation.” These questions can be articulated as follows: How does one apply the above stated ideas to groups, such as those studied here, whose claims for “social transformation” run in divergent directions than those more commonly associated with community-based work? What is the relationship between civically and politically engaged faith and the efficacy of visceral performance strategies?

In examining the connections between conservative Christianity, performance practice, community identity, and articulations of violence this study questions why and how practices that encourage both violence and the fracturing of community, while simultaneously encouraging adhesion around monolithic values thrive? What are the specific techniques of the performances discussed in this study that enables them to be abundantly successful at shaping community values and recruiting new members into a community of values? How does fear of sin, of violence, of Revelation and Tribulation, and of Hell shape these performance events? How does the display of death, “sin,” and violence – meant to engender fear and uncertainty about salvation – intersect with the recruitment of new members, create re-invigorated support for church and community concerns, and help practitioners organize toward further social, spiritual, and political action?

Through asking questions about specific performances this study provides more nuanced understandings of the political, economic and moral concerns that give rise to these practices. In the following pages I explore why and how – when community-based and identity performance is often associated with the left and liberal concerns it is thriving in communities that could – arguably, be understood as right and/or conservative. This study investigates how the elision of social and

spiritual identity within the space of performance speaks to complex interactions between “American” identity and “American” spirituality.

This work also enhances our understanding of the dynamics of community-based performance, as it functions in both conservative and liberal communities. As articulated earlier, often community-based performance is understood as a liberal form, this study examines phenomena that are wide-reaching and successful, though oft overlooked, in the hopes of discerning particular strategies that make conservative community-based performances efficacious in enacting the “social change” that Haedicke and Nellhaus articulate as central to community-based theatre.

The following points are the central measures of efficacy as discussed in this project:

- 1) Shared Purpose, this purpose may be multi-layered, and community members may articulate it in different language;
- 2) Communal labor deployed in the interest of community above individual concerns, i.e., arranging vacation time from work during the Judgement House run;
- 3) A network of understanding: norms, habits, practices;
- 4) An alteration during the process, which can include strengthening, of communal and/or personal identity systems.

The manner in which each group enacts these four categories is divergent and the overlaps and divergences between them will be discussed on in later Chapters.

... the link between politics and art also led anthropologist Victor Turner to his conviction that theater is the site where the relationship [between politics and art] becomes especially relevant...art exposes both the overt mechanisms at work in a society and the unconscious and culturally-produced ideologies at work in its psyche...⁸⁶

It is not solely their value as community-based performance that makes these works rich objects of study. No performance happens in a vacuum and these

⁸⁶ Myriam Yvonne Jehenson, “Staging Cultural Violence: Griselda Gambaro and Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’,” *Mosaic* (1999): 85-86.

contemporary religious performances are worthy of study in part because of their lineage and their deployment of techniques traceable to Passion, Pageant, Mystery and Morality plays, as well as to temperance drama, Chick Tracts, and educational scare films.

1.10 Chapter Structure

If one accepts the proposition that the meanings of utterances, actions and events are affected by their ‘local position,’ by the situation of which they are a part, and then a work of art too will be defined in relation to its place and position.⁸⁷

It is to this relationship between “local position” and community identity that we turn our attention in the following pages. The performances included in this study have been selected for several reasons: the range of issues they treat, the methods by which they hope to convey their message, the performative strategies they use, their geographic locations, and their views of audience conversion and performer experience.

In the following pages I will briefly lay out the chapter structure of the work and preview the key concepts I plan to engage in my discussion of each of these performances. These events were selected from a range of events that could be labeled Christian, conservative and “performative” because they all are inherently theatrical, the primary responsibility for their creation lies within a specific community, they all take place during the Halloween season,⁸⁸ they represent a broad

⁸⁷ Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000), 20.

⁸⁸ Some, like *Scaremare* capitalize on this connection more explicitly by taking the form of “haunted” houses.

range of organizational structures, they all have similar faith practices, and they use a range of performative spaces ranging from an abandoned high school to a mountainside.

1.10.1 Scaremare, Hell House, and Nightmare

Scaremare is discussed largely in relation to the teen audience it attempts to reach and the means by which it tries to reach them. *Scaremare* – the first Christian “haunted” house started at Liberty University in 1972 – is brutal, bloody and actively works to bewilder, terrify, and frighten its audiences by whipping them into a frenzy over a multi-hour wait and then sending them off in small packs through the cold, dark woods. More so than any of the other events discussed *Scaremare* uses aggressive pop-culture oriented fear tactics. Unlike any of the other events discussed, *Scaremare* presents no causal narrative⁸⁹ but is a frenetic and disorienting, high-budget extravaganza of gore. Targeted at a college age, high school, and even middle school audiences, *Scaremare* combines the thrills of a traditional haunted house with a plea for audience conversion. Ironically, precisely because of its ties to Jerry Falwell and Liberty University, *Scaremare* does not engage directly in representations of politically and socially significant issues; abstract and highly symbolic representations of death and the fruits of sin make *Scaremare* ideal for

⁸⁹ *Scaremare* does present a thematic or symbolic narrative as the end tableaux of Jesus on the cross only serves sense and purpose when one reflects back on the events leading up to that point. During the experience the structure is not clear, but as one emerges from the brutal imagery of the maze to the calm and sparsely staged symbolism of the final room the pieces fall into place. This final scene could not occur in any other place but the end without prompting a completely different reading of the scenes that come before.

comparison with some of the other works that it has inspired over the last thirty-six years.

I address the ways in which *Scaremare* reaches its target audience by joining images of pop-culture horror and religious iconography. This Chapter also deals with notions of “fear” and “reality.” For the most part, *Scaremare* takes an approach somewhat devoid (until the end) of the obvious and overt morally charged message of many of the other performances in this vein. As a mission, *Scaremare* seeks its lost sheep far and wide, rather than solely within their local community. They encourage people to come for thrills and hope that some of those who do will leave saved.

In this Chapter I also discuss Hell House and the Hell House Outreach Kit, its origins and its recourse to the symbolism of Halloween, wedded with the display of extremely controversial social issues such as: abortion, gay marriage, school shootings, and terrorism. While *Scaremare* uses fright, the Hell House Outreach utilizes representations of what is perceived by its creators as the degenerate nature of the social world to drive home the twin points of damnation and salvation. I discuss Hell Houses in this Chapter as they are the lens through which most individuals experience the broader range of dramas discussed in this work as a whole. Hell Houses are by far the most socially controversial of all these performances and thus have gained the most exposure and media coverage.

Finally, in this Chapter I discuss *Nightmare* and GUTS, the church it originated from, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. *Nightmare* is a fascinating mixture of the approaches of *Scaremare* (fear, fright, horror, gore) and Hell House (controversial social issues). It is also a high-budget and well attended production. The discussion

of *Nightmare* in Tulsa leads into Chapter Three where I discuss a production of *Nightmare* in Marshfield, Wisconsin; the Marshfield production was originally inspired by the production in Tulsa, but has shifted over the last ten years into an event better suited to the Believer's Church of Marshfield message and their desire to build bridges between the secular and religious community in the geographical area of Marshfield.

1.10.2 Nightmare: Your Own Personal Jesus

Nightmare engages in a similarly gore-oriented project as that of *Scaremare*, but with the intent of showcasing the leading killers of teens in the United States: drunken driving, gang violence, suicide, and drug use. Housed in a warehouse space built by the Believer's Church in Marshfield Wisconsin, *Nightmare* uses a rotating cast of volunteers from several local churches, a voice-over soundtrack (instead of dialogue) that allows performers a highly movement oriented performance style, and a stunning array of special effects including lifts, smoke, snow, rats, and prosthetics for demon characters.

Nightmare and *Scaremare* share tactics but have a different organizing structure and slightly divergent audience base and thus the discussion of them is separated here. This Chapter also discusses most fully the relationships between performances and geographic communities. Through tracing community debates about the display of a statue of Jesus on public land and advertising for religious events in public spaces the relationship between *Nightmare* and its geographical community is illuminated.

This Chapter also examines how bodies relate to spiritual referents looking at how spiritual meaning and physical trauma can come together in the event to shape performer and audience experience. I also examine the questions: Do these performances help us better understand the relationship between church communities and geographical communities? How do their aesthetics express the intertwining of Christian belief and commercial culture?

1.10.3 Judgement House: 'They ought learn how to spell,' or, Inside and Out

Discussed as an organization in this Chapter, Judgement House is the most highly organized, widely distributed, and externally controlled of these types of performances. Judgement House is one of the most wide-spread and influential forms in this genre of performance. Franchises are furnished with selections of scenes and stories that allow congregations to tailor the scenarios to the needs of their church community. As a franchise organization, New Creation Evangelism, Inc. offers insights into the commercialized structure of conservative Christian organizations.⁹⁰ In Chapter Four, I provide a basic overview of the history and community building strategies used by Judgement House. I also examine the nature of the franchise, tying it to practices of community-based performance. The examination of the larger franchise operation of Judgement House is countered in the latter half of the chapter where I discuss specific Judgement House performances

This Chapter provides analyses of performance processes and practices including: content selection, style, quality, pitch, visual symbolism, verbal style, performance space, audience experience, etc. Drawing upon interviews with participants, and my

attendance at performances and rehearsals, it offers a discussion of the events' creations and addresses ways in which these events intersect with national and local issues. Additionally, it examines how community members articulate their mission in performing these dramas and what they perceive to be the effect of the events on their community, on their lives, and on the larger world.

*1.10.4 Tribulation Trail and Revelation Walk: "It's the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine)"*⁹¹

Tribulation Trail and *Revelation Walk* are both outdoor performances in which the audience proceeds through a performance environment. They both overtly engage with contemporary international politics and pop-culture through their use of images crystallized for mainstream consumption in Tim LaHaye's series of *Left Behind* novels, movies, and video games. The performances both detail the alleged events of the end of times and serve as an intricate representation of the performing communities' fears about the One World Government, the consolidation of currency, the loss of traditional values, terrorism, war, and the events that they believe will occur during and after Christ Raptures the faithful. They are both large events that grow out of specific congregations and are not based on a franchise structure.

Tribulation Trail is produced by Mount Vernon Baptist Church (formerly Metro Heights Church) in Stockbridge, Georgia; performances began in the early 1990s and they garner about thirty thousand paid visitors per run. Scenes deal with events such as: The Rapture, The Tribulation, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (conquest,

⁹¹ R.E.M., *It's the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine)*.

war, famine and plague), and footage of the attack on the World Trade Center, war encampment scenes, and school shootings.

Revelation Walk takes place in Alabama and is put on by the Eden Westside Baptist Church. It consists of twelve to fifteen scenes that take place as audiences walk down a mountain in small groups. The performance centers around apocalyptic scenes drawn from *Left Behind* and the Book of Revelation, as well as on the decisions one might make in life in the days leading up to The Rapture, many of the scenes are set in day-to-day settings such as doctors' offices, living rooms, work sites, etc. (These every day locations are admittedly made strange, and gain a certain power, by their placement outdoors on a wooded mountainside).

In this Chapter I apply the work of Richard Schechner, dealing with the braided notions of entertainment and efficacy, examining how these tools can shed light on the means by which community-based works are created in conservative communities, and the ways in which these performances offer new ways of employing and understanding these techniques.

Both of these performances occur outdoors and the audience moves through wooded landscapes that are rife with gunfire and pyrotechnics. In this Chapter I also consider the effect of movement, disorientation, and the confluence of outdoor space with the dramatic representation of the end of times – the effect of half-buildings (sets constructed in the woods) strewn throughout a burning mountainside and field. Through these performances I investigate the link between violence and redemption, fear and aggression, utopias and dystopias.

1:10:5 Conclusion

The Conclusion to this study focuses on other avenues that remain open for exploration in the field of Christian community-based performance. The scope of events is broad, and, as I conclude, I provide ideas for future directions in the study conservative Christian performance most specifically in the United States.

It is also here, in the last pages, that I weave together ideas from each chapter, comparing the strategies of each group and identifying what common practices make these works successful and useful to the broader field of community-based performance.

2 *Scaremare, Hell House, and Tulsa's Nightmare*

I am not sure how I feel about the concept. On the one hand it does appear a bit heavy-handed. On the other hand some of the most effective sermons and messages in history were heavy-handed (i.e. *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*); and I am most willing to blame our distinctively modern aversion to critical or judgmental messages for the widespread negative reaction to this idea. Sometimes I think a little more heavy-handed intolerance among all American cultural sects (Preemptive disclaimer: not of the Jihadi variety, but of the traditional, Socratic, rhetorical variety—picture battles between Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryant [sic]) would be a good thing...⁹²

Popular discrimination is concerned with functionality rather than quality; for it is concerned with the potential uses of texts within everyday life...Popular culture is made at the interface between the cultural resources provided by capitalism and everyday life. This identifies relevance as a central criterion. If the cultural resource does not offer points of pertinence through which the experience of everyday life can be made to resonate...then it will not be popular. As everyday life is lived and experienced fluidly, through shifting social allegiances these points of pertinence must be...open to social rather than textual determinations.⁹³

2.1 Introductory Map of the Chapter

In this Chapter I will examine displays of horror meant to illicit fear in the face of death. I will also begin the discussion of bodily suffering, as linked to the portrayal of sin and social ills. These pages will examine Hell House, *Scaremare*, and *Nightmare* (in Tulsa, Oklahoma) and how these events reach their performance participants and their audiences. There are commonalities among these three performances that make them each significant contributors to field of conservative Christian community-based performance.

⁹² John, Comment on “The Hell House,” Creative Slips Blog by Rhesa posted on October 12, 2004, Comments by John, October 13, 2004, <http://www.creativeslips.net/archives/2004/10/12/348/> (accessed on December 12, 2007).

⁹³ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 122.

The Hell House Outreach has been examined the most extensively in popular culture, as well as in academic circles. It merits discussion here if only because it is the lens through which most people outside of performing church communities understand the whole range of performative events this dissertation covers. Conversely, those within church culture take great care to emphasize the differences between their events and the other kinds of performance events out there; they do this precisely for the reason that in media and scholarly coverage often Judgement Houses, *Scaremare*, *Nightmare*, *Tribulation Trail*, *Revelation Walk* and other performances are referred to simply as ‘Hell Houses.’ While they do all share some common characteristics – fear, violence, deployment of controversial social issues, a desire to represent “reality” as articulated by their belief structures, a complex relationship to mainstream popular culture and horror, a strong basis in local communities, a live relationship between faith and spectacle, etc. – they each use these tools in highly divergent ways. The three performances discussed here take conflicting approaches to many of the above concepts; however, they are also the most sensational, gory, violent, and socially controversial of all the performances I have studied, and thus, I have grouped them together here.

They also are linked in an evolutionary chain. *Scaremare* first kicked off in 1972 and influenced Hell House, and Hell House (though not Roberts’ House), was the pre-cursor to *Nightmare*.

Commonly understood as didactic drama stressing mercy and forgiveness of sins...Populated by personified abstractions who engage in ritualized battles of good against evil, moralities would seem unlikely dramas in which to find exuberantly unruly bodies... these plays are in fact full of flamboyantly bad behavior...Whether known as Mischief, Titivillus, Moenen, Sloth, Avarice, Riot, or World such tempters, tricksters, vices, and devils all represent

disorderly behavior grounded in the misuse of bodies...In these moralities the grotesque body is linked to the world of goods.⁹⁴

The later moralities transformed the demons of the cycle plays into rebellious clowns. Often the characters of the vices were far more attractive in performance than the virtues were. As a result, the audience or reader of the text sympathizes with the spirit of vice. As the example of the reception of and agency of the vices in medieval moralities demonstrates a large segment of medieval popular culture subverted official culture, most often during times of flux and fantasy such as carnivals and on holidays and feasts; this subversion of official culture is present within the Hell House, *Nightmare*, and *Scaremare* performances' take on the contemporary world; in a world of amoral action accepting Christ becomes the subversion of the amoral social system on display in the spectacle. In the moralities it was not uncommon that the vice characters escaped punishment, even when Church doctrine necessitated that very punishment. In these works, the Devil is never punished, the vices have taken over the world, and one must counter their influence through Christian action.

The performances discussed in this Chapter take recourse in linking sin to the what participants perceive dominant outside world order through utilizing the images of sin and the excesses of the dominant cultural landscape, as largely demonstrated in their reliance on the power, imagery, and fantasy of the Halloween season. They subvert sin by displaying it for the purpose of “good;” these performances operate in ways similar to the moralities, as their purpose is to push “heavy-handedly toward full

⁹⁴ Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 79-80.

expression of a moral message about human sin and divine salvation;”⁹⁵ however, this push is made through skewing the gaze of the moralities, instead of good and evil in battle, good is dominated by evil throughout the spectacle except in the body of Christ.

The ritualized, religious, and communal theatrics of the middle ages eventually became a channel for public mockery and criticism of the Catholic belief structure they had, had a large hand in helping to disseminate.⁹⁶ This shift, however, did not happen overnight; it was largely dependent on the influence of the very subversive bodies of Christ and the vices that Sponsler points out. This subversion allowed for a critique of the social realm embedded within the performance of the spiritual.

The intolerance of Catholic intermediarity, and the proud Americanism and Protestantism inherent in the representation of Christ’s love as personal is alive and well today in performances such as *Scaremare*, *Hell House* and *Nightmare*, and it is apparent in an online version of *Hell House* in which Catholic priests languish in Hell for sodomizing young boys, wildly proclaiming how much they enjoyed their sins; the priests are quite surprised, however, that they are not forgiven despite their use of the sacrament of confession. They missed the larger point that while Jesus did die for our sins, one’s relationship with Jesus is just that, a relationship – personal, intimate, often highly tactile, and not in need of intercession.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 79.

⁹⁶ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1978).

As these contemporary torch bearers in the long line of religious and didactic theatrical performances point out – while based largely in Protestant belief communities – the mysterious, ritualistic, symbolic, and off-putting intricacy of a Catholic worship structure present in medieval dramas still exists in the relationship between spirit and matter present in these works. In *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* McDannell observes that the connection between spirit and matter rests heavily on the contemporary consumer centered world's predilection for ornaments, doodads, baubles, and knickknacks all of which create a personal experience with spiritual power, utilizing a carnivalesque transubstantiation of matter and spirit that relies, much like performance, on materiality. Somehow God is present and working on you and others through personalized evangelical golf balls and Testamints candies.

Artifacts become particularly important in the lives of average Christians because objects can be exchanged, gifted, manipulated...People need objects to help establish and maintain relationships with supernatural characters... While some Christians accomplish the same things through the exchange of ideas, many prefer to interact with visual and sensual symbols...Religious meaning must be constructed and reconstructed over and over. Amid the external practice of religion—a practice that uses artifacts, arts, architecture and landscapes...The sensual elements of Christianity are not merely decorations that mask serious belief; it is through the visible world that the invisible world becomes known and felt.⁹⁷

This calling forth of the invisible side of belief through recourse to the tangible objects of the visible world (corrupt as they may be) is one of primary tactics of the performances discussed in this Chapter. Whether that invisible force is made clear as an aide in the continuous reconstruction of belief for those who are already committed or whether the experience is brought to the fore for those who are not yet

⁹⁷ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 272.

believers; it is this transubstantiation moment amongst social world, the performer's body, and the audience's relationship to the social world and the body in which these works find functional and efficacious power.

2.2 “Ought” + “Is” = Issues

For the religious, religious practice effects not only personal beliefs about the universe, it also affects the way one plugs into and interfaces with one's social and political worlds. As Geertz puts it:

Religion is never merely metaphysics. For all peoples the forms, vehicles and objects of worship are suffused with an aura of deep moral seriousness. The holy bears within it everywhere a sense of intrinsic obligation: it not only encourages devotion, it demands it; it not only induces intellectual assent, it enforces emotional commitment...The source of its moral vitality is conceived to lie in the fidelity with which it expresses the fundamental nature of reality. The powerfully coercive **“ought”** is thought to grow out of a comprehensive factual **“is,”** and in such a way religion grounds the most specific requirements of human action...(emphasis mine)⁹⁸

As articulated above, for Geertz, religion is not merely worldview but also the philosophy that scaffolds the vista; it impinges on belief and action. The main goal of the performances discussed in this dissertation is to link Geertz's “ought” – the powerful utopia of a religious imaginary – and the “is” – the presence of a socially degraded and sinful “real” world – and in this intertwining to create options for revised social and spiritual action for participants. Revised social action will help to bring the world that “is” closer to the world as it “ought” to be. This relationship between “ought” and “is,” though magnetic, is not simple – in calling forth the “is” of a particular social issue, such as school shootings or abortion, and putting that “is” into contact with a communal view on the “ought” several perspectives must be

⁹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 126.

negotiated. Some performances I will discuss do this negotiating with great sensitivity, like *Scaremare* and Judgement House; others like Hell House and *Nightmare*, often use issues to draw people in, through fear or anger. However, whatever else they do, they certainly open debate and get people talking.

Halloween festivities at the House of Prayer Ellettsville were both bold and shocking, not to mention at times offensive, exactly as Pastor Mitchell declared in his HELL HOUSE manifesto. “God does not send people to hell,” as stated in the manifesto. “People choose it by rejecting God’s gift of salvation through His [sic] beloved son, Jesus Christ.” The participants in group 16 did indeed choose to attend HELL HOUSE, but they did not choose to receive messages of guilt and fear. Because the primary audience demographic consisted of young people aged 10 to 18, the House of Prayer Ellettsville’s Halloween show seemed to terrify and frighten the participants more than educate them about modern politically polarized issues facing the nation in the 21st century... Might the House of Prayer Ellettsville construct a HEAVEN HOUSE next year to provide teenagers with a more positive spin on the difficult choices and issues they face each day living within contemporary American society?⁹⁹

2.3 School Days, School Days, Good Old Golden Rule Days

When the tragedy of Columbine High School took place four of the shooting victims were believed to have been evangelical Christians, including Cassie Bernall who was reported to have answered “Yes” when one of the killers asked her “Do you believe in God?” Many claim that Cassie’s Christianity was never a part of her death, such as the writers and correspondents of the site Positive Atheism quoted below:

Although his report didn’t mention which churches are doing this, he said that some are reenacting the supposed “martyrdom” of Columbine massacre victim Cassie Bernall. In one scene, two men in trench coats storm the school library, shout, “Any Jocks or Christians in here?” and start firing away. A gunman then grabs a young woman, points a gun to her face and says, “Do you believe in God?” The woman says, “Yes,” and the gunman then shoots her in the face. Even if the Bernall “martyrdom” had actually

⁹⁹ David A. Nosko, “‘HELL HOUSE’ Terrifies Tricksters Seeking Treats,” *Indiana Student Daily*, November 1, 2005.

occurred, these antics would be shameless and despicable exploitations of Cassie's memory...

We asked Conrad Goeringer to provide the names of some of the churches desecrating Cassie Bernall's memory by dramatizing this lie. He told us: Arvada Colorado Abundant Life Church; Dade City, Florida, Family Worship Center; St. Louis Gateway Tabernacle; Sterling, Virginia, Community Church...¹⁰⁰

Regardless of Positive Atheism's take on the issue of Cassie Bernall's death it is significant to note that Cassie Bernall's mother, Misty Bernall, published a book based on Cassie's journals and Mrs. Bernall's own experiences and opinions about Cassie's death entitled, *She Said 'Yes': The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall*. In the opening pages of the book the reader is greeted with quotes from: *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The LA Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Baltimore Sun* among others, all addressing the specific issue of Cassie's status as a martyr. "Perhaps Cassie is a martyr; perhaps not...But the power of her story is obvious."¹⁰¹ While Cassie's "martyrdom" may be a topic for debate for many, within the performances discussed here it becomes part of the "is" world, speaking forcefully to thousands of teens about what "ought" not to happen (but "is" happening) and what "ought" to be. While the event itself may or may not be true, the performance of Cassie Bernall's "martyrdom" is not in question, and the repeated performance of such violence works to solidify the "fact" and tangibility of the event; the actuality, which we can never know is not as significant as the image which we can encounter.

¹⁰⁰ Cliff Walker, "Cassie Bernall 'Martyrdom' Hoax: A Christian Haunted-House Theme!?" *Positive Atheism*, October 24, 1999, <http://www.positiveatheism.org/index.shtml> (accessed on May 6, 2004).

¹⁰¹ *The Detroit News/Free Press*, as quoted in "What the Press is Saying About Cassie Bernall" Section in Misty Bernall, *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999), Front Matter.

Religious belief and ritual confront and mutually confirm one another; the ego is made intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life implied by the actual state of affairs which the world describes, and the worldview is made emotionally acceptable by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs of which such a way of life is an authentic expression...Whatever else religion may be, it is in part an attempt...to find a general meanings in terms of which each individual interprets his experiences and organizes his conduct.¹⁰²

While knowledge of what really happened at Columbine High School will never be assured and Cassie's answer will never be known; it is, within this context, only relevant that Cassie's story reached legendary heights, Cassie's mythos soaring to the status of martyrdom among evangelical youth. Her death lay at the center of the narrative of one Hell House entitled *Beyond the Grave: The Class of 2000*.¹⁰³ The performance re-created the shootings at Columbine. Its popularity eventually extended the run drawing more than one thousand people each evening.

Men in trench coats...shout 'Any jocks or Christians in here?' ...A gunman then grabs a young woman, points a gun to her face and says, 'Do you believe in God?' The woman says, 'Yes,' and the gunman then shoots her in the face...¹⁰⁴

One of the disturbing concepts at work in this tableau is the fact that Cassie was a real woman and she was shot in the face. The alleged story of her dramatically defiant ownership of her Christianity and its centrality in her death is disputed; Cassie's death is not. In this spectacle, Cassie's death, while indeed viscerally

¹⁰² Geertz, 126-127.

¹⁰³ The Columbine massacre, in specific, and school violence in general have spurred many secular works that deal with the controversial issue of violence in our school systems. Some would argue that these artistic representations, such as *Columbinus* or *Bang! Bang! You're Dead* utilize the tragedies at Columbine and elsewhere to examine social issues, raise questions, and act as a deterrent to violence. There is little protest over these performances. Many Hell Houses use these violent and disturbing incidents to examine violence in schools and its place in the contemporary world.

¹⁰⁴ Cliff Walker, "Cassie Bernall 'Martyrdom' Hoax." Derivations and variations of this scene are reported on in many Associated Press news stories and it is accessible in numerous versions on various Hell House websites, and in many segments on the DVD version of Ratliff's film *Hell House*.

present, is dismantled and reassembled under the banner of faith. Cassie herself is lost, emptied. She becomes a foil for the “real” body and ever more “real” soul of the good Christian who suffers bravely taking the bullets of not only her own, but everyone else’s, unsaved sin.

‘Look out! Simon’s got a gun!’
A loud bang shatters lunch hour peace...when the smoke clears, four students are dead.
Two will enter the pearly gates into Heaven. But two rejected Jesus Christ.
They’ll go straight to Hell...¹⁰⁵

The description above is of a scene in a Judgement House performed in Tennessee in October of 2002.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ “‘Hell Houses:’ Some Question Eerie Form of Halloween Evangelism,” *The Beacon*, October 31, 2002.

¹⁰⁶ This scene was performed just months after the Columbine shooting at the Trinity Church’s Hell House. The controversy is well documented in George Ratliff’s documentary film *Hell House*. School violence scenes occur in several Hell and Judgement Houses. Judgment is spelled with an *e* as part of the Judgement House brand image; Judgement House® is right protected. One way to tell whether a Church is a “Covenant Church,” which means they paid \$329 dollars for a kit, is the spelling of Judgement versus Judgment in event titles.



Figure 2.1. Promotional image for *Revenge* script

“Revenge!” is a story we see all too often on the evening news. A young, man tired of being pushed around at school, takes matters into his own hands with deadly consequences. Simon feels like a geek and an outcast at school and even at home. His father doubts he will ever amount to anything and has no problem telling him so. Mitch and his football teammates enjoy humiliating and bullying Simon any time they can. Toby is a Christian and tries to reach Simon and the other students at school with the message of a saving and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but Simon can’t believe that anyone could ever love him, and chooses not to accept God’s offer of salvation through His Son Jesus Christ. Mitch and his friends cross a terrible line when they steal Simon’s treasured journal and pass its contents throughout the school lunchroom. All the pain, hurt and embarrassment boil over in Simon’s mind and rage takes control and revenge is the only thing he wants, and unfortunately for the students at his school, he gets it.¹⁰⁷

While not directly referring to Cassie Bernall’s death – in these scenes played out in Judgement Houses throughout the nation – the Columbine tragedy serves as

¹⁰⁷Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., “Our Scripts,” Judgement House, <http://www.judgementhouse.org/WhyJudgementHouse.htm> (accessed on July 2, 2007). The Judgement House phenomenon, however, has been less controversial than Hell Houses. While their intents are similar their narrative structures differ and their kits are distributed through different organizations. The school shooting scene is one of the only scenes that directly overlaps.

foundation for a myriad of concerns regarding the degenerate nature of a popular culture that could induce two young men to murder their classmates and themselves. However, this scene does much more cultural work than to demonize (or rationalize) the violence enacted on April 19, 1999; it positions this violence and its agents in the dead center of a maelstrom characterizing the battle between good (read: GOD) and evil surging through the wires of the modern global village.

To react to these performances simply from the side of the “saved” or the “sinners” is to deny complexity to events in which church communities enact the sins they fear on the very bodies of the saved. To dismiss these events as reactionary or theatrically substandard in product or intention misses the mark. By not examining the complex messages inherent in the mimetic act, the common attempts to forge a naturalistic environment replete with actual crashed cars and policeman dressed in the uniforms of the local town, in not acknowledging that often over one third of the congregation is involved for months in creating the performance, not addressing the ever-present emphasis on sensory stimulation, akin to, but more “real” than, a video game one is dismissing events that in Bhabha’s words,

...become the negotiation of contradictory and antagonistic instances that open up hybrid sites...and destroy...polarities between knowledge and its objects... effective because it uses the subversive, messy mask of camouflage...¹⁰⁸

Heedless to the warning that “those who use a church as a theater for representing the deeds of the Antichrist, or the rage of Herod are themselves guilty of the vices of the personages portrayed,”¹⁰⁹ several Hell Houses, and other like performances such as

¹⁰⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*. (London: Routledge, 1994), 26.

Nightmare, Judgement Houses, and *Tribulation Trail* portray school violence, burn coffins purporting to contain gay men who have died from AIDS (Hell House Outreach and Tulsa's *Nightmare*), and depict graphic abortion scenes (Hell House Outreach and Tulsa's *Nightmare*).¹¹⁰ These performances are often attacked, and dismissed, in the media, as well as among believers for these portrayals, without looking into the work they do in the communities who perform them.

The Colorado AIDS Project and the Council of Churches has called this event intolerant and judgmental. I can possibly understand why the Colorado AIDS Project would call the event judgmental, based on its content and their agenda, but why would the Council of Churches criticize the event? God's house is holy. Is it right to sell admission to events held in the sanctuary? Does this verse apply? Matthew 21:13 ...It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.¹¹¹

However, outside attention, especially negative attention, often results in increased attendance, as well as a more militant galvanization of congregational support behind church advocated views: as this poster, a member of the Abundant Life Christian Center in Arvada, which was once home to Pastor Roberts and the Hell House Outreach, demonstrates in their response to the above rebuttal of Hell House's methods:

Here is a question for thought. If someone's house was burning down, and you knew that the owner was asleep inside, would you stroll inside and "gently" wake him, or would you run in yelling...or would you ignore the

¹⁰⁹ Gerhoh of Reichersberg as quoted in Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 67.

¹¹⁰ Abortion, gay marriage, and AIDS related death are not usually part of Judgement Houses. None of the scripts put out for use by Covenant Churches deal with any of these issues. Hell Houses and *Nightmare* in Tulsa do. If a group is representing these issues they are not doing so with the permission of the Judgement House organization. Generally, the Hell House Outreach, though they distribute kits, retains far less control over what churches present using the Hell House name.

¹¹¹ Pastor Rod, "The Church: Hell House," Gentle Ministries Blog, Posted on October 25, 2002 <http://www.gentle.org/News/article/sid=168.html> (accessed on May 6, 2004).

entire situation and let the man be burned to a crisp, because you don't want to disturb the man's sleep?...Does this verse apply? Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal Life in Jesus Christ Our Lord. Comments?¹¹²

Or as Keenan Roberts, Hell House's founder puts it, "Every time a story appears – good or bad – we get hundreds of phone calls and faxes from people who support what we're doing."¹¹³ Negative press works to enforce the posture of selfless sacrifice against the rages of a resistant world adopted by many conservative Christian groups.

2.3 Victims

Personally, Duran said he's a Hell House fan. The Broomfield man encouraged his 15-year-old daughter, Megan, to go. "I think it's good for girls to witness this information," he said. "They're making a lot of these choices and there's a lot of peer pressure."¹¹⁴

The performance of Cassie's death opens platforms for engaging with the ways in which a darkly troubled and recently threatened masculine identity feeds the fires of Hell, eliding the concept of victim hood with that of sin. In this system women are worked upon by the forces of a sinful world and they, by their nature, are

¹¹² Abundant Life Christian Center Member Comment on "The Church: Hell House," at Gentle Ministries Blog posted on October 25, 2002 comments on April 14, 2003 <http://www.gentle.org/News/article/sid=168.html> (accessed on May 6, 2004).

¹¹³ Keenan Roberts as quoted in Conrad Goeringer's article "'Hell Houses' Denounced for Bigotry and Poor Taste," October 29, 1999 indexed online at <http://www.positiveatheism.org/writhellhaus.htm>. Hell Houses have been covered widely in the press with the success of Ratliff's documentary *Hell House* (about the Trinity Church in Texas). They have also garnered much publicity from the "Hollywood Hell House" spearheaded by Maggie Rowe who was inspired by Ratliff's documentary and the "absurdity" that she felt when viewing the movie. The "Hollywood Hell House" is based on the kit obtained (under false pretenses) from the Abundant Life Christian Center. In an interview Rowe discusses the impact of the Hollywood variant on the original, reinforcing a liberal bias that this event is for mocking and does not merit a serious examination. The interview with Rowe is available on <http://www.ostrichink.com/oct2004/hellhouse.html>, "... the weird part of it is ... Hell House is so much more successful this year because its gotten press from us... 'Hell House' as parodied in Hollywood starring blah, blah, blah..."

¹¹⁴ Mary Butler, "Meet Mister Hell House: Pastor Keenan Roberts Blazes Trail with Scary Youth Outreach," *Camera*, October 30, 2004.

highly susceptible to sin. Cassie Bernall's death, as performed, raises questions about the feminization not only of "sinners," but also of the victims of a cruel and remorseless social world. Dramas that offer such scenes present a physically tangible Christian desire to remain clean of sin and its equivalent directive to cleanse others so that the Christian will be saved by virtue of their saving mission, if necessary cleanse by force, cleanse by fear.

As Pastor Keenan Roberts, the founder of the Hell House distribution franchise declares, "If showing a simulated abortion keeps one young lady out of the back seat of a Camaro with her boyfriend we've done our job."¹¹⁵ In these performances men enact violence on the bodies of women; women suffer, die, and go straight to Hell. In the majority of scenes women are the ones who sin, and women's bodies are the focus and locus of violence. The woman's body as the central field of violent action is clear in the rape scene, the suicide scene, the adultery scene, the domestic violence scene, the abortion scene, the abduction/sexual predator plotline in Judgement House's script *Web of Lies*, the two young cheerleaders abducted in the Judgement House script *Abducted*, as well as in the *Nightmare* in Tulsa's more original attempts at creating a narrative frame for the horror they present:

Nightmare starts by introducing you to a child molester, who, because of "alleged faulty DNA testing and **civil rights violations**" is being released from jail after only 17-months of a lifetime sentence. "Chester" shows up in the second room, hanging from a swing. All of the **young, murdered girls pop creepily out of nowhere** and give you a long, hard, sad look. The molester says he wants to show us his favorite dreams. The rest of the rooms involve all the things he wishes would happen in the world, including a horrible car wreck, junkies getting busted for smoking pot in the school's bathroom, a Columbine-imitation in which **cheerleaders writhe in agony on**

¹¹⁵ Keenan Roberts as quoted in Conrad Goeringer, "Church Groups Operating Halloween Hell Hoaxes," *AANEWS*, American Atheists, October 24, 1999.

the floor after being blown apart, and a **homosexual man** who **commits suicide** after **domestically disturbing his pretty wife**. (Emphasis mine)¹¹⁶

Even in drunken driving scenes the female character is the most likely character to go to Hell, while the male characters are often the ones saved. Additionally, in Hell House's "Mother's Womb Abortion Scene" in which a young woman meets the child she could have had, had she not had an abortion (a procedure which killed the young mother anyway), the aborted fetus turned dream child is often female and wearing what would have been her wedding gown.

In an online interview Roberts again makes transparent the pitiable, passive, and infantilized position of those represented as sinners,¹¹⁷ "...sometimes you have to be willing to get out in the middle of interstate traffic to rescue the infant that has crawled out there unknowingly."¹¹⁸ This rhetoric creates a renewed, nostalgic, and utopist harkening back to a time "gone but not forgotten;" days of "family values" when agency, power, and the right to protect principles by force were concentrated in the hands of the white male (Jesus Christ included). When dealing with those who might fall victim to the fires of Hell the "good" Christian is responsible for, and through these performative displays now justified in, using force to save, to rapture, or to properly socialize the "weak."

¹¹⁶ Clyde Wright, "The GUTsy Nightmare and the Trail of Blood," *The Collegian Online*, October 20, 2003, <http://www.utulsa.edu/collegian/article.asp?article=1901> (accessed on January 18, 2004.)

¹¹⁷ Women, those identifying as homosexual, and children are the most likely committers of sinful acts in these performances. Even though they are sinners, the roots of their evil are nourished by outside forces; they are the victims of both the devil and the world. They take sinful action as a direct consequence of pre-existing, inherent "weaknesses," and as a result of previous acts of violence committed against them. The suicide victim in a Hell House is usually a young woman raped at a rave or party after taking drugs (sometimes she is slipped the drugs unbeknownst to her), an incest victim, a woman who has had an abortion, or – in some recent portrayals – a gay teen.

¹¹⁸ Stacey Capps, Interview with Keenan Roberts of the Abundant Life Christian Church accessible on <http://www.du.edu/~scapps/documentary/main.htm> (accessed on May 6, 2004).

One can read the women of Hell House as the humble Christians suffering at the hands of a depraved outside world, as *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, as a sickness to be sent into remission (submission) through violation, or as a negotiation of all of these concepts whose intersecting corridors provide illuminating and terrifying insights about the ways in which the religious reframing of national traumas dehistoricizes and dematerializes the human factors of the economic, social, and cultural equation.

While women play an ever present role in the visual and auditory stimulus that is the Hell House, the female characters themselves are often superfluous as characters and solely useful as agents to be acted upon; it is the action that their presence allows for that lends them their pivotal roles in these didactic religious dramas. It is not the actions they take, for they are usually at the mercy of others or under the control of violent force, it is the actions taken against them that propel the dramas forward. Much like women merely carry children in some pro-life mindsets, women such as Chrissy in the abortion scene (excerpted below) are simply carriers of a societal crucible.

CHRISSY's lines are few, but her impact is gigantic. She is one of the characters who will be **talked about most** by the visiting public. **She cannot hold back** or come across as being shy or embarrassed to be doing what she is doing. **Screaming, crying violently, and convulsing** all fall into her **bag of tricks**. She must play her part convincingly or the entire abortion scene falls flat. (Emphasis mine) ¹¹⁹

In examining the wording of the above passage from Roberts' Hell House Outreach script we see that Chrissy is built upon the bedrock of common tropes. She speaks

¹¹⁹ Keenan Roberts, "The 1997 Hell House Outreach Manual," published by the Abundant Life Christian Center, Arvada, CO. at: <http://www.postfun.com/pfp/features/98/nov/helladd.html> (accessed on May 6, 2004).

little but is talked about a whole hell of a lot. She is hysterical and “cannot hold back” her emotionality, nor apparently her sexual desire. She also carries with her, her bag of tricks, the one thing that every socially deviant young woman cannot leave home without. Through Chrissy one observes that Halloween is not the only part of secular pop-culture that the Hell House Outreach accesses.

...His medical instruments are clearly visible. Hospital sound effects are playing in the background. The moment the tour group is within earshot, Chrissy starts crying. She is extremely distraught. Throughout the entire scene the medical staff is cold, uncaring, abrupt, and completely insensitive to Chrissy.¹²⁰

The doctor is not only evil but he oozes his evil directly upon Chrissy and her baby, she is too scared, weak, and incoherent to fight him, and he will not let her question his work. Chrissy objects, reaching out for the abandoned “parts” of her child, but alas it is too late. The forces working against Chrissy are not only her own sins, but the unfeeling and evil doctor bent on destroying her. In the end she is not responsible; she is entrapped by an impersonal, clinical, and bureaucratic evil impinging upon her life and the life of her baby.

DOCTOR: (irritated) Chrissy, it’s only a medical procedure!
CHRISSEY: (screaming and crying) Don’t do this, I want! I want! MY BABY!
(The nurse places the first piece of bloody baby in the glass bowl as Chrissy screams MY BABY! Chrissy also reaches for the bowl as she says that phrase.)
ASSISTANT: You should have thought of that a long time ago.¹²¹

These performances speak not only of, or to, misogyny and patriarchy by denying the young woman any recourse or agency, they also show that much like a good nation gone bad, Chrissy would not have chosen so wrong-headedly unless she had been

¹²⁰ Roberts, “The 1997 Hell House Outreach Manual.”

¹²¹ Ibid.

misled. Chrissy is a “murderer” but one who “killed” in weakness. What will she do? The Answer: beg for forgiveness in Christ, subjugate the rest of her life to the church’s will or die in Hell. If only Chrissy had turned her decision-making over to the larger structure of church values she would never have been confronted with the fate of Hell; her choice would have been made, as it should be, for her.

Women and children, especially in scenes of abortion and domestic violence, afford men the right to fight against the dangerous yet unseen enemy – Satan. If the female form becomes a stand in for a troubled nation morally beleaguered and urged toward Hell by shunning its responsibilities to the weak, the childlike, and the unprotected it becomes a real man’s prerogative to step in save the nation’s soul. This battle between the contemporary social landscape and a “better” time past in which women could not destroy their souls by virtue of their choices also plays itself out in the next Chapter in which participants discuss the battle over a statue of Jesus on town property as central to their understanding of the world as a place gone wrong and the *Nightmare* event they perform as a tool in the transformation of community relations and spirituality.

2.4 “But why fear and why now?”¹²²

One may ask why Hell Houses? The answer: “Oh my friend – Hell is forever and ever...Jesus Christ took hell very serious.”¹²³ The answers on their surface are not shocking, nor are they original to an evangelic and/or conservative mindset,¹²⁴ but they are frightening in their obvious simplicity. We see violence; we learn from images. Violent images appeal to us. Viscerality is a technique that seizes attention in an intensely media based world, as The Trinity Hell House in Texas articulates in their mission statement:

The youth of today are media driven ...They like to see, hear, and feel each experience. Hell House is a radical alternative to a haunted house, presenting the truth in a manner that appeals to them long after they go through. (Ephesians 6:12).¹²⁵

The Hell and Judgement market’s consumer must see, hear, smell, touch and taste Hell, which has become, “a national phenomena with the help of Limburger cheese, smoke machines, and roaming demons.”¹²⁶ Audiences are disoriented through the use of smoke, strobe lighting, blaring music, multi-dimensional staging, audience plants,

¹²² Jason C. Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (New York; London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

¹²³ *The Truth About Hell* indexed online at www.av1611.org/hell.htm (accessed on May 6, 2004).

¹²⁴ Some secular examples would include depictions of violence in teaching “right” behavior in educational films of the 1950’s forward. I am reminded of the many films I watched of mangled bodies, demolished automobiles, and wailing mothers in driver’s education. As a product of the early 1980’s I also remember the intense televised battleground of the U.S.’s War on Drugs.

¹²⁵ From the Trinity Church of Cedar Hill website at <http://trinityministries.org>. The verses paraphrased, Ephesians 6: 11-13 reads as follows, “Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. Our battle is not against human forces but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in the regions above. You must put on the armor of God if you are to resist on the evil day; do all that you duty requires and stand your ground.”

¹²⁶ Jean Torkelson, “Hell House’s New Home on Stage at Denver Church,” *Rocky Mountain News*, September 15, 2003.

constant movement, the use of real firearms, blood, wailing, touch, heat, cold, overcrowding, and the smells of decay (cheese), as well as the smell and sight of raw and bloody meat in the abortion and human sacrifice scenes. However, Hell Houses do not merely serve to frighten and delight; they bring together churches and religious believers, as well as open debate and galvanize reaction among those opposed to their messages.

There's little pleasantness in exposing sins, Roberts said. Getting to heaven is the fun part. "Really, it's just a different way of packaging church," he said.

Gay activists say Hell House supports a culture of hate; Planned Parenthood says it inappropriately uses scare tactics that won't reduce the number of unintended pregnancies in teens.

Roberts responds: "Hell House has nothing to do with hatred or trying to send people to hell." However, serving any God other than Jesus Christ, he said, is serving "a lie."

"A lot of people think they can just be a good person and still get to heaven," he said. "We'd be doing a disservice if we told them that was true. Jesus Christ is not one of many ways to get to heaven. He is the only way."¹²⁷

The Hell House Outreach Kit – assembled, sold, and marketed by Roberts – is available for two hundred and ninety nine dollars and provides churches with a show that can be tailored to specific congregational needs. The basic kit contains a DVD of scenes from previous Hell Houses, a how to list for handling the media, and troubleshooting for production needs, as well as scenes covering homosexuality, abortion, suicide, drunk driving, Satanism, Hell, Heaven, and featuring additional and/or alternate scenes of domestic abuse, raves, teen suicide, mother's womb

¹²⁷ Butler, "Meet Mister Hell House."

abortion,¹²⁸ and gay weddings. Additional scenes can be ordered for an additional forty five dollars each.¹²⁹

Piece by piece, prop by prop, costume by costume – the master plan is organized in a comprehensive manual. A video of what Hell House in action looks like and a special-effects compact disc audio master are also included. This sizzling evangelism event is designed to capture the attention of our sight and sound culture!¹³⁰

Some church sponsored performances, like Hell House, are criticized for allowing evil into a house of worship.¹³¹ These criticisms however, only begin to lay out the problems many have with this kind of evangelism. Church sponsored Hell Houses offer the visitor an opportunity to confirm, to convert, or reaffirm their faith, often in front of witnesses and counselors. The central problem for many is that the church uses fear, frightening people into embracing the love and forgiveness offered by Christ, instead of, as many believe they should, allowing people to come to Christ on their own terms. In short, cheap tactics make cheap converts.

It's an event called "Hell House" that –in my opinion– attempts to literally scare the Hell out of people, and in turn scare them into simply praying "the

¹²⁸ In the Mother's Womb Abortion scene a young woman encounters what would have been as she sees her aborted child at four moments over the course of its "life." In the "regular" abortion scene a doctor and a nurse ruthlessly abort the fetus of a young woman, with much blood and gore as images of a "real" late term abortion are projected on screens.

¹²⁹ Some of the over thirty topics also covered include: "Prayer Emphasis, Preparing Your Church, Budget, Recruitment Of Coordinators And A Dependable Staff, Casting And Costuming, Set-Design And Construction, Rehearsals And Performances, Publicity And Promotion, Effectively Handling The Media Including *The Tough Questions And How We Answered Them*, Ticketing, Host Facility Tips And Helps, Lighting And Special Effects, Technical Coordination, Prayer Partners And Follow-Up, Organization And Time Line, Plus... receive our original Hell House scripts and accompanying theatrical and technical cues!" List found at the New Destiny Christian Center website, http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_kitInclude.cfm (accessed on March 4, 2009).

¹³⁰ New Destiny Christian Center, "The Hell House Outreach Kit," http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_resources_orderSelection.cfm (accessed on March 4, 2009).

¹³¹ Judgement House, while receiving some critical attention for using fear as a tactic for conversion, does not use the same graphics, does not employ the same level of demonography and social controversy that Hell House does and, thus, receives more critiques for its tactics than its content.

prayer of salvation.” Pastor X’s letter boasts of 1 in 4 participants praying such a prayer after experiencing the Hell House. It’s simply a soul-winning campaign, and what I know of the program design of Hell House shows no plan or concern for how to nourish new believers after such an emotion-sparked conversion experience. What happens when the emotions fade? What is a new believer left with? Just like love, the foundation for lasting faith cannot be emotion. Because what happens when the emotions subside? ... I easily affirm the following:
Personal sin is real.
Eternity apart from God (in Hell) is real.
Satan’s conniving and deceiving presence among us is real.
But beating the “unsaved” over the head with only these particular theological concepts is not the way to invite them into a whole and balanced relationship with our Creator.¹³²

While there may be debate about the lasting effect of shock and awe tactics, these performances work on young people’s actions and perceptions and while they may push many away from the church they certainly encourage young people to encounter and consider the issues they raise in a visceral way that they would not watching the news, debating on a blog, or reading the opinion column in the local paper:

When it came time to meet Jesus, those same girls quickly filled out a questionnaire placed under their seats. The survey asked them to pinpoint Jesus’ place in their lives.
“This was a reality check for my spiritual life,” said Yolanda Salgado, 23.
“Hell’s not a place where we want to spend eternity.”¹³³

From the very beginning of the Hell House phenomena audience members have come for many reasons and their responses, expectations, and desires are not always linked to the same notions of salvation that the churches performing these events are working to impart.

“It shows what is going on in the world,” says James Ulrich, whose wife plays the mourner in a fictitious funeral for an AIDS victim.

¹³² Russell Duren, “Hell House,” More Questions than Answers Blog posted on September 20, 2007, <http://rduren.wordpress.com/2007/09/20/hell-houses/> (accessed on February 12, 2009).

¹³³ Butler, “Meet Mister Hell House.”

Casey Thorton, 19, of Buena Vista drove 2 ½ hours to see the show. “It got the most press...and it’s big enough for protests...so it must be good.”

Said Nathan Lefever, 18, of Fort Morgan: “If I start throwing up, I’m going to make a donation to this church.”¹³⁴

Whatever one’s position on religion, and more specifically saving souls through fear, it is clear that narratives of “evil” can expose what is wrong, unspoken or unseen in our society; the evil that one embodies, names, and fights helps one to face their day-to-day challenges on symbolic terms. Being able to create these narratives gives one power over them and allows one control over that which one might have originally understood as evil (uncontrollable) influences.

I want my children to know the price, that if they get in a car with somebody who’s drinking, I mean the price that could be extracted from them. You know it’s interesting my wife and I were sitting at a stoplight and these two cars hit head on going fifty or sixty miles an hour and it was like that (*snaps fingers*) well, that’s how life is. I mean it’s full of those sudden things that we don’t have control of, except giving our life to the Lord. That puts us in a place where there is protection and there’s safety and this whole deal, but we’ve gotta get to that place where we submit our lives to the Lord...¹³⁵

These performances are extensions of the tales we tell to relate the human to the godly. Stories, have always been told not only to maintain civil order through making the threat of damnation palpable, but also because they are entertainment, animating the struggle between good and evil, God and Satan. “The Devil works in ways you don’t always see...here in the scenes you see that, the Devil controls our actions in ways we don’t know, we can’t know...if you’re not looking you won’t see it...”¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Kris Newcomer, “Hell House Opening Draws Throng,” *Rocky Mountain News*, October 27, 2005.

¹³⁵ Bill Scheer, interview on *The Future of Real Estate* with Darryl Baskin, accessible on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h672FPyf4wk> (accessed on March 4, 2009).

¹³⁶ Janice Ballard, interview by author, Dudley, Georgia, July 20, 2007. Ballard is a Judgement House co-director.

2.5 The Moral in the Mirror

Jude 1:22-23

And of some have compassion making a difference
And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire...

These events mirror (often a fun house kind of mirroring) the mainstream contemporary world, creating a model that traffics with that world not only to evangelize towards salvation, but also to provide outlets for escape. Performances shape changes in their participants; events unveil a hypothetical future condition, a projection. Public events such as these have within their very nature incompatible conflicting visions of contemporary existence and the participants in these worlds must use their own strategies of meaning making to overcome inconsistencies.

While showcasing what some may see as far-fetched depictions of death and life, Hell Houses, and like performances, are viewed by many in the Christian and local communities (Christian or not) as safe alternatives to other Halloween activities. It is within a socially controlled environment that visitors are confronted with graphic scenes of death, pathetic and heartrending narratives, eternal damnation, and all forms of social evil.

The fears these performances engender in many of their audience members may be real, but the threat is keyed as theatrical, linked to a broader culture, emphasizing in their generality the “importance of ambiguity in ordering and unifying...”¹³⁷ The falsehood and duplicity of the contemporary world is captured and the world is represented as a frightening place; even though “reality” is what the performance aims for, it is keyed as unreal. This false keying owes to the fact that a

¹³⁷ Bell, 184.

given performance draws on the images of the larger culture for its force – and thus cannot be “true” – corrupt data, false results. While relying on images of Jason, cheerleaders, drug addicts, and sadistic medical professionals performances simultaneously critique themselves as false hallucinations of the very world they wish to save souls from.

Freddy Kruger is here with razor-blade fingers. As is the ghoul from “Scream.” Outside, anticipating the night’s first group and sporting bloody gashes across his face, Jesus waits on the cross. “It’s really an evangelistic event,” said robe-clad Jesus – 22-year-old Liberty senior Douglas Slachter. “The majority of it is reaching out to those who don’t know Christ.”¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Erin Hutkin, “Scaremare’s Holy Horror House,” *The Roanoke Times*, October 24, 2007.

2.6 Scaremare



Figure 2.2. A Liberty University dresses as Michael Myers, a character from the *Halloween* movie series

Scaremare, or The House of Death, is Falwell's Liberty University's religiously oriented response to Halloween, began in 1972. Formed from the basic skeleton of a haunted house, *Scaremare* is a precursor to Hell House, Judgement House, and *Nightmare*. The event is a non-franchise based performance that is highly gruesome and quite entertaining.¹³⁹ *Scaremare* takes an approach somewhat devoid (until the end) of the obvious and overt morally charged message of many of the other performances in this vein. It is horrific, gruesome, grizzly, and gross.

¹³⁹ There are churches that perform their own version of *Scaremare* around Halloween. I have encountered six in my research. These productions are much smaller in scale and decidedly D.I.Y. *Scaremare* does not offer assistance to these churches, nor do they sell any type of kit. The "official" *Scaremare* event revolves around Liberty and the Lynchburg community; they change their content each year.

2.6.1 Preparing for Scaring: Fall in Line



Figure 2.3. Concessions in line at *Scaremare*

The performance site consists of an abandoned two-story brick high school and its adjacent football fields abutted by an old rail road bridge. Adding to the mythos of the event the old school building is “rumored to have been a day care center, an orphanage and the site of at least one death.”¹⁴⁰

The crowd composed of discrete groups: local families dedicated haunted house aficionados and thrill seekers, youth groups, throngs of teens, and the few curious stragglers like my husband and I. You can sense the anticipation. Seasoned audience members come prepared: blankets, thermoses, folding chairs, sandwiches

¹⁴⁰ Hutkin, “Scaremare’s Holy Horror House.”

and sodas. Those new to the *Scaremare* scene will not go hungry though, in a few hours the various pizza, kettle corn, ice cream, soda, and hot chocolate stands will open for business. By four in the afternoon the line has filled over half a length of the football field, by the height of the evening the line will grow to wend around the entire field at least three times.

Lt. Bobby Bray, LUPD – “When it starts to get very busy, we’re constantly walk [sic] around.”

This is the 23rd year Liberty’s Lt. Bobby Bray has monitored the large crowds. He says they’ve been fortunate.

Bray – “We’ve not had any violent situations whatsoever.”

That doesn’t mean they aren’t ready if it happens. A couple dozen officers patrol the lines each night.

Bray – “It’s either behave or we’re putting you at the end of the line or not letting you come at all.”

They have seen their fair share of weird things. Just two years ago, a naked man ran out of the woods while volunteers were working on the house.

Vandergriff [sic] – “It did stir up a little bit of interest at Scaremare.”¹⁴¹

Inside (and outside) the building the actors get ready. Once the cast is suited and blooded up student leaders review house rules and safety procedures. Organizers make a final inspection of the grounds.

Shortly before showtime, a young man – a stage manager type – stands among the headstones and makes an announcement to the lost soul crouched beside an open grave, to the pale-faced guy carrying a severed arm and the young girl sitting upright in her burial plot, hair littered with dirt and dead leaves.

“You’re amazing, and I love you guys, and we’ve got a group coming pretty soon,” he says, exuberant.¹⁴²

The sun goes down and the lines rush forward. From the woods one can pick up on shrieks, demented laughter, and chainsaws. Groups begin to leave the terrifying

¹⁴¹ ABC 13, Transcript, “It’s Time for Scaremare Again,” October 10, 2007, Lynchburg, Virginia, <http://www.wset.com/news/stories/1007/462538.html> (accessed on February 9, 2009).

¹⁴² Hutkin, “Scaremare’s Holy Horror House.”

stands of trees into the carefully crafted serenity of the white tents. Here the faithful are welcomed, celebrated, finding their faith bolstered in this communal experience; those who are still searching for, or not yet walking with, Christ are invited to find salvation and counsel.

“Scaremare is like running a business or a farm — there is always something to do.”¹⁴³ The office estimates three thousand one hundred people had attended that evening and more than seven hundred and fifty people made a first-time decision to follow Christ, while another one thousand two hundred re-dedicated their lives to Christ.¹⁴⁴

2.6.2 *Freaky Friday: October 2005*

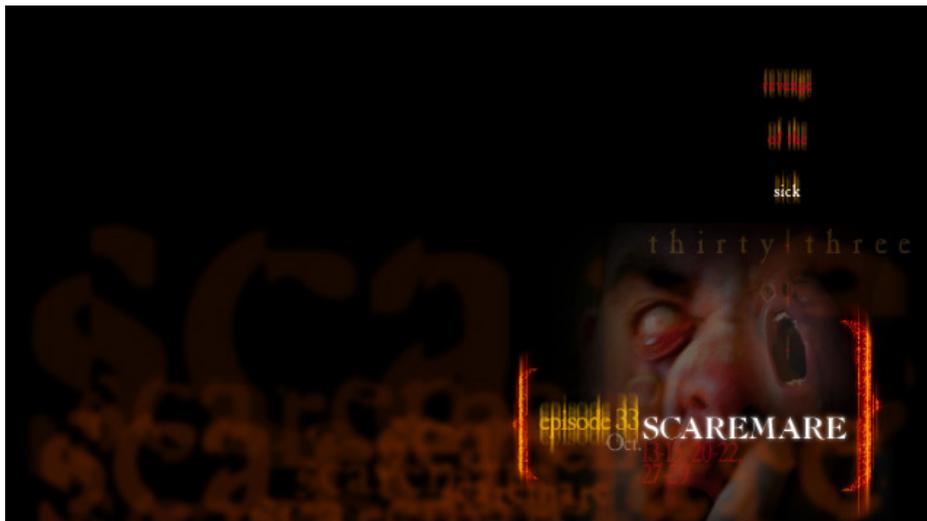


Figure 2.4. *Scaremare* website graphic

¹⁴³ Steve Vandegriff as quoted in Christi Corbin, “Behind the Scenes at Scaremare,” *The Liberty University Champion*, October 23, 2007.

¹⁴⁴ These numbers reflect 2005. In 2006 four thousand three hundred people made professions of faith.

Pastor David Anderson of Faith Baptist Church has dubbed *Scaremare* “a fun and frightening contrast between the real death and the promise of faith.” The “real death” part came early as my husband and I waited in line on a cold football field, for four hours, with thousands of other people snaking our way through orange plastic fencing. The desert of waiting only broken by a strand of pizza stands, kettle corn, and white masked performers staring menacingly at members of the line; as we draw closer to the sanctum of the event hot chocolate and funnel cake become available. Thankfully, we ate dinner first, tarrying over our food, not knowing the line would be so long, not knowing anything. Finally, after about three hours, we are crammed into a wooden structure where the line becomes reminiscent of an amusement park and “demons” pound on the side of the structure peering in through the cracks to terrify audience members whipped into a frenzy by the multi-hour wait.

Groups of eight cost less and get through the line faster than small parties so my husband and I are recruited to join a group that consisted of four pre-teens, the two of us, and a woman in her twenties with her two children. When we reach the front of the line we are solemnly told to proceed. We tentatively step off into the woods, alone; timed well the fifty thousand dollar plus budget production takes care not to overlap groups.

Suddenly men and women appear from behind trees, some in distressed overalls and some in Victorian frocks with pale make-up whitened faces. They are quite effectively gory, some looking like Bella Lugosi after years of decay, others wander blank eyed before us in our path, while still others scream Artaudian yelps and still others thwack at trees with shovels. After a terrifying walk followed by a

crawl through an underground tunnel we make it into the old orphanage where we must proceed through twisted, tight, dark hallways built to have sharp turns and sloped and raked floors. There is no guide. We are alone. We can hear the screams of others around us, but we cannot see them. I find myself clutching the shirt of an eleven year old with one hand while holding onto my husband's hand with the other as we fight to stay linked to a quickly moving chain. One of the kids at the front of our ragtag group is yelling directions "left, right, left, up, straight" as our chain of eight attempts to stay locked together while navigating the hairpin angles in the pitch deep darkness. Occasionally, we emerge into open spaces populated by horror movie inspired scenes of heinous gore: screaming men and women are being operated on by sadistic dentists and surgeons with drills, construction site accidents, in which Jason inspired men jack hammer and bloodied bodies beseech our help like screeching harpies.

In between rooms it is back into the claustrophobic maze until the final room of the house¹⁴⁵ where Jesus hangs from his plain cross in a brown square of dirt. His head adorned in a simple crown of thorns, the blood on his hands, sides, and forehead appears focused and minimal after the tremendous amount of bloodshed we have recently encountered; a woman in a red robe, resembling of a pool of thick blood, lies frozen in a pile at his feet. We take more time in this room than the others. It is quiet.

Next we are sent back out into the woods nervously huddling together, reflecting silently on what had just occurred until we are ushered into what looks like an emergency relief tent, white and portioned into several small rooms, each room

¹⁴⁵ I have been going to *Scaremare* for three years now and in the first year I went, Jesus was crucified inside. In subsequent years the crucifixion occurred at the end of the house outside in the woods.

bearing a freshly dug grave with a cross above it in the dirt. The tent is bright and the student prayer guide's face luminous as he leads us in a prayer asking us to look up into his eyes if we want to commit to Jesus. No one in our group signed up and we went home bewildered and befuddled. *Scaremare* did not try to convert us through our moral sentiments but through devastating and bewildering our sensory impulses, giving us over, as is their stated mission to the question, "What happens after I die?" *Scaremare* seeks for its lost sheep far and wide, as opposed to solely within their local communities. They encourage people to come for thrills and hope that some of those who do will leave quite saved.

But religion is not forced upon anyone—there is, after all, an \$8 admission charge—volunteer Mike "Rabbi" Sandal said. *Scaremare*, the Liberty senior explained, seeks only true-believing Christians. "We're certainly not saying, 'Turn or burn,'" he said. "Forced faith is no faith at all."¹⁴⁶

2.6.3 *The Scared and the Profane*

Performances run for three weekends (Thursday to Saturday) in October. The majority of performers and staff are Liberty students, though some are students of Lynchburg Christian Academy, which is associated with Liberty. Liberty students are required to perform twenty hours of community service a semester, which can be compromised of a wide range of options at churches, local schools, and social service organizations and agencies throughout the Lynchburg community; however, many volunteer at *Scaremare*.

On any given performance evening there are two hundred to two hundred and fifty student volunteers working at *Scaremare* in some capacity as: performers,

¹⁴⁶ Hutkin, "Scaremare's Holy Horror House."

security, parking attendants, counselors¹⁴⁷ concession vendors, ticket takers, line handlers, as well as running outreach booths for other mission projects affiliated with the University. According to Dr. Vandegriff, *Scaremare*'s faculty organizer, that figure of two hundred to two hundred and fifty does not include cleanup days following the event or the setup days preceding it.

I worked at Scaremare last night and now I've lost my voice and I'm more sick than I was. But it sure was fun! Instead of traveling this weekend and the next weekend we (YouthQuest - www.LUYouthQuest.com) are going to be working Scaremare. Basically doing whatever they ask us too, whether it be characters, concessions or security. I found myself getting a bad attitude last night, but then I realized that I'm not doing it for me, I'm doing it for the Lord. That's definitely something that I need to keep in mind.¹⁴⁸

Early in the year student volunteers are placed into tight-knit groups, students often stay in the same group year to year, and room leaders are often chosen from among the students who have been working in the room in previous years. The event's two floors are each presided over by a floor leader (student); in addition to the floor leaders each room has its own leader to to manage the performers, oversee effects, and take charge of safety. The performers are not allowed to go out of character *at all* so room leaders must be present in case there are any situations that need to be addressed.

“What kept me motivated to stay in character all night was just the reactions of the people walking through,” sophomore volunteer Kelly Marvel said. “They were really freaked out by all the blood and gore, so screaming at them really added to the effect.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Performers, security, room leaders, parking attendants, and counselors tend to be the core workers who commit many more than twenty hours to *Scaremare*. They are usually committed before and after the event and from year to year.

¹⁴⁸ Jake, “Family, Friends and Scaremare,” posted on Monday, October, 20, 2008 at 15:06 PM, <http://www.libertyu.com/index.cfm?PID=16067&blogid=387638omans 5:3-5> (accessed on February 12, 2009).

¹⁴⁹ Butler, “Meet Mister Hell House.”

In the second year I attended *Scaremare* one of the young women in one of the groups I went through with started to hyperventilate and bolted in the wrong direction through a sheet draped maze. My friend and I followed her to help, as we had been through once already that evening; we became lost in the maze of backstage for over twenty minutes. There are no “actors” there, or that is the impression they sought to portray, only a few scary looking people who began to rip at their sandwiches and snacks with demented ferocity when we approached. They are “on” all night and come backstage only briefly to eat, drink, and use the facilities; even when backstage they snarled at us and did not offer assistance.

Killing time, she showed off her injuries. There’s a bruise on her arm. She scared a teenager so much that she got punched in the throat – twice. All the pain, she said, is for a higher purpose. “People are getting saved,” she explained. “And that’s our goal.”¹⁵⁰

Finally, we were shown back into the maze by one of the floor leaders, the only one qualified to deal with the practicalities of the house. The leaders are not actors in the event, but often the leaders are part of the team that comes up with ideas for the event, and thus they are able to communicate those ideas to volunteers. Leaders are also there during the operation to ensure the room is fully staffed.

“SV: ...We started up on this year over a year ago, at last year’s *Scaremare*... people are already talking about and getting ready to get better next year...”¹⁵¹ As indicated above training, rehearsal, fiscal preparation, and volunteer organization for *Scaremare* begins several weeks prior to the October debut and includes: spiritual

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Steve Vandegriff, interview by author, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia, October 14, 2006, Tape Recording.

motivation, spectacle and effects planning, and a lot of discussion. The event is a valuable training experience for those wishing to go into ministry as it requires planning skills and hones students' ability to manage other individuals.

2.6.4 *The Power of Christ Compels Thee*

One of the consistent scenes from year to year at *Scaremare* is a crucifixion scene. The crucifixion, much like in *Nightmare* – discussed in this Chapter and the next – serves as a reminder within the brutal “narrative,” a focused marker, absorber, and bearer of the suffering that preceded it. Typically, this scene is the last scene of the tour. Sometimes it is held in the woods outside the house and sometimes in the final interior space in the house. The Christ figure, a student, is lashed to a crucifix and barely garbed in a well worn white cloth. A bright white light strikes across his haunting figure. He is bloodied by the nails in his hands and feet and by the red welts across his chest.

...Slachter, as Jesus, lifts his head and asks about the crowd. There's a steady flow, even on a Thursday. On Saturdays, people wait up to five hours to enter the house. Saturday brought 4,300 guests – Scaremare's largest-ever one-night total.

But even Slachter knows Scaremare isn't for everyone, he says above the recorded sound of whipping wind. Some curse at him as he grips the cross, saying Jesus at a haunted house is “just wrong.”

Others take long, contemplative looks while passing. Conversely, one man approached Slachter on Scaremare's first weekend and gave him a hug.¹⁵²

As viewers emerge from *Scaremare*, still laughing and ribald from the fright, groups tripping and running through the deserted woods, giddy from the adrenaline fear supplies, they stumble still laughing upon the sobering scene of the suffering of

¹⁵² Butler, “Meet Mister Hell House.”

Christ. Many grow silent; others cannot contain their laughter, whether this is out of derision or discomfiture remains unclear. The Christ figure repeats: “I died for you, I want to save you.” A variety of reactions take place in each small group some make fun of the Christ figure, a group of teens on one of my tours cried out mocking insults. The teens and pre-teens often cannot contain their giddiness; some grow wide-eyed and frightened, while still others look away.

The groups with higher adult populations (especially adults known to the teens) and families might have a few laughs, but on the whole they tend to be more somber, shocked, and “appropriately” emotionally affected. Eyes brim with tears, head bowed in silence, and many people display an inability to look at Christ’s body, even after enduring the much bloodier horror preceding it. It is a telling reaction, on one hand Christ becomes part of the fun house world, used as scary monster; he becomes just that, a frightening sight – part and parcel of the house that came before. His body links him to the violence and titillating scares leading up to this moment.

Admittedly, Christ is an odd climax to what has come before – scenes fresh out of horror movies and the pop-cultural imaginary of a ‘House of Death.’ For some the bridge the performance seeks to build between the torments of the house itself and the suffering of Christ is far too short for the wide gap that is present; after all, God is God, and horror is horror. Young people’s reaction, however, also seems to lend veracity to the link between realistic, horrific suffering and the broken Christ that the event hopes to engender.

When asked why he yelled back a young man in one of my groups responded: “Why not? They’ve been yelling all night right... It’s for fun.”¹⁵³ This desire to claim agency in the face of one’s fears, to stand up to what frightens one and to nullify its power over the self by mocking it or decrying its power, as expressed above, is a common reaction to fear and the exercise of power over self. Speaking back, especially at an age where bravado means a lot, is a carnivalesque reaction to the power fear attempt to exercise over human action.

You stand in line for hours just to go through this death house to see depictions of death, suicide, confusion and other reflections of abuse and horror. Then at the end you see a depiction of the ultimate death which is Christ on the Cross. Emotionally, anyone who sees these images then leaves with our Lord suffering and crying out from the cross is going to experience sorrow. But not the sorrow because of their sin, but that they just saw 20 different people and now Christ suffering and dying.¹⁵⁴

The fact that teenagers, mostly Christian teens, understand the crucified Christ as an image with the same power and popular agency as the figure of Jason speaks to a successfully linking of pop-culture, horror, and spirituality on the part of the house. “Thrill seekers are ushered around the grounds of a building where bodies spill out of the wreckage of a grisly car crash, a young girl is laid to rest and a bloody Jesus hangs on a cross.”¹⁵⁵

The blood quantity in the crucifixion has shifted over the years from a more symbolic bloodshed to one that seems motivated by Mel Gibson’s *Passion* and then

¹⁵³ Anonymous Audience Member #1, interview by author, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia, October 14, 2006.

¹⁵⁴ James Tippins, “Scare Mare and Such,” posted at Jamestippins.com on October 22, 2006, <http://jamestippins.com/?p=93> (accessed on October 24, 2007).

¹⁵⁵ Robert Paul Reyes, “What’s Scariest, Scaremare Or Bush’s Victory?,” posted November 8, 2004, <http://www.useless-knowledge.com/1234/new/article030.html> (accessed February 12, 2009).

back again to the symbolic. “SV: Gibson’s *Passion* shifted people’s thoughts about the crucifixion...we have had to get more graphic.”¹⁵⁶ The contact within groups between hecklers and the more solemn contingent also solidifies a desire among Christians to recommit and strengthen bonds with Christ. The tension within the group mirrors a perceived tension in the social world. It reflects what many Christians see as a contemporary type of persecution that is of the same source as Christ’s suffering, and is made manifest in the War on Christmas, the removal of Christian monuments from public spaces, the legalization of abortion, gay rights, and the removal of prayer from public schools.

Directly after they encounter the crucifixion, groups flood into the enclosed, bright area separated from the event proper by a sobering walk through a thickly wooded area. Prayer leaders teach those in the audience who might have been distracted by all the blood the intended meaning of the event: to put forward the message of the Gospel. Participants think that they are not endeavoring to scare people to a decision for Christ, but rather to get audience members come to terms with the reality of judgment. This area is central to the event, because those who walk through the house have the chance to hear the gospel and to make personal decisions about their own lives in this space. It is the part of the night many workers look forward to the most:

“I hope to see God do incredible things through the use of Scaremare,” Matthew Cameron, junior volunteer, said. “I have witnessed changes in the past years, whether it was salvations in the tents or the discussions afterwards due to the seeds being planted.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Vandegriff, interview.

¹⁵⁷ Amanda Thomason and Jennifer Schmidt, “Scaremare Launches ‘Every Room Remembers’,” *The Liberty University Champion*, October 14, 2008.

Most of the participants, Christian or otherwise, appeared to enjoy *Scaremare* for the spectacle, giving little or no thought to the meanings behind it and grudgingly sat through the prayer as part of the price of admission. Again much of the power of experience – even scary experience – is focused inward on those doing the scaring, on the reaffirmation of a community of believers.

Scaremare does such a successful job of encapsulating, deploying, and performing horror that many who go see it as just that, a Halloween thrill. Since 1972 *Scaremare* has developed a loyal following. Parents often will bring their children for a family night out. The father in one family, I spoke with told me: “We’ve been coming for 10 years. It brings us together and gives us something to talk about on the ride home. We compare each year. Some are scarier. Waiting is more time to spend with the family.”¹⁵⁸

2.6.5 *Making it Personal*

Vandergriff [sic] – “If they’re afraid of the Burger King, if they’re afraid of demented bunnies, and we have a few other surprises as well. If they’re afraid of those things, they probably shouldn’t come.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Anonymous Audience Member #2, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia, October 14, 2006.

¹⁵⁹ ABC 13, Transcript, “It’s Time for Scaremare Again.”



Figure 2.5. Demented bunny waving to the crowd at *Scaremare*

Clearly, *Scaremare* and other performances such as *Nightmare*, Hell and Judgement Houses can be understood as representative of American society and American Christianity's relationship to the consumer culture of horror, violence, and gore in the contemporary world. However, scenes that intersect popular culture, as well as that those hold religious significance or deal with the demonic and occult, especially in *Scaremare*, because of its ties to Liberty, are carefully debated, vetted, and organized.

One of the most difficult parts of the process is coming up with scenes for the house. It requires extensive discussion in terms of content and planning as well in terms of execution. Topical scenes, while often avoided due to the controversy they may cause, are also difficult to make the cornerstones of the house, as what is in one year will likely be old news the next. New scenes each year are also not a possibility

because the planning and resources that go into constructing the space and effects for each scene cannot be recreated each year. There is always a tension between making it different for the many repeat customers, which *Scaremare* does by titling and matching performances to popular themes: *The Revenge of the Sick* (same year as *Revenge of the Sith*), *The DaScaremi Code* (same year as the *DaVinci Code*), and the practicality of making a whole new tour. Often the physical settings of the scenes will stay similar and the characters or fright gags will change.

“Ideas are usually suggestions from students about what scenes should be done.” Vandegriff described the scenes as random acts of death. There have been scenes that have been repeated over the years simply because it is so hard to come up with new ones.¹⁶⁰

Scaremare is an extreme example of caution due to heightened public attention, even in smaller productions the choice of script and scenes is carefully debated by the pastoral and production staff of a sponsoring church. This is done in consideration of the community and their concerns. Take the example of Grady Dishroon, a pastor at a church in Knoxville, Tennessee who had performed Judgement House’s script *Land of the Free, Home of the Brave*, discussing using a scene of the funeral of soldier in a community that had many young people overseas:

GD: We took a long time on that one. There are people in the house who are staring down that reality every day, husbands, fathers, loved ones gone. Waiting for word. We didn’t know how it would hit. We want it be real, not to make fun, we want it to be real but it can’t be; it isn’t. It brings real emotions though, that you can be sure of.

KM: What happened?

GD: We decided to do it, but in a way to show respect and to show families hope for where their loved ones are and where they might go. Good possibilities. We did more to give comfort than pain. To understand their

¹⁶⁰ Vandegriff as quoted in Corbin.

sacrifices and kind of, well, to celebrate them and show we are proud, as a church.

KM: How did it go? Did people, were people upset, OK?

GD: It was emotional, but we talk a lot and people were prepared, they knew what was coming. We didn't hit them blind. It was part of service...everyone has a hand in this outreach, we're small. I won't say it wasn't hard, for some really, really hard...in the end I think it gave strength, and maybe encouraged those wavering on the war.¹⁶¹

Churches and producing groups weigh heavily what is considered acceptable and what a community may or may not be able to face. For the coordinators at *Scaremare*, what a community may stomach can be a delicate dance.

While many of the performances discussed in this work do take the care with their representative choices, due to their association with Hell Houses many in the media, as well as in the religious community elide *Scaremare* and Judgement House, neither of which have ever done an abortion or gay marriage scene, with Hell Houses and the *Nightmare* (Tulsa) who often use controversial issues to draw crowds.

This year, for the 33rd year, students at Jerry Falwell's "Liberty" University (it is an accredited institution...but I think the quotation marks are appropriate) put on a show called "Scaremare," an elaborate performance described by the Washington Post as part haunted house, part sermon. Visitors are led into an abandoned orphanage with graphic demonstrations of what hell is like and who "deserves" to be there. These interactive scenes include women who have had abortions and gay men who have died of AIDS. No, I'm not kidding. (I wonder if they've made room for the feminists yet).¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Grady Dishroon, interview by author, Knoxville, Tennessee, July 24, 2007, Tape Recording.

¹⁶² Brendan Sweeney, "Happy Halloween from the Hate-Mongers on the Right" posted on October 31, 2004, <http://www.feministing.com/2004/10/> (accessed on February 12, 2009). Obviously this writer read *The Washington Post* article "Faith through Fright," which discusses Hell Houses and *Scaremare* and decided as they were both products of a certain worldview they are interchangeable. And yes, some HELL HOUSES, **not** *Scaremare*, have made room for feminists, most notably the Hollywood Hell House.

While certainly the scenes in *Scaremare* are meant to terrify, to draw people in, to attract crowds, and to connect with youth culture, they do so without the overt use of social issues, choosing to rely much more fully on scenes of horror and pop-culture. They bewilder, they frighten, they connect this world to a living Hell, but they aim to not offend, at least not outright. The goal is not to get people to argue with their message, but to accept it.

We've known about Hell House for a few years. I'm not sure whether we're flattered or not. I'm not against those guys. That's their way, and if it's causing people to think, fine ... but from our vantage point, we're not going to go as far as they go.¹⁶³

While *Scaremare* builds community among Liberty students and between Lynchburg and the University, their focus is on reaching, exciting, and creating a fun and meaningful event for teens and others who would not otherwise come into a church environment. They do this not through presenting in your face social issues, but by frightening audiences with a more "traditional" Halloween romp.

2.7 Hell's a-Poppin': Hell House Outreach

In October 1992, the Hell House Outreach began in Roswell, New Mexico. The House was part of Pastor Keenan Robert's first ministry assignment. The original Hell House contained: a funeral for a young gay man who had passed away from AIDS, a young woman undergoing a late term abortion, a drunken driving incident, human sacrifice, a teen suicide, and a tour through Hell, with the final stop being a visit to Heaven, and finally on to a counseling area where newly committed Christians could receive prayer and advice. All of the six scenes preceding Heaven

¹⁶³ Butler, "Meet Mister Hell House."

operate in sharp distinction to it. In the Heaven scene, audience members come before Jesus, who descends from his cross to counsel to those in need. This original model still serves as the basic foundation on which most Hell Houses are based.

Hell Houses are most often performed during the Halloween season in an endeavor to alter belief practices and impart conservative Christian beliefs and social values in attendees, all while reaffirming church beliefs in participants and performers. Every year hundreds of evangelical communities throughout the United States produce Houses.¹⁶⁴ Enormous amounts of money, time, and passion go into each production. These performances are often so popular (and lucrative) that churches, some of whom have congregations of less than one hundred people, are willing to invest great amounts of time and resources in their creation. They have typical performance runs of only two or three consecutive weekends usually in the month of October;¹⁶⁵ however, production planning can kick off as early as March. Leaders come up with design ideas, create publicity, make costumes, plan out special effects, make casting decisions, and set schedules for performers and crew.¹⁶⁶

2.7.1 “Mister Hell House”

“I think he connects with people,” Mamie Roberts said. “He loves to talk to people, loves to meet people. He’s not afraid to talk to Phil Donahue.”

¹⁶⁴ These productions are from kits and from performances not using the kits, but adapted from the format. Hell House is far less controlling of its branding and image than Judgement House.

¹⁶⁵ Some Judgement Houses are performed around Easter. There is also an entire performance industry devoted to Easter performance. These performances do not often operate on the fear factor that the performances surrounding Halloween have recourse to; in fact, in Easter performances Heaven scenes, not Hell scenes, are the focal point of the performances.

¹⁶⁶ Room directors often have large say as to who will participate in their scenes. Groups grow very close and often a body of performers and crew will stay associated with the same room for several years.

Roberts beams when he talks about his media experiences. He says such exposure is good for Christianity.

“We don’t save people,” Roberts said. “We’re just called to reach people.” In recent weeks – largely in part because of Hollywood Hell House – he’s been interviewed by major media outlets: The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, CBS Radio.¹⁶⁷

Scaremare is based on fright, horror, gore, and guts, but largely not on controversy, except when elided with a Hell House. Several Hell Houses use sensational topics to draw attention from the press, re-invigorate congregants, and find recruits. The fright such performances often engender is not rooted in high budget horror or truly rendered car crash scenes, though these things certainly play a part in their effectiveness; these performances draw their strength from focusing their content and spectacle on the heightened presentation of controversial issues like abortion, gay marriage, school shootings, drugs, rape and terrorism within the spectacle. In Hell House controversial issues draw critics, open debate, and get people talking; all of these are goals of the organization, and while Hell Houses work within their church and geographic communities they also take pride in shaking up issues and confronting critics of their world view.

The majority of events, however, are much smaller than events like *Nightmare* or *Scaremare*. These smaller events are not drawing in huge *new* crowds. While controversy and protest provide media coverage, the practice of these performances still works primarily to re-enforce participants’ views about the issues at hand and the perilous position of “Christian” values in the contemporary landscape. Performances in small church communities exist to bolster believer’s faith in the rightness of the

¹⁶⁷ Butler, “Meet Mister Hell House.”

social positioning of their church on controversial issues just as much, if not more, than they exist to draw in new recruits to their mindset. The combative and in your face nature of the Hell House Outreach allows those performing in the event to take a stance on an issue, stridently proclaiming their beliefs and protecting them from the attacks of the outside world. This combative posture allows for galvanization around core values and for churches to assume an offensive posture in regard to social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and the structure of the patriarchal family – views they usually feel they have to defend. “Hell House, he [Roberts] said, has always been meant as ‘an assault.’”¹⁶⁸ This combat ready mentality bands the church’s members closer together and affirms/reaffirms that their values are, in fact, worth fighting for.

There’s little pleasantness in exposing sins, Roberts said. Getting to Heaven is the fun part. “Really, it’s just a different way of packaging church,” he said.

Gay activists say Hell House supports a culture of hate; Planned Parenthood says it inappropriately uses scare tactics that won’t reduce the number of unintended pregnancies in teens.

Roberts responds: “Hell House has nothing to do with hatred or trying to send people to hell.” However, serving any God other than Jesus Christ, he said, is serving “a lie.”¹⁶⁹

As one tours the performance fright is writ large in the expression of some audience members, as is rage and disbelief across the countenances of the many who go to disagree with (or mock) the presentation in terms of its tactics and/or its take on social issues. However, gratification is clearly apparent in the participants who perform as demons, devils, and sinners. They proudly don the transgressive roles they

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

are denied, fear, and would shun, under ordinary circumstances. Without question, these works provoke deep reactions by those who participate in them, as audience members or as performers.

2.7.2 *We've got spirit (and matter) how 'bout you?*

George Ratliff's 2001 documentary film *Hell House* begins with a series of reality television style confessional "monologues" spoken by the several individuals that viewers will follow throughout the film; the interviewees stand in contrast against a pure white backdrop while they discuss the relationship between their contemporary reality and the presence of the demonic in the everyday world. As they speak it becomes clear that they believe that demons and other spiritual influences exist on a plane that is not only tangible, but that shares equal (if not greater) import with the material world, and as well that these spiritual entities enact direct influence upon the material world. Each participant discusses specific instances in their lives in which they acknowledge the presence of the demonic such as: rape, a child's illness, and other family struggles. These critical life events have an impact on their belief structures and their continuation or resolution can be traced, by the speakers, directly to the tangible presence of the demonic and the spiritual. In short, the individuals in Ratliff's film contend that spiritual forces are primary agents of influence on their lives. The point of their *Hell House* (and most others) then is to convince others of the interdependence of the spiritual and material, and finally to encourage them to act suitably (accept Christ's offer of saving love) once they too have recognized this vision.

Within this spiritually present and socially charged realm one can clearly apprehend how the introductory sequence of the film *Hell House* dealing with participants' takes on the demonic and its influence on the everyday, in tandem with the "moral" focus of the pursuant Hell House performance, whose making the documentary covers, might call to mind not only various aspects of a medieval world view vis-à-vis the spiritual and the material, but also bring to light relationships between the performance practices of the medieval and the contemporary. These practices are such that they showcase the interaction of material and spiritual forces, forming, in performance, a reality that attempts to conjure an ideal balance between matter and spirit.

While not on the scale of the *Castle of Perseverance* or the York Corpus Christi pageants, these productions are quite elaborate, occur within specific communities who take ownership of them, and are largely created by people who donate significantly to them (financially, with time, and with skills or items garnered from their professional lives). They all require the participation of several hundred volunteers each evening. Each room of the performance is overseen, directed, and constructed by a team; it is that team's business, financial, and social ties within the community that make the rooms effective. Often room directors, one to two people who are in charge of procuring/designing/constructing the effects and scheduling and rehearsing performers, take their vacation time the week before and after the event to assemble their rooms and then to disassemble them. It is their skills and the connections they have at work or in the community that provide that cars to crash, police and fire uniforms, and lumber and cubicle space for the prayer areas.

Performances showcase horrific possibilities for death, or least to be physically injured. Mirroring the type of incidents occurring in real social space.

The group, acting through its delegates or representatives, bends or throws itself back upon itself, to measure what its members...have done against its own standards of how they should or ought to have conducted themselves...established ways of doing things, are set in train, the aim of which is to defuse tension, assess irrational deeds against the standards...and to reconcile conflicting parties—having convinced them, through showing them the damaging effects of their actions on group unity.¹⁷⁰

The House exists for the good of the group and maintains values as set forth by the group and/or its leaders. However, these values are often exaggerated beyond recognition or become debased by overemphasis and overuse. “One of the demon tour guides used a surgical tool to pick up part of the pretend fetus to show it to the tour group, shaking it in their faces.”¹⁷¹ While the ultimate goal of the Hell House experiment is to save through fright – not fear of Jason of Freddy but fear of the demons at large in a random and deviant world – this goal can run amuck and obscure the message through recourse to excessive violence and incredibly controversial issues.

No matter how long the group has planned for the event, what special effects are available, what controversial issues are presented, how the group is advertised, or how many audience and volunteers participate in the event saving souls is *always* articulated as the primary objective, even if it is not always the most successful outcome; it is the highest aim. The teen suicides and car crashes depicted in a Hell House do more than warn against certain types of behavior. They not only frighten

¹⁷⁰ Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988), 104.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

with literal depictions, but also give perspective and understanding of one's place in society vis-à-vis their relationship to the events presented.

2.7.3 “Wanna Play? You'll wish it was only make-believe.”¹⁷²

By attending performances which produce fear and enact rage audiences can exercise some of their own pent-up aggression in a safe, sanctioned environment. “Violence is present in both the themes and gestures; but the process of theatricalization renders this violence less harmful than it would be if actualized...the resulting performance is entertaining.”¹⁷³ The performance landscape allows for the release of social traumas, irritants, and sorrows and these releases are just as “real” in their catharsis, and yet less dangerous, than the avenues into which one would generally channel such feelings.

One may struggle to determine whether a play like atmosphere is in place during a performance, especially when performers have created a role with a particular social or political message, because that message is linked inextricably to the tensions of the social world from which it emerged. However, often participants' own perceptions of the characters they create are so severely skewed, that their representation within the theatrical frame appears to match what they *wish* to believe (as it makes their positions in light of the issues that much more monolithic and certain) are realistic representations of such roles. For instance, while most participants know from experience that medical professionals are not sadistic,

¹⁷² These are the catch phrases of the demented doll Chucky in the *Child's Play* horror movies.

¹⁷³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 2003), 273.

uncaring murderers the medical staff in the abortion room in many Hell Houses are presented in just that matter:

...copious blood and callous medicos are perennial favorites, of course - although more sensitive churches have begun depicting the baby killing women as filled with guilt and remorse in order to promote the invention of something called "Post Abortion Syndrome." Also in the sex vein are examples of tragedy resulting from sex before marriage, spousal arguments that drive men to adultery and the supposed evils of same-sex relationships.¹⁷⁴

There is clearly an atmosphere rooted in the poetics of play at work in the Hell House; however, it is best read by participants as realistic to allow for the release of anger, fear, and rage built up in the non-play "real" world. This reading allows participants to blow off steam, often deflating the desire for social action. The more closely the play frame represents the participant's personal view of the issues, the more release participants feel. On the other side of the spectrum, those who have different readings of characters and events within the performance often grow angrier or are more deeply offended by the note that the keying of the frame strikes; the frame becomes the forefront not the backdrop.

When the frame itself becomes obscured by the religiosity it presents and performers and audiences invest their emotions heavily in moments of performance, the line between the playful and the serious, the performed and the "real" emotionality of the event can become hard to delineate. I have witnessed blurring along the borders of this divide firsthand when an actor in a Judgement House I was attending who was playing the father of a teenager killed in a drunken driving accident attempted to read aloud the bloodied note his daughter had written to him

¹⁷⁴ Theresa Darklady Reed, "Halloween "Hell Houses" Act Out Depraved Christian Wet Dreams," *The Huffington Post*, Posted on October 31, 2008 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/theresa-darklady-reed/halloween-hell-houses-act_b_139825.html (accessed on February 9, 2009).

and had tucked away in her pocket before the crash scene. The actor, whose language was heavily accented, was having trouble getting out the words printed on the note. He was too choked up to speak clearly and his hand kept shaking so severely that he could not read the note at all. All was silent except his choked sobs.

Eventually, enough time had passed and the next group had waited outside longer than usual; the guide for the next group knocked on the door, then opened the door – a clear reminder of the play setting reality that we inhabited. The other actors in the scene who usually sit reading in the hospital waiting room – their objective to try to politely ignore the distraught father – had all dropped their papers and magazines to their laps and were staring wide-eyed in awe at their fellow performer. Finally, the woman playing the mother came over and read the note to the sobbing actor – the play frame had broken forth, but the deep seriousness overpowered any emotional slippage. Having been through the scene on three previous occasions I knew that the scene had been altered, but the strength of the performer’s “real” emotionality, pointed up both the artificiality of the circumstances and the seriousness of the purpose for which all those performing and many of those witnessing had gathered.

“All social frameworks involve rules, but differently...In sum, then we tend to perceive events in terms of primary frameworks, and the type of frame we employ provides a way for describing the event.”¹⁷⁵ For those whose stage these performances, the emphasis is on the authentic and maintaining a sense of “reality” as a means to encourage participants to understand the dangers presented by the “real.”

¹⁷⁵ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 24.

This “realness” serves to demonstrate how progressive and in touch with the times a church truly is, as well as to convince congregants themselves that the positions they hold are merited and in step with the world at large. Attempted authenticity assists in creating a willing cooperation between spectator and performer. Goffman suggests any practice can be marked off by frames; the performer (and observer) shift and manipulate these frames through keying practices.¹⁷⁶ The “key,” according to Goffman is a “set of conventions...already meaningful...transformed into something...seen by the participants to be something quite else.”¹⁷⁷

Finally, play, like other liminal phenomenon...refers to what may or might be. It is also concerned with supposition...with the domain of “as-if” rather than “as-is”... “As-is” refers to the world of what culture recognizes as factuality... [Play] can be said to perhaps play a similar role in the social construction of reality.¹⁷⁸

A part of the success of Hell Houses and like performances is the use of play as a tactic and a tool; this permits a realistic framing of events, as well a constant reference to their non-reality through the play frame. Play, above all is malleable, but it is also a space of clearly defined roles and regulations – these roles and regulations help participants create meaningful experience from the fluidity of the play action.

“Play is educative.”¹⁷⁹ Randomness is often seen as a central element of play. This is significant here, as these are performances, and it is chance and random interactions between audience, spectacle, and spectator that shape experience. I have seen this dynamic in action having gone through several of the events discussed

¹⁷⁶ Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 10.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

¹⁷⁸ Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 171.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

numerous times, as well as when sitting backstage in Hell watching the audience groups go through the scene. The group that one is partnered with thoroughly impacts both one's experience as a spectator and the performer's actions and attitudes. Randomness also works on another level within the performative space; it motivates fear. It is the chance of death and the randomness of life that is highlighted in the content and the form of the presentation. Safety from this unknown draws participants (audience and performer) towards choosing Christ.

Most of the Christian performance events discussed in this study can be understood as play events marked off by the frames of: tangibility and possibility, materiality and spirituality, the demonic and the godly. The elements of the demonic that adorn performance participants in Hell are telling markers that delineate and contrast church member identity with the identity assumed within performance frame. A performer, who simultaneously embodies real-life and fantasy persona, participates as both a character and as a church member deeply involved in the event.



Figure 2.6. Image of performer made up to appear half-demonic

An indication of the carefully balanced relationship between performance identity and the performer's real social identity is evident in the process of the physical preparation for one's role. The make-up choices themselves are created by church volunteers who research online and within contemporary culture to learn how to enact the symbolic transformation of the demons and the damned from their previous identity as committed congregants into their new temporary identity as the unholy.

The embedded frame of the demonic (or the guide if a particular performance's guides don't appear as demons, as they don't in *Judgement Houses* or *Nightmare*, Marshfield) is crucial to audience's observing the realistic scenes of

drunken driving accidents, suicides, and domestic violence as part of the real world under the influence of the demonic. “I did some of the demons’ makeup, mainly Tina’s. Each demon was kinda half & half - one side normal, the other demonized, to demonstrate how Satan & his demons are deceptive & don’t show their true sides to the world.”¹⁸⁰

Satan a stereotypical demon stands in sharp contrast to the hyper realistic scenes of death and violence. In Hell House frames are defined from a position both inside and outside of one’s social environment; these frames, as in Figure 2.6, are formed by the conjuring forth of the demonic and the spiritual present and the faith tradition, the church member’s identity, and the identity of the character.

Quite the opposite of the *Scaremare* or *Nightmare*, where groups are often ribald outside the event and become somber and frightened within, in Hell House there is a clear sense of revelry once the tour itself begins. The community’s normal association with the church space dominates while audiences wait, but once inside the reality becomes twisted, a sense of community among groups which was not present while outside the performance space, develops inside.

¹⁸⁰ Lady Gunn [pseud.], “Judgement House - Makeup Room - Demons,” LadyGunn Blog Posted on December 4, 2007, <http://ladygunn.blogspot.com/2007/12/judgement-house-makeup-room-demons.html> (accessed on February 12, 2009).



Figure 2.7. Satan on his throne

In almost every community I researched and/or observed I heard about the audience member who broke down while witnessing a particular scene. In one Judgement House in Roanoke I watched a teenage boy punch through a wall in the hallway after leaving the Hell scene.¹⁸¹ One of the great strengths of these performances is that they understand and appreciate the participant–audience relationship and use the feedback from actor to audience to make the performance more effective. Within the slippery frames of these performances, church members and participants alike negotiate with, comment on, and play within the balance of power (real and imaginary).

¹⁸¹ This occurred in October of 2005 at North Roanoke Baptist Church’s Judgement House performance.

It is clear on the level of the “real” represented that public power is concentrated in the hands of the demonic, the deranged, and the debased controlling the “real” world as it is epitomized within the play frame, a world which parallels the world outside the performance’s bounds. The control that the demonic, the horrific, and the corrupt contemporary exercise within the playscape dominate over the audience; both the audience and the victim characters can only counter this control by calling on Christ, by removing oneself from the frame of contemporary reality and working to cultivate a power that does not belong to the world of men. Within the world of these performances the righteous become part of the group subordinated by the outside world and seeking Christ – performing their Christianity for themselves and others becomes an act of insubordination directed at the powers of the demonic world. Participants perform and audiences experience Christianity at the hands of demonic control, speaking out against that control at the seasonal height of demonic power. Play functions beyond testing social boundaries; it works here to foster a bridge between death and life, spirit and matter.

Performances in this vein, operate as vehicles, which serve to delineate the demonic and to perform worlds crafted on the interplay of the demonic and its influence on reality – whether or not the performance brings into play explicitly demonic characters – each presents a distinct lack of human agency in a world being manipulated by forces beyond the everyday, and over which personal decisions to be “good” may have no consequence. The reality of demonic power is illustrated in the mirroring and distortion of social realities, which relates to the contemporary world, and the battle with evil participants find themselves entangled in on a daily basis.

There are people who do not like *Scaremare* simply because of the association with Halloween. They would like no association with Halloween. And believe me, I understand that. Obviously, October is the only time of year that you could do it.¹⁸²

Scaremare and its offspring are evangelical tools, but the structure and content of their scenes is primarily drawn from standard Halloween imagery that depends on the presence of the demonic, and thus, the spiritual.

2.7.4 “*The P.T. Barnum of fundamentalism if ever there was one...*”¹⁸³

The popularity of Hell Houses escalated in the mid 1990s, reflecting not only the continued growth of evangelical communities in the United States and abroad, but the explosion of Christian popular culture.

The days when Christians shunned secular culture are over—which means many Christian products are competing against the best of the general market though Christians still cut them a lot of slack. While the Christian pop-culture bubble does a good job of keeping people out it no longer functions to keep Christians in...Our walk around the hall brought us past the Christian pirate who gave us a cheery wave...I’d been flabbergasted at the shamelessness of jumping on the pirate trend, but after it occurred to me that it was only a trend because a lot of people – not just Christians – had jumped on it.¹⁸⁴

Marketing strategies have emerged, which purposefully blur the lines between the sacred and the secular in an effort to make over and restructure the secular commercial marketplace. In line with this intra-cultural dependency Hell House performances are based on models of the secular haunted house and on images of secular Halloween entertainment. “Its politics draw on emotional discourses – those

¹⁸² Butler, “Meet Mister Hell House.”

¹⁸³ Bill Geerhart, “Halloween Hangover,” Posted on October 29, 2003
<http://www.postfun.com/pfp/features/98/nov/hellhouse.html> (accessed on May 6, 2004).

¹⁸⁴ Radosh, 24-25.

of evangelism and those of the popular culture of horror.”¹⁸⁵ In Hell House, just like in *Halloween* (the movie), it’s important to stay a virgin.

The Hell House genre makes use of the symbolism and the special effects of the secular. “Halloween is associated with dressing up, suspending social conventions, overindulgence, and a rash of slasher movies sharing its name.”¹⁸⁶ The Hell House Outreach’s purpose, however, is not solely to entertain the masses and to convince them of the error of their ways, thus bringing them to Christ, it is also to convince those inside the church community that the horrors they perform are threatening, pressing, and real. As performers enact the parts of abortion girl and gay suicide teen they enter a world of pain and suffering, perhaps this suffering engenders empathy and understanding, but this empathy also re-affirms the need to save those sufferers from Hell and the world at large. The Hell House galvanizes church members by working to make sin more personal, tangible, and visceral; it strengthens the participants’ desire to remove sin from the world.

The threat of demonic presence manifests in performed, and therefore tangible, social ills; threats of the socially external type, even when placed upon (not within) the body of the performer, “embody what director John Carpenter refers to as ‘right-wing horror,’ where the threats identified are located externally (as opposed to ‘left-wing’ horror which is concerned with internal threats). Horror’s formulaic cycle of threat-safety-threat has certainly long subsisted on fears of contact and

¹⁸⁵ Bivins, *Religion of Fear*, 10.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

contagion.”¹⁸⁷ In Hell Houses social reality and the spiritual merge to defy and destabilize contemporary values. Hell Houses are created to be extreme staging graphic death. Many of the tactics employed are graphic, violent, and deeply disturbing – audiences bear witness to that which is not normally experienced up close and first-hand. “...One encounters such a variety of horror—rendered in documentary detail—that one might reasonable conclude that few places of safe purchase exist in the world.”¹⁸⁸

To assist performers with the strains of performing sin and victimhood, Hell House’s have prayer teams, counselors, pastors, and backstage support networks that participants can share their experiences with. However, in spite of the trauma incurred everyone wants the parts of demon tour guide, abortion girl, gay, lesbian, or suicide teen. Several of the performances I attended required that those playing the roles of demons and sinners pray before entering costume and make-up, after entering costume and make-up, and again before departing to protect them from the damage that wearing, performing, and embodying evil might do to their souls.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 163.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 150.



Figure 2.8. Cast for the Hell scene praying together before the performance begins

Because it uses bold designs and rampant sensationalism, as well as the promise of salvation, word spreads quickly among community members. Local and national media coverage, of Hell Houses especially, contributes to their notoriety. To entice more press, Reverend Keenan Roberts has a library of bombastic, in your face, rhetorical slogans to attract the media and protestors such as: “Shake your city with the most in-your-face highflyin’ no denyin’ Satan be cryin’keep you from fryin’ theatrical stylin’, no holds barred cutting edge evangelism tool of the new millennium!” or “Get prayed up and powered up and be prepared for the ride of your ministry life!”¹⁸⁹ After all, good protest means good money.

Hell Houses have usually had an audience of about three thousand each night. In communities where it may be the only entertainment going, many will see the

¹⁸⁹ New Destiny Christian Center, “The Hell House Outreach Kit.”

House several times. They come back not necessarily for the spiritual significance of the performance, but in an effort to socialize with one another and to see friends and family perform. In 1995 only a sprinkling of Hell Houses were scattered across the country; however, the Hell House Outreach was soon to draw attention from media nationwide. Roberts launched his Outreach Kit comprised of effects, advice, scripts for scenes, sounds effects (supplemental effects and scenes can now be purchased individually via the godelstiny website), as well as helpful information about dealing with media, mixing blood, and constructing spaces for the performance; as of 1998, he had sold over three hundred Kits.

After Columbine the interest in Hell House was at a high, but after September 11th they were eclipsed by more tangible and pressing tragedies. While some Hell Houses faded from existence, others, rocked by the fears of September 11th became more committed and strengthened in their desire to return America to the order it had lost. The loss of order, reflected in the loss of a patriarchal and socially conservative social system, was what enabled the attacks and order was what must return for America to be safe again. In Chapter Four I will discuss *Judgement House: Operation Homeland Security*, an event that clearly lends itself to these nostalgic fears; however, it is important to note that while there were less Hell Houses, their fierceness of those that remained only escalated in the face of national disaster.

Hell Houses were brought back onto the national scene, ironically, by a group of Hollywood writers and performers that sought to lampoon them for their intolerance. The Hollywood Hell House, while it sought to lampoon the Hell House Outreach through mockery succeeded in bringing it back into the spotlight as a media

darling. Roberts was in demand on the talk show circuit, kit prices rose, and so did demand for the productions among church groups who felt wronged and attacked by the Hollywood backlash.

Within the last five or so years (since 2001) there has been a resurgent fascination with and study of evangelical Christian forms of pop-culture, following a conservative leaning in United States politics, the continued expansion of evangelicals domestically and internationally, and the commercialization of Christianity due to increased Christian utilization of popular media and merchandising. Evangelical Christians have comprehended the importance of popular appeal and mass communications. However, to maintain the message and to compete with the secular market, the aesthetic quality of the production is often sacrificed; the result is that a sell-out, a compromise of ideals.

The largest subset of Christian gifts is apparel. Christian T-Shirts are the uniform in which most Evangelical suit up for battle, and the companies that make them are constantly scrambling to come up with designs to appeal to today's youth, generally to embarrassing effect: "God is my DJ," "Friends don't let friends go to hell,"... "Modest is the Hottest." The tangled rationale of that last one— we can persuade girls to dress in a way that does not attract sexual attention by telling them that doing so will (and I would add as a message to men should) attract sexual attention, especially if they wear this form fitting shirt—begins to hint at the tension in bending Christian messages to pop-cultural forms.¹⁹⁰

The product message is often too loud, flashy, sentimental or just plain cheesy to be apprehended with seriousness for both Christians and non-Christians. However, evangelicals are employing new strategies and finding ever savvier and sophisticated pathways into contemporary media and marketing culture in an effort blur the boundaries between the secular and the sacred. Taming the message is a sacrifice for

¹⁹⁰ Radosh, 12.

Christian performers and media makers, yet they rationalize it as a way to advance the gospel.

Certainly, for many Christians the connection to Halloween obscures the message, but while the message is compromised it fights this watering down in the overt graphics of the social reality it creates. Hell Houses also work well to appease the believer's mistrust and unease with the secular world by reinforcing particular narratives and beliefs about where sin is located in the world. These works provide escapist entertainment for church members and general audience members, as well as for their performers and are created primarily for profit in terms of: souls, coffers, and spiritual warriors. Evangelism's resurgence on the national field as a social group with significant influence has brought the events, objects, and views of an often dismissed culture to the forefront.

Connections between medieval performances, the articulation of lived faith, and the portrayal of participants' experiential world can be made in relation to Hell Houses; however, there are other performance events which depend on the linking of belief and the experiential as well. Often these performances go unnoticed, due largely to their community-oriented and less overtly controversial subject matter. The Hell House that most people are familiar with is rendered large by the grotesquery of Hollywood Hell House and the ironic "sociological detachment" of *Les Freres Corbusiers Hell House*, as well as through the official Hell House's flashy and overtly confrontational content.¹⁹¹ Not only do these linkings of Hell House performances

¹⁹¹ Dan Bacalzo, "A Hell of a Time: Les Frères Corbusier brings the controversial *Hell House* to New York City," Posted on October 4, 2006 http://www.theatermania.com/new-york/news/10-2006/a-hell-of-a-time_9170.html (accessed on October 15, 2007). I saw this performance and will talk about it more in the Conclusion. Hell House was put on by a LFC a Brooklyn based **experimental theatre**

with an explosive, simplistic didacticism parallel the ways in which medieval performance has often been viewed, as "... 'Childlike,' 'naive,' and 'popular,' ... mask[ed] by patronizing stereotypes....,"¹⁹² additionally they provide a vivid sketch of a culturally telling imaginary of the average Hell House and their participants.

The stereotype-contradiction isn't lost on Roberts, who laughed when recalling the shocked reactions of Hollywood Hell House's producer and director upon meeting him.

"It was like they expected some Bible-thumper in a polyester suit," Roberts said. "It was nice to see them recognize that we're just regular guys"¹⁹³

The looming shadow cast by this imaginary conservative Christian often prevents a nuanced view of the other types of performance that occur in this vein. These other performances, specifically *Nightmare*, can be fruitfully connected to medieval performance practice and belief structure, which I will discuss in Chapter Three, as well as to the marriage between slick branding and the contemporary culture of horror, violence, and fear, which I will discuss in the upcoming section on the Tulsa church, GUTS, that originated the *Nightmare* as a high budget response to smaller Hell Houses across the nation.

2.8 GUTS: The Stuff Nightmares Are Made Of...

Come as you are, as you were,
As I want you to be
As a friend, as a friend, as an old enemy
Come dowsed in mud, soaked in bleach
As I want you to be¹⁹⁴

company. They put on the performance supposedly without any **judgment**, presenting the kit as it was given to them by Roberts.

¹⁹² Gail M. Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 5.

¹⁹³ Butler, "Meet Mister Hell House."

¹⁹⁴ Nirvana, *Come as you are*.

It seems appropriate to start our examination of *Nightmare* with the story of GUTS Church, which created and staged the original *Nightmare* production. GUTS prides itself on being a church where worshippers can “Come as you [they] are.”¹⁹⁵ And this rock-n-roll ethos permeates all levels of the church culture. Even when transplanted (and transformed) to Marshfield, Wisconsin, where most of Chapter Three’s energies are focused, it helps to grasp *Nightmare*’s formative environment as a fulfilling marriage of secular marketing and successful outreach. This combination of GUTS well branded image along with *Nightmare*’s heavy dependence on horror and socially relevant issues is central to apprehending its methods, and to understanding how Marshfield has adapted the event away from the in your face Hell House inspired aesthetics and content to the type of performance better suited to the specifics of their church and community environment.

Um... so, what IS the message? All I get from the video is that they scare the heck out of people by re-creating actual traumatic and devastating events... and then pray w/ people?
Huh? What’s that have to do with the Gospel? This is silly.¹⁹⁶

The concerns that surround other types of Christian performance discussed in this dissertation also surround *Nightmare*. However, *Nightmare* in Tulsa is significant in that it is the bloodiest, goriest, and scariest performance out there; it also holds a place of esteem among gore seekers in Tulsa, it is known as the best executed scare around.

¹⁹⁵ This sentiment is expressed by GUTS pastor Bill Scheer in several newspaper articles, as well as in writing about the church on their own website and church publications.

¹⁹⁶ Lavria, “GUTS Church’s Nightmare Haunted House ‘Outreach’,” A Little Leaven Blog, Posted on October 8, 2008, <http://www.alittleleaven.com/2008/10/guts-churchs-ni.html> (accessed on October 15, 2008).



Figure 2.9. Demon lunges at audience members after death scene

I guess you could call it a Christian “spook house,” but it is so much more. For all of us long-time Tulsa residents, we eagerly look forward to this major community event. In 2006 over 30,000 people attended the *Nightmare*, making it one of the largest special events in Oklahoma.¹⁹⁷

I have placed the introduction to *Nightmare* and the story of its creation at GUTS at the end of this Chapter because GUTS’ *Nightmare* is a combination of the strategies of both *Scaremare* and Hell House.

Scheer: Well, *Nightmare*, this is the 15th year of it. It is an annual outreach that is essentially designed to scare the Hell out of you and, and that’s literally it. What we do is we take, uh, it originally started as the five biggest killers of young people graphically exposed, and the price Jesus paid for our love. And now just because the first few years it was fun, because we got to sneak up on people, people didn’t know what it was and now everybody knows and its kind of full disclosure we got just throw our books open and let ‘em, let everybody see it. So we change it every year this year there is kind of terrorism theme in it.

It’s a haunting house, is, is what is it is essentially. We just take very culturally relevant situations and just graphically expose it; we’re not glorifying it or anything. You know it’s interesting ‘cuz there’s things involved in it that are going to be very gripping for anyone that can go through.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Anne Carlisle, “Nightmare Time Again,” Tulsa Voice Blog, Posted on October 3, 2007 <http://tulsaveice.blogspot.com/2007/10/nightmare-time-again.html> (accessed on February 9, 2009).

¹⁹⁸ Scheer, interview on *The Future of Real Estate*.



Figure 2.10. Demon putting away body after abortion scene

As one can see from Scheer's words *Nightmare* deals with socially relevant issues like Hell House, but it also chases the scare factor and mass local audience appeal that is *Scaremare*'s bread and butter. This blending of the social world and the horror world is an important part of the Tulsa *Nightmare* and while its brutality and bloodshed carry over to the Marshfield *Nightmare*, it's in your face social message is transformed in Marshfield's version in an effort to bridge communal tensions and create a viable community event for church members, Christians, and non-Christians alike.

The story of *Nightmare* begins in the shadows of the large brass hands that grace the campus of Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the United States of America, right near the center. The church is called GUTS because according to its

founder Pastor Bill Scheer, “It takes GUTS to stand up to God.”¹⁹⁹ GUTS Church is non-denominational and has been labeled both seeker-sensitive and emergent, though they propose no label for themselves. They hold services that aim to reach out to those people who would not be caught dead at a regular church service.

Commentator: Well that’s probably been a lot of the reason for GUTS Church explosive growth and how people have just flocked there.

Scheer: Well, the church is essentially it’s designed to reach the unchurched. It’s people that, and I thought I invented that term but now everybody uses it, and so maybe I didn’t, but people who weren’t necessarily attracted to traditional church...

Commentator: People who weren’t comfortable sitting in those hard wooden pews—

Scheer: —Probably, no, yeah, because none of it was relevant towards, I mean for me, I grew up in 70s and the church wasn’t relevant to me then, and why not make it relevant? Where we’ve got a command to go into every man’s world and not try to change them just culturally and socially but, but impact their lives at the deepest level and that’s what we try to do...²⁰⁰

Following this philosophy GUTS services are decidedly informal and wildly emotional; complete with dancing, singing, and a less structured approach than what might be considered a more “traditional” worship service. As a method they take pride in, and stake their success on, being relatable and open to all who come. They reach their target audiences through a variety of groups, events, and ministries such as: the “Tougher than Hell Motorcycle Rally” and *Nightmare*. As discussed below a basic set of beliefs is hard to locate in GUTS promotional material:

Their website confuses and disturbs me. The key tenets of the church, based on the site, appear to be... Motorcycles... giving... goatees... did I mention

¹⁹⁹ Lou Ann Ruark, “Shepherd of the Street: Bill Scheer’s Unorthodox Ministry Reaches Kids in Need,” *Tulsa World*, January 9, 1994.

²⁰⁰ Scheer, interview on *The Future of Real Estate*.

motorcycles? I'm looking for a mission statement, a set of core doctrinal beliefs, ANYTHING. Hmmm. The Sub30 page gives me Bacon Mints, fashion tips, Tetris, and events. You go with what you've got, I guess.²⁰¹

The website's flashy, hip, and intensely categorized interface does make it hard to pinpoint a central belief system; however, some basic beliefs can be summarized through listening to podcasts of Pastor Scheer's sermons,²⁰² tracking through each segment of the website (Youth, 2nd Mile, Sub30, GUTS Girls, etc.), reading Pastor Scheer's book (available for free download from the GUTS site), *What have you got to lose? 9 Truths Considered*, as well as by talking to *Nightmare* participants who attend GUTS Church. As Harold King a ministry tent worker says, "Man, I do the ministry tent because I know that when people confess the name of Jesus Christ that the Word says that it breaks every yoke of bondage in their life."²⁰³

In short, GUTS teaches that the Bible is the authoritative word of God, salvation is attained by grace alone through placing faith in Jesus, and Jesus is sinful mankind's only hope of redemption. GUTS also teaches belief in Heaven and Hell, as real destinations; and finally, no matter what one does on this earth their eternal destiny is based upon the acceptance of Jesus. Or as Julainna Gonzalez says, "They're coming out just totally amazed that this story is personal. It's for them. And then I get to pray with them and they're walking out with a smile on their face, because they know they're going to Heaven"²⁰⁴ The whole organization lets off a

²⁰¹ Frank Turk, "More like a working Hiatus," Blog *Pyromaniacs*, Posted on July 17, 2007, http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2007_07_01_archive.html (accessed on December 14, 2007.)

²⁰² Podcasts of sermons are available through subscription at iTunes.

²⁰³ Harold King, GUTS Church *Nightmare* promotional video.

²⁰⁴ Julia Gonzalez, GUTS Church *Nightmare* promotional video.

marketing savvy air and seeker-oriented philosophy in which God works to support success, happiness, and wholeness in the lives of all who place faith in him; at GUTS God works for you.

Let's look at this a minute. You are a sinner. Your life is a train wreck—or a train wreck ready to happen. You don't feel inside. You have problems that you cannot solve and issues that drive you crazy. You aren't the person you want to be...How does Jesus make the difference in your life? He changes you from the inside out...He gives you a new heart.²⁰⁵

In 1992 GUTS founders Pastors Bill and Sandy Scheer moved to Tulsa fresh from their work with an inner city ministry in Los Angeles. Inspired by their success in working with gang members, they began GUTS Church with a mission of reaching youth on their own terms. They rented a large warehouse space on 41st Street in downtown Tulsa. At their inception the space was too big for the congregation of two hundred; however, it was ideal for the outreach event they had planned: *The Nightmare on 41st Street*, a title fitting not only of their graphic aesthetics, but also of their roots in pop-culture. In the first year, according to Scheer, over seven thousand five hundred people attended the event.²⁰⁶

Nightmare stemmed from Scheer's knowledge of a Hell House started by a Texas pastor who put on the event for a mere hundreds of dollars.²⁰⁷ Drawing on Hell, the demonic, damnation, and the horror of the everyday Scheer believed he

²⁰⁵ Scheer, *What Have You Got To Lose?*, 14.

²⁰⁶ According to GUTS Church records attendance and salvations have increased every year. Starting at: 7,500 in 1992, 8,000 with 800 saved in 1993, and 12,000 to 15,000 in 1994. The numbers plateau and then increase after the Church moves to their new facility reaching a high of 35,000 in 2005.

²⁰⁷ This is not the same Pastor Keenan Roberts who sells kits from his Colorado Church. I have attempted to contact this Pastor but so far have only been able to find his brother.

could combine the impact of the Texas Hell House with more resources to make the event powerful, visceral, and entertaining.

‘We just thought if we could put some resources into it, it could be a good thing.’ Thirty thousand dollars later, Scheer and his congregation were inviting people to visit their worst nightmares...teenagers mangled in pools of blood, to twitching drug addicts moaning on the floor...²⁰⁸

While *Nightmare* may have been inspired by a Hell House it takes a different approach in both structure and style. The clearest distinction is that *Nightmare* does not present a Heaven, though Hell plays a large part in the performance. In *Nightmare*, while you are presented with clear scenes of suffering there is no effort to place the specific characters from previous scenes in recognizable positions in Hell. The other major distinguishing factor is the voice over narration and the portrayal of the crucifixion in which religious sentiment and socially loaded imagery coalesce in the be-jeaned, bare-chested, neo-Nazi looking young men, who whip and scourge Jesus for his crimes, equating an image of worldly evil and hatred with the spiritual torment of Christ, as well as rendering a scene of male aggression, dominance, and bare-shirted power over the temporarily submissive form of Christ who is biding his time and eventually will, like the beaten down identity of masculine and centralized power, rise again.

²⁰⁸ Megan Gilligan, “Guts Celebrates 10th Season of Scaring,” *Tulsa World*, October 25, 2002.



Figure 2.11. Christ being beaten before being crucified

The event, true to their mission of teen outreach, is aimed at showcasing the leading killers of teens in the United States: drunken driving, gang violence,²⁰⁹ suicide, and drug use. Much like GUTS Church itself, the event reaches out to those who might not ordinarily come to church. As Holly Newman, Public Relations Director for the *Nightmare* in 2002 said, “When we first began other churches didn’t support it at all. It’s not your typical way of helping people.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ In 2002 the Tulsa Nightmare changed the issue of gang violence to school violence because, as organizers have noted, it seemed to them to be more relevant an issue to the youth of the greater Tulsa area.

²¹⁰ Natalie Mikles, “Church’s Yearly Spook House is Different Kind of Scary,” *Tulsa World*, October 30, 2002.



Figure 2.12. Christ on the cross

GUTS brings together currents of ministry common to many types of community-based Christian performances that center on the afterlife and the demonic and operate out of a desire to bring teens in on their own terms. Often performances focus on: blood, guts, and terror.

Absolutely, I mean we, we it's very culturally relevant. I mean if there are some people, the concerns people have are well is it too graphic? Yeah, well I, it's way too graphic but it's real, so we can't change that and I think when we as the church decide to be real people are attracted to it.²¹¹

Through disorientation and graphic portrayals of real life occurrences GUTS puts its message in competition with a media saturated environment, as Pastor Freel of Believers Church in Marshfield, Wisconsin, another church that performs *Nightmare* observes:

²¹¹ Scheer, interview on *The Future of Real Estate*.

JF: Dramatic outreach is visually stimulating, studies have been done that show the average attention span is about 15-20 minutes and we want to get our message across in that time. It's a big message and *Nightmare* allows for all the senses, for communication that is deeper than just words. The performances give you smell, sight, touch, and the message gets communicated.²¹²

Nightmare is utilizing tools that can only be accessed through performance,

“Basically, we just like to take reality and graphically expose it.”²¹³

This attempt to be accessible and cool can create tension with others in the Christian community. GUTS techniques, in *Nightmare*, and as a church, have been both heralded and flogged for attempting to promote a message of, “come as you are, doused in mud, soaked in bleach.”²¹⁴ Critics aside, Scheer has experience (some might say street cred), as he freely admits in his sermons available in podcasts and in several media interviews to being at one time a misguided young man active in drugs and heading “nowhere fast.”

It wasn't always that way. Scheer grew up not knowing God and looking for answers in all the wrong places. ‘I was in college doing drugs and had a hit called on me in the spring on '79,’ He found a life line of support from his family who recently found God...The elder Scheer asked God to prevail in his son's life.²¹⁵

According to Scheer he accepted God later that evening when he found out the hit on his life had been rescinded.

²¹² John Freel, interview by author, Believer's Church, Marshfield, Wisconsin, October 7, 2007, Tape Recording.

²¹³ Scheer as quoted in Megan Gilligan, “Guts Celebrates 10th Season of Scaring,” *Tulsa World*, October 25, 2002.

²¹⁴ Nirvana, *Come as you are*.

²¹⁵ Scheer as quoted by Susan Jakobsen, “Glory Bound: New Home for GUTS Church,” *Tulsa World*, April 12, 2000.

The sensibilities of a renegade preacher with a rock-n-roll lifestyle permeates all of the church's offerings and lends force to their message of a community whose dramatic outreach attempts to reach, "the kids who are flicking cigarettes on the street..."²¹⁶ GUTS invites people to worship to whatever music makes them feel good and even has dance contests during its services.

PM sub30 service, we got there late—and found a dance-off not only in progress but in full throw-down. After the music stopped once, to the credit of whoever was MC, I did hear someone say, "Remember—let's keep it clean, OK?" So there was no dirty dancing going on, and I'm not personally so much of a prude as to say that dancing is itself an evil in which Christians should never participate.²¹⁷

The GUTS Church message, or lack thereof, maybe maligned, memorable, and/or misguided; they may very well be missionary geniuses – the jury is still out, but one thing is for certain GUTS Church is slick, cool, and hip.

Tonight we have a lot going on at Sub30. We have limited edition, v-neck, T-shirts for sale starting tonight, and they will cost \$12. This weekend Sub30 is taking over the Admiral Twin Drive-in! We are going to see the new Blockbuster hit *Indiana Jones* at 9 pm! Meet us there at 8:45, and we will all get together and have a blast.²¹⁸

Scheer started his cooler than Jesus outreach by going to the parking lots around Tulsa where the "troubled" kids hang out and talking to them about their lives, presenting GUTS as an alternate space that is fun, open, and supportive.

He believes he has reached a level of effectiveness with his target group that other ministries have not reached. He does no counseling however and frequently makes referrals to a professional or an agency that can help a particular youth with addiction or psychological problems. Pastors of some mainstream churches praise the 36-year old ministers outreach approach, which one describes as a "dynamic ministry that reaches the young people we

²¹⁶ Ruark, "Shepherd of the Street."

²¹⁸ GUTS CHURCH, Sub30, "The Low Down," <http://www.gutschurch.com/Sub30/tabid/454/Default.aspx> (accessed on May 19, 2008).

can't seem to reach." Another Minster says, "We're all trying to reach out to teenagers...Jesus told Andrew and Simeon "Follow me and I will make you a fisher of men." Well, Bill Scheer is fishing with different bait and its working.²¹⁹

Teenagers started pouring in the doors and parents after them; many came to see just what it was their children were doing. What exactly had transformed them from, "Kids with drug problems. Kids about to drop out of high school. Kids without parents. Leather kids. Metal kids...Kids who have been abused. Kids who need something..." to members of Jesus' flock?²²⁰

"...his grades have risen from D's and F's...Shad's last report card revealed a B average...he and Shad now play pool together... "A dad and his son playing pool together...Shad has changed so much I couldn't say all the ways. And so have I." McMinn is a regular at GUTS.²²¹

Once in the door and in the seats many parents stayed and the church grew. GUTS now hosts a bike rally entitled the "Tougher than Hell" bike rally, *Nightmare*, has podcasts, and has relocated to a church campus that seats over four thousand five hundred people. Their range of programming is staggering: running from the typical age and gender denominated programs available at most large churches to twelve month internships, 2M an entire life training program, as well as bike rallies and dramatic outreach, music, merchandise, CD releases, facebook groups, bowling nights, luncheons, and an extensive relief mission organization that travels abroad, nationally, and locally. Their TEAM RELIEF program donated significant manpower, money, and time to Hurricane Katrina relief and then began working

²¹⁹ Ruark, "Shepherd of the Street."

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

around the Tulsa area. “GUTS Girls” one of their most successful groups, headed by Sandy Scheer, offers classes on topics ranging from how to entertain to how to maintain a marriage. They have luncheons and brunches and a decidedly juicy couture looking pink rocker logo. While the ladies are at play “GUTS Men” learn how to be savvier in dealing with the Lord and their ladies. Last but not least, GUTS Church has developed an internship program for students going into ministry to learn hands-on through specializing in an area and then working for a year at the church in their specialization such as: Audio & Lighting Production, Event Planning, Graphic Design, High School Ministry, Junior High Ministry, Kids Ministry, Missions, Music, Non-Profit Business, Sub30 (college), and TV Production to name just a few. All of this is not free and GUTS merchandise is a large presence at both their events and on their website. You can buy pictures from GUTS events and have them placed on key chains, coffee mugs, and mouse pads. A powerhouse of slick marketing most of the staff looks like they stepped out of a Christian rock band and their look fits stunningly well with their thoroughly-branded image, an image that is ideal for presenting a work like *Nightmare*.

As mentioned earlier, *Nightmare* in Tulsa grew out of GUTS Church’s desire to ramp up the Hell House that Scheer had seen in Texas and bring bodies in to GUTS and other churches in the Tulsa area. While *Nightmare* focuses on the top killers of teens as their starting point the Tulsa *Nightmare*, keeps true to its Hell House roots by often representing scenes of abortion, rape, terrorism, and AIDS related deaths. These threads and their courting of controversy connect Tulsa’s *Nightmare* more closely to the Hell House phenomena than to events that take

recourse in traditional scares, seeking to reach out to their communities in less confrontational ways. Over the years the Tulsa *Nightmare* has maintained a sense of creativity using different framing devices such as having the whole *Nightmare* exist in the warped head of a child molester. They have also sought to change up special effects by using 3-D imaging and intense and involved prosthetics for their demonic guides; they have sought to stay close to both controversy, which draws crowds and originality, which draws return visitors.

2.9 Moving Forward

A common tactic utilized amongst all of the performances discussed in this Chapter is to play on deeply held fears, fears rooted in anxiety around socially explosive issues. The politics these works are steeped in are largely heterosexual and patriarchal. Performances revive the terrors of a godlessness associated with communism rampant in earlier decades of the twentieth century, equating godlessness and dictatorial control with anxieties about gender roles and racial hierarchies. After the tragedies of September 11th end time fears in Christian America came to seem more palpable, what with America actually being under physical attack. This newly raging fear demanded to be fed by surety in some form; these performances intersect with that desire for surety. Through staging the outside world they re-affirm the social beliefs of those inside the community, while actively making participants feel as if they are engaged in meaningful spiritual work. “It’s amazing. It’s a great tool. My

wife and I are so excited to be part of it and just look forward to seeing how many thousands of kids give their life to Christ.”²²²

These performances, asserts multiple levels of fears, the terrors of the best-selling *Left Behind* book series, which I will discuss in Chapter Five: what if I am not among God’s chosen? What if I’m doomed to eternal suffering? But these fears are nothing new. They are themselves historically located in larger fixations about the erosion of political and economic power for traditional status holders.

In Marshfield, discussed in the next Chapter, there is an anxiety over changing times, but also a desire to help the community as whole move beyond these tensions. This desire to move beyond has helped tame some of the graphic nature and slick marketing of Tulsa’s *Nightmare*, Hell Houses, and *Scaremare*; however, *Nightmare* in Marshfield still remains a frightening experience full of the “reality” of random death and chance, and it presents quite clearly the message engendered in these works: you are not in control, the world is sliding away, the world cannot be trusted, you cannot be trusted, the government cannot be trusted, what is to be trusted in this time of uncertainty is, ironically, the least tangible entity in the free world: faith.

²²² Jeff Badey, GUTS Church *Nightmare* promotional video.

3 Nightmare: Your Own Personal Jesus

YOUTH. For my sin I will mourn,
All creatures I will turn,
And when I see misdoing men
Good counsel I shall give them
And exhort them to amend.²²³

TS: They are wonderful folks, and while I don't necessarily agree with all of their ideas, I respect...many of the Believers members. I even spoke to a young man who turned away from what was clearly a self-destructive life because of *Nightmare*. Hey, if it saves someone's life that is great. I take issue with scare tactics in order to get to know God. While I don't belong to any church, I do try to maintain a relationship with God...conversation gets strained at times, but I hope we understand each other. I do know that when I feel the presence it is not through fear or desperation but during times of gratitude. Evangelicals clearly dig the fear approach, and more destructively, the "I'm right everyone else is wrong" stance. That is always bad, bad news.²²⁴

3.1 Introductory Map of the Chapter

This Chapter asks how contemporary bodies relate to spiritual referents for, "in these Pageants Christ's naked and tortured body is open and vulnerable,"²²⁵ as well as how the construction of a space dealing in physical trauma, but replete with spiritual meaning can effectively circumscribe an audience in a performance event, forging a strong model for performances that seek to reach out to other worldviews, while enforcing and strengthening the belief system of those already inside their networks of belief. Can these performances, from our contemporary position allow us

²²³ *Youth*. at *From Stage to Page - Medieval and Renaissance Drama*. NeCastro, Gerard, ed. <http://www.umm.maine.edu/faculty/necastro/drama> (accessed on June 12, 2008).

²²⁴ Troy Schoultz (former reporter at *Marshfield News Herald*), email correspondence with author, February 17, 2008

²²⁵ Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 140.

to encounter some of what medieval audiences may have experienced? How do their aesthetics express the intertwining of Christian belief and commercial culture?

In this Chapter I will discuss the central elements of *Nightmare* performances in Marshfield, Wisconsin (and somewhat less in Tulsa, Oklahoma) that address their relationships to their communities and the audiences they aim to serve. To that end, this discussion will examine the role of the human body and the graphic display of suffering on the body, *Nightmare* performances' recourse to and roots in pop-cultural imagery, as well as in sacred imagery, the intersection of spirituality and the day-to-day, and scenes of crucifixion and their relationship to concepts of medieval vision and time. In the following pages, I offer a reading of *Nightmare*'s goals and aesthetics in terms of both communal and spiritual efforts, marking these performances as an extension of earlier forms of spiritual performance. *Nightmare*, like its historical predecessors, is a performance that concerns itself with bringing the physically tangible in relation to the spiritual to teach life lessons.

Today performances meant to teach proper social behavior exist, among many other locations, in American high schools where they are utilized to instill social values and to curb behavior understood as socially undesirable; these secular performances aimed at teens deal with many of the same issues as Judgement House, *Nightmare(s)*, *Scaremare* and Hell Houses, and these secular dramas can be seen as shaping forces on the decidedly non-secular performance events discussed here.²²⁶

²²⁶ For a more Warholian and comedic take on the phenomena of performances such as *Every 15 Minutes* (mission and description of *Every 15 Minutes* is attached as *Appendix A*) look at the "Wake in the Lake" episode of the short-lived sitcom *Aliens in America*. The show itself focuses on the relationships between the Tolchuck family and their sixteen year old Pakistani exchange student Raja, and the friendship between Raja and the nerdy Justin Tolchuck. In the episode, a take off on *Every 15 Minutes*, Raja, as the Grim Reaper gets to select one student to die in a staged car wreck; he upsets the balance by picking Justin instead of the traditional choice of the most popular kid in school, Dan

These secular performance events are lauded for their impact and community involvement; meanwhile events such as *Nightmare* intending to scare teens into similar conclusions are often lambasted for their graphic practices:

DT: People say it is about saving teens. Oh, It is. We also want teens to think. Even if they don't accept Jesus they might think again about having a few beers at a house party and jumping in a car, or drugs. You know?

KM: Yeah.

DT: Those are things with serious consequences. We hope *Nightmare*'ll bring kids closer to a relationship with Jesus, but we know it'll freak them out about all the other stuff too.²²⁷

This forceful aesthetic, however; while obviously part of *Nightmare*'s religious message, as discussed later in this Chapter, through the analysis of the brutal crucifixion scenes at the end of the performance, is also part of a widespread culture understanding – both secular and religious – that to reach teenagers you need to “scare them straight.” The *Nightmare* and other performances use graphic and realistic violence not only out of religious motivation, but also as part of an effort to be on par with other types of secular didactic performances that teens are privy to.

We live in a fear filled and violent world, it is no shock that fear breeds fear and that a whole host of messages utilize fear and graphic violence as a medium for creating changes in audience behavior. In referring to violence and its presence in

Archer. The principal intervenes and asks Justin to step down and survive; he won't and the two die together. The whole issue becomes a contest between the underdogs and the popular revolving around whose mock funeral will be the most attended. Dan Archer ends up throwing the “Wake in the Lake,” the biggest party of Medora High Social Season and Justin and Raja serve as designated drivers for those at the party.

²²⁷ Donna Thompson (*Nightmare* director), phone interview with author, November 14, 2007, Tape Recording.

daily life and performance practices of the middle ages, Sponsler observes a similar connection between secular entertainments and their violent content:

In the Late Middle Ages, violence was often on display. In public spectacles of punishment and execution of criminals as well as in violent sports such as tournaments, bull and bear baiting, an combat games, assaults on human and animal bodies were commonplace.²²⁸

This link between secular appeal and the way religious intent is performed, advertised, and influenced is made evident in the Tulsa, Oklahoma *Nightmare*'s publicity outreach in 2006 in which, "The church has distributed tickets to every high school and junior high school student in Tulsa and the surrounding communities."²²⁹ These tickets declared *Nightmare* to be full of among other things, "gore, grime, and GUTS"²³⁰ a clever play on the church's name and on the desires of the Halloween fun seeking teenage demographic.

TS: If you ask any Believer's Church member, they will probably tell you that the purpose of *Nightmare* is to show young folks the consequences of bad decisions. Really what they are trying to do is scare folks towards God and Jesus. Why else would they have the Satan/damnation finale and Mountain Dew afterwards? Nothing satisfies the fires of hell resulting from wickedness like a Dew.²³¹

These forms of message oriented performances exist to steer teens away from "bad" life choices, and each of them occupy the same field of recreational options, especially in small towns, without many competing entertainment choices. *Nightmare* in Marshfield has even been credited with a reduction of teenage driving accidents

²²⁸ Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 136.

²²⁹ Staff Reporter, "Have your kids got the GUTS?," *Tulsa World*, October 7, 2006.

²³⁰ GUTS promotional flyer for *Nightmare* 2006.

²³¹ Schoultz, email correspondence with author.

during the Halloween season. As Allan Hicks Staff Writer for the *Marshfield News Herald*, who has filed several articles about the event for the *News Herald* writes,

During a typical year, volunteers hear of at least three dozen people who have dramatically altered their actions as a result of going through the *Nightmare ...* Some enter drug or alcohol rehabilitation while others reconsider their thoughts about suicide...²³²

Christian and non-Christian alike attend, making *Nightmare* part of the larger field of cultural performances intended to reach teens; not simply a religious event, but one designed to straddle the uncomfortable divided between reality and its relation to the divine. While, advertisers do not hide the religious sentiments of the event – there are crosses, as well as the words *sponsored by Believer's Church* all over the advertising material – they do seek to connect with teens on both a religious and secular level by offering pop-culture inspired horror and suffering in tandem with a religious message.

The relationship between spectacle and effect are closely tied together in works like *Nightmare* and their secular counterparts; there is a cause and effect relationship between fear and reformed action. One is scared to die so one does not drink. However, *Nightmare* and other religiously oriented works in this vein, must take a step beyond the type of fear that can be alleviated by personal action for their message to function. While operating on the level of a behavioral deterrent, these performances must not stop at solely linking right action to personal choice: I will not let my friends drive drunk. They must create an overwhelming atmosphere of lack of control: over one's life trajectory, over one's physical surroundings, over one's own movement all the while still advocating good teen decision making, rendering it clear

²³² Allen Hicks, "Haunted House Results So Far: Frighteningly Good," *Marshfield News Herald*, October 13, 2003.

that even if you don't drink and drive someone else might and you could still die. In *Nightmare* the presentation within the narratives and the physical space of chance, randomness, and the inability to control the actions of others are tactics used to make participants think about what actions they could take that would ensure security in an unsafe world, a world ruled by chance.

SR: Anything can happen, at *any* time...preparation for, that's what we want to send home to people, get ready. When you leave here tonight, tomorrow at breakfast...You just never know what's going to be thrown at you...what the Devil might bring...be prepared is what we're saying.²³³

This double operation of social and religious salvation allows viewers to question the behavior of the characters, such as the suicide girl – *what else could she have done, what other action could she have taken?* Also, this layering emphasizes the role of security (through Christ) in a landscape populated with the overwhelming forces of randomness. It is the character's (and in turn the audience reflected therein) depth of personal despair that draw these spectacles toward their violent conclusions. In this despair and randomness, which is brought about by the demonic forces that plague our world, the answer to the suffering young woman's despair as she puts a gun to her head and pulls the trigger in reaction to the screaming and violent fight between her parents in the next room is not solely to accept Jesus and not solely to get counseling or some other form of socially acceptable assistance, but an amalgam of the two – seeking help in the social world is commendable, but the only way to truly save one's soul from such torment and despair is to seek strength in Christ.

Resources in the social world are proffered as viable forms of help, church oriented counseling, as well as information about secular counseling services

²³³ Remus, interview.

available in the community are available, proffered, and present after each performance; however, that same social world where those services are rooted is also understood as highly susceptible to the demonic, through its commerce with liberal ideals and the changing face of the community.

These performances work against the image of the contemporary world, as a sane and healthy place, and through attempting to connect the bodies of performers, the actions of characters, the spectacle and performance space closely to the participant's day-to-day experiences *Nightmare* seeks to indict the world they present as corrupt, vile, a place of twisted torment and sick bodies, an expressionistic view to the workings of the contemporary social context, in which only Christ's broken body, and faith in the power stemming from that violation can lead to wholeness.

In so doing these depictions of violence questioned the notion of orderly social harmony...moreover, violated bodies as well as violent ones could serve as images of resistance...And finally, the dissolution of the body as it is tortured and ultimately destroyed in these plays could become a positive maneuver in the struggle over control for subjectivity...²³⁴

The broken bodies in *Nightmare* subvert the dominant vision of the vital body as healthy and useful, present the social body as corrupt, and ask participants to ponder in what realm they wish to be fruitful– the present or the eternal?

3.2 Welcome to the Nightmare: “You’re Next.”²³⁵

When a group from Marshfield's Believer's Church visited *Nightmare* in Tulsa they were moved by its effort to focus on the top killers of teens: suicide, drugs, gang violence, and drunken driving. They spoke to the organizers of the Tulsa event

²³⁴Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 128.

²³⁵ This was the slogan of the Marshfield Wisconsin *Nightmare* in 2007.

and returned home to Wisconsin with the soundtrack and a promise of advice and counseling if their church decided to put on the event. *Nightmare* had, and has, no organized kit like Hell and Judgement House. The Tulsa *Nightmare* has given soundtracks to ten churches that have put on their own version of *Nightmare*. The Marshfield *Nightmare* is the one that has both adapted the material to its own context and remained a strong and viable event over the years.²³⁶ Marshfield, Wisconsin's *Nightmare* has lasted despite tension between the church and secular community in the town and due to the *Nightmare* organizer's tremendous commitment to the event, as well as their desire to extend the event beyond the bounds of the church, letting it act as a draw for the unchurched and a fun event for the whole community.

A: No. I'm not, we're not Christian...We come every year....I'm not moved by the Jesus stuff. I know its coming. But the deaths make you think, they're gross too...Hell is the best when you ride through and all those kids are screaming, it's funny, but freaky.

KM: Would you ever volunteer?

A: No, but I'll come.²³⁷

Marshfield's broader community mission is evident in the name recognition around the area. For example, as I was waiting in the airport to fly out of Wisconsin, I was wearing a *Nightmare* sweatshirt I had been given (quite the 'blessing' after our bags

²³⁶ Often churches take on these performance events not realizing the time, commitment, and resources needed to launch such a large scale effort. They also don't realize the community backlash that may come with performing some of the more controversial content. Without the large scale support and step-by-step manual provided by Judgement House or the name recognition of Hell House many church groups find themselves lost. They either blossom into it over a year or two or the event is replaced by another form of outreach.

²³⁷ Anonymous Audience Member NM #1, interview by author, Believer's Church, Marshfield, Wisconsin, October 7, 2007.

were lost in transit) and I was approached by five people who asked if I had been, or currently was, involved in the event.

Where can you see a car accident, a suicide scene, a drug fight, and Jesus hanging on the cross all in one building? The *Nightmare* at Believers Church is the answer. This is truly an amazing place to walk through. It opens your eyes to a person's problems and where they can find help by looking to God.²³⁸

Believer's Church, first known as Faith Christian Center, started meeting for services in Marshfield, Wisconsin in 1980. Within a few weeks they leased their first space, which they used until 1981 when the congregation had grown and the space was overflowing with congregants. They then moved to an old furniture warehouse building. Their next extension, the Orbital building, a large warehouse style building that also serves a youth center was built to house *Nightmare* in 1998 after a delegation from Believer's Church saw the event in Tulsa. For the first two years they used the narration/soundtrack that had been given to them by GUTS Church in Tulsa; however, in 2001 they changed the narration/soundtrack to fit the needs of their community more fully.

Nightmare in Marshfield, Wisconsin is a huge event for the town and for churches across the region. Occurring over three weekends in October it draws over thirteen thousand visitors and over one thousand volunteers (two hundred to two hundred and fifty a night). Volunteers come in groups from churches throughout the state to volunteer for *Nightmare* as, "an inexpensive way for a church to do mission,

²³⁸ Wisconsin Girl [pseud.], "Experience the Nightmare at Believers Church in Marshfield, Wisconsin," Posted on June 11, 2007, http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/269039/experience_the_nightmare_at_believers.html?cat=8 (accessed on October 17, 2007).

we give them some food, and some even sleep here in the Orbital or at other participants' houses."²³⁹

The Orbital, a massive building constructed by the church in 1998-2000, specifically to house *Nightmare* (the car crash scene is permanently placed inside the building), sits in the middle of a large field off of Highway 13, just on the outskirts of Marshfield. Stretching across the field are several huge white event tents brimming with teenagers. The waiting crowd is dotted with the occasional parents or youth group leaders. Christian hard-core rock music blares out of the speakers, occasionally – though not while we attended – a live band will play. The wait runs from between two to seven hours and the cost of admission is eight dollars at the door.

When we reach the front of the line we are given a brief talking to by a gruff security guard who explains the security process that we will be expected to engage in as the next step in our entry process. He also offers suggestions for the faint of heart: "LEAVE NOW." There will be rats, people will touch you, people freak out all the time here, etc. When we step into the next room it is as if we have been detained in a large-scale evacuation. The warehouse, the fields, the military style costuming of the security guards, and the throngs of people are all vaguely reminiscent of a B-movie about the Soviet threat, or even more appropriately those waiting in line to take the mark in one of Donald W. Thompson's films about the Rapture.

We are led to a counter where we are instructed to fill out and sign a waiver allowing *Nightmare* performers and crew to touch us, but in which we promise we won't touch them. We must then empty our pockets of pens, paperclips, cameras, etc. We do this because we are told someone in our group might "freak out" and hurt

²³⁹ Freel, interview.

someone else with one of the mundane objects we carry in our pockets. A sure fire way to build tension is to throw suspicion back on the everyday, as well as upon the other people around us. All of our possessions are placed in a labeled bag and we are directed into two lines: one for women and one for men in which a metal detection wand is run over our entire body.

Once our group has been cleared for take-off we cluster outside the metal door, which leads into *Nightmare*. We are then made to stand in a straight line and spit out our gum (if we have it) into a bucket held by a uniformed man playing the part of a drill sergeant. He chastises anyone who breaks a smile and lambastes the awkward teenagers who laugh or give him lip – questioning the manliness of the gangly young men who sneer and laugh, trying to look brave.

Finally, we are led into a round holding tank, a circular space of about eight feet in diameter lit from above through a plexi-glass ceiling, and pumped full of haze. The room is cylindrical and the walls are painted in white and black stripes. Strobe lights flare. It is hot. There are sixteen of us in the small room plus an attendant. The attendant does not smile, much less speak. There is a piped in soundtrack that kicks in after a full three minutes of standing in a circle in a tight strobe-lit space considering each other. The silence only punctuated by heavy breathing, the occasional giggle, the occasional teenager whispering, and the periodic screams of the groups already inside *Nightmare*'s playing space. The voice on the soundtrack tells us we are entering a nightmare and that it could be our nightmare; the voice grows more and more distorted and about the last thing we can make out is the distorted voice telling us that this nightmare could all be in our own minds.

We are then shooed out of the tight space into a vastly open space containing a house whose front porch is populated by swarms of teens at a house party.²⁴⁰ Then there is darkness. Next our attention is seized by the sounds of a crash, a high-pitched screaming draws our gaze and then our group drifts over to an area where we see a crashed car, downed telephone pole, and injured, bloody teens on the ground and splayed out on the hood of the car. The scent of beer lingers from the party scene. It is cold and it snows over the accident. The space, though divided into individual scenes, especially in the outside scenes appears hangar like; the high ceiling and vastness seems sprawling in comparison to the small strobe enclosure we have come from. It feels as if we are outside.

We step over the injured and dying teenagers into a dark empty space filled with gunfire; two gangs fire mercilessly at each other, at the end of the gunfire they lay dead and we step again through the space of the deaths into a living room where a wife and husband fight with melodramatic brutality. They do not speak but scream, the narrative here is provided by the soundtrack, which is deliberately contorted, frightening; the voice is unidentifiable, is it Satan, God, a sociopath, a voice inside your head, a garden variety demon?

Physical and symbolic cues and actions are the keys audience indicators, much like in the liturgical drama of the medieval period. The soundtrack pumped over the loudspeaker is deliberately slurred and undecipherable; it rises and falls, and identifiable voices fade in and out, for the average audience member it provides the emotive background landscape, while physicality provides context and meaning. The

²⁴⁰ This scene used to take place in a bar, but in 2003 it was changed into a house party to make it more relevant for teens.

older performers playing the parents are aided in their delivery by the narration, allowing their physicality to expand and distort into an intensity that could, for inexperienced performers, be stifled by having to speak and remember the words. As they fight, our attention is slowly drawn by a hushed sobbing, to a room on the other side of the living room, a bedroom where a teenage girl sits listening to the parents arguing.

As the light grows brighter on her weeping and slouched form our group drifts over to surround her. The adults continue fighting, but her whimpering cries become louder and louder. She does not speak. She stops sobbing and just breathes, faster and faster. As she raises her hand from her lap we see that it conceals a gun. She places the gun in her mouth and pulls the trigger. BAM. The lights go black for an instant and when they come back up there is silence. She is slumped over; her brain matter spattered behind her. Eerily the parents fighting soon resumes as the next group enters and we are shooed forward. Several young women perform in this scene in rotation, as it is one of the most demanding parts and the rotation between actors allows the performers to clean up in between audience groups. Having multiple performers also allows many young women to perform one of the most popular roles in the production.

As you walk through the place, you will feel a lot of different kinds of emotions. It is a little disturbing at some of the scenes. The car accident scene looks so real with a teen in the back seat bleeding to death after his friend crashed the car after a drinking party. The next scene as parents are in the house fighting, a young girl sits crying. She has a gun in her mouth and the shot goes off.²⁴¹

²⁴¹ Wisconsin Girl, "Experience the Nightmare."

We are quickly ushered out of this room by the macabre demons that have been wending their way in and out of our group, pushing us closer and closer to the display, as well as closer to each other. Our group is herded into a sprawling scene of depravity intended to represent a crack house or drug den. It is dank and grey and it smells horrible. Bodies are slumped over on tables and chairs, moaning, half alive, some sprawl out overdosed on the floor. Somewhere a baby cries. Open and chaotic, the highly imaginative, yet still grotesque drug den²⁴² unfurls itself logically into the next scene – the voyage to Hell.

We are led into a hallway of demons; prosthetics deform their faces and limbs. They reach out from alcoves and touch us, whispering unintelligible hisses in our ear as we proceed down the hall. Eventually we are crammed into a giant cage that is suspended above the ground. When the whole group is loaded the cage moves through Hell. In Hell other demons are hanging in cages all around us, the performers go about equating the audience's physical situation to the damned that surround us, in case anyone missed the point thus far. Hell is heavily populated; between sixty and seventy volunteers perform in the Hell scene each evening. Hell is a scene that is easy to train new performers for and large visiting groups can work together, having a shared volunteer experience. People writhe on the floor below our suspended slow moving cage; they reach out at us from the walls and shake the other cages. At the end of our ride we are ushered into the next section of our tour.

We enter a series of rooms showing the crucifixion in brutal and graphic terms; Mel Gibson's passion may be "truer," but this brutality is live, close, hot, and

²⁴² *Scaremare*, in some years, also represents a chaotic cross between a drug scene and a den of horrors.

smelly. In the first space we see Christ almost nude in the center of a group of men who beat him mercilessly with whips as he tries to stand. In the next room we watch as Christ is whipped and nailed to the cross. We stand as close as three feet away. Christ screams and his blood gushes, by the end of the night blood pools up around the audiences' feet. In the next room his ever more bloodied body hangs on the cross, dying.

The demon roles may be more fun, but the roles of suffering, such as the suicide and Jesus, are the ones most admired by the other performers and there is an entire team dedicated to providing clean up, refreshments, and comfort to these performers throughout the night, bringing them water, snacks, and moist towels between groups.

AP: I don't think I could do it every year. Everyone wants the part, but it takes a toll—I'll volunteer, but you get to know that, that feeling of being alone, and though God is there and it's a sin I know, you know that moment so many times and you cry and you scream and it feels like it is real. You show so much.

KM: Why do you do it?

AP: You see people who come in and they are, they resist and you see, you feel like they need to be forgiven, and for some reason that you don't know they think they can't be, and in the scene God works on them and they open up, and you feel this weight come off them like they know they're forgiven now, God is going to be there.²⁴³

After navigating through three rooms rife with Christ's suffering, as an audience we are led into a room with a white screen. It is a calm, cool, quiet room where we watch a video about how Jesus died for us and about the point of the

²⁴³ Anonymous Participant NM, interview by author, Believer's Church, Marshfield, Wisconsin, October 7, 2007, Tape Recording.

Nightmare. We could die at any time; life can be suffering, but it does not have to be, and our suffering, confusion, and anger can be spared us by committing to Christ and accepting his sacrifice. The bad things we do, the confusion we feel, need not keep us separated from the people around us who care us, nor from God. In fact, it is this very separation which often makes us so confused that we sin out of desperation; we are fooled by the forces of evil into finding comfort in actions that will only ensure our damnation.

As we flood out of the room into a large space framed on one side by refreshments and on the other side by a table of sweatshirts, T-shirts, and CD's volunteers approach us and ask us to pray with them, or if they can pray for us. On the second, third, and fourth rounds it is not too hard to get by the earnest individuals trying to counsel us. In fact, out of all the events discussed in this dissertation, the Marshfield *Nightmare* is the only one that does not sit each group down for a group prayer. Instead, many groups flood the open room and designated counselors walk throughout the space asking us to pray with them or permission to pray for those who have just toured the event. They also ask a series of questions about the *Nightmare* and one's experience there such as: Were you scared? What was your favorite part?²⁴⁴ This more laid back approach has its advantages. "...I'll talk about it with them, you know, it was scary, awesome. I'll talk about what happened you know effects. If someone wants to talk about God if I want to I will or I'll walk away, no thanks, I

²⁴⁴ According to Stacy Remus, public relations director for *Nightmare* in Marshfield, when the counselors are asked what people respond to the questions above the most popular answers are: 1) Hell and 2) Jesus on the cross.

paid.”²⁴⁵ Teens feel more comfortable talking to other people in a casual environment and the one-on-one conversation often removes the teen from a peer-pressure oriented response that can, and often does occur when prayer is held in a larger group setting.

3.3 The Key Issues

The room that looked like it came from the movie *Wrong Turn*, in which people were hacking each other in half with chainsaws, was by far the scariest room. The school shooting scene was most realistic and therefore the most terrifying because it could actually happen.²⁴⁶

In the above mentioned shooting scene the youth violence serves as the catalyst for thinking about the nature of violent action within pop-culture, emphasizing the point of the performance, that something has gone terribly wrong in a world where school shootings are not unheard of anomalies but events to be feared, prepared for, and warned about.

SR: We thought about transitioning to school violence – not the gang scene – they did in Tulsa, and, others voted no. But you know our mission is to deal with the top killers of teens in America. I was on the side to change it. I mean, maybe less kids die from school shootings, but they say so much about where we are and this world you know, that kids could do that to other kids that they can do that, they’re taught, they learn, to do that, to kill.

KM: Isn’t gang violence scary in the same way?

SR: Not here, not in Marshfield. It’s sad that that kind of violence happens in so many numbers, but it isn’t reality for most of our teens and the way to get a hit with them is to show them things they know; not things they imagine. In other communities maybe the gang thing would work. I’m sure it’ll come up again for vote next year. I think a lot of the kids want to change it too.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Anonymous Audience Member NM #2, interview by author, Believer’s Church, Marshfield, Wisconsin, October 7, 2007, Tape Recording.

²⁴⁶ Emma McRary, High School Junior as quoted in Dhara Sheth, “We dare to go through the Nightmare and live to write about it,” *Tulsa World*, October 26, 2007.

²⁴⁷ Remus, interview.

This culture of violence – shootings, gangs – represents the result of loosening strictures in a culture, that to some appears, “...to tolerate everything except Christianity. This ideology is killing our kids.”²⁴⁸ According to Standaert in *Skipping Towards Armageddon*, a frank, if somewhat biased, discussion of the political intent and rhetorical symbolism of Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series this tension,

...can be attributed to the increasing number of ways that the world views realities...identity politics has become a defining factor of our times... hand in hand with a postmodern world less certain of these absolutes, which fundamentalism wraps around itself in an attempt to offer hope amidst confusion...²⁴⁹

As Bill Scheer, the Tulsa pastor who created and popularized *Nightmare* asserts about the intent of *Nightmare* and its relation to the contemporary world,

I’m thinking its more than just a reality check, it depicts challenges and problems with our culture and who we are right now. And it provides a solution. I think it absolutely pushes the envelope, but I think our culture does too. What our children are experiencing at the age of thirteen, we better provide a solution for. Our culture does a good job at pointing out the problem, but we as a church need to provide a solution for that...²⁵⁰

The message embedded in the scenes of death and violence in *Nightmare* is not the commercial spirituality of ‘We are Columbine,’ the message is that *you*, watching, *you* are Columbine. This message in turn creates community by drawing boundaries between us and them, the world of material culture and spiritual culture. For instance, just as the Marshfield *Nightmare* does wish to reach out to Marshfield’s non-Christian community it also wishes to indict those who do not share church

²⁴⁸ Terry and Tom Kongslien, “Our youth being devoured by evil one,” Opinion Section, *Marshfield News Herald*, October 12, 2006.

²⁴⁹ Michael Standaert, *Skipping Towards Armageddon: The Politics on Propaganda of the Left Behind Novels and the LaHaye Empire* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2006), 4.

²⁵⁰ Scheer as quoted in Megan Gilligan, “Guts Celebrates 10th Season of Scaring,” *Tulsa World*, October 25, 2002.

values in the creation of the violent world displayed; if you are not part of the solution you are part of the problem. Exactly who is this *you*? The “easy” answer is: those who seek and perform abortions, perpetrators and victims of rape, Marilyn Manson, homosexuals, gang members, drug users, drinkers, practitioners of arcane magic – in short the UN-saved; those outside *or inside* church doors who allow the corrupted values of today’s secular world to form their social actions.

When more fully examined the *you* discussed above is everyone involved, on all levels of the performance event, in all positions of the cultural field. *Nightmare* performances do the work of reaching out to embrace outsiders through making connections to American pop-cultural imagery – a wealth of imagery firmly rooted in “values” that they seek to fight – such as horror films and the teenage predilection for the gory, the loud, and the fl(e)ashy. However, they do not use these images without knowledge of what they are doing; they utilize these images to draw in consumers and in a Brechtian distancing they then use the spectacle to critique the very drive that pulls the consumer towards the image presented. “Seriously, you know this is what people want to see. People who are interested in church are at church, doesn’t mean they’re right though...Reality, the graphic stuff that brings people in.”²⁵¹ While the performance clearly reaches out to those not already part of a church community, those involved in church may also need help.

For those that are part of and those who are outside of the church population, “*Nightmare* has gone from being a religious experience to being the cool thing to do

²⁵¹ Stacy Remus, phone interview with author, November 10, 2007, Tape Recording.

in October.”²⁵² For most of the teenagers that attend these events they have become a way to affirm their spirituality while still managing to maintain a modicum of cool.

Since *Nightmare* deals with issues people face like suicide and drunk driving, *Nightmare* is something Sushen said she can bring her friends to it even if they don’t usually attend church.²⁵³

Nightmare is a Christian event “cool” enough to share with friends, and those in the religious and secular community look forward to it each year.

TS: It has become one of Marshfield’s biggest seasonal attractions, if not THE biggest attraction. Second perhaps only to the county fair, but that would depend on which 1970s musical superstar is headlining the grandstand any given night.²⁵⁴

3.3.1 *I Have a Confession: God is my Autopilot*

The notion of seeing, internalizing, and thus naming one’s fears recalls Foucault’s “confession.” Comparably, this brand of confession or talking with God also creates a powerful discourse in which the Christian relinquishes power over their lives by confessing themselves and thus giving that power to God.

So what have you got to lose by believing you are a sinner and you can’t save yourself? What happens if you finally admit you are out of control and nothing you do will make anything better? You get the answer to all your problems: Jesus.²⁵⁵

While one must take care not to minimize individual agency in Foucault’s discourse or in the realm of Christian re-birth and spiritual confession, it is clear that in both

²⁵² Dhara Sheth, “We dare to go through the Nightmare and live to write about it,” *Tulsa World*, October 26, 2007.

²⁵³ Bryanne Sushen as paraphrased by Allen Hicks, “Haunted House Results so Far: Frighteningly Good,” *Marshfield New Herald*, October 13, 2003.

²⁵⁴ Schoultz, email correspondence with author.

²⁵⁵ Scheer, *What Have You Got to Lose?*, 20.

models freedom and forgiveness are directly related to the relinquishing of personal power to a higher force, whether that higher force be the state or Jesus.

The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites: one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles...One confesses in public and in private...one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain...The obligation to confess...is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands" only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place...²⁵⁶

The cultural acceptance, adaptation, and deployment of "confession" relies on the sinner's awareness and ownership of their guilt before God; once that guilt is owned and confessed its weight is gone and it becomes, not a fault at all; it is merely an inevitability on the path to enlightenment. The recognition and attendant confession of one's own corrupted and inferior nature in relationship to both God's love and the hurdles of the crazy, corrupted world is precisely what events such as *Nightmare* seek to engender in their audiences.

What have you got to lose by believing in the devil? The lie that God is the author of evil, that He's responsible for all the misery in your life, and that there is no hope for you to come out of it. You lose deception – You are no longer deceived and blinded from the truth that there is an evil force in the earth that opposes all the goodness of God and wants to destroy your life. You know who your real enemy is.
You know who your real friend is.²⁵⁷

Nightmare specifically attempts to show the audience who this "real" friend is by bringing the horror of the crucifixion into conversation with everyday experience, allowing for confession and surrender.

²⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume One*, Trans. Robert Hurly New York: Random House, 1978), 59-60.

²⁵⁷ Scheer, *What Have You Got to Lose?*, 10.

DT: No matter how many times I see it, I know that Jesus suffered for me and that is what I want kids to see, that suffering has already been done and that you can stop your pain and give it up, and some kids can be really alone and hurt. You remember being a teenager? I want them to see that their suffering can be positive and what they go through is nothing to the things they are seeing here and if it is true to them and does relate...there's help here.²⁵⁸

Through the construction of a space where daily experience (drunk driving, domestic violence), horror, and religious imagery (Hell and crucifixion) work in tandem *Nightmare* works to assist sinners in admitting their failings, and through that process of confession name those failings, and then accept those failings before God, experiencing the release of “truth” and the breaking free of the constraints similar to those found in Foucault’s notion of confession.

SR: I have seen so many people just fall apart in the end. So much has happened and they don’t know what to do and they turn in and see what they have isn’t enough to get through; when they think about it they might not know God, I, think, but they know they need something and...They know where drugs or drinking – where – where so much in this world will get them and they know they need to do something.²⁵⁹

3.3.2 *The Challenge of Mimesis*

No reverence is shown to Christ’s image, as a thing...because reverence is not due save to a rational creature. It follows therefore that reverence should be shown to it, in so far only as it is an image...the same reverence should be shown to Christ’s image as to Christ himself.²⁶⁰

Theologians, philosophers, and social thinkers have engaged for generations in complex discussions about the relationship between image and referent. Aquinas, quoted above, asserts that images can be viewed as a way to engage the spirit rather

²⁵⁸ Thompson, phone interview with author.

²⁵⁹ Remus, interview.

²⁶⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Online Edition 2008 Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4025.htm> (accessed on June 1, 2008).

than declaring them hollow, void of substance, without weight; however, he still asserts that images glean their power from the truth to which they refer. When one is staging the “Truth” of the Bible this becomes a dangerous proposition; the performed images not only refer to Biblical history, but create that history on the bodies of performers.

SR: It is hard to be a demon in Hell and we pray together each night about those people. The sinners though, to repeat that sin over and over again that can work on you too. We check in a lot with the people playing those parts throughout the night, throughout the show and rehearsals... it takes a lot...Jesus, he suffers and suffers and that is hard to do for hours...we try to keep those rooms light in between groups, popcorn, jokes, because that suffering is not meant for him.²⁶¹

This breakdown in the relations between the religious image and the vessel of the human body can be clearly seen in Taussig’s description of the mimetic faculty, “The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power.”²⁶² The assumption of authoritative power by a representation of authority may be liberating in a Bakhtinian inversion, but when dealing with the sacred, “this bodily participation in the potentiality of another world”²⁶³ was, and is, not only an issue for performers, but for an audience as well.

Christian faith ought to take embodiment seriously: “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us...” (John 1:14) The embodiment of God in Jesus Christ is in faith’s perception, God’s decisive and crucial self-disclosure. But for those who believe in God’s continuing manifestation and presence, the

²⁶¹Remus, interview.

²⁶² Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xiii.

²⁶³ M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 48.

incarnation is not simply a past event. The words *still* becomes flesh. We as body selves...are affirmed because of that.²⁶⁴

By witnessing Christ's crucifixion during pageants, audience members participate/d in the event of the crucifixion. Whatever the intent vis-à-vis the intersection of spiritual world, contemporary world, and performance space "...in the medieval theatre," much like in community-based religious performances of today, "...the audience is always present as a silent partner..."²⁶⁵ The idea that a human body draws on the power of divinity and may actually in presenting that divinity become powerful, is a risky proposition that haunted not only medieval performances, but also problematizes and strengthens the impact of the *Nightmare* of today.

KB: I know, you know, he isn't really in pain, but he looks like it and, and you know it must have hurt. What you see in your schools and in your church and talk about are right in front of you, right here. You can feel it, even though we are all laughing...and then you hear the screaming while you wait to come back in.²⁶⁶

As the words of the young woman quoted above, whose role it is to bring refreshments into the room where Jesus is being lashed, indicate there is tremendous strength to be found in representation. Empowerment, identity, and understanding become substantial and tangible when they are enacted.

Note the *replicas*. Note the magical, soulful power that comes from replication. For this is where we must begin; with the magical power of replication, the image effecting what it is an image of, wherein the image shares in or takes power from what is represented...²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 8.

²⁶⁵ Hans-Jurgen Diller, *The Middle English Mystery Play: A Study in Dramatic Speech and Form*, Trans. Frances Wessels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 112-113.

²⁶⁶ Kathy Baxter, interview by author, Believer's Church, Marshfield, Wisconsin, October 7, 2007, Tape Recording.

²⁶⁷ Taussig, 1-2.

In medieval experience the differentiation between real (material) and what is unreal (lacking materiality) overlaps so that one is often seen in light of, as having effect on, or in relation to, and often equivalent with, the other. Surely, this interaction can help us to understand how medieval performances were read. However, it can also be fruitful in the examination of performances such as *Nightmare*, in which the world of the audience and the performers, the space of performance along with the spiritual nature of that space, and the marriage of the scared and sinful in the event all allow the audience to interact with the spectacle through a type of vision akin to that of the medieval participant.

3.3.3 *Hell IS Other People*

- In 2007 more than half of adults (57%) say that the devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.
- In 2007 46% of born again Christians deny Satan's existence.
- Two-thirds of Catholics (64%) say the Devil is non-existent and only a symbol of evil. (2007)²⁶⁸

I remember an old seminary professor I once knew who told his students something like this: 'Don't ever preach about Hell without tears in your eyes.' His meaning was clear: If we truly believe in Hell, our hearts will be broken and filled with love for those who deliberately choose to go there.²⁶⁹

It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God for one moment; but you must suffer it for all eternity.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ The Barna Group, "Beliefs: Trinity, Satan," <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=6>, (accessed on July 15, 2008).

²⁶⁹ Billy Graham, My Answer, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, http://www.billygraham.org/MyAnswer_Article.asp?ArticleID=5061 (accessed on July 15, 2008).

²⁷⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, 1741.

The principle of Hell was central to Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* and many others like it. Preachers from Christian denominations various and sundry have made a name for themselves in pulpits and at altars, across radio and television airwaves, and on street corners with fire and brimstone sermonizing designed to terrify their listeners by bombarding them with the horrors of Hell in the form of visions of heat, starvation, physical torture, deprivation, and darkness that stretches on past eternity. This type of preaching rests firmly on the principle famously espoused by Billy Graham, "If we had more Hell in the pulpit, we would have less Hell in the pews."

The concept of Hell – eternal and wickedly uncomfortable – when presented to the right demographic can serve as a catalyst towards leading a life that is "righteous" and within the bounds of church sanctioned behavior. Both churches examined here, GUTS and Believers Church in Marshfield, articulate belief in a literal, physical Hell as central to their religious doctrine.

Everything in Heaven reflects the character and nature of God, so it is filled with life, love, peace, joy, and infinite wisdom and power. Likewise, Hell reflects the nature of the devil, who is pure evil. No love, mercy, or grace there. No fun times. Just hate, rage, condemnation, shame, isolation, loneliness, and total hopelessness. 24/7 for the rest of eternity.

Where do you want to go when you die?²⁷¹

These groups, understandably, attempt to represent Hell in their performance outreaches as closely to their particular Biblical guidelines as possible. They portray and articulate Hell as a fiery inferno, full of sufferers *a la* John 5:16, "If a man abides not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned."

²⁷¹ Scheer, *What Have You Got to Lose?*, 18.

Simultaneously accessing a pop-culture image of Hell to draw in those more familiar with horror films and Halloween than they may be with the biblical portrait of Hell, practitioners recognize both the religious and biblical significance of Hell's representation while acknowledging that the use of make-up, prosthetics, and cages draws in, "...people who need a shake, to say wait, I don't want to go there...it is not, not a movie, but they see it and it's scary that way..."²⁷² The pop-cultural titillation that Hell presents works on members of the church community as well,

BS: I don't know how we got all the make-up lay-outs because I haven't been here the whole time – some are left, but we have a chart for each one – some have been here since I got here, but people will look for things for the demons on-line or in movies, people get really into this, especially after we added the prosthetics.²⁷³

Despite the emphasis on literality in the groups discussed in this dissertation, there are also contemporary Christian beliefs operating within the church communities discussed here that regard the nature of Hell as rooted in the spiritual aspects of suffering, over, or at the least in tandem with Hell's physical torments. Hell within this spiritually oriented ontology is articulated as a separation from God's love. The pain attendant to a Hell experience is most fully apprehended as stemming from the free will of humanity to actively reject God's offer of eternal life; suffering in this type of Hell experience is an eternal epic of regret. Billy Graham sums up this type of Hell in an essay in a 1984 issue of *Decision* magazine. "...Hell is a terrible

²⁷² Remus, interview.

²⁷³ Becky Schlueter, interview by author, Believer's Church, Marshfield, Wisconsin, October 6, 2007, Tape Recording.

burning within our heart for God, to fellowship with God, a fire that we can never quench.”²⁷⁴

The specific Hell a person may believe in is hard to pinpoint, even if one knows the denominational beliefs of that individual, as doctrinal beliefs and human understanding exist in the perilous region where theory and practice collide. Even among those interviewed in this study, within the promotional material, and performances themselves Hell is articulated with reference to biblical literality, pop-cultural imagery, as well as spiritual suffering. Whatever the blending of beliefs that affects how Hell is represented the presentation of Hell can be an effective tool in reaching the churched and unchurched alike.

The spectacle of death that comes before the Hell scene leads us to equate the day-to-day life depicted in the scenes before with Hell itself. Hell becomes a natural progression, an extension of the world we live in. Most often Hell, for those who place belief in it, has been understood as a place of intense, eternal, physical, and/or spiritual torment. Condemning another human being to eternal punishment for having a divergent belief system is something that not many people aspire to or take pleasure in. Even many conservative Christians, who are often represented as what one participant at *Nightmare* in Marshfield termed “Hell Happy,”²⁷⁵ are not overjoyed with the prospect of sending other people into a burning lake of fire or into a spiritual torment of loneliness or into any combination thereof. The desire to prevent that end is one of the reasons outreach is such a serious and touching issue for those involved

²⁷⁵ Remus, interview.

in projects like *Nightmare*; they present Hell, in part, to stay that punishment for their friends, neighbors, and loved ones.

Hell has become both a great tool and an embarrassing “reality” to many fundamentalists and other evangelical Christians.

I don't agree with preachers who say we're going to go to Hell if we don't get right with God. God is loving and kind, and I don't believe He would send anybody to Hell. I think people who believe in Hell are just angry and want to see other people suffer. — A.McF.²⁷⁶

The notion of Hell as a place of torment is a major stumbling block that prevents many potential converts from accepting the beliefs of conservative Christianity. Many saved and unsaved persons reject the concept that a just God could create Hell.

I respect you, but I believe it's wrong to say God will send some people to heaven and some to hell. I believe in God's love, and I think some day every person will share in the joy of heaven. — T.B.²⁷⁷

In short Hell is a major impediment to fulfilling the “Great Commission.” It is often the deal breaker, not the rainmaker. Thus, churches presenting Hell in performance must use the literal scripture, but insert an imaginary world horror to appeal to a wide range of individuals.

This discomfort with utilizing a literal fear of damnation that manifests itself in physical torment can be read as a progression away from a physically/bodily oriented world in which suffering need be articulated on the human form, which once served as the primary vehicle for experience. This personal bodily suffering, linked to Christ's weak and brutalized body stands opposed to a distance oriented view of calamity and suffering garnered through television news and the internet. This

²⁷⁶ A. McF to Billy Graham in “My Answer.”

²⁷⁷ T.B. to Billy Graham in “My Answer.”

separation from apprehending physical suffering as essential to salvation can also be noted in shifts in what we do with our bodies as workers and consumers. For many more people demanding physical activity is a leisure activity (i.e. going to the gym or joining an intramural sports team) rather than a necessity.

However, while shifts in cultural perceptions about what bodies are used for in the market is significant in understanding how a culture articulates suffering – physically or metaphysically – the teenage body, *Nightmare*'s primary demographic, is understood socially as an overly physicalized zone: hormonal, sexual, and thus vulnerably demonic. Here the centrality of physical suffering rises to the surface of the experience of *Nightmare*. The creators of the *Nightmare* event in Marshfield and in Tulsa also claim that a graphic, performance-oriented and physical approach is necessary to present teenagers with an un-pixelated, personal form of suffering and spirituality. While claims are made that the true horror of Hell is spiritual torment, the entire display of *Nightmare* seeks to return to an emphasis on Hell as a literal physical reality, and bodily suffering as a part of that reality linked to an acceptance or rejection of the meaning of the bodily suffering of Christ. This linkage allows the imperfect suffering body of the average participant to symbolically merge with the perfect suffering embodied in the tortured Christ. Sin and suffering are physically and metaphysically entwined in the spectacle and its content (metaphysical suffering makes one vulnerable to physical suffering – not knowing God makes one vulnerable to destructive behavior) creating a space, within the empty white room at the end of the drama for the participants to enact their own resurrection in Christ. The resurrected Christ is not portrayed in *Nightmare* – as he is in Judgement House, Hell

House, *Tribulation Trail*, and *Revelation Walk* – emphasis remains on Christ’s suffering showing his brutalized body as a concretion of symbolic suffering. The final empty room of *Nightmare*’s performance forges a space in which people can reflect on what to do with the lessons they have been taught.

JF: The last room is a message. We want to leave people to a vision of their life, of life, and let them decide what impact *Nightmare* has on them. What is their world like? How far are they from what they saw? The last room is there for you, the audience, to reflect on what you saw before, to think about it before you go back into the world...a world that is not in a lot of ways that different. These are the top killers of teens in the United States...That is real.²⁷⁸

3.3.4 *Two Great Tastes: Violence and Hell*

As Sponsler argues in, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, Theatricality in Late Medieval England*,

...Medieval art and drama likewise stressed the realistic representation of the physical suffering of saints and martyrs, while also lavishly depicting the brutality of those who inflicted that suffering. A frequent ingredient in cultural representations of all kinds, violence and its effects could hardly have been less hidden.²⁷⁹

In regard to Christ’s body, participants’ bodies, and performer’s bodies violence is central to their journey from the beginning of the performance experience. When entering *Nightmare* you are physically searched. You sign a waiver agreeing to be touched but not to touch in return. You surrender possessions and are herded into a small disorienting room in silence with fifteen other people. You have no choice but to focus on physical experience, pressed tight to the bodies of others. In this first room, a small circular space filled with haze, the walls are painted in black and white

²⁷⁸ Freel, interview.

²⁷⁹ Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 136-137.

stripes and strobe lights run wild; you stand in a huddle facing each other for over three minutes, saying nothing. Eventually, a metal door is thrown open and you are thrust into the *Nightmare* – a party full of drinking teens.

Physical sensation is paramount in *Nightmare* and all the physical situations within the display are uncomfortable, most are representative of extreme physical and emotional suffering on the human form. The audience is uncomfortable, not only because of fright; they are uncomfortable because of the unpleasant physical world they are part of: the stale smell of alcohol in the air, the tight quarters, the prosthetic limbed people lurking around each small pack of audience keeping people pressed close, the heat in Hell, the cold in the outside scenes, the cage in which each group is transported across a dank marsh full of hands reaching up from the floor and out from the walls, as the tormented shriek from other cages hanging throughout the space.

The display itself also lends itself to outrageous physical suffering on the bodies of its performers. In the “real” world the performance purports a car accident, a gang shooting, a drug den, domestic violence and a suicide, though campy at times, are bloody and uncomfortable; “some were genuinely disturbing, such as the drug den room,”²⁸⁰ the human bodies are contorted and writhing. A voiceover narration, struck through with a scary demonic voice urging the characters toward their ultimate destructive choices provides the skeleton of plotline. This technique also serves to focus attention on the performer’s expressive bodies, as opposed to their words.

In the spiritual realm *Nightmare* presents Hell as first a fiery inferno surrounded by a dank somewhat purgatorial marsh in which bodies writhe and reach, then a more severe central Hell where extremely distressed individuals burn and wail

²⁸⁰ Schoultz, email correspondence with author.

followed by a brutal three room crucifixion. Hell is not only Biblically literal, but linked through physical suffering to the spiritual realm. The everyday of tangible events such as a drunken driving accident are connected, through physical suffering, to Hell itself; without Christ's saving grace not only is there a literal Hell, but the material realm of day-to-day existence when lacking a spiritual dimension becomes a land of physical and emotional suffering as well.

Performances like *Nightmare* address this concern by making Hell biblically "correct" and physically present in their performances, but they also position Hell in terms of the day-to-day world. Hell is both Biblical and a part of our everyday lives. The day-to-day goings on of life are directly linked to Hell – spiritual and physical – through the concept of human suffering. Life is harsh and brutal and without god in it, it is worth very little, next to nothing at all; it is Hell.

Nightmare performances present a way out of the suffering, simultaneously calling forth the formidable duo of biblical "Truth" and Hollywood Horror – the two categories informing and reifying each other. As mentioned above, stringent biblical concepts of Hell can make spreading a gospel rooted message increasingly difficult as society becomes more secular. Performances like *Nightmare* work in an effort to fight the secularization and liberalization of values by deploying both biblical and pop-cultural notions of Hell, putting them in conversation, and placing them in, and on, the bodies of their audiences and performers, in the hopes that either side of the argument will be enough to turn people away from behaviors that are socially, spiritually, and physically damaging.

While potential converts may well reject the gospel because of teachings about Hell that are hard to ignore if interpreted literally, *Nightmare* makes an effort to mediate that divide by emphasizing Christ's tangible suffering, graphically portraying his death and focusing their message and their aesthetic bang on the saving and sacrificial aspects of what the performance's creators and performers believe is God's offer of saving love.

Christ's suffering is a way towards salvation, offering an escape from damnation. This equation is forged stronger by presenting Hell's perversion and terror with great intensity. "It's on a Hollywood level of effects from what I'm told by several folks," thus making Christ's sacrifice in carrying such a weight more pressing and ever more graphic.²⁸¹ *Nightmare* concentrates the final three performance oriented rooms on the crucifixion: Jesus being flogged (Room Six), Jesus being nailed to the cross (Room Seven) and Jesus hanging on the Cross (Room Eight).

They also temper Hell with visual and physical representations, making Hell "real," material, frightening if only for a fleeting performative second. When a masked demon's breath hits the back of your neck and the young woman behind you cries out with a piercing terror you may think more closely about your dismissal of Hell, especially if you are disoriented, very hot, have lives rats in your face, are hyped-up from hours in line listening to throbbing music, and are between the ages of thirteen and eighteen.

Most conservative Protestants believe that the descriptions of the afterlife throughout the Bible are consistent. Most will agree that every person has a chance at eternal life and claiming their immortal soul after their death and judgment; most

²⁸¹ Ibid.

believe that only those who have repented of their sins and have trusted Jesus Christ as their personal lord and savior will be spared Hell and attain eternity in Heaven. Returning to Graham, whose words began this discussion, there are at least “three kinds of hell.” Hell in the heart, Hell in society, and a future Hell. Graham locates Hell in the sinfulness of human nature and the wickedness of secular society. This concept is clearly articulated in performances like *Nightmare*, which connect biblical notions of Hell with the suffering of sin on earth.

3.4 Not Just Another Day in the Park: Jesus in Marshfield



Figure 3.1. Statue of Jesus, “The Listener” in front of Applebee’s in Marshfield

SR: ... we are becoming more liberal in Marshfield and we want to remind people of the dangers – the city doesn’t let us, hang our signs in town or send pamphlets into school...People are looking away and that is when things go

wrong, and most kids don't even realize what is making this peer pressure or fighting, bullying...²⁸²

As my husband and I rolled into Marshfield, Wisconsin in our rental car late, late at night after a long drive from Chicago, a cancelled flight, and no baggage in early October of 2007 despite our exhaustion we were struck by a prominent and well-lit statue bearing the inscription "The Listener" perched on the hill in front of the local Applebee's overlooking the Super Wal-Mart. It was dark when we arrived, but at the time the statue seemed significant enough that we returned and took pictures the first thing the next morning. As I perched on the hill outside of Applebee's trying to get the best angle without eliciting too much attention from Applebee's patrons, I had no idea that this statue – public as it is – could not hold a candle to Marshfield's more notorious statue of Jesus Christ.

Later that morning on our drive through Marshfield's main street in search of a breakfast place where we could try the ubiquitous cheese curds everyone was talking about, we spotted a huge sign grafted to the gate of what appeared to be a public park on the outskirts of the City of Marshfield's main drag. The sign read, "PRIVATE PARK, This enclosed property is not owned or maintained by the city of Marshfield, nor does the city endorse the religious expression thereon."

²⁸² Remus, interview.



Figure 3.2. Sign demarcating the statue of Jesus from Marshfield City property

From the road, and with no context, it seemed an odd sign. The statue housed within the gates was hardly visible to passing motorists; what was quite apparent was the sign itself; there was no missing that. As Freedom from Religion Foundation lifetime member Clarence Reinders expresses it:

...our successful defense of the first amendment will be long immortalized. We have encaged behind an iron fence for all to see the central figure of a major religion...Whenever anyone looks at the idol in it's newly-imprisoned setting he/she will see the fruits of our labors...The idol cannot now be viewed except through our American secular lens...²⁸³

We pulled over and took a picture of the statue and sign, thinking that this statue must somehow be significant as well; it was gated with a huge sign in front of it after all.

However, it was not until speaking with Stacy Remus, the Public Relations Director of *Nightmare* in Marshfield that I realized the weight of this statue in the

²⁸³ Clarence Reinders, "We Done Good," *Freethought Today*, http://www.ffrf.org/fttoday/2001/jan_feb01/reinders.html (accessed on October 18, 2007). Reinders was the plaintiff in the suit against the City of Marshfield and was subsequently named the "Freethinker of the Year" in 2000.

world of Marshfield – and in the larger “war” between “old time values” and secular “progress.” When asked about *Nightmare*’s relationship with the Marshfield community Remus brought up the statue as a marker denoting the point at which she believes the balance of power had shifted away from what she perceives as Marshfield’s traditional or conservative worldview to a more liberal one, “...the statue has been there as long as I can remember, since I was a girl, no one had a problem until a few years ago...”²⁸⁴ This shift in attitude towards the statue, in Remus’ view, marks an assault on values that have been accepted in Marshfield since she can remember. It denotes a change, not necessarily in the composition of the community itself, but in the beliefs that the community espouses. Remus does not blame this shift on demographics, but on the transforming values of the community as whole,

SR: It is not so much people moving in to Marshfield, there have always been changes. It is just what people think is important. I’ll give you an example, we used to hang a sign on a railway bridge, don’t know if you saw it? That goes over the main street in town. It cost fifteen dollars to hang the sign for *Nightmare* and we do it every year, last year someone saw it there and complained that the sign was for a religious event and shouldn’t be allowed to hang there, because the bridge is the city’s. People can’t leave it alone. I mean don’t come. Now, all sorts of signs hang there, and we paid, but the City of Marshfield made us take it down. It’s just an event; it doesn’t say come to Jesus. Just the date and location and some graphics...²⁸⁵

Remus traces this attitude to the Jesus statue controversy, stating that it all seemed to start around then.

In 1998, the year of the first *Nightmare* performance in Marshfield, the Freedom from Religion Foundation brought suit against the City of Marshfield on

²⁸⁴ Remus, interview.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

behalf of Clarence Reinders, a Marshfield resident, for an alleged violation of the separation clause.²⁸⁶

Marshfield, WI – The Freedom from Religion Foundation, an anti-religion activist organization, filed suit to have a statue of Jesus removed from a city park where it has stood since 1959, when it was donated to the city by the Knights of Columbus. Even though the site of the statue had been purchased from the city of Marshfield by a private organization, the Freedom From Religion Foundation sued both the city and the private group, the Henry Praschak Memorial Fund. In December, a federal judge rejected the lawsuit and allowed the statue to remain.²⁸⁷

The original judge dismissed the case after a group of citizens formed the Henry Praschak Memorial Fund and purchased the statue and the land on which it stood from the city for twenty-one thousand two hundred and seventy six dollars and created the Henry Praschak Wayside Memorial Park. However, the Freedom from Religion Foundation appealed the ruling on the grounds that a reasonable person would have no knowledge that the land was not maintained by the city, and thus they would not know that the city did not endorse the religious display on its land. According to David Lasker an attorney for the Freedom from Religion Foundation, the establishment clause was still being violated because no one would know the land was privately owned unless, “...they were looking over the fine print of a legal document at the register of deeds.”²⁸⁸ Tensions in the town mounted; there were acts

²⁸⁶ The City of Marshfield was represented by the American Center for Law and Justice a group which focuses on pro-life, pro-family and first amendment cases. More information about their work can be found at www.aclj.org.

²⁸⁷ 1997 Catholic League Annual Report, <http://www.catholicleague.org/annualreport.php?year=1997&id=30> (accessed on August 9, 2008)

²⁸⁸ David Lasker as quoted in “Jesus Statue Unconstitutional,” Associated Press, February 5, 2000 (accessed on Lexis-Nexis October 17, 2007).

of vandalism against the statue, churches, the judge and Reinders. The people of Marshfield were tense.²⁸⁹

The case was heard on appeal in Chicago's 7th Circuit Court of Appeals and then sent back to the U.S. District Court Judge who ruled for the construction a four foot tall iron fence around the statue to be flanked by two signs, one of which is pictured in **Figure 3.2**. The Freedom from Religion Foundation was upset with the final outcome due to the height of the wall; they had requested a cement wall of ten feet and four signs. However, they were happy with the wording of the signs. Both sides seemed to feel that the compromise was, in the words of the Freedom from Religion Foundation's spokesperson Annie Laurie Gaylor, "...better than nothing."²⁹⁰

While the Marshfield case may have been anticlimactic, with neither side feeling particularly vindicated, it did set precedents for several future court cases involving the removal of religiously toned statues and monuments on once public land throughout Wisconsin and the nation.²⁹¹ It became a crowning example of the American Center for Law and Justice's crusade to keep religious monuments intact even when they are/were abutting public land.

In Wisconsin alone there were two other incidents that fed the Christian community's sense that times were 'a changin'. In 2001 the city of Milwaukee removed a Ten Commandments Statue donated by the Fraternal Order of Eagles in 1955, and dedicated to the city by Yule Brynner in 1957, to avoid the types of issues

²⁸⁹ These incidents are culled from reading the newspaper coverage of Marshfield during the period of the case.

²⁹⁰ Annie Laurie Gaylor as quoted in "Judge reaffirms requirement for wrought-iron fence around Jesus statue," Associated Press, June 18, 2000 (accessed on Lexis-Nexis October 17, 2007).

seen in other states and in Wisconsin. In LaCrosse even after the city sold the land on which a Ten Commandments monument, donated by the Fraternal Order of Eagles in 1956, stood back to the Fraternal Order of Eagles who then erected a fence and posted a sign stating that the city did not endorse or maintain the statue, following the ruling in the Marshfield case, they were still ordered to remove the monument. The City of LaCrosse appealed to the 7th Circuit Court in September of 2004, but the city was ordered to undo the sale of the property and remove the monument.

These few examples are representative of the climate in Wisconsin, and across the nation. The contest between these two extremes surely feeds into Remus' perception that values are shifting. No matter what one may feel about those particular values – good/bad, right/wrong, angered/indifferent – they are being questioned.

Anti-God groups are hard at work to remove the presence [of] God from our society. Alabama: removal of a Ten Commandments monument from a judicial building...Ohio: removal of Ten Commandments monuments from four high schools, privately held student prayer meetings being forced from school grounds, the removal of Benediction from graduation ceremonies, the change of the word 'Christmas' to 'holiday' and a myriad of other examples...They are attempting to push us – to push God – into backrooms and basements...²⁹²

The proliferation of what is perceived by many Christians as anti-religious behavior leading the United States astray is echoed in many communities affected by events like those surrounding the Marshfield Jesus. “The above shows that, at least as far as

²⁹² Terry Wiermsa, “Minority of Citizens Dictating to Majority,” Opinion Section, *Marshfield News Herald*, September 6, 2003.

these two markers are concerned, Marshfield and LaCrosse have both lost the culture war.”²⁹³

These feelings find outlet in national events such as the 2005, 2006, and 2007 “Justice Sunday” gatherings in which thousands of Christians were encouraged to pray for the judiciary appointment process and again for judicial reform more broadly to support conservative social issues.

The overarching picture created by the chorus of speakers at Justice Sunday II is of an America where the voices of praying children are silenced by black-robed tyrants. The Christian right has frequently organized its anxiety around the figure of innocent children who live under the constant threat of coercion and violence from the ‘cultural elite’ ...²⁹⁴

Judicial decisions that intersect on the battlefield of progress and nostalgia, such as those made regarding the statue in Marshfield, as well as across Wisconsin and the nation, are often hard to apprehend fully from either side; beliefs held tend to be rather virulent. What does seem clear, however, is that for a variety of reasons: personal, political and spiritual every decision is felt strongly and often taken personally.

The organizers of the two Justice Sundays seem intent on turning the nation’s churches into political staging grounds. Americans may tell pollsters that they favor more morality in public life, but we doubt that this is what they have in mind.²⁹⁵

It is because community members perceive their strongly held beliefs to be curtailed, shoved aside and misapplied or misunderstood that opposing parties have such a difficult time respecting, discussing, and engaging the other side of the issue. While

²⁹³ David Eisner, “Two Battles Lost,” Opinion Section, *Marshfield News Herald*, June 20, 2003.

²⁹⁴ Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Persecution Complexes: Identity Politics and the ‘War on Christians’,” *differences* 18, no.3 (2007): 159.

²⁹⁵ Editorial, “Justice Sunday Reloaded,” *New York Times*, August 16, 2005.

one group argues that there is some merit in the past, the other argues other for a better future; often the respect and the compromise inherent dialogue can be lost.

American individualism and the veneer of communal balance run up against each other in colorful ways. My way or the highway, language such as, "...we have encaged behind an iron fence for all to see the central figure of a major religion..."²⁹⁶ is reminiscent of the stormy and less than tolerant language that the nation has become more accustomed to associating with conservative "non-tolerant" leaders.

The biggest Holocaust in world history came out of the Supreme Court with the Roe v. Wade decision. On his syndicated radio show nearly two weeks earlier, on April 11, Dobson compared the "black robed men" on the Supreme Court to "the men in white robes, the Ku Klux Klan." By his logic, the burden of oppression had passed from religious and racial minorities to unborn children and pure-hearted heterosexuals engaged in "traditional marriage."²⁹⁷

While many do not appreciate in your face evangelizing, most people would treat the central figure or tenant of another person's belief system with a modicum of respect. The intolerance on both sides of the issues conflated with the rhetorical gymnastics that leaders go through to justify their beliefs creates a distance that is difficult to bridge. Marshfield's *Nightmare* seeks to bridge these gaps by reaching out to members of the non-Christian and unchurched community in Marshfield. Admittedly, their first purpose is conversion, but they also seek to present a safe, viable Halloween option that helps teens to think about their choices in both a religious and a secular context.

It is this type of rhetoric that solidifies zeal in conservative constituents and liberal activists alike, a zeal that reaches crescendo in cultural posturing such as the

²⁹⁶ Reinders, "We Done Good."

²⁹⁷ Max Blumenthal, "Justice Sunday Preachers," *The Nation*, April 26, 2005, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050509/blumenthal> (accessed on August 1, 2008).

much covered “War on Christians” and its attendant “War on Christmas.” Each side retreats to lick their wounds and this defensive posture, can, according to Castelli in “Persecution Complexes: Identity Politics and the ‘War on Christians’,” has been a tremendously fruitful rhetorical posture for conservative Christians throughout their history in America. Tracing this martyr complex to a variety of sources such as the American Jeremiad and its utopist vision, as well as the discourse of Christian martyrdom, and the language of the civil rights struggle Castelli offers insight into what is to be gained, as well as feared when the political world and social issues are imbued with a religious dimensionality,

According to the “war on Christians” activists, the so-called banning of God from the public square also signaled the general decline of American Christian values...when the Supreme Court...legalized abortion, a watershed moment occurred: the eviction of God from the public square was complete...resulting in the perverse undermining of the family by feminists, homosexuals, and the judges who sympathize with them.²⁹⁸

The tension between values and the way they appear to be applied in what *Nightmare* participants view as a corrupt social world is made manifest in the ways that bodies are broken, feminized, and subjugated to the forces of the material world within *Nightmare*'s spectacle.

Stepping out of the last scene, a girl being raped by five guys. I was suddenly on my way to hell...Once I got my wits about me I was able to enjoy the macabre situation. A butcher like man splashed with blood stumbled by me with heinous-looking, borderline primitive humans crawling and lurking through the swamp...It was enough to get an adult screaming, a child bawling or a desensitized teenager entertained. I subsequently understood the reasoning behind the 12 and over age requirement... Entering the next two rooms I experience another type of reality, the reality of Jesus Christ...²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ Castelli, “Persecution Complexes.”

²⁹⁹ Williams, “X Axis: Nightmare.”

Sin and suffering is equated with a feminized and/or youthful posture; sinners suffer and the Father saves. The “good” Christian is responsible for linking their victory over sin and the sinful world to Christ’s victory over human sin and suffering. This is again reflected in the broken form of Christ from which participants draw power. The world that the broken body of Christ represents – one rife with sin, on the wrong track, devoid of moral values, and engaged in an attack against the good Christian – gives the religious participant in the spectacle the strength to go on. It inspires one to save themselves from this world, to fight by accepting their part in the clean up effort.

In the final tally *Nightmare* guides participants to see the brutality performed on the bodies in the spectacle as tantamount to the social, spiritual, physical, and emotional brutalities of their existence and then after giving them a long hard look asks them: “What have you got to lose by believing Jesus is the living Word and shows you the Father?,” and gives them an answer: “Being an orphan. And you gain an eternal, loving Father.”³⁰⁰

3.5 Pop Goes the Devil

Christian pop-culture – performance and otherwise – not only creates a Christian alternative to secular experiences, for example many of the performances discussed here present viable alternatives to Halloween for teenagers and parents:

DT: Most people in Marshfield are happy that there’s something for kids to do that presents these issues, even if they don’t agree with all the message. It shows a lesson. And it’s a safe place to go during Halloween. We’ve been told by the police that they don’t have as many problems with kids drinking during *Nightmare* time.³⁰¹

³⁰⁰ Scheer, *What Have You Got to Lose?*, 15.

³⁰¹ Thompson, phone interview with author.

These alternatives carve out the outline of what is commonly referred to as a “parallel” consumer culture. This “parallel” market provides a retreat in which Christians can stay “safe” from secular social views, while still performing the duty of consumption. This “parallel” market, however, also offers a secure operating base from which Christians can actively reach out to a broad range of demographics on their own terms. In essence, Christian pop-culture uses the master’s tools to bring about the master’s return.

What works like *Nightmare* have in their favor besides their “cool” factor, community building, and identity affirming properties, can also be observed in other forms of Christian cultural activities. As both Hendershot in *Shaking the World for Jesus* and Radosh in *Rapture Ready* discuss, much of the consumerism of Christian pop-culture can be explained away by participating Christians through viewing actions, items, and goods traditionally outside of the purview of a conservative religious lifestyle as tools for witnessing to the unchurched:

A major retailer of witness wear, Living Epistles, tells visitors to its website that, “a message will actually be read 9,600 times in the life of the average witnessing shirt. And that’s actually a conservative estimate! So don’t forget to pray every time you put on the witnessing shirt.”...Christian cultural products seem to promise evangelicals that they can consume without being tainted by ‘worldliness.’³⁰²

This double purpose consumption is apparent in works like *Nightmare* when speaking to both participants and audience members alike.

KM: So what is the point of *Nightmare*?

³⁰² Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 18-19.

JB: ...To have some fun, to be dressed up and go a little crazy. I crawl around on the floor and scream. It's my job for the night. Where else can you do that?

KM: So it's fun?

JB: Yeah, because I do it for a reason. It's hard to scare people with angels and Heaven. It's like everyone thinks that that's where they're going. Right? The whole thing helps them see where they are now.

KM: Not where they're going?

JB: ...Hell is closer to like where they are now and where they are going. It's true how close those things are that we show in *Nightmare* – accidents, drinking, drugs – and people're used to seeing that stuff and then we put Hell with that stuff and it gets clearer...They are close together. Here and Hell are close.³⁰³

The seasonal intersection of the *Nightmare* performance with Halloween allows Christians to celebrate (though they might say work to combat) the spirit of Halloween through calling forth the demonic to purvey their message, whilst also witnessing to those who are not part of that message. Though obviously witnessing is a central facet of the event, the idea of getting to participate in mainstream culture's celebratory iconographic portrayals of Hell, damnation, horror, and sin is titillating and exhilarating for many.

TS: In my opinion, *Nightmare* serves one major need that the church folk will never admit; it gives them a visceral horror fix. Bible believing folks who would never think of picking up a Stephen King novel (or J.K. Rowlings for that matter) nor celebrate Halloween are given a chance to dance in some primal terror and get the haunted house thrill without the satanic undertones. Youth pastor Rob even seemed overly excited when he described the realism of the gallons of fake blood used. I can only imagine what Evangelical Christian sanctioned porn would be like. Of course, that's probably a bit in the future...³⁰⁴

³⁰³ Jessica Basil, interview by author, Believer's Church, Marshfield, Wisconsin, October 7, 2007, Tape Recording.

³⁰⁴ Schoultz, email correspondence with author.

According to The Barna Group's website, "There has been a significant increase in the number of unchurched Americans in the last thirteen years. In 1991 there were thirty-nine million unchurched Americans compared with seventy-five million currently. (2004)"³⁰⁵ In short, all people implicated in, "a society in which abortion mills send a van to the local junior high schools..."³⁰⁶ are part of the problem, not the solution; this image populates an imaginary landscape in one Frank Peretti's novels, but it is still frightening for its implied relation to the contemporary world. As Donna Thompson the performance director of *Nightmare* in Marshfield puts it, "It is not just that people are coming in who might not know, but people in the church themselves who have a place they need to work on."³⁰⁷ The *Nightmare* event is multi-tiered in its effectiveness and its outreach strategies. Performers themselves do a lot of spiritual work and searching, as well as bonding with church members they might not otherwise see. "You know we have our seats, where you go each Sunday. You sit with the same people every week, you go to groups with people like you, your friends; *Nightmare* shakes it up across those cliques."³⁰⁸

In this cultural field the attribute that sets performance apart from many other pop-cultural forms of Christian media is the commitment that it demands of the community, a liveness,³⁰⁹ which makes strict adherence to pre-defined social norms

³⁰⁵ The Barna Group, "Unchurched," <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=38> (accessed on May 4, 2008).

³⁰⁶ Radosh, 98.

³⁰⁷ Thompson, phone interview with author.

³⁰⁸ Remus, interview.

³⁰⁹ This notion of liveness does not simply privilege performance over other forms of Christian consumer culture. Obviously, according to the logic above, buying a witness wear shirt and wearing it

more challenging (one must perform what one fights) combined with the performances' ability to bring the viewer into (some might say simulated) contact with the divine in a way that a video game, a novel, or a deluxe edition surfing biblezine simply cannot. As Radosh makes clear in discussing a moment he experienced during his performance as a volunteer in the Eureka Springs *Great Passion Play*, performance as tool opens up opportunities for embodied understandings that enhance and complicate physical and emotional responses to events.

I was under the gaze of not only a few contemporary Americans but of all past and future generations. I was a linchpin of history, and I had a choice... "Maybe we should reconsider this!" I shouted desperately. "Maybe a flogging is enough!"...I turned away and buried my face in my hands. I exaggerated every movement so that even from four hundred feet away the audience could see something they had never witnessed before, never considered before: a compassionate Jew who wasn't willing to accept Jesus as the Messiah but did not want him tortured to death either.³¹⁰

While Radosh's contention that no one in the audience of hundreds had ever considered the notion of a compassionate Jew before is a bit overblown and denies complex levels of thought and individuation to the many people in attendance, his experience does speak to the power of live praxis. I can only add that no matter the amount of times I have attended events (or watched footage after seeing the events) such as *Nightmare* I too want to stop what is being done in my name two feet from me. I am an experienced theatre-goer who knows that the actress playing Desdemona

may reach as many people as a Judgement House, but it is the quality not the quantity that makes the message stick. I use liveness to discuss bodily experience, as well as something that relates to the total experience of not only audience and event, but those creating the event. In the Conclusion, and in my discussion of *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk*, I use Auslander's notion of liveness and its relation to the mediatized to discuss the significance of these events for the communities who enact them.

³¹⁰ Radosh, 56-57.

will not die, but I still cry and wish to cry out every time the actor playing Jesus is lashed.

To me, the most disturbing scenes occurred in two of the last rooms when we saw Jesus Christ nailed to the cross in a bloody, gory mess. In the first of these scenes, the cross was on the ground, and demonic people were dancing around Him, spitting in His face. The next scene showed Him on the cross, spitting blood and hanging until He died. The focus was simply on the suffering and the horrible things Jesus went through on the cross...³¹¹

3.5 Drama is a Tool

In an effort to explore communal endeavors to create religious drama whose function is to bring the spiritual and material together for evangelical purposes, this segment of Chapter Three focuses on the walk-through dramatic presentation of *Nightmare* in Marshfield, Wisconsin. Through an examination of the performance's relationships with its communities (geography and belief), its performance aesthetics, and the overlap of its intent and means with medieval performance traditions such as the Corpus Christi pageants and mystery plays, I place *Nightmare* in a long tradition of community created and enacted religious drama that seeks to bring the divine and the day-to-day into direct relationship, with the aim of leading its audiences and participants towards forging a stronger relationship with God (and church), as well as to create a community of shared moral, social, and political values.

The biblical and historical presentation of Christianity's scope offered in Corpus Christi pageants prompted medieval audience members to examine the moments that formed the backbone of their spiritual and social lives. This examination, when performed with the right recourse to biblical truth and the social

³¹¹ Emily Lampert, The Collegian Online, "Nightmare: Scaring the Hell Out of You," October 29, 2002, <http://www.utulsa.edu/collegian/article.asp?article=1507>, (accessed on May 15, 2007).

world could send audience members running to find God as quickly as possible. Much like *Nightmare*, mystery plays and Corpus Christi performances formed a space for participants to encounter a spiritualized reality that allowed them to indict, identify, and transform those present who had failed to hear God's message.

This type of performance moves away from Coleridge's famous "willing suspension of disbelief," which reflects the Western concept that the world forged in performance lacks authority in and of itself, and that it only assumes authority to the degree that the audience grants it weight. Or as Felix Williams, a teenager writing about the Tulsa *Nightmare* states, "...whether you treat it as a life changing event is up to you."³¹² Performance, since Plato, has been viewed with suspicion, as a deceitful shadow, a viral copy of "truth" and "reality." Despite many official Church decrees against performance during the middle ages, a tradition did grow in England (and continental Europe) which sought ways of bringing together spirit and matter, soul and body, salvation and daily life in acts of performance that endeavored to transform the participant's spirituality. Performances such as *Nightmare* are part of that lineage, and should be regarded as both performances and spiritual or ritual practices that enhance meanings, bonds, and relationships among those who create and attend them.

It is certainly in the interest of people to have some sense of reality by virtue of which they can live in communication with others...it may well be the constraints of community...that holds ideas together for the sake of a flexibly unformulated but practically coherent worldview...a process whereby certain social practices are depicted to 'natural' or 'right.'³¹³

³¹² Felix Williams, High School Student, "X Axis: Nightmare," Tulsa World, October 14, 2005.

³¹³ Bell, 192.

Much like Dolan posits a utopian view of performance's efficacy, "*Utopia in Performance* argues that live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share images of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world."³¹⁴ These works seek that utopia not only in the believer's commitment in the moment of conversion/re-dedication, but also in the larger social world, a social world that conversions will help bring about. The performances themselves present no utopian vision within the spectacle; they posit their utopia through the change that the dystopia of the performance spectacle will help bring about in converted audience members and re-affirmed participants. *Nightmare* offers an efficacy that is stunning for its highly communal and spiritual vision. An awareness of the overlaps in perception between the middle ages and our own time may help us to see valuable aspects of contemporary performance practices, inviting us to reconsider the spiritual aesthetics that inform these performances today as successful tools for envisioning radical possibilities of change in the social world.

Secular entertainment focused on Halloween and Christian performance events in the same vein share sources in medieval Christian drama, a form of performance that developed as both public worship and as a teaching technology. Today's *Nightmare* inverts this relationship being a form of private self-guided worship for many participants, while acting broadly as a teaching tool for those who do not identify as Christian, or perhaps those who are newly minted Christians.

³¹⁴ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.

For the newly minted Christian empire, most theatrical performances violated church instruction through graphic displays and nudity. Additionally, the Church looked upon the act of performing as a falsehood and therefore a sin. As the Church labored to establish power over newly dominated geographies they sought to create a social system that replicated Church ideals; medieval society was largely focused on how to gain entrance into the divine landscape (Heaven) that lay beyond the suffering of the material, as well as about how to recognize the signs of the divine and the demonic at work in the world. This desire for spiritual fulfillment beyond the present, yet effected by the present, let people remain committed to a social structure crafted largely from cultural patterns, which afforded them little personal fulfillment in the material, earthly realm, yet much spiritual promise in the future. Much like the *Nightmares* of today, medieval theatrical performance taught about sin while easing anxiety about a corrupt and frightening social world. These performances, much like Wickham explains of moralities, are works which exist to:

...Propagate the message that the only existing reality is individual reality, and that in consequence every individual must be himself and become responsible for his salvation. He must be assisted to understand that Lucifer and all his devils will attack him constantly and in insidious ways with the hope of corrupting him, but that if he opens his heart to God he will be lent assistance – emotional and intellectual that will protect him despite his unworthiness.³¹⁵

Or as Stacy Remus puts it in reference to *Nightmare*:

SR: People are in charge of their world and their choices. We all know that we make up our mind about what we eat for dinner and whether we are mean to someone or what we wear. God doesn't tell you that. We are in control in a lot of ways; still we have forces that work against us. Satan is full of power. A lot of little decisions pile up on you, things go wrong, or no matter how many good decisions you make or deeds you do, or how gentle you are, there

³¹⁵ Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, Third Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 109.

is pain and death, loss, accidents, illness – cancer, layoffs, drinking, that is testing you and the only way you can pass through that test is with God...so we show suffering, yes, in the hope that people who see it will understand that the choice that matters is the one to get closer to God, to have a loving relationship with Jesus.³¹⁶

The perception of theatre as a tool for conversion and the enhancing of conviction and as a vehicle to show people the power the demonic exercises on their day-to-day existence emerged slowly from an originally contentious relationship between early Christianity and theatrical practice. The Church was threatened by theatre, as performing muddies clear divisions between the real and the performed, the fantastical, the imagined, as well as the demonic, and divine. Dox illustrates the Church's understanding of this muddying process through citing Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*: "Unlike scripture which Augustine considered to be the unmistakable and natural son of God theater could only represent 'something which is not actually in the state in which it is asserted to be true'"³¹⁷ Augustine and other clergy apprehended the power of the performed, but only granted that power within a secular context. Theatre was artifice and as such it was flawed, even if it was created by and for the purposes of the Church.

In the views of the early Roman Catholic Church, dramatic interpretation of the Scriptures was tantamount to lying. When reforms were enacted in the eighth century this strict view began to erode:

...in the medieval mind the idea of commemoration used with the doctrine of real precedents: if the bread and wine are truly changed at the moment of

³¹⁶ Remus, interview.

³¹⁷ Donnalee Dox, "The Eyes of the Body and the Veil of Faith," *Theatre Journal* 56 (2004): 30.

consecration into the flesh and blood of the Savior, then Christ must be literally present at every mass.³¹⁸

It was the responsibility of the priests to convey their meanings to the congregation, these symbolic rites in their very nature, wed the symbol and the tangible, becoming one successful performative, to show that through the dramatic God's Truth could become more than words; it could become an emotional event for all present, a vehicle through which individuals present at mass might become inspired and empowered by the scriptures and thus feel God's presence during services.³¹⁹

AP: When Jesus is being lashed there is something beyond just you in there. I feel it. Before the people are all alone – the suicide girl, the parents – they seem alone but God is waiting for them to see Him. You feel Him in that room.³²⁰

Priests were looking for innovative ways in which to make services meaningful and engaging for the public, while still retaining the cache of priestly power, a power that was deployed to enforce the emerging social structures in which the mystery of God must reside within the priest so that the Church, “increased its property and received in turn the obedience of the peasantry which was increasingly subordinate to a hierarchic an authoritative Church.”³²¹ Without connection to the message the Church found its lower level congregants lost, disorderly, and without the fear necessary for order and unity, but by putting too much of the message in their hands

³¹⁸ O.B. Hardison, *Christian Right and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays in the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama*, (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 43.

³¹⁹ Dox, 44-45.

³²⁰ Anonymous Participant, interview.

³²¹ Leonard Goldstein, *The Origins of Medieval Drama* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corp., 2004), 97.

the Church would strip the local priests, enforcers of its power, of their tools. Both clarity and mystery were, and are, necessary to garner the value of spiritual understanding. It was hoped that through the use of liturgical tropes congregants who did not understand the words of the service would understand the action and be moved by, and perhaps more fully grasp, the mystery behind the event.

SR: You probably noticed it's hard to hear what people are saying. The actors don't talk, really. When we got the soundtrack from the church in Tulsa we used that and you could, some stuff was distorted, but it was hard to get people to match up their motions exactly to what was being said. I don't remember how it came up, but we thought what if the whole thing was like the more demonic parts. People wouldn't have to stress out about the words matching up and it would be more disorienting, to watch for people, harder to take. Donna worked with them to make their movements bigger...It's not that important what they are fighting about but how they fight. The world is distorted...the sound and their gestures add to that feeling.³²²

Priests stressed the significance of the mystery by utilizing and altering the patterns of the music at crucial points, as well as through incorporating gestures and facial expressions.³²³ Liturgical tropes continued to be created as late as the twelfth century, but the connection with the church building eventually waned as the plays grew more ornate in their execution.

This connection between the social world and the spiritual, the reaching outside of faith proper to find ways of engendering that very faith is similar to what *Nightmare* does in making recourse to popular secular dramatic forms such as *Every 15 Minutes*, popular horror films, and educational scare films.

SR: The creepier it is the better. Out of all the performances you have seen what were some of the scariest ones you have seen? I mean I'm asking 'cuz

³²² Remus, interview.

³²³ Hardison, 75.

we can so use those ideas. In our group meetings we're always trying to find places to make it more extreme.

KM: *Nightmare's* scary now. The room at the beginning, where you're all locked in together. I don't know. *Scaremare* has a lot of gore. It's overwhelming and you crawl through tunnels.³²⁴

Mystery or cycle plays presented the biblical history of the world, from creation to the Apocalypse. They played throughout Europe from about 1350 until their suppression in 1583 after the aftershocks of the Protestant Reformation. The scenes depicting Hell were always a favorite.

KM: So tell me about Hell.

SR: My husband does a lot of the tech work. There are these hydraulic lifts; I think you rode in it once already right?

KM: The cage?

SR: Yeah. The cage. We have about sixty or so people a night in there.

KM: All from your church? How do you choose who goes to Hell?

SR: Well, you know we don't really. They all really want to go. (*Laughs*) We have a few key people in the church in bigger roles – more important – shh, I didn't say that, roles and then youth groups come for mission work and we put the larger groups in the room to make it as packed, hot, and weird as it can be...The make-up and prosthetics really help....The crew back there, the leaders, look at horror movies and magazines, search on the internet and join these sites, they do [this] all year for new looks for demons...There are key people, like I said before. There are the characters people look for every year – the zombie game show host, the lizard woman – but we try to get new scares in each year.³²⁵

It is the intentions of both mystery plays and moralities that bear the greatest similarity to the intents of the performances studied here; they all aim at engendering faith through spectacle and communal interaction, while remaining committed to the

³²⁴ Remus, interview.

³²⁵ Ibid.

teaching of Church doctrine, with the result of also teaching proper social behavior. The subject matter of the mysteries was largely concerned with biblical narrative; a historical foundation undergirds the plots and the object is to teach and enforce the Truth and the history of the Catholic faith. The morality play, conversely, is fictitious and stresses the application of Christian doctrine to everyday life.

The Morality Play and the shorter Moral Interludes they were evidently didactic in purpose. Unlike the Saints Plays or Corpus Christi drama, however, they were not designed to edify though the example of others but to illustrate in a much more personal and direct manner what traps the Devil set for the unwary; how they were baited; and how, with the aid of Divine Grace, the individual soul...might still obtain salvation.³²⁶

Ultimately, however, for those involved in the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic counterreformation, moralities were unsettling for their lax views and seemingly philosophical approach to repentance. Because the Protestant faith underscores an individual's responsibility for the state of their soul, Saints were understood as idolatry, priests maligned God's word, and art enacted a corruption of God's truths.

The performance's discussed here bring back many of the techniques and tactics of medieval performance: large scale spectacle, community volunteers, intersection with Halloween, the underscoring of the presence of Satan/the spiritual in day-to-day life, the emphasis on the confluence between the spiritual and material realism, and the use of fear and bodily suffering to enforce Church teachings. However, the works discussed here strive to drive home, ironically, mainly Protestant religious teachings.

³²⁶ Bernstein, 106.

3.5.1 *The Body of Christ: Corpus Christi remixed*

The forces of a religion and supporting social values rests, then, on the ability of its symbols to formulate a world in which those values, as well as the forces opposing their realization, are fundamental ingredients. It represents the power of the human imagination to construct an image of reality in which, to quote Max Weber, “events are not just there and happen, but they have a meaning and happen because of that meaning.”...The tendency to desire some sort of factual basis for one’s commitments seems practically universal; merely conventionalism satisfies few people in any culture. However its role may differ at various times, for various individuals and in various cultures, religion by fusing ethos and worldview gives ...what they perhaps most need to be coercive: an appearance of objectivity.³²⁷

The image of Jesus Christ works on multiple levels and is deployed in *Nightmare* as both the protector of humankind (the power of Christ compels thee) and the beleaguered vessel of all human frailty. He is both passive and resplendent, friend and warrior. His relationship to the spectator in works such as *Nightmare* is central to the mission and message of the performance: Christ is strong and can protect one from the weakness of the world; however, he is simultaneously and literally weighed down by the sins of others. The brutal beating and crucifixion of Christ in *Nightmare* serves as metaphor for one’s own humanity – beaten by the sin of the world; the displays that come before the crucifixion: drunkenness, drugs, shooting, domestic violence, suicides, and Hell link Christ through the spectacle of bodily suffering to this specific segment of teen America while separating him and postulating him as *THE* answer. Christ embodies the positive strength to transcend suffering, peer pressure, and a corrosive cultural system. The image of Christ’s tormented body admixed with the message of strength contrasts with the weakened bodies of the sinners, while Christ’s body is broken by our sin, quite literally, he is

³²⁷ Geertz, 131.

able to endure that suffering; the other performers simply fall over, die, and go to Hell.

Christ came to be displayed on early medieval crucifixes as a winner who could convey safety and power to his followers...Christ is not represented as a human sufferer in great pain...Christ's extraordinariness is displayed through his ability to accomplish deeds which ordinary human beings could not without fear of death.³²⁸

The *Nightmare* display combines the concepts of Christ as warrior and Christ sufferer allowing recourse to the rhetoric of martyrdom, as well as to the identity of cultural warriors. "He fought for us and this example we work each day to follow."³²⁹

Significantly, throughout the whole performance the three rooms of the crucifixion are the smallest, simplest, and most intimate; the audience stands closest to the performers in these scenes, the body of Christ and its torment take precedence. There are no car wrecks, living rooms or gun shots, just audience, the body and its torturers, a transcendent suffering.



Figure 3.3. Christ after being crucified in Marshfield's *Nightmare* 2003

³²⁸ Harold Kleinschmidt, *Understanding the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, England: Boydell Press, 2000), 69.

³²⁹ Freel, interview.

In an early Christian worldview Christ (and his body) were powerful forces able to offer safety to the individual bodies housed within the Church, providing a sense of security in a precarious world. Early feudal leaders used their closeness to Christ by calling on the tradition of the pagan “battle helper.” Connection to Christ could offer the social leader greater power as a spiritual talisman. As much as George W. Bush (and many other leaders) feel the need to espouse their religious beliefs, the population seems to need to hear these declarations to feel protected; by aligning with and supporting Christianity early feudal leaders similarly gained the cache of bodily invincibility associated with the body of Christ. Eventually, this link became dangerous to the Church as they tried to solidify power in their own hands. As Christianity worked to assert its authority over the secular the new image of Christ and the saints became that of a body dependent upon God (and Church hierarchy) for its strength.

The new image was that of a Christ who was the pale, cadaverous bearer of earthly sins with profusely bleeding wounds. It entailed a perception of the human body as not only frail, but also as the sinful prison of the soul...³³⁰

It becomes clear that both levels of the Christ imagery are working to speak to the bodies (and souls) of the participants (performers and audiences alike) in *Nightmare*. Christ is both a brutalized vessel of sin whose sacrifice one is supposed to appreciate and a blameless protector who is strong and able to lead even in his weakened state.

If for the Late Middle Ages the body, and especially the paradigmatic body of Christ, provided a key way of imagining social communities and the positions of individuals within them, then it was the whole, perfect fully functioning

³³⁰ Kleinschmidt, 69.

and intact body that was understood to stand as the exemplary model for the community.³³¹

In *Nightmare* the broken body does this exemplary modeling, the broken body is representative of the broken communal world. A world that believes religion to be a mental disorder:

To me, to me it's a real dividing line between people of intelligence and – not that there haven't been some intelligent people who are religious. I mean, T.S. Elliott was a great poet and he became a very devout Catholic... But I always call religion a neurological disorder. I really do believe that. I mean it's not criticizing. I'm just saying if you took religion out of it and somebody went to a psychiatrist and said you know I believe in you know this crazy, illogical thing, the shrink would say, well you have a neurological disorder. And you need to really get therapy or take a pill.³³²

Christ's suffering is the world's suffering and the world is certainly suffering when God is a brain disease.

3.5.2 *Vision, Spirit, and Matter*

One of the most dangerous assumptions a pastor can make is that church members clearly grasp the truth about the supernatural realities that shape our lives.³³³

Many who participate in, organize, and attend the performances discussed in this dissertation perceive a disregard in our contemporary world for the type of vision that allows them to apprehend the forces of the demonic and the spiritual in what they perceive as the cultural decay of their surroundings. This vision is similar to that of the medieval mindset regarding the intersection of spirit and matter discussed by

³³¹ Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 138.

³³² Bill Maher interview, "INDEPTH: US ELECTION 2004," CBC News Online, October 20, 2004, http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/uselection2004/maher_bill.html (accessed on November 18, 2008).

³³³ David Kinnaman, "A Field Guide to Spiritual Beliefs," <http://www.rev.org/article.asp?ID=2554>, Posted November 2007 (accessed on May 4, 2008).

Erickson in *Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception*. This type of vision affords the participant a view of the interdependency of the spiritual upon the material and is directly related to the views about demonic presence articulated by Stacy

Remus a *Nightmare* organizer,

SR: The Devil does things on all sides. The Devil can work harder. He looks for weakness, and exploits places where we don't know what to do and we lash out. God's friendship and love is helping us from that, with that, we believe there's less room for the Devil. God protects us in what we do. I mean there're some nights, I say, I can't do it, and people aren't showing up. We need fifty volunteers, a mission cancels, but it works out the, (*Laughs*) show must go on and it does, but it's not us. God brings us what we need somehow, enough people come and it happens. He protects us because the Devil wants us to stop this, right? So God helps us and people, even people who go to church see this and know God will help them too, with what they need help on.³³⁴

According to Erickson, in *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception*, the medieval range of perception was broad enough to strike an equivalent balance between the material and the spiritual. The dominant theme of Erickson's volume is that out of all of the senses, sight predominated in medieval experience. Admittedly, much the same argument could be made for many eras, including the contemporary world, but Erickson identifies sight as *vision*, or a capacity to see beyond the visible, *through* the physical universe for a sight of the divine.³³⁵ Understanding was communally established and operated on a visually symbolic level:

...the Deadly Sins, the Cardinal Virtues, and the Liberal Arts found their way by similar means into the common stock of knowledge. Justice was as recognizable by her sword and scales as was Judas by his red hair...Prudence

³³⁴ Remus, interview.

³³⁵ Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) 30-32.

with her mirror and Envy with her snake were instantly identifiable: animals, birds, trees, flowers, and precious stones were all pressed into service as symbols to distinguish, define and reveal...amongst stones and metals, gold symbolized idolatry, the carbuncle (because of its blood red colour) Christ's Passion.³³⁶

At Christianity's beginnings, believers scrutinized events in the physical world, which might well hold a symbolic meaning more vital than outward understandings could demonstrate. According to the Marshfield *Nightmare*'s blood captain in 2004, "Images are overly graphic so those who attend can recall them."³³⁷

In Erickson's argument, spiritual survival and general well being in the medieval worldview – much like in the contemporary world of Marshfield – necessitated keeping at least one eye out to interpret, and act, on the signs of spiritual workings upon the material world.

JF: It is about seeing it, then knowing it better. When they see the car accident scene, then there are these demons, then you get to see Hell, you make connections. More people are in seats right before and after *Nightmare* time. People who talk about being saved in church. It, it helps to see what they're saved from, reminds us...We want to help people, who come to *Nightmare* to see what God has to offer and how very serious that offer is.³³⁸

Purely at the level of the spectacle, the Hell scene³³⁹ is enough to bring forth fantastical imaginings of a hell mouth and while this hell mouth's geographical/scenic placement might be weakened, its ability to haunt its spectators through its recourse to a cultural and visual world of horrific proportions remains a vivid and impressing experience. Within a worldview in which the spiritual and material intertwine and God's will is enacted to counter the forces of evil:

³³⁶ Wickham, 110.

³³⁷ Jon Gneiser, "Nightmare Shows Teens Potentiality," *Marshfield News Herald*, September 24, 2004.

³³⁸ Freel, interview.

JF: Satan uses ideas, lies, power, fear, revenge, shame in what we do...just like having spiritual discipline helps open us up more to God and our church, indulging in an evil opens us up to sin and an unhappiness...³⁴⁰

Failure, on a field motivated by forces that cannot be seen only read, is not a conceivable option, and when, for instance a speaker cuts out, or a blood cue is off, some deeper significance is sought within the event to turn the experience toward success. For example, when *Nightmare* had to shut down in the middle of a performance in 2005, due to technical difficulties, several teens were recruited in ways they wouldn't have been by seeing the performance in the usual way, by getting to tour and experience the complicated technical spectacle that is *Nightmare* their interest was piqued. Some of those teens volunteered that year and the next and have signed on for 2008.

It is in summoning the “demons” that plague contemporary morality that these performances do their most fundamental work, throwing the spiritual into simultaneous contact with the material: moral, physical, and political. A crafting of a time and place distinct from the audiences' materiality and spirituality, yet constructed from the melding of these influences, generates for Diller in the revised 1992 translation of *The Middle English Mystery Play*, a marked departure from the always present theatrical frame (altar, church architecture, officiate/observer) provided by liturgical drama. According to Diller, and observed in *Nightmare*, it is within this fused mimetic realm that participants come to see the contravening forces of the spiritual and material. When an environment must be created with a mind to house both spiritual and material performance the differences between the two realms

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

becomes more starkly observed. However, their interdependence may also become more pronounced.

The performance's purpose then is to present the power that these two forces – spiritual and material – hold when wed. They possess the capacity to enact change: for reformation, for possibility, for conversation, for solidification of values and not least for conversion. “Most people come in with some type of pretty concrete mentality of the church. What we want to do is soften that a little bit and say, ‘Hey, God may want to do a new thing in your life.’”³⁴¹

The intermingling of the material and the spiritual may also contain, in the case of *Nightmare*, the potential to create suffering when their interdependence is ignored. In the context of the medieval individual's contest with the powers of mortality and damnation weight was placed on, “...the primacy of non-corporeal forces...”³⁴² The individual could perceive, could witness, and through that witnessing participate in the divine, constructing meaning in the material world on their body, through the marriage of viewer and object, thus eventually obtaining salvation. The presence of the demonic in the life of believers still holds sway with many contemporary Christians. This can be seen in various places such as GodTube's copious videos on “spiritual warfare,”³⁴³ from pulp classics such as Hal Lindsey's

³⁴¹ Scheer in Matt Gleason, “Church's Notorious Spookhouse Adds 3-D: Tries to Scare Kids Straight,” *Tulsa World*, October 17, 2004.

³⁴² Erickson, 11.

³⁴³ Several hundreds of videos can be found on GodTube that deal with “spiritual warfare.” I have provided links to three of the most popular and typical videos in this genre here.

“Spiritual Warfare”

http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=cafadd0a75405d85e6fb

“Powerful Spiritual Warfare Prayer!”

http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=4230e9b81c00106ee1e1

best seller *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* to Bibleman's belief in spiritual warfare, "I believe in spiritual warfare. I believe there is an enemy out there, as sure as there's a God."³⁴⁴

Capitol "T" "Truth" in medieval experience was Christ's passion and its placement in the past, while simultaneously enacting a saving power in the present, demonstrates the pervasive understanding of not only history and time (Biblical and secular) as melded, but the spiritual (salvation) and the physical (suffering) as co-existent. Thus "untruth" can be apprehended as the inability to recognize, or the sheer dismissal of, the influence of God and demonic entities in the material world. This is a worldview, which, especially in contemporary academic circles, appears only pardonable because medieval individuals are seen as simply not privy to a more objective, rational worldview; ignorance is excusable, while willing unacceptance of reason is dumb. A rational worldview, it is argued, certainly would have been claimed by the reasonable, the intelligent – if only it had been available to them. "The existence of things the identity of which can be known quite apart from ourselves, is a product of a scientific rationalist age; it is not a medieval idea..."³⁴⁵ One's own contemporary conceptions of what can be termed "realistic" prevent us from seeing that these contemporary morality performances are attempts at a realized representation of the believer's phenomenological reality.

"Dangerous Spiritual Warfare--Part 2-Digging in the Word"

http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=e26315cf395fd2f79462

³⁴⁴ R.T. the actor who portrays Bibleman on the *Bibleman* live shows and videos, as quoted in Radosh, 129.

³⁴⁵ Natalie C. Schmitt, "The Idea of a Person in Medieval Morality Plays," in *The Drama of the Middle Ages: Comparative and Critical Essays*, eds. Clifford Davidson, C. J. Gianakaris, and John H. Stroupe (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1982), 306.

“...Following Augustine’s theory of vision as a ray projected onto the object that then passed into the viewer and bonded with the soul,” medieval physics accounted for visualization as a union that wedded the seer to the object seen.³⁴⁶ This connection between the seer and the object can work in performance to strength the seer’s relationship with Christ by wedding the vision of his sacrifice to the viewer’s soul; the medieval individual would then be able to rationalize the world around them in terms of Christ’s suffering. This wedding of spirit and object helped the viewer to grasp the mysterious, painful, and inexplicable as part of God’s plan. The relationship between vision as an affective force that leads toward action is present in *Nightmare* as well; it works to lead spectators to the following:

Well, what have you got to lose by believing in God? Well, when you don’t believe in God, you have to believe in you. You are the center of the universe. You rule your life and call the shots. Everything falls on your shoulders. If you do something great, you pat yourself on the back and hope everyone around you does too. If you mess up, you have no place to go. And if you run into real trouble, you’ve got to get yourself out of it. Sometimes other people will help you, but sometimes they won’t. Sounds like a pretty heavy load. Do you want to lose it? Believe in God!

Let’s get real here, the creator of the universe wrote the Bible *to you*. All of a sudden you are not such an insignificant worm because the Bible tells you what God thinks about you, how He feels about you, what He wants you to do...if the Bible is for real (all the history and science either have or are being proven true) then what God says about Himself, the devil, and about you is true too. (Emphasis in original)³⁴⁷

Additionally, much like in Scheer’s ontology, the viewer would then be able to see themselves – through this interaction with the visible world rendered spiritual – as an active and vital part of the universe in God’s plan. Or as Scheer asserts, “Believing in

³⁴⁶ Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 122.

³⁴⁷ Scheer, *What Have You Got to Lose?*, 5, 14.

Jesus as your Lord and Savior is not religion; it is pure relationship. His spirit lives in you. He talks to you.”³⁴⁸

This linking of vision and transformative bodily experience – a unity of social, cultural and personal events with the spiritualized universe in/on the body of the viewer – took on potency in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries due in large part to the agony of the plague. The plague made terrorizing images part of everyday experience and, much like the complex web of events that menace America and the global community today: terrorism, economic crisis, school shootings, drug crime, violence, natural disaster, poverty, environmental destruction, water shortages, disease, etc., in the wake of tremendous population loss and seismic shifts in economic systems too many causes could be offered up for the plague and the fear it left in its wake, ranging from demonic intervention in communal affairs to the looming Apocalypse. The only protection from destruction was to be found in embracing faith and letting faith explain death.

The internal melding of spirit and material occurrences helps believers to manage confusing, terrifying, and threatening events and serves as part of the broader experience of Christian history/meaning making in which, “...the main purpose in God’s master plan for history is to glorify himself through Jesus Christ. Therefore, Jesus Christ is the goal and hero of history.”³⁴⁹ The performance of biblical “Truth” provides the believer with a process for naming, identifying, and working to resolve

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 22.

³⁴⁹ Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice, *The Truth Behind Left Behind*, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2004), 180.

threatening forces through the live experience of penitence, the soul saving effort of outreach and instruction, and the profession of “truth” and faith.

3.6 Moving Forward

In the blending of the theoretical and the practical in these *Nightmare* performances human bodies use performance to share the narratives of their faith and fears in a communal ritual which seeks to solidify belief and heal souls. The use of familiar space and time to stage biblical truth, pop-culture, and the display of the brutalized bodies of the performers offers a nightmarish journey whose logical end is Jesus Christ.

In the next Chapter I will continue the discussion of fear, embodiment, community, and efficacy in a discussion of the franchise organization of Judgement House and in a discussion of specific Judgement House, as well as offer an overview of the Judgement House organization’s community building mission.

In Chapters Four and Five I examine the relationship between fantasy and possibility, utopia and dystopia. What does this type of performance say about who the performer (and audience member) should strive to be (or strive to be different from)? Concerns around these questions inextricably intertwine with the admittedly loaded concept of “reality.” While notions of what is invested in “reality” may be divergent what the groups discussed present is a spectacle representatives of possible – and even probable – circumstances, which in turn makes Hell seem more plausible.

...Religious zealots have always felt that the end justifies the means, even if that means scaring innocent children into superstition...One is left to ask, what

is the purpose...if not to use fear to convince someone of something that reason cannot?³⁵⁰

Isn't that what art does? Art often offers a view into the darkness that the light of reason alone cannot permeate. In many ways it is the point of artistic expression, and more so performance to show, "...terrible cruelty which things can exercise against us...the sky can still fall in on our heads. And the theatre had been created to teach us that first of all."³⁵¹

³⁵⁰ Adam Butler, "Three Atheists Go To Hell: Alabama Freethinkers Visit 'Judgement House'," *Freethought Today* 14 No. 9, November, 1999.

³⁵¹ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1958), 86.

4 Judgement House: They ought learn how to spell, or, Inside and Out.

Inside: We get a lot of questions about how we spell our name, and while we wish there were some deep theological or spiritual reason (and believe us, we've tried to think of one) for spelling Judgement House with an "e" in Judgement, instead of spelling judgment without it, there really isn't one. The dictionary allows it to be spelled with or without the "e" and to be completely honest, Tom just liked the way the "e" looked and his wife Karen didn't mind it either when they founded the organization in 1983, and the "e" has been with us ever since.³⁵²

Outside: 1st: *They* ought learn how to spell...2nd, and more seriously: People ought not to come to the faith out of fear. We're told to be meek, humble, gentle, but not *craven, cowardly, and spineless*. Christ offers us eternal beatitude with him. He ought not be reduced to a get out of hell free card. The site does clarify that it doesn't do this as much as other similarly named so-called ministries, but there seems to be a significant element of that. It smacks of cheap grace. [Emphasis mine]³⁵³

4.1 Introductory Map of the Chapter

While the performances discussed in the preceding Chapters have crafted a reality that comments on the participants' perceptions about evil in the contemporary world through recourse to eliding the social issues they represent with worldly corruption, as well as through the use of violence and horror, Judgement House, as its name implies, references a normative social structure through recourse to systems of judgment and justice. For instance, the image printed above their slogan is a gavel and even their e-newsletter is entitled *The Gavel*.

³⁵² Judgement House/New Creation Evangelism, Inc., "What's with the 'e'?", Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/What's-With-The-e-40_pg.html (accessed on October 24, 2007)

³⁵³ J. Roberts, Judgement House, Open Discussion Room, "Suspicious," comment on "Thoughts on Judgement House. Good, bad, ugly, are all welcomed."



Figure 4.1. The Judgement House logo and slogan

Judgement House does not attempt to represent reality as a twisted and morally remiss playground, but as a legitimate social system through which the Christian must navigate by utilizing their faith and its rewards as a guide. The reality they seek to create is the social structure as participants believe it operates; in Judgement House the contemporary world is not Hell, fever dream, nightmare, etc. (as is posited in *Scaremare*, *Nightmare*, and *Hell House*). In Judgement House Hell is Hell, Heaven is Heaven and a car crash is a car crash. The narrative metes out a judgment that is systematic and non-confrontational to the established and organized order; this judgment bears relation to the real systems of everyday life. For instance, the script *Web of Lies* begins with an execution by lethal injection and the story then follows the path of how the executed arrived at the confluent moments of spiritual and social justice. In the Judgment room the audience stands before the heavenly

Judge who is wearing robes, seated at a bench, and who is old, male, and pounds a gavel.

The message in Judgement House is that the world can be healthy when one lives a healthy life in it. One can deal with the difficulties that the world throws at them through faith. These displays, while still attempting to convince people to choose salvation in Jesus Christ, do so by presenting a world that can be difficult: job loss, abuse, alcoholism, peer pressure, terminal illness, economic strife, war, natural disasters; however, instead of looking at the world as demonic they present a world that is challenging, yet that can be managed and conquered by faith. Judgement Houses portray graphic scenes of death such as: executions, earthquakes – and the favorite death of all performances aimed at teens drunken driving accidents – but they do so largely without demons; in a Judgement House the demons are in Hell and the angels are in Heaven.³⁵⁴

A Judgement House performance operates largely without the horror and without the controversial issues; it tries harder than any other work discussed here to get at “real” social circumstances. In the domestic violence scene in a Judgement House we don’t see two parents screaming and not know why. As an audience we know that Sherry is a working Mom with lots of pressure at her job and at home, and who is a new Christian. We know that she and her husband AJ have been going to counseling. We know that AJ has had problems with internet porn in the past. In

³⁵⁴ The exceptions that I have seen to this are that two demons usually come to take the sinners out the room of Judgement and that in some Judgement House individuals (male or female) will walk through the performance with a group, usually dressed in non-descript clothes and when the group reaches Hell one sees that these “group members” are wearing black light make-up; they identify themselves as Satan stepping out from the group as a reminder that Satan walks among us.

Collision we know that Natalie’s father is drinking more frequently because he was recently laid off. Satan is still present in the world, bad things happen, but free will and social networks are there to guide people – people are not alone; they have recourse to Heaven through accepting Jesus Christ, and they gain recourse to social support through the church community as well.

Judgement House presents and advocates community in a way that is not present in the works discussed in preceding chapters. All of those performances (*Scaremare*, *Hell House*, and *Nightmare*) build community among their church members, as does Judgement House; it is, “an amazing relationship builder within the church family.”³⁵⁵ Additionally, Judgement House places community as central to the storyline and the spectacle. They show the Christian faith as one shaped by communal forces. Characters are often part of church social networks. For instance, in *Jamaica for Jesus* students are going on a mission trip when their plane crashes. In many of the Judgement House scripts students attend youth group parties and bring friends, often characters discuss church groups, meetings, and support networks. Pastors visit troubled parishioners at their homes, etc. Judgement House presents Christian community as strategy for support and meaning making within the contemporary world.

Not only does Judgement House present this community to those it hopes to draw towards a Christian lifestyle, it also offers already committed young people, and other church members models for how to evangelize and how to discuss religion with their friends, “Judgement House impacted all [our] community in an awesome ways.

³⁵⁵ April Mullins, “Judgement House Questionnaire” designed by author. A questionnaire is attached in the appendices.

We had many, many souls saved. It also showed the community a different means of outreach techniques!”³⁵⁶ Judgement House can also serve as a sobering check on the ways those already committed are living their Christianity within the world, as evidenced in the character of Erica in *Web of Lies*. Erica goes to church, but she does not live *Christian*, and thus is damned to Hell.

In addition, Judgement House fosters communal understandings both within the spectacle and among those putting the performances on, positing Christian identity as a mainstream, acceptable, positive, and successful identity that does not only help one steer clear of Hell, but that may also help one to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of the contemporary world as well. In this Chapter I will discuss Judgement House as a community building organization that operates among the members of church communities and their local surroundings, but also as a communal organization that provides a Judgement House network of community through its organizational practices. Additionally, I will discuss my experiences at specific Judgement House events connecting these events to the contemporary world and their roots in religious, didactic drama.

4.2 Inside and Out

The account that follows of my first meeting with Medrith and my first journey to her Judgement House in North Roanoke serves to point out both my place in this event and my consciousness of that place, as well as how performances such as Judgement House can serve to strengthen commitment and community on multiple levels: by providing nuanced articulations of community, fostering reflection and

³⁵⁶ Tim Wessell, “Judgement House Questionnaire” designed by author.

dialogue across groups, between individuals, and by intervening in individual relationships to a church community.

My husband and I just ate Mexican in a tiny restaurant that was at one time an Arby's. The dining area stubbornly wears the vestiges of its former identity. The booths are more than recognizable, sporting the same classic stale colors, peeled and cracking; many of the original trademarks of fast food dining stubbornly persist, even in conjunction with the Mexican music, tapestries, and place settings. It is as if they both still live to tell some perplexingly post-modern fable – one aspect constantly shifting the diner's perception of the other. This landscape is wavering. The world here won't always be the same as it ever was. The population is changing. North Roanoke will be transformed. Some here say for the better,

They could mean the difference between a growing Roanoke and a shrinking Roanoke: Since 1980, the city's population has dropped more than 7,000 residents, with a median age that ranks as the 12th-oldest in the nation...[but] when you factor in the thousands of Roanoke Hispanics who operate below the radar, uncounted by census takers. Hispanic leaders put the number somewhere between 10,000 and 12,000 and as large as 16,000 for the entire Roanoke Valley.³⁵⁷

And others here say for the worse,

...why do you think we have so much identity theft these days???? My advice to American parents is to watch your sons and daughters, do not allow them to socialize with these illegal Mexicans, as all they want is to become romantically involved...There is no end to what they will do to get their feet planted in the USA! This happens more often than not and we can't be stupid and believe their "hard-up stories" any longer and allow this to continue!³⁵⁸

³⁵⁷ Beth Macy, "A growing presence," *The Roanoke Times*, July 23, 2006.

³⁵⁸ Mary, Comments in "*Recent Comments: Share your thoughts*" section of *The Roanoke Times* website in response to the series of articles, "Land of Opportunity: an Occasional Series on Hispanic Immigration in the Roanoke Valley," run in *The Roanoke Times* in the Summer - Fall of 2006, Comments posted on August 17, 2006, <http://blogs.roanoke.com/immigration/comments.php> (accessed on August 28, 2007).

Greasy plastic booths aside, it was a good meal, especially after the long drive. We were not going to go out before attending the Judgement House, but we arrived in North Roanoke a full three hours early. After checking in to our hotel and looking around the room we decided that the day was in all probability going to be a long one; we would most undeniably need to open the bottle of wine we brought when we returned to the hotel that night.

Much to our dismay I forgot the corkscrew; I picture it alone, small wooden handle luxuriating on the kitchen counter back at home in Baltimore, where I wish that I was. Maybe if I pray hard enough – I chortle internally – I could trade places with the corkscrew or even better yet we could go back and get it; it's only about a five hour drive. After some deep breaths and a solid forty minutes of changing my shirt, with each new look asking my beleaguered husband not the standard questions – whether it looks good or I look fat, but if I look respectable, if my shirt is cut too low, if I look too casual, or too dressy, too urbanite or too inappropriately country? He sighs. I settle on a plain T-shirt in maroon, blue jeans, a ponytail, a hooded gray sweater, and tennis shoes. My fashion crisis having come to a close, we venture to the local CVS and buy a corkscrew. On the way we pass this little Mexican restaurant. Paul, who is just along for the ride, suggests going to the church early but I am awfully nervous and don't want to get there at all, much less *early*.

We drive by the church and gawk at it; we turn around and drive by it again. I shoot footage of it with our digital camera. In the parking lot there is a long line of people: young and old, families, gaggles of teenagers, and youth groups emerging from those vans that are notorious for rolling over. A hot dog stand crowned by a

bright yellow and white striped umbrella and manned by an imposing individual in black T-shirt and headset completes the scene.

No one is buying hot dogs, not a soul. I wonder why. It is right around dinner time and these people look like they have been waiting at least a few hours. The church looms in the background. When I see the hotdog henchmen's headset I lose it a little, retreat is my only option, aware of the fact my husband loves Mexican I suggest this little hole in the wall to kill time. Dinner comes, dinner goes.

As we get up from the table I puzzle over and replay parts of the phone conversations Medrith and I have had prior to our impending meeting. I try to picture her in my mind, her imagined image changes each time – now all I can hear is the twang of her voice. “Sure, you can come. I'll put you on the list. I believe that you contacted us for a reason.”

At this point I am wondering what that reason was. Why am I here? I don't really like meeting new people. I am fine when I get somewhere and start talking, but I dread the first moment of interaction. Angry at my own audacity in enacting this ludicrous idea I mull over the fact that I could leave and do a literary comparison or historical study for my dissertation – the grass is always greener; I could deal with dead people who you never actually have talk to. What on God's green earth compelled me to do this?

As we wander out of the restaurant full and confused, I pop way too many breath mints in my mouth as if they are going to sanctify me, I cough. As I look up into the emerging night I see a huge electric star – red, white, and blue—lit up bright,

perched atop the highest mountain peak in town. I take a deep breath through my mouthful of mints and get in the car.

I am here in North Roanoke because Rev. Tom Hudgins, at the time the youth pastor in Moody, Alabama, created the first Judgment House in 1983, “as a Christian alternative to Halloween.”³⁵⁹ Judgement House’s umbrella organization New Creation Evangelism, Inc. markets kits as a vehicle for bringing “...participants face to face with their mortality and Creator, giving them the opportunity to look into the eyes of the One who paid love’s ultimate price for us.”³⁶⁰ Their website and promotional DVD describe the format of their event as follows:

A **Judgement House** presentation is a walk-through drama that takes place in a series of up to 9 rooms...The series of rooms in which the drama takes place combine to tell a story. Each story or “script” is unique in its setting, characters and plot and is a relevant interpretation of events happening around the world today. Although the scripts are different, all of the scripts ask the same important question, “What will you do with God’s offer of a saving and personal relationship with His Son Jesus Christ.”³⁶¹

For Medrith, the North Roanoke Judgement House director, Judgement House has become a way to reach out to her community and to invite others to join her church family. North Roanoke *is* changing, but it does not have to change beyond recognition. It can be old and new – different harmoniously – *if* newer members of the population enhance familiar social and spiritual networks, if they do, at least one part of life here is altered for the better; there would be an increase in congregation and salvations. This would re-invigorate and strengthen a church community that, at

³⁵⁹ Tom Hudgins as quoted in, “Morality plays,” <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/issue/981214/14lett.htm> (accessed on May 14, 2005).

³⁶⁰ Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., “Why Judgement House?,” Judgement House, <http://www.judgementhouse.org/WhyJudgementHouse.htm> (accessed on July 2, 2007).

³⁶¹ Ibid.

its most essential, is interested in fostering exchanges across cultural, national, linguistic and racial borders. In short, Judgement House and North Roanoke Baptist church are equal opportunity redeemers. The advertising strategy of the North Roanoke Judgement House is to purchase ad space on radio stations and on billboards in areas of town that are comprised of newer, often immigrant, residents.

As a leader, and as a Christian, Medrith finds her greatest rewards within her ministry at Judgement House. It is great fun for her; it is scary and Medrith takes great pleasure in scaring people; she likes to, “you know, shake things up.”³⁶² However, her commitment to Judgement House springs from her desire to forge and deepen community bonds. Medrith wishes to help her church community attain a deeper level of commitment and to grow towards the future. Of course, Medrith speaks of the audience and the change in their life she hopes that Judgement House will serve as a catalyst for; nonetheless, her most common and passionate answer articulates the role that Judgement House holds in the lives of participants. Medrith’s commitment to the event is so strong because she believes it to be a *personal* mission.

MW: I knew what to do, I knew what God was calling me to do, and I was beside myself. I prayed and I said Daryl. I have *got* to do this. My biggest fear is that some other church in North Roanoke will get a Judgement House, and then I don’t know. God has called *me* to do it and if I don’t respond he will look elsewhere and then I don’t know what I, I won’t know what, to do...³⁶³

God did not look elsewhere and Medrith’s relationship with the Judgement House organization has grown. She and her husband Hal have become regional trainers for the national Judgement House organization. They are responsible for presenting to

³⁶² M. Woody, interview.

³⁶³ Ibid.

and training church groups in Virginia and the Carolinas who express interest in learning about and becoming part of the organization. However, they remain so committed to their own church community that they often travel back home on a Saturday night, after days of training, just to be at North Roanoke Baptist on Sunday. As Medrith expresses it, “there are those ministries you love to do and those you need to do.”³⁶⁴ They are needed at North Roanoke. In addition, they are needed within the Judgement House organization, in October 2006 and 2007 their Judgement House served as a national training conference. Representatives from interested churches came for one weekend to meet with the Judgement House founder Tom Hudgins, listen to him present and preach, go through a training session, and tour the North Roanoke House. Medrith’s success in this endeavor has made her ever more certain of her decision to pursue the Judgement House ministry.

As we pull up to the church parking lot we see many people milling around, some in line, some standing around parked vans. It is cold and dark; a moist drizzle hangs in the air and settles on the cars. Still no one is buying hot dogs and still it puzzles me. There are several large men in black T-shirts with headsets directing people how and where to park their cars so as to avoid “traffic” after the show. Their shirts say SECURITY, underneath the word SECURITY is a quote from scripture that fits thematically with the job of SECURITY, and then the Judgement House logo (Figure 4.1.).

One man approaches the car and asks if we have reservations. I answer, timidly – “sort of” – feeling ashamed that we are going to cut the large line that looms

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

outside the church door, a damp strand of people that stretches past the lonely hot dog stand. I explain that I had spoken to Medrith about visiting the Judgement House; she said to talk to someone at the registration desk when we arrive. He asks if we are the Messer's. I nod yes; he waves us into a parking spot. Into his headset he barks, "Tell Medrith those people she wanted us to keep an eye out for are here." Then to us, "Follow me. I'll take you to Medrith." He leads us through the lot and to my palpable discomfort past the line and into a large cafeteria/gymnasium room alive with swarms of people; there are four "holding" quadrants where groups of between fifteen and twenty are waiting in various stages for their tours to begin, our reservations are for 7:15 p.m. sharp.³⁶⁵

On the brief tour of the building we take with Laura, the PUBLIC RELATIONS leader (her T-shirt tells us this) we learn that each "holding" station is timed. At one station a tour guide checks the pronunciation of each group member's name, once for use in the tour and also for the PRAYER WALKER who follows behind the group praying for each person as they go. I amuse myself thinking that it would be quite funny if God were to send his light down on another person due to a case of mispronunciation. Smugly, I internally assert that God does not care about this minutia, but then I feel bad and repent silently to myself, I don't mean it. I turn to say something to Paul, to see if his face registers any of what I am feeling. Nope, just awe; he is lost in a world of homemade baked goods.

I follow his gaze across the room to a huge kitchen with a counter the length of the back wall of the room. Here people are congregating to buy cookies, cakes,

³⁶⁵ Most Judgement Houses operate on a reservation system, one shows up at a reserved time and begins the registration process. From entering the event until the actual tour one could wait an hour or more. Walk-ins are usually worked into existent groups and their wait is often much longer.

candy, and freshly made sandwiches. Now I finally understand why no is touching the hot dogs. Everyone is talking, people in T-shirts of various colors with scripture and logo buzz through the crowd. The shirts, I surmise, denote their function in the event: REGISTRATION, PRAYER WALKER, DOOR KNOCKER, ADVERTISING/MEDIA, SECURITY, OFFICE, KITCHEN, etc. I later learn that these shirts were Medrith's addition to the event; the main office did not send them. She thought them up and the Judgement House headquarters has adopted them as part of their package. The shirts are a testament to one of Medrith's self-identified spiritual gifts: her organization.

The SECURITY guard guides us to one of three long tables where people are filling out registration cards with their names, information about their religious status and denomination, and their contact information. This information is used both in the performance event itself, as well as to contact churches that people have designated as their church if they re-dedicate. It is also used to locate local churches to refer people to if they are not from the area, and to send them resources if they make a spiritual commitment. At the table children are scrambling over each other for the kind of lollipops you would get in the bank when I was their age. Do they still have them in banks here I wonder? Snapping me out of my reverie, SECURITY tells the REGISTRATION woman that we are here and asks her where Medrith is. Her voice sounds tense, but I cannot tell if it is because something out of the ordinary is happening or if it is merely the huge amount of hustle and bustle going on around her: people grabbing pens from in front of her, children snatching lollipops from the bowl,

etc. She tells us to fill out some registration cards and wait; they will find Medrith as soon as possible.

For about fifteen minutes we stand in the corner taking in the frenetic pace of the room and trying to figure out how the line progresses from station to station. From, the hallway at the back of the room next to the kitchen, a woman emerges and walks with purpose through the crowd. She is wearing a different color shirt than any we have previously seen, a deep blue. I don't know if someone has told her who we are or if it is just *that* obvious we don't belong. She reaches us and extends her hand. Her handshake is firm and her voice booming. "Hi, I'm Medrith. We are so excited to see you here. Did you fill out registration cards? We can walk around a bit and meet some people behind the scenes. Sorry to make you wait, I was in the Children's room. Sometimes, it is the only place that is quiet." Her voice is spot-on the way I had replayed it in my head, but even though I have pictured her in a thousand different ways she looks nothing like I had expected. She wears pajama bottoms that seem comfortable (I am envious); they are made of cotton and have a blue striped pattern that matches her Judgement House shirt; it says DIRECTOR. She has big gold hoop earrings and a short edgy haircut, kind of hip with blond highlights; she wears a gold cross around her neck. She hugs us each and then turns quickly motioning for us to follow her as she begins her rounds of the complicated event, speaking into her headset and then back to us, pointing out this and that as we move through a labyrinth of divided hallways and impromptu backstage passages. I breathe. It has started, we're off.

A little later Medrith tells a story that, as I look back over our talks, has become recognizable as a structure by which she organizes and explains her world: challenge and growth. This is a structure that also permeates the narratives of Judgement House as characters learn about the importance of faith and grow into Christ through the challenges of losing a loved one. Much like myself, Medrith spends a lot of her time in front of people; we share the same fear of meeting others, as well as of presenting in front of groups. Both of us, it seems, would rather be behind the scenes. As a teacher, I liken her ability to focus her shyness and speak with and lead a large number of people to the different person I become in the classroom. Medrith explains this ability in terms of her relationship to faith and in her commitment to believing in God's plan for her life,

MW:...I am really am much more comfortable behind the scenes, I'm not, I mean, I'm a people person but to get up in front of people and talk and to get to know a lot of strangers and know that I have, have to get to know them on a really personal level with their commitment to this, um, was definitely way outside my comfort zone...so when I was struggling for those two years and just restless that is what was really unexplainable, you know I just was not content and leading up to the point and realizing that this was what God was calling me to do I began to realize...I'm gonna have to get up and talk to people, I'm gonna have to get on the telephone and call some people and ask them if they would take a particular role...he did that because that just wasn't me... so, um, I do believe that God doesn't call the qualified, he qualifies the called and that's what he did with this...I could not have done this on my own and had those challenges before me knowing that and gotten through them on my own. He's really guided me and given me the wisdom of what to say, of how to act to people, and help build those relationships with people.³⁶⁶

Focusing on growth under God's tutelage Medrith explains the phases of her life as growing phases. If a phenomenon seems unexplainable Medrith perceives that event as a gap she must fill with her faith. In Medrith's worldview the inexplicable is not random chaos, it is not occurrences scientifically unexplained as of yet, it is not quite

³⁶⁶ M. Woody, interview.

pre-destined, it is not brought on by any human action; it is simply a piece of God's divine vision that we, as humans *cannot* grasp. This narrative structure of growth through experience, her ability to catalogue all experiences as fruitfully developmental, harkens back to Medrith's facility for, and love of, organization. Everything is planned and has purpose, if she cannot find the meaning it is not for her to know, but for her to have faith in.

In a structure of belief such as this, when one struggles with the inability to see an answer to questions such as: Why did this one or that one die? Why are they sick? Why did the hurricane hit there? When one seeks the absolute and insists on logically verifiable answers to these unexplainable issues one doubts God's purpose; in this schema, faith is that which accepts circumstances and deeds are the acts one performs to help others accept God's actions. As Hal, Medrith's husband who oversees the construction for the event explains, in attempting to comfort Medrith, while she recounts having to turn away a van of young people from Lynchburg,

HW: God's going to put here what he wants here. You know it's not for us to decide what is going to come out. He knows what's going to happen. We don't and we should not question him.

MW: Yeah, exactly.³⁶⁷

The church for Meredith, as for many others of all walks of life and types of religious practices, provides entertainment and "social capital"³⁶⁸ in a geographic area and within a popular culture without many "wholesome" diversions. The North

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ I use the term as Putnam defines it in *Bowling Alone*, however, it is not his term exclusively as he points out, "social capital itself turns out to have been invented independently at least six times over the twentieth century, each time to call attention to the ways our lives are made more productive by social ties." Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2000), 19.

Roanoke Baptist Church provides a social scene outside of one's career or home, and a place to make friends, join groups and make meaningful connections in what some view as an increasingly isolated and isolating world. Children are cared for; the community shares weekly meals. One glance at the church activities calendar demonstrates that this is a place where one can invest time, energy and commitment and witness the fruits of that dedication. Judgement House and the Judgement House performance and preparatory work offers an environment where that commitment and dedication can lead to fulfilling bonding experiences for members of different demographics. Individuals of different ages and interests work together and church members can showcase and serve through strengths that might go unnoticed in other church events. "It brings us together and allows us to see many different gifts, abilities, and passions being used."³⁶⁹

In this context, the one time in her religious life that Medrith had no answers must have been troubling for her. She has elided this time into a crucible in which she came out smelted and ready to heed God's call. For all intents and purposes it was a success; her faith has transformed the event into a useful part of her narrative. For one so organized, committed, and hungry to know things, for someone who, "reads everything I can get my hands on, looking for answers,"³⁷⁰ such an inexplicable event can only be resurrected by faith. When dissatisfied with the depth of her religious commitment Medrith attempted to remedy the situation by seeking out many experiences of leadership. When she was still not fulfilled she relinquished them for

³⁶⁹ Rich Youger, "Judgement House Questionnaire" designed by author.

³⁷⁰ M. Woody, interview.

inner reflection. As all action fits into God's plan, Medrith was able to transform what many would read as a random diversion during spring cleaning into a life-changing event.

MW:...Where am I going to be most useful to you? ...twelve plus years we taught Sunday school 2nd grade and 5th grade, um...and I couldn't – I just kept, sensing the fact that you just need to back away from it all and I needed those two years to really study. I needed to take those two years to really study and grow as a Christian, to learn from these different studies not knowing at the time I was going to need these things, for this... Those two years were very much a learning process and then Daryl had given me this video tape five years ago that I had just, you know, stuck on the shelf. And one day I was doing some heavy dusting where you like actually move stuff, where you don't just take the wand and go (*makes dusting motion*). I was actually like moving things and I was like there is that video tape Daryl gave me and I never watched it. I should watch it...And I said there's a real simple solution we're gonna watch this tonight and I put it in and Hal's just sitting there like...lying back, probably thinking more about the show I interrupted with the video. I started moving closer and closer to the edge of the couch as it was going on, and I mean it was as if God was sitting right next to me on the couch and he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "This is what I want you to do..."³⁷¹

4.3 The Key Issues

Red states and blue states often seem too-convenient labels, which serve as the restrictive frame to the façade of a homogeneous religious movement that thrives on so-called "family values." While homogeneity is not always present in our day-to-day lives, the politics of the Christian right and the "family values" agenda play a significant role in individual and communal visions of what America should (or should not) be. Among outreach programs sponsored by evangelical Christians in recent years, there has been a proliferation of religious performances, which seek to change souls, and in their plots and methods also work to re-present traditional family structures and behaviors, portraying what happens when the concepts of traditional

³⁷¹ Ibid.

family structure, and thus the patterns of Godly living, are not respected. These Judgement House performances (and others) provide bonding, engagement and serve as a warning to church members who might not be truly invested in their faith. They also reach out to non-Christians, those who have wandered, or those who still seek a spiritual home. While many of these performances are locally based and produced on a modest budget, there is also an emergent structure of evangelistic Christian corporations that have emerged and flourished in the last fifteen years due to a rising sense of crisis in the last decades of the twentieth and the first decades of the twenty-first centuries. Judgement House is a leader among these organizations. Begun in the early 1980s, Judgement House's stated goal is to appeal to teenagers, who according to their website are "the targets in an intense spiritual battle where eternity is at stake."³⁷²

Not as rooted in the demonic as other groups Judgement House still presents the same final choice scenario about salvation and damnation to its audience members. Additionally, Judgement House churns up deeply held fears, based upon gendered terms. The politics, as reflected in the poetics of the Judgement House collection of narratives, overflow with the longing for a heterosexual, male-led family as presented in the plot and performative structures of the scripts themselves. Again, while they are neither as *overtly* political as a Hell House or a *Nightmare*, nor are they as frightening and gory as a *Scaremare*, Judgement House does present, like these other performances, a reality that rests upon the randomness of life and death. One could die at any time. This reality is set up to be a mirror of the local world (not a fun house mirror); Hell and Heaven should be read as spaces that are as literal as a living

³⁷² Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., "What is Judgement House?"

room. The scripts present a patriarchal world full of suffering and victimized women. They often enact what goes awry when the contract to love and honor one's family responsibilities is broken through: unruly children, drunken/abusive fathers, adulterous mothers, etc. While the contract has been broken and the world is no utopia, the scene presented shows a familial structure that is right in its contrast to that which has gone wrong. The head of all is God the Father, the head of the household should be God the Father as embodied in the literal father – when those duties are rescinded trouble appears on the horizon.

While AJ is sitting at the PC screen, Sherry comes back in to get something off a table in the back of the room. She stops cold, though, and stands looking undetected over AJ's shoulder as he stares at the pictures on the screen. The audience can see AJ's intense face, and his wife's increasingly concerned and shocked face. She stares in disbelief, and is no longer able to contain herself.

Sherry: “AJ,” *(she cries, walking from behind to beside him)*, “you promised. You promised you'd stop – and this is even worse before. That girl you're looking she's just a child. No older than our own daughter! You've gone too far this time! Trish and I are leaving – do you hear me? We are really going to stay away this time!”³⁷³

The dramatic action is set in motion by AJ's rejection of his duties as father, protector, and head of household. Judgement House works to solidify the proper functioning of familial structure by pointing up what can go wrong when one lives improperly in the world, as well as by tempering that impropriety with a model of a “good” and “proper” family that is impacted by the actions of the “bad” ones. “Order is threatened; reordering courses of action, the ‘antibodies’ of the group, are produced in response to that group's contact with a sociocultural ‘antigen,’ interpreted by the

³⁷³ Judgement House Writing Team as inspired by Karen Rines, *Web of Lies* (Clearwater, Florida: New Creation Evangelism Inc., 2007), 20.

representatives of the group's ideal solidarity..."³⁷⁴ thus, in *Web of Lies*, AJ's family is countered by Bill's whole and wholesome family.

4.3.1 *Get Real*

In describing their intentions for Judgement House the New Creation Evangelism, Inc. organization states repeatedly that their goal is to present "reality." However, this not just any old reality but a ritualized reality – symbolic yet tangible, referent yet rooted – a reality that will move people, but also mark the tangibility of God's presence in the daily places of their lives.

"Whereas the repression thesis emphasizes how ritual exercises control over the individual's affective state," a part of ritual present, to be sure, in Judgement House and other performances discussed in this project through the use of fear, violence, and the purging and performance of social vices, Judgement House also deploys, "the definition of reality thesis," which, "focuses on how ritual models ideal relations and structures of values," seeing, "ritual as a symbolic modeling of the social order, with this imaging or iconic quality at the center of its efficacy."³⁷⁵ This reality includes bloody and detailed car crashes, fully rendered pizza parlors where you can smell the pizza, "Kyle (Pizza Guy) wears an apron with pizza sauce on one side and blood on the other,"³⁷⁶ and Heaven and Hell.

One of the key techniques of Judgement House is to bring the spiritual in touch with the physical, the local in contact with belief. God is in the kitchen, on the

³⁷⁴ Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 104.

³⁷⁵ Bell, 175.

³⁷⁶ *Web of Lies*, *Ibid.*, 8.

battlefield, at the sleepover, in the car, at the prison, the pep rally, on the street of the town, in the execution chamber, and so naturally God is in Heaven as well. The newscaster on TV refers to local highways and the police men are dressed in the uniforms of the town. Sometimes the Devil, disguised as security, walks with tour groups. This specificity allows for identification with the spectacle in the realms of both the spiritual and the day-to-day.

Available Judgement House scripts cover a wide range of “ripped from the headlines topics,”³⁷⁷ which include: *59 Minutes*, which deals with the choices that disparate characters make in the last fifty nine minutes of their lives; *Abducted*, “Somebody call the cops! Some guy was just pulled in the parking lot and two girls were pulled into the back of a white van!”³⁷⁸ And so begins the terrifying experience of two middle school cheerleaders, Becca and Abby; *Revenge* which deals with school shooting and violence; *Found Faithful* which is based on the true story of a young devoted Christian’s struggle with cancer, his impact on the lives around him, and ultimately his death and entrance into Heaven; *Jamaica for Jesus* in which a plane crashes on a mission trip to Jamaica; *Collision* and *Behind the Family Portrait* which both deal with drunk driving and family violence; *Land Of The Free. Home Of The Brave*; which deals with three soldiers who die at war, and one of the most recent offerings *Web of Lies* which addresses the danger of sexual predators on the internet.

Most Covenant Partner Churches usually perform the newest script each year, although some will pick a script that speaks to a specific community concern, i.e. a

³⁷⁷ Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc. “Our Scripts.”

³⁷⁸ Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., “Our Scripts, *Abducted* Summary,” Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/Our-Scripts_7_pg.html (accessed on November 9, 2007).

high percentage of soldiers at war in a congregation, a recent car crash, the death of an active congregation member, etc.³⁷⁹ Year to year the Judgement House writing staff tries to use similar props, settings and events, to minimize the strain on churches which do not have the time and/or resources to re-invent the wheel each year when it comes to building sets, creating effects, and procuring props. In return for the benefits provided to Covenant Partners New Creation Evangelism, Inc. has more sway over the manner in which the scripts are produced. Covenant Partner Churches do often alter the material to make it more significant, appropriate and/or feasible for their specific congregation; however, when they do most of them go through New Creation and Hudgins, working with the larger organization to tailor the material and keep it true to the Judgement House mission. Hudgins freely admits that this arrangement works well for him as it puts him in closer contact with the Covenant Church leaders. The people “out there in the communities bring me scripts and issues and I take it to my team.”³⁸⁰

Judgement House is based in Clearwater, Florida and operated under New Creation Evangelism, Inc, yet their national network is quite extensive. There have been Judgement Houses in thirty two states and seven foreign countries. The highest concentration of Judgement Houses in the United States is, not surprisingly, located in the Bible Belt, though the Heartland has a fair share.³⁸¹

³⁷⁹ Churches often try to match scripts with congregational events and concerns. Judgement House aims to present “reality,” and thus finds it greatest strength in intersecting the “real” lives of community members.

³⁸⁰ Hudgins, interview.

³⁸¹ A list of Judgement Houses in the United States is attached as Appendix C.

As the “The Results” sections of their website reports, from 1998 to 2006,³⁸²

3,017,430 people have attended a Judgement House presentation. 225,619 people have chosen a saving and personal relationship with Jesus Christ for the first time. 294,122 people have renewed their spiritual commitment to Jesus Christ. 2120 members of a Judgement House presentation's cast have chosen a saving and personal relationship with Jesus Christ for the first time. 21.95% of people who attend a Judgement House presentation make a decision or commitment regarding their spiritual condition. 335,270 is the average number of people who attended a Judgement House presentation each year. [In] 2004 451,111 people attend a Judgement House presentation. The most ever in one year.³⁸³

Admittedly, given the duration of time that these numbers cover they are not jaw dropping. However, if one focuses on the relationships fostered within congregations performing Judgement House its effects on the, “750 churches and organizations [that] have partnered with Judgement House...both in the United States and abroad,” including, “56 in Brazil, 21 in Costa Rica, [and] 11 in El Salvador”³⁸⁴ its impact becomes far more impressive.

While not as “sexy” or “scary” as some of the other contemporary Christian dramas based on ideas of damnation, repentance and sin – and while not quite as polarizing and overtly issue laden as Hell House – with which they are frequently confused and conflated – Judgement House, I argue, goes deeper; it allows one to move beyond polarized views and overtly offensive imagery to see a dynamic and

³⁸² These numbers according to Hudgins and the Judgement House website are the most up to date numbers available; they will be updating their website and their statistics again in late 2009.

³⁸³ Judgement House/New Creation Evangelism, Inc., “The Results,” Judgement House http://www.judgementhouse.org/The-Results_10_pg.html (accessed on September 9, 2007). New Creation Evangelism, Inc. did not start keeping detailed /reliable records of attendance until 1998. Judgement House has been presented since 1983.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

nuanced field in which identities are negotiated with more complexity than drawing chalk lines on the political playground and hurling insults.

Judgement House does not deal with socially controversial issues and instead chooses to focus the entire presentation and in fact every scene, even Hell, on presenting people with the opportunity to choose a saving and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Hell House on the other hand, deals very graphically with highly controversial social issues such as abortion, homosexuality, date rape and suicide.³⁸⁵

As the Judgement House organization notes, they shy away from the, “in-your-face, high-flyin’, no denyin’, death-defyin’, Satan-be-cryin’, keep-ya-from-fryin’, theatrical stylin’, no holds barred, cutting-edge...”³⁸⁶ aesthetics of Hell House – rife with polarizing messages.³⁸⁷ Instead, Judgement House chooses to focus on everyday events that most “ethical” – if not “religious” – individuals would recognize as tragic or at the very least somewhat saddening. This allows even a non-churched observer to enter the spectacle, to be part of the event and to think about its message without having to fight through its politics outright.

4.3.2 It takes different strokes to save the world

Put on by “ordinary” evangelicals, Judgement House works in broader strokes –operating largely on “American” cultural types: the cheerleader, the good kid, the soldier, the rebel, the jock, and the out of luck working man. In Judgement House, “Ritual forms of solidarity are usefully promoted because...they focus on common symbols...ritual does not appear to communicate common understandings of its

³⁸⁵ Judgement House/New Creation Evangelism, Inc., “How is Judgement House Different?,” Judgement House, [http://www.judgementhouse.org/How-is-Judgement-House-Different- 8_pg.html](http://www.judgementhouse.org/How-is-Judgement-House-Different-8_pg.html) (accessed on August 27, 2007). The discussion of Hell and Judgement Houses differences can also be tracked in several articles from the *St. Petersburg Times* from 1999-2004.

³⁸⁶ Hell House/New Destiny Christian Center, “Hell House Outreach Kit,” New Destiny Christian Center, http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_kit.cfm (accessed on September 1, 2006).

central symbols...”³⁸⁸ It is the scope of these symbols that allows participants to intersect with them on their own terms supporting the notion that cultural and social positioning vis-à-vis the performance (spectacle and text) rests on openness, “deem[ing] such ambiguity to be essential to ritual.”³⁸⁹

Judgement House also draws its demonic symbolism from the wide field of pop-culturally stylized depictions of Hell and the demonic, offering a more subtle form of cohesion and identity. Belonging is not predicated on a series of virulently held beliefs, as in Hell House, but on an acceptance of Jesus Christ; the journey towards that acceptance of Christ, however, is dependent on how one sees oneself in relation to what is called forth by the performance itself. The belief structure put forward as right is present not on the overt level of the obvious subject matter (an abortion scene, a gay marriage scene), but in the subtle way that “real” life is represented and critiqued. Socially correct behavior lies in the characters their types and the fates meted out to those types.

When I was 15 years old, I was the youngest guide at Judgement House. Normally only adults are allowed to guide. I was excited to take groups through the house...and watch the awesome change from the first scene to the last. If you have never guided a group through Judgement House, you have missed a blessing. I watched people goof off and play around in the first scene, but when we came to the Judgement scene all that changed. When God called their name, the sudden realization that, one day that could be them began to sink in. They were fearful in Hell, but when Jesus wrapped his arms around them in heaven, God really began dealing with their hearts. Some would shy away from Jesus. Some would run and embrace him. Some would cling to him, weeping and needing salvation.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁸ Bell, 183.

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 184.

³⁹⁰ Jonathan from Alabama, “Your Stories,” Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/Your-Stories!_159_pg.html (accessed on August 24, 2007).

While Hell House utilizes a style of performance that is tightly focused on the sinner and their sin, the body and its ills – the audience stands significantly with the demon guide while each character is shunted through the final, often bloody moments of their lives – Judgement House, in contrast, presents a less bodily oriented picture, eschewing the graphic nature of sin for the “reality” caused by chance; in a Judgement House the viewer encounters mass calamity displacing emphasis from the suffering of one single body to the “randomness” of life and death. The dramatic structure of the event – always climaxing in mass calamity – creates a more communally referential spectacle.

One concrete reason for the broadened focus on chance in Judgement Houses, versus the emphasis on sin and pain as manifested on the body in Hell Houses, is that in a Hell House the audience moves from sin to sin – from the abortion scene, to the gay marriage scene, to the rave scene, etc., associating one specific set of “sinners” with each scene. However, in a Judgement House the audience moves from location to location watching one story unfold in different settings. They follow the same characters; the characters themselves are played by different performers in each location and association is encouraged through the use of characters wearing the same emblematic color whether they are in school, dead in a drunk driving accident, or languishing in Hell.

4.3.3 Fear is Your Friend

TH: If reality is scary, then sure, we’re scary. Call us scary. We do try to scare people, but into thinking...We want to build communities, to change communities. If we were all about fear why would people keep coming back? There are other intangible things about the performances that bring them;

those things have to do with being in a community...It's not an easy ride, we're not saying like Hell House, right? If you live your life this way, go burn in Hell, branding people, making them ashamed. We're not saying this is what to do or die. I don't want to disrespect anyone, I believe one thing, all I want to do is show what I believe, what we as a group believe, not tell you that what you believe is evil, but this is what you can do to make this world and the next easier on all of us.³⁹¹

While Hudgins works to separate the two forms (Judgement House and Hell House) it is impossible to deny that fear is a factor, both in the performance and the discussion of Judgement House. One of Judgement Houses more severe critics parallels the experience of attending a Judgement House to child abuse.³⁹²

It has been said that "hell serves the holy purpose of cradle to grave intimidation," and this is exactly what that church is attempting to do. But for civilized people, including most Christian people, what they did can be considered child abuse. They can only be thankful that with the separation of church and state, child protective service agencies cannot do anything about it.³⁹³

I do not support the politics (or the terror tactics) of fear-based brands of religious proselytizing; however, I am certain that reactions, such as the above, which mystify or polarize debate are very dangerous positions to take in present times. While one might not agree with Judgement House it is important to attempt to look beyond the surface and try to apprehend Judgement House's reaction to the contemporary world and the way in which they operate to forge a community. Whether you believe fear is

³⁹¹ Hudgins, interview.

³⁹² I would like to note that most Judgement Houses that I have interacted with do not let small children (under twelve) in any scenes with violence and/or blood, or into Hell. Guides also warn tours that what they are about to witness may be emotionally disturbing or upsetting and ask anyone under twelve to wait outside; they are then brought back into the group after the scene. Most Judgement Houses also provide childcare for participants' children and some for audience members' children.

³⁹³ John W. Loftus, "[Judgement House: A Legitimate Case of Child Abuse](http://debunkingchristianity.blogspot.com/2007/11/judgment-house-legitimate-case-of-child.html)," on the blog Debunking Christianity, Posted on November 1, 2007, <http://debunkingchristianity.blogspot.com/2007/11/judgment-house-legitimate-case-of-child.html> (accessed on November 12, 2007).

bad, fear is good, or fear is necessary the performance of fear and performances that engender fear are reacting to an ethos of fear that permeates American culture in the twenty-first century since September 11th; Judgement House engages that fear as a way to build community and, as such, is more valuable than to be dismissed as a cheap trick or a Halloween scare.

YES, I agree totally with your assessment of how we are to “come to Christ” I have serious hesitation about “scaring” people to Christ. My hope is that fear will lead persons to speak to the counselors; I am one, who will instruct those person on becoming a Christian. Our church also has follow up programs. We are being mentored by a church that has presented Judgement House for a decade. They will help walk us through the after care.³⁹⁴

The propensity of critics to either demonize or dismiss these performances as parodies of themselves is emblematic of a larger cultural blindness. Judgement House is important because, while an event that portrays tornados, fires, car crashes, shootings and Hell cannot purport to be free of fear, it engages these concerns in a way that allows for conversation around tactics of fear. While I would not go so far as to say that we are confronted with, “culturally imperialistic critics praying at the altar of...oversimplified radicality, [who] disallow human beings the right to see on stage what they want to see...an appalling preconceived notion of what the community needs.”³⁹⁵ Communities who put on Judgement Houses, such as those discussed in the following pages are engaging concerns that they need to see, but also that those outside those specific communities need to recognize as vital parts of a

³⁹⁴ Christianenbalmer [pseud.], Judgement House_Open Discussion Room, “Cheap Grace at Judgement House,” comment on “Thoughts on Judgement House. Good, bad, ugly, are all welcomed,” Christian Classics Ethereal Library Discussion Board, Posted on November 12, 2007, <http://www.ccel.org/node/3947> (accessed on November 14, 2007).

³⁹⁵ Alison Carey as quoted in Sonja Kuftinec, *Staging America : Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater*, Theater in the Americas (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 14.

national discussion on issues such as how fear and violence are engaged and deployed in contemporary America. The value of this form of performance can be understood in a multiplicity of ways. Judgement House can be apprehended as a voice in discussions about both American and Christian identity, “light up your face with the zero degrees of joy and pleasure, smile, smile, smile...Americans may have no identity but they do have wonderful teeth.”³⁹⁶ Judgement might very well be part of the conversation that many don’t wish to reflect on, but certainly the connections between sin, fear, violence and good upstanding American character made in Judgement Houses do not exist in a vacuum. Judgement House as cultural artifact places the Alabama Freethinkers Association and other groups critical of the phenomena in conversations with a progression of dedicated Christians who wonder where faith and fear do and should intersect. Also, Judgement House permits reflection on the many ways fear is being, and has been, used as a means of social control in the past, in religious and non-religious contexts. Unlike, Hell House, which opens up debate like a can of whoop ass, Judgement House allows reflection across multiple boundaries.

Judgement House Covenant Partner Churches reflect a transformation of the use of fear in American politics and religion. They have revisited and reanimated the far reaching fears of a “godless Communism,” a socialized welfare state and the threat of nuclear deployment active and identifiable in the Cold War period, transferring these fears fully forward into the dissonances of our contemporary disquietude. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, these fears reflect: uncertainty about who one’s might be allies and who are one’s enemies might be in

³⁹⁶Jean Baudrillard, *America*, translated by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 34.

an age of multinational co-operation and corporations, instability in gender roles and practices since the feminist and gay rights movements have brought alternative lifestyles and choices into the sight of mainstream culture, anxiety about national borders and national identity in an age of global finance and increased immigration and migration, fear and mistrust of national political leaders, and the anger over the financial landscape and the duplicity of “elitist” practices. Many Americans have an uneasy sense that this list of nagging qualms adds up to an attack on their “way of life,” and that the privileges and opportunities that seemed to be present in their childhood, are no longer open to their children. The world is unstable and one must find certainty somewhere. Many Christians have transformed their apprehension into an uneasy sense of assault on their way of life; this is manifest in each of these performances in different ways (controversy, gore, presentation of sanctioned social order gone awry), but they all address this uncertainty in some manner.

NH: A lot of those that come in whether they are church people or not, don't know what path they're on, not just in faith, in their whole life – jobs, friends, school. I think the Judgement House gives them a sense of something they can do to take control back, be a part of something, and drop some of the weight off. That is what accepting Jesus Christ as your Savior does...³⁹⁷

4.3.4 Community: Building Bridges

Though the term community is discussed in the Introduction to this study, I think it is important to re-trace the definition of community deployed here, as well as the specific aspects of the term addressed in this Chapter. Community, here, in its

³⁹⁷ Norma Huguley, interview by author, Mount Olive, Alabama, July 22, 2007, Tape Recording.

widest scope refers to an encompassing field of values;³⁹⁸ it is the thread knitting together a series of beliefs, loose enough to re-shape. Community has often been categorized along three intersecting strands: the local – territory or geography, interest – belief or club-oriented³⁹⁹ communities, and communities of communion, in which there is not only a field of electively shared beliefs but the energy, focus, and spirit that promotes a profound encounter among participants, much like the encounter of conversion or salvation.⁴⁰⁰ Community can also be viewed as something one actively works to attach themselves to. Communities of place or belief may not always share a recognizable identity, however, identity can be articulated through actively utilizing tools such as ritualized practices and vocabulary.

It is what Durkheim called a “church,” that is, “a society whose members are united by the fact that they think in the same way in regard to the sacred world and its relations with the profane world ...” such units [are], composed of aggregates of individuals who regard their collective well-being to be dependant upon a common body...⁴⁰¹

Individuals of diverse locality and belief can “...construct community...making it a resource and repository of meaning and a referent of their identity.”⁴⁰² Judgement House serves as this repository through connecting individuals to a church

³⁹⁸ This concept is drawn from the work of Elizabeth Frazer in *The Problem of Communitarian Politics, Unity and Conflict*.

³⁹⁹ Interest or belief oriented communities often subsume cultural and racial categories by seeing them as communities with which one selects to identify to greater or lesser degrees. I choose to elaborate a community of culture, which includes communities with which one identifies by choice, as well as communities in which one is placed by physical, economic or geographical markers. This concept is explicated and applied more fully in the next Chapter in the discussion of the North Roanoke Baptist Church’s decision to create Spanish Language evenings to include immigrant populations in their congregation.

⁴⁰⁰ These three strands stem from the work of Willmott 1986, Lee and Newby 1983, and Crow and Allen 1995; they are discussed more fully in the Introduction.

⁴⁰¹ Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors* (1968) as quoted in Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 137.

⁴⁰² A.P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Tavistok, 1985), 118.

community within their locality, as well as by engaging a diverse group of localities in a larger community of, what the Judgement House Organization terms, Covenant Partner Churches.⁴⁰³

In understanding efficacy in community-based work I draw on concepts that several scholars and practitioners such as Geer, Frye Burnham, Cohen-Cruz, Haedicke and Nellhaus, and Kershaw, among others, have articulated. From their works I have culled four attributes that I am using to address the “success” of community-based performances,⁴⁰⁴

- 1) Shared Purpose, this purpose may be multi-layered, and community members may articulate it in different language. In Judgement House this would generally be salvations;
- 2) Communal labor deployed in the interest of community above individual concerns, i.e., arranging vacation time from work to help during the Judgement House run;
- 3) A network of understanding: norms, habits, practices. For instance, Judgement House engages a specific set of vocabulary to denote and describe the roles of community participants;
- 4) An alteration during the process, which can include strengthening, of communal and/or personal identity systems. While I argue that Judgement House performs this function on a myriad of levels, the simplest to express is an altering of identity due to a change in religious commitment, i.e. salvation.

Judgement House acts as both a “bridging” and a “bonding” practice.⁴⁰⁵ This “bridging” and “bonding” is not something that occurs solely between communities

⁴⁰³ A Covenant Partner Church is a church that has signed an agreement and a paid a fee to operate a legitimate Judgement House under the guidelines given to them by New Creation Evangelism, Inc. As the name implies, they have entered into a covenant with New Creation Evangelism, Inc.

⁴⁰⁴ For a deeper discussion of how I came to this analytical schema please see the Introduction to this study.

⁴⁰⁵ Putnam, *Ibid.*, 22. Putnam credits the labels of “bridging” and “bonding” to Ross Gittel and Avis Vidal in *Community Organizations: Building Social Capital as a Development Strategy* (Thousand Oaks California: Sage: 1998), 8. “Bridging” refers to bonds between communities or groups that

of place; it occurs also within communities of belief. Sarah Roby, who characterizes herself in the following quotation, as she imagines she is seen through the eyes of more conservative faith, as: "...a typical liberal Christian who is destroying the meaning of Christianity because I embrace worldly and popular views of God and that I refuse to be obedient to the true message of God... choosing the passages of the Bible that meet my own compass-less standard,"⁴⁰⁶ received a card in the mail advertising a Judgment House at El Toro Baptist Church, disturbed by the card she posted a comment about it to her blog, part of which is listed below.:

The people of this church are so filled with God's love, and so eager to share His radical message of redemption and peace for mankind, and so moved by their own experiences with His divine touch, that they pow-wowed on how to reach out to the community so that they can share this love with others, and this is what they came up with? A PG-13 rated scare tactic? Has Christianity stooped so low that we need to scare our friends and neighbors into believing in Christ?⁴⁰⁷

Others from the geographical community commented on her blog that they had also discerned what they saw as a "PG-13 scare tactic" in the card and still others from her belief community recommended books that she could read, etc. Perhaps the most interesting post was the response of El Toro's pastor who noted that Sarah did not attend the event and then went on to address many of her concerns in an even-handed fashion:

encourages re-definition of strict categories, creating in-roads, while "bonding" refers to strengthening bonds within community. Putnam goes on to discuss how most activities are not either/or but have attributes of each.

⁴⁰⁶ Sarah Roby, "Judgement House update," Every other minute of it blog, comments posted on November 2, 2006, <http://sarahroby.blogspot.com/2006/11/judgement-house-update.html> (accessed on August 24, 2007).

⁴⁰⁷ Sarah Roby, "Let them know we are Christians," Every other minute of it blog, comments posted on October 11, 2006, <http://sarahroby.blogspot.com/2006/10/let-them-know-we-are-christians.html> (accessed on August 24, 2007).

Perhaps trying to capture the attention of a lost world during the time of year where witches, ghosts and goblins are welcomed may seem a bit extreme to some, but we are simply trying to make an eternal difference in the lives of those who will come. Obviously not all people in the Kingdom agree on the exact approach in sharing the message of hope. But we should all be active to do something.⁴⁰⁸

Roby responded to the pastor and her response post in turn prompted a dialogue among people with many perspectives on the event from the larger blogger community, as well as the geographical El Toro community. Roby's post and the response to it demonstrates how discussing events like Judgement House can help one to see that identity and self-articulation are tied up in our oftentimes blind assessment of others, "...I was careful to make sure it passed the 'true Christian test,' i.e. I didn't want to say 'You all are horrible Christians and I am going to tell you so because that's what good Christians do; we judge each other with mean spirited sarcasm...'"⁴⁰⁹ This exchange illustrates how one Judgement House performance fostered an discussion about belief, politics, and methods that moved "beyond accusations and towards communication."⁴¹⁰ The conversation amongst Roby and her respondents also illustrates how Judgement House can create active contacts between divergent types of community.

4.3.5 Splitting Morals

What these plays have in common most obviously is that they offer their audiences moral instruction through dramatic action that is broadly

⁴⁰⁸ Pastor Mike, Comment on "Let them know we are Christians," Every other minute of it blog, comments posted in November 2006, <http://sarahroby.blogspot.com/2006/10/let-them-know-we-are-christians.html> (accessed on August 24, 2007).

⁴⁰⁹ Roby, "Judgement House update."

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

allegorical...The protagonist is generally a figure of all men, reflected in his name, Everyman or Mankind, and the other characters are polarized as figures of good and evil. The action concerns alienation from God and return to God, presented as the temptation, fall and restitution of the protagonist.⁴¹¹

The five plays traditionally associated with the English medieval morality genre are *The Pride of Life*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Wisdom*, *Mankind*, and *Everyman*, all hail from the late fourteenth through the early sixteenth centuries. Moralities, emergent in the latter 1300s, can be fruitfully compared to Judgement House's emphasis on the life of an emblematic individual, portrayed as an representative allegorical figure. For example, the starring victim/tragic female character in *Web of Lies*, one of the performances I will discuss later in this Chapter, is a good girl gone wrong,

Erica lives in a good home with parents who have pampered on their only daughter. She attends Church begrudgingly...She even attends Christian School. Erica has been actively posting on her MySpace account – and has gotten increasingly daring...⁴¹²

The plays (both Judgement House and moralities) underscore a central figure's journey and their eventual salvation (or in the case of Judgment House damnation and salvation) through the intervention of a divine figure. Enormously popular, it was not atypical for a morality to draw gatherings as great as four thousand people.⁴¹³

John Cartwright, Jennifer Mackey, Matthew Burke, and Jake Rhoades are living different lives, in different places, with different struggles, aspirations, and routines. They have very little in common. One a lawyer, another captain of the cheerleading squad, another a happy student looking forward to a life of mission work, and another just looking for trouble. Their spiritual conditions

⁴¹¹ Pamela King, "Morality Plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 240.

⁴¹² *Web of Lies*, 7.

⁴¹³ Richard Southern, *The Medieval Theatre in the Round: A Study of the Staging of The Castle of Perseverance and Related Matters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), 58-59.

are as varied as their lives, but the one thing they do have in common is that they each only have 59 minutes left to live.⁴¹⁴

Judgement House uses the allegorical symbolism of the moralities, through the deploying of archetypal American and Christian character types and by splitting the pivotal Everyman/Mankind character into two roles (one goes to Heaven, one Hell). Judgement House also utilizes the ethos of *Everyman* through implicating every spectator in the action and calling each of their names at the seat of judgment. The audience stands next to the main characters and is held accountable for their actions as well. The performance of Judgement House also extends this metaphorical connection by taking the audience on a guided tour of each of the character's fates on which the audience can see the possibilities that the dramatic spectacle lays out for them – Heaven or Hell.

The strategies of ritualization clearly generate forms of practice...of articulating an understanding of the personal self vis-à-vis community... The results might well be seen in terms of the continuity between self and community, or in terms of an autonomous identity...to recognize that ritual is not designed to join what the modern world experiences as divided; rather ritualization is one set of cultural practices that contribute to the formation of such experiences.⁴¹⁵

In each spiritual location the audience is acknowledged, greeted, and welcomed by the personification of evil (the devil and his minions) and the personification of good (Jesus and his angelic host). These characters are costumed in stereotypical American iconographic fashion as evidenced in the character

⁴¹⁴ Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., "Our Scripts, *59 Minutes* Summary," Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/Our-Scripts_7_pg.html (accessed on November 17, 2008).

⁴¹⁵ Bell, 217.

description for the angels in Judgement House scripts, “Small Children/Angles: small Children Singing Jesus Loves Me to harp Music in Heaven.”⁴¹⁶

Although these [morality] plays are often described as didactic, that term requires qualification. As is the case with the cycle plays, their orthodoxy serves to confirm and to celebrate rather than to argue. In fifteenth century religious drama, the desired effect was concordance, achieved by a conspiracy of the verbal and the visual: diction, costume, placing and gesture all function as clear supportive signs of moral status. The dynamic nature of these plays lies not in internally contrived conflicts, but in the manner in which they generate pressure upon the audiences emotionally and physically, as well as intellectually.⁴¹⁷

4.4 What is Judgement House? Well, It’s About Choice

Guide, Scene 1

Hi, my name is _____ and on behalf of the _____ Church I would like to welcome you to Judgement House. Judgement House is an 8 scene walk-through drama that tells a story. Throughout the drama, you will see the choices that are made by our characters, and you will see the consequences of those choices, both good and bad. Please pay close attention to the names of the characters in each scene, as they will be played by different individuals as you go from room to room.⁴¹⁸

Simply put, the Judgement House organization aims to present, “a dramatic walk-through presentation about the truth of people’s choices and their consequences both in this life and the next...a **Judgement House** presentation becomes an ‘agent of change’ in the community in which it is presented.”⁴¹⁹ Tom Hudgins, Founder and President of New Creation Evangelism, Inc. created the first Judgment House in

⁴¹⁶ *Web of Lies*, 9.

⁴¹⁷ King, 243.

⁴¹⁸ *Web of Lies*, 9. This opening is the same in all Judgement House scripts.

⁴¹⁹ Judgement House/New Creation Evangelism, Inc., “What is Judgement House?”

1983;⁴²⁰ Hudgins describes this first Judgement House experiment as an attempt to get his youth congregation – then in Moody, Alabama – to invest as much time, energy, and passion in outreach as they did in Halloween and other social and dramatic activities. It was remarkably successful for the participants; the experiences of the youth in that first congregation were quite significant and several of them went on to become youth pastors or ministers; some even present Judgement House in their communities today and are part of the Judgement House training network. In the first years after Judgement House began, and before Hudgins founded New Creation Evangelism, Inc., he would often receive requests for scripts or for advice about staging a Judgement House from other youth ministers around the nation and he did his best to keep up with them; however, he was often dismayed by the changes in quality, content, and message that his scripts underwent and so he decided to create a more fully organized structure for the distribution of the scripts and the Judgement House organization was born.

The organization Hudgins created to distribute scripts has grown in scope; Hudgins now works full time on New Creation Evangelism, Inc. and though affiliated with Calvary Baptist Church in Clearwater, Florida he no longer serves as youth pastor there in order to dedicate his resources to Judgement House and New Creation Evangelism, Inc. Judgement House is actively seeking in-roads into other nations, as well as reflecting on their structure's inclusivity and efficiency. Their strategic plan

⁴²⁰ The event did not, as it is often misstated in news coverage, grow out of *Scaremare*, Liberty University's Halloween time drama ministry begun in 1972 and discussed in Chapter Two. Hudgins has stated in an interview with the author that he has not been to *Scaremare*, though his daughter attends Liberty and discusses the genesis of Judgement House. *Scaremare*, explored in Chapter Two, is striking in its differences from Judgement House. To name a few divergences it is organized by college students, it has no narrative through line and it relies heavily on gore, blood, fright, and horror movie imagery. The ends are similar, the means are not.

focuses on enhancing and expanding their web presence, extending into other forms of drama outreach, increasing collaborations across faith, cultural and linguistic boundaries,⁴²¹ and strengthening the regional network structure by adding new regional leaders and creating offices throughout the United States, as well as in countries such as Mexico, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Brazil.

We have a full time missionary in Brazil that has been with us for four years. We have 56 covenant partners in Brazil and the ministry continues to grow and is reaching tens of thousands with the message of a saving and personal relationship with Jesus Christ annually. In 2008, we will be launching a mobile team in Brazil, to further the Gospel's penetration into this vast and magnificent country. The mobile ministry of Brazil will be utilized to provide much needed services to the people in remote villages by day and the Gospel during the evening. Judgement House has also had a missionary in Costa Rica, and we have a group in El Salvador utilizing Judgement House as one of their major evangelistic tools for reaching their country/communities with the message of a saving and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We have our knees bent and an open ear for God's direction as we seek to expand around the world. Judgement House has also been done in Jamaica, the Ukraine, Africa and Thailand. Currently, we are talking with people from Japan, Korea, Chili, India, Germany, South Africa, Italy and England.⁴²²

Judgement House is also working to increase their Mobile Ministry and further develop Mission JH a service which helps smaller churches put on Judgement Houses through fostering partnerships with youth who wish to go on local mission trips, providing staff, advice and resources to churches in need of assistance.⁴²³

⁴²¹ Judgement House has a staff member who works with deaf ministries. Recently, (July 2007) they performed an A.S.L. version of Judgement House. They also have some scripts available in Spanish and have scripts written specifically to deal with the issues that are pressing in the countries in which they are working. "The drama was very Salvadorian as it ended up with a murder of 2 young people in a park. Since murder is the number one cause of death in El Salvador we decided to use that as the story. It was also great to see people saved in earlier Judgement House presentations working in this one. Some were even counselors." Judgement House, *The Gavel E-newsletter*, April 8, 2009.

⁴²² Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., "Our Organization: Judgement House is International," Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/Our-Organization_5_pg.html (accessed on November 14, 2008).

⁴²³ The information about Judgement House's past and development was supplied by Tom Hudgins in an interview by the author. The Judgment House Mobile Ministry is a traveling team that helps support

As a **Judgement House** director and trainer the most exciting thing about working with **Judgement House** is that I have the honor and privilege of helping churches, who don't think they have the resources, or ability to produce a quality **Judgement House** presentation, realize their potential and see their faces at the end of a night full of groups! Through that process I have made life-long friendships with people all across the country. Friends that I talk to and share with, even cry.⁴²⁴

A Judgement House performance is a carefully planned and ordered event that utilizes hundreds of volunteers who perform duties as various as providing childcare for other volunteers, preparing dinners for other volunteers, performing, praying and parking cars. Several Judgement Houses also galvanize members of the community (local and belief) who cannot, for various reasons (age, child care, work, etc.), be present at the Judgement House by phoning or emailing prayer requests to individuals who are willing to spend what time they can in prayer; this type of involvement allows all members of a church who are interested in being involved the ability to participate. A single Judgement House production requires people to work as performers, room directors,⁴²⁵ audio/visual crew, cast refreshment providers,⁴²⁶ child care, concessions, construction, make-up, costumes, counseling, guides, prayer support, promotions, props, registration, security, strike set/storage, and last but not least parking and traffic control. Each individual is encouraged to join a group that

churches who are new to putting on Judgement House and whose resources in terms of people and space might be strained. In Mission JH, mostly students, travel to a community to help assist with the construction and performance of a Judgement House.

⁴²⁴ Rose Harris, "What Others Say About Judgement House," Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/What-Others-Say-About-Judgement-House_36_pg.html (accessed on October 12, 2007).

⁴²⁵ A room director serves as director for one scene or room. They are in charge of coordinating all aspects of that scene/room: acting, special effects, etc.

⁴²⁶ The cast and crew are provided with dinner and refreshments for each run of the show. Much of the food is donated. Refreshment providers are responsible for making and obtaining food, collecting cast and crew requests, and circulating the food to the rooms.

speaks to their interest and time commitment. The room director, who reports to the director, is one of the more demanding positions, “The room directors are drama coaches, spiritual leaders, cheerleaders, refreshment providers, etc. It never fails that each group becomes ‘family.’”⁴²⁷

When one attends a Judgement House the tightly structured format is easy to discern over the loose noise of gymnasium chatter and the taped boundaries on the floor designating where each group should stand or sit. Upon arrival one fills out a registration card and is placed with a group; this group will be their fellow audience throughout the event. Groups range in size from ten to twenty members. Each group also has a guide, whose job it is to not only lead, but to summarize each scene’s content as it applies to the performance and to the scripture that the performance cites. The guide both prepares the groups for the scene they are about to witness, cueing one into what to look for, as well as summarizing the actions the group has just witnessed in the preceding scene.

Land of the Free, Home of the Brave

Guide: This sounds very dangerous, I hope they’re gonna be OK. Follow me. (*Small Children advised not to enter*)

After Scene 4 (Field Combat)

The scene you have just witnessed represents the incredible, self sacrificing way many courageous men and women in our great country have fought and died. We all as Americans need to know that the freedom we enjoy comes at a great price...They are too young. It was sad, yet moving to see Cory holding his best friend in his arms...The Bible says in John 15:13, that ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends...’⁴²⁸

Web of Lies

⁴²⁷ Norma Huguley, email correspondence with author, June 12, 2007.

⁴²⁸ Tom Hudgins, *Land of the Free, Home of the Brave*, (Clearwater, Florida: New Creation Evangelism, Inc., 2003) 6.

Guide, Scene 3

Proverbs 1:8-10: “My child, listen when your father corrects you. Don’t neglect your mother’s instruction. What you learn from them will crown you with grace and be a chain of honor around your neck. My child, if sinners entice you, turn your back on them!”

At the same time another family drama is playing out. Come on and I’ll show you what I mean.⁴²⁹

The audience members proceed through a series of rooms set up all over the church grounds, in and out of Sunday school classrooms, gymnasiums, cafeterias, libraries and sanctuaries, parking lots, and roads. The trail is draped and labyrinthine, transforming straight forward hallways into a network of break rooms, prayer rooms, and performance spaces. After proceeding through the earthly storyline, which ends in some form of calamity, the groups faces Judgement where each audience member’s name is called, along with the characters. The audience then travels to Hell and Heaven (most often performed in the church sanctuary) and finally to a room of prayer where the significance of the event is explained one last time.



Figure 4.2. Judgement House Heaven scene

⁴²⁹ *Web of Lies*, 16.

At this point visitors who have re-dedicated their lives or dedicated their lives for the first time are taken into counseling areas where they receive information, support, referrals, and guidance about the next steps to take. They are also referred to the Judgement House website where they can tell their stories, as well as peruse several key resources that are designed to help guide them as new Christians.

As Bell notes in *Ritual Theory/Ritual Practice*, practices broadly understood to strengthen and enforce “hegemony,” “ideology,” and “power” are better comprehended by considering these practices as negotiations, both nuanced and active,

...in grounding and displaying a sense of community *without* overriding the autonomy of individuals or subgroups...any form of social control, however indirectly defined, will be effective only when this control can afford to be rather loose...[it] will not work as a form of social control if it is perceived as not amenable to some form of individual appropriation...⁴³⁰

The success of Judgement House is located precisely in this looseness; it is adaptable to various local circumstances, while still accessing communities of belief. For example, while character descriptions, and often actor performances, refer to a monolithic presentation of identity, “Bill: Loving, Christian Man. Leader at Church. Dotes on his daughter...Susan: Loving Christian Woman. Teaches a life group at Church. Encourages her daughter to be a positive role model...,”⁴³¹ the actual audience experience is quite divergent vis-à-vis the fracturing of that monolithic character identity through the device of multiple bodies playing one character, multiple bodies linked symbolically through emblematic clothing color, etc. This

⁴³⁰ Bell, 222.

⁴³¹ *Web of Lies*, 6.

brings the theatrical reality of the story in relation to the actuality of the Church building and community, providing a successful wedding of the sacred with “the adultery [of] all that is unreal.”⁴³²

From Grecian landscapes struck theatrical by their position, the medieval world’s merging of market and performance, flash mobs, El Teatro Campesino’s re-inscription of the work space of field and truck, Happenings, countless religious rituals, Gilbert Moses’ staging of *Slave Ship*, Grotowski, Schechner’s *Environmental Theater*, Bread and Puppet’s festival performances, cabarets, Boal’s Invisible Theatre, and street performance, to George W. Bush landing on board the *USS Lincoln* in the co-pilot’s seat of a Navy S-3B Viking all assert that performance – as a process of understanding – is tied, by sensory necessity, to the cultural site that the given performance inhabits.

In simultaneously showing, “that all this world being here is but vanity for a while, *as is miracle playing*,”⁴³³ the Judgement House puts the day-to-day in contact with reflections on the divine. It is the layering of participants’ experiences, “moved to compassion devotion and, weeping bitter tears,” whether they identify with the spiritual journey of a character, feel great pity or sorrow, are, “converted to God through games and play,”⁴³⁴ or whether they are “witnessing that they love more the

⁴³² Tertullian, “On the Spectacles,” translated by Reverend S. Thelwall, from *The Writing of Septimus Florens Tertullianus* in Bernard F. Dukore, *Dramatic Theory and Criticism from The Greeks to Grotowski* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1974), 92.

⁴³³ Anonymous, “A Sermon Against Miracle Plays” from *Reliquiae Antiquae* in Dukore, *Ibid.*, 114 [emphasis mine].

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

liking of their body and of prosperity of the world than liking in God,”⁴³⁵ in concert with the theatricality of a presentation occurring in real church space, which illustrates how Judgement House engages in this same tactic of spatialization and meaning making. This doubling of place and performance creates room for a liberalizing (personal experience based) relationship to the performance. In the moment of a character’s damnation whether one eschews the message, accepts the message or takes exception to it one must make meaning in negotiation with it. When one stands in the Heaven scene while the actor playing Jesus embraces each individual, whispering a message in each person’s ear one is confronted with their relationship to that message; they make its meaning.

First Name: Crystal

State: Kansas

My Story...: I heard about Judgement House and decided to take our youth group. I talked to a few of my friends and they agreed to help me out as chaperones. That night the house had a theme about kids getting into a car accident. The church we went to was in Wichita and the accident scene looked so real. There was even a real ambulance. The actors who cried shed real tears. But it was not until we met the actor that portrayed Jesus did I realize how much the Holy Spirit had played a role in all we had seen. Jesus walked up to each one of us and had a private message. To my friend he said “I know how much you love your wife and how hard you are trying and I honor that” my friend had marital problems and had been working very hard on his marriage. To me he said “You have no idea what it means that you brought all these people here tonight.” There was no way that actor could have known that I was the one who brought that group there. Our questionnaire did not even address such topics. When we returned to the church we all sat in the hallway and each gave our testimony of what “Jesus” had said to us. We all knew that the Holy Spirit had given that young man messages to give to each of us. It was the closest I have ever come to looking into my savior’s eyes. A few in our group excepted [sic] Jesus that night and there is no doubt in my mind that they will never forget Him.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 116.

⁴³⁶ Crystal from Kansas, “Your Stories,” http://www.judgementhouse.org/Your-Stories!_159_pg.html (accessed on January 12, 2009).

It is this *moment of meaning* that I look to as a model of efficacy within Judgement House. The concept of communion, as a model of theatrical exchange has been noted by theatre scholars and theorists too numerous to mention. It is often articulated as a necessary part of both the exchange and change that occurs between audience and audience, as well as between audience and performer.⁴³⁷

As Dolan asserts, “People are drawn to attend live theatre and performance for other, less tangible, more emotional, spiritual, or communitarian reasons.⁴³⁸ In this study, I look toward that *moment of meaning*, toward that “less tangible reason” – the consideration of self in relation to the performance (content and spectacle) enacted as one enters the robe room and is draped in communal identification⁴³⁹ – as one model of efficacy. If these moments are successful in a quasi-religious, though decidedly secular context, as Dolan asserts that they are – they can, as well be expressed as successful, through similar techniques employed in a religious context. The crucial components of these *moments of meaning* are understandings of place and belief, these intersecting communities of place and belief provide the framework for a community of communion.

The notion of community-based performance as a mode of art making that is largely assumed to have value through a liberalizing mission is articulated in the Introduction to this study. Also noted in the Introduction is the propensity to

⁴³⁸ Dolan, Jill, “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative’,” *Theatre Journal* 53, No. 3 (2001): 455.

⁴³⁹ In a Judgement House performance participants enter the robe room and, “are given a robe (usually just a white cloth that covers the shoulders) as a representation of the new bodies **Judgement House** believes the Bible promises us when we reach Heaven.” Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., “What is Judgement House,” Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/What-Is-Judgement-House-39_pg.html (accessed on November 9, 2007).

understand, performances with salvational intent as non-liberalizing, highly communitarian and conservative. When Frye-Burnham asserts, “The question for the critic is: What is good community performance?”⁴⁴⁰ She is defending and embracing the principle that “good” community performance is not based on the product, but the *process*. The valuable work to be done is amongst the members of the community participating. “Artists,” in the case of Judgement House, New Creation Evangelism, Inc., and the members of the Judgement House training teams and Mobile Ministries are merely the facilitators.

Judgement House not only affects our community but also surrounding counties. It’s an amazing experience that once you have been thru [sic] can’t help but make you walk with Christ a closer walk. As for our church, you can’t believe how it brings your church together feeling like a family. It also includes people that normally don’t get involved in church activities. A sense of accomplishment as you complete the months of preparation.⁴⁴¹

As Kershaw asserts, the power of community dramas is inherent in their activism, a community uses its own traditions to comment on the issues at hand. One need only observe the mingling of overtly biblical Hell oriented images with pop-cultural notions of the suave, well dressed, city slicking, near metro-sexual devil found in several Judgement House Hell scenes to apprehend the myriad interpretational forces at work.

Community-based performance is a way to address disparate and often competing concerns that often wait cloaked under a shared identity. A community conveys its expectations and concerns to its members, as well as to those outside its

⁴⁴⁰ Linda Frye Burnham, “Darn it, But Thank You,” *Community Arts Network*, Original CAN/API publication 2002, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/06/darn_it_but_tha.php (accessed on July 8, 2006).

⁴⁴¹ Heidi Cade, “Judgement House Questionnaire” designed by author.

bounds, by the stories it tells *to* itself and *about* itself. When, "...a tornado abruptly ends the championship basketball game and the lives of Coach Wyatt, Robb, and Dina and brings to light the importance of choosing a saving and personal relationship with Jesus Christ,"⁴⁴² throughout areas of Florida where natural disasters are somewhat common occurrences shared experience and knowledge of past events create commonalities that can connect people both inside and outside "official" communal boundaries.

FW: Community is when people come together...not only when they have hardships, when, I say when they just have to live together, in some relationship...I'm not sure, if, that you get to pick it, like family. The church you pick, but once you do we try not to let go. I, it seems to me, there are different ways of being in a community...You can be active in it or you can try to ignore it...if your there you're in it. I suppose I would say it is how you interact with the people where you live.⁴⁴³

The presentation of shared local experience can also act as a primer for those outside a community of belief who wish to become integrated into that system of belief. For each individual participant, these intersecting commonalities create multiple loci of identification – as a local person who has survived a natural disaster, as a church member, as both, etc. Community, thus, implies both similarity and difference in relation to each other.

Transformation rarely occurs through absolute leveling, but through replacing, rebuilding, or re-affirming. One set of definitions consistently cites the other to create the force of their own argument. Thus, without the drunkard in the

⁴⁴² Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., "Our Scripts, *Remember the Magic* Summary," Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/Our-Scripts_7_pg.html (accessed on November 9, 2007).

⁴⁴³ Frank Wood (Pastor, Dudley Baptist, a church performing Judgement House) interview by author, Dudley, Georgia, July 20, 2007.

performance frame, the car at the Judgement House cannot crash, souls cannot be saved, and lessons remain unlearned. To present one concept, “salvation,” you must do so in relation to the other, “damnation;” “God” needs the “Devil” to stay in business. If you don’t like Black Eyed Peas you won’t like tobyMac if you don’ like Good Charlotte then you won’t like MxPx.⁴⁴⁴

Community-based performance is much more than activating a community in a pleasant emotional connection. It is more than just accepting a story as shared ground or affirming a structure of belief; to be successful it must go one step further. A participant must be able to recognize the link between another’s situation and one’s own circumstances. This understanding, in performances such as Judgement House, is based on a live interaction between social worlds and spiritual world, and this link is precisely what Judgement House seeks to engender through the rhetoric of the real in their slogan: “Real People. Real choices. Real Consequences.”⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴⁴ These are suggestions from a “Music Comparison Chart” on the Judgement House website intended to help new believers segue into the Christian music scene. Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., “Stuff you Should Check Out,” Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/Stuff-You-Should-Check-Out_55_pg.html (accessed on November 9, 2007).

⁴⁴⁵ This is the Judgement House slogan. It can be found on their website and all their promotional material.

4.4.1 “To not choose is to choose.”⁴⁴⁶



Figure 4.3. Promotional image for *Collision* script

MW: The message on *Reality on the Highway [Collision]* is, there is character in it Natalie, and you'll, you'll get to know Natalie she is just a wonderful person I mean she is just a good kid and she's a cheerleader in this play and she just kind of reaches out and helps people and, and in the Judgement scene, which is in this room, you see Natalie realize that it's not about being a good person, that gets you to Heaven and she goes to Hell in the Judgement scene and it is very, very powerful. Our daughter plays that role, and I mean she literally screams at the top of her lungs, I mean, to where it just sends chills down your spine as she's screaming' and they're throwing her in.⁴⁴⁷

Natalie's tragic flaw – her pride, youth, and brash insistence that she thought she would have “more time” – blares out from behind the harsh strobe lighting, heat, and heavy smoke as she wails and pleads while being handled by two large, masked, robed and backlit demons a mere three feet from the crowd. The strength of this spectacle is aided by the fact that many of the people watching this event *know* the

⁴⁴⁶ This is the slogan for Mount Olive's 2006 Judgement House. It was printed on the T-shirts and sweatshirts they sold and on their publicity material. The 2007 Mount Olive Judgement House will be discussed later in the chapter.

⁴⁴⁷ M. Woody, interview.

actress playing Natalie from school, church, and work or just from around and she is a “good” person. Just as “...to see Christ crucified on the Pageant Wagon is to see the truth renewed, to be forcibly reminded of it, to have it brought powerfully before the spirit, and so in a sense to believe it once more,”⁴⁴⁸ seeing Natalie tossed into eternal damnation after a tragic death – not at all her own fault – watching her suffer viscerally and palpably is to understand one’s own relation to sin and salvation more fully.

In addition, the relationship between Natalie, as “good kid” and the actress playing Natalie as “good kid” works to enforce standard categories of “Christian,” as well as “all-American” identity. Natalie is: 1) an attractive young white woman, 2) a cheerleader, 3) a “good kid” who reaches out to help others; her one flaw – lack of *explicit* faith – nullifies all her “good” earthly qualities. The scene is replete with recognition and reversal, in the truly tragic sense. One is left watching Natalie come into her own wisdom – too little, too late. Unfortunately, Good Deeds can’t save her in this Judgement scene; Natalie is no Everyman, merely that girl I know. However, Natalie becomes more full-bodied and complex depending on how one relates to Natalie’s “good kid” character.

Much as we see Natalie or Erica or Alexander (AJ) or any of the other volunteers as part of the community and the spectacle, during the medieval mystery and cycle plays the audience was, as well, watching a performance featuring, for the most part, the men of the town and one saw these men onstage performing remarkably similar tasks to their daily tasks. Not only did the audience watch familiar

⁴⁴⁸ Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 78.

faces perform, they got to see these faces up close, creating an intimate and personal relationship between performers and audience. These guild-produced plays “used actors from the community who were known to the audience in real life.”⁴⁴⁹ Although the man that many amongst the medieval audience assembled knew in a personal context is not really Christ seated in Judgment his presence connects Christ to the realities of this world through a communal religious act. The earth upon which Lucifer stalks is both Hell and the streets of the town, and the play is set simultaneously in the distant past, the immediate present, and the future.

Performance can be most usefully described as an ideological transaction between a company of performers and the community of their audience...in this sense performance is ‘about’ the transaction of meaning, a continuous negotiation between stage and auditorium to establish the significance of the signs and conventions through which they interact.⁴⁵⁰

Kershaw asserts that people are not simply responsible for applauding the veracity of traditions, but that they are all individually, personally, intimately, and ultimately connected by bodies, selves, and assumptions to the ways in which difference and identity are articulated. Community-based performance should (and does) go beyond giving a voice to the unheard, silenced, underprivileged, culturally bankrupt, the infirm or the poor – in short the “powerless.” It asks the spectator and the participant to critically redraw their boundaries; to understand that what connects them to Natalie is both the mythologized “Americanization” of her character and the damnation of her soul. The broadly tragic stokes of Natalie’s character hearken back

⁴⁴⁹ V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1966), 23.

⁴⁵⁰ Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, 16-17.

to *Everyman*,⁴⁵¹ to temperance dramas such as *The Drunkard*, and educational scare films. I am no Natalie, no *Oedipus*, but if this happens to her, what of me? This message does all the vital work of creating, assessing and deploying identity.

...the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived...the physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society...there is a continual exchange of meanings so that each reinforces the categories of the other.⁴⁵²

One must assess Natalie and apply themselves in relation to her. The drama itself relies on, in fact forces, not only reflection, but self-definition; it requires the articulation of identity in relation to the spectacle in ways both complex and basic by drawing attention to how, “negotiated compliance offers manifold opportunities for strategic appropriation, depending on one’s mastery of social schemes...”⁴⁵³

Cohen-Cruz suggests that current community-based performance practice places the value of process over product and takes as its central organizing principle the philosophy that when different kinds of people⁴⁵⁴ work together on a common process change happens in the interaction leading up to the event, not necessarily in the performative event itself. This type of work is viewed by Cohen-Cruz as radical because it purports to undermine the dominant ideological structure by subverting a product based hierarchy and professionalized aesthetic elitism.

⁴⁵¹ There is a vast theological disconnect between *Everyman*’s path to salvation and the path to salvation presented in *Judgement House*. This differentiation lies in the Catholic versus Protestant debate over Good Deeds or Grace as the centerpiece of salvation.

⁴⁵² Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1996): 69.

⁴⁵³ Bell, 214.

⁴⁵⁴ Differences here can be articulated in terms of education levels, economics, race, gender, religion, nationality, age, etc. The most constant factor among participants seems to be geography, or in the case of *Judgement House* a religious belief set that supersedes, yet eventually refers to, geography.

We are a church ranging from 1200-1500. With our facility we need to have multiple services on Sunday. Because of that, many times people are there for years and never meet each other. We found that the very first time we produced a Judgement House presentation, our church family changed. We had people of different interests and ages forming friendships because we put them together in this ministry. Young kids in a drama scene with a more mature person as their door knocker who would come in and pray with them between scenes, a runner who would bring coffee to our prayer warriors with over 70 years age difference between them, a working mom serving concessions with a single mom finding common areas in which they bonded.⁴⁵⁵

While investment in the story being told during a performance is significant, being free to articulate shared beliefs across geographical, class, age, and cultural bounds also creates community; one that is strengthened in its exclusivity via personal choice. Each church that does a Judgement House does not just do a Judgement House on their own; they perform their beliefs in communion with the two hundred and seventy five other Judgement Houses all over the world also performing a similar set of beliefs. While this is in essence, “preaching to the converted,” as Miller and Roman point out the “converted” sometimes need to gather, to be in the presence of community, and to feel the strength that comes from community.⁴⁵⁶

4.4.2 Share to Scare

While the processes of community-based performance groups is often focused on the performance product as a tool for change or re-evaluation of issues or ideals that effect a community, the most successful community-based performance occurs somewhere in between the desire for an aesthetic product and a fruitful and altering

⁴⁵⁵ Wendy Shields, “What Others Say About Judgement House,” Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/What-Others-Say-About-Judgement-House_36_pg.html (accessed on October 17, 2007).

⁴⁵⁶ Tim Miller and David Roman, “Preaching to the Converted,” *Theatre Journal* 47, no.2 (1995): 169-188.

process; Judgement House is no exception. The work that is done by room directors, crew, make-up and costume is painstaking and meticulous, the product is important, in so much as it is perceived as necessary to the desired outcome: salvations.

However, many participants express the changes Judgement House has brought in their relationship to their spirituality, the effect Judgement House has had in their lives in terms of commitment to their church and the strengthening of ties between the church and local community, as well as the expanding the ways church members enact their calling as evangelical Christians:

Johnny from Alabama: I have always been willing to use the gifts but I have never trusted God to qualify me to do every Christian's assigned task of sharing the Salvation Plan. I stood waiting for a counselor to come for this young girl until I knew I had to step up to the task assigned to me by God or I could not call myself a Christian. This was hard to admit to myself and even harder to write on paper. Here I was a Believer, a Christian, even a Deacon and struggling to share the greatest of Gifts. Yes, I shed more tears than Sylvia but God directed my words when I allowed Him to be in charge. I ONLY THOUGHT I WAS HOOKED BEFORE.

The following year the sponsoring church decided to no longer do Judgment House. I was devastated. Who would take this mission up so we could be a part of it? Bethel was not big enough to take on a project this size! This mission surely was not to die now! No budget, no experience with this kind of project, no Youth Minister at church at this time to manage the mission as the other church had done, no -----, no-----, no-----.

Who would ever think that a small group of men at a hunting camp would have a burden for this Ministry to continue? Who would ever think local business men would donate the needed funds? Where would an available building be located...? Who would ever think ALL age groups of a church would come together with like minds. Seniors supplying food for the workers, Brotherhood constructing sets, all ages presenting drama, people discovering they could counsel, all ages parking cars, and people working side by side doing whatever job or task was needed...⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁷ Johnny from Alabama, "Your Stories," Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/Your-Stories!_159_pg.html (accessed on August 24, 2007).

As indicated by Johnny's story above, both aesthetic and process based models are valid in examining works like Judgement House and the broad range of evangelical community-based performances discussed throughout this dissertation project. However, Judgement House does not, like many secular community-based performance groups – such as EcoTheatre, Roadside or Community Performance, Inc. – draw material from the specific stories of a local community. They enact stories that tap into broader concerns of America, American Christianity, and evangelical identity.⁴⁵⁸ Distributing structures, such as New Creation Evangelism, Inc., provide organization, guidance, and content/material to those interested in sculpting a performance event in their local communities, but the event itself takes on much more than an authority-subordinate relationship. This process may seem, at first blush, decidedly non-local, however, it is the structured nature of the event that allows for a strong sense of interaction and change among participants; the system provided by the franchise structure allows for greater freedom and a sense of local unity, while simultaneously providing membership in a community larger than one's church locality. By the numbers, these works are highly efficacious, but they also work at the level of strengthening those already committed.

The first year, a teenager who had been through twice told me, "This is the best thing Brighton has ever done." It's a big event that unites our church and draws people from many towns. We end up exhausted and elated...Every time I do it; it reminds me why I believe what I do. Not so much from the drama, but the preparation of it.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁸ This shared belief and purpose is also instilled through a highly interactive website with special information and access areas for Covenant Partner Churches, this fosters a strong sense of branding and belonging.

⁴⁵⁹ Bobby Kennedy, "Judgement House Questionnaire" designed by author.

Judgement House has managed to balance the format of a large yet interactive organization with hands on event creation at the local level. When a church becomes a Covenant Partner with the Judgement House organization they pay a fee which is either yearly, or multi-yearly.⁴⁶⁰ In exchange for this fee they receive a very significant amount of support: marketing information, discounts on purchasing supplies needed for the event, Do-It-Yourself Promo packs, access to all the official scripts, extensive training sessions, the support of regional coordinators, and a traveling troubleshooting team that will come and help smaller churches operate parts of the Judgement House that they may not be able to operate on their own.⁴⁶¹

New Creation Evangelism, Inc. also sponsors several fund-raisers and community building activities each year. In 2007 alone they have had: a new script kick off event, a new website launch, an Open House and Barbecue (continued 2008), “Lets Go Low” the Seventh Annual Judgement House Golf Tournament (continued 2008), and the “This Is My Story” Judgement House Annual Fundraising Banquet (continued in 2008)⁴⁶² So far in 2009 they have had the Judgement House Spare Change Bowl-A-Thon and plan to continue their other events: the Barbecue, Open House, the Golf Tournament and the Judgement House Annual Fundraising Banquet. In addition to these structured events, on the Judgement House website there is a list

⁴⁶⁰ The multi-year plan available in 3 year (\$1,647) and 5 year (\$2,495) increments was just launched in 2006. It is the beginning stages, but due to the fact that it offers a significant savings most Churches who have been doing Judgement House for more than two or three years have signed up for this option.

⁴⁶¹ Steadman Baptist Church in Leesville, South Carolina has an average attendance of 75 people, which is smaller than the number needed to put on Judgement House, but they have a Five Year Covenant Partnership with the Judgement House organization and are able to put on the performance with the help of the traveling support team and the involvement of other churches in their area.

⁴⁶² In this event Hudgins told the story of his life and Judgement House.

of what to pray for towards the further development of Judgement House, as well as ways to donate material resources.

Crew cab truck to pull Judgement House trailers, Ministry vehicle, Additional Mobile Ministry Trailers and Trucks, New trade show booth for display at youth and ministry conferences and events, New office space/property, Updated phone system for home office, Office furniture/chairs etc. (God provided), Conference Table) New flooring for current home office (God provided)...Travel assistance via frequent flier miles and/or trip sponsorship, Training Conference sponsorships, Refrigerator for current home office (God provided)...⁴⁶³

Beyond simply praying for office upgrades and the needed day-to-day operating supplies of New Creation Evangelism, Inc. interested Judgement House community members can join the Judgement House National Prayer Team.⁴⁶⁴ They pray for not only specialized requests sent to prayer members' email addresses but for the following:

1. Revival in America and that Judgement House by God's grace may play a roll in that revival.
2. The movement of the Holy Spirit over the communities in which a Judgement House presentation will be presented...
5. Protection and provision for our Judgement House Brazil Missionary Wallace Costa...
6. Traveling mercy for Jeff and Tammy Huey as they criss-cross the country...
10. The addition of new Covenant Partners.⁴⁶⁵

While these requests speak to larger concerns of safety and salvation, they are local enough to engender a sense of legitimate participation. This balance of the real and

⁴⁶³ Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., "Wish List," Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/Wish-List_21_pg.html (accessed on November 5, 2007).

⁴⁶⁴ "Members of this team will commit to praying for needs specific to Judgement House and its Covenant Partners. Team members will be notified regularly via email of prayer needs raised by a Covenant Partner or by the home office team. Our desire is to develop a network of hundreds of prayer team members across the country all committed to keeping Judgement House and it's Covenant Partners bathed in prayer." Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., "National Prayer Team" Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/National-Prayer-Team_18_pg.html (accessed on November 5, 2007).

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

tangible, mingled with the archetypal and spiritual pervades Judgement House on every level, and it is precisely this mixing of categories that enables strong community cohesion. Judgement House seeks to represent the specific and the universal, the naturalistic and the melodramatic. The work that New Creation Evangelism, Inc. does with the Judgement House support networks allows for a communal engagement beyond the local, while maintaining identity specificity,

...At Judgement House, a few basic spiritual beliefs drive everything that we do. They define who we are, what we are, and how we view our purpose as people and as an organization. We also feel passionately that all of our Covenant Partners should share these same beliefs.⁴⁶⁶

4.5 On the Ground

In this Chapter, thus far, I have laid out the structure and methods of Judgement House, as an organization to prepare for a discussion of how specific congregations enact Judgement House on the ground in their communities. In the next sections of this Chapter I will examine two specific Judgement House performances the “identities” they create, the issues they intersect, the tactics they use, as well as how Judgement House participants view the work they do.

I will start off with a discussion of the 2004 performance of *Judgement House: Operation Homeland Security* at Heritage Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia. It is important to point out that this script was not written, nor was it distributed by the Judgement House organization. Heritage Baptist is a Covenant Partner Church, however, they felt that after looking at the scripts available that at

⁴⁶⁶ Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., “Our Values,” Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/Our-Mission-Vision-and-Values_4_pg.html (accessed on November 5, 2007).

that time a script about terrorism, which the Judgement House organization has shied away from, would best fit what their congregants needed and wanted so they approached the New Creation Evangelism, Inc. organization and were granted permission to perform their original script while retaining the Judgement House format, name, branding, and structure.

TH: ... if a church has a need we try to listen. Especially if it is a church with folks we know and that we have worked with as partners in the past, we have a relationship with. They know their regions and audiences, what people need at that time more than we do here...We've had requests, suggestions from Covenant Partners for a terrorism based script. We're looking at the probable, this is reality, right? 9/11 was real, but it is not for us to do, we don't have the resources, I don't know, to be honest, how to treat that, I don't want to dress people up like terrorists, that isn't what we're for...like I said though, we read the script and if the church is compelled and we know their standards and commitment to JH and it fits the mission than we say go with it. It's clear...At least they asked, some don't even ask and do this stuff that just offends me...⁴⁶⁷

The second discussion of a Judgement House performance event will address the performance of the *Web of Lies* script in October of 2007 at the Mount Olive Baptist Church in Mount Olive, Alabama located about forty five minutes outside of Birmingham. Mount Olive is a church with an active congregation of around seven hundred people and the Judgement House event has been one their most profitable, enjoyable, and well attended outreaches for the last five years.

While the Judgement House organization distributes scripts, a format, and publicity materials they also work to maintain the idea that each Judgement House is a very local production, and has different inflections and emphases, based on the congregation's desires, skills, and resources. Having been to several different Houses and seeing the same script performed in different locations I can attest to the fact that

⁴⁶⁷ Hudgins, interview.

each church has their own approach to staging, effects, performance, and audience experience.

4.5.1 Heritage Baptist: Operation Homeland Security

At the close of a Judgement House experience, after seeing the performers face death and suffering and then confront their salvation or damnation, audience members are invited to pray a prayer claiming Jesus Christ as their savior, and to join the church where the event is held, or are given a referral to other churches in their own geographical area if they have travelled a significant distance to be there. In this prayer room, much like the characters were in their lives before their sudden and unexpected deaths, the audience members are confronted with the question that frames the narrative of the performance: if you die tonight, tomorrow, on the way home, will you go to Heaven or to Hell?

Most Hell Houses center on young people and women's bodies – controlled, broken or abused – in the 2004 election season, Heritage Baptist Church utilized the unknowns of terrorism in a performance reminiscent of the terrors of September 11th. Heritage Baptist's *Judgement House: Operation Homeland Security* takes place in an America under continual assault, the threat: unidentified terrorists. They represent the presence of demonic evil, an evil that often goes unnoticed in the contemporary universe.

WS: We don't see them 'cuz it' not about just one group of bad people. It's about a world in danger. You never know when something could happen...we felt that enough time had passed that it was alright to deal with...We wanted to be clear that evil isn't just about terrorists or however you want show it; it's unexpected... You can't name it or pin it down...If you say fear this, or fear that, then people take care of that thing...it doesn't work that way and we

wanted to show something unexpected; that could never happen here, but it in the House it does...⁴⁶⁸

The unnamed terrorists stand as tangibly embodied representations of the randomness of death and of the palpable anxiety that comes from living in a world where those that are there to protect us offer duct tape as key to human survival.

The central character is a young female teacher enthusiastic and full of life. Despite the tragic loss of her unborn child she is still full of faith, energy, and hope. She accepts the obstacles that have been put in her path and she will surmount them through the support of her faith. The loss of her child has led her to become committed to the lives of the students she serves. Our guide tells us that our heroine is not troubled by the escalating violence in the world around her. She even tells her husband that she is not afraid of the terrorists, because she has Jesus. Her students, *with whom she discusses faith in Jesus Christ*, are the ones who do, or do not, accept Christ and they are the characters the audience follows into judgment, Heaven, and Hell.

At the local Starbuckian café young people chat and work on computers. A man plays a guitar, while people of all ages order lattes and macchiatos from the pretend barista counter in the back of a transformed youth activity space. The teacher is located toward the center of the coffeehouse space, the audience mills around her table and her young pupils sit at tables ensconcing hers. The atmosphere is surprisingly coffeehouse like and the audience is encouraged to spread themselves about the tables. The students are talking about school assignments until their teacher comes over to their group to discuss God. During their talk the teacher coos over a

⁴⁶⁸ Wendy Shields (Judgement House director), interview by author, Lynchburg Virginia, March 4, 2009, Tape Recording.

baby and mother strolling past; we catch a quick glimpse of her pained face as she, and we, remember the loss of her child, but she and her faith are strong and coming out of this difficult moment she is inspired to tell the students about God's plan for their souls.

The students lay out who they are and what motivates and characterizes their actions towards God. Each student is representative of a different teen identity group (emo, jock, nerd), as well as representative of different perspective on God: good girl interested in God, young man full of rage for the perils of his life thus far, and another good kid who just has too much going on in her life to make time for Jesus. The teacher is unable to sway the angry boy and the busy girl to accept Jesus, but their conversation trails off amicably. After being led out of the café and listening to the scene's ending lesson from our guide, we are told that the café has been struck by the terrorists and that there have been many casualties.

We walk through a set of double doors, and enter by far the most effect heavy, chaotic, and alarming tableaux we will see here at Heritage Baptist. This is the street area directly in front of the café; amazingly a full size café front has been built into the large gym like space. Lights strobe and sirens scream. Chaos has broken out all around. Children and teenagers are screaming, stumbling about and writhing on the ground while clutching bloody limbs. Firefighters and paramedics carry stretchers, as well as the adorable (now deceased) infant from the previous scene out of the building's working facade. Covered bodies are scattered throughout the street. Camera crews from news stations run through the disaster getting shots – linking this scene which we are a part of, to a larger viewing audience, who will see us as

participants stumbling among the battlefield of terrorist invasion, recalling the experience many of us had watching the mediated versions of the September 11th attacks; we are now on television, part of the horror that others will see. A man in a Sheriff's uniform tells the camera and the viewing public more attacks are expected, though we know not when, where, and/or how. Much like our actual government, he as a representative of the government, cannot offer us the promise of safety. The public world is not ever safe. He tells us all to go home; home is the only place where we have a fighting chance. "We named it Homeland security 'cuz not just America is under attack, but to make sure people think about whether they are *secure* in their path, where will their eternal home be?"⁴⁶⁹

While the law ushers us all towards the exit and presumably our homes, a well dressed business man pushes frantically through our ranks. He is asked to stop and to leave with us, to clear out, but he doesn't; he won't, and he has to be restrained by two officers. It is then that we learn he is the husband of the young teacher. He cries out when he sees that his wife has been killed. He crumbles to his knees, grinding his clenched fists into his eyes, screaming, raging. Even the American ideal of power and agency – the young, handsome, successful business man – has been felled by the forces of uncertainty and chaos that surge throughout the world. Whatever will he, and we, do in the face of this threat to our way of life? His young, attractive, innocent wife has died, he is justified (like the American people) in his desire for vengeance; this, vengeance, is his first impulse which the production gives recourse to through an impassioned speech about his desire and right to revenge himself upon the world and the forces that have attacked and destroyed his beloved wife (America).

⁴⁶⁹ Shields, interview.

Eventually though he is overcome by his desire to return to his lost wife's values and he declares himself a Christian in the face of this misery.

His choice to affirm and respect his wife's faith leads him toward a deeper relationship with God. This decision becomes magnified in a funeral scene for the young teacher in which the audience sits in chairs scattered among the mourners at the funeral parlor, the actors dotted throughout the crowd stand at intervals to speak of the teacher's faith and its influence on them. One of her students who survived the attack discusses their decision to accept Christ because of the teacher's sacrifice and impact. In this scene we learn that the decisions one makes in life do not merely influence one's personal afterlife destination, but also the decisions of those one reached out to (or did not reach out to). The subdued sobs of mourners contrasts strikingly with the wailing and uncertainty that we encountered in the previous scene.

As a viewer I was quite affected by the performers. I was shocked by their volume, but also by my proximity performance of pain. Even though I was well aware of what *Judgement House: Operational Homeland Security* was trying to do in terms of my emotions. It was effective. I had been prepared for the event, but the lights, the cameras, the screaming all brought fear to the surface of my consciousness. It was confusing, disorienting, and random just like the violence in the world it presents, critiques, and offers an answer to. If I had not been prepared for what had occurred, if I had not been to other Judgement Houses I can only imagine that I would have been impacted even more fully by the deliberate appeal to my fear of disorientation, violence, and uncertainty.

The major ideas that are expressed as central in *Judgement House: Operational Homeland Security* are that our country (and by the replication of the nation's social structure our family structure, our homes, and our freedom to express ourselves in public spaces) is under attack from a faceless, nameless, indefinable threat manifest *this time* in violent terrorism. We must be prepared because we can be attacked at any second by the forces of evil in the world and no one – neither our government, nor our officials, nor our friends, nor our families can protect us fully. The only place to find certainty is in Jesus Christ.

In summation we follow all the characters to Judgment in which the teacher is adjudged a good Christian and is sent to Heaven to be united with her baby. The two students: the angry young man and the busy, good girl are sent to Hell. Our names are then called and we step forward; the Heavenly Judge decides it is not our time and sends us back into the world.

In Hell, they wail in pain and cry out for God – too little, too late. In this Judgment House, the themes of fear and terror are utilized to shape Christian spectacles that teach and perform proper belief in the face of terror, as well as reinforce the suffering bodies of women and children, connecting them to the terrorized bodies of America herself.

4.5.2 Mount Olive Baptist: Web of Lies

NH: The first year, there were approximately 230 church members involved. We have 17 different ministry teams responsible for everything from prayer (each individual who attends our presentation is prayed for by name), to parking, registration, publicity, security, hospitality, etc. These teams have been tweaked slightly over the years, but only slightly. In 2006 we had 357

church members helping with JH. To put that into perspective, our average weekly worship attendance is 700.⁴⁷⁰

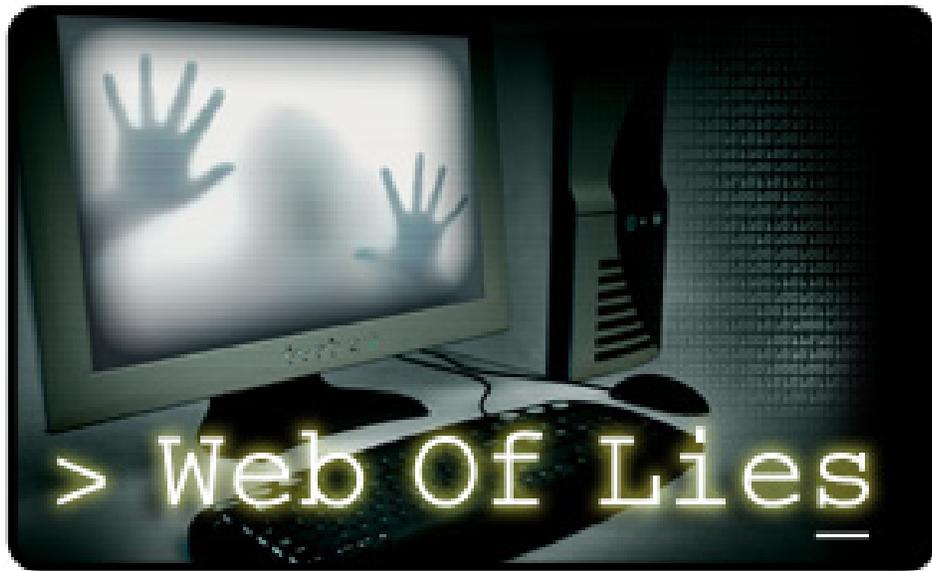


Figure 4.4. Promotional image for *Web of Lies* script

During my travels in the summer of 2007 I was able to meet with Norma Huguley the director of the Mount Olive Baptist Church Judgement House. Norma discussed the Judgement House structure, promotions and the process that had gone into the decision to perform *Web of Lies*, so when I returned to Alabama in October I made certain to attend the Mount Olive House.

Below is the summary of the *Web of Lies* script used in Judgement House promotional material:

Well over 200 million people use social networking sites like MySpace, and Facebook and Erica is one of them, unfortunately for her, so is AJ, a father with a checkered past and a double life. Erica finds friendship and a good listener in Reynaldo a Brazilian exchange student...in just such a social networking site. Her new friend would love to meet her in person if she is willing. Most of her friends don't think it is such a good idea, and her parents don't even know she's chatting online with anyone.

With a naive curiosity and sense of safety, Erica makes plans to sneak away from a slumber party once her friends and parents fall asleep and meet

⁴⁷⁰ Huguley, email correspondence with author.

up with Reynaldo. She manages to sneak out with her friend Trish, but doesn't anticipate her father, Bill, checking in on the girls late that evening after she has left. Her father quickly finds out about her late night meeting and rushes out to find his daughter...

Erica finds herself in a familiar pizza restaurant, and in the company of an oddly dressed Reynaldo who is more than happy to offer her the drink into which he has quietly added a common date rape drug. Moments after Erica is finished with the drink, Reynaldo is leading her out of the restaurant, and into the final stages of his dark fantasy, when Bill literally runs into his daughter and her abductor. In the ensuing struggle Erica loses her life, Bill loses his daughter, and Trish loses her double-life leading father to the justice system.⁴⁷¹

As we pull up to Mount Olive at six thirty in the evening in early October the parking lot is already two thirds full. Participants have been asked to carpool whenever possible and their cars are parked on a gradual sloping hill behind the lot. We have reservations at seven thirty but have come early to meet briefly with Norma and go on a quick tour through the concessions, dressing rooms, and costume areas. We give our names at registration, which is set up at a series of three long tables outside the doors of the large gymnasium/cafeteria. The line is not long; tours this evening won't start until seven. We fill out our registration cards and file into the gymnasium/cafeteria area. It is huge and open; set up with several (twenty) round tables each with six to eight chairs, in the center of each table is a neat stack of board games and card games for the walk-ins that might have to wait over an hour. At the side of the room flanked by the kitchen there are pizza slices, homemade baked goods, sodas, and coffee for sale. Next to the concession area is a table full of T-shirts, sweatshirts, and coffee mugs. Items with last year's slogan are on sale for a

⁴⁷¹ Judgement House/ New Creation Evangelism, Inc., "Our Scripts, *Web of Lies* Summary," Judgement House, http://www.judgementhouse.org/Our-Scripts_7_pg.html (accessed on January 12, 2009).

reduced price. After checking the place out we sit down at a table and wait for Norma. I know from doing this a few times now the director's schedule on a show night is pretty hectic. Norma breezes through the doors like a small hurricane about five minutes later and explains that she cannot talk before our reservation time, but she will be back to meet us afterwards and take us around backstage. Apparently there has been a melt down in the Angel room and Norma has to go fix it before the first group of audience members arrives in Heaven to find a disarrayed, crying, bedraggled group of angels without wings.

We get a soda and check out the T-shirt table. The room is starting to fill up, not only with those coming in for the next tour group, but with several walk-ins. Across the room I notice an older gentleman in rainbow suspenders and bowtie carrying a brown paper lunch bag, metal hoops, and some twine. He comes up to our table and entertains us with a series of magic tricks. Over the course of our discussion I learn that he is a congregation member who lost his wife two years ago and was brought to the Judgement House by some friends that year to get him out of his house. While waiting to tour the Judgement House that first evening he started entertaining a group of children and more people came over to participate while waiting; he enjoyed it so much that he now comes each evening to entertain those waiting with magic tricks, jokes, etc. He explains, "Doing a part was too much structure, a prayer walker or a doorknocker fine, but I like to talk...I am an active senior."⁴⁷²

⁴⁷² Doug Jameson, interview by author, Mount Olive, Alabama, October 13, 2007, Tape Recording.

When I explain why I am at the Mount Olive Judgement House all the way from Baltimore he shares that Judgement House has really impacted him by letting him open up and be around people after his wife's passing, saying:

DJ: I'm not the volunteer kind. I would come to services and I always have attended church events. I support that way, but the Judgment House has let me meet people that we didn't know well...every night I'm here and I have fun – that's important...I practice new tricks each year.⁴⁷³

Then he blows into his paper bag, tells me he has made a wish for my travel, gives me the bag and tells me not to open it unless I really need it some day. I still keep it at home in my jewelry chest. We say adieu for now; our names have been called.

We shuffle off to wait with our group in the twenty chairs that have been set up at the pre-entry station. Here volunteers call out our names from our registration cards and ask us to clarify pronunciation so that in the Judgment scene the Judge will be able to pronounce our name without stumbling, an all-knowing God should know how to pronounce one's name after all. At the next station we stand waiting for actual entry into the House. Here we are introduced to our guide and each other. Three of our group are church members who have worked on rehearsal and performance food for the performers and crew, six are teenagers that have come to see a friend who plays Erica in one of the scenes, there are three middle school girls who are giddy and excited, and two middle-aged women who explain that they are not members of Mount Olive, but that they are from another church about twenty minutes away and they come each year before they bring their youth group to get a sense of the script, as well as to see some of the kids from their church who are in the production. Finally, the doors open and we enter the *Web of Lies*.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

Before the first scene the guide soberly lays out what we are about to see, framing the event for us as participants and letting us know what we should be paying attention to and why. The guide not only moves us through the maze like hallways built into the church's inner structure, they also provide explanations before and after each scene to let us know what to look for and what we have seen, and finally they connect the spectacle to specific passages in scripture.

Tonight's journey begins in a prison cell where Alexander Johnson has been served his final meal on this earth. He has been involved in a horrific act of violence and sentenced to death by lethal injection. How on Earth can someone end up in this type of situation? I wonder how his mother must be feeling. Where is his father and what happened to cause Alexander to become another death row statistic?⁴⁷⁴

This quote sets up the concerns of the text – direct and indirect. What caused Alexander (AJ) to go wrong? We are going to find out, but already we know that negligent fathering might be to blame – a lesson hidden away and not explicit becomes clear. While Alexander's father hurt him and he hurts his daughter they are both free to choose their own spiritual destiny, while good family structure can protect it cannot decide. "We chose *Web of Lies* because the issues are relevant; also it shows that wherever you are in life you always have a choice of where to go and who to go with."⁴⁷⁵ His mother feels for him, but as the guide tells us at the scene's conclusion: "Sin whispers to the wicked..."⁴⁷⁶ There is some hint that Alexander's father has contributed to his downfall, but Alexander's inability to take personal responsibility is the final nail in his coffin.

⁴⁷⁴ *Web of Lies*, 9.

⁴⁷⁵ Huguley, interview.

⁴⁷⁶ *Web of Lies*, 7.

The door knocker knocks on the door to let the group of performers know that we are on our way in. The groups are timed so that an audience group goes through then the performance group has a five to ten minute interval for prayer, socializing, and refreshments.

NH: Each scene prays for the group that is about to come into their scene and for the group that has just left. On weeknights each scene will present their part of the story 11 to 12 times and on weekends they have done the presentation up to 25 times in one evening...⁴⁷⁷

Having sat backstage in several Hell scenes and two or three other scenes (where I could hide when the crowd comes in) I have always been surprised at the room leader's ability to keep their mostly teen and pre-teen casts in line, while there are the silly shenanigans and in-jokes that occur in any close knit performance setting, the teams do, with the exception of rare moments when scenes are running off schedule, pray for each group that has come and gone.

After the door knocker receives a quick knock back (some churches use a wiring system in which participants press a button when they are ready inside and a light flashes green) the door swings open and we are led on to arena style audience space with three levels. We fill up the top two levels. A small group of five chairs sits on the right side of the first audience level. The lights come up and we see a prison cell: a cot, a dirty urinal, a table and chair, two metal bars to the left represent the jail.

Alexander (AJ) is seated at the table. We watch as his daughter Trish and then her Pastor both try to convince him to accept Christ before he is executed. Alexander (AJ) refuses outright saying, "You get my old man to walk through that door and tell me that he loves me and that he's sorry for all he did to me. You make that happen

⁴⁷⁷ Huguley, email correspondence with author.

and I'll believe in God."⁴⁷⁸ Through Alexander's example we learn that past abuses are no excuse, Stephen, the pastor explains to Alexander (AJ) that it is his decision to murder and it is his decision to except forgiveness. We cannot blame outside forces for our actions. Our choices take root in our own free will; our work ethic, our success in this life and the next is based on our ability to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and our failures are brought on by our wallowing in our own misery. Good Americans, good Christians suck it up and find help in God; they don't kill people.

Alexander flies into rage and disrespects Pastor Stephen lunging at him; Stephen grabs his Bible and leaves still in prayer for Alexander's soul. The prison guards come to take Alexander (AJ) away for his execution imparting one last lesson, "**Guard 2:** Yeah man, you can't even treat a preacher with respect. You deserve everything you are about to get."⁴⁷⁹ As they lead Alexander (AJ) out of the cell they walk him to a gurney in front of the chairs in the first row, slowly a group of witnesses file in and we all scoot over to stand behind them not wanting to miss any of the lethal injection. Alexander (AJ)'s daughter Trish cries, Pastor Stephen comforts her. Our group is somber and quiet; the lights fade as we exit on Alexander's death.

And here, in this journey, "We have sophisticated instruments of social reflexivity which aim at reproducing as exactly as possible chains of social events

⁴⁷⁸ *Web of Lies*, 11.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

leading to consequences disruptive of social harmony.”⁴⁸⁰ The rest of the earthly script centers on finding out exactly what happened to lead Alexander (AJ) to death. We never do learn exactly what his father did to him, only that Alexander is a flawed and abusive husband and father whose socially deviant actions lead to several deaths including his own.

In Scene Two “Girls Night” we are led from the execution chamber to a slumber party where teenage girls sprawl out across a sofa and on the floor and eat popcorn, while watching an actual episode of *American Idol* on a large screen TV. They giggle and tease the active, happy, and Christian father figure when he dresses up in robe and girly bunny slippers so he can get his nails done. In this scene we learn about each of the young women. Erica, whose loving supportive family is hosting the slumber party, is the popular girl at church and at her Christian school. Despite her family and opportunities Erica is insecure, according to the script, and makes bad choices, such as posting racy pictures of her self on MySpace. Ashley is the straight arrow who condemns Erica’s behavior:

Ashley: “Erica, I can’t believe you posted that picture of yourself. Don’t you go to a Christian school? If anyone from church saw that they’d be like, so shocked! Seriously, Erica, what if Pastor Steve saw it ?!”

And finally there is Trish, AJ’s daughter, who is new to church and wants to impress Erica the popular girl. Once we have met the girls we are ushered out of the slumber party and we get our first glimpse of Alexander (now known in the script as AJ).

In Scene Three “The Dysfunctional Family” we meet AJ and his wife Sherry. AJ is at the computer and Sherry struggles to get his attention before leaving for a Rotary Club meeting. We are also witness to a phone call from Pastor Steve who has

⁴⁸⁰ Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 39.

been helping Sherry and AJ as a counselor; he feels that AJ is in trouble and is calling because, “The Lord has really put a burden on my heart for you.”⁴⁸¹ AJ rejects the Pastor’s offer of assistance and returns to his secret identity on MySpace; as he does Sherry enters and seeing that he has returned to his old ways she brings up the question that we have all wondered, what happened to AJ to make him like this?

Sherry: “...You’re sick. You disgust me. You’re just like your father – perverted and cruel.”

AJ: (*Moving toward Sherry, threateningly, voice low and menacing*) “Don’t you dare mention that man’s name in this house. I am NOTHING like him.”⁴⁸²

As AJ advances on Sherry the tension in the room becomes palpable. Some type of domestic violence scene occurs in most Judgement Houses with a family focus, but even audience members familiar with the event’s structure step back as the screaming fight gets closer and closer to the audience. As the accusations continue AJ and Sherry move towards us and when AJ grabs Sherry by the shoulders and shakes her roughly while screaming unintelligibly, audience members gasp, as a group we recoil. Sherry manages to struggle away and run out the door and AJ returns to his computer. As an audience we have been unsettled; our emotions are off balance. We stand closer as a group and many people are muttering as we exit the scene speculating about what is wrong with AJ.

In Scene Four “Chat” we return to Erica’s house, but this time to her bedroom, a stunning pink and green setting, with bed, dresser, curtained windows, phones, vanity with mirror, make-up, perfume bottles, a pile of laundry and a floor littered

⁴⁸¹ *Web of Lies*, 19.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 22.

with sleeping bags full of sleeping teenagers. Erica and Trish are still awake and are lit by the glow of Erica's laptop as she (BabyGirl990) chats saucily with "Reynaldo" (LatinLover22). For audience members the dramatic irony is heavy as Erica makes plans to meet her new friend at a local pizza parlor. A few of the teens in our group gasp, not only do we now know that "Reynaldo" is AJ (Trish's father) but we know he is highly agitated and violent.

As Erica and Trish climb out the window to meet "Reynaldo" they make a noise that wakes Bill, Erica's father, who after reading the conversation left open on Erica's computer cries out, "**Bill:** Oh dear Jesus-what is my baby girl up to?"⁴⁸³ After waking and questioning all the remaining slumber party revelers he rushes out to protect his daughter from the trap he's certain she's stepped into.

As we step out of Scene Four we walk towards the full brick façade of a pizza parlor; it is complete with a large glass window – the word *Pizza* in red letters stenciled on the glass – ivy grows up the side of the brick, and there are planters full of Fichus flanking the window and door. Our guide explains, "that we are on a collision course towards destiny."⁴⁸⁴ As we step into Scene Five "Interface" the tension in our group is thick, everyone knows something terrible is going to happen, but no one quite knows what will happen or how it will go down. The semi-public atmosphere of a pizza parlor works to calm the group, but also seems bright and harsh after all the cozy, private, interior spaces we have just journeyed through. Bells hanging from the door jangle to alert the staff to our presence. In one corner a man in a gray hoodie sits with a paper. He is wearing sunglasses. At another table, complete

⁴⁸³ Ibid, 27.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 29.

with parmesan cheeses, hots, napkin dispenser, silverware rolls, red and white checkered tablecloth, and small red candle sit a group of teenage boys. They are friends of Erica and Trish's from church. The girls enter and begin to speak with them.

I hear one of the women in the group talk about how hungry she is. I feel the same. It is because, I learn later, that they stack fresh pizzas and the old pizza boxes from concessions backstage at the pizza place scene to give it a realistic smell.

The conversation among Erica, Trish, and the young men is important to the drama, as in it Erica is offered another opportunity to accept Jesus Christ fully from one of the young men (Kevin) who found Jesus at the concert he just came from; he was inspired by the lead singer of Casting Crowns who told the audience that:

Kevin: ...Jesus was this really normal guy who had a rough start in life with his parents almost breaking up before he was born, and then he lives this faultless life until he started his ministry – then he was in hot water – when things got really hot they all abandoned him. I could totally relate to how he was all alone you know.⁴⁸⁵

Erica brushes him off saying she is too young to worry about being so Christian – she needs to have fun, she's a good person – and besides she's looking for "Reynaldo."

During the conversation the waiter has brought the man in the hoodie two sodas; the man, "Reynaldo," pours some powder into one of them. As Erica turns from the conversation the man in the hoodie motions her over handing her the soda. She drinks a hefty gulp and as she starts to get dizzy she realizes "Reynaldo" isn't quite what he seems. She manages to get out a slurred, "Hey, you don't look like your

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 32.

picture. I don't feel so good."⁴⁸⁶ As she tries to leave "Reynaldo" grabs her and starts to hurry her out the door. As they reach the door Bill bursts in and "Reynaldo" and Bill have a physical battle that ends with Bill unconscious on the floor at the feet of the audience. "Reynaldo" grabs the weakened Erica and runs out. The young man at the other table, Kevin, follows them. The waiter picks up the phone to make an emergency call.

We hear a scream outside and we all wheel around and look out the big glass window. The space is lit now, police lights flashing. We hear another scream, "He's got a gun!" and see Erica and Kevin running. Two shots and they both fall. The police arrive and take "Reynaldo"/AJ. Bill having revived runs out into the street and brings his daughter's blood covered body into the pizza parlor where we all stand a little shell-shocked by the pace of events. Poor Trish, having recognized her father as "Reynaldo" just keeps repeating, "Daddy, Daddy what have you done to Erica?" Erica says she's sorry to her dad, sorry for letting him down. The police come in and take her body and we learn that Kevin has died as well. Our earthly storyline has concluded.

The next stop is "Judgment," Scene Six, where we witness the verdict being handed down on each character's final fate. The characters stand amongst the audience. The Judge sits at the back of the room at a large judge's bench, dressed in white robe, with beard and gavel; the room is sparkly and bright and we are spread throughout the space. There are two doors on either side of the Judge's bench. As the Judge calls each character's name and looks for it in his book we learn that both AJ and Erica are being sent to Hell, while Kevin is going to Heaven. Good home, bad

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 33.

home, wonderful parents, crappy childhood, victim or perpetrator it doesn't matter. Neither Erica nor AJ accepted Christ and they are both damned. The door on the left opens; red light and smoke pours out, and two demons emerge. First they take AJ, who is accepting and excited about his fate, as he believes Satan will welcome him to Hell with open arms. Erica quietly pleads with the Judge. The audience members near her back away as she asks for their intercession. The demons return for her and they move through our midst brushing by us as they reach for her and pull her struggling and screaming from judgment into Hell. The Judge then calls each of our names and we are asked to move forward collectively, we are told:

Judge: It is not your time yet. Unlike Erica and AJ, you do have another opportunity, but be assured of this. No one knows the day or the hour that your soul will be required of you and on that day you WILL stand in Judgment. You are dismissed for now, but when that most important day comes; will your name be found in the Lamb's Book of Life?

We then rejoin our protagonists and watch as they are tossed into Hell to suffer. The Hell scene is hot and dark, when we arrive we are led into a fenced in pen about seven feet high; outside our pen the demons rattle the chains. Other groups of sinners stand inside other pens scattered throughout the fog heavy room; their pens are smaller in construction, but are placed close to ours.

AJ and Erica both are brought in to Hell. AJ's notions of being "happy" in Hell, where he feels he belongs, are quickly deflated. Erica screams terribly as she is tossed into her pen. The high school kids who are the actresses friends, first laugh and point, but as this attracts Satan's hissing, shaking, and shouting at us they stop their antics and stand still trying to avoid the extra attention they have now drawn to themselves. The two middle-schoolers who are pressed to the front of the pen,

because of their height, turn their faces away and squeal in fear. Satan lectures us on his plans for recruiting sinners and then lets us out of our enclosure so that we can walk through the dark, hot foggy space passing by the various pens of sinners who cry out to us, rattling the fencing that holds them in while demons leer at us.

From Hell we are led to Heaven which takes place in the church sanctuary, a harp player sits on a pedestal in the entrance way and several young girls all in white with ringlet curls stand on stage flanking a long white runner; white borders hang all over the room, covering the everyday markers of the sanctuary space. Flowers and plants line the edge of the stage and at either side of each pew is a pair of young women, also in white; they are often the angels' mothers and they keep watch over them between scenes.

We all file down the aisle and reach the stage like area. Gates in front of the stage are opened and we are allowed in. Once we are all standing facing the entrance the music "I Can Only Imagine"⁴⁸⁷ by MercyMe, a Christian band, begins. The angels begin a gestural dance to the song as Jesus enters down the walkway and into our midst. By song's end Kevin, our friend from earlier, has made it to the stage and Jesus accepts him into Heaven. The Welcomer's described in the script (and fitting the description in performance) as: "...the 'saints,' born again who are believers dressed in white tops and light khakis pants..."⁴⁸⁸ come out from behind the white curtains and sing while Jesus walks among us and hugs and whispers something into each audience member's ear. A few of the teens shy away but everyone is respectful, and one of the middle-schoolers embraces him tightly. Heaven, though a bit contrived

⁴⁸⁷ The lyrics are attached as Appendix D.

⁴⁸⁸ *Web of Lies*, 42.

at times, certainly has a calmativ e effect. After the chaos of the pizza parlor and the hot disorientation of Hell the slow cool open spaces of the sanctuary work well to support the performance's mission.

In the final room, we are informed that there are many resources for us if we are interested in giving our hearts to Christ or even simply learning more about being a Christian. We are asked to bow our heads, and close our eyes as the leader of the room prays a prayer aloud; if we pray along we have begun the journey to be saved. We are then asked to keep our eyes closed. I can hear a vague sniffing from the women standing behind me. The leader then asks anyone who has committed or re-committed to look up and she will take them to counseling. I hear a rustling and later learn that three in my group have gone into the counseling room. As we are led out of the room I find a security guard and ask him to let Norma know I am through and that we will be in the waiting area when she has a second.

As we sit at a cafeteria table two women with Registration shirts on approach our table and introduce themselves. They have heard about me and want to know, interestingly enough, if I have ever been to *Revelation Walk*, a performance I will discuss in the next Chapter, and if so would I recommend it? It is about a forty-five minute drive from Mount Olive and I hesitate for a minute. The two events are so different. They are wondering whether it's worth the ride. I explain that it enacts the Book of Revelation and is outside; that it's really different from Judgement House, but they should check it out. I tell them I am going tomorrow night. They laugh and tell me good luck.

When Norma comes in walkie talkie blazing she breezes up and says: “Follow me.” She walks us through the backstage set up for each tour and leaves us in the kitchen of the slumber party. After about three tours, my husband leaves for the pizza stand and I move on to wait with the techies in Hell and then with Jesus in Heaven.

He explains what he feels are the greatest pressures and promises of the event:

TH: It’s rough when people pull away. I get to see a lot of kids hurting, but they don’t even know how to process that hurt, they’re tough, like at that age, you don’t need anybody. They can’t turn it around; they shut down; I can feel it...for them there are the kids...

KM: mostly kids?

TH: Mostly, adults too though, not just kids, that just release it, when I touch them...Some nights it feels off, strange you...

KM: What strange, what way?

TH: Being Jesus that they sort of see you as Him, at first it felt wrong, some days it still is off...Like I was a faker. I realized it was through me though. I wasn’t Jesus, really? (*laughs*) but I stand there and I represent forgiveness, an example...the whole thing is an example of what not to do...also where to turn – it shows in life, that God touches and has influence on good things, life can be a lot, if you work at it and let God work on you, that is the example we, I, hope people take...⁴⁸⁹

4.6 Moving Forward

Judgement House offers a variety of ways individual participants can intersect communities of geography, belief, and communion. It sponsors connections amongst church members as well as amongst its Covenant Partners through its extensive support networks. In Judgment House the Christian faith is presented as a largely communal endeavor; a sense of community process is present in creating the event, as well as in the ideas that the scripts themselves present. They offer guides for Christian

⁴⁸⁹ Tim Hardesty, interview by author, Mount Olive, Alabama, October 13, 2007, Tape Recording.

behavior in the contemporary world, behavior that if applied in this life might save one in the afterlife. Judgement House displays Christian community as a strategy for support and meaning making within the contemporary world.

In the next Chapter, I will discuss *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk*, events which foster similar community building strategies in terms of process, but in the spectacle they build radical and frightening pictures of the past, present, and future of the church community and the world.

“If the performance’s purpose is to effect transformation—to be efficacious—then the...performance is a ritual”⁴⁹⁰ However, if the purpose of the performance is entertainment, that is, if the performance lacks the transformative power of ritual, then the performance is theatre. These two approaches are “braided,” as per Schechner’s argument, quite closely in the *Revelation Walk* and *Tribulation Trail* performances discussed in Chapter Five. This braiding allows for audiences to approach performances from many avenues and increases their efficacy, in terms of both entertainment and transformative power.

⁴⁹⁰ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 120.

5 ***Tribulation Trail and Revelation Walk: “It’s the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine).”***⁴⁹¹

Apocalypticism shapes our stories about America itself and about the direction and meaning of the world. This apocalypticism takes various forms—it fuels books, comic books, movies, and television and touches nearly every form of popular culture with which America engages. Apocalypticism reaches deep into the history of the American nation emanating from European conceptions of the “New World” and from the preaching of the early Puritan ministers.⁴⁹²

5.1 Introductory Map of the Chapter

Tribulation Trail and *Revelation Walk* are the two types of Christian performances that this Chapter will focus on. They are included together because both performances enact aspects of the Rapture and the Tribulation inspired by the Book of Revelations and by popular and Christian cultural manifestations of these images. Both performances take place in isolated outdoor areas and require the audience to walk through the dramatic presentations, as well as their natural surroundings. The events that the performances dramatize are both anchored in the revelatory visions of St. John while on the island of Patmos, which are the basis of the Book of Revelation. These two performance events also portray popular depictions of what will happen after the Rapture with recourse to different degrees of engagement with popular Christian cultural images such as the *Left Behind* series.

As themes of the Apocalypse are attracting more public interest, especially with the success of the Christian thriller movie *Omega Code* and the popularity of the *Left Behind* series – its books, movies and video games – as well as through the

⁴⁹¹ R.E.M., *It’s the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine)*.

⁴⁹² Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, 14.

numerous academic studies such as Frykholm's *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* and more popular studies of Rapture belief such as Radosh's account of various Rapture related Christian media *Rapture Ready!: Adventures in the Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture* – it becomes more fruitful to examine communities who enact performances that engage in presenting a Rapture experience to believers and the unchurched alike. In regard to the *Left Behind* series Frykholm states that there is a,

...new Christian emerging in this fiction. No longer ostracized, alienated, and old-fashioned, the new Christian is wealthy, technologically savvy, and exerts a powerful cultural influence. Perhaps, given the history of conservative Protestantism, its aggressive engagement with popular culture, its growth among middle and upper classes since World War II, and its participation in emerging technologies throughout the 20th century, this transformation in Rapture fiction should not surprise us...What does the story of Rapture and Tribulation mean, if it is no longer an anti-worldly and anti-modern formula? What does the story signify to its readers, if not alienation and isolation? Why does dispensationalism remain persistently popular as apocalyptic narrative and how has its meaning been transformed?⁴⁹³

In this Chapter I seek to explore some of the ways in which this “new Christian” is manifest in the dramatic events discussed, events which work to render live the scenarios that Rapture fiction attempts to present on the page.

This Chapter will deal with my accounts of attending both of these events, discussing their intent with their creators, examining how community is articulated in their spectacle, as well as my reading of these performances. I will also present some of the basic belief structures of dispensational premillennialism, the theory about the end of times that is predominant within the congregations performing these works, so that the reader may better grasp the intent of *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk*.

⁴⁹³ Frykholm, 36.

5.2 The Key Issues

It is my contention that both *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk* provide conservative Christian communities with models for understanding themselves as part of a cohesive communal unit in opposition to, yet dependent on, the mainstream contemporary world. They do this by enacting a ritual performance event that separates true believers visually, spatially, thematically, and emotionally from the broader non-believing populace; however, the performances also posit the believer's dependence upon the same non-believers to bring about the final utopia these performances reference – the Kingdom of Christ on earth. While their aim is to “save souls” if everyone is saved then the Rapture and Tribulation have no meaning and Christian history is shattered and untrue. In short they walk the line that Schechner lays out in delineating ritual and theatre, “If only a few stay away, it is they who suffer; if many stay away, the congregation is in danger...”⁴⁹⁴ So while their stated intent is to “save souls,” their efficacy lies in their ability to foster bonds between believers, to allow believers to experience the events they will presumably miss after the Rapture, and to shore up believer's convictions about the Truth of Christian history, present, and future by bringing past and projected moments into an experiential format. More than any of the works discussed in the previous pages *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk* mirror the role of the engwura ritual in the life of Arunta males and its meaning in the community, as discussed in *Performance Theory*:

The overall structure...is analogic, while its interior structure is dramatic. The two structures are integrated because the Arunta believe concretely in the

⁴⁹⁴ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 137.

Dreamtime and felt their own moving from “ordinary” to “super-ordinary” reality. They experience the interaction between these realities...performances are the...point of time where the two intersected and meshed.⁴⁹⁵

This instance of intersection between performance and actuality is central to *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk* and serves to validate Christian history and prophesy for believers.

In examining how these performances work to support Schechner’s contention that, “Postmodern tribalism is medievalism under the auspices of technology”⁴⁹⁶ I will look to their connections to medieval performance and notions of time in relation to apprehending meaning in Christian history, examine the types of community that participants find in these events, and discuss their relationship to the contemporary world through the relationship between communities of geography, belief, and communion.

5.2.1 The Popular Moral

Some medieval moralities were obviously planned for large-scale outdoor productions, while others were performed varying locations, making use of church yards, town halls, and cathedrals. Obviously, these moralities converse with and affect their audiences in divergent ways, stemming from the nature and scale of their setting.

The large-scale public moralities were very popular and were produced, like most cycle plays, on an essentially non-commercial basis by groups of citizens—often quite large groups. Sometimes the audience had to pay to see them, but the intention was usually not to make a profit but simply to defray expenses, as happened with the large-scale continental mysteries and saints’ plays—after all, scenic units and costumes must have made considerable

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 124.

demands on the pockets of the producers in the case of plays like *The Castle of Perseverance*, and such costly pieces cannot possibly be intended for professional production. In an age when it was difficult to keep even a six-man troupe together, it would have been economic suicide for travelling players to risk mounting anything so enormous...⁴⁹⁷

Both *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk* tap into the communal production model discussed above, utilizing vast outdoor spaces, as well as the idea of creation, not for profit, but to defray the costs of production.⁴⁹⁸ These performances work largely to bring the community together to affirm their identity through the enactment of their beliefs. They offer themselves as, "...a type of safety valve that formally arranges the diffusion of social tensions and personal emotions generated by social conflict...finally repressing" or in these works enacting, and thus purging, "human violence so as to allow for ordered social life."⁴⁹⁹

Performance has been understood throughout time as a cultural group's means of self reflection, and as a method for the solidification and assertion of categories of identity. As part of configuring and reconfiguring identities, people affirm themselves as individuals in relationship to, and with, communities through an array of methods: television, movies, literature, music videos, performing arts, fashion, internet, and other technologies; they have access to a wide array of local, regional, and inter/trans-national cultural sources at their disposal to shape the way they understand themselves, and, in turn, the way they are understood in relation to their social world. Because of this vast field from which one may choose facets of identity the public

⁴⁹⁷ John Wesley Harris, *The Medieval Theatre in Context: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1992), 161.

⁴⁹⁸ Both groups do make a profit from the productions, but they are also both re-investing heavily back into improving the production with new more expensive effects, costumes, and sets.

⁴⁹⁹ Bell, 172-173.

performance of identity does not often remain unchallenged; yet, it is this challenge that enforces identity categories in these works. Participants consistently define themselves as in opposition to the “other,” the non-believer and the challenge to identity provides the outline of the identity they claim.

Althusser’s central thesis is that ‘ideology interpolates individuals as subjects.’ Every ideology, through the mechanism of recognition, calls individuals into place and confers on them ‘their’ identity. Ideology...

Like the purposefully open symbolism of the performances discussed here,

...is addressed to individuals so that –answering, turning round, converted – They become freely subjected to it. Althusser cites Pascal: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer and you will believe’...constituted there as subjects in a double sense...through being subjected and tied to an imaginary identity.⁵⁰⁰

Countervailing forces such as the state, the market, and social movements, may tighten or free expression with varying degrees of strength and efficacy. Therefore, performance and identity are vital sites of social, political, and cultural battles over the local connotations and significances of images and texts.

Like Althusser’s citation of Pascal above, liveness, through its experiential nature, holds power in these performative exchanges by presenting audiences with the ability to interact, shape, and read the displays they are physically moving through. The scale of the performance, whether they take up a whole town or a whole mountainside such as in *Revelation Walk*, absorbs the audience within the event as they navigate the space of the performance finding themselves interpolated in relation to it.

⁵⁰⁰ Madan Sarup, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996) 53-54.

Whether, an “episode’s action calls for the crowd itself to be searched and divided into souls, damned and saved,”⁵⁰¹ whether that be deciding to sit on the right or left of Christ in Judgment, or whether it be having to navigate through the woods and walk amongst (not passively look at) a wasteland of Tribulation, the scale of the drama requires a participation that is requisite for liveness to have power. Liveness, here, as Auslander argues, is not dependant on presence, but on interaction. The liveness of these performances depends on the mediatized environment that they draw from and to which they react. “Live performance now often incorporates mediatization such that the live event itself is a product of media technologies.”⁵⁰² *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk* – though outdoor events – showcase video presentations as part of their production. They both deploy mediatized images to support the experience simultaneous to the experience itself. The power of performance is made clear to participants through its ability bridge conflict between divergent groups, its ability to educate, and its ability to create, reify and re-sculpt, if only in passing, new social vistas for its participants.

Whatever form didactic performance takes it has the capacity to distill complex situations into recognizable categories of action in which, “public identification with a group reinforces the individual’s attachment to the group.”⁵⁰³ Overt oversimplification and the broadening of symbolism along the line of narrative structure, genre, and character type can defuse or ignite tense situations, as these

⁵⁰¹ Anne Higgins, “Streets and Markets,” in *New History of Early English Drama*, Eds. John D. Cox and David S. Kastan, Foreword Stephen J. Greenblatt (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 91.

⁵⁰² Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 24.

⁵⁰³ Bell, 187.

performances address audiences constituted from all segments of a community. The interpretational openness of the performance's aesthetics, their recourse to both prophetic (and varyingly interpreted) religious symbolism, as well as to the artifacts of popular Christian consumer culture point at the notion that, "...the obvious ambiguity or over determination of much religious symbolism may even be integral to its efficacy."⁵⁰⁴

While performance often affords its viewer the promise of improved/alterd social order or a new way of seeing the existent social order, it also, depending on its audience and their composition, can point up the sharp discontinuities between the social utopias (or dystopias in the case of the performances discussed in this Chapter) and the actual social world of the viewers – leading to uncomfortable, though often fruitful, moments for understandings across social boundaries.

How can we hope for a better future in such an environment? What can hope mean in a world of terror? What can performance do politically against these overwhelming odds?...Performance continues to entice me with magic, to give me hope for our collective futures...⁵⁰⁵

In *Revelation Walk* and *Tribulation Trail* this utopia is positionally rooted. As Carla Reeves, who used to co-direct *Tribulation Trail* asserts:

CR: I enjoyed, for me, the best thing about *Trib. Trail*, was it gave me a picture of what the world'll be. I could see, where as Christians, we're going...Doing the images on the movie made it about now and what's next for us. It can be horrible to think about, to see it is horrible – I – but it strengthens, for me, the idea that it is all part of one thing that ends up better in the end, the Kingdom come...⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 184.

⁵⁰⁵ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 3-5.

⁵⁰⁶ Carla Reeves, telephone interview by author, July 12, 2007, Tape Recording.

This kind of utopian view is aided by the concept of *figural* thinking in which time is collapsed in upon its progression providing a way of understanding past, present, and future as inextricably interrelated, even fused:

...Here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is simultaneously something which has always been, and which will be fulfilled in the future; and strictly, in the eyes of God, it is something eternal, something omni-temporal, something already consummated in the realm of the fragmentary earthly event.⁵⁰⁷

Events in the here and now are thus marked both by the ghosts of what came before and by their connection to the end – to Kingdom come – where all events end up.

Within this understanding of historical narrative, no event is meaningless or insignificant, since every event interweaves with all the other events, just as a thread weaves throughout a tapestry shaping, connecting, and influencing the totality of the image. This relationship to time, however, is not merely progressively linear, the event does not exist as a simple step towards the end, but it exists in simultaneous consort with all the events it is connected to past and present, which is why John on Patmos serves a fulfilling framing device for performances that enact a dispensationalist worldview.

One of the difficulties in understanding the way these biblical events relate to one another, contemporary events, the events of a future trauma, and the Kingdom Come in performance is apprehending, as medieval audiences did, the idea that time can occur in a vertical schema:

This idea can be best described by saying that medieval man saw time not as a straight line but as a rising spiral, so that history continually repeated itself as it progressed. A man could either look forwards and backwards along the

⁵⁰⁷ Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Ralph Manheim, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 74.

curving line of time or behind him...or he could look straight up and down at the equivalent points on the many curves of the time-line directly above or below him, thus taking a “vertical” view...This “vertical” view of time intimately linked together events of the past and the present...every time you reached Easter you were mystically linked with the original Crucifixion...everyday drew the threads of the past and present closely together and was full of spiritual meaning.⁵⁰⁸

So as a linear horizontal perception of time urges one to view events within a domino like structure, within the medieval vertical view, events can be both real and historical. John is not free from history; however, his history exists in tandem with the present. Both the single event – the moment of Rapture – and the Rapture’s fulfillment indicate and imply each other:

...a *figura* or ‘figure’ occurred, when some episode in Christ’s life appeared to be anticipated or re-enacted by another event occurring elsewhere in history, which thus became a ‘shadow’ or ‘reflection’ of the original event...events such as the deaths of Christian martyrs were seen as a re-enactment of Christ’s Passion, a reiteration of his message. Thus, in the light of *figura* the whole of sacred history was seen as woven together into a single, seamless garment.⁵⁰⁹

This tradition of *figural* thinking clearly extends into the construction of a premillennialist performance space in which all events performed can be interpreted as significant and interconnected with the present; the power of this presence gives history its experiential liveness and asserts the importance of each Christian action – then, now, and future – to the whole of Christian history.

Orthodox tradition maintained that human destiny depends upon the events of “salvation history”—the history of Israel, especially the prophets’ predictions of Christ and then his actual coming, his life, and his death and resurrection. All of the New Testament gospels, whatever their differences, concern

⁵⁰⁸ Harris, *The Medieval Theatre in Context*, 101.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

themselves with Jesus as a historical person. And all of them rely on the prophets' predictions to prove the validity of the Christian message.⁵¹⁰

The reading of performed *figura* thus carved out a path for connecting different events in time thematically, spiritually and interpretationally; the outcomes of these relationships were not already prescribed, except in the broadest sense – God comes three times: in the beginning (creation), the middle (resurrection), and the end (Kingdom). The Kingdom is inevitable, but personal choice is a part of how the Kingdom will apply to one's personal and spiritual journey, individual choices in the future are written in one's own hand.

Even in its earliest meaning, *figura* might stand for either “model” or “copy” thus the performances discussed in this Chapter, when applying a *figural* reading are, in fact, as Boal might say, “the rehearsal [s] for the revolution [Kingdom].” Plays like the *Creation* or the *Last Judgement*, as well as their *figural* antecedents *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk*, perform humanity's journey within a cosmic and spiritual setting. Torches light the stage or Hell fire springs from the ground, Satan is cast down. The performance, the pageant, and history spiral in upon each other and those who have chosen well on their journey are granted entrance to the Kingdom – justified in the performed now, and the choice of those justified rings forward into the future, “...think through the choices...as it goes, you think what you would do, in the end you know if your thinking lined up.”⁵¹¹

⁵¹⁰ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 132.

⁵¹¹ Dennis D'Oliviera, interview by author, Stockbridge, Georgia, July 19, 2007, Tape Recording.

5.2.2 *Apocalypse Now and Apocalypse Later*

“The revelation, a book that was almost left out of what is now known to be the Bible, has arguably become the most prominent lens through which premillennialist Christians view the world today.”⁵¹² While anticipation of the second coming of Christ and his millennial reign has been central to Christianity since it began, the idea of the Rapture came into more popular parlance in the late nineteenth century. When Anglican priest John Nelson Darby constructed a theological interpretation around the Book of Revelation; this complex vision became known as dispensational premillennialism. Built upon the theories of the twelfth century monk, Joachim of Fiore, Darby developed the idea of ages of the Church (dispensations). These dispensations were later used by the modern day premillennialists to build their theories. Protestant fundamentalists of various stripes began to blend these ideas into their own readings of the Bible.

In the twenty-first century premillennialism is the most widely held view of the end of times as interpreted through the Book of Revelation, though other views on the dispensations also developed, as well as arguments over the nature and placement of the Rapture within the schematic frame of the end of times,

The drawback (*for me at least*) was that rather than a walk through the book of Revelation it was more like a recreation of the Left Behind movie concept. And it was complete with the whole “*second chance - if you missed the rapture and will refuse the mark you can still be saved*” teaching. Those of you who know me or have set under my teaching no [sic] that I don’t believe that. Now, I respect others views on it, even if they differ with mine. It’s not a make it or break it item.⁵¹³

⁵¹² Standaert, *Skipping Towards Armageddon*, 28.

⁵¹³ Christway Church, “Revelation Walk,” October, 29, 2008, <http://christway.info/revelation-walk/> (accessed on January 14, 2009).

Despite disagreements over some of the details, dispensational premillennialism is the most influential, as well as the most dominant philosophy deployed in the congregations that sponsor *Revelation Walk* and *Tribulation Trail*.

Within the increasingly embattled America of the 1920s, Fundamentalists were still licking their wounds, fresh from the embarrassing national lambasting of their views during the Scopes “monkey trial.” Evangelical historian Randall Balmer observes that premillennialist ethos of desperation and desolation effected the twentieth century evangelical movement considerably.⁵¹⁴ The blows that fundamentalist projects like prohibition and creationism absorbed denoted a withdrawal from the world. During this time of withdrawal fundamentalist Christians readied themselves for Christ’s new Kingdom on earth. It was within this climate that Darby’s philosophy would find its proper welcome.

Most scholars of American religion – historical, cultural, and theological – agree that the Rapture surfaced as an alluring belief in American Protestant culture at a time when conservative Protestants were experiencing a precipitous drop in social power. This lack of power and Darby’s ideas as largely presented in the Scofield Reference Bible (1909, rev 1917) came together to shape dispensationalist thought.⁵¹⁵ At this historical juncture two vectors met – urbanization and immigration – and

⁵¹⁴ See Randall Balmer’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*.

⁵¹⁵ See Paul Boyer’s *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, Julie Carpenter’s *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, Grace Halsell’s *Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War* and James Davison Hunter’s *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity*, Amy Johnson Frykholm’s *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*, and Christian Smith’s *American Evangelicalism Embattled and Thriving*.

began to amend the nexus of power on the American landscape; power was now flowing into the hands of emergent populations, a power that had previously been held by the Protestant majority. These two forces portended, for fundamentalists, the deterioration of traditional lifestyles and the loss of the reigns of cultural control. They were no longer at the wheel, but they must work to do what they could to maintain their way of life while the vehicle, in their view, careened out of control. This loss of control is still evident today in the way in which performances such as Hell House, Judgement House, *Nightmare*, *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk* attempt to intersect with and relate to the contemporary world. These events take away audience control over physical space attempting to mirror the lack of control that one has within the contemporary world – positing Jesus Christ as a legitimate answer to the unhinged nature of late modern life.

While a loss of control marked the 1920s, by the 1940s and early 1950s some fundamentalists were weary of separatist rhetoric and policies; they began to argue for a shift in the way in which conservative Protestantism dealt with the larger culture. This new approach to the social world – while still dependant, though to a lesser degree, on a rhetoric of separation and martyrdom – helped to shape what we now understand as the contemporary evangelical take on the cultural landscape. From the rigidity and inward looking posture of fundamentalism – yet with a new openness towards the tools, tactics, and practices of the modern world – the conservative Protestants we now call evangelical began to coalesce into unified groups, entering the social world ready for action.⁵¹⁶

⁵¹⁶ For more in depth discussion about the distinction between fundamentalism and evangelicalism and the emergence of evangelicalism please see Jerome Himmelstein's *To The Right: The Transformation*

What many of those first evangelicals desired was to make their mission of spreading the Gospel bear on the contemporary world. The ways in which this was done varied: some espoused a socially active form of conservatism which would directly engage social problems beyond the evangelical world proper, as opposed to retreating into their own world they would work to conform the world to their standards; some founded universities and entered the academy to sculpt an academic form of Christian understandings, and still others utilized the mediums of popular culture to appeal to the world at large. However, even in this time of opening and expansion, dispensationalism did not fade in significance; it stayed a powerful motivator and echoed throughout the community; it still holds power to this day.

In the 1970s a string of popular prophetic literature emerged. Hal Lindsey's *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, the genre's superstar, became one of the best-selling publications of the decade. Sales, however, occurred almost entirely in Christian bookstores and through Christian distribution systems; the book stayed largely off the radar screen of mainstream publishing, unlike LaHaye's later blockbuster the *Left Behind* Series. Another example of the savvy use of media to forward dispensation premillennialist thought was a series of movies made by Donald Thompson: *A Thief in the Night*, *A Distant Thunder*, *Image of the Beast*, and *Prodigal Planet*. These dispensationalist morality tales, in the guise of a series of thrillers, follow the story of a group of young people whose actions provide a reminder for the youth watching

of American Conservatism, James Davidson Hunter's *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* and *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, as well as George M. Marsden's *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* and *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.

about the dangers of failing to embrace the message of Christian salvation. These films continue, decades after their release, to be shown in churches and youth gatherings for Christian young people.

It was not until the late twentieth century that Darby and his theology would be admixed with right ring conspiracy theories, as well with the American tale of exceptionalism, the construct of the New Jerusalem, and the projection of the shining city on the hill. This potent admixture of American and biblical symbolism brought forward a resurgent form of evangelical fundamentalism interlaced with political activism.

In the simplest of terms, dispensationalism partitions the Bible – and thus humankind’s narrative history – into dispensations of times or ages. There is no consensus in the evangelical world on a precise eschatology. There are many evangelicals that do not accept premillennial dispensationalism; however, the performance events discussed in this Chapter put forth a premillennial dispensationalist image of the world and spiritual events. As churches, not necessarily as individuals, they largely believe in the veracity of the events discussed in the following paragraphs coming to pass.⁵¹⁷

After the Jews are re-gathered in the Holy Land, civilization starts to unstitch: morals loosen, families break apart at the seams, and crime spikes. Political unrest, war, economic crisis, epidemics of disease, natural disasters, and other catastrophes amplify anguish and misery throughout the world. Even religious leaders abandon

⁵¹⁷ I will not try to make the connections between these broad circumstances and world events, I do think the reader can do that, as they see fit, as an experiential exercise in premillennialist meaning making.

long held doctrines, slacken their personal standards of public and private conduct, and accept immorality. There is nothing, despite the most valiant attempts, that can stay human civilization's perilous slide down the slippery slope on which it has started.

The Rapture of the faithful is the next major step in the process. In the premillennialist last days the Rapture is the beginning of the end and all the true believers will be taken up to Heaven to watch the unfolding horror in Heaven with Christ. The rest of humanity will be left on earth for the seven year Tribulation period. During this seven year period the false prophet and Anti-Christ will rule. He is a charismatic world leader who will gain a following by promising peace and security to an uncertain world. This world leader cum Anti-Christ leads a ten nation confederacy in Western Europe. Unaware of the Anti-Christ's true identity, Israel signs a treaty with him and rebuilds its temple in Jerusalem. After three and a half years, the Anti-Christ breaks the treaty, and declares himself God on earth. He persecutes those who do not and/or will not worship him and who won't receive a mark that shows their faith and obedience to the One World government and the One World religion. The remainders of God's people, those converted after the Rapture (some don't believe in this second chance), endure atrocious persecution in the Great Tribulation. At the end of the seven years the final battle of Armageddon occurs, Christ attains victory over the forces of evil and the world: Heaven, earth and the New Jerusalem are created anew.⁵¹⁸ The surviving Jews accept Jesus Christ as their

⁵¹⁸ This account of premillennialist belief structure comes largely from speaking with events' participants, as well as from the resources I was given by church members, most specifically Robert Van Kampen's *The Prewrath Rapture Position Explained: Plain and Simple* (Grand Haven,

Messiah. For a thousand years, Christ will rule the world from Jerusalem and God will fulfill all the promises made to Israel.

As Boyer points out, the strength of the Anti-Christ as a powerful force in world cultural crystallized around the same anxieties that solidified many other fundamentalist and evangelical beliefs around the family and social values that the other performances discussed in the dissertation also deal with, “conformity, alienation, advancing corporate power, the degradation of politics, and the narcotizing effect of the mass media, were of course the common coin of postwar thought.”⁵¹⁹ Beliefs about the Anti-Christ and the unraveling of social order are the very scenes enacted in *Revelation Walk* and *Tribulation Trail*. They, like other performances discussed in previous chapters, take an active and unique posture towards the contemporary world and while they hope to bring people to the Christian faith, the fact of their performance can be seen as a cultural proof of end of times narratives for believers, rather than as a convincing argument to entice non-believers. For, unlike Judgement House or Hell House, who would be content if all people found Jesus Christ, these performances, by philosophical necessity, strengthen a decision already made. If everyone finds Christ who gets Tribulated? Just as good and evil, the demon and the angel are related in the didactic dramas we have discussed, thus far, the damned and the Raptured are related and entwined in *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk*. These performances do not focus on the reformation of socially

Michigan: Sola Scriptura, 1999), which was I given at *Tribulation Trail*. Also see Ruth W. Mouly’s *The Religious Right and Israel: The Politics of Armageddon*.

⁵¹⁹ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 290.

deviant behavior; they don't condemn it, in fact, they need it for their very survival. While it is disquieting that Christians must accept the damnation of others for their own ultimate salvation, it also creates an air of tolerance towards other life choices that one does not see in *Hell House* or *Nightmare* – it opens the possibilities of portrayal and reserves – dare I say – judgment?

TJ: I don't think I'd be afraid to show controversial issues, but – I – we aren't trying to be controversial or tell anyone how to live, there are things I think are wrong, you might not think the same, so, that's not our point here...We show what gets a person to eternity. People sin in lots of ways, too many for us to pick 'em all out, one isn't worse than another...⁵²⁰

5.3 Trip the Trail

In October of 1992 the concept of *Tribulation Trail* was launched via the leadership of Metro Heights Baptist Church in Stockbridge, Georgia. And as the story goes:

A similar event called “The Chilling Fields” which had been sponsored by two local churches began to awaken the vision for Tribulation Trail many years earlier and became a model for this evangelistic event to become a reality. Rev. Calvin Yarbrough was the Senior Pastor and Rev. Don Yarbrough was the youth pastor of Metro Heights at the time...

As kids, and for many years after they grew up, Calvin and Don would construct a “haunted house” in their garage at Halloween time until the lines to get candy and a Halloween scare became so long that they finally constructed a “trail” in the wooded backyard of their parents’ home. It was a neighborhood treat to experience the haunted trail every Halloween and now this neighborhood trail has become a community TRAIL WITH PURPOSE...

In 1992, Don reminded Calvin of the childhood events and of “The Chilling Fields”... He suggested that Metro Heights’ youth group sponsor a trail. Believing that God was leading the brothers to embark on such an event, Tribulation Trail was birthed.

In its first year of existence, hundreds of people attended in support of the effort and event, and it became a purposeful expenditure of the Church. The next year, a few hundred more people attended, and again, the trail touched and changed lives.

Since then, Tribulation has touched the lives of over 25,000 visitors per year from all around the nation and overseas. Thousands of people cross the line of faith each year. Countless others make decisions to re-dedicate

⁵²⁰ Thelma Jones (*Revelation Walk* founder, writer, and director), interview by author, Pell City, Alabama, July 23, 2007, Tape Recording.

their lives to Christ. All who visit the trail will leave with a renewed sense of direction and purpose.

...This powerful drama, carried out by hundreds of tireless volunteers, is designed, scripted and performed with the purpose of reaching the unchurched and unconvinced and leading them to faith in Christ.

We hope you will come each year and bring your family and friends.

THIS WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE FOREVER!⁵²¹

As is evident from the above history showcased on the *Tribulation Trail* site, *The Trail* serves many purposes for the church; its history is based on the touching story of two brothers that involves a communal childhood experience, the need to perform outreach, and the desire to change the lives of the churched and the unchurched alike. After speaking with several participants and the primary producers of *The Trail*, past and present, I learned that Metro Heights Baptist Church, the original creators of *The Trail* and the original owners of the property on which *The Trail* occurs had since dissolved in an ugly congregational dispute over leadership and finances. Discussion around the topic was very politic; no one wanted to say too much. Many church members left Metro Heights Baptist Church; even though some congregation members remained the church was left significantly dwindled in numbers. No congregation means no finances. Things grew ever bitterer as jobs were lost. In time, Metro Heights could subsist no longer and the burgeoning and successful Mount Vernon Baptist Church contacted them; Mount Vernon needed somewhere to grow. A deal was arranged and Mount Vernon purchased the property and agreed to maintain *The Trail*.

⁵²¹ Tribulation Trail at Mount Vernon Baptist Church, "History," http://www.tribulationtrail.org/site/cpage.asp?cpage_id=140014964&sec_id=140005154, (accessed on November 12, 2008).

There are many reasons why Mount Vernon decided to maintain *The Trail*, one of the more obvious being that *The Trail* is a money maker for the church⁵²² and a very popular community event, which requires minimal advertising. Additionally, in evaluating Mount Vernon's website and speaking with participants it became apparent that Mount Vernon supports and utilizes dramatic ministry as a key tool in their evangelical work. For example, some of their congregants are getting ready to shoot a screenplay, and many participants in *The Trail* were discussing the upcoming auditions when I visited in October of 2007. They have also partnered with the organization On-Cue drama ministries, one of the many franchise ministries dedicated to bringing performances to Christian communities throughout the country. While On-Cue is not one of the larger organizations, Mount Vernon uses their services to bring in Easter and Christmas pageants to their church. Given their focus on drama ministry keeping *The Trail* seemed a natural choice.

Though both Dennis (technical director) and Allen (director and writer) expressed some amazement that Mount Vernon, which both men describe as a more traditional Southern Baptist Church, with people *sitting* in the pews on Sunday, would wish to continue a ministry that was so untraditional, they both admit that Mount Vernon has stepped up to support the mission in many ways. According to Dennis, the increased budget has allowed them to re-wire *The Trail*, purchase new equipment, new costumes, and in short to keep *The Trail* running in style. The only major disagreements regarding *The Trail* have been with older church members who felt

⁵²² Though it is a money maker a large share of the profit goes back into the Trail; however, it does boost Mount Vernon's name recognition in the community.

that some of the post-rapture scenes of Apocalypse featured young women who were not clad as fully as the older congregation members may have wished:

DD: Some of the young ladies in the area after the Rapture took off running with it; like prostitutes, wearing stuff their parents won't let them out in, know? Short skirts, a lot of make-up...I don't know what that leader was thinking, but the older parishioners who went through were upset...we told the ladies to cover it a bit more; wear what people you see everyday would have been wearing before the Rapture. We're not trying to say that only prostitutes and addicts are Left Behind – people from all walks are...that isn't what the complaints were about, but it helped to clarify a message.⁵²³

In the first year that *The Trail* was under Mount Vernon's purview many feared *The Trail* would not continue, as several of the old volunteers from Metro Heights had either gone to new churches or been subsumed in Mount Vernon's other ministries. The remaining dedicated Metro Heights contingent decided to put on *The Trail* and solicit help from the parishioners at Mount Vernon, at first they received very little. However, after the first weekend of *The Trail* requests to volunteer poured in. In the next year there were too many volunteers to coordinate. Once they had experienced *The Trail* first hand, Mount Vernon, and especially their youth group, were quite excited to be able to put on such a large scale show that spoke to their already thriving interest in drama ministry.

The *Tribulation Trail* production requires up to three hundred and fifty church members of varying ages to mount successfully. Preparations for the expected fifteen to twenty thousand visitors that will tour *The Trail* Friday and Saturday nights in October often require up to an additional two hundred volunteers. "We have other

⁵²³ D'Oliviera, interview.

churches from the area involved with production,”⁵²⁴ explains Carla Reeves, who served as co-director of *The Trail* before Metro Heights merged with Mount Vernon.

On *The Trail* participants get to see a demonstration of the Rapture, the Tribulation, and finally the Kingdom of Christ. The Tribulation, as its name implies, is a seven year period (this is the most commonly accepted time frame) during which a wrathful God sends massive afflictions down on humanity. Along the way visitors see the Anti-Christ and machine gun toting soldiers mowing down people who have refused to get a computer chip – the Mark of the Beast – implanted in their heads or on their arms. One character warns: “War on every continent...not in America, you say? You can run, but you cannot hide the worst is yet to come.”

In one year, after a classroom debate on separation of Church and State, a ‘Goth’ girl clad in black brandished a gun and shot another student while shrieking that she was, “sick of hearing Jesus this and prayer that.” In one of the final scenes a bedraggled woman meets Jesus Christ and prays for mercy; Christ though, is unsympathetic to her begging telling her, “I never knew you,” and sends her through a trap door to Hell. Some of the other scenes depicted on *The Trail* are the exile of John, the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, movies of: the attack on the World Trade Center, footage of the Asian Tsunami, war, starving children, Hurricane Katrina, Marilyn Manson, Britney Spears and Madonna kissing – in short a quick video clip of all in the modern worlds that denotes that the end is nigh. Carla Reeves who worked produced many of the video clips before the dissolution of Metro Heights explains the significance of the video footage:

⁵²⁴ Reeves, phone interview by author.

CR: All day these pictures impact on us but not in one instant. I tried to bring up all the things that impact on us from the world, different types of stories – entertainment and tragedies, to show pollution, to make it clear that the problems aren't in one place—entertainment, morality, news events...I was proud; it's an impactful when you watch it on the screen all coming together.⁵²⁵

Carla is right about the impact, as one stands in the wide outdoors of suburban Georgia – the stars bright, the night air crisp – in an open expanse of field stretched out between stands of trees, and images of death, destruction, opulence, greed, and chaos flash before one's eyes one cannot help but wonder where the world has come up with these excesses and evils, one cannot help but think about the distance we have come from staring at the sky to staring at the screen.

5.3.1 Trail Blazing



Figure 5.1. *Tribulation Trail* logo 2004

It was a hot mid-July day in Georgia in the summer of 2007 when I first met Dennis in person; we had talked a bit on the phone before my visit. Dennis is, though he holds no official title, what one might call the technical director of *Tribulation Trail*, *Trib. Trail* or *The Trail*, as it is known among locals and participants.

Before pulling in to the Mount Vernon Baptist Church parking lot my husband and I stopped at the local Food Lion to get sodas and to prepare for our wait; both

⁵²⁵ Reeves, phone interview by author.

Dennis and Allen, the writer and director of *Tribulation Trail* had already called several times that day to push our appointments back. Even in July walking through the Food Lion there were signs advertising *The Trail*, which was not opening until October. I asked one of the customer service workers at the Food Lion if he had ever been to *Tribulation Trail*, and his response was “Are you kidding? Every year.” When I pressed for details about why he went, was it religious reasons or was it for fun? He shrugged and said non-committally that it was a bit of both and that he had also known many people that were personally involved with putting on *Tribulation Trail*. This theme of attendance due to personal investiture above and beyond religious conviction is common throughout many of the forms of performances in this study, but those involved in *Tribulation Trail* seemed to emphasize communal value and cohesion equally, if not more fully, than religious cohesion. As I spoke with more participants it became clear that for the average individual participant or audience member *Tribulation Trail* was, though fraught with religious meaning, not solely (or to many not even primarily) a religious event.

The Trail represents a geographical community’s ability to come together and create a large-scale dramatic event. Unlike several of the Judgement Houses discussed in earlier chapters *Tribulation Trail* relies strongly on inter-faith and interchurch volunteers. While most Judgement Houses might gain support from local businesses or from the resources and connections of church members and volunteers, audience members, including visiting youth groups, are usually based in similar faith practices. *Tribulation Trail*, however, receives assistance from volunteers and church

groups that do not always share the same beliefs about the Rapture, the attendant Tribulation, and the end of times.

As I sat in our white HHR rental car in the parking lot of the Mount Vernon Baptist Church in Stockbridge, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta I was nervous, I had a terrible case of swimmer's ear and could barely hear. I sat pondering my meeting with Dennis. He'd seemed gruff and rushed in our phone conversations, and I was uncertain that he even wanted to meet with me. Most people I have spoken to thus far in the project had seemed willing to speak with me on the phone for significant periods of time. Often, this seemed to be part of a vetting process by which organizers and participants measured whether they wished to associate with me further and whether the goals and aims of my project were something they wanted to participate in. Dennis, on the other hand, had been quick and seemed not overly interested in my goals or research; all he needed to know was that I was interested in learning more about *Tribulation Trail*. He had given me a number to reach him when I arrived in Stockbridge and was unwilling to set a date and time for our interview before I reached town. The whole fly by night nature of our previous discussions made me wary about the interview to come.

The parking lot of the church was vacant and humongous. It bordered a vast overgrown field and wooded area. The church building sat back from the lot and seemed somewhat out of place in the wild, overgrown landscape. Dennis arrived in a large pick-up truck; he was a big man with one good eye and a distinctly Boston accent that struck the ear as unusual after three weeks of traveling throughout the Southeast. I eventually learned that he had rented the truck as he and his wife were

driving up to Boston that evening to attend a funeral the next day. It was the wait at the rental car place that had pushed our plans back. I got out of the car and we shook hands. I again explained what the goals of my project were and that I would be recording our conversation. He read my form, signed, and seemed nonplussed. He then quickly dismissed himself to go get a golf cart. My husband and I looked at each other blankly. In a matter of moments Dennis returned from the edge of the field by the church in a small golf cart, leaving churning clouds of red Georgia dirt in his wake. He peeled up in front of our car and I clambered in the passenger seat; my husband stayed in the car and Dennis and I took off across the field into the woods. Even though Dennis does not play the part of a demon in *Tribulation Trail*, he was certainly a demon behind the wheel of that golf cart.

We started our tour at the beginning of *The Trail*. Dennis explained that the ride would be bumpy as the clearing crews would not come in until late August or early September to clear out the spaces where scenes would be performed and the paths that audiences would walk throughout *The Trail*. The crews start in before rehearsals and spend two full weekends clearing out dirt and brush, as well as re-securing the structures for each scene and carefully clearing out roots and growth along the route the audience and backstage personnel, in golf carts like this one, will traverse.

On our first pass through *The Trail* we took the path of a typical audience member.⁵²⁶ Dennis briefly explained what usually happens at each location. He was careful to clarify that Allen, the writer and director, who I would be meeting later that

⁵²⁶ On the second time through we took Dennis' backstage routes and he proudly showed me his short cuts between scenes.

day, was always careful to stick closely to the Book of Revelation in the religiously oriented scenes, only altering key earthly scenes from year to year. The biblical scenes are not altered in content very often; it is the effects such as fire, explosives, and live horses that are changed to keep the event fresh.

The challenging aspect of writing is to keep to the Book, but not have it be too expected, to keep it new and remain within the tradition. People come to see explosions, yeah, but they also see Revelation, or our beliefs about it...⁵²⁷

Therefore, as Dennis pointed out, the structures in place for each scene are, at the very least, semi-permanent. For instance, the first scene has been a family dinner scene, a domestic violence scene, and a school shooting scene; the basic box set room stays in place but the décor (paint color, furnishings) change depending on the location called for in the new script. While a script is rarely repeated two years in a row, *The Trail* might rotate openings doing a school shooting every third year, but framing it a bit differently. Most of *The Trail*'s visitors are returning visitors so they try to alter the opening scene, as well as the larger effects yearly. Conversely, scenes, such as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the scene of Christ on his Heavenly Throne receiving the Christians, the pouring out of the plagues, or the scene that showcases the world after the Rapture and the citizenry fighting or accepting the Mark are in place year after year with only minor variations in text, yet with sometimes significant variations in special effects.

I was immediately struck by the expansive vastness and the simultaneous sense of enclosure the performance space afforded. It was fully possible to at the location of one scene, and not see or hear anything from the other scenes, except, perhaps, explosives and gunfire during the scenes between Christ and the Anti-Christ.

⁵²⁷ Allen Greene, interview by author, Stockbridge, Georgia, July 19, 2007, Tape Recording.

Several times during our tour of the grounds I had to get out of the golf cart, so that Dennis could maneuver it up steep inclines that were not yet cleared. The sense of spatial isolation was palpable. You could not see the church, the road, the parking lot, or any surrounding structures. The dense trees were thick with foliage; though Dennis assured me it was usually much sparser in October when *Tribulation Trail* is performed.

As we spoke, it became clear that while this was certainly a mission of religious intent in Dennis's life, his excitement about his "calling" to *The Trail* centered largely on his ability to control, improve, and organize the technical logistics of *The Trail*. While not in charge of organizing the volunteers, Dennis spends most of the show backstage or backwoods, as it were, in his golf cart with the volunteers. He runs his cart on a separate track from the audience and makes sure that wires are working, lights are set in place, all technical aspects of the show are ready beforehand, actors have what they need, all scenes have their warm food and grill set up backstage for between scene breaks, and that all is in place at the beginning of the day and packed up at the end of the day. Often Dennis arrives at *The Trail* before noon and does not leave until four in the morning. As we ride through *The Trail* I ask Dennis what the most difficult job on *The Trail* is. Without hesitation, he answers "Tiki lighters." In response to what I surmise must be a puzzled expression on my face. Dennis explains:

DD: There are Tiki torches; you can see them there...It gets dark, early...We don't want anyone to fall...but not too much light – this is the end – they're like fire, they've got a eerie glow. People see wires...less convincing, less fun...we got these Tiki torches, but they have to be lit and put out every night. It's miserable. I used to do it every night. We could never get volunteers for it. The oil stinks, bad, and there are hundreds of them... four years ago, a

couple came through, after, they contacted me and asked if they could help light them; they couldn't stay, didn't want to perform; they wanted to do something together...They come for 'bout half the shows and light them, drive over an hour to get here; they don't stay, last four years. They don't go to our church. I'm not even sure that their church teaches the Rapture...⁵²⁸

As our tour of the "backstage" section of *Tribulation Trail* comes to end, Dennis fondly recalls what each scene served at their backstage grills last year.

DD:...Over there, behind the Christians, those [that] won't take the mark. They have burgers, dogs and chili; there's electricity and they plug in a crock pot. It's a laugh when you see them scrounging for food in the trunk of a bombed out car and then when no one's around they run off and stuff up...⁵²⁹

The golf cart draws to a halt in front of a small trailer in the midst of the open part of the field. Dennis clambers out and motions for me to follow. We approach the trailer door and before we can knock Rob swings the door open. Rob, the sound engineer for *Tribulation Trail*, motions me into the trailer, which is full of wires, equipment, and speakers, as well as a small sofa. Said sofa is quickly cleared for me and Rob pops in a DVD he made, and has used for the last three years, for *Tribulation Trail* promotions, into the player in front of the sofa. Dennis runs off in the golf cart to fetch my husband and the promotional materials he can gather from past years from inside the church office. As we sit watching the video, Rob and I converse about what brought him to *Tribulation Trail*. He explains that he has been a sound engineer for several Christian bands and works at one of the larger amusement parks in Atlanta, specifically with the many Christian groups that they bring in. His face glows when he talks about the bands he has worked with; he scans my face for recognition, but the names are all new to me. I have trouble keeping up with

⁵²⁸ D'Oliviera, interview.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

mainstream contemporary music, never mind Christian rock. After our conversation, I decided to do a little research into Christian rock arena and eventually realize that Rob has quite a promising and lucrative career. He explains to me that he has dedicated a significant amount of his time to *Tribulation Trail* each year, because:

RD: When I work setting up groups for the park people know what they're about to see. The band is there and people've been waiting to see them for like months. It's like MercyMe is coming in August, get ready. Sometimes people come by, and don't know anything about the band (*awkward laughter, as we both realize I am one of those people*) and that's ok, but it's not like *The Trail*. People here, a lot that come aren't Christians, and a lot are...People laugh at the actors or are drunk. Seriously...We try to keep them out... It strengthens people who're there to celebrate. If you're Christian or not it's still fun, a rush. You get to be a part of it. If you don't believe you're still gonna be surrounded by belief...I try to do that with the sound, make it seem all around you. You're part of what's going on. Not like a band, people dancing, praising. People praising have energy, and it affects the band, that happens in *The Trail*, but more like the total experience with the woods and everything...⁵³⁰

When Dennis returns to the trailer with Paul (my husband) he brings with him several brochures, posters, and even some T-shirts from previous years. In going over what he has brought Dennis discusses some of *The Trail's* advertising strategy. In past years they have mainly relied on posting signs at local businesses in which volunteers and/or parishioners worked, word-of-mouth, and advertising on Atlanta's primary Christian radio stations. When I ask Dennis and Rob about outreach and their approach's relevance or usefulness for bringing in non-Christians neither of them seemed to have an answer to my question: why, if the purpose of the performance is to gain recruits, conversions, souls for Christ, or as many contend to scare teenagers into believing, why don't they advertise in non-Christian arenas? Is it because they are afraid they would be dismissed by non-Christians?

⁵³⁰ Rob Delfry, interview by author, Stockbridge, Georgia, July 19, 2007, Tape Recording.

DD: Most of our advertising budget goes into Christian radio – talk and music...I know what you're saying; we do want to save souls...If people come through a little softened, they're with someone it matters to, with a friend, family, someone who's concerned, those people are a better chance of deciding for Christ...

Dennis' answer reflects the ambivalence that runs through the divide between the analysis of, and the actuality of, all of these performances. The concerns many opposed to these works express most cogently is the performances' ability to work on the sensitivity, fear, uncertainty, and roiling emotionality of the young. Critics believe that these performances seek to scare audience members into conversion, or at least scare them into walking a straight line of restrictive behavior. While *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk* are decidedly more adult than works such as Judgement House, Hell House, *Nightmare* or *Scaremare*, they both still work on the unsettling basis of shock and awe. It is explosive and highly sensory being outside in the woods in the dark and cold. Often detractors cite the innocent and unknowing, who stumble into these works, a side-effect which would certainly rise in conjunction with an increase in advertising outside of the Christian media market. While some audience members will say afterwards that they thought they were going into a haunted house or Halloween spook fest full of fun and a few fears only to have their emotions worked over and pitched up for Christ's sake, this kind of misunderstanding is markedly uncommon. No audience member I spoke to, overheard, or toured with were *unaware* of the Christian message, though many were unchurched and found the message ridiculous. That is precisely why they were there, for a good laugh. As most observers – casual or otherwise – note those putting on the performances, as well as the attendees are well aware of the religious significance of the events and by and

large. Most people go to these performances, especially *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk*, which depict such dire and prophetic world circumstances to affirm an already standing faith and to participate in a practiced communal expression of that faith and its beliefs. Of course some people do bring friends, acquaintances, and relatives in the hopes that they will be struck by the message. However, even those tagging along to see the work of friends, family members, or just for fun are aware they are going to a church sponsored and religiously oriented ‘haunted house.’ Even those who are outside the purview of religiosity, who come just out of curiosity, or for kicks, or to mock “those crazy Christians” are aware of the religious nature of the event.

Most practitioners are aware that the event’s source of strength lies within the community, and while they aim to put on a good show for all who come, they understand the bonds that these performances create are based in a shared a celebratory enacting of their faith and the views that flow from it. *The Trail* performance is a way of letting believers witness the end of times – the Rapture and Tribulation – that they, as true Christians, will never get to see except from Heaven; the performance affirms and rewards the path that most of its attendees have laid out for their lives. In both *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk* performances’ presentations of a social dystopia audiences and believers encounter:

(1) *sickness* or misfortune afflicting...members of contending parties in social drama phase 2, *crisis*; (2) recourse to divinatory or oracular procedures whose verdicts...relate...to phases 1 and 2; (3)...action ostensibly directed to the cure of the afflicted person, but usually involving confessional statements which refer to the antecedent crisis...(4) the ritual cooperation enjoined upon participants and celebrants, and the religious theory that the invisible cause of affliction will not be removed unless there is unanimity of heart...⁵³¹

⁵³¹ Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 39.

The Trail, as in Turner's model above, solidifies the identity of its audiences through rehearsing and presenting crisis, far more than it seeks to alter identity through conversion.

DD:...We're not looking to bring people just to our church. We want, to welcome them, but we don't need more. And *The Trail* doesn't even come from Mount Vernon...We refer people all over, a church that might be closer to them. We're not exactly hurting for people. It's not, we don't just want to grow faith, we want to nurture it...People don't walk in without knowledge of the content; if they do they're not looking hard. Just pull into the parking lot, there are huge crosses, we had Jesus on a cross one year as our logo. You're at a church, man, come on...and they come for fun year to year; they keep coming, no Jesus, maybe someday they will if you plant a seed. Right? But we can't handle too much more than we have...youth groups come in, and not just youth groups, but groups from all over.⁵³² They come for a weekend to help build, sell refreshments, to tour, to work *The Trail*...

KM: Do they perform?

DD: Um, to fill in, if a scene needs something we'll pull in a few kids to scream, take the Mark. We try to keep the larger roles open for those people who can commit...There a lot of people who may go to church all the time and still need to renew. Look at the message of *The Trail*. What is the message?

KM: Let's see if I can get this one. That the Rapture and the Tribulation are going to happen, they are going to be frightening and if you want to save yourself commit to God.

DD: (*Laughs*) Well, sort of, it's a hard world; you'll see that in the first scene. The guy gets stuck in traffic this year, trying to feed his family, almost hits his wife, God stops him. It's not easy to stand up or to commit; what's easy's to give in...We aim to strengthen those outside of our church and people inside who need it, and we want to be enjoyable. So, we remind people that it's there in the community; it's the church that come back...⁵³³

When our conversation draws to a close Rob, Dennis, Paul, and I walk back across the field and to the parking lot to our rental car. Apparently Allen has decided,

⁵³² I toured on one of the nights I was at *Tribulation Trail* with a large group of Brazilian students.

⁵³³ D'Oliviera, interview.

after speaking with Dennis, that he will, in fact, be able to meet us for dinner. After a firm handshake Dennis asks me to let them know when I will be coming to town in October and makes me promise to call if I have questions along the way.

5.3.2 *The Pre-Trail Tribulation*

The Applebee's is quiet. Everyone who comes in the door has me convinced they are Allen and his wife. After about twenty minutes they arrive. Allen is an unassuming white-haired man in his early fifties. His wife seems about the same age; they both obviously just have come from work. I eventually learn that Allen owns his own successful construction supply business; his wife works in his office. After some awkward introductions and a little casual chit chat Allen summarizes what he feels my project is about. I correct and clarify to try to give him a general and fair sense. He seems, as the writer and director of *The Trail*, a bit more defensive than the other two; they are primarily backstage and Allen is the one who usually deals with making inquiries, asking questions, wondering about the meat and theme of *The Trail*.

Allen begins our conversation by explaining how he is inspired to write the scripts and expresses that they are, in his opinion, drawn predominantly from the Book of Revelation; he feels he does his best not to place any attachment to pop-culture on them. I admit that I'm quite familiar with *The Left Behind* series and other Rapture narratives such as *A Thief in the Night* and *A Distant Thunder*. Allen shrugs and attests to his familiarity with these books and movies, but adamantly asserts that any similarities between his work on *Tribulation Trail* and any of the films and books dealing with the Rapture stem from the fact that they, like him, are part and parcel with the contemporary world and readings of the Book of Revelation and therefore

the themes and imagery of their work overlaps. I mention that I have talked to Carla Reeves who Allen worked with co-directing *The Trail* in the past and that she feels:

CR: I don't do it these days not just because of the Metro/Mount situation, it has changed – I think it doesn't have the same kick; it's too Biblical and for people who don't know that stuff the message should be more like – explosive.⁵³⁴

Allen admits that “He has moved away from that and part of it is the new atmosphere,”⁵³⁵ but he has tried to keep his scripts – other than the opening framing scene, which he uses to evoke contemporary issues and the movie segment, which is a quick imagistic, fast paced montage of significant world events – rooted in Revelation. When I asked how he gets inspiration and why he picks certain themes or ideas to emphasize, especially in the segments that deal with contemporary America.

Allen replies:

AG: It's simple. The Bible is there, and I study it. My mission is to dramatize Revelation with an impact, but still be faithful. We try to change things, but the idea is the same, the Bible is the same. I don't do anything creative. I— you'll see when you come this year, the family scene, that I really like, at the beginning, that scene pulls the audience in to now—the problems, the demons surrounding us. But how I picked that, you'll laugh, inspiration. I read a story or see something on the news and know that it's significant.⁵³⁶

After a three hour lesson on the nuances of Rapture belief and enough Darby, Scofield, and brownie pie to fill the most revelatory of appetites we parted ways until October.

⁵³⁴ Reeves, phone interview by author.

⁵³⁵ Greene, interview.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

5.3.3 “*Rapture, be pure. Take a tour.*”

We are back for *The Trail*. The weather this weekend in mid-October 2007 is unseasonably warm, even for Georgia. I have called Dennis and let him know we are coming, but I have purchased our tickets through Ticket Master and I have decided that we will wait in the line and go through once before letting Dennis know we are there. I know that he will want us to jump the line and I want to wait and get a sense of the crowd. We get there early and wait for about a half hour in line. My husband gets us each a hamburger from the grill/concession stand next to the line. Around us the chatter is loud; there is no music or band this evening, but the hum from the crowd is loud enough. We all stand at the edge of the parking lot at Mount Vernon. A large rolling field fringed by forest stretches out parallel to the parking lot. The people around us seem to be a mixed group: some student groups (one visiting the United States from Brazil), local teenagers, curious and dubious thrill seekers from Atlanta looking for something novel to do, committed Christians, family members, co-workers and friends of participants (Christian and non-Christian alike). I even overhear one group of conspiracy theorists. There are also those who come every year from other parts of Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama.

When we reach the front of the line, about a half hour after our tickets say we will launch, we are led by a T-shirt wearing volunteer over to the very border between parking lot and field at the demarcation line where the field slowly curves upward. In a small folding chair an ancient looking woman sits wearing a sweatshirt airbrushed with a wolf howling at the moon and even though it is past dusk, a huge sun hat; she drinks out of a Big Gulp cup, which she sits down as she stands to give us the rules of

The Trail. She looks decidedly Left Behind. Her voice strains against the excited whispers of our group: composed of part of a student group from Brazil, a father and three tween age boys, and my husband and I. The elderly woman tells us no cameras, no flash photography (which would seem to logically proceed, but go figure) and to follow our guide for our own safety. A young man not dressed demonically, but militaristically clad all in black emerges from the woods over the hill; the Brazilian girls giggle. He motions for us to “come along” and we pick our way slowly up the hill and into the woods where we walk carefully over tree roots and up a small incline until we are eventually confronted with a beach like area where a fire glows and a shape in ragged robes sits with his head in his knees. As we all assemble he lifts his head. Our guide informs us that this is John and we are with him on the island of Patmos.



Figure 5.2. John on the Island of Patmos

John speaks from the Book of Revelations in long intricate passages about the end of times and the destruction of the whore: “And the ten horns which you saw, and the beast, these will hate the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat

her flesh and will burn her up with fire...”⁵³⁷ As John’s frightening speech meanders on, our guide motions us forward saying, “What was John talking about? Let’s go see.” John returns to his hunched position by the fire. We are led out as another group files on to the shores of Patmos.

We emerge from the thickly wooded area surrounding Patmos into a more open space. The next scene deals with an earthly struggle. We see a living room and kitchen set up in the middle of the field. It is a box set, as if someone had ripped the roof and fourth wall from off of a small suburban ranch house. On the right of the room stand two white robed figures. They have no wings, but I suppose in relationship to the black robed figures they are meant to be an angelic presence. The demons have no horns; they do wear black robes with hoods though.

In the living room a young man, seated on the couch, plays with a game system. His mother curses in the background because they are out of milk and some other key ingredients for the preparation of dinner. She opens the frig and appears distressed, cursing and discussing how she has been too busy to go to the store. The demons draw closer the angrier she gets. The young man does not seem to hear her or notice the demonic or angelic presences. Next, the father enters, he is cursing and angry over the traffic, when he asks about where dinner is the mother starts yelling and cursing more stridently. A verbal fight ensues with one black robed figure standing behind and controlling the movements of the man, the other the woman. As the argument reaches its height the man reaches up to strike the woman and as he does the scene slows; the white clad figures place themselves between the man and the woman. At this moment the man seems to realize what he is about to do, and he

⁵³⁷ Revelation 17:16

shakes the weight of the demon from his up swung arm. He then says he is sorry, that life is hard and pressures do get to them each day, but they have each other. He calls over the young man and the family embraces. The young man suggests saying a prayer and then ordering pizza. As they begin to pray the white robed figures flanking them raise their arms and point towards the distance; the black robed demons retreat. Our tour guide simply says: "Follow me."

We move further into the open field toward the next stand of trees, but before we get there we are all stopped in front of a small fence; behind the fence four large jets of flame shoot up from the ground. The flames rise stories up into the air. We hear gun shots in the distance. The flames shoot up again and in the center of the four flames we see a demon on a podium, lit by an uplight. A prerecorded voice with distortion, though still quite intelligible unlike in *Nightmare*, Marshfield, speaks about the end of the world. The demon's figure twists and contorts as he mouths the words. He calls forth each of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and as he does an appropriately clad figure on horseback rides in and positions themselves in front of one of the flame jets as he tells of their fearsome power. When they are each in place the flames rise again, the demon's light goes out, and the horsemen storm off into the distance.

Next, we are led again into an area that borders the woods. The walk between each area is at least two to three minutes, which gives groups time to reflect on what they have just seen; the three young men are very impressed by the flames. In the distance we hear gun shots again. Our group is led into a small, round enclosure with a large screen – like a mini drive-thru theater. We are here to watch the movie

discussed in the introductory map of this Chapter. In the flash of terrifying and overblown images fear is dependant upon, “a pervasive sense of disestablishment; that things are in the unmaking.”⁵³⁸ This idea is pervaded with the creeping realization that life is horror. The affect of these images is cumulative.

Nothing (not even God) now disappears by coming to an end, by dying. Instead, things disappear through proliferation or contamination, by becoming saturated or transparent, because of extenuation or extermination, or as a result of the epidemic of simulation, as a result of their transfer into the secondary existence of simulation. Rather than a mortal code of disappearance, then, a fractal mode of dispersal...⁵³⁹



Figure 5.3. Platform for demon introducing the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse
We are herded out of the impromptu theatrical bunker back towards the woods. We enter the wooded area on the opposite side of the field from where we had started. Gunfire is everywhere around us now. It seems almost as if the movie itself has brought on The Rapture through its piling up of frenzied images. As is indicated above, chaos surrounds us; the absence of the Raptured Christians is

⁵³⁸ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Berkley Press, 1981), 14.

⁵³⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (London; New York: Verso, 1993), 4.

countered by a frenetic presence. The world dies through the accrual of destruction, not the disappearance of some, but the demise of many. There are bodies and abandoned clothes all around us on the ground. We see figures sprinting through the woods on either side of our path; we are not sure yet what they are running from. We next approach the porch of a house where an elderly man is seated in a rocker holding his wife's glasses; her dress and shoes are laid neatly out on the rocker next to him. He explains how his wife has just been Raptured. He tells us of his fear that if his wife was right about the Rapture, which it appears she was, that she might be right about what is to come.

The rest of the tour centers on the shocked reactions of those Left Behind and their trials on this earth during the seven year tribulation period. After the preceding scenes in which the audience stops and focuses on the narrative components of the events watching as characters purvey important parcels of information, the tour's pace picks up mirroring the chaos of life after the Rapture. We plunge through an atmosphere of: crime, prostitution, drug use, starvation, empty unearthed graves left hollow from the Raptured bodies, and a camp in which Christians are executed for not taking the Mark. We are offered an opportunity to take the Mark, and we watch others do so; however, we are rushed forward before we can accept or reject it. We see people ransacking the trunks of cars with dead bodies in them for food and then being shot by armed guards as they crouch on the ground eating like animals.

There is an emphasis on the repetition terrors as they are affirmed and enacted several times during each group's tour. You can hear the Horsemen's hoof beats as you listen to old man repeat the tale of his Raptured wife. You can see the flames

burst through the sky while you wait in line and while you listen to John on Patmos. While you wend your way through the horrors of Tribulation the sound of automatic weapons rips through the night. We trip through several scenes showing us deviations on disaster until finally we are privy to the casting back of the Anti-Christ and Christ's Kingdom on earth.

Christ stands far above us and the Anti-Christ on our level, the tour groups stand between their respective areas, Christ casts the Anti-Christ back into Hell and once more we are treated to a huge wall of flame that rises in front of the area to which the Anti-Christ has skulked off to. We move on to see Christ seated before a throne, judging those who have taken the Mark and those who remained steadfast in their beliefs.

Finally, Christ the King tells us to move forward into the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. We walk about another three minutes in the woods and then are confronted with a palatial faced, bejeweled, bedazzled vista, complete with two streams running along its sides. We must cross over small golden bridges in order to bask calmly in the craft store glory of the Kingdom.

At the very end of the tour we are led out of the woods on the other side of the church building across the parking lot from where we started. Here we are encouraged to "Realize, Repent, and Receive," as is the Trail's salvation slogan. A counselor meets our group; several of the young people from Brazil are in tears. The counselor talks to us in an impromptu style about the dangers of the world and the wages of sin. We are led to the entrance of the church where we are given fliers and fill out cards that ask questions about our demographic data, the effectiveness of *The*

Trail, and our religious intent as influenced by *The Trail*. Those who wish to talk to someone more fully are shown inside the church into a counseling area that appears both accommodating and inviting.

5.4 Walk the Walk



Figure 5.4. *Revelation Walk* publicity image

Our **Mission** is to be a Family of Faith. We have been called into a living, growing relationship with God through His Son. We will share the good news by word and deed. To be a **People of Compassion**, we know God’s unlimited and unconditional love. We will be instruments of His love to those who are hurting, lonely, and discouraged. To be a **Community of Service**, we have received God’s best, His only Son. We will give our best service to God through the use of the gifts He has placed in us. To be a **Body of Worship**, we have experienced the glory of our sovereign God. We will glorify God through corporate and individual worship, seeking to magnify Him in all that we do.

TO BE THE BEST BIBLE TEACHING CHURCH IN THE WORLD ⁵⁴⁰

Revelation Walk was first presented in 1998 by the Eden Westside Baptist Church in Pell City, Alabama, a small town about an hour and a half outside Birmingham and about twenty minutes from the Talladega Speedway. It consists of thirteen – to fifteen outdoor scenes performed and crafted by over two hundred

⁵⁴⁰ Eden Westside Baptist Church, “Mission, Purpose, & Culture,” http://www.edenwestside.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=69&Itemid=92 (accessed on January 17, 2009).

members of the congregation. *The Walk* is described on Eden Westside Baptist's website as, "an outdoor drama that will show what the end times will be like for those who are left behind when Jesus raptures the Church."⁵⁴¹

Reverend Jacky Connell of Eden Westside Baptist Church offers his concept of the purpose of *Revelation Walk*; it stands to, "evangelize the sinner, to edify the Saints, and to exalt the Savior."⁵⁴² During the course of the walk the audience is privy to scenes of domestic violence, alcoholism, a harrowing and exhilarating bus ride, a comic scene in a travel agency, as well as the traffic accidents resultant from the cars without drivers left when Christ Raptures the faithful. Another scene shows a plane wrapped around a tree from the presumable loss of its pilot and many of its passengers, in a nod to the opening passages of the *Left Behind* novels, in which Rayford Steele, the protagonist and a successful airline pilot, is Left Behind while piloting a flight over the Atlantic Ocean on which many of his passengers up and disappear. The plane used on *The Walk* is an actual wrecked aircraft that has been obtained by the church, through the work of one of the congregation, free of charge, and used for the last three years. Biblically centered scenes depict: the Anti-Christ (played simultaneously by multiple actors, most interestingly a woman), the Anti-Christ being cast back by Jesus, and Heaven with Jesus on his throne.

The Walk was created after a delegation from Eden Westside visited *Tribulation Trail*; they did not go to *The Trail* with the idea of doing a performance,

⁵⁴¹ Eden Westside Baptist Church website and Cliff Walker, "Cassie Bernall 'Martyrdom' Hoax: A Christian Haunted-House Theme!?", *Positive Atheism*, October 24, 1999, <http://www.positiveatheism.org/index.shtml> (accessed on July 19, 2008).

⁵⁴² Jacky Connell as quoted in Cliff Walker, "Cassie Bernall 'Martyrdom' Hoax: A Christian Haunted-House Theme!?"

but the concept stuck in the thoughts of Thelma Jones, *The Walk*'s founder, director, and head writer.

TJ: My husband says I'm dramatic, but I don't think that's it. Not that I'm not sometimes. Seriously, I always liked writing poetry, traveling, talking to people...

KM: Where did you get the idea for *The Walk*?

TJ: *Tribulation Trail*. I liked what they did. I always did enjoy Revelations and I have seen Judgement House, but there is a church here in Pell City that does that and a real, a real great job of it...I thought hard about *The Trail*...and I liked that you were outside, but I wanted to make it more about real stuff in life, how we cope with things and the Rapture, not all demons and explosion. We have fire and stuff, you'll see when you come back and it's in the script, but I wanted to show stuff about the world, like they have this first scene, when I saw it; it was a shooting...I wanted to do more scenes like that.

KM: How did it start up?

TJ: Well, let's see...I told our Pastor, you'll meet him, about my idea and I thought since we had this, well, we call it a mountain, but it's really a big hill, since we had it, I thought we could use it... He said to write up some ideas and he liked them.

KM: What's the process of writing?

TJ: The first year it was mainly me and I'd show it to friends and Pastor Jacky, to check biblical stuff. We have about twelve to fifteen scenes a year... Revelation doesn't change. We have one in a travel agency this year. And now's about the time we start picking up on ideas from the core team, we meet weekly, starting in March. The script is done by June so we can build, cast...Now the mountain is wired and all, but we have to plan how traffic flows from one scene to the next and what we can use from what's left from last year... I know a lot of churches make money from these. Oh and we do, but not that much money, and what we do goes right back into ministries and to improve *The Walk*...A few years ago, we permanent wired the mountain for the electric, light and sound.

KM: Has your church changed, has *The Trail [Walk]* changed?

TJ: The church, oh yes, of yes, when you talk to everyone they'll tell you. We get a lot of crossovers between groups that are usually kept to their own, and within groups we'll get a whole group to volunteer. Like our seniors are what we call Lamplighters, they light the way to the Kingdom; they can't stay late

so they make sure everything is lit and set up. Our singles run refreshments one weekend and our young marrieds the next; it's like a competition. Performing and crew and security, of course people aren't all from one group and that's great, but it really strengthens us within the groups too. Everyone gets really excited, for them it's really a social thing, selling the refreshments or setting up tables to advertise for their events. A few years ago we had a poster competition in the youth group...⁵⁴³

Eden Westside's *Revelation Walk* is not as large as *Tribulation Trail*, serving about three thousand to five thousand visitors a season (compared with *The Trail*'s twenty five thousand), with two hundred and fifty volunteers. However, it does not aim to be large. As Pastor Jacky Connell, who was celebrating his twentieth anniversary as Pastor the day I visited in July 2007, told me,

JC: It's about reaching people, sure, it would be wrong to say we don't want to reach out to all people who need faith and welcome them. Welcoming people of faith from all places is what we're about, but I also see it as a teaching mission, the church members working on it learn from each other, get stronger...When I started we were a small church, under fifty, now we have two thousand active members, but we did that by keeping the feeling small and close. When Thelma came to me with it, I thought it would bring a lot of people into our church, and it has. *The Walk* helps us stay small too, it's big, but we're doing it together, that is, I think, the value...Sure, we wanna win souls but we also want to keep the ones we have.⁵⁴⁴

The performance of *Revelation Walk* focuses on teaching about both the end of times and the ways one can find safety from the frightening experiences of the everyday world, while simultaneously working to solidify existent community bonds.

5.4.1 *The Magic Bus*

As we stand in line for *Revelation Walk* various church groups hand out goody bags from informational tables where audience members can sign-up to be

⁵⁴³ Jones, interview.

⁵⁴⁴ Jacky Connell, interview by author, Pell City, Alabama, July 23, 2007, Tape Recording.

more involved in church activities. As I look around the line I realize that this is one of the most mixed-age groups I have seen at any of the performances I have attended; usually adults dot the crowd, and except for a few older couples adults are usually parents whose children are involved in some way or youth group leaders and/or chaperones. Here about half the audience is adult. “We have a mixed group...Our scenes aren’t about teenagers, but about everyone. There are families, older people, children, and teens. I think teens are in trouble, but so are we all.”⁵⁴⁵ One of the only performances that actively reaches beyond teen aesthetics and does not seek specifically for, and present specifically to, the youth demographic, *Revelation Walk* also has the widest array of scenes some of which change from year to year. The constant scenes out of the twelve to fifteen scenes put on each year are: “The Word From John,” “The Horseman of the Apocalypse,” “The Execution (after refusing the Mark),” “Casting out the Anti-Christ,” “The Great White Throne (Judgment),” and the counseling area. In some years visitors have been able decide, at one turning point in the dramatic action, whether they will take the Mark or whether they choose not to submit to the One World government, thus being ostracized and a leading life (and a walk) of fear; the path, in those years, is altered depending upon one’s decision.

The changeable scenes from year to year deal with various day-to-day issues such as loss of a child, illness, drug and alcohol problems, suicide and depression, work accidents, layoffs, discussing problems with one’s Pastor, camping, as well as with various scenes after the Rapture: a plane crashed into a tree with no pilot, wrecked cars, the promise of a militaristic future, and finally the confrontation

⁵⁴⁵ Jones, interview.

between Christ and the Anti-Christ, which changes in terms of location, language and effects.

The only way up the mountain is on an old school bus painted with wide swoops of color; it looks like those buses you see in abandoned car lots. It speeds up and down the “mountain” delivering about forty audience members to the top; once there the groups divide into about twenty people each. Every time the bus approaches people in line squeal and shout, “There’s the bus! The bus!” Unfortunately, all I can think is: “The plane Boss, the plane!” I just do not get what is so exciting about the bus until we are seated and beginning our ride up the large hill. We lurch upward, the bus swaying back and forth until we are almost near the top. At this point the bus slows, people scream, then the bus accelerates rapidly and we shoot, like a rocket, up the rest of the hill, branches battering the windshield and windows. The bus is flying and everyone is revved up. We spill out and divide. The first group begins and we wait as the bus turns and goes back down the hill. Apparently, the ride up is famous in these parts. The bus driver is an essential part of the event. “She just figured out she could do it and people get pitched up so she always tries. We’ve had people complain that the bus ride was too tame.”⁵⁴⁶

A man in military fatigues and black shirt hustles us over to a huge screen where a movie similar to the one at *The Trail* is shown. This one is set to U2’s *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* and involves the same sort of images of famine war, and devastation, but also includes images of sad and lonely looking people: eating sandwiches alone, isolated on city streets, looking lonely in crowds and at social events, as well as a healthy dose of scenes from Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of The*

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

Christ. When the movie is complete we are led down a lit trail where we see an entire living room built onto a platform abutting the hill. Here a family argues and a father drinks.

In the next scene, the travel agency, several people enter a travel agency complete with phones and reception desks and sit in the waiting area. They pick up travel brochures which they peruse to see where they might want to spend eternity, the journeys available are: Catholicism, Buddhism, Judaism, and a pick and choose package where you apply what you like from any of the other vacation packages/religions. As we hear about what each has to offer, the customers discuss why each of them are valid, but the one catch is they all end up in Hell (Chicago's O'Hare). In the end the travel agent comes in and tells them where they should really go if they want a peaceful vacation that does not end in damnation. The scene is light, humorous, and somewhat absurd ensconced outdoors amongst the trees on this October night.

We continue to proceed down the mountain and we see a scene of a father and son who are working at a construction site; they discuss the afterlife, and immediately after the son goes behind the building. There is a loud crash and he is killed in a construction accident. We then encounter a group of people in a waiting room at a psychiatrist's office discussing loneliness, depression, and the trials of their life. One person offers Jesus Christ and the social opportunities of a church community as a solution to the loneliness that life dishes out. After the last of several scenes full of souls searching for meaning in life, our group continues down the incline.

As the path starts to get steeper armed and uniformed men rush out of the woods screaming at us, telling us to stay put, barking out that they are in control, and that it is a state of emergency. Two guards take up the front and another the rear of our group; they escort us down the hill explaining that several millions of people have disappeared from the face of the earth creating mass chaos and that they are rounding us up for our safety. As we progress we see a plane crashed into a tree, some bloodied people wandering dazed, a few bodies, people looking for their friends at a campsite, and others wailing and crying for lost loved ones.

As the tour moves forward down the mountainside we see the deprivation and starvation that is left after the Rapture and we learn of the One World government that will soon be established to protect us. We see groups of people take the Mark. We watch as the seven plagues are poured out across the earth and we hear and see the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse storm down the mountainside before us. Aimless people in rags wander around starving and wailing.

Eventually, we are invited to join a “secret” service. A cadre of worshipers and our group huddle in a small rocked off area and the performers begin to pray, as they pray armed men burst in again and we are taken “by force” to either be executed or take the Mark. The people from the “service” discuss what has been going on in the world and our choices with us as we proceed down, down, down.

We are led to the throne of the Anti-Christ, a depraved Hell like place with two large temple façades, the parapets and stairs decorated with skulls and full of lounging and writhing demons, who skulk at us and walk leeringly among us. Some call to us, others laugh at us and call us “stupid Christians.” A huge burst of flame

explodes out of the ground a little further down and we are told that Nikolai, our leader, wants to see us.

We continue downhill towards another stage like area flanked by tin drums full of fire; it is hot for October and we gather close as a series of performer's enter: a woman in pleather pants and jacket, a business man, and a military/demon man. They each take turns mouthing the part of the Anti-Christ's speech discussing how they have fooled us through appearing in myriad forms of evil, disguising themselves as good, as order, as progress to steal our bodies and souls to them; they say we will take the Mark or die. However, just as we are being marshaled forward by our armed escort, to death or martyrdom, above a large wall painted to signify stones and flanked by trumpeters Christ emerges and in flash of fire effect dispatches the Anti-Christ (s).

From here we are led to an area that looks a bit like a skate park built into hillside, white with a cement base and curved walls. Jesus sits on the throne flanked by all manner of angels and tells us we will not yet be judged; because we did not yet take the Mark, we will be able to choose him still. From here we are guided to another screen where we watch a video message about *The Walk* given by Pastor Jacky Connell.

After the video, which emphasizes that we are not alone in the world, that we have Jesus Christ and personal choice, we are ushered into a tent where we sit and are asked to bow our heads and pray along. The prayer leader again emphasizes the tough choices that we face in the world, spicing the speech up with personal anecdotes about a group of firefighters who came through and were saved right before a huge

fire. The prayer leader's script is loose; it seems to change every time through, but always emphasizes the idea that we are not alone. We then get up; those who wish to remain for extra counseling are ushered to a seating area at the side of the tent and the rest of us stagger out into the flat field at the end of the mountain.

5.5 "He Who Fights with Monsters..."⁵⁴⁷

Fear in this performance landscape keeps a community at watch, on the alert, both vigilant and vigilante. The weight of the performance does not rest on this world, but on another alternate dystopia. Hell House, *Nightmare*, *Scaremare* and Judgement House all take on and enact a specific relationship with the present social world: whether that be railing against it, making it strange and frightening, hoping to change it, or providing strategies to live within it. In contrast, *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk* have given up on it. They do not imagine their church community in terms of the social world, in relationship to the everyday, but in terms of their stake in a future reality both radically dystopian and utopian. The spectacle itself enacts community, much like Judgement House does, but it is not a community whose outline is drawn in contrast to our world; this is a community linked to the spectacle and appearing to reach beyond this world.

As a performance participant or audience member the Christian is asked to envision brotherhood and eternity, salvation and rule, while the non-Christian is asked to envision destruction, pain, and abject terror. The parallel between suffering and sin is drawn early on in the tour in the video segment of *Tribulation Trail*, which

⁵⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, 1885, "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you."

contrasts images of Madonna and Britney kissing and Marilyn Manson with Hurricane Katrina and the destruction of the Asian Tsunami, starving children, and genocide. The sickness of the world is directly responsible for this suffering, but this suffering is not senseless; it all leads us towards the Kingdom. In accepting Christ one finds the answer. The Anti-Christ represents all that is evil and by extension the “otherness” of the non-Christian worldview.

Baudrillard states that we seek, “the Other’s ‘cruelty.’ The Other’s unintelligibility, the Other as specter; constrain the Other to foreignness, violate the other in his foreignness,”⁵⁴⁸ This foreignness makes the Anti-Christ (and his representatives the othered non-Christians) into what Baudrillard would call “others” – the Christless representatives of sin (pop-culture) and suffering (third world suffering). The non-Christian is actively othered in the event. When asked to choose whether we will take the Mark, no time is given for us to respond. We are ushered on through the trajectory of the Christian narrative line; this is no choose your own adventure. One finds their position – if not a Christian – first normalized (Left Behind as everyone else here has presumably been Left Behind) then marginalized as the narrative shifts once again toward redemption.

If you reject Jesus Christ you will experience the terrors you have just seen. If you welcome Jesus Christ into your heart you will be on God’s side. You will be active in creating terror, not passive in accepting it. You can view the terror from the Kingdom; the way we often view the terrible images present in the earlier video montage from the comfort of our living rooms. Not everyone knows the signs of the times, not everyone can be redeemed; the suffering of the unredeemed is necessary

⁵⁴⁸ Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, 147.

for the redemption of the Christians. The Rapture is no fun without the Tribulation; it's not called Rapture Trail for a reason.

While the fear tactics of *The Trail* and *The Walk* might seem like a call to the unchurched to shape up, they are also (and more strongly) a way of strengthening the Christian community through watching the suffering they will not be a part of, by watching their faith affirmed, their hard choices vindicated, and their "persecution" justified. *The Trail*, more so than *The Walk*, does not attempt to recreate (except in the kitchen scene) the "real" social world, but an imagined, future reality. It does echo reality in the *figura* of the latecomer Christian's struggles and persecution under the rule of the Anti-Christ, equating it to beleaguered Christian identity in the contemporary world.

However, this spectacle is complicated by the apparent quandary that God is both monster and salvation, just as Jesus Christ becomes equated with the monsters in the house in *Scaremare*. The violence God enacts upon the non-Christians in the spectacle renders his actions monstrous and in recounting this monstrosity one prepares for it. One must retell and rename this destruction, this is what *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk* do for believers; they reaffirm their choices, realize their future, legitimize their commitments, and familiarize Christian participants with ways to read the horror on whose side they have enlisted. In short, they desensitize.

In this spectacle both Christ and Anti-Christ are monstrous. The Christian participants must put themselves at a level of spectatorship, which lets them remain vigilant in the face of their fears. Tellings and re-tellings of the Apocalypse are a type of storytelling that may engender fear in the "other;" those outside the Christian

community, but for those who live awash in this landscape of fear they serves to legitimize violence done in their name.

6 Conclusion

“...community-based theater includes theater for the purpose of ...express[ing] the values, interests and concerns of those communities,”⁵⁴⁹ which perform works rooted in their beliefs and concerns about the world around them, whatever those beliefs, and the values they entail, may be. In the preceding pages I have written about my experiences attending and observing community-based performances enacted by conservative Christian communities in the United States of America, as well as the experiences and ideas of those putting on the events discussed. As articulated in the Community-Based Performance section of the introductory chapter (section 1.9, pages 49-53), throughout this study I have largely tried to answer and be guided by the following questions put forth in the “Introduction” to the Community Arts Networks (CAN) *Performing Democracy* study:

- What does theater rooted in community (or grassroots theater) mean to the participants? [The term “participants” includes everyone involved in the theater experience from conception through performance and subsequent community events.]
- What tangible and intangible results happen in the community as a result of the group’s work?
- What do the participants describe as successful practices?⁵⁵⁰

As stated in the Introduction, the examination into these questions was carried out through a combination of critical analysis of the performances, analysis of local and

⁵⁴⁹ Robert H. Leonard “Grassroots, Community-based Theater: A View of the Field and Its Context,” Community Arts Network website, CAN, Original CAN/API publication: December 2003 http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2003/12/grassroots_comm.php (accessed on July 19, 2008).

⁵⁵⁰ CAN, “Introduction to ‘Performing Communities: An inquiry into ensemble theater deeply rooted in eight U.S. communities.’ Ibid.

national press coverage surrounding the performances themselves, an analysis of these performances as community-based arts within their performed contexts, as well as through an attempt to link these performances to the didactic dramas that are their ancestors in aesthetics and intent.

In this Conclusion I will seek to provide some preliminary answers to the above questions based on my research, present other avenues for inquiry, discuss a few of the many reactions to these events, and end with a brief statement on the study's meaning thus far, as well as where and how this examination might deepen in the future.

What I have discovered thus far about the works discussed in this dissertation is that these events, like community-based art that is not religious or conservative, are: firmly rooted in the idea of process over product, engaged deeply in their communities (geography and belief), require enormous amounts of dedication on the parts of their organizers, and strive always to improve; organizers and participants wish to be better trained, prepared, relevant, and work to make the performances more entertaining for their audiences with each year.

Two of the related questions the CAN study asks are: “What does theater rooted in community mean to the participants?” and “What tangible and intangible results happen in the community as a result of the group’s work?”⁵⁵¹ In the context of these works I have discovered that much like community-based work that seeks to deal with issues of a community’s history, future, or concerns about a community’s current circumstances, these performances also ask questions of their participants. They do not exist solely to frighten or convert, or solely to convert through fright, as

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

many of their critics assert, though they do perform these functions; these works exist to ask believers and their local communities' questions about their relationship to their spiritual and social worlds.

As articulated most fully in the discussion of the *Nightmare*, *Tribulation Trail*, and *Revelation Walk* (but certainly discussed throughout the work as a whole) often these performances create bonding between church community and geographical community. They are longstanding social events with a presence in the community that serves to strengthen a church member's individual purpose and the church's community profile, as well as to affirm the church's position within the local community. They also provide interaction between divergent religious and social groups; this interaction may increase tolerance or create division, but it certainly serves to bring each group's identity into being in relation to other groups encountered in the act of creating and performing the event.

It is in terms of these events' various meanings in the lives of the participants that these performances, like much community-based work, find their strength. The works discussed in the preceding pages also serve to: bring believers into contact with the divine, to test and loosen boundaries between spiritual and secular worlds for believers, to spark debate, to make the abstract tangible, to provide a social release valve, and to bring church members together to embody, articulate, and share their beliefs in communion with one another, as well as their geographical communities.

They do all of this by using pop-culture, horror, violence, fear, by embodying "reality," by critiquing the social world, and by positing Christianity as an answer to a troubled universe full of chaos and death. However, they also work to supply

believer's with vital depictions of Christian and non-Christian identity that they will then utilize in navigating the "real" world. Some of these images of Christian identity are positive (though still loaded), as in many Judgement Houses, and some are controversial and offensive as in many Hell Houses; however, they are all successful in that they represent the stories, perceptions, ideas, beliefs, and histories of the groups that are performing them.

This recourse to, and dependence on, popular culture has its tangible and intangible results in that it often tangibly increases attendance numbers, spurs the energy and excitement of participants who are performing normally "transgressive" actions in a space of play, as well as its less tangible results, in that it serves to break down stringent barriers between the secular and religious world by engendering the type of conversation and alliance Radosh seeks for below, allowing for identification and conversation based on the issues themselves and not solely on the religious aspects of those issues,

...By framing the debate as *any religion* versus *no religion*, atheists force religious moderates to side with fundamentalists...when they might actually have more in common with people who share their beliefs about...the nature of society...from what I have seen it is insularity that breeds intolerance...⁵⁵²

While these performances are often insular operating within a specific town or locality and while I have argued they have their greatest impact is on church members and participants as opposed to their outside audiences they do, however, force church members and participants alike to engage in popular culture and the larger social world. They engender engagement and interaction whether that engagement comes by performing deviant behavior, creating "real" social space, researching trends and teen

⁵⁵² Radosh, 305.

behaviors, or simply through interaction with non-believers. These performances may appear to reinforce belief and structure, and they do, but intangibly they also require crossover, reflection, and the adaptation of secular behaviors into a performative Christian context.

One of the many ways that these groups are successful is that they take into account, as per the CAN study, “what participants describe as successful practices.”⁵⁵³ As the Judgement House organization’s broad network and its willingness to take script ideas and organizational suggestions from the community at large attests, participants feel successful when they are heard and their suggestions – individual or organizational – are considered and enacted. These performances gather support in their communities because they connect people across age groups and social groups; they get communities talking about the issues they address.

Another way in which they foster this participant success is that they also allow for a tremendous degree of grassroots ownership, something that much community-based art struggles to do. While there are aesthetic standards involved in these works, there are very few professional art makers who take part in these performances. This is not to say that large scale and highly effective blood and special effects are not deployed, or that participants are necessarily unskilled performers, but it is to say that a strongly democratic forum in which each room leader, director, performer, etc. feels as if they are doing something that best suits their gifts is created in the performances of these works. There is a hierarchical order,

⁵⁵³ CAN, “Introduction to ‘Performing Communities: An inquiry into ensemble theater deeply rooted in eight U.S. communities.’ Ibid.

to be sure, but all contributions are important and vital to the event. A childcare worker or the cook who provides volunteers with dinner is given the same import as a performer. This practice lets individuals feel fully needed and encourages investment.

It is in this personal investiture that the success of these performances is ensconced. Each contribution from a participant is seen to come through God and so it shares equal weight with all other contributions, creating a sense of investment not always present when a group of “artists” comes into a community and assigns roles based on a structure common to professional artistic practices. These performances are communally organic, and thus, highly successful in engendering commitment from the communities that enact and house them.

In addressing these questions in summary here and throughout the body of this work, I have attempted to show the nuance in a small sub-set of the field of Christian performance in North America by comparing the aesthetics, aims, practices, and intents of performances that deal in enacting violence, fear, death and the demonic. However, the field itself is vast and by no means limited to performances centering on these themes. The journey I have taken has primarily been a fact finding mission; as I move forward in this work I will need to more fully engage theories of ritual, identity, horror, and pop-culture, spend more time in in-depth participant observation, and gather much more statistical data about the performances I have begun exploring.

6.1 Other paths for inquiry

The range of Christian theatrical productions in the United States and abroad is staggering. Many of these performances pose fascinating questions about the relationship between faith and the issues of the contemporary world; studies of them

would serve as wonderful contributions to our understandings of how performance articulates political, religious, and social concerns. They would also work to point out viable entrance points into understandings of the relationships between the Christian “parallel” consumer market and the mainstream market. Though many are decidedly not community-based performances such as those at the Sight & Sound Theatre (a large scale Christian performance venue in Branson, Missouri and Strasburg, Pennsylvania), *The Miracle*, an extravaganza about the life of Christ outside of Dollywood in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, and The Holy Land Experience theme park in the shadow of Disney in Orlando, Florida, they do afford a broad range of inquiries into the relationship between belief, consumption, American identity, and the social world.

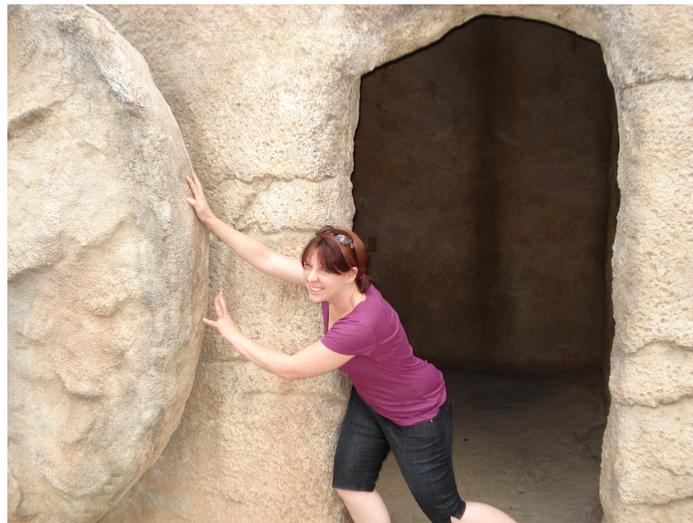


Figure 6.1. Opening the Christ’s Tomb at The Holy Land Experience



Figure 6.2. Lake and gardens at The Holy Land Experience



Figure 6.3. Billboard for *The Miracle* in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee



Figure 6.4. *Noah: The Musical* at the Sight & Sound Theatre in Branson, Missouri

There are also many groups in churches, and independently, who supply Christian scripts to churches and Christian performance groups, as well as groups who tour nationally and internationally. Within the huge array of church drama groups, signing, role play, and expressive dance are also quite popular.

The performance of *Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames*, an evangelical Christian “crusade” event that is similar to Judgement House in content, but is not presented as a walk-thru drama would also be worthy of study. I think that investigating *Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames* as a franchised ministry would provide a valuable contrast to the organization of Hell and Judgement Houses. The interaction between event and community is markedly different than in either Hell or Judgement House, as Sunshine Evangelic Association describes it,

This live drama draws its cast from among your church members. The plays are strictly focused to ensure a consistent performance every time. A highly trained and experienced director comes to your town, trains the cast, brings the lighting, sound, costumes, sets, props, and directs the drama. Because of this need to maintain excellence and predictability the drama is not available as a script, nor can scenes be lifted from the production for local use.⁵⁵⁴

Reality Outreach Ministries⁵⁵⁵ based in Ontario, Canada also offers a similar drama entitled *Heaven's Gates & Hell's Flames*[©] that also uses local community members in tandem with an experienced director and technical crew. Founded in 1979, and represented in twenty-five countries, their mission is, "joining with local churches to proclaim the Gospel worldwide through drama."⁵⁵⁶ These events primarily occur in early spring and around Halloween and Christmas. Due to the touring structure of the event they occur widely throughout North America.

Other Christian performance practices worthy of study for their intersection in the body, their performative engagement in Christian identity, and their exchange with pop-cultural notions of masculinity and femininity would be both Christian Knighting practices and the phenomena of the Father and Daughter Purity Ball.

⁵⁵⁴ The Sunshine Evangelic Association, "Get the Drama at Your Church" <http://www.mze.com/heavensgates/> (accessed on June 14, 2007). Sunshine Evangelic Association has a very interesting history that I think also merits investigation. According to the history of the ministry on their website they were influential in making performance, as a means of ministry, acceptable beginning in the 1950s.

⁵⁵⁶ Reality Outreach Ministries, "About our Ministry" <http://www.realityoutreach.org/about%20our%20ministry.htm> (accessed on June 14, 2007).



Figure 6.5. Celebratory ballet at Father and Daughter Purity Ball

Studies of each of these types of performances would allow for the examination of how Christian culture positions itself in relation to mainstream culture and would foster better understandings of the relationships between the two realms.

As Radosh asserts:

Both James Dobson and Paris Hilton still exist. As our alternate universes begin to merge, we can either brace for explosion, or we can open ourselves up to the possibility that the new integrated universe will be better, richer, and more humane for everyone.⁵⁵⁷

In examining the conversation between Christian identity and the wider cultural landscape I also think it would be fruitful and interesting to follow the study of Judgement House, and other community-based Christian performance works, into their international projects in Costa Rica, Brazil, El Salvador, Japan, and the Ukraine. I would also hope for examination of other community-based works in the United States that spring from divergent religious traditions and cultural influences. Finally, my work with groups who enact the Book of Revelation has sparked my interest in a

⁵⁵⁷ Radosh, 308.

project investigating representations of revelation and apocalypse in traditional dramatic texts and in performances across multiple cultures.

I see all of these performative events, and explorations into them, as offering compelling access points into the following questions: if identity is performed as a negotiation of discursive meanings than what can be apprehended through a performance that seeks to perform communal beliefs, as well as to recruit others into its system of meaning making? How do participants (especially professional performers in works like *The Miracle* and at The Holy Land Experience) articulate the relationship between their faith, their career, and their artistic identities? What is the role of ritual and how does it operate to solidify, define, and question identity in communities performing Purity Balls and Christian Knighting?

6.2 Reactions



Figure 6.6. Publicity image for *Hollywood Hell House*



Figure 6.7. Publicity image for Les Frères Corbusiers *Hell House*

Another tool which these performances utilize is the primacy of the body and physical experience. They are not afraid to disorient audiences, to disquiet crowds, and to elicit reactions of fear and terror; they do this all by heavily weighting the performance experience towards the human form, the body. This bodily primacy is highly effective and is engendered by belief and sincerity – traits that imitators of these performances often lack. All of the issues in a Hell House, Judgement House, *Nightmare*, *Scaremare*, *Revelation Walk* and *Tribulation Trail* have tremendous importance in all our lives. Whatever one feels or thinks about them, all of these issues are physical, visceral, and played out literally on the human form. In all of the scenes (and their corollary issues) it is the body that is at stake – a bloody and contradicted body, which is forced to choose its own relationship to sin, the spectacle, and the spectacle of sin.

The *Hollywood Hell House* began in 2004 in Hollywood, California when Maggie Rowe, a writer and comedian, obtained a kit under false pretenses from Roberts. It was a success among the Hollywood community and has gained much press and notoriety largely by exploding, parodying, and mocking Hell Houses. They make no attempt at sincerity.

One compelling reaction to the *Hollywood Hell House* was that of Les Frères Corbusier an experimental theatre company who saw the *Hollywood Hell House* in California in 2004 and felt that the performance did not offer any valuable insights into conservative evangelical culture because of its excessive style. The group decided to bring a new type of *Hell House* to Brooklyn, with the help of Roberts.

Several interviews given by the company's executive director and artistic director articulate that their desire was to put the show on as evangelicals would do it.

Les Frères Corbusier's *Hell House* turned St. Ann's Warehouse into separate performances rooms just like in a Hell House tour. They used a company of almost one hundred individuals. The performance style was "bad" as the group attempted to recreate what they perceived to be the poor production values inherent in non-professional performances in general, and in Hell Houses specifically.

Roberts' reaction to both the *Hollywood Hell House*, that was put on without his consultation, and the Les Frères Corbusier's Brooklyn version, which was done with his blessing and consultation, was not that they were evil, or insincere in the case of Les Frères Corbusier, but that they lacked intensity, an intensity that comes from community adhesion around shared and pressing values, hours of dedication, time, and most all BELIEF. The examples of *Hollywood Hell House* and Les Frères Corbusier's *Hell House* show that ritualized performances are often more effective when invested with the beliefs that engendered them.

Outside of these two performative reactions to Hell House, both of which could be examined more fully, there also many protestors and bloggers who oppose, support, and protest the whole gamut of these performative events. They could be fruitfully interviewed and studied, for in the end this is about conversation, not monologue. And it is my sincere hope that by asking more and ever more questions about, and of, events that perform the meaning(s) of faith in America that our culture will, as Turner suggests, come close to being able to,

...whittle out for itself a piece of space and a while of time, in which it can look honestly at itself. This honesty is not that of the scientist, who exchanges

the honesty of his ego for the objectivity of his gaze...It is, rather, akin to the honesty of the creative artist, who, in his presentations on the stage...reserves to himself the privilege of seeing straight what all cultures build crooked.⁵⁵⁸

6.3 The picture that emerges

Much that I have encountered over the course of my study has proved to be positive and reassuring in regard to conversations between faith and its effects on community-based performance. On a larger scale, I have also seen much that bodes well of the desire and the will to foster understanding between faith communities and secular communities. In this study I have tried to highlight some of these more positive moments if only because I believe that the relationship between faith and secular communities in the United States is often presented in a defeatist light in the media, in mainstream culture, and in the academic world. However, while there are highly positive practices and desires on the part of those involved in these events all that I have seen does not point towards solely positive trends.

As I move forward with this work the most pressing issue that I will examine with more specificity and focus is the representation of fear and violence and its role in these performances. These works can help encourage deeper understandings of the place of fear and violence in the contemporary United States through examining the ways in which fear is enacted, as well as how it is marketed and consumed.

These performances also provide great insight into how our contemporary culture utilizes the experience of fear to de-historicize and de-contextualize actual events, leaving observers locked in instinctual reactions of flight or fight when it comes to issues such as terrorism. This is evident in works such as *Judgement*

⁵⁵⁸ Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 122.

House: Operation Homeland Security, which simultaneously enacts and abstracts the concrete reality of September 11, 2001. In obscuring the specific circumstances of the attacks of September 11, 2001 and replacing them with the generic circumstances of the performance the event becomes a vehicle for fear and panic. In stripping the event of its specifics the performed event seems applicable to a broad range of communities, and gains power as “real” and present; this “real” and present danger engenders fear. Events such as *Tribulation Trail* and *Revelation Walk* also deploy fear and violence to justify their belief structures and to de-sensitize believers to violence that may be conducted in their names. In works like *Nightmare* the active violence on the body of Christ and the linking of that violence to the sins and sufferings of the average person also serves as a tool for cultivating and accepting violence as a marker on the path to righteousness.

In her article, “Are Christians Theologically Prepared to Accept Torture?” Sentilles asks the complex question: “Might atonement theologies and images of the crucifixion prepare Christians to see torture as salvific?” This question certainly applies to the performance events discussed above, not only because they depict bodily suffering and sometimes the crucifixion itself, but also because they present that suffering as an escape from a highly uncomfortable, contestory, and violent live physical space. When this live space of discomfort is layered atop a representation of the “real” world the link that Sentilles points out below becomes more fully visible.

If you believe that a man was tortured to save your life...how do those beliefs effect how you understand violence more generally? At the center of Christianity is a man who was tortured. How this event is understood, interpreted, and *believed in* will, at least in part, shape how Christians understand torture.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁹ Sarah Sentilles, “Are Christians Theologically Prepared to Accept Torture?”

The relationship amongst violence, fear, and the distortion and abstraction of social issues in these performances requires more unpacking. Social issues rendered palpable through violence and fear permeate each performance event discussed here and influence how each event presents “reality” and the social world, as well as how that presentation is received by participants and audience members alike. Fear and violence are, perhaps, these performances most utilized, clear, and relatable link to the mainstream world. However, these issues are not contained solely within the performances themselves; they can be examined in light of the ways in which they illuminate the preponderance of fear and violence as mediums for messages in the contemporary social world – secular or religious.

In the end, the picture that begins to emerge is one of community and conversation across social boundaries, however, fear and violence permeate the subtext of that conversation, because fear and violence are the lenses through which the contemporary world is viewed by the secular and the religious in the twenty-first century. As I move forward I seek to discover more fully how this relationship operates in performance and why these tools work so well. I aim to do this by examining the performances in light of not only their spectacle and content, but also by contextualizing the events they portray and examining the ways in which historical, actual events are abstracted, emptied, and used as vessels for fear.

Posted on Religion Dispatches on May 12, 2009 at:
http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/humanrights/1441/are_christians_theologically_prepared_to_accept_torture (accessed on May12, 2009).

Appendices

Appendix A, *Every 15 Minutes* Event Summary

The Every 15 Minutes Program offers real-life experience without the real-life risks....the “Grim Reaper” calls students who have been selected from a cross-section of the entire student body out of class. One student is removed from class every 15 minutes. A police officer will immediately enter the classroom to read an obituary which has been written by the “dead” student’s parent(s)...A few minutes later, the student will return to class as the “living dead,” complete with white face make-up, a coroner's tag, and a black Every 15 Minutes T-shirt. From that point on “victims” will not speak or interact with other students for the remainder of the school day...officers will make mock death notifications to the parents of these children at their home, place of employment or business.

After lunch, a simulated traffic collision will be viewable on the school grounds. Rescue workers will treat injured student participants. These students will experience first hand, the sensations of being involved in a tragic, alcohol-related collision. The coroner will handle fatalities on the scene, while the injured students will be extricated by the jaws-of-life manned by Fire-Fighters and Paramedics. Police Officers will investigate, arrest, and book the student “drunk driver.” Student participants will continue their experience by an actual trip to the morgue, the hospital emergency room, and to the police department jail for the purpose of being booked for “drunk driving.”

At the end of the day, those students who participated in the staged accident as well as those who were made-up as the “living dead” will be transported to a local hotel for an overnight student retreat. The retreat will simulate the separation from friends and family. A support staff of counselors and police officers will facilitate the retreat.

...the students will be taken through an audio - visualization of their own death. Then each student will write a letter to his or her parents starting out with ... *“Dear Mom and Dad, every fifteen minutes someone in the United States dies from an alcohol related traffic collision, and today I died. I never had the chance to tell you...”* These letters will be shared the following day when students and parents will be reunited at a school assembly.

... A mock funeral service will be held at the High School. The assembly will begin with a video of normal school day activities including scenes from the first day of the “Grim Reaper” and the staged accident. Speakers will include students who will read letters to their parents, police officers, and hospital personnel who shared their emotional trauma of dealing with kids killed in accidents...We will also have a powerful speaker who actually lost a child to a drunk driver...This very emotional and heart-wrenching event will illustrate to students, the potentially dangerous consequences of their use of alcohol, regardless of how casual they believe their use may be.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁶⁰ Every 15 Minutes, “About Us,” <http://www.every15minutes.com/aboutus/index.html> (accessed on November 18, 2008).

Appendix B, "Judgement House Questionnaire"

**JUDGEMENT HOUSE DIRECTORS,
TEAM LEADERS AND CHURCH LEADERS**

Please feel free to use the back of this sheet or any additional paper. I would also welcome responses sent via email to kmesser@umd.edu or you can call me at 410-837-8109. Thank you so very much for your valuable time.

NAME: _____ **ADDRESS:** _____

CHURCH/ORGANIZATION: _____

PHONE: _____ **EMAIL:** _____

I WISH TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS (check here): _____

How long have you been involved in Judgement House?

How did you become involved in Judgement House?

In what capacity have you served in Judgement House during the time you have been involved?

In your opinion, how has Judgement House affected your community (church and local)?

How has Judgement House affected you as a person?

How many people attend the Judgement House at your church?

How many people participate in putting on the Judgement House at your church?

Can you describe the planning process that you go through when putting on a Judgement House?

What scripts have you performed? How did you decide which scripts you were going to put on year to year?

Do members of other churches serve in, or contribute to, your Judgement House, if so, how do they contribute?

Have you ever put on a Judgement House in any language other than English, if so what was it?

Any other comments you wish to share would be appreciated:

Appendix C, Judgement Houses in the United States as of October 2007

Alabama (11)

Pleasant View Baptist Church
First Baptist Church Boaz
Morgan United Methodist Church
Mount Olive Baptist
First Baptist Church Brewton
First Baptist Church Centre
First Baptist Church Grant
NorthBound YOM
Lineville Baptist Church
First Baptist Church Lanett
First Baptist Church Gulf Shores

Arizona (1)

First Baptist Church of Mesa

Arkansas (4)

Union Valley Baptist Church
First Baptist West Memphis
Watson Chapel Baptist Church
Brookland Baptist Church

Florida (9)

Calvary Baptist Church
Crossroads Baptist Church
Centro Cristiano El Shaddai
Duval Station Baptist Church
Morningside Baptist Church
Church of the Nazarene
Pine Grove Baptist Church
First Baptist Church Salt Springs
First Baptist Church Orlando

Georgia (8)

Faith Baptist Church Monroe
First Baptist Church Blairsville
Hawhammock Baptist Church
Mountain View Church
First Baptist Church Blacksheer
Dudley Baptist Church
Toms Creek Baptist Church
Southside Baptist Church

Illinois (5)

Dorrisville Baptist Church
Steeleville Baptist Church
Lakeland Baptist Church

First Baptist Church Vandalia

First Baptist Church Maryville

Indiana (3)

Oak Park Baptist Church

Grace Community Church - Goshen

Faith Family Ministries

Kansas (4)

NewSpring Church

Calvary Baptist Church Valley Center

First Baptist Church Leavenworth

Great Bend Church Of The Nazarene

Kentucky (5)

Winchester FUMC

Unity Baptist Church

Porter Memorial Baptist Church

The Potter's House Baptist Worship Center

First Baptist Church Liberty

Louisiana (3)

First Baptist Church Haughton

Woodland Park Baptist Church

Emmanuel Baptist Church

Michigan (1)

Brighton Nazarene Church

Mississippi (5)

First Baptist Church Cleveland

First Baptist Church Tupelo

Ephesus Baptist Church

Lauderdale Baptist Association

Star Baptist Church

Missouri (10)

Potosi Southern Baptist Church

First Baptist Church Butler

Green Valley Baptist Church

Miner Baptist Church

Corticelli Baptist Church

Northgate Baptist Church

First Baptist Church Garden City aka Heart of Life

Highview Baptist Church

First Baptist Church Otterville

First Baptist Church Vienna

Montana (3)

Mid-Rivers Baptist Chapel

First Baptist Church Butler

Green Valley Baptist Church

North Carolina (14)

The First PH Church
West Burnsville Baptist Church
Howard's Creek Baptist Church
Ebenezer Baptist Church
Locust Grove Baptist Church
Hamer Creek Baptist Church
First Baptist Church Kings Mountain
Central Baptist Church Dunn
Oak View Baptist Church
High Point North Carolina
Thrift Baptist Church
First Baptist Church Indian Trail East Campus
Smyrna Pentecostal Holiness Church
First Baptist Church Rockwell

Ohio (4)

Urbancrest Baptist Church
Chillicothe Baptist Church
Hope Community Church
Grace Church

Oklahoma (4)

Trinity Baptist Church
First Baptist Church Nicoma Park
First Baptist Church Heavener
Wilmont Place Baptist Church

Pennsylvania (3)

Dubois Alliance Church
Emmanuel Leidy's Church
High Point Church

South Carolina (11)

Steadman Baptist Church
Riverside Baptist Church
Pleasant Grove Baptist Church
Cudd Memorial Baptist Church
Ridgeland Baptist Church
Town Creek Baptist Church
Covenant Baptist Church
Hopewell Baptist Church
North Trenholm Baptist Church
Emmanuel Baptist Church Hartsville
Calvary Baptist Church Rock Hill

Tennessee (10)

Warren Community Church
Solid Rock Baptist Church
Shiloh Baptist Church Seymour
First Baptist Church Selmer
Oakwood Baptist Church

First Assembly of God
New Horizon Baptist Church
New Market Baptist Church
North Acres Baptist Church
Trace Creek Baptist Church
Texas (7)
Southside Baptist Church Wichita Falls
Paramount Baptist Church
New Faith Church
Calvary Mennonite Church
First Baptist Church Willis
First Baptist Church Hallettsville
First Baptist Church Colmesneil
Utah (1)
First So. Baptist St. George
Virginia (5)
Winn's Baptist Church
Heritage Baptist Church
North Roanoke Baptist Church
Bethel Baptist Church Chesapeake
First Baptist Church Suffolk
Washington (1)
Richland Baptist Church
West Virginia (2)
Memorial Baptist Church
Christ Temple Church
TOTAL as of October 2007 = 134

Judgement House Covenant Partner Churches often rotate, doing a Judgement House every other or every third year; therefore, numbers can change year to year. The numbers will be updated in October/November 2009.

Appendix D, *I Can Only Imagine* lyrics by MercyMe

I can only imagine
What it will be like
When I walk
By your side

I can only imagine
What my eyes will see
When your face
Is before me
I can only imagine

I can only imagine

[Chorus:] Surrounded by Your glory, what will my heart feel
Will I dance for you Jesus or in awe of you be still
Will I stand in your presence or to my knees will I fall
Will I sing hallelujah, will I be able to speak at all
I can only imagine

I can only imagine

I can only imagine
When that day comes
And I find myself
Standing in the Son

I can only imagine
When all I will do
Is forever
Forever worship You
I can only imagine

I can only imagine

[Chorus]

I can only imagine [x2]

I can only imagine
When all I will do
Is forever, forever worship you

I can only imagine

Appendix E, "Sample University Approved PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM"

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Identification of Project/Title	<i>Christian Community-based Performance Practices in Contemporary North America</i>
Statement of Age of Subject	<i>I, the participant, state that I am over 18 years of age, and agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Kristen Messer and Catherine Schuler in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park.</i>
Purpose and Duration	<i>The purpose of this research is to study religiously motivated community-based performance events. The duration for participation in this study will vary by participant; however, on average a participant can be expected to be interviewed to two three times over a six month period.</i>
Procedures	<i>The procedures involve a series of several one-two hour interviews, which will be tape-recorded. These interviews will involve questions and conversations about the performance events the project examines and the participant's involvement in these events.</i> <i>I give permission for this interview to be audio-taped.</i> YES ___ NO ___
Confidentiality	<i>All information collected in this study is confidential and I understand I will not be identified by name, or by other indicators of identity, unless I agree to have my name used, as indicated by my initials below.</i> ف I agree and prefer to have my name used in investigators reports where I am cited or quoted. Initials _____ Date _____
Risks	<i>I understand there are no foreseeable risks associated with these interviews.</i>
Benefits, Freedom to Withdraw, & Ability to Ask Questions	<i>The research is designed to help the investigator learn more about the performance events in which I am involved.</i> <hr/> <i>I understand I am free to ask questions or withdraw from participation at any time and without penalty.</i>
Contact Information:	Principal Investigator: Catherine Schuler, Department of Theatre, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, University of Maryland College Park Phone: 301-405-6688 e-mail: cschuler@umd.edu Student Investigator: Kristen Messer, Department of Theatre, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, University of Maryland College Park Phone: (h) 410-837-8109 or (c) 301-919-9920 e-mail: kmesser@umd.edu Faculty Advisor: Dr. Catherine Schuler Phone: 301-405-6688 e-mail: cschuler@umd.edu If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of

Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742;
(e-mail) irb@deans.umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0678

**Participant's Name,
Signature**

NAME of Participant

**SIGNATURE of
Participant**

**Contact Information, and
Date**

DATE: _____

Phone:

e-mail:

Address:

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