

JONATHAN KALB

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO BILLY

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 nonbelievers: "We believe in the God that people who don't 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 past 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 information-age savvy, he also dreams up pointed and often hilarious guerrilla 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 ninety-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 City. 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 theater artists and community groups.

The week-long festival he organized and cohosted in December of that year at Judson Memorial Church, “Millennium’s Neighborhood (Not a Celebration of the



Bill Talen as Reverend
Billy. Photo: Michael
Rubottom.

Malling of New York)," drew more than 1,200 spectators on its first night, even though there was no preopening coverage in the city'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 surveilled public spaces." It began with a "permitless parade" from Charas Community Center (a former public school that the city is trying to sell for luxury development) to Judson Church, led by two men bearing aluminum crucifixes with large Mickey and Minnie dolls duct-taped to them. Performances and exhibitions by some eighty artists, pranksters, and activists followed, among them the Surveillance Camera Players, who led group addresses to the cameras attached to streetlamps 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 seriocomic celebrity. He not only has a growing following as a performer but is also frequently sought out by local groups just as an actual spiritual leader might be. During 2000 he was at the center of protests against the efforts of New York University to tear down a nineteenth-century building in which Edgar Allan Poe once lived and replace it with a tower for the law school, and he was arrested 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 "antishopping 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, which he rejected at sixteen. After graduating from Franconia College in New Hampshire and occasionally taking part in antiwar 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 like Spalding Gray, Reno, Holly Hughes, and John Kelly. Watching these artists perform convinced Talen that 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's 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 from the pre-Christian Gnostics, scholars Elaine Pagels and John Dominic Crossen, and 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 that he is engaged in a much more complex (and benevolent) deception that harks back to P. T. Barnum and Herman Melville's Confidence Man. Talen co-opts 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 counterswindle, which is all the more effective for being obviously phony and live.

The night for
Esperanza Garden,
bulldozed by New
York City, February
2000. Photo: Rudolf
Baras.

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 twenties) their first chance ever to shout “Hallelujah!” and engage in Pentecostal call-and-response. In so doing, they find themselves possessed of a precious community that is not accessed via flickering screens, as well as a delightful channel for various inchoate angers that 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. Talen’s 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 doing it in the 1960s—an era when religious trappings and rituals were embraced by such groups as the Living Theatre, the Bread and Puppet Theater, and Jerzy 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

Reverend Billy.
Photo: Michael
Rubottom.



rely on the hollow superiority of irony, however, 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-twentieth-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 like "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" Talen means the kind Walter Benjamin described in "The Storyteller" that pass down "counsel" or individual wisdom, which are either increasingly melted down and remolded to serve the culture's corporate supernarrative 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 point 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.revbilly.com), with its sincere invitation to “confess your shopping sins” via e-mail, to appreciate his grasp of this complicity.

Talen’s 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 worldview on idiosyncratic New York City), to Starbucks (a young, fast-rising multinational giving lip-service to social consciousness as it rapaciously expands), to NYU, one of the largest landowners in Manhattan, which Talen calls “the quintessential abusive nonprofit” because of its architectural depredations in Greenwich Village. (In January 2001, after weeks of well-publicized protests and street theater around the Poe house, New York University agreed to a settlement in which the design of its law school tower was altered to incorporate the Poe house facade and restore it to its original 1845 appearance. Several interior elements will also be preserved and a room will be dedicated to Poe and made available for readings and lectures.) An important precedent for Reverend Billy’s wilier 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 different ideological tyrannies nonetheless 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” sent out by e-mail to followers in New York and made available on his Web site in the summer of 2000. Its main feature is a script intended to be spoken loudly (and improvised on) by two people seated at a café table.

THE NEOLIBERAL 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 Neoliberal 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 used his script to hilarious effect in local Starbuckses. 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 is a subject in at least five forthcoming films: a movie by Richard Sandler, who made the documentary *The Gods of Times Square* (about the five-year "mallng" process there); *A Day in the Hype of America*, by the Seattle filmmakers Global Griot; *The Right to Jam*, by the Canadian filmmaker Jill Sharpe; and others in preparation for German television and the BBC. He plans to run for mayor of New York in 2001 (he ran for president of the United States in the 1992 New Hampshire primary). And his audiences grow with each new comic church service. Still, his is essentially a lonely and dangerous art involving frequent police harassment, which he suffers by himself; 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 information glut, virtual values, and twenty-four-hour cyber-shopping, the toughest political task is to maintain the notion that critical thinking truly matters.