

The Boston Globe

Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping

This 'Reverend' preaches with punch

By Janice Page

Boston Globe

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Reverend Billy preaches his gospel on street corners, in subways and stores, even from the occasional rooftop. Put down your Starbucks lattes and Barnes & Noble paperbacks, he shouts through a handheld amplifier; let Disney know that you grasp the four-fingered devilishness of its clever merchandising.

As this self-appointed minister of social change sees it, America's neighborhoods are being overrun by exploitative corporate storefronts pushing dangerous transnational fairy tales. His guerrilla sermons aim to point out the dangers of indiscriminate consumerism; in fact, he may be the only spotlight-craving evangelist who advises that the way to save your soul is to quit opening your wallet without thinking. "Hallelujah!" he exclaims as he lays hands on the forehead of a Disney store patron in midtown Manhattan. "She stopped shopping!"

But what's most miraculous about Dietmar Post's highly entertaining documentary "Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping" is that it frequently gets past all the theatrics and manipulations, capturing what's genuinely empowering about a guy who dedicates himself to living outside the box.

Bill "Reverend Billy" Talen is no formally ordained minister; that much is immediately clear from his cobbled uniform with the white clerical collar that doesn't even meet the neck of his black T-shirt. Still, this self-styled preacher/performance artist has more spirit and conviction than most churchgoers. He spends his days organizing "actions," which might be protests that he leads at the ersatz cafes that grind on him like Bob Marley musak, or an intervention to save a condemned historic home of Edgar Allen Poe. Say what you will about Talen's hyperventilating, Jimmy Swaggart-style choice of character, Reverend Billy generally has no trouble drawing a crowd.

And where there's a heated crowd in New York City, there are, eventually, police. Post's most volatile footage involves authorities employing all manner of methods to deal with Reverend Billy, up to and including arrest. Reverend Billy isn't as belligerent as Andy Kaufman or as famous as Michael Moore, so the confrontations have an unpredictable excitement.

Best of all, though, are the many moments when German filmmaker Post puts a camera on Reverend Billy's misfires and imperfections. Two women listening to the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir sing ("No more Starbucks! No more mochas!") pronounce it an insult to God. A Disney store protest involving Mickey Mouse duct-taped to a wooden cross causes a befuddled passerby to remark "Mickey's dead?" And even an activist has to have a sense of humor when he's caught owning the very products he condemns. "If you walk on water with Florsheims," he jokes as he laces up his dress shoes, "you're just going to drown."

Social change begins with the willingness to trespass and make a fool of yourself for what you believe in, Reverend Billy preaches. If you fear that concept has lost its place in our world, check out his church.

Movie Showtimes for Saturday, May 3

Coolidge Corner Theatre
290 Harvard Street
Brookline, MA

5:45, pm, 9:45, pm, 11:30, pm



Rev. Billy preaches to anti-globalization choir

by Paul Sherman

Friday, May 2, 2003



Whether you love him or hate him, Michael Moore's politicking at the Oscars at least roused people into thinking. Joining Moore at the rant-against-the-machine barricade is the grassroots hero and title "character" of the documentary "Reverend Billy & the Church of Stop Shopping."

The creation of New York performance artist Bill Talen, Rev. Billy fights the good fight against the loss of our neighborhoods - and, in a sense, our way of life - to corporations and greed.

During director Dietmar Post's hourlong movie, we see Rev. Billy at work on three protests: against Starbucks (for its malling of America and poor trade practices), the Disney Store (ditto the malling, plus the sweatshop conditions under which its goods are made) and New York University, which sought to knock down the Edgar Allan Poe House and put up a tower in its place.

Like the offspring of Abbie Hoffman, Andy Kaufman and media prankster Alan Abel, Rev. Billy mixes theater and message and makes his points in amusing and effective ways.

For instance, during one street demonstration in Manhattan's Astor Place, where Starbucks occupies three corners of one intersection, Billy preaches, "We all have become tourists in our own lives" because of globalization. Then he rails against Starbucks because "this is the place where they turn Bob Marley music into Muzak."

Of course, there's truth in both points, but the reverend doesn't let the performance get in the way of the message. Perhaps the deepest thing he says about Disney is "when (sweatshop companies) abuse people on the other side of the world, they abuse us."

The overriding notion in Billy's preaching is the importance of neighborhoods, cities and a world where people have a personal stake in their interactions with others and aren't just taking the money and running. He asks us to think before we spend.

I'm sure people in any major city can relate to how their hometown has become a little more like everywhere else, and a little less interesting. In Boston, Jordan Marsh was bought out by Macy's, the Coffee Connection was swallowed by Starbucks, and every new stadium prostitutes itself with a corporate-bought name.

Can we get Rev. Billy up here?

("Reverend Billy & the Church of Stop Shopping" includes no objectionable elements.)

"Reverend Billy & the Church of Stop Shopping." Not rated. At the Coolidge Corner Theatre.

<http://www2.bostonherald.com/entertainment/movies/reve05022003.htm>

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By John Petrakis
Special to the Tribune
Published August 23, 2002



Recommended **CHICAGO UNDERGROUND FILM FESTIVAL 2002** offering:

World Premiere of

Reverend Billy & The Church Of Stop Shopping (Documentary)

(Dietmar Post and Lucia Palacios; U.S./Germany/Spain). Bill Talen is a high-profile performance artist whose famous persona is the Rev. Billy, a collar-wearing preacher who snaps and howls with the fervor of a Baptist bible-beater. But his concerns are less spiritual than secular, as he works the busy streets of Manhattan, with his altruistic disciples, to preach the evils of Starbucks, Disney and other conglomerates. The film follows his attempts to save the building where Edgar Allan Poe wrote "The Raven," which has been targeted to make room for a law school expansion at NYU.



No Collection Plate

FRI 11/21/2003

All these unassuming consumers wanted was a latte at Starbucks, but they got a lot more than they'd bargained for (if a \$5 latte can be considered a bargain). In walks a red-faced minister, swaggering like Swaggart. "We don't know how to stop chain stores," he bellows into a microphone. "We don't know how to stop corporate franchise imagery. We don't know how to stop the globalizing economy that makes our local economy swim in this sea of identical details, these endless repetitions, this feeling of emptiness, dullness, where we are all tourists in our own lives." **But we can stop going to Starbucks, and we can watch Dietmar Post's documentary about the performances of activist Billy Talen, Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping.** 8 p.m. Friday, November 21. Aurora Picture Show, 800 Aurora Street. For information, call 713-868-2101 or visit www.aurorapictureshow.org. \$5. -- Keith Plocek

houstonpress.com | originally published: November 20, 2003
<http://houstonpress.com/issues/2003-11-20/urban.html/1/index.html>

Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping

Year Released: 2002
Directed By: Dietmar Post
(NR, 60 min.)
at Alamo Drafthouse Cinema
July 9, 2003 at 7:15 and 9:30 PM



Reverend Billy, aka Bill Talen, is a performance artist/political activist who dresses in preacher garb to spread his gospel of anti-globalization and anti-consumerism during staged public actions and interventions. This documentary, filmed by a German TV crew over the course of a year, captures three protest rallies staged by Reverend Billy and his crew of evangelists. The first is at a Starbucks in New York City's Astor Place, the second at the Disney store in Times Square, and the last at the building where Edgar Allan Poe wrote "The Raven" – a building that its NYU owners wanted to tear down in the name of progress. **Both funny and inspiring, the Rev. Billy is in the forefront of modern agitprop.**

<http://www.austinchronicle.com/issues/vol17/issue27/screens.film.html>

Austin American-Statesman
statesman.com

If Michael Moore took on the mall mentality, he might come up with something like 'Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping.' (Wednesday)

<http://www.thestatesman.com>

Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping
Currently playing at the **Coolidge Theatre in Boston**
May 2 – 8, 2003

(Germany, 2002) dir. Dietmar Post, 1h

Reverend Billy, a.k.a. Bill Talen, is an actor/performance artist and a leading figure in the anti-globalization movement. His work combines the forces of social and political change with the means of theater arts to counteract our media culture. Like Michael Moore, Reverend Billy puts himself on the line, exposing corporate pomposity wherever he finds it, and his artistic and political work is influenced by various concepts of street theater. His disruptions or "shopping interventions" in public spaces are in the tradition of the Jose Bove, Lenny Bruce, and The Yippies. He calls it stepping into somebody's imagined box. The police call it illegal trespassing. And his actions/performances inside and outside of Starbucks coffee shops and Disney stores often end with the Reverend being arrested. Social change always begins with civil disobedience, as is evidenced by the great leaders of the civil rights, peace and labor movements. Reverend Billy attacks some of our most notorious cultural dead zones, and armed with a vicious wit and the word of truth, he is proof that, indeed, one man can make a difference. Even in a Starbucks.



The documentary film Reverend Billy & The Church of Stop Shopping played twice at the San Francisco Independent Film Festival (February 6 – 16, 2003)

“Like Michael Moore, Talen puts himself on the line, exposing corporate pomposity wherever he finds it.”

“ Bill Talen was a well-known San Francisco solo performer and a founder of the groundbreaking theater production space Life on the Water back in the late '80s. Nowadays he lives in New York and makes trouble for The Man as Reverend Billy who, as the fearless leader of the Church of Stop Shopping, preaches about the evils of corporations leeching life from our cities. Whether he and his colleagues are parading into a Disney Store with Mickey Mouse nailed to a cross (Disney's sweatshop laborers make as little as 16 cents an hour) or making it difficult to buy lattes at rapacious Starbucks (there are four Starbucks cafes blighting one block in New York's revered Astor Place), his astonishingly in-your-face political street theater is brilliant, hilarious and, yes, righteous. The dismayed responses of the embattled store managers is worth the price of admission. His church, he says, "puts the odd back in God." Like Michael Moore, Talen puts himself on the line, exposing corporate pomposity wherever he finds it. Do I have a witness? Amen! ”

Tod Booth, Programmer, San Francisco Independent Film Festival

The following article first appeared in "Theater", Volume 31, #3, Spring 2002 issue about "Theater And Social Change". Jonathan Kalb, author of THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO BILLY, is chair of the theater department at Hunter College in New York. Kalb was so kind to revise his article in March of 2002.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO BILLY

By Jonathan Kalb

His pulpit, when he performs in theaters, is a red Village Voice distribution box stolen from a street corner, with his own picture displayed in the window. He wears a clerical collar over a black shirt and a white dinner jacket, the bleached-blond tips of his Roy Orbison hairdo adding just the right touch to his uncannily accurate Jimmy Swaggart imitation. He rushes in, flashes a politician's smile, and begins preaching to his typically hip, downtown congregation of faithful non-believers: "We believe in the God that people who do not believe in God believe in. Hallelujah!"

This is Reverend Billy, a.k.a. Bill Talen, minister of the Church of Stop Shopping, and over the last few years, his brand of mock-evangelism poised on the border of real belief has risen to lucent prominence in the depressed landscape of radical theater in New York. Talen is a self-sacrificial political gadfly, a theatrical species generally given up for dead in the United States--Alisa Solomon calls him "the Al Sharpton of the ultra-ironic yet politically committed Downtown set"--and like his spiritual predecessors in the 1960s, he doesn't confine himself to the controlled environments of auditoriums and playhouses. With startling info-age savvy, he also dreams up pointed and often hilarious guerilla theater for (in his words) "the tight proscenium arches that are in the subways, in the lobbies of buildings and in parks."

In 1997, Talen began preaching on the sidewalk outside the Times Square Disney Store, eventually conducting numerous "preach ins" and political actions inside the store, which led to several arrests. During the same period, he also preached 90-second sermons as Reverend Billy on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" and performed the character in solo plays at various venues around New York. By the end of 1999, no less to his surprise than to anyone else's, he had become a lightning rod for the creative and political aspirations of an extraordinary range of other theater artists and community groups.

The week-long festival he organized and co-hosted in December of that year at Judson Memorial Church, called "Millennium's Neighborhood (Not a Celebration of the Malling of New York)," drew over 1200 spectators on its first night, despite no pre-opening coverage in New York's major newspapers. Conceived as an alternative to the Disney-led millennium celebrations in Times Square, it was devoted to the causes of resisting consumerism, battling the encroachment of corporate monoculture in New York, and (in Talen's words) reclaiming "contested and surveiled public spaces." It began with a "permitless parade" from Charas Community Center (a former public school that New York City is trying to sell for luxury development) to Judson Church, led by two men bearing aluminum crucifixes with large Mickey and Minnie Mouse dolls duct-taped to them. Performances and exhibitions by some 80 artists, pranksters, and activists followed--among them, the Surveillance Camera Players, who led group addresses to the cameras attached to street lamps in Washington Square Park, and the labor advocate Charles Kernaghan, who arrived directly from the World

Trade Organization protests in Seattle and delivered a fiery lecture on Central American sweatshops.

Talen now enjoys a unique seriocomic celebrity. He not only has a growing following as a performer but is also frequently sought out by local groups as an actual spiritual leader might be. During 2000, he was at the center of protests against New York University's efforts to tear down a 19-century building in which Edgar Allan Poe once lived and replace it with a tower for its law school, and he was arrested again several times for that. His main work, however, is on his own quasi-sacred stage: he conducts comic church services featuring clownish deacons, obscene exorcisms, propagandistic canonizations, and a gender-bent gospel choir, usually leading his audience out of the theater afterward to commit a political action on the theme of the evening. These actions have included defacing a dot-com billboard in Silicon Alley, applying orange stickers to Starbucks logos to replace the mermaid's missing nipples, and hiding a cassette player behind the toys in the Disney Store in order to disturb the utopian environment with "anti-shopping speech." (One example of such speech: an interview with the Middle Eastern food sellers who were evicted from the lobby of the old Selwyn Theater--now the American Airlines Theater--in the preparatory purge for the new Times Square).

Born in Minnesota in 1950, Talen was brought up in a Dutch Calvinist tradition that he rejected at 16. After graduating from Franconia College in New Hampshire and occasionally taking part in anti-war and civil rights protests, he moved to San Francisco and became a performer, honing various storytelling routines incorporating music and poetry. His transformation into a staunchly political artist occurred while he was Co-Artistic Director of Life on the Water, a theater in Fort Mason that hosted radical and marginalized groups from around the world, as well as prominent author-actors from New York such as Spalding Gray, Reno, Holly Hughes and John Kelly. Watching these artists perform convinced Talen he had to concentrate on his own art.

He moved to New York in 1994 and became an artist-in-residence at St. Clement's Church, where he began developing the Reverend Billy character under the guidance of Sidney Lanier. Lanier--the former vicar of St. Clement's, Tennessee Williams' cousin, and the model ("only the noble parts," he says) for the character T. Lawrence Shannon in *Night of the Iguana*--helped Talen through what had become a serious spiritual crisis by giving him religious readings by the pre-Christian Gnostics, Elaine Pagels and John Dominic Crossen, among others. Talen related these to the tactics and values of his own comedian-heroes--chiefly Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman--began studying the demeanors of preachers in New York's Pentecostal churches, and found himself with an act whose power no one could have anticipated.

One has to see Reverend Billy in action to truly understand his allure. At first glance, he is easily confused with a simple parody preacher in the vein of Don Novello's Father Guido Sarducci from "Saturday Night Live," but to watch him through an evening's performance is to realize he is engaged in a much more complex (and benevolent) deception that harks back to P.T. Barnum and Melville's Confidence Man. Talen coopts the persona of a right-wing televangelist and uses it to awaken actual spiritual hungers in his ostensibly impious audiences. Faced with what the philosopher Ernst Bloch once called the "swindle of fulfillment" in rampant consumerism, Talen nullifies it temporarily with his own counter-swindle--all the more effective for being obviously phony and live.

Flooding the halls he performs in with an astonishing torrent of righteous words about the spell of consumer narcosis, he ends up offering hundreds of hard-core artsy skeptics (often in their 20s) their first chance ever to shout "hallelujah" and engage in Pentecostal call-and-response. They then find themselves possessed of a precious community not accessed via flickering screens and a delightful channel for various inchoate angers he has done them the service of naming. Just as a placebo is sometimes more effective than medicine, a phony preacher is sometimes more comforting and inspiring than a real one. His subjects range from the encroachment of deadly suburban blight on the city's neighborhoods (proliferating Gaps, Banana Republics, Starbucks, and the like), to the outsized role a media giant like Disney plays in shaping American values and determining who is seen as an American, to the general debasement of a democracy that now defines freedom as consumer choice.

Talen and charisma aside, much of his effectiveness has to do with his lucidity about the differences between making radical theater today and in the 1960s--an era when religious trappings and rituals were embraced by groups such as The Living Theater, The Bread and Puppet Theater, and Grotowski's Polish Theater Laboratory with an earnestness that would now seem naive. Talen taps the lode of emotion behind religious expression in a much more sophisticated and ironic fashion. He doesn't rely on the hollow superiority of irony, though, but rather uses sophistication as an enticement into a no-pressure self-searching process that his audiences are prepared to accept. It's a delicate operation, as he explained in an interview in February, 2000, "because the whole 'spiritual' thing has been completely hijacked. All the language has been hijacked by people we're in mortal combat against: if it's not the right-wing fundamentalists, then it's the New Agers, who are just as fundamentalist. But if you start by simply saying 'stop shopping!', and stop right there, then suddenly we're all at the edge of this abyss together and it's the beginning of an invitation back into your own individual chaos."

Communities are solidified by adversity, the partisan bonds formed and strengthened by action against a common problem or enemy, and Talen's key perception is that the lived reality of consumerism--murky though its contours are--can serve this purpose if described with appropriate humor and intelligence. He is a penetrating observer of what Nigel Thrift has famously called "soft capitalism"--referring to the late 20th-century shift from a "hard," factory-based, locally rooted economy whose power-brokers cultivated images of control, leadership and steady management to a global, extraterritorial, more loosely organized one in which young executives style themselves as rebels and corporations purvey metaphors of deracination and unaccountability such as "dancing" and "surfing."

Those who run today's international economy are so dispersed, hard to identify, and responsible to different interests that any totalizing picture is *prima facie* too complicated to fan any flames of protest. Thus, like all good preachers, Talen zeroes in on selected issues, such as the use of public space and *de facto* media censorship, and artfully fits them into a larger picture while telling and enacting engaging stories.

Public space is a perfect subject for his sort of theatrical intervention because the tool of protest, theater, is itself an example of the sort of non-commodity-centered interactive human engagement that malls, airports, corporate plazas and the like are deliberately designed to discourage. Similarly, the commercially

circumscribed content of mass media is a natural target for any brand of live performance designed to operate subversively beneath the mediated radar of mass culture. Talen says: "It is my feeling that in the Age of Information most statements can't carry progressive values. Such words disappear in thin air, become instantly nostalgic or stylistic. We seem to lack a critical culture right now. Why? Information carries meaning hypnotically but not powerfully. Stories, in contrast, create meaning when we observe the experience of a changing individual." By "stories" he means the kind Walter Benjamin described in "The Storyteller" that pass down "counsel" or individual wisdom, which are increasingly melted down and remolded to serve the culture's corporate super-narrative, or else ignored by the media.

Reverend Billy is hardly the first to take aim at these targets, of course. What sets him apart from other theatrical prophets of capitalist excess, however, is his understanding that effective critique must be pointed inward and outward at the same time. As Daniel Harris concedes at the beginning of his excellent recent book on the aesthetics of consumerism, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic*, it is ridiculous to "single out corporations as the source of all that is crude, manipulative, and mercenary in our society, while . . . whitewash[ing] the consumer as a helpless victim. . . . If there is a conspiracy, we ourselves are its tacticians, as well as its beneficiaries. The aesthetics of consumerism are not foisted upon us; they emerge out of a rich and imaginative collaboration between the forces of capitalism and our own fears and desires. If there is kitsch in our daily lives, it is because there is kitsch in our minds." One has only to visit Reverend Billy's amusing and informative web site (www.revilly.com), with its sincere invitation to "confess your shopping sins" via e-mail, to appreciate his grasp of this complicity.

His array of corporate targets over the years has also shown an awareness of the need to adjust his tactics to subtler moral questions and more complex attachments by his young audience. He has progressed from Disney (the classic, arrogantly despotic multinational trying to impose its regimented and sentimentally sanitized world-view on idiosyncratic New York City), to Starbucks (a young, fast-rising multinational giving lip service to social consciousness as it rapaciously expands), to NYU, the second-largest landowner in Manhattan (which Talen calls "the quintessential abusive non-profit" because of its architectural depredations in Greenwich Village). An important precedent for Reverend Billy's wilier actions in the Disney Store is the subversive form called "invisible theater" invented by Augusto Boal for use during the period of military rule in Brazil--and this connection makes sense in that ideological tyrannies invite similar responses. The greater challenge for Talen, though, has been in adapting such techniques to his other campaigns.

My favorite example of this is the "Starbucks Invasion Kit" he sent out by e-mail to followers in New York and made available on his web site in the summer of 2000, whose main feature is a script intended to be spoken loudly (and improvised on) by two people seated at a cafe table. THE NEO LIBERAL AND THE HAPPY FETUS

NL: The music at Starbucks is just perfect. HF: I don't care about perfect--the music could be Barry Manilow. NL: Understated. A selection from early Miles, old Cuban music, world music ... HF: I'm just happy to have Starbucks wrapped around me like a prophylactic. I don't have to deal with New York craziness. NL:

It,s a script for me, Starbucks. They,ve given me a soundtrack and a drug to make my heart race and now I,m the romantic lead in some kind of movie . . . some vague movie . . . don,t you feel that? I,m just waiting to start the scene of a movie, sitting here. It,s a nice wait. A nice moment, just before the moment where I stand up and enter the action. HF: But we don,t have to start. I,m not starting any action in my life right now. I don,t want to be born. IT,S LIKE I,M A HAPPY FETUS INSIDE MY MOMMA MERMAID!! I,M FLOATING IN MY PLACENTA!! The dialogue continues in this vein for five minutes or so, until the Happy Fetus is thrust into life after the Mermaid,s water breaks ("I,M SLIDING INTO PUBLIC SPACE ... STARBUCKS IS CLOSING AND I,M BECOMING A CITIZEN AGAIN"). This event then terrifies the Neo Liberal with the prospect of new responsibilities ("OH NO--IS THIS THE REAL MOVIE?"). People as far away as Utah and Hawaii have e-mailed Talen to let him know they have used his script to hilarious effect in local Starbucks. The common thread in the reports has been that the scenario leaves many of the amused "eavesdroppers" feeling flattered--after all, they,ve been intelligent enough to follow the heady scenario--which then disposes them to congratulate the performers and fall into political discussions with them.

The immediate future looks brightly contentious for Reverend Billy. He recently became the subject of a full-length documentary film, Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, directed by the German filmmaker Dietmar Post and produced by Lucía Palacios, and he is featured in several other new or forthcoming films: among them, A Day in the Hype of America by the Seattle group Global Griot, and culturejam by the Canadian Jill Sharpe. He tours and teaches at various colleges around the country and has begun to raise international eyebrows since his peace marches and church services held in the wake of September 11, 2001 (under the banner "The Church of Stop Bombing"), received media coverage in seven European countries. He is producing a CD of "gospel songs and refracted vespers" and writing a book called What Should I Do If Reverend Billy Is In My Store? --the title taken from a memo sent to New York Starbucks managers from executives in Seattle. He also has a new solo play in the works, entitled What is Peace?, featuring Reverend Billy, an anarchist, and a bond trader.

Still, Talen's is essentially a lonely and dangerous art involving frequent police harassment that he suffers by himself, and there are times (especially during smaller gatherings) when one feels that his followers are as fascinated by the spectacle of a man throwing his body in front of a train as they are moved by the content of his sermons. In theater, as in all art pitched to even the most curious and engaged in our brave new culture of info-glut, virtual values and 24-hour cyber-shopping, the toughest political task is to maintain the notion that critical thinking truly matters.



Dietmar Post's delirious new film, *REVEREND BILLY & THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING* (play loud! productions; <http://www.playloud.org>), offers a persuasive portrait of Reverend Billy (a.k.a Bill Talen), an anti-globalization performance artist who slips on a fake-clerical collar and, with a religious fervor, leads guerilla protests throughout New York City. The hour-long documentary begins in the East Village, where Billy heads an Astor place "Boycott Starbucks" assembly, complete with his anti-shopping gospel choir. It continues with Billy's 29th "Disney Action" at their Times Square tourist-trap, with Billy and his merry band protesting their corporate sweatshop tactics while lugging crucified Mickey Mouse plush toys on the subway. The final sections cover Billy's civil disobedience in the face of NYU's decision to replace the landmark Poe House with a high-rise, which leads to his arrest by the humorless NYPD. Billy's revolution against consumerism and trans-national super-companies is a noble cause, but what makes him so effective is his mix of savvy street theatre and humor, while Post does an expert job of capturing Talen's intelligence and off-the-wall passion. This informative and hilarious DVD also includes a half-hour interview with Bill in his home. Hallelujah!

Steve Puchalski, Shock Cinema Magazine, # 22, Spring-Summer 2003

January 1, 2003

Preaching Against the 'Evil' of Consumerism

By CONSTANCE L. HAYS

Some people may be upset that retail sales failed to meet expectations during the holiday season. Not Bill Talen.

For the last four years Mr. Talen, also known as Reverend Billy, has been performing from the theaters of Bleecker Street to the Starbucks on Astor Place, exhorting people to resist temptation — the temptation to shop — and to smite the demon of consumerism.

With the zeal of a street-corner preacher and the schmaltz of a street-corner Santa, Reverend Billy, 52, will tell anyone willing to listen that people are walking willingly into the hellfires of consumption.

Shoppers have little regard for how or where or by whom the products they buy are made, he believes. They have almost no resistance to the media messages that encourage them, around the clock, to want things and buy them. He sees a population lost in consumption, the meaning of individual existence vanished in a fog of wanting, buying and owning too many things.

"Consumerism is a dull way of life," he says. "We're all sinners. We're all shoppers. Let's do what we can."

It's an act, a kind of performance art, almost a form of religion. He named it the Church of Stop Shopping. As Reverend Billy, he wears a televangelist's pompadour and a priest's collar, and is often accompanied by his gospel choir when he strides into stores he considers objectionable or shows up at protests like the annual post-Thanksgiving Buy Nothing Day event on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan.

The choir, which is made up of volunteers, includes people like David Glover and his daughter, Zena, from Brooklyn. There is also Beka Economopoulos, who once sang at the White House, and Meredith Manna, who came in courtesy of one of the keyboard players. When they erupt in song, it is hard to ignore: "Stop shopping! Stop shopping! We will never shop again!"

Other performers preach the same gospel, with their own twists. Ange Taggart, who lives in Nottingham, England, turns up in places like Troy, N.Y., to go into a store, buy a lot of

things, and then return them. She recently filled a cart with Martha Stewart products at Kmart, then put them on the conveyor in a certain order, so that when she got her receipt, she said, the first letters on the itemized list spelled "Martha Stewart's hell."

There is also Andrew Lynn, who created Whirl-Mart last year. He gets a group of people together, everyone with a shopping cart, and they stroll the aisles of Wal-Mart or Kmart, putting nothing in the carts. When store managers tell him to take his protest elsewhere, he tells them: "This isn't a protest. We're performing a consumption-awareness ritual."

There may be something to it, too. Psychologists at the University of Rochester and at Knox College in Illinois have published studies concluding that people focused on "extrinsic" goals like money are more depressed than others and report more behavioral problems and physical discomfort.

Some economists have also addressed the phenomenon of rich people who feel poor. Juliet B. Schor of Harvard University, the author of "The Overspent American" (Basic Books, 1998), says people are frustrated because they compare their lives with what they see on television. Robert H. Frank of Cornell reached a similar conclusion in "Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess" (The Free Press, 1999).

It's not that Reverend Billy thinks no one should ever buy anything; on a recent afternoon, he himself was seen purchasing a ream of printer paper and a bottle of wine. It is the futility of shopping he is trying to address — the futility of leaning too heavily on the material at the expense of the spiritual and emotional.

That mission has given focus to his art, his politics and even his religion. Raised by what he calls "strict Dutch Calvinists" in Rochester, Minn., he made his way to New York in the early 1990's. He had his epiphany in 1999, when protesters disrupted the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle; he discovered the potential of drama to send a political message.

He discussed the revelation with a friend, Sidney Lanier, an Episcopal minister and cousin of Tennessee Williams who had used theater to evoke social reform themes in the 1960's. Mr. Talen soon realized that after years of producing Spalding Gray and others, he suddenly had an act of his own.

Mr. Lanier said he suggested a man of the cloth as a vehicle for Mr. Talen's message. "I encouraged him," he said. "I said, you have a kind of Calvinist preacher in you that wants to come out."

Mr. Talen, even before he developed the character, said he admired the cadence and the poetry of good fire and brimstone. Child labor, environmental damage and evidence of union busting by big retail chains, all to deliver low prices to consumers, provided plenty of material for any pulpit. "I sense right now that our lives are getting absurd," he said.

On a recent evangelical side trip, Mr. Talen ventured into the Kmart on Astor Place, where speakers blared Elvis and Tom Petty Christmas carols. His own face blank, he began to look for smiley-faces, which he considers one of the most nefarious of marketing tools. He found them on signs, on children's pajamas, on stickers. Few of the shoppers, however, were smiling, he noticed. And that is part of the problem.

"The smile has been so thoroughly appropriated by transnational capital," he said. "They discovered that smiling makes money."

When he left Kmart, he walked down Lafayette Street, bellowing now and then in character about how creeping consumerism threatens the fabric of society, in the form of chain stores, sweatshops and more.

But to the public, it mostly just means more stuff to buy at a good price. Indeed, it is no surprise that Reverend Billy has not had much of an impact. Even this year, considered to be a particularly disappointing Christmas shopping season, Americans are still expected to spend almost \$1 trillion at stores, restaurants and auto dealers in the last three months of 2002, up perhaps 3 to 4 percent from the year before.

"They don't care!" Reverend Billy shouted to no one in particular on a dark stretch of Lafayette Street, as people carrying shopping bags from J. Crew, Macy's and the Gap poured into a nearby subway entrance.

"They do care," a bearded man beside a scaffolding replied. "They just have a bad attitude."

"Hallelujah!" Reverend Billy said. He says that a lot.

The Reverend Billy made his first formal appearance at the Disney store in Times Square, circa 1998. He was driven away in a police car, his wrists still cuffed to a large statue of Mickey Mouse. The store has since closed.

He has found other targets; in general, he selects large global companies that he feels are inappropriately seizing control. In 1999, he zeroed in on Starbucks. He was pleased to discover later that he had become the subject of a company memo.

"Reverend Billy sits quietly at a table with devotees and then begins to chat up the customers," the memo, dated April 24, 2000, reads. "He works the crowd with an affirming theme but gradually turns on Starbucks. Toward the end, he's shouting." And it adds: "According to a store manager, he may stand on your tables."

Audrey Lincuff, a Starbucks spokeswoman, confirmed the authenticity of the memo — and disputed the accuracy of Reverend Billy's message, at least as it pertains to Starbucks. "We consider ourselves to be locally relevant where we do business," she said, "and work very hard to weave ourselves into the fabric of the community by associating and working with nonprofit groups and other community groups." The company's goal,

she added, is to "connect with our customers not only on a business level but on things that are important to them in their lives."

Reverend Billy says he tries to remain relatively low key. "I'm against a lot of political people who have become fundamentalists themselves," he said. He doesn't like the anti-fur people who ridicule pedestrians in fur coats or hats, for example. He is a latte drinker, though he doesn't order it at Starbucks.

He wants to help awaken desensitized shoppers, he says, because "they are underestimating the complexity and beauty of life." And besides, "they are definitely underestimating the impact of shopping."

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SAVING THE POE HOUSE

NYU fights Rev. Billy, 'Raven' by JIM DWYER

Published by DAILY NEWS, Sunday, September 10, 2000

We know not the hour, warns the Bible, so here was the Right Reverend Billy Talen preaching from the demolition scaffolding around one of Edgar Allan Poe's homes.

"Nevermore!" he shouted to 100 people cheering him from below.

The Poe residence is one of several 19th-century buildings that New York University wants to tear down on W. Third St. for a new high-rise law school building. The matter is still in court, but Rev. Billy takes no chances.

A guerilla performance artist who is the founding angel of The Church of Stop Shopping, Talen and confederates sneaked onto the demolition site shortly after 6 PM yesterday. He preached to the crowd spilling out of bars and walking along W. Third St. who stopped to laugh and listen.

The police scrambled and sealed off the street and carefully climbed onto the scaffold and surrounded Talen.

"Shame! Shame!" called the people on the streets as he was led off the scaffold.

In 1845, while living at 85 W. Third St., Poe wrote "The Raven." Or maybe not. A banner floated over the sidewalk: Reverend Billy and the Ravenettes Say No to NYU Expansion.

An officer unstrung it from the scaffold and tossed it to the sidewalk.

"Vandals!" someone hollered.

Next to go was the giant black vinyl raven, which was unceremoniously tossed over.

Before police arrived, on the scaffold was an actual Poe relative -- or, at least, a possible actual one.

"When I was a small child, I was told about a family member's deathbed confession that we were somehow related to Poe," says Tony Torn, the son of actors Rip Torn and Geraldine Page. He read to the crowd from "The Raven."

At that moment, a small colossus stopped to watch the action. David Margolis, 90, an artist whose prominent mural adorns the entry to Bellevue Hospital, instantly linked history to those very sidewalks.

"I knew Eugene O'Neill when he lived right where the law school is now," Margolis said, "Mark Twain lived right where the law school is now," Margolis said. "Mark Twain lived at Ninth Street and 5th Avenue, and we raised \$17,000 to try to save that place. How many Edgar Allan Poe's does a country get?"

Why would a great University tear down a literary landmark? The official answer is that the law school needs the space. It's not much of a Poe landmark since he only lived there for short periods in 1844 and 1845, and Poe wouldn't recognize the place with all the changes. The true answer is this: NYU has become one of the hottest schools in the country, the law faculty among the most prestigious, and it wants the space.

Demolishing the house where Poe lived for a few months is easy to name as a bad thing; it's much more difficult to put your finger on the poor cultural and civic hygiene of dropping a high-rise tower into a neighborhood that, at

its most endearing, is no more than three or four stories. Hop on the carousel of history for a minute.

After World War II, the GI bill put college education within the reach of millions. NYU, then a backwater, was expanding and needed faculty housing. The school was obliged through the efforts of Robert Moses, the building czar of New York, who used "slum-clearing" powers to clear out a commercial section of Greenwich Village.

Developers erected and NYU bought slab apartment towers near LaGuardia place. The AIA Guide to New York says these are the "antithesis of Village scale and charm." These buildings, among other events, aroused a brilliant thinker named Jane Jacobs, who wrote "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," and people started to think about preserving old neighborhoods, rather than bulldozing them.

Since 1973, when NYU shut down its main undergraduate campus in University Heights in the Bronx, its growth around Washington Square has been spectacular. "Felicity," the teen melodrama TV show, is set around NYU's campus.

The university got more than 30,000 applications last year, and in its promotional material packages a good education with the opportunity to live in "Greenwich Village, one of New York City's most creative and energetic communities and a historic mecca for renowned artists, writers, and scholars." Among these, NYU boasts, was Edgar Allan Poe.

Lynne Brown of NYU says that saving the Poe residence would be expensive because it doesn't meet modern building codes, and for the law school to straddle it would require, in effect, erecting two buildings.

The ground in Manhattan is expensive, so the new tower will go up, rising to 169 feet, the equivalent of 17 stories. It will involve destroying not only the Poe building, but also Judson House, a gathering place for modern artists in the mid-20th century.

None of this seems to be inspired planning or thinking by NYU. West Third is pleasant because of its human scale. The sky is worth something, too, even if the debt to a specific moment is easier to rally around than any obligation to unknown people walking down a city street in shadows.

"If the house where Poe lived and wrote can't give out an unearthly shriek as it's dragged into whatever hole it's going, then we're going to do it," Torn says.

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VILLAGE VOICE

Reverend Billy Preaches the Anticorporate Gospel to Starbucks – Rage Against the Caffeine

by Alisa Solomon

Nobody smashed any windows in an overcaffeinated rage at Starbucks in Washington, D.C., over the weekend, as many had predicted after the trashing the chain's outlets took in Seattle in February. But that doesn't mean that the steam has gone off the rebel froth. If, in the coming months, you try losing yourself in a latte at any of Manhattan's 101 Starbucks—yes, 101 of them—the jittering vision that rises before you may not be caused by caffeine alone. Leaping onto chairs in the upscale joe joints around the city, his voice and body trembling as he rails against "the low pay for those who tend the trees" and "the ruination of our neighborhoods," the Reverend Billy is waging a local campaign against corporate domination. Coffee is the second-largest traded commodity, after oil.

Starbucks was the target of a national campaign against ecological damage and unfair labor conditions overseas that was to be launched last week by Global Exchange, one of the IMF rally organizers. But days before the protest, Starbucks announced that it would begin to stock some Fair Trade-certified coffee and monitor consumer demand—and the "Roast Starbucks" action was called off. For Reverend Billy, though, to "dare us to choose the one product for which they're paying the workers fairly and then in six months to say, 'Well, we tried,' is not enough." Besides, the java giant—which currently has 2500 stores in North America, and nearly 400 beyond (including in Beirut and Beijing), and which vows to have 20,000 worldwide within the next few years—"is destroying communities one by one."

The creation of the actor Bill Talen, Reverend Billy began preaching the anticonsumerist gospel in the Times Square Disney store three years ago. Wearing a white dinner jacket over a black T-shirt and a priest's collar, and flashing a salesman's smarmiest smile, he confronted shoppers with the ugly news that Bambi had been built in sweatshops, and lamented the corporate monoculture that has conquered Times Square.

In December, Talen organized a weeklong festival of political pranks and public performances at Judson Memorial Church, called "Millennium's Neighborhood (Not a Celebration of the Malling of New York)." And last month, he presented a series of mock worship-services in his "Church of Stop Shopping" (replete with a campy gospel choir), which canonized as saints such activists as the proprietors of the recently bulldozed Esperanza community garden, and labor rights crusader Charles Kernaghan. At the end of each stirring show, he'd lead the congregation into the streets to take part in a direct political action overseen by the organizers being celebrated that night. With each new project, the flock kept growing and the leftist right reverend began to acquire a weird sort of cachet as, well, a spiritual leader: Though the collar is fake, the call is real. The Reverend Billy has become the Al Sharpton of the ultraironic yet politically committed Downtown set. Reverend Billy's Starbucks campaign began brewing at least as far back as December, when, as part of "Millennium's Neighborhood," activist Megan Wolff led audiences on a tour of the three green-logoed shops at Astor Place, discoursing on the role of coffeehouses in fomenting the American Revolution, the economic history of the pungent bean, and the politics of public space. Starbucks won't keep all three adjacent storefronts in business for long, she predicted. Rather, she explained, "They saturate the neighborhood until the competitors become invisible and soon the neighborhood itself becomes invisible."

The sense that New York is becoming one vast billboard was a central theme of last month's performances, and the reverend always reserved part of his sermon for a lyrical lament about the small businesses that give neighborhoods their character, but are being driven out by the megastores. Meanwhile, the economies of scale that allow the big chains to trample the mom-

and-pop ventures give them enormous clout with suppliers: Their demands for lower and lower prices exacerbate substandard working conditions and environmental devastation. Could there be any better example of this cycle than Starbucks, with its ubiquitous little green sea goddess logo? (Reverend Billy's acolytes are pasting pink nipples on her blank, bare chest on as many iterations as they can get their hands on.) "Times Square is lost," Reverend Billy sighs. "Starbucks is more to the point."

So last week Reverend Billy announces a 24-hour marathon in which he'll preach in all 101 Manhattan shops. But not even the demon dark-roast can keep the Rev revved all night, and besides, most of the joints close at 10 p.m. The marathon quickly becomes a summer-long campaign.

Still, after appearances at half a dozen stores, and hours before boarding the early Saturday bus to join the protest in D.C. over the weekend, Reverend Billy hits the Starbucks at 23rd and Park. He sits quietly at a table with a couple of cronies, then gingerly begins to chat up the customers. With his lifeguard good looks and clerical collar, he meets little resistance as he invades the space of the Frappuccino set. "Pretty strong coffee, huh?" he asks a white guy in a Yankees cap. "Whatchya gonna order?" he queries a black woman laden down with Duane Reade bags. "Get something good and strong, now." Such good coffee, such strong coffee. Gosh, it's good. He works the crowd with that affirming theme, and the bright-eyed workers behind the counter look on with approving smiles.

But gradually the juice he's extolling seems to possess him like the holy spirit. He's suddenly all aquiver, arms outstretched and flaying the air, legs wobbling like tofu. "Hallelujah! I loooooove the coffee in Starbucks, children!" Reverend Billy is shouting now. And the smiles of the counter help begin to morph into expressions of panic as the sermon segues into charges that the shop's "earth-tone touchy-feeliness masks corporate ruthlessness." The reverend's devotees—in this instance, Jason Grote and Beth Sopko—hand around leaflets explaining how Starbucks is screwing the planet, the farmers, the baristas, and New York's neighborhoods, and the manager is dialing 911. "Amen, people," booms the reverend, as he heads for the door.

The Starbucks scene is a tougher gig than the Disney store, he says (despite his string of arrests at the latter). At Disney, he explains, "you've got these listless tourists doing that Stepford-wife drifting, and these comically paranoid salespeople," and it's all "very ethereal and symbolic." At Starbucks, though, "people have a willful alienation from the place," so it's hard to engage them. Yet "it's more direct, it has more traction. People live nearby and remember what used to be there."

Indeed, Reverend Billy is inviting anybody with a pre-Starbucks reverie to e-mail him a six-line sermon. He'll choose a bunch to perform with the writer present in the Starbucks of the writer's choice. Within a day of his e-mailed call for such texts, he has received 80 of them. One, from Brooklyn Heights, recalls the "best small Italian bakery in the charted universe, where a gooey pastry and coffee was still \$1.50, and perfect Sunday hangover food. It was a short jog from the bounty of Damascus Bakery, a haven of wonderful Middle Eastern sweets and breads, both of which go better with strong coffee than any white-bread crap from Morebucks."

Such prose makes the reverend rapturous. "People are describing their neighborhoods with such force," he says. "They're actively missing people and places." He pauses, as if to leave some space for a few amens. "It makes me think that something is possible."

To send your sermon, write to revbilly@revbilly.com

Tell us what you think. editor@villagevoice.com

Election-Week Docs Profile Anti-Globalist Cleric, Deliver Civics Lesson

by Josh Goldfein



Trouble brewing: Rev. Billy in action

Reverend Billy & the Church of Stop Shopping

Directed by Dietmar Post

Third Party

Directed by Michael Burns

October 31 through November 4, 2003 at Anthology Film Archives

When is a flash mob not annoying? When it's accompanying Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping to one of his guerrilla services. In the last six years, Bill Talen's pseudo-cleric has become a fixture on the anti-globalist circuit, firing up friendly audiences and unsuspecting shoppers with his jihad against McWorld, wage slavery, and the like. Director Dietmar Post gives you nothing more than you'd want: a simple you-are-there p.o.v. as Billy prepares for and then stages unauthorized sermons at leading temples of multinational exploitation, including Starbucks, the Disney Store, and NYU.

The choice of the third venue highlights the broad elasticity of Talen's critique; he relates his crusade to save Edgar Allan Poe's tenement apartment from a law school wrecking ball to Jane Jacobs's revolutionary battles with Robert Moses over the same real estate, but admits he only learned of the connection after he got involved in the issue. Still, the NYU scenes capture Talen at his best: He sneaks onto the roof of the doomed structure, incites passersby to resist, sings along with a band dressed in raven suits, and handles the inevitable arrival of the NYPD with modest aplomb, even after they arrest him. "How should I Chyron you?" a NY1 reporter asks in the midst of the chaos, and Billy seems befuddled; "performer-activist-teacher-playwright" doesn't fit across the bottom of a TV screen.

A snippet of a Reverend Billy sermon early in Michael Burns's *Third Party* provides one of the few real jolts in this understated civics lesson, which is mostly as dry as its subtitle, *Political Alternatives in the Age of Duopoly*. Burns, also a rookie, offers a procession of nattering nabobs from Chomsky to Zinn, representatives of the major minors (who knew Communist Party U.S.A. VP nominee Jarvis Tyner was so smart?), and the doomed campaign of a Green guy in Connecticut. There's a glimmer of a strategy debate between Frances Fox Piven and Danny Cantor of New York's own Working Families Party, which is on the verge of electing Letitia James to the New York City Council, but mostly there's just sucking of thumbs; it turns out our political system is characterized by cynicism and apathy. The only other frisson comes with the first appearance of human lightning rod Ralph Nader, whose role as spoiler is barely addressed. There's nothing like a little acid reflux of 2000 to whet your appetite for the 2004 election year.



The New York Times

Reverend Billy's Unholy War

By JONATHAN DEE

Published: August 22, 2004

On a Monday morning in Los Angeles, in a half-empty strip-mall Starbucks on Reseda Boulevard, two young women are declaring their love for each other.

"I can't keep it to myself any longer," says the one with the two-toned hair -- who, judging by the frowns and squeamish stares from the other customers, has made little enough effort to keep it to herself at all. She stands up. "I love you!" she says joyfully. "Brought to you by Monsanto!" Her companion blanches. The standing woman, it emerges, has obtained an endorsement deal for their love. Her lover, not surprisingly, has reservations, and an argument ensues.

In truth, these two women are not a couple at all; they are putting on a play, one of several being performed simultaneously inside the store. But this has not dawned yet on the legitimate customers. All they know is that their Starbucks routine has been hijacked somehow. They turn to each other, friends and strangers alike, with variants on the same question: Is this for real?

Enter, from the parking lot, Reverend Billy.

He is 6-foot-3, impossible not to look at in his white suit, clerical collar and dyed-blond pompadour. He is also not a real minister -- he is a New York-based performance artist and activist named Bill Talen -- but it

generally takes people a minute or two to figure that out, and this confusion over the exact derivation of his authority is the space in which he thrives. "Hallelujah!" he shouts through a white cardboard megaphone as he bursts through the door. "This is an abusive place, children! It has landed in this neighborhood like a space alien! The union-busting, the genetically-engineered milk, the fake bohemianism! But we don't have to be here, children! This is the Good News!"

The "actors" -- many of whom are members of the choir of Reverend Billy's church, the Church of Stop Shopping -- get up from their chairs and surround Talen, hands in the air, shouting, "Amen!" The manager of this particular Starbucks outpost is officially beside herself. She may not know what's happening, but her first instinct is to try to prevent people from taking pictures of it.

Talen (pronounced TAH-lin) makes his way to the counter, where he tries to lead the congregation in a laying of hands on the cash register. "We must exorcise this cash register," he shouts in his best Holy Roller cadence, "of the evil within it!" By this time -- as almost always happens -- one customer has taken it upon himself to come to the corporation's defense; he wrestles briefly with Talen, who, in trying to vault the counter (he is an athletic 52, but 52 nonetheless), gashes his hand on the register. Things are threatening to spin out of control, and Talen, who is on a tight schedule while in Los Angeles, has promised his wife and collaborator, Savitri Durkee (who is somewhere in the crowd), that he will stop short of being arrested.

"Let's leave now, children!" he says. "Starbucks is over!" Followed by the choir members and a few other acolytes, he exits onto Reseda Boulevard and strides toward his next engagement. As the adrenaline subsides, he looks down at the palm of his hand, which has now bled onto his white suit. "Stigmata," he smiles.

What has he just accomplished? The one person you can be sure will never again cross the threshold of the Reseda Boulevard Starbucks is Talen himself. (In fact, a subsequent court order enjoins him from coming within 250 yards of any of the 1,481 Starbucks franchises in the state of California.) But the proper measure for any street preacher is not the number of souls he saves; it is the purity of his example. The road is long and hard for an evangelical, even a fake one.

Can true activism be funny? Talen's performance would have to be categorized more as guerrilla theater than as activism; to the extent that the expansion of a business like Wal-Mart (another of Reverend Billy's *betes noires*) is ever successfully opposed -- as recently happened in Inglewood, Calif., via public referendum -- that opposition comes from unions and grass-roots political organizations, not from Brechtian street performers with self-described "bad Elvis hair."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/22/magazine/22BILLY.html?8br>



<http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0443/sottile.php>

A California court bans performance activist Reverend Billy from preaching at Starbucks

No More Coffee Talk

by **Alexis Sottile**

October 26th, 2004 11:25 AM



Exile from the latte kingdom: Bill Talen
(photo: Robert Yager)

Four years ago, theatrical provocateur Reverend Billy launched his crusade against Starbucks. The New York-based performance activist told *The Village Voice* ("**Rage Against the Caffeine**," April 25, 2000) that it was his intention to preach against corporate greed in Starbucks cafés all across Manhattan. In response, the company issued an internal memo to its NYC stores, establishing a protocol on how to handle one of the Reverend's "interventions."

Bill Talen, a/k/a Reverend Billy, has delivered on his promise, having done hundreds of political pieces inside the chain's many locations worldwide. But Starbucks, at least for the time being, doesn't have to worry about any more of

Talen's impromptu teach-ins of the Tazo set.

A California brew-haha led to the Reverend's temporary exile from the latte kingdom. On April 19, 2004, Reverend Billy performed his usual Starbucks ritual upon entering one of the chain's locations on Reseda Boulevard in Northridge, California. He prayed for the healing of the store's computerized cash register, asking for the bills that lay safely locked inside to make their way into the pockets of the families who work for low wages to harvest the coffee beans. One can rest assured that he was not praying for more of that money to go to the corporation's billionaire founder, Howard Schultz, or to aid its union-busting operations, or, in all probability, to help the chain reach its goal of expansion to 30,000 stores worldwide.

In a recent phone interview, Talen described how, as he prayed with "one hand in the air, and one hand on the thing that needs to be healed," he was grabbed from behind by an aggravated Starbucks customer, who witnesses claim was an ex-marine. Some say he was "tackled"; Talen himself describes it as a "bear hug." Either way, the Reverend was going down. After a few chaotic minutes, both Talen and the computerized cash register came away anything but healed. Talen walked away with a bleeding palm, which he and his Church of Stop Shopping choir dubbed the "Cash Register Stigmata," and the cash register's plastic guard was apparently torn.

Talen has made a career out of provoking strange scenes in chain stores. As early as 1999, he was agitating with his crucified Mickey Mouses and evangelical gesticulations at the Disney Store in Times Square. His message then was one of communal salvation: the preservation of neighborhood uniqueness and spontaneous culture in the face of what some members of the Reverend Billy project call corporations' "colonization." According to one Church of Stop Shopping choir member, "It's not usually an upsetting experience for the customers."

Nothing in the past has come close to the response that Reverend Billy and his choir received on

Reseda Boulevard. Aside from being jumped for his theatrical antics, the reaction was unusual in that a police report was filed with the LAPD, resulting in the first ever trial by jury for Talen (slated to begin in a Los Angeles criminal court on November 1).

In addition, the court issued a temporary restraining order on Talen, stipulating that he refrain from coming within 250 yards of any of California's over 1,500 Starbucks. He is also barred from entering any Starbucks in the U.S. until this injunction expires in July of 2007. Ironically, the first judge assigned to the case had to recuse himself from the upcoming trial because of his shareholder status in Starbucks Corporation.

Talen was arrested for his theatrical protests during last November's Buy Nothing Day festivities in New York, though he was dismissed without charges. (For Talen, a night in the Tombs in defense of free speech is nothing to be ashamed of.) But the misdemeanor charges filed against him in California—destruction of property and obstruction of business—are something totally new.

Art Goldberg, Talen's attorney from the Working People's Law Center in Los Angeles, says that the security camera tape of the event is in Talen's favor: "After seeing the video, [it was clear that] he didn't disrupt much. The other person was an aggressor."

Professor Tony Perucci, who had invited Talen to teach his communications students at Cal State Northridge, was also at Starbucks that day. He feels that the prosecution of this activist could only happen "outside the spotlight of New York, where he's so well known."

While Starbucks is not bringing the suit against Talen, as would happen in a civil case, it is the corporation that is named as "victim" in the proceedings. Ever alert to corporate ironies, those in Reverend Billy's camp are quick to point out that the "victim," in their reading of the temporary restraining order, is the "computerized cash register itself."

Talen hopes to use the trial as a springboard to air the concerns of Starbucks workers, and to highlight the company's lack of real commitment to fair-trade practices. Though he has difficulty seeing the cash register as a victim, he still would like to heal it.