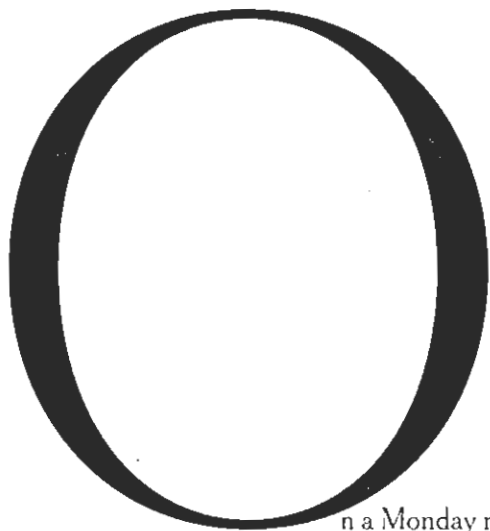


# Reverend Billy's Unholy War

A performance artist in a cleric's collar is on a crusade against consumerism, franchise stores and the loss of a sense of place.

By Jonathan Dee



On a Monday morning in Los Angeles, in a half-empty strip-mall Starbucks on Reseda Boulevard, two young women are declaring their love for each other.

"I can't keep it to myself any longer," says the one with the two-toned hair — who, judging by the frowns and squeamish stares from the other customers, has made little enough effort to keep it to herself at all. She stands up. "I love you!" she says joyfully. "Brought to you by Monsanto!" Her companion blanches. The standing woman, it emerges, has obtained an endorsement deal for their love. Her lover, not surprisingly, has reservations, and an argument ensues.

In truth, these two women are not a couple at all; they are putting on a play, one of several being performed simultaneously inside the store. But this has not dawned yet on the legitimate customers. All they know is that their Starbucks routine has been hijacked somehow. They turn to each other, friends and strangers alike, with variants on the same question: Is this for real?



Enter, from the parking lot, Reverend Billy.

He is 6-foot-3, impossible not to look at in his white suit, clerical collar and dyed-blond pompadour. He is also not a real minister — he is a New York-based performance artist and activist named Bill Talen — but it generally takes people a minute or two to figure that out, and this confusion over the exact derivation of his authority is the space in which he thrives. "Hallelujah!" he shouts through a white cardboard megaphone as he bursts through the door. "This is an abusive place; children! It has landed in this neighborhood like a



**Storefront Religion** Reverend Billy performs a "register exorcism" at a Wal-Mart in Panorama City, Calif.

space alien! The union-busting, the genetically-engineered milk, the fake bohemianism! But we don't have to be here, children! This is the Good News!"

The "actors" — many of whom are members of the choir of Reverend Billy's church, the Church of Stop Shopping — get up from their chairs and surround Talen, hands in the air, shouting, "Amen!" The manager of this particular Starbucks outpost is officially beside herself. She may not know what's happening, but her first instinct is to try to prevent people from taking pictures of it.

Talen (pronounced TAH-lin) makes his way to the counter, where he tries to lead the congregation in a laying of hands on the cash register. "We must exorcise this cash register," he shouts in his best Holy Roller cadence, "of the evil within it!" By this time — as almost always happens — one customer has taken it upon himself to come to the corporation's defense; he wrestles briefly with Talen, who, in trying to vault the counter (he is an athletic 52, but 52 nonetheless), gashes his hand on the register. Things are threatening to spin out of control, and Talen, who is on a tight schedule while in Los

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Angeles, has promised his wife and collaborator, Savitri Durkee (who is somewhere in the crowd), that he will stop short of being arrested.

"Let's leave now, children!" he says. "Starbucks is over!" Followed by the choir members and a few other acolytes, he exits onto Reseda Boulevard and strides toward his next engagement. As the adrenaline subsides, he looks down at the palm of his hand, which has now bled onto his white suit. "Stigmata," he smiles.

What has he just accomplished? The one person you can be sure will never again cross the threshold of the Reseda Boulevard Starbucks is Talen himself. (In fact, a subsequent court order enjoins him from coming within 250 yards of any of the 1,481 Starbucks franchises in the state of California.) But the proper measure for any street preacher is not the number of souls he saves; it is the purity of his example. The road is long and hard for an evangelical, even a fake one.

CAN TRUE ACTIVISM be funny? Talen's performance would have to be categorized more as guerrilla theater than as activism; to the extent that the expansion of a business like Wal-Mart (another of Reverend Billy's *bêtes noires*) is ever successfully opposed — as recently happened in Inglewood, Calif., via public referendum — that opposition comes from unions and grass-roots political organizations, not from Brechtian street performers with self-described "bad Elvis hair."

Still, the notion of politically motivated pranksterism is enjoying a renaissance: consider the career of Michael Moore, or the high-wire irony of the fake PAC Billionaires for Bush. By playing, as he says, "the politicized Fool," by being willing to suffer embarrassment and worse in a series of hushed quasi-public places, he can, he has discovered, make these enterprises reveal themselves. At one of the 30-odd "retail interventions" (as he terms them) Talen staged at the Times Square Disney Store, one manager became so unhinged that he made the following announcement: "Anyone who isn't here to buy something will be arrested!" Who said irony was over?

During the past seven years, Talen has made himself a thorn in the paws of Walt Disney, Nike, Home Depot, Barnes & Noble and any other chain he says he views as casually destroying the essence of neighborhoods. Just one day before the Reseda Boulevard Starbucks intervention, he led 40 disciples to a Los Angeles Wal-Mart for a bit of protest theater

known as a Whirl. The participants enter separately, discreetly, as if they don't know one another; each grabs an empty shopping cart and simply circulates through the acres of aisles without stopping, falling in line behind other empty carts as he or she encounters them until a silent conga line of nonshoppers forms, snaking through the store in a hypnotic display of commercial disobedience. It gets under the skin of the store managers in a spectacular way. A spokeswoman for Wal-Mart, while recognizing Talen's name, wouldn't utter it herself, referring only — and repeatedly — to the corporation's general disregard for "special-interest groups with specific agendas."

So what is Talen's agenda? Just as the God's Angry Man role steals back a kind of musty, reactionary archetype (Lenny Bruce, one of Talen's heroes, had a right-wing evangelist persona as well), Reverend Billy claims for the left a concept usually owned by the right: conservatism. The reason he condemns Starbucks or Wal-Mart as "evil" doesn't have so much to do with labor practices (though he mentions those), or any other tropes of the left, as with the destruction of place. "We are drowning," he likes to say in his sermons, "in a sea of identical details!" It's hardly a fringe idea; in May the National Trust for Historic Preservation put the entire state of Vermont on its "endangered" list and laid the blame explicitly at Wal-Mart's door.

In a world where our neighborhoods are reconfigured daily by the expansion strategies of anonymous businessmen, Talen has committed himself to the idea that to think locally is to act globally. He no longer stresses, as he used to, boycotts of companies he doesn't like. Instead he is determined to keep alive the collective memory of those communities that the chain stores are equally determined to colonize. "We remember that this place used to be the Astor Riviera Diner," he shouts at passers-by on Astor Place in Greenwich Village, where three Starbucks now face each other across an intersection. "We remember their famously abusive waiters!"

And now it's his own community — New York City — whose collective memory he seems to feel is under attack. Angered to the point of disequilibrium by what he considers the Bush administration's hijacking of ground zero for the purposes of staging "an early western," Talen will be working hard to, as he says, "counternarrate" the season's chief provocation, the Republican National Convention. On Aug. 29, the day before the convention opens, Reverend Billy will "marry" (or remarry) any couple who comes to the Great Lawn in Cen-

tral Park, with the proviso that the wedding vows must include a recitation of the First Amendment. He will also protest, somehow, on behalf of the Madison Square Garden-area vendors ordered by the police to shut down and move on to make way for the G.O.P. And in a scheme inspired by a recent trip to Barcelona — where store owners called the police to report that Talen was "agitating" in stores he never actually set foot in — he promises to unleash an army of some 70 imitation Reverend Billys to preach all over Manhattan. "The collars only cost five bucks," he says happily.

WHAT TALEN AND DURKEE now refer to as "the Reverend Billy project" began in 1997. Talen — a Minnesotan by birth, raised by Dutch Calvinists — had lived for many years in San Francisco, where he founded, and occasionally performed in, a respected avant-garde theater called *Life on the Water* (best remembered for producing the work of Spalding Gray, whom Talen can still barely discuss without crying). When the theater lost its financing in 1994, Talen moved to New York to join its legion of actor-waiters. From his new home in Hell's Kitchen — a reconditioned church, in fact — he had a front-row seat for the extreme makeover of Times Square.

It outraged him, and as he watched the area's businesses and residents being relocated to make room for what he calls "an outdoor mall," he noticed that the most resistant were the street preachers, whose profound eccentricity still commanded a certain respect. Though there was a rather glaring difference between him and them — they were, in Talen's words, "flaunting right-wing fundamentalists," while his own politics are somewhere left of liberal — he had the basic fiery-eyed look, and the stature, and the voice trained to make itself heard in the last row. And so, with a collar bought at a clerical-supply shop and a white dinner jacket left over from a catering job, he hit Times Square to preach against its destruction.

Around the corner from his makeshift pulpit on Broadway sat the flagship of the effort to make Times Square safe for tourism, the Disney Store, and before long Talen decided to take the fight right to it; he entered the store and began thunderously commanding consumers to back away from the smiling stuffed Mickeys that he condemned as the products of sweatshop labor. These semi-regular visits soon attracted the attention of the police. In turn, Talen's lonely crusade attracted aficionados of both fringe theater (at the 1999-2000 Obie Awards he won a "special citation" for his Reverend Billy work) and of left-wing resistance,

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# The road is long and hard for

Talen started working with a director and put together a choir, and the Church of Stop Shopping was born.

The choir, let it be said, is no joke. Numbering 25 or so, rehearsing several hours a week and performing for no pay, they sing Talen's politically inflected lyrics with genuine gospel chops that flatten irony. They are a diverse group in terms of age and race. Some are professional musicians on a kind of busman's holiday, some are lapsed fundamentalists happy to offend certain sensibilities and some are genuinely religious — they just feel that their own churches neglect the antimaterialist spirituality that the Church of Stop Shopping, in its oddball fashion, keeps alive. (Two choir members are actually former Starbucks employees.)

Talen met Durkee four years ago in a theater elevator. She was a dancer and playwright who, like Talen, had a strict religious background (Muslim, on her father's side). They live in a modest railroad apartment in Brooklyn, on a tree-lined street of two-story houses with nary a transnational chain store in sight. They get by primarily on fees paid by colleges where Talen takes short residencies and guest-lecture positions. She's the organizational spirit and the emotional ground wire for Talen, who, as he gets deeper and deeper into character, can't always be relied upon to act in his own best interest.

In fact, "Reverend Billy" may finally be less a character than a mode of expression — one that, he has discovered, people will pay attention to. When Talen speaks in his own voice on the subject of, say, Donald Rumsfeld, he can become quite strident; whereupon, perhaps catching the didactic note in his own voice, he will suddenly punctuate his remarks with a loud, startling and yet somehow tension-lightening "Hallelujah!"

Talen and Durkee's romance preceded their working relationship by a year or two; she gave up her day job to help him sophisticate the somewhat crude iconography of those early days (nailing Mickey Mouse to a cross, for example). Talen soon began broadcasting a sermon fortnightly on National Public Radio. He sent his disciples into various chain stores to perform the scripted public arguments he calls Spat Theater. He tormented Starbucks to such a degree that in 2000 a memo was circulated to all its Manhattan employees, answering the question "What should I do if Reverend Billy is in my store?" Later, Talen gleefully appropriated the phrase for his own book. "In the Church of Stop Shopping we believe that buying is not nearly as interesting as not-buying," Talen wrote. "When you back away from the purchase, the product may look up at you with

wanton eyes but the product dies quickly back onto the shelf and sits there, trying to get a life. The product needs you worse than you need it, remember that."

For a while Reverend Billy was, in his words, "this month's flavor." Then came his own time in the wilderness.

**A**mong the thousands of deaths on Sept. 11, 2001, was one that proved to be temporary — the death of irony — and yet when Talen went to the spontaneous village that arose in Union Square in the days following the catastrophe, he did so, for reasons mysterious even to himself, in character as Reverend Billy. He wasn't trying to be funny. He had 30,000 hits on his Web site on Sept. 12, and President Bush was on TV urging all true patriots to go shopping, and, Talen says now, he knew he had some role to play; he just didn't know yet what it was. Something inspiring was happening on that site, he believed, something that, however dismal its cause, resembled the unearthed spirit of community, of unmediated talking, that Talen had been summoning for years. Then one morning Talen showed up at Union Square and everything — the temporary shelters, the art, the fliers that kept alive the "missing" — had been collected overnight by the Parks Department.

In terms of Reverend Billy, Talen says, "we were back at Square 1. The choir fell apart, for one thing. The choir leadership was troubled by our political message at that time. They had so many friends that died." Nevertheless, Talen and Durkee patiently rebuilt the project. They reassembled the choir, and they found new spaces in which to perform; and as they did so, they found that something unexpected had happened. For performers and audience alike, the whole Reverend Billy experience, born in parody, was becoming less and less distinguishable from an actual church service — a reaffirmation, in a ritualistic setting, of a common core of spiritual values.

It sounds like a whole new frontier in sacrilege, but anyone who goes to a Reverend Billy service these days expecting a high dose of camp is in for a confrontation with a profoundly odd sincerity. Talen performs several services a year at the famously left-leaning St.-Mark's-in-the-Bowery Church in the East Village; a recent one, a benefit to fix the church's leaky roof, took place on Mother's Day before a crowd of about 300. Several yellow-robed choir members circulated in the minutes before the show with rolls of duct tape, with which they good-naturedly covered any visible logos on the congregants' clothing — the rejection of worldliness, as Dur-

kee points out, being a theme common to most religious experiences.

Soon the reverend entered, shaking hands, working the crowd ("Thank you for coming to church today"), as the choir sang and the three-piece band played. He went through a few signature bits — a James Brown moment in which he collapsed and was brought back to his feet by the exhortations of the choir; a "credit-card exorcism" — and people were laughing, for a while. But by the time he got to the recitation of the original (and politically pointed) 1870 Mother's Day proclamation by Julia Ward Howe, and of the First Amendment, and of the reasons that George Bush must be denied a hero's welcome when he returns to ground zero this summer, there was nothing about the responsive amens that wasn't 100 percent on the level.

"The political climate makes people want to be joyous even more," Durkee said later. "I would say we have enough people who come to every show that there's a regular sense that people are going to church. Strangely enough."

What's wrong with preaching to the converted? Isn't that what any church does? As Talen, the wayward son of religious parents, asked the



**No Refills** A Starbucks customer in Los Angeles seizes Reverend Billy, who was later enjoined from approaching any California Starbucks.

congregants to let their spirits rise communally into the night sky high above that leaky roof, as he led them in prayer to "the God that is not a product," your first thought, perhaps, might be that a psychiatrist would have a field day with this guy. But given the amount of time he spends putting himself in harm's way for the sake of his convictions, it's hard to begrudge him a little worship. And if one or two newcomers are still smirking a little as they shout "Hallelujah" for the first time in their lives, Talen is untroubled, perhaps because he knows from his own experience what's happening to them. Act as if you have faith, and faith will be given to you. ■