

# A Hell of a Ride

by Greg Hartman

This Halloween, thousands of “Hell Houses” and “Judgement Houses” worldwide will pack in visitors, each of whom will cheerfully spend hours in line and \$10 or more for the chance to “tour your final destination.”

**I**t's 11 o'clock: Are your kids in hell yet? Churches and youth ministries once built haunted houses to attract youth and funds. Now they're sending kids to hell—a sophisticated, multimedia, mass-marketed hell, but hell nonetheless.

Halloween scare tactics are nothing new. Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, for instance, has sponsored Scare Mare, a mix of traditional haunted house scenes and eternal judgement scenes, since the '70s. But in recent years, some ministries have been staging hell bigger and better than ever and marketing kits to help do-it-yourselfers light their own eternal flames:

New Creation Evangelism has signed up hundreds of “Judgement House Covenant Churches,” each of which receives a script and plans for building a Judgement House. Sunshine Evangelistic Association puts hell on wheels with “Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames,” a traveling stage production depicting the afterlife.

But the granddaddy of them all—in terms of controversy, at least—is Hell House, brainchild of the Rev. Keenan Roberts, senior associate pastor of

# A Kinder, Gentler and Better Approach?

According to Dan Southern, president of the American Tract Society (ATS) evangelism will come home for Halloween. Instead of the more traditional idea of Christians meeting others in public places and sharing the gospel with them, ATS believes Halloween is a great time to reverse the process.

“Ten years ago many Christians would attend a church or even plan an outing on Halloween evening...this year Christians are planning to stay home Halloween night...and wait at the door with candy treats and gospel tracts.”

Such an approach seems to be far less in-your-face and more Christ-centered than the fear and scare manipulation of Halloween hell houses.

Abundant Life Christian Center in Arvada, Colorado. Hell House premiered in Arvada, a Denver suburb, in 1995, and has grown more elaborate every year—last year’s Hell House tours lasted 45 minutes and covered 30,000 square feet.

Nearly 500 other churches have purchased Hell House kits. The main Hell House in Denver is wildly popular: It has hosted more than 33,000 guests—6,000 in 1999 alone. And every year, hundreds of visitors sign decision cards, proclaiming that they have trusted Christ for the first time.

## Get Thee in Front of Me!

“Hell House is the most politically incorrect thing you’ve ever seen in your life,” Roberts says, “but it’s also the most spiritually direct.”

No exaggeration. Roberts, who writes all the scripts for Hell House, favors the Universal Studios assault-on-the-senses approach: Blinding lights, ear-shattering volume, interactive 360-degree dioramas and burning Limburger cheese. No, really.

Tour guides are demons, who introduce the scenes and cackle at their handiwork. “We’ve got your alternative lifestyle, allright—in hell!” a demon shrieks, pointing

at a gay AIDS victim lying in a casket. “We told him he was born that way! Who in the world would believe that?” Hell House has also graphically depicted abortions, drug overdoses, school shootings, occult worship and drunk-driving deaths.

“I don’t know what we’ll be doing this year,” Roberts says, “but we always do something on abortion and something on homosexuality. And we’ll always show hell and heaven. The demon guides are really just preaching truth from the dark side of the pulpit.”

After about half a dozen such scenes, visitors see hell, replete with strobe lights, smoke machines, bellowing demons, the aforementioned Limburger and the damned screaming in agony. Satan himself confronts visitors, boasting of his power—until Jesus arrives. Satan takes a powder, Jesus takes the visitors to heaven, and everyone is invited to become a Christian.

## Fire at Will

Not surprisingly, Hell House is the target of vociferous criticism. Roberts has received death threats—most in response to Hell House’s stance on homosexuality. The main Hell House in Arvada gets so many protesters every year

that the church sets up a shelter for them and serves them coffee and doughnuts.

“If we worried about everybody’s reaction,” Roberts says, “we would never be doing this in the first place. We consider what we need to say and what we want young people to hear, and then we say it.”

Christians’ responses are mixed. “I think they have a good thing going,” says Ruben Montijo, a Colorado Springs youth pastor. “The world uses these tactics to push immorality—I say right back at ‘em.”

Others aren’t so sure. Matt Stickel, 12, a member of Montijo’s youth group, thinks Hell House is using immoral methods in pursuit of Godly goals. “You can’t use evil to do good things,” he says. “People aren’t getting saved there because they love Jesus; they’re just scared of hell.”

Roberts counters, “Fear is a great motivator. We are not communicating fear for fear’s sake; we are communicating reality and truth. We’re saying, ‘You’re living in a burning house, and it’s about to crash down on you.’”

Roberts isn’t worried that he might be serving his critics a stereotypical bigot on a silver platter. “We’re an easy target for somebody who just wants to spew out rhetoric,” he says. “I don’t care. They say that we’re causing all the shame and confusion that the homosexual experiences—absolutely wrong. We’re saying, ‘You were not born this way; God did not do this to you. Jesus has all of the power to overcome and to set you free.’ It’s a conservative message presented in a very nonconservative way.”

## Billy Graham vs. Hulk Hogan

Hell House might be no more than an old-style crusade dressed up like a WCW match, and it’s unmistakably popular—but is it a wise method of reaching youth? We don’t use topless choirs or keg parties to attract seekers to our churches, no matter how successful they might be. If the means

ILLUSTRATION BY MONTE WOLVERTON—PTM

# A Taste of Hell

Here's our parody of what you might find in an actual Hell House. In keeping with Dante's vision of Hell, sinners are punished according to the sins that attracted them while they were still alive. Well, okay—maybe there are no Hell Houses quite like this one. We assure you that no cartoon characters were burned during the creation of this illustration. Kids, don't try this at home. But seriously, is fear and intimidation really the best way to share the good news of the gospel?

## 3. So You Want to Be a Liberal...

Visitors must listen in horror as Al Gore speaks for hours on end in a boring monotone maddening to even the most dedicated Democrat.

## 4. Forfeit Your Fun

In the attic, youthful visitors are forced to turn over their MP3 players with secular music, gangsta rap CDs or Harry Potter books and the like, which are later incinerated in fires below.

## 5. Turn or Burn

Deacons with cattle prods attempt to persuade each visitor to sign a document agreeing to jump through legalistic denominational hoops for the rest of their lives.

## 2. Berserk One-Armed Bandits

The results of gambling and card playing are graphically illustrated as a demon-possessed slot machine attacks gamblers.

## 6. Slice of Paradise

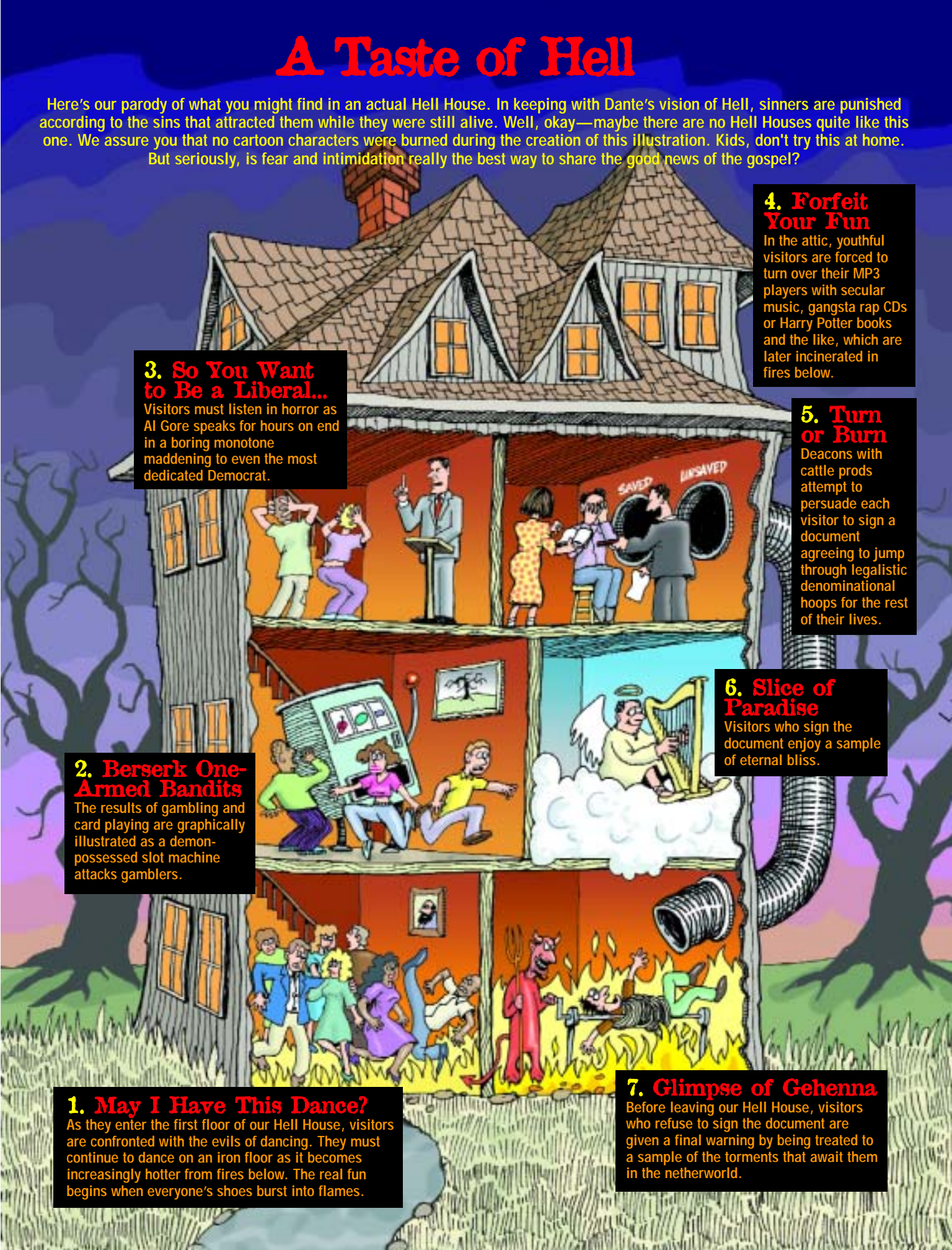
Visitors who sign the document enjoy a sample of eternal bliss.

## 1. May I Have This Dance?

As they enter the first floor of our Hell House, visitors are confronted with the evils of dancing. They must continue to dance on an iron floor as it becomes increasingly hotter from fires below. The real fun begins when everyone's shoes burst into flames.

## 7. Glimpse of Gehenna

Before leaving our Hell House, visitors who refuse to sign the document are given a final warning by being treated to a sample of the torments that await them in the netherworld.



# Emotional Rescue?

One common complaint about ministries like Hell House is that they drive people toward an emotional, not an intellectual, response to the gospel. But the church actually has a long history of attempting to bypass the intellect and appeal directly to the emotions.

Stage plays and drama evolved from the medieval church's mystery and morality plays. Mystery plays dramatized key events in the Bible for illiterate listeners, while morality plays used allegory and personified vices or virtues to dramatize the war between good and evil.

By the end of the 15th century, stage drama had been co-opted as secular entertainment, and the church has played catch-up ever since. With the notable exception of the printing press, we have often lagged a generation behind in employing different forms of communication or media for the sake of the gospel.

The pipe organ was dubbed "the devil's pipes" when it was first invented; the violin "the devil's strings." When Salvation Army founder William Booth was criticized for his (ungodly!) brass bands, he retorted, "Why should the devil have all the good tunes?," a question contemporary Christian music pioneer Larry Norman rephrased a hundred years later when he was attacked for trying to use rock 'n roll as a vehicle for the gospel.

Nevertheless, Christians throughout history have, with varying degrees of

**Christians throughout history have, with varying degrees of success, employed fear as a goad.**

success, employed fear as a goad: The apostle Paul himself; hellfire-and-brimstone preachers; the producers of apocalyptic movies such as *Thief in the Night* and *The Rapture*; the authors of apocalyptic books such as *Behold a Pale Horse*, *The Seven Last Years*, *The Late Great Planet Earth* and today's *Left Behind* series; and Halloween alternatives like Hell House.

Emotion is, obviously, an important and powerful part of what makes us human. But playing on that field has its risks. One major problem is that, being fallen, we find it far easier to provoke or experience the fear of judgment than love and the hope of heaven.

C.S. Lewis expressed this frustration in his preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, his classic book about a demon teaching a younger demon the art of temptation. Lewis found it frighteningly easy to lower himself into the mind of a demon and write a book tinged with the smoke of hell—yet impossible to evoke God's kingdom in the same way:

"Though I had never written anything more easily, I never wrote with less enjoyment. The ease came, no doubt, from the fact that the device of diabolical letters, once you have thought of it, exploits itself spontaneously.

"...Ideally, *Screwtape's* advice to Wormwood should have been balanced by archangelical advice to the patient's guardian angel. Without this the picture of human life is lopsided. But who could supply the deficiency? ...Mere advice would be no good; every sentence would have to smell of Heaven."

Ministries like Hell House face the same weakness. It's easy—too easy—to conjure up hell and its torments. But how can we envision our risen Savior, much less the glories of heaven? The cartoon image of clouds and harps merely underscores the extent to which our imagination beggars at the task.

Hell House's "heaven"—ethereal music, a glitter-haired Jesus, billowy wall hangings and potpourri—probably does as good as job as could be expected outside of Industrial Light and Magic. Yet we have to wonder if, like *The Screwtape Letters*, Hell House is capable of presenting anything other than a lopsided image of the truth.

need justification, they're off-limits to Christians, regardless of the ends.

Is Hell House's message independent of its methods? Some say no, pointing out that, as Marshall McLuhan put it, the medium is the message. If you tie a sonnet to a brick and heave it through your lover's window, don't be surprised if your lover gets mixed messages.

In *Monsters From the Id: The Rise of Horror in Fiction and Film* (Spence Publishing, 2000), E. Michael Jones traces the roots of the horror genre back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Viktor Frankenstein ignored those who warned him not to play God, and his murderous creation stalked him for the rest of his life—a parable of the ruin Shelley and her husband experienced when they experimented with open marriage.

In the same way, Jones says, when morals are rejected in favor of license, they return as Nemesis: a distorted reflection of its creator that destroys everything it touches. Just so, America's appetite for gory, violent, sexually explicit entertainment is matched only by our violent, promiscuous society—and both are grotesque mockeries of the morals we have systematically discarded over the last three generations.

If Jones is right, ministries like Hell House may be sending a mixed message. By pandering to our appetite for violent, gory thrills, Hell House's producers might be decrying violence and immorality even as they glorify the same violence and immorality that spawned our appetite in the first place. □

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For more about hell, see our cover story in the September/October 2001 *Plain Truth*, "The Battle Over Hell," (<http://www.ptm.org/01PT/SeptOct/SelectArtcl.htm>) and Greg Albrecht's Commentary in the May/June 2003 *Plain Truth*, "The Hotter the Better!" (<http://www.ptm.org/03PT/MayJune/dept.htm>).