

Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping

This 'Reverend' preaches with punch

By Janice Page

Boston Globe

Published: 05/02/2003



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