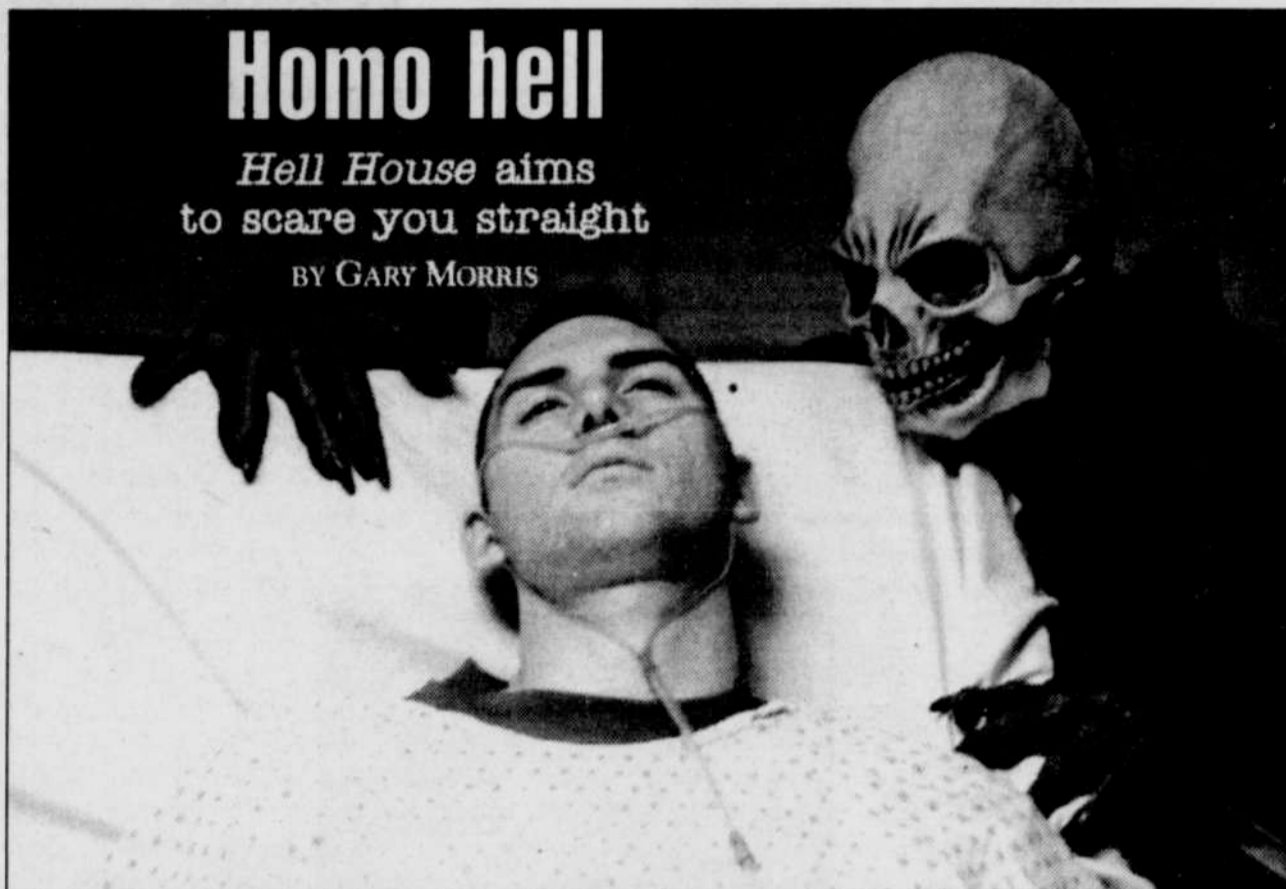


FILM

Homo hell

Hell House aims to scare you straight

BY GARY MORRIS



The scourge of AIDS in *Hell House*, playing Oct. 25 to 31 at Clinton Street Theater

Texas has always produced more than its fair share of oddities, from executions of mentally retarded prisoners to lawsuits against Oprah for dissing beef to that zany illiterate we call our president.

Joining this august company is *Hell House*, a fundamentalist Christian spookhouse featuring Grand Guignol tableaux of botched abortions, dying AIDS patients, rave rapes and that perennial Christian fave, the everlasting fires of hell, rendered in high school variety show style with colored fogs and golden foil.

Hell House, from journalist-turned-director George Ratliff, is a fascinating cinéma vérité look at this tightly run cultural phenomenon. Staged by Trinity Church in Cedar Hill, just outside Dallas (one of those Assembly of God operations), *Hell House* claims 75,000 visitors during the past 10 years of operation, with 15,000 "scared straight" souls instantly converted to the joys of the Christian lifestyle.

What inspired this success rate? Perhaps it was the "hospital" sequence with beds containing "abortion girl," a screaming teen-ager lying in a pool of blood, and "dying AIDS guy," another screaming teen-ager whose "choice" of homosexuality and denunciation of Christ assures him a prime place at Beelzebub's knee.

These hokey productions combine the latest technology (video monitors, etc.) with very old-school techniques: corny dialogue, screaming, Disneyland haunted house sound effects and boilerplate messages of dire consequences to any behavior that deviates from an exceedingly narrow norm.

It's easy to laugh off this stuff as yet another wacky phenomenon from the heartland. Heck, it could even be read as naive art. But the

uneasy parade of little kids and young teens through what look like outtakes from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* may make you want to dial the child abuse hot line.

The religiousos running these shows talk a lot about the "susceptibility" of youth to the horrors of Satan, queerness, sex before marriage, drunken driving and more. But they're equally guilty in trying to induce trauma in their audiences, oblivious to the effect these chambers of horrors have on impressionable minds.

Hell House the movie (playing Oct. 25 to 31 at Clinton Street Theater) is refreshingly neutral in

treating this material. It simply records—in painstaking detail—the complicated process of choosing actors, building sets, rehearsing and the show itself, leavening it with glimpses of the sometimes pathetic lives of the people putting it on.

But one thing that shines through is the organizers' enthusiasm for what they're doing. It wouldn't be overreaching to conclude that these supposedly devout folk are a little too excited at their bloody pastiche. You can almost see them getting off on images of date-raped teen-agers, spread-eagled abortion "victims" and the other unfortunate denizens of this kitschy hell. **J**

OUT ON DVD

STRAIGHT

StageDirect
Seattle writer and performer David Schmdar, who went undercover in 1998 to infiltrate the controversial homosexual conversion movement, is a bright spot in queer culture.

In addition to the original newspaper article, his research inspired *Straight*, a one-man stage show just released on DVD. (The performance was shot on digital video before an appreciative audience at Portland's CoHo Theatre.)

In marked contrast to David Drake's *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, another recent gay one-man show filmed and released on DVD, Schmdar's piece is relevant, well considered and affecting. As he tells his story in a laid-back, laconic manner, painstaking honesty leads him to skirt easy demonizations to create a more complex picture of his experiences.

He's quotably provocative; tidbits include: "If being gay was my impediment, then pride was the cure. I came to realize that there is no impediment, I required no cure, and 'pride' is as stupid as shame" and, regarding the "distant father" explanation proffered by the ex-gay gurus, "If anything, my fagginess was the cause of our distance, not the result of it."

Never mean-spirited, he's a thoughtful, charming, attractive guy (you can keep your primpy *Queer as Folk* stars—Schmdar's affability and intelligence make him a crush-worthy star in this writer's constellation) seeking insight into his own sexuality while explaining his problems with those who would gently intimidate vulnerable people into denouncing theirs. He uses his insulting yet frequently humorous ex-gay encounters as a catalyst to reflect on coming out, his eventual



ambivalence toward the gay community and his bemusement at his parents' alternately dorky and touching attempts to embrace their queer son.

There's little sentimentality here, and Schmdar's descriptions of his fellow future heterosexuals are mostly played for laughs. However, the story of Allison—a young, attractive "sports dyke" who so desperately wants to accept what she's told is God's plan for her gender identity that she mummifies herself in a Laura Ashley dress—is intensely saddening.

Schmdar is more David Sedaris than Tony Kushner; he avoids self-righteous oversimplification like the plague. Instead, he attempts to understand the motivations of conversion perpetrators and their often all-too-willing victims while testing and refining his opposition to their insupportable ideals and methods. He's a truth-seeker, not a cheerleader, and what he gives us in *Straight* is well earned and real.

—Christopher McQuinn

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Criterion Collection
Recently, in these very pages, I excoriated Oliver Parker's film of Oscar Wilde's masterfully comic 1895 play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wilde's ingeniously airy words and concepts, I argued, were sunk by Parker's mundane style, which somehow made the gay author's fresh, nonchalantly subversive wit seem stuffy, sluggish and dull.

How fortuitous, then, that the Criterion Collection released a DVD of Antony Asquith's 1952 *Earnest*, which is all the things Parker's version wasn't, at the same time as its errant descendant. Here, we see Wilde's play



filmed in a truly Wildean (read: florid, flamboyant, irreverent) style.

Wilde's protagonists are two rakish friends, golden boy Jack Worthing (played with the appropriate self-serious buffoonery by Michael Redgrave) and playboy Algernon Moncrieff (the dapper, sassy Michael Denison). The two attempt to mislead their prospective mates, Gwendolyn (Joan Greenwood) and Cecily (Dorothy Tutin), as to their names, a deception necessitated by the two ladies' ridiculous but heartfelt insistence that they wouldn't be caught dead marrying a man named anything but Ernest—the only moniker that "really inspires confidence."

Aided by the thundering disapproval of Worthing's potential mother-in-law, Lady Bracknell (the incomparably ostentatious Dame Edith Evans), the pair dig themselves deeper and deeper into hilarious misunderstanding and coincidence, all topped off with a giddily improbable Maraschino cherry of a happy ending.

Crises of identity and situation are handled with aplomb by Wilde's exemplarily satirical characters—purely social creatures who have no real "inside" psychologically speaking and so always have a witty remark and careless air available for even the most awkward circumstances. Wilde considered any "seriousness" of tone a grave offense, but *Earnest* is as pure and singular in sensibility as the greatest operas.

Through Asquith's deliciously artificial sensibility, *Earnest* can be read as a skeptical outsider's view, both of heterosexual convention (Wilde dutifully played hetero and paid the Victorian-era price—two years of hard labor—when his homosexuality was revealed) and the absurdity inherent in all socially regulated human interaction.

This Technicolor *Earnest* is simultaneously the sharp satire it was always meant to be and a big, gaudy, delicious cinematic dessert. Wilde and Asquith make perfect co-confectioners.

—CM

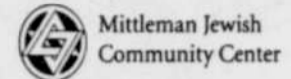
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