

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 serio-comic 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.

Talent 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 willier 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.