



# AND THE WINNER FOR BEST ABORTION GIRL IS:

## Performance and Religious Identity in Evangelical Hell Houses

BY PATRICK MOLONEY

REVIEWED BY DR. JOSEPH LAYCOCK AND

DR. NATASHA MIKLES

EDITED BY CHEYANNE CLAGETT

Hell Houses have terrified spectators for the last forty years. Developing first as a religious haunted house and eventually morphing into a sensation, Hell Houses have been a topic for many researchers due to their ability to scare people into belief. However, much of this rhetoric is reductionistic of Hell Houses, claiming they are formed only to scare. The research laid out here tries to understand the connection between identity creation and performance through the analysis of George Ratliff's 2001 documentary *Hell House*. The Evangelical Christian identity is laced with

historical subtext and built through a multitude of religious figures and movements. Specifically, three religious figures or movements are fundamental in understanding Hell Houses: George Whitefield during the First Great Awakening, Aimee Semple McPherson and the Pentecostal movement, and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. Performance is one tool harnessed by preachers in the Evangelical Christian tradition. My research attempts to explain that Hell Houses are not just events made to scare, but to construct Evangelical Christian identity and a political agenda through performance.

Since 1991, the Trinity Church in Cedar Hill, Texas, has performed a “creative alternative to the traditional haunted house” that features varying hellish scenes that range from year to year and offer “real life situations” meant to be “ambiguous” for the spectators (“Hell House”). Hell Houses have been described as nothing more than “a spatial sermon that culminates in a virtual tour of Hell.” These attractions portray “young Christian actors moaning and writhing in the flickering redness of special effects” (Jackson 42). Prior research on these performances depicts them as bastions of fear mongering used to incite terror in the viewers in a ham-fisted effort to inspire conversions. Prior research additionally focuses on the fear-based “scare-to-salvation” and “religious feelings” produced through viewing these performances (Jackson 42). For example, fear is what first comes to mind when seeing a depressed adolescent commit suicide or an AIDS victim die in the hospital. While such a visceral reaction is appropriate, research which focuses only on this reaction is ultimately reductionistic; it serves to explain away Hell Houses as a simplistic expression of Evangelical intolerance.

There is more to these performances than simply arousing fear in the unbaptized and unchurched; both watching and performing in a Hell House bolster the “saved” and “unsaved” identities central to Evangelical Christianity. Fear and performance together, therefore, create this identity for those who participate—an identity that is explicitly political. From the research, the Evangelical Christian identity can be defined as non-denominational, conversion-focused, and aimed toward social transformation (Carter and Porter 4). Moreover, through analyzing the 2001 documentary *Hell House* directed by George Ratliff, this paper will argue

that Evangelical Christians perform Hell Houses not simply as a means of fear-based conversion, but also as a means of creating and cementing Evangelical Christian identity as an integral component of a larger political agenda.

## **Understanding Hell Houses and Primary Source *Hell House* (2001)**

Hell Houses represent a twist on the regular horror spectacles of the Halloween season. Hell Houses originated in 1972 from the Reverend Jerry Falwell’s youth ministry at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. His event was titled Scaremare and was “designed to illustrate the consequences of sin with documentary realism in the context of a haunted house” (Bivins 132). Scaremare was ultimately more of a religious haunted house but was equally influential in the development of Hell Houses, such as the one at Trinity Church.

More recently, Ratliff’s 2001 documentary was filmed in the height of Hell Houses’ popularity. At the start of the film, the audience is first introduced to the Trinity Church community in the preliminary planning phases of the Hell House. Planning for the Hell House begins in August in preparation for a public opening in early October. For most Hell Houses, there is a range of seven to ten scenes. There is a great deal of discussion surrounding the exact content of these scenes, but Tim Ferguson, Trinity Church’s youth pastor, states that the Hell House deals with themes of “family violence, suicide, abortion, drugs, alcohol, [and] drunkenness” (qtd. in Ratliff). A major focus is placed on themes culturally relevant at the time; for example, at the 2000 Hell House depicted in the documentary, a scene inspired by the Columbine Shooting is

portrayed. After selecting the relevant social themes, the church implements a creative twist, making the scenes explicitly religious. Following scene development, scripts are written for each respective scene. What then ensues is a complex auditioning process where a great number of church congregants vie for specific roles. There are only four major female parts, with the “suicide girl” and “abortion girl” among the most prized by the congregants (Ratliff). Copious numbers of volunteers assist with the physical labor in the production, as there are complex set designs and an intricate ensemble of technical and acting roles.

For many of the individuals involved in the production, this work is not only theatrical, but spiritual as well. Ratliff’s documentary focuses both on the Hell House event and the spiritual perspectives of the church’s congregation. The burning question throughout the documentary is “Why do these Evangelical Christians believe what they believe? Why do they think this is appropriate?” As noted by Jason Bivins, Brian Jackson, and the documentarian Ratliff himself, Hell Houses certainly aim to produce fear in their audience. Brian Jackson, a researcher in English rhetoric, states in his article on Hell Houses that such events employ “*argumentum ad baculum*” or the “warning that some bad or scary outcome will occur if the respondent does not carry out a recommended action” (44).

Jackson links this contemporary religious technique with similar efforts to arouse fear through religious sermons in the First Great Awakening, citing a connection to Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was a prominent Protestant preacher during this period and was known for cementing “hell fire rhetoric” in his sermons. This rhetoric would later be influential in serving as “a prototype”

for Hell Houses (Jackson 44). Bivins, a religious studies scholar, posits in his 2008 book that “erotics of fear” are at play, where Hell Houses gleefully represent “sin and evil” to “establish security of conservative evangelical culture and belief” (141). Such emphasis on producing fear as a primary means to conversion is evident in the way Hell House participants discuss their work in the documentary. Applying this idea to youth pastor Tim Ferguson, the documentary shows him rhetorically asking his committee, “Is our youth ministry, and even our church, driven by fear? No. Is fear a part of it? Absolutely.” Ferguson later states in an orientation meeting that “we’re competing for lost souls” and “we’re trying to partner with God to bring them to eternal life” (qtd. in Ratliff).

Many scholars, therefore, are taking the statements of the Trinity Church at face value and stating that this event is primarily about fear-based conversions. However, more is going on here. Perhaps if it were actually all about fear, there would not be such a rush to play “abortion girl.” There is a complex interplay between performance, identity, and religion on display in the documentary which remains largely unexamined by contemporary commentators. What this paper seeks to understand is how Hell Houses reflect

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the roots of the Evangelical Christian identity historically and what is the nexus between performance, identity, and political agenda.

### **Evangelical Christian Identity**

As with the understanding of any widely encompassing identity, religious identity is fluid and can be understood best through its historical context. To understand the development of contemporary Evangelical Christian identity and its deployment in the production of Hell Houses, we must discern three historical events in Evangelicalism in America: George Whitefield and the First Great Awakening, Aimee Semple McPherson and the Pentecostal Movement, and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. These events are not the only pivotal times through which Evangelical Christians have cemented performance as a foundational part of their identity, but their effects continue to be evident in the Trinity Church community.

In the history and development of Evangelical Christianity, George Whitefield was a well-known English Methodist preacher. Whitefield was a revolutionary in his religious innovation of "rhetoric and communications" during the period of American history that has come to be called the First Great Awakening, roughly between the 1730s and 1740s. The purpose and importance of the First Great Awakening was the creation of a "new religious enthusiasm" amongst the church (Carter and Porter 1). The spread of Evangelical Christianity was influential in the transformation of social norms. Whitefield's ability to persuade was particularly influential in this transformation toward an Evangelical spirit. His presentations to huge audiences were meant to catalyze a "dialogue between the speaker and the hearer." Whitefield, unlike some of his contemporaries, understood the "rhetoric of sensation" and was able to rouse the

passions of his spectators (Carter and Porter 4). This resulting blur between church and theater would be influential not only to the eventual creation of an Evangelical Christian identity, but also to the legacy of sensationalism that would contribute to the modern Hell House. A sermon that particularly exhibited his theatricality was centered on the Biblical scene of "Abraham Offering His Son." During this famous sermon, Whitefield stopped and wept to "momentarily halt the discourse" (Carter and Porter 4). Without prescience, Whitefield would usher in revivals, theatricality, and performance as institutions in the Evangelical Christian tradition.

Roughly a hundred years later, Evangelical Christianity would continue to transform. The Pentecostals were a religious movement born out of the Azusa street revivals in Los Angeles. Although starting on the West coast, this movement spread rapidly throughout America and the global South, particularly after the 1914 meeting in Hot Springs, Arkansas, during which the movement became separated into several other denominations. The Pentecostal movement was a theology and religious practice. While not every Evangelical engages in Pentecostal style worship today, most Pentecostals see themselves as part of the Evangelical Christian movement. In fact, there are hundreds of Pentecostal denominations today (Ahlstrom 820). Components of Pentecostal practice influenced the larger understanding of Evangelical identity. The use of "performance" as a part of everyday church was a large aspect of the Pentecostal influence. Ministers used their authority to "call down spontaneous eruptions of speaking in tongues" which was characteristic of these worship services (Fitzgerald 212). The purpose of speaking in tongues was to reinforce a belief that

“the supernatural was real, present, powerful, and often even visible” (Bauer 46). However, this defining aspect was not the only distinctive feature of this church. They also have “a strong belief in divine healing, a distrust of medical care, and an extremely Puritanical code of personal behavior” (Ahlstrom 820). Compared to non-Pentecostal services at the time, the performative aspects of the Pentecostal tradition were very distinct. The Pentecostals’ religious evangelism and these unique practices did not deter attendees. Rather, small aspects of Pentecostalism disseminated throughout other churches in forms of folk religion or popular beliefs about the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostals’ adherence to these religious practices was influential in cementing a “theological[ly] conservative” identity and outlook (Ahlstrom 820). These factors were influential not only in forming a religious identity, but also in impacting performance through the practice of speaking tongues. While Pentecostal Christians do not consider them a performance, these various actions represent an outward manifestation of what are supposedly internal states.

Aimee Semple McPherson was a Pentecostal emblematic for her use of performance. During the late 1920s and 30s, her style of preaching utilized the increasingly popular performative aspects of the Pentecostal movement. Semple McPherson was a product of the Pentecostal movement and converted in a revival. She has been characterized as “a prophet, evangelist, storyteller, and performer” (Maddux 295). Her style of church became its own denomination of the Pentecostal movement, known as the Foursquare Church. During the development of her church, certain distinctions emerged among Evangelical Christians. Evangelical discourse increasingly included “a narrative, experiential framework toward reaching

more people” that thrived “in revivals and worship services” (Maddux 295). She would later become a popular preacher and sought to bring the “Christian gospel to mass audiences” either through revivals or her Angelus Temple (Maddux 306). These massive revivals featured hundreds of believers who “spoke in tongues and convulsed on the floor” (Maddux 312).

In 1926, McPherson was accused of faking her kidnapping to Los Angeles police and was prosecuted by a grand jury, but her case was later dismissed by the Los Angeles District Attorney. Her sermon the following Sunday after the grand jury verdict featured “seven young actors made up as demons, rising out of painted craters, and holding a meeting to discredit McPherson’s character.” The sermon ended with two more actors dressed as angels where “one brandished the sword of truth, while the other carried a chain to bind the devil and his lies” (Bauer 53). These theatrical performances served a clear message that the Devil sought to ruin her reputation; although she was never convicted, the mere accusation of her wrongdoing was enough for her to use her religion to create a particular narrative for her followers. In the broad perspective of Evangelical Christianity, she was influential in popularizing performance and cementing it as part of conversion technique, which would later impact the development of Hell House performances.

Lastly, Jerry Falwell’s impact on the political aspects of contemporary Evangelical Christian identity was monumental. Falwell’s political activism was catalyzed following the 1954 case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Although common perception of the religious right view *Roe v. Wade* as the catalyst for their political involvement, it was in fact this case as well as *Green v.*

*Kennedy* in 1970 and *Green v. Connally* in 1977. When the federal government started to enforce desegregation in public schools, private religious white-only K-12 academies were formed in retaliation. The result of these two latter cases was the United States district court for the District of Columbia ruling that “racially discriminatory private schools are not entitled to the Federal tax exemption provided for charitable, educational institutions” (Balmer). This situation started the fundamental undercurrents for the religious right and Falwell’s Moral Majority.

Later in the 1970s, Falwell worked with Paul Weyrich, founder of the Heritage Foundation, and other religious conservatives to politically advocate against school desegregation and galvanize religious conservatives. His 1979 formation and organization of the political organization and action group Moral Majority defined, inspired, and mobilized a “Christian agenda” against what he saw as the rising tide of secular humanism. In addition, Falwell

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and Weyrich worked with Francis A. Schaffer, a conservative political activist, to goad fervor over the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* court decision (Balmer). Most political observers at the time did not anticipate the rise of the Christian right. Religion had previously been relegated to the private sphere and understood as something separate from politics. However, a growing tide of people such as Pat Robertson, Phyllis Schlafly, and, of course, Jerry Falwell himself began to push back against what they saw as a

culture that “had fallen into evil ways” and “jeopardized their covenant with God.” Falwell pushed for Christians to become involved in their government or “lose their freedom”(Fitzgerald 307). By politicizing Evangelicalism, Evangelical Christians gained a platform to persuade society toward their identity. This persuasion was funneled through cooperation with politicians such as Ronald Reagan. Falwell’s initiatives reverberated throughout Evangelical Christianity. He even started the process of convincing fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and conservative Southern Baptists to “work for common goals without compromising their theology” (Fitzgerald 318). Falwell’s impact on Evangelical Christianity transformed their beliefs into something explicitly political. As a result, Falwell’s impact on the Evangelical Christian identity is crucial to understanding the purpose of Hell Houses.

When combining the historical developments in Evangelical Christianity and the conclusions of the documentary, there is a clear pattern of tools that church leaders have used to build identity. In the very beginnings of Evangelical Christianity, George Whitefield established theater and sensation as a powerful tool to connect to congregations and elicit religious devotion. Aimee Semple McPherson and the Pentecostals took this revivalism and added other performative actions to continue belief. Lastly, Jerry Falwell’s political organizing shifted the agenda of Evangelical Christianity. The culturally conservative politics of Evangelical Christians combined with the performative aspect of revivals provide the optimal breeding grounds for the Hell House. As we shall see in the next section, they go beyond merely

fear-based conversion efforts to act as an important force to build identity within Evangelical Christian circles.

## Performativity and Hell Houses

As a theatrical experience, Hell Houses are a performance aimed at transforming culture. In one sermon shown in Ratliff's *Hell House*, the head pastor states, "Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to infect the culture. We are set to do the same thing Jesus came to do... We are here to infiltrate the culture. We are here, to expose the futility of selfishness and the demonic influence." However, a great deal of this paper is trying to understand how such performative aspects relate to the development of the Evangelical Christian identity.

Though focusing primarily on the development of gender, Judith Butler is a pioneer in theorizing performance as a constructor of identity. Butler argues that gender, and indeed all identity, is a fundamentally performative act—a trait which she calls "performativity." Performativity can be thought of as a nonverbal social action meant to regulate identity. Butler posits that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (34). While Butler theorized primarily about gender, we can apply the idea of "performativity" to a wide variety of identity constructions. As gender is performative, we may argue that the Evangelical Christian identity, and all religious identities for that matter, are also constructed through performativity. Hell Houses, therefore, represent a site of performative construction of identity. For example, Butler discusses how Drag is an exaggerated performance of the female

identity (185). Likewise, Hell Houses are an exaggeration of religious devotion. For many, the drastic depiction of Hell in our unwise actions is the only way to convince others of salvation. These depictions reinforce a dichotomy between the "saved" and the "unsaved," thus reinforcing an Evangelical Christian identity through the performance of Hell Houses. In the latter half of the *Hell House* documentary, it is reiterated that the crew is "competing for lost souls" and that they are "trying to partner with God to bring them eternal life" (Ratliff).

Just as gender is a construction of social institutions, religious identity is a construction of institutions such as the church and its rituals. Butler argues that "gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the ideas of gender" (190). With respect to religious belief, this identity would not exist without the rituals and performances of the religion. Evangelical Christians speaking in tongues, attending religious services, and putting on Hell Houses are all constructed facets of religious identity. The "punishments that attend with not agreeing to believe in them" are many when speaking of religious identity (Butler 190). The agenda, religion, and ideology are all tied to social community; failure to participate in these religious acts leads to ostracism and isolation from the community. This threat of isolation is a psychological exploitation

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by Hell Houses. Furthermore, by performing in and spectating a Hell

House, individuals are reminded of their damnation, religious identity, and personal values. The revivals utilized by Whitefield and Pentecostals play into a similar psychological aspect that Hell Houses do when concerning community. When spectators finish the tour of the Hell House, they are asked to reaffirm their faith based on the experience. Ultimately, they are asked to conform to this Evangelical Christian identity and truth. Although Hell Houses are not the only factor to identity creation, they play a part in the same vein that revivals do.

Butler states that gender is an act, with this performative action requiring repetition. Religious identity, too, is built through “reenactment and reexperience.”. Those that perform in Hell Houses perform each scene repeatedly. With each meeting, rehearsal, and tour the actors “ritualize” the experience (Butler 191). They are convinced of the legitimacy of their feelings towards abortion, homosexuality, and religion. Religious identity, just like gender, is determined by time and the “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 191). This identity building goes beyond Hell Houses and encompasses the whole church. The repetition of church attendance, Holy Communion, and even the songs sung in community meetings also feed into this identity over time.

Attendance of the Hell House is also a public action. The pressure to conform to religious identity espoused by the church is received by spectators and the crew. Involvement, technical advising, and acting to large audiences builds this identity. The “appearance of substance” Butler argues is where is the audience and the performer “come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (192). We can rightly assume that in the conclusion of the Hell House that those who performed the characters and

those that witnessed them are further tied to the religious identity of Evangelical Christianity. The relationship between Hell House performers and spectators is a two-way street that reaffirms or changes the identities of both parties.

Butler’s concepts of performativity, when applied to Hell Houses, explain a complex aspect not explored by previous research. Hell Houses use psychological exploitation, repetition, and public action to build pieces of Evangelical Christian identity for individuals. In addition to supporting preexisting concepts of identity, those who enact Hell Houses use performance to shift the current political narrative to their own beliefs.

## **The Politics of Hell Houses**

Hell Houses do more than simply reinforce Evangelical Christian identity, they also explicitly orient that identity toward political action and social transformation. The cultural politics of Hell Houses are an overlooked aspect of their performance. A great deal of the beliefs espoused by Evangelical Christians and specifically Hell Houses are deeply conservative. The connection can be drawn back to Falwell’s Moral Majority between the 1970s and 1980s, as well as Robertson’s Christian Coalition in the 1990s. These two movements not only cemented the idea that Evangelical Christians had a culture to fight for, but also strengthened the conservative ideals already present amongst them. This cultural fight was even more poignant in the context of *Hell House*. Since *Hell House* takes place in the aftermath of 9/11 and other tragedies such as the Columbine shooting, there was a push to reassert conservative Christian values amongst Evangelical Christian communities. Evangelical Christians saw these tragedies as *opportunities* to gain converts. In Dave Cullen’s book *Columbine*, he describes



how Evangelical Christians descended on Columbine. Evangelical Christians saw it as “an obligation to stand up for Jesus,” and one Evangelical Christian pastor even approved of “using the massacre for recruitment” (206). This period cemented a political conversation about the Evangelical Christianity and conservative political values.

Cultural politics, Evangelicalism, and the concept of performativity combine to build a potent formula for identity creation in these Christian communities. In Ratliff’s documentary, one scene connects the moralizing and political agenda of Hell Houses. The spectators are introduced to a young gay man dying of AIDS in a hospital room assisted on his side by his female friend. A demon leers over him, mocking him for “choosing” his gay lifestyle, insinuating that it was the cause of his AIDS. Just after we are introduced to this young man, a young girl is brought in hemorrhaging from a botched abortion pill. This dichotomy is critical in understanding the Evangelical Christian political agenda. In the boy’s final moments of life, he is tormented by images of Hell, and his female friend urges him to “give [his] life to Jesus.”. He yells “I hate you, God” and rejects faith, and it is implied the demon in the hospital room takes him to Hell. Just as the girl is about to die, she pleads “God help me” and is saved in her final moments (Ratliff). The scene clearly communicates that Evangelical Christians understand what will damn a person to Hell and that an adherence to their identity is the only salvation.

The images of the scenes described above serve a purpose. Politics are integral to the creation of a group identity, just as action and performance contribute to an individual identity. By presenting these contrasting images, the audience is forced to accept that members of the LGBTQIA+ community

are in fact deserving of going to Hell for their poor choices. In a scene from the documentary, a group of teenagers confronts the security guard after the performance, angry at the suggestion that the gay man would go to Hell (Ratliff). This situation reasserts a claim made throughout the documentary that Evangelical Christians can know with certainty what activities will damn people to Hell. Most Evangelical Christians who attend a Hell House are either believers or half-way to becoming a believer. The performance serves to construct a moral sensibility for Evangelical Christian spectators; they are “good” and their secular opponents, such as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, are “evil”. Thus, Hell Houses help Evangelical Christians maintain their beliefs and political agenda by communicating them to other people and making it clear that they believe these views come from God Himself.

There is great historical context that overlays the social dynamics of the Evangelical Christian church community. Falwell wrote that America faced a moral crisis that impacted the sanctity of the family. He claimed that abortions, homosexuality, and drugs were all proof of a movement toward an “amoral society where nothing is absolutely right or absolutely wrong” (qtd. in Fitzgerald 366). The larger argument was that Christians needed to take up arms “against social ills.” The Christian coalition urged a “pro-family” political viewpoint and the protection of “traditional values” (qtd. in Fitzgerald 366). The close connection to institutions of power such as the President reinforces the connection between Evangelicalism and conservatism. But overall, this political agenda is part of building the Evangelical Christian identity that exists within the context of Hell Houses. It reiterates that some are deserving of Heaven and some

are damned to Hell, with this attitude in line with the conservative political agenda. The purpose of Hell Houses is to tie together the Evangelical Christian identity, religious performativity, and the political agenda of this group.

## Conclusion

In the last scene of the documentary, Ratliff leaves us with the Evangelical Christian understanding that the end times are near, and our salvation should be of utmost importance. This urgent reiteration of evangelism connects to the understanding that those who have viewed a Hell House must conform or be damned. The whole documentary serves a purpose to reinforce the institutions through which identity is created. The people who participated are also the products of the performance. From its start in 1991 to 2001, the film states that 75,000 people have visited the Hell House at Trinity Church, with 15,000 converting or recommitting (Ratliff).

Within the context of the history and politics of Evangelical Christianity, Hell Houses play a unique role. Just as other Evangelical Christian communities use performance, so does the community who attends Trinity Church. Hell Houses use fear as a tactic not only to urge attendance in their congregation, but also to reinforce identity. Identity, as discussed, is complex. There are multiple psychological, social, and religious tactics used implicitly and explicitly by Evangelical Christian communities. Although the Trinity Church and any community that performs Hell Houses would say they only serve a religious function, that perspective would be reductive of the history and research surrounding these performances. They reinforce what it means to be an Evangelical Christian. Hell Houses moreover serve the political agenda that Evangelical Christians enforce in their community; according

to them, their political viewpoint is not a gray issue, but black-and-white. When spectating and performing a Hell House, personal salvation is on the line. These performative experiences show that it takes constant work to maintain the Evangelical Christian worldview, which might disintegrate otherwise. In the larger perspective, Hell Houses are a facet of a constant effort to justify beliefs and communicate them to a wider audience beyond true believers. After all, salvation is on the line.

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