

**A USER'S GUIDE TO  
HELL, FEATURING  
BERNARD MADOFF**

**BY LEE BLESSING**



DRAMATISTS  
PLAY SERVICE  
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# A USER'S GUIDE TO HELL, FEATURING BERNARD MADOFF

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A USER'S GUIDE TO HELL, FEATURING BERNARD MADOFF was originally produced by Project Y Theatre Company (Michole Biancosino and Andrew W. Smith, Artistic Directors), New York City, in the fall of 2013. It was directed by Michole Biancosino; the producers were Andrew W. Smith and Liam Joynt; the set design was by Kevin Judge; the costume design was by Emily DeAngelis; the lighting design was by Ben Hagen; the sound design was by Teddy Anderson; the video design was by Shawn Boyle; the fight choreography was by Mike Rossmly; and the production stage manager was Caitlin Lyons. The cast was as follows:

BERNARD MADOFF ..... Edward James Hyland  
VERGE.....David Deblinger  
FEMALE RESIDENTS OF HELL..... Erika Rose  
MALE RESIDENTS OF HELL ..... Eric Sutton  
CHORUS .....Noah Berman, Evan Coles,  
Jean Jisoo Hyu, Sarah Lusche,  
Molly O'Keefe, and Gadi Rush

## CHARACTERS

BERNARD MADOFF — A Shade. An older gentleman in a baseball cap.

VERGE — A Vapor. A blue-collar type; one of those classic New York guys. He could have been in construction, city services, waste removal — any of a hundred jobs. What's important about him is that he knows for an absolute fact that New York is the only city in the world.

RESIDENTS OF HELL — Various New Yorkers. The Residents of Hell are played by one man and one woman.

# A USER'S GUIDE TO HELL, FEATURING BERNARD MADOFF

*Darkness. Then dimness. Slowly, sounds of the great city of New York begin to rise, one by one: cars honk; jackhammer pounds through concrete; car alarm a block away; bus brakes with hydraulic hiss; garbage truck engages; subway train rumbles past, pile-driver throbs steel on steel; cab squeals its brakes; someone yells “MotherFUCKER!!!”; pedi-cab bell rings; dogs snarl, bark at each other; someone shouts “STOP THAT!”; high school girls shriek, laugh, and run down the block; never-ending chant of “Please — even a penny will help. One red penny. Help the homeless”; men argue loudly in Arabic; horse pulling a carriage clops smartly along the pavement; police sirens wail in the distance. These sounds and others typical of Manhattan intermingle and grow steadily to an alarming level. As they do, lights rise on the same count to illuminate an empty, white space. Just as the lights become too intensely bright for comfort to keep one’s eyes open and the cacophony reaches the point of pain — Everything stops. Darkness. Silence. No more than five seconds later it’s all back again, son et lumiere, instantly — at a slightly more tolerable level. At the same moment Verge rushes on, pulling Bernard along with him. They’re walking fast. Verge looks around as though hunted.*

VERGE. Keep moving!

BERNARD. Where?!

VERGE. Doesn’t matter where —

BERNARD. No! I mean, where *are* we?

VERGE. What’s it look like?

BERNARD. I'm not sure —

VERGE. Chrissake — Who's got time for this? *Smells like?*

BERNARD. New York?

VERGE. Genius! Come on.

BERNARD. No, no — wait, wait, *wait* —

VERGE. *What?!*

BERNARD. I'm home?

VERGE. Will you just come on?

BERNARD. It's not supposed to be ... New York.

VERGE. Yeah? Where's it supposed to be?

BERNARD. I don't know, not ... New York.

VERGE. What do you know? You just got here. Come on, it's all gonna start.

BERNARD. What?

VERGE. *Pain! Torture! Your guts on a spike! Giant heel squashing you like a roach!* That's just the standard shit. Come on! (*Verge moves again, dragging Bernard along. Suddenly, a terrible crash comes from behind and above them. Verge drops to the ground, pulling Bernard on top of him for cover. They wait. Silence.*) That was close.

BERNARD. What was that?

VERGE. A very loud noise. I *hate* loud noises. Got sensitive ears. (*After another terrible crash, holding his ears.*) *Agghh* — !

BERNARD. Maybe we should go inside.

VERGE. Inside?! There's no inside.

BERNARD. What do you mean? It's a street, there's buildings —

VERGE. You see any *doors*?

BERNARD. What? (*Still lying on Verge, Bernard looks around.*) There's no doors.

VERGE. There's *no doors*. Entryways, but no doors.

BERNARD. Let me up.

VERGE. No.

BERNARD. Let me *go!* (*Tearing himself away, rising.*) I was not meant to lie in a gutter!

VERGE. You sure about that?

BERNARD. Positive! If there's no doors, we'll just crawl in a window — (*Looking around, confused.*) There's no windows.

VERGE. That's right.

BERNARD. They're all bricked up. Why?

VERGE. How should I know? Maybe the roaches kicked us out. Come on, we gotta find someplace quiet.

BERNARD. Where? If we can't get in —

VERGE. Who's leading this tour? I got my spots. I'll find someplace. You're lucky I'm with you. There's lots of folks around here who remember Bernie Madoff.

BERNARD. Are they still mad?

VERGE. A little. *(At another terrible crash.) Aggggh — ! (Verge falls to his knees and sticks his head between Bernard's legs, trying to use them as earmuffs.)*

BERNARD. Stop that!

VERGE. Want me to go deaf? I gotta protect my ears.

BERNARD. Stand up!

VERGE. No!

BERNARD. Get *out* of there — ! *(Finally pushing Verge away.)*  
Who are you?

VERGE. I'm Verge.

BERNARD. Verge? Verge who?

VERGE. Just Verge. I'm your guide, okay? It's Hell — you gotta have a guide.

BERNARD. This is hell?

VERGE. No — Hell, with a capital "H."

BERNARD. But ... it's just us. Where are the crowds being tortured?

VERGE. You kiddin'? They're all around you. Screaming like crazy. You can't hear 'em?

BERNARD. Hear them? I can't even see them.

VERGE. Takes a little while for it all to come into focus. But believe me, if we stick around here, you will be *very* sorry.

BERNARD. I don't believe a word you're saying. There's no one here. Show me one person! *(Bernard is suddenly struck, as though by an invisible person rushing past.)*

VERGE. There. *(Bernard suddenly spins around as he seems to be struck by two more invisible pedestrians.)* And there. *(As Bernard's knocked over once more.)* And then again there.

BERNARD. I don't understand. I don't ... Wait a minute — I do hear something.

VERGE. There you go. See? Told you you'd adjust. *(Hushed sound of several voices — hard to make out at first, then slowly more audible. They're saying "Fuck you!" over and over.)*

BERNARD. Is that about me?

VERGE. Nah, that's just the bass line. Goes on forever. *(One voice — crazier and raspier than the others — dominates the chant*

*until it's the only one left. The speaker, a homeless woman, enters. She's ragged, looks insane. She shouts "Fuck you!" in Bernard's face.)*

HOMELESS WOMAN. *Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck YOU! FUCK YOU! FUC — ! (Verge gently takes the homeless woman's hand in his. She freezes in mid-shout, looking down at their clasped hands.)*

BERNARD. Does she hate me that much?

VERGE. She doesn't even know you. Fucking loon. Here, look. *(Verge turns the homeless woman around and lets go of her hand. She resumes shouting — only now at Verge.)*

HOMELESS WOMAN. *Fuck you! Fuck you! F-u-u-u — ! (With a fingertip Verge twirls her around and pushes her away. She shambles out, muttering "Fuck you," etc.)*

BERNARD. Why can't I see anyone else?

VERGE. You will; give it time.

BERNARD. Where am I?

VERGE. You mean, where in Hell? Read the sign.

BERNARD. East 64th Street? This ... This is my block. That's my building. I live here.

VERGE. Not anymore.

BERNARD. Why are we here?

VERGE. Do I look like I set the itinerary?

BERNARD. We can go in there. The doorman knows me.

VERGE. Except ...

BERNARD. What? Oh — no doors. Still, he'd recognize me.

VERGE. You *want* to be recognized?

BERNARD. He'll be all right. We always got along —

VERGE. No time. Gotta keep moving.

BERNARD. No! I want to see him. He could let us sit in the lobby — There he is! I can see him! Right in front of the building! *(Shouting.)* Manny! Manny! It's me, Bernie! Can you believe it? Yeah! *Yeah!* Come here a second, will you? *(Slowly Manny enters, in full doorman regalia. His movements are stolid and look a little painful. He has a Hispanic accent. He looks charred, like he's been in a fire. He gives off a little smoke.)* Manny?

MANNY. Mr. M. How're you?

BERNARD. I'm all right. How are you?

MANNY. Can't complain.

BERNARD. Have you, um ... have you been here long?

MANNY. Hard to say. The days are pretty much the same.

BERNARD. Say Manny, do you think we could — this is Verge, by the way —

MANNY. I know Verge.

BERNARD. Ah. Well, could we maybe ... sit in the lobby for a while?

MANNY. Not possible, Mr. M.

BERNARD. It's so noisy and ... strange out here —

MANNY. What can I say? We lost our door.

BERNARD. How?

MANNY. They wanted better security.

VERGE. Guess they got it. Let's go.

BERNARD. No! There must be other doors. In the back, or...?

MANNY. All we got's the arch. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't know where to stand.

BERNARD. Can we ... stand in the arch with you?

MANNY. Sorry. There's only room for me. Besides, you gotta be union.

BERNARD. I see.

VERGE. Can we go now?

BERNARD. (*As Manny turns to go.*) Manny, tell me — are you in pain?

MANNY. More like boredom. No one comes in, no one goes out — hard to fill up my day. Sometimes, when things are real slow, I set myself on fire. That stings a little.

BERNARD. Why are you here?

MANNY. Usual story: lost my retirement, killed myself.

BERNARD. How did you ... lose your...?

MANNY. You oughta know.

BERNARD. You never invested with me. We used to joke about it. I always turned you down.

MANNY. Yeah, but the folks who managed my retirement fund got talking to some feeder fund. You know, looking around for a good deal. Guess they found it.

BERNARD. Oh.

MANNY. I don't blame you, Mr. M. It's my own fault for not going to Harvard Business School.

BERNARD. I'm ... so sorry. (*Bernard gently claps Manny on the arm. Manny's arm falls off. They stare at it.*)

MANNY. Oh, damn. Would you mind handing me that, sir?

BERNARD. What? Oh. Sure. (*Bernard hands Manny his arm. Manny stares at it, sighs.*)

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by Lee Blessing

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Is there really a Hell? This speculative dark comedy follows the footsteps of the highly guilty Ponzi-scheming Bernard Madoff (and Verge, his guide) through an updated version of Dante's *Inferno*. As a Jew, Bernie doesn't believe in Hell — so why's he here? And why does everything look like Manhattan? Trying to solve these metaphysical mysteries, Bernie and Verge encounter both criminals and their prey. What kind of Hell is this?

*“... thoughtful, witty theatre ... well worth discussion once you've stopped laughing.”*  
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