

Theater: 'Shadowlands' casts light on Lewis, love

Poignant roles carry Contemporary show

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By [LAWSON TAITTE](#) / Theater Critic

Shadowlands has a great story to tell: The eminent scholar, fantasy writer and Christian apologist C.S. Lewis learned all about the loves he wrote about – and the pain he wrote a book explaining – by marrying a totally unsuitable, brash and mortally ill American, Joy Davidman Gresham.

Playwright William Nicholson, however, wasn't content just to tell the story. He tailored it and shaped it to make it a strong and popular drama that steals a bit of the magic Lewis himself knew how to conjure.

Contemporary Theatre of Dallas' new production, which opened Friday, gives us the deluxe edition, like one of Lewis' favorite books of Renaissance poetry done up in finest calf's leather with the pages edged in gold.

As Lewis, James Crawford's emotions lie too close to the surface sometimes, and Diane Worman's Joy brays too many lines. Director Marianne Galloway should have dialed back both performances early on. Thereafter, Ms. Galloway has helped this central pair find the three hankies' worth of tears and strange elation at the heart of the play.

T.A. Taylor nearly steals the show as Lewis' brother Warnie, a character who's almost the stereotype of a stiff-upper-lip, taciturn Englishman. Mr. Taylor doesn't stint on the role's basic humor; he just breathes life into it – and lets us glimpse all sorts of subtle responses underneath. He's also the only actor who completely convinces us he's an Englishman.

A team that has done all kinds of sterling work at Contemporary wraps the story in a design that shows it off beautifully. Randel Wright, the poet among Dallas set designers, uses that old standby technique, rare for him, of trucking set pieces in from the wings. Presiding over the whole affair, though, is a simple symbolic element that represents everything from Gothic windows and spires to that famous wardrobe that Lewis wrote about. Christina Dickson's costumes and Russell K. Dyer's lighting transport us back to mid-20th-century England.

C.S. Lewis has become something of a secular saint, and his books, both fiction and nonfiction, have been a spiritual force in many lives. *Shadowlands* shows us Jack Lewis, the man behind the books, who had to learn the same lessons he taught to so many others. And learn them he did, the hard way. That's the comforting thing about *Shadowlands*: It helps us all learn that pain is part of the cost of love.

•Through March 4 at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, 5601 Sears St. 150 mins. \$27.
214-828-0094, www.contemporarytheatreofdallas.com.