

Our Town

[snip] **Are all those people who say they care about the environment lying?** Maybe, judging from figures cited by Philip Deutch in *Foreign Policy*: "More than 50 percent of U.S. consumers now have the option of buying electricity generated from renewable energy sources, but only 1 or 2 percent actually do. Hybrid car sales represent less than 1 percent of automobile sales; suvs account for 25 percent." —HH



Bill Talen, aka Reverend Billy, at a recent New York appearance

Mischief

Jesus Christ, Stop Shopping

Reverend Billy brings his anticonsumerist congregation to town this week.

By Mark Engler

Reverend Billy is leaning against the counter of a Starbucks in Northridge, California. Dressed in a white suit and clerical collar, his gelled, dyed-blond hair swept skyward in a John Travolta pompadour, he could easily pass for a real man of the cloth—until he opens his mouth.

"They are coming into our neighborhoods like space aliens!" he says in a booming televangelist voice. Then he intones a litany of sins: "The union busting, the genetically engineered milk, the fake bohemianism!"

A store manager pushes through the crowd and risks catching spittle by trying to put her hand over the reverend's mouth.

"I ask for the god who is not a product to please nullify, neutralize this cash register now," he cries, seizing the machine, "and kick this Starbucks out of this neighborhood!"

A congregation of a dozen support-

ers yells "Hallelujah!" as an ex-marine, deciding to act as store security, clutches at the reverend's jacket.

"Let's go, children! Starbucks is over. Amen and change-e-lujah!"

Reverend Billy, the charismatic leader of the Church of Stop Shopping, is the creation of New York performance artist and avant-garde theater veteran Bill Talen. His Jimmy Swaggart-like persona may be rooted in parody, but Talen—who draws inspiration from ACT UP, the Guerrilla Girls, Lenny Bruce, and Abbie Hoffman—is serious about his work. The reverend is his main focus year-round; he even earns a modest living from the character, doing lectures and residencies with arts organizations. When his choir belts out lyrics like "So it's Christmastime, now let's stop our shopping / Consumer confidence, yes oh yes it's dropping," it shows off vocal chops honed in weekly rehearsals. And when Talen delivers his sermons he gets genuinely red faced and sweaty. He is his own manner of true believer, "trying to put the 'odd' back in god," he says.

Talen's anticorporate critique is part labor rights, part petroleum conservatism, part aesthetics. He charges big-box outlets with sweatshop practices and calls Starbucks "the uprooter of old diners." But more often he invokes a vision of "real neighborhoods," of a Jane Jacobs-style urbanism that has been undone by gentrification, advertis-

ing, and franchising. In his 2003 book *What Should I Do if Reverend Billy Is in My Store?* Talen decries public spaces where supermodels tower on billboards but where there are "fewer stoops for human words."

"We really are trying to figure out the addiction of consumerism," he says. "Why do Americans shop this way? Advertisements persuade us that consumerism itself is democracy. They persuade us that it's normal. But we think it's unprecedented."

It seems doubtful that many latte sippers have been converted by the Church of Stop Shopping's "retail interventions." Bewilderment is a common response, and some customers grow defensive. But Talen claims that others add their own hallelujahs to the choir, and that he has even seen employees clapping. Starbucks headquarters has taken notice: the title of Talen's book is lifted from a memo the company circulated to employees unsure of how to respond to the pageants. (Needless to say, it did not recommend applauding.) At a Disney Store in Times Square—a favorite target of the church—a manager once tried to warn off troupe members by saying, apparently without irony, "If you're not shopping I can have you arrested."

Talen estimates that he's been arrested 30 to 50 times as Reverend Billy. Though he's typically released without charges being filed, he did spend three days in a Los Angeles County jail last year after a post-

What Are You Wearing?



Heidi Dakter

The History of Haiti

Heidi Dakter has created costumes for the Zephyr Dance company and floats for Redmoon Theater. Her latest fashion pieces are politically inspired—like this two-piece ensemble embroidered with major players in the ongoing unrest in Haiti, which she visited on a medical mission in 2004. The outfit will be on display at the restaurant Follia, 953 W. Fulton, starting December 9.

What's the concept here?

I feel like the age of protesting has kind of passed us by, and one way I approach it is to create a way to speak without having to say anything.

What was it about Haiti that affected you so much?

People are still flourishing and being content in a situation like that. I look at my life here in the U.S. and I have choices: What do I want to eat? Can I be a vegan? What do I want to be when I grow up? I can be anything.

That's former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide and that's Colin Powell—who are the two little girls labeled "victims"?

People's children will actually be kidnapped to get money from the families who are somewhat well-off in comparison to the rest of the people. Some families cannot afford the ransom, so instead of killing their children or just leaving them, they gouge their eyes out and then return them to the families.

And the red—is that supposed to be blood?

Yeah. It's something you can't hide. It's not just a small stain.

You're selling other pieces like this at Robin Richman. Isn't it odd to sell clothes about poverty and strife at a boutique where prices run into the hundreds of dollars?

I know. . . . I feel like the people who would buy it at that store would be the women who are like, "Oh, that's crazy, what's that all about? I don't know, but I'm buying it!" But I feel like customers like that are the ones who especially need to be seeing the spectacle.

I could've gone to Haiti and been really involved in figuring out ways to make money for the country, and I will donate a percentage from sales to charities. But just the great need to talk about issues like this, the imbalance of wealth throughout the world—that's what the rest of the series will continue to be about. —Heather Kenny

Thanksgiving action. "I got in over my head that time," Talen says. "It's a rough, rough place."

Now Talen is hitting the road with 30 fellow activists and performers for the "Shocalypse Tour," a monthlong cross-country trek that started a few days after Thanksgiving in New York City and ends with an anticonsumerist Christmas celebration December 25 in Los Angeles. He hasn't publicly announced the exact route—to avoid tipping off corporate security—but events are planned in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Dallas as well as a slew of smaller towns along the way. In Chicago the congregation plans on "twisted caroling" down the Magnificent Mile on December 7—and it's bringing 100 extra robes so locals can join in. That evening he'll read excerpts from his book at Left of Center Bookstore. Mess Hall in Rogers Park will host a Reverend Billy revival the following day. "We're going right at Christmas shoppers and saying, 'You've got to come too. You've got to wake up,'" Talen says. "It doesn't make sense to express love this way." ■

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