

## **Designed to Save: Scenography and ideology in Hell House**

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The website described Hell House as a way to 'shake your city with the most 'in-your-face, high-flyin', no denyin', death-defyin', Satan-be-cryin', keep-ya-from-fryin', theatrical stylin', no holds barred, cutting-edge' evangelism tool of the new millennium!' [note]1 Via the same website, one could order a so-called Hell House Kit, providing a set of do-it-yourself materials to stage your own version of the event. The press release included in the 300 page manual acts primarily as a way to attract visitors, promising that:

It's the most radical, life-changing seasonal attraction you've ever seen! It has impacted millions and it's on its way here! [...] Witness a human sacrifice! Watch a bloody abortion! Feast your eyes on a teen suicide! Be blown away by the drunk-driving fatality and the agony of the gay funeral! Plus, descend into hell and meet Satan! (Hell House Kit (HHK), 1996-2010:68)

The promises made here about a visit to Hell House, both on the website and in the manual, are not unfounded. Drawing on the iconography and structure of American Halloween performance, Hell Houses are among the most notorious of seasonal entertainments. Here, visitors will not find ghosts and ghouls, but rather images of family tragedy, abortion, date rape and human sacrifice, as a means to warn an audience of the reality and dangers of sinful behaviour, and a way to guide them to the light of God. The aim of this paper is to examine the importance of staging and set in the presentation of the event (specifically the Hell and Heaven scenes), and its relationship to the intentions of Hell House performance. Particular attention will be paid to what this dramaturgy is intended to do, as Hell Houses ultimately use a created environment to represent a spiritual reality, in which both Heaven and Hell should be considered very real. By examining the lineage of Hell House in the context of other Christian haunts and of traditional scare attractions, this article discusses the relationship between theatre and belief and the impact of such a rationale on the design and scenography of the event, as described in the Hell House Kit. Although I am aware that the topics covered by Hell House and the way in which these are

addressed are controversial, I do not wish to place my investigation at a distance from these practices. Instead, I intend to align the essay with the method of Ann Pellegrini, who, in her 2007 essay 'Signaling through the Flames: Hell House Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling', argues how 'cultural critics need to move beyond simply analyzing - and lambasting – the overt content or theology of Hell Houses (what Hell Houses say) and focus instead on the affectively rich worlds Hell House performances generate for their participants (what Hell Houses do)' (912). As is hinted here by Pellegrini, much of the existing literature on Hell Houses indeed takes such a critical position, with authors either condemning or critically assessing Hell House practice from a coolly distanced secular perspective. Although these approaches have their merit, for this paper I wish to enter and interrogate the affective worlds created by Hell Houses for their audiences, as well as their intentions and rationale. For this reason, the Hell House Kit and, in particular, its 300 page manual, will be used as a central primary source throughout the piece. **In doing so, please be aware that the article will include (at times graphic) descriptions of the performance and the issues it wishes to address from the conservative Pentecostal Christian perspective that drives the event, including depictions of (violence against) LGBTQ+ individuals, abortion, and suicide.**

First and foremost, it should be noted that Hell Houses cannot be separated from the secular entertainment they mimic. Based on the tradition of the haunted house or haunt (also known as scare attractions), these evangelical events borrow much of the structure and iconography of secular Halloween entertainment, creating what Pellegrini terms a 'willfully hybrid experience' (2007:913). Traditionally, haunts are events which are performative in nature and closely allied to the aesthetics of immersive and promenade theatre. Visitors are required to enter the attraction and move from room to room and scene to scene, where scares are created using actors, special effects and set design. The quality of these haunts ranges from small DIY efforts (known as 'home haunts', which are primarily staged on private property and for local communities) to the state of the art productions of theme parks such as Universal Studios. Although Christian Halloween events knowingly borrow from these secular sources, the connection between Halloween and Christian organizations in America has always been a complex one. On one side of the issue, there is a question of whether Christians should take part in celebrating the holiday at all

(Pellegrini, 2007:911-912; Bivins, 2008:130-131), with some communities offering what Fletcher describes as 'religious dramas conceived as Christian Halloween alternatives' (2007:313). In this context, Halloween is most commonly understood as a pagan holiday, and although there is no direct condemnation of its celebration found in biblical verse, many have argued that its themes and associated iconography (such as sorcery and witchcraft) pit it against Christian teachings. On the other hand, there is a distinct intertwining between religious communities and Halloween entertainments, with the rise in popularity of haunts in the 1960s sitting squarely in the camp of two Christian youth organizations: the Junior Chamber of Commerce (or JayCees), and Campus Life, an off-shoot of the non-denominational church organisation Youth for Christ. As Morton notes, these events were primarily run as fundraisers: 'The first haunted houses staged outside of home parties all seem to have been charitable events' (2013:101), with the earliest example being staged in 1967, before secular haunts gained further momentum by the opening of the Haunted Mansion in Disneyland California in 1969 and the first instalment of Knott's Scary Farm in 1973. The Campus Life and JayCee performances closely model the structure of later haunts, where 'guests typically queued for one to three hours for an experience that lasted between fifteen and 30 minutes' (Morton, 2013:101) as they were led through various rooms and scenes of actors and special effects. The true flashpoint for the Christian alternatives, where religious influences are more prominently featured, comes in the 1970s, when evangelist Jerry Falwell starts to present Halloween as a teachable moment. Falwell's Scaremare, first staged in 1972, presents a model that appears to be closely allied to the Campus Life and JayCee efforts: here, classic horror iconography and monsters are used to provide entertainment, but with the additional reminder to its visitors to contemplate death, their own mortality, and what might come after. In 1983, Scaremare is joined by Judgement House, where the Christian message is more overt, but the emphasis of the narrative is on choice. Although Judgement House presentations share a number of scenarios with Hell Houses, such as domestic violence, substance abuse and school shooting, they clearly position themselves as opposed to the other event. [note]2 Despite these differences in emphasis and approach, as Pellegrini points out, all three events share their indebtedness to traditional haunts as 'Scaremare, Hell Houses, and Judgment Houses (which date to the mid-1980s) all depend upon an audiences familiarity with the horror genre and with the haunted attractions at

secular amusement parks' (2007:913), with each in turn borrowing and relying on the aesthetics of wider horror culture to structure their event and present their narratives. [note]3

Yet within this supposed dichotomy of Christian performance and Halloween haunts, Bivins notes that 'there is little mistaking a Roberts-style Hell House, whose brio and bloody aesthetic are distinct among these dramas' (2008:150). Of the three, the message and delivery of Hell House are perhaps the most aggressive, where the Outreach is 'supposed to scare you, but for a much higher purpose than the secular entertainments it so knowingly mimes' (Pellegrini, 2007:917). Hell House in the format that it is discussed here can most reliably be traced to 1995. Although predating the mid-nineties, it is at this point that the form gains its notoriety through the efforts of Pastor Keenan Roberts. Roberts found a way to package and market this particular performance event, creating a licensed Hell House Kit and garnering much attention from the media in the process. Described a live theatrical outreach event structured in a tour production format, Roberts' Hell House consists of seven scenes: two of these are reserved for Hell and Heaven, with the others dedicated to what Roberts describes as 'social-sin issues' (Pellegrini, 2007:921). In the manual, the included scenes deal with a gay funeral, with a young man dying of AIDS; abortion; satanic human sacrifice; drunk driving; and teen suicide. Additional scenes exist and were available for purchase: some of these address alternate scenarios of the same issues (such as the 'mother's womb' and 'post-birth' abortion scenes), whereas others look at different narratives such as date rape due to drug use, domestic violence and a school shooting. Different versions of the Heaven and Hell scene are also offered, with a total of four versions of Hell available at one point. [note]4 The full Kit consists of the 300 page how-to manual, including contextual information and details of the seven core scenes (designs, prop lists and scripts), as well as a DVD containing a recording of a full Hell House performance filmed at the Assemblies of God Church. Further CDs that include music and sound effects to be used within the production complete the package. Although the contents of the Kit require the efforts of a dedicated and sizeable cast and crew (Roberts describes how he has just up to 200 bodies for his events), all materials can be used out of the box and, aside from some DIY props, costume and set dressing (with shopping lists and patterns

included in the manual), can simply be placed onto the stage by any church community willing to do so, providing they could afford the \$299 price tag.

The overall quality of the filmed performance resembles that of a home video, including slightly awkward captions, flashy fades between the different scenes and the addition of special effect overlays for certain parts of the recording. Opening with the Funeral Scene, two Demon Tour Guides are seen directly addressing the visitors, who are positioned as being present for the interment. The audience is seated amidst the performers portraying the grieving family, and are facing the set which is covered in black fabric and smoke. Impressions of flames and a HELL HOUSE sign frame one side of the stage; a casket and flower arrangements adorn the other. As the scene ends, visitors follow the mourning performers and file past the casket to pay their respects, with the Demon Tour Guides at the back of the line. Upon arrival in the Abortion Scene, the action is initially obscured from view by green curtains. Behind these, Chrissie is facing away from the audience and placed on an examination table, her feet in stirrups. Her lower body is covered by more green material, and a light has been positioned between her legs, creating a stark outline of the actions performed by the doctor and nurse. A table of medical equipment frames the back of the scene, and blood stains the cloth covering Chrissie. As the procedure continues, the girl appears to have a seizure, and visitors file past her twitching body as the doctor and nurse continue their work. It is the Demon Tour Guide who introduces the Human Sacrifice Scene, throwing open a door to reveal a number of figures in dark robes stood around a wooden table. The walls are covered with black fabric and cobwebs. As the ritual progresses, a plant in the tour group is selected and dragged into the scene, tied to the table and stabbed in front of the audience. Her death is punctuated by a blackout, after which the body is shown covered in blood. The Drunk Driving Scene appears to transport the audience outside, to a space covered in trees, fallen leaves and rocks, with the wreck of a car and an ambulance with its siren blaring drawing the attention and drowning out the dialogue. Both vehicles are surrounded by the bodies of those involved in the accident, some dead, some still alive but critically injured. Body parts litter the scene. The tight bedroom space of the Suicide Scene that follows once more alters the dynamic of the space. Populated by the ordinary artefacts of furniture and posters of a teenager's room, it focuses on the central performer as the Demon Tour Guides

entice them to end it all. Strobe lighting, rock music and sound effects punctuate this struggle and its inevitable outcome as the performer places the gun against his head and pulls the trigger in front of the tour group. Announced in the video by stock footage of burning fire, Hell appears the most elaborate in its design: the space is strewn with performers, portraying those who are damned against the now familiar black backdrop. The overlay of the fire animation makes it difficult to make out more detail, but the scenes seem to include chains and cages, as well as numerous grave stones to build the environment in which the Hell Dwellers reside. The Gate Keeper, dressed in red robes, leads the tour group before Satan, but here, too, it is the technical flourishes of the video recording that give life to an otherwise minimal set and black background. Satan is found sitting on a throne and lit by muted red and blue lights, but little or no further detail can be made out in his space as he delivers his speech in close proximity to and addressing the audience. He is interrupted by the arrival of two angels, who takes the tour group through to the final Heaven Scene, its bright lighting and ethereal music a clear contrast to Hell Scene which precedes it. Here, visitors are introduced to Jesus in front of a garden trellis covered in white gossamer, fairy lights and fake leaves, his presence framed by further angels, one of whom holds the Book of Life. After Jesus' speech and accompanied by triumphant music, visitors are greeted by the angels before the performers leave the scene, to be replaced by a member of the church. Further details on the design of both Hell and Heaven as found in the manual draw attention not only to the aesthetic, but also the smell of these locales, advocating the use of smelly cheese in Hell and potpourri in Heaven, thus creating an experience aimed at more than just the visual. The full duration of the video is just under thirty minutes, with the five social sin scenes only taking up about half of that time: it is clear that Hell and Heaven are the focal points of the performance.

The brief outline of the Hell House performance, as provided here, should serve to provide some insight into where the Kit sits in relation to more professional performance efforts. Although meant to be illustrative and indicative on how a community purchasing the Kit can stage their version of Hell House, the quality of both visuals and sound is often too limited to show much at all. It is the manual which sheds more light on both the approach and rationale advocated by Roberts, and it is here that aspects of realism, authenticity and believability are described as key for

the success of these performances. One of the first things that becomes clear upon examining the Kit is that it is set up as a 'do-it-yourself' manual, and is not aimed at theatre professionals. Throughout the material, Roberts makes reference to how helpful it would be to bring people on board who have some knowledge or understanding of drama, but primarily, the documentation, scripts and accompanying CDs are aimed at providing a cookie cutter way to reproduce Roberts' production. Perhaps as a result, a large part of the manual is taken up by discussions of particular jobs within the Hell House organisations, from director to ticketing, and from seamstresses to security. Prior to these descriptions, and opening the document is what I will refer to as the mission statement of Hell House, where Roberts repeatedly stresses the spiritual importance of the undertaking. In the third chapter, *Setting the Tone*, the position of Hell House (also referred to as the Outreach) as mission is addressed and, more interesting for the current argument, it emphasizes the reality of the issues addressed within the production. In this section, Roberts discusses the effectiveness of the methods chosen by his church as it allows them to really connect with their audiences, as opposed to the way in which the ministry operates at other times of year. He explains how Hell House 'brings to life biblical truth in a way that most unchurched people have never seen', resulting in a high level of conversions and rededications (HHK, 1996-2010:31); more specifically, the chapter draws attention to what Roberts considers 'the realities of the issues', which 'represent where the American culture finds itself today' (HHK, 1996-2010:33). A copy of the information sheet included in the chapter further emphasizes this notion of truth, discussing the reality of Jesus as Saviour and of the battle Satan wages for one's soul, as well as the ways through which they work. As Roberts states: 'By experiencing theatrically, hopefully they [the audience] will avoid the same in reality': 'Hell House is cutting-edge performance; it is shocking; it is aggressive. But it is truth' (HHK, 1996-2010:35). These aspects of reality and truth are highlighted further in a section of the manual entitled *Managing the Media*, which includes a list of 'tough questions and how we've answered them' (HHK, 1996-2010:73-80). Here, some of the stances from earlier in the manual are addressed in more detail, but the main thread remains an emphasis on their conceptualization of truth and reality: Hell House is not opinion, but 'the absolute truth of the Word' and all of the social sin issues (homosexuality, abortion, suicide, substance abuse, the occult) 'are happening today' (HHK, 1996-2010:73). The task of the Outreach, then,

as represented here by Roberts, is to save those who are in the crossfire: 'We are sending the lifeboat to get them out of the storms of life and onto the shores of spiritual safety' (HHK, 1996-2010:74). Ultimately, Roberts states: 'Hell House deals with reality, and gives directions and answers to the problems' (HHK, 1996-2010:74), primarily found in dedicating one's life to Jesus Christ. This rationale goes some way to help explain the approach to the designing and running of the event, as found in the remainder of the manual. For my discussion, it is the chapter which deals with set design and construction that is of the most interest. Here, as in a later chapter dealing with the theatrical technology required to run the Outreach, the grassroots nature of the event once more shows itself, as the do-it-yourself approach is continued. The tech required can be termed rudimentary at best and often simply refers to playing the CDs that form part of the Kit. Much of the information dealing with design is practical, with pages being taken up by patterns and floor plans to help church communities sew the demon robes or build the smoke pit used in the Funeral Scene. Yet underneath this step-by-step guide, the rhetoric of reality and truth is continued: 'Hell House brings into focus the everyday deeds of the kingdom of hell. It is shocking to watch and listen to because it is reality.' (HHK, 1996-2010:77). After asserting the importance of set design, as 'each scene set is an opportunity to display to those visiting that the play they are about to witness is a first-class production' (HHK, 1996-2010:197), Roberts continues to refer to the authenticity of the sets used. Primarily, this is done through the inclusion of real objects, such as the casket in the Funeral Scene, or bringing a junked car into the performance space for the Drunk Driving Scene. Similarly, a discussion of the staging of the Abortion Scene highlights the need to give it 'a legitimate medical appearance with instruments, examining table, medical staff attire' as well as posters from pro-life campaigns, which should 'illustrate the reality of what abortion is' (HHK, 1996-2010:88). Within this discussion, there is a clear direction on what Roberts considers necessary in terms of a design. A later section of the manual, which deals with downscaling the Outreach for smaller productions, details which props and parts of the set can be omitted. Throughout his notes on this topic, Roberts continues to emphasize the need for each scene to 'appear authentic and believable', and for the production to display 'excellence' through a certain level of quality in design and costuming (HHK, 1996-2010:199). Further emphasis on these features of the production is placed in the descriptions of individual scenes and the props and cast



required, again reiterating the fact that 'all of the Hell House scenes are based on reality' (HHK, 1996-2010:230). This last quote is used in relation to the Human Sacrifice Scene, a moment of the production which deals with Satanism and the occult and, as Roberts acknowledges in his document, may seem like a leap of fancy to some audience members. Yet here, too, he asserts the relationship of this issue and the script to events which take place within America today, hinting to the wider spiritual reality that Hell House wishes to engage with, and which culminates in the Hell and Heaven Scenes at the end of the tour. As Roberts notes, Satan and his kingdom of demonic forces 'are a part of the spiritual world that is just as real on a daily basis as the physical world' (HHK, 1996-2010:76), and it is both of these worlds that Hell House wishes to represent. This aim, then, guides the design of the more tangible themes of homosexuality and abortion in terms of 'authentic representation' (as shown in the way in which Roberts discusses these aspects in the manual), but the same mission and design principles underpin the more esoteric moments of the production:

The Hell Scene should be so vivid and eye-opening that they [the audience] do whatever necessary to escape spending eternity in that place. The Heaven Scene should be so marvelous [sic] and awesome that the image of a loving Jesus looking personally into their eyes will be a moment they will never forget. (HHK, 1996-2010:75)

Each of these elements, as well as how they are realised in the Outreach, speaks to a particular approach to performance and, more specifically, the belief in its power to affect and change its audience. The aim of Hell House is clear: to reach its audiences and make them aware of the real dangers of demons and Hell, and every aspect of its design is intended to present a version of this reality in order to bring the message home.

This particular aspect of the experience is addressed by Hank Willenbrink, who examines the concept of what he terms the salvific performative, used 'to refer to the embodied act connected to religious conversion' (2014:74). In his definition, Willenbrink is primarily concerned with conversion as speech act, where language is made sacred through its function to evince such a life change. As was noted by

Pellegrini, the ultimate goal of Christian Halloween entertainments lies in an act of conversion or rededication by its audience, and the form and structure of the event are aimed at facilitating this. Willenbrink similarly highlights this connection between the mission statement and the goal of the production, noting that: 'In Hell House, because of the reliance upon theatrical mechanisms, the salvific performative is intricately tied to the production' (2014:74). Due to this reliance, Willenbrink argues, the principles underpinning a Hell House performance change in light of what the production is intended to achieve:

While many assume, based on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous phrase "willing suspension of disbelief," that an audience attending a theatrical event agrees on a temporal reality for the duration of the performance, religious plays like Hell House call for an understanding of theatre as a place where ideology can be instituted into the lives of spectators beyond the temporal frame of the production. In Hell House, as disbelief is suspended, belief is made when the performance carries real-life consequences for its audience. (2014:75)

It is worth quoting Willenbrink at length here, as his essay lays bare the tension central to Hell House performance and its attempts to negotiate reality. On one level, there is a potential problem in using theatrical devices to represent the real and the 'truth' (as it is understood by Roberts), but, more poignant to the current discussion, this reality consists of a particular worldview where the abstract concepts of Heaven and Hell gain spiritual materiality. As Willenbrink argues, 'For Roberts and other Hell House producers, Hell House expresses more than theatrical content—it portrays reality' (2014:80), and as previously noted, much attention is paid to the idea of making scenes seem authentic by bringing in real-world props. Willenbrink comments on this, referring specifically to the Abortion Scene, where the use of medical equipment, scrubs and the placement of pro-life posters which may be familiar to the audience helps to bridge the gap between the performance and the experience of its visitors. In this context, items such as these posters act as 'a reminder that what is portrayed in Hell House is "reality," where devils and angels exist and where turning away from God has lasting and severe consequences' (Willenbrink, 2014:81). A similar sentiment can be found in Pellegrini, who notes that

'within the worlds laid bare by Hell House performances the devil is neither allegory nor projection of the unconscious; he is real and he is coming for you' (2007:915). Although such an understanding of the Outreach does not objectively change the elements of performance, it does guide the way in which it is intended to be read by its audiences and critics. The central problem for Hell House, Willenbrink argues, is that it needs to present itself in a particular way for the potential of the salvific performative to arise:

Hell House is a complex performative event that deploys an evangelical rendering of reality and engineers change in an audience member by convincing him or her that performance is truth. [...] The challenge of Hell House producers, then, is to render their salvific narrative as the best product to their audience, influencing them to cast off other narratives in favor of the performed one. (2014:75, 78)

In order for this to be possible, the performance needs to present its narrative as reality, but particularly, as a reality which is more attractive than the one currently inhabited by its audiences. Where Hell House is successful in reaching a visitor, 'a spectator changes from a passive observer of theatrically represented reality into a participant in the reality articulated through the representation. Thus, a spectator turned convert in Hell House sees theatrical artifice as "truth"' (Willenbrink, 2014:75), thus adopting the supposed reality of theatrical performance and extending the narrative of the event into their daily life. The world as represented in Hell House is not a theatrical one, separated from reality by the conventions and frames of the performative event, but rather a direct representation and reflection of the daily life of its audiences.

This understanding of and approach to the performative event results in an interesting tension with academic understandings of scenography and its functions in performance. In the preface to the third edition of her book, Pamela Howard notes the status of scenography as a 'holistic approach to making theatre' (2019:xxvii). In particular, Howard's work draws attention to the notion of scenography as a central node within the different elements of design within the theatre and, by extension, as an effort which is primarily constructed. Although set design may incorporate

(features of) the space in which it takes place, as a discipline, it still retains the status of design, and of deliberate decisions made by the various creatives who are part of the production on how the performance will be staged. As Howard notes, 'scenography is the joint statement of the director and the visual artist of their view of the play, opera or dance that is being presented to the audience as a united piece of work' (2019:xxxii). Whereas at this point in her argument, Howard is more interested in the collaborative aspects of scenography, I wish to instead draw attention to the idea of the 'view of the play'. This position supposes a process of review and interpretation of the text, which may result in final designs that can take a range of forms: from set design serving as a setting and a background to the action, to a naturalistic representation of the world of the text or more abstract and experimental designs. By contrast, Hell House does not engage with set design on such a level, which might be due to a lack of understanding of the medium; as Willenbrink notes, 'Hell Houses are unmistakably amateur productions, suffering from poor scripting, bad acting, and overly stagey direction' and offering a 'gruesome theatricality' (2014:80). Despite this potential issue regarding its understanding of scenography, the structure of the Outreach as a walkthrough performance places particular emphasis on set and the world it creates for its audience. In her work on immersive theatre, Machon discusses the importance of creating such a performative place through use of physical space, scenography and a possible appeal to multiple senses through sound and smell (2013:93-95). In creating and bringing audiences into such a fictional space, Machon argues, those attending will become more easily absorbed in the world and the events that take place within it. This aim of absorption and transformation aligns with the mission statement of Hell House, yet the world created in its performance should not be read as fictional. Instead, what is intended to be staged is a copy of the everyday lives of audience members and a reflection of the issues they might face. Scenography here is not an extension and interpretation of a performance text, but instead is a necessity to truly bring home the importance of these social sins and their possible consequences in the afterlife.

In its treatment of scenography and the representation of its understanding of physical and spiritual realities, Hell House taps into horror aesthetics and affective methods in order to try and facilitate a change in its audiences. Arguably, there is a lack of theatrical expertise underpinning this process, resulting in a script and design

that is both amateurish and bombastic. More abstract stagecraft is traded for an attempt at faithful reproductions of domestic spaces and sites of medical trauma, culminating in two key scenes of spiritual reality: Heaven and Hell. Interestingly, these are treated by Roberts in the same way as the other scenes as he discusses the rationale of the Outreach in the manual. Aside from detailed notes on what should be included in Heaven and Hell, Roberts does not address the aesthetic choices that are important for either scene. It becomes clear that they are the focal point of the show, and, as previously noted, Roberts argues for the visual impact that both scenes should have to leave a lasting impression. Yet no information is included on why Heaven and Hell should be constructed in this way, or why certain props or elements of set are included: although both scenes are discussed in some details, Roberts' writing on the subject seems to be reflective of an assumed and universal understanding of what Hell and Heaven can be expected to look like. The visual effects of fire and magma that are superimposed over the footage in the DVD further hinder a detailed view of the aesthetic of Hell, in particular, despite its clear importance within the Outreach production. Based on the floor plans included in the Hell House Kit, the Hell Scene is allocated the biggest room of all scenes, a notion which is further enforced by the fact that four versions of the Hell Scene exist (the next highest number is the Abortion Scene, with three different scripts). In terms of the contents of each, both Heaven and Hell appear stereotypical in their context and design: dark, loud and smelly for Hell; bright, pleasant and serene for Heaven. These choices, in particular those in relation to Hell, seem to reinforce the connection between Hell House and secular horror entertainment. As Fletcher notes, Hell House productions 'typically invoke and alter haunted-house conventions, replacing ghosts and monsters with demons and sin—all designed to confront unsaved audience members with the reality of spiritual warfare and the necessity of being born again' (2007:313). Some theorists have similarly questioned the relationship between Hell House's mode of representation and Biblical text. Both Schmidt (2013:143-145) and Stewart (2017:174-179) draw attention to the possible link between Hell House and the teachings of the Apostle John (most notably, the Book of Revelation) as a potential source for the gruesome imagery employed by the event, but these connections are often complicated and can be difficult to trace. Although Stewart notes that 'Christian horror houses are indebted to the Apocalypse of John for more than just the visual and imaginative imagery of angels, demons, blood, gore, and the

flaming fires of hell' (2017:175), the rhetoric surrounding the staging of Hell House often seems to fall back on its generic predecessors. Indeed, Stewart acknowledges that:

Theatrical performances at Christian horror houses are particularly liable, in their attempt to visualise invisible realities, to draw more from cultural perceptions of the spiritual realm as informed by Hollywood horror films than by any biblical portrayal of the future, intermediate state, or spiritual dimension. (2017:179)

This ambivalence in position in relation to the source material, sitting somewhere between the popular culture that is rejected by Hell House events as they warn of the dangers found within them, and potentially superficial readings of the more lurid parts of the Bible, as well as a wish for authenticity in its depictions of the social sin issues, create a number of tensions in the quest for representation. Hell House's indebtedness to horror iconography is ubiquitous and often openly addressed, and in the manual, Roberts is quite clear about the lineage of the event. The 'What is the Hell House Outreach?' section of the website, it is noted that 'the tour production is set up much like a typical haunted house', and that 'Hell House normally capitalizes on the Halloween season when people are thinking about frequenting associated attractions with this season and time of year'. [note]5 Bivins acknowledges this and notes the use of horror aesthetics and techniques within the production: 'The productions' reliance on the techne of horror and shock theater yields settings that often vividly recall horror films, with eerie lighting, spectral presences, and computer-generated graphics designed to unsettle and startle' (2008:144). This may seem like a contradiction, but as Bivins argues, horror as a genre is no stranger to morality:

The primary attribute of a Hell House is, of course, its brutal consequentialism: those who commit certain actions will meet with a grisly fate, in both a bodily and spiritual sense. The ghouls and frights creeping from the shadows of these walk-throughs signify that Hell Houses appropriate one of horror's most recognizable traits: the starker and more resolute the moral conviction, the deeper the detail and exuberance of the portrayal of gore and fear. (2008:140)

The bloody and violent ends of each of the individuals shown in Hell House serves to reinforce both its mission for conversion, as well as its ties to secular horror. This is further fed by what Pellegrini refers to as the affective sensibilities of Hell House (2007:930). As Willenbrink explains:

What is happening in Hell House cannot only be understood as a changing of narrative; otherwise, a secular production could result in conversions. The narrative must be homiletic; rendered with evangelical dramaturgy; and utilize the appropriate interpretive frames, rhythm, immersive experience, and sensations to have the performance succeed—that is, to convert spectators. (2014:85)

This tension has been flagged up by other critics: Pellegrini (2007) discusses the 2006 version by Les Freres Corbusier in New York City and Schmidt (2013) examines a performance of Hell House by Back to Back Theatre in Sydney in 2012, and both productions are of interest in how they approach and discuss their engagement with the material. Pellegrini addresses the sincerity of the Les Freres performance, noting that this Hell House ‘as a kind of sociological artifact, not a living thing, and the company’s anthropological approach proved theatrically limiting’ (2007:928). This is confirmed by Roberts himself, who attended the event in New York and commented it needed more intensity, an intensity which in the case of a religious Hell House would be provided by the belief of cast and crew (Pellegrini, 2007:930). Schmidt’s discussion of Back to Back’s performance shows a similar approach to the material, with Hell House being presented as ‘an anthropological study’ and framed by an academic context in the form of public lectures and debates (2013:139). Both productions provide an experience that benefits from the theatrical expertise of those involved, more than likely improving on every aspect of Roberts’ do-it-yourself package and script, yet in doing so, both also seem to lose part of the Hell House experience. As Pellegrini argues, ‘To put the matter in theatrical terms, you could say that Les Freres was coolly Brechtian when it needed to be engaged and Aristotelian, let alone bloody red and Artaudian’ (2007:927), and based on Schmidt’s account, I would argue the same could be said about Back to Back’s production. Here, theatrical expertise offers the ability to recreate and improve the

design of the Outreach, but doing so alters the frame and may serve to reintroduce the fiction, away from a particular evangelical worldview.

Hell House, then, can be seen not as a representation of the real world, but rather as a reflection of a version of reality, an 'obsessive dedication to a common vision' (Schmidt, 2013:142) born from religious belief and evangelical zeal. In a day-to-day life permeated by the influence of Satan and his demons, by constant temptation to engage in sin, Roberts envisions the Outreach as a safe haven, a port in the storm. From a theatrical perspective, the spaces created by Hell House cannot be understood in more traditional readings of scenography and set, or in terms a separation of fiction and reality. McAuley's notion of the physical reality / fictional place duality (2010:91), which outlines the distinction between the material qualities of the theatre space and the other worlds which are created within it, does not apply here. Instead, Roberts' intention is for the production to mimic a particular version of life, and to present audiences with a snapshot of both their physical and spiritual realities, where the fantastical is rendered material. In order to do so, his Hell House Kit relies on a tension between mission and secular influences, drawing on conventions of walkthrough and horror performance to realize this vision. In the words of Bivins, 'Hell Houses routinely blur the line between the sacred and the profane, the sinful and the pure, the supernatural and the mundane' (2008:167), and in doing so, they represent a particular liminality. Within the performative space, a world is created, but fiction remains at a distance: what is found here is real life, a physical and spiritual materiality of domestic tragedy, Hellish torture and Heavenly salvation, covered in black drapes and white fairy lights.

## Notes

1 The current website for the Assemblies of God Church can be found at [www.godestiny.org](http://www.godestiny.org) and still shows the importance of drama for its outreach efforts: <https://www.godestiny.org/drama-productions> [Accessed May 8, 2020]. The quotation used here is taken from the old website, which can be accessed via the Internet Archive:



[https://web.archive.org/web/20081220064325/http://www.godestiny.org/hell\\_house/H\\_H\\_Kit.cfm](https://web.archive.org/web/20081220064325/http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/H_H_Kit.cfm) [Accessed May 8, 2020]

2 The information about Judgement House used in this paragraph can be found on its website and related pages: <http://judgementhouse.org/new-here/what-is-judgement-house> [Accessed May 8, 2020]

3 See Bivins, 2008:132-136 and Hoedt, 2012:253-255 for a more detailed history of each of the three events.

4 Information about these scenes can be found on the websites describing the HHK, as well as on the old order page:

[https://web.archive.org/web/20081121051309/http://www.godestiny.org/hell\\_house/H\\_H\\_KitIssues.cfm](https://web.archive.org/web/20081121051309/http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/H_H_KitIssues.cfm) and

[https://web.archive.org/web/20081121051056/http://www.godestiny.org/hell\\_house/H\\_H\\_resources\\_order.cfm](https://web.archive.org/web/20081121051056/http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/H_H_resources_order.cfm) [Accessed May 8, 2020]

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[https://web.archive.org/web/20081121052440/http://www.godestiny.org/hell\\_house/H\\_H\\_KitWhat.cfm](https://web.archive.org/web/20081121052440/http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/H_H_KitWhat.cfm) [Accessed May 8, 2020]

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