

# Dallas Observer

## Joy of Sects

CTD's *Shadowlands* chronicles the unlikely love between C.S. Lewis and a brash American

By Elaine Liner

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The box of Kleenex on each table is the tip-off. *Shadowlands*, the latest production at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, is a four-tissue romance about an unlikely couple and the deep love they share only when one of them is dying.



George Wada  
Grief observed: Confirmed bachelor C.S. Lewis (James Crawford) finds a late-in-life love in "lapsed poet" Joy Gresham (Diane Worman) in *Shadowlands* at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas.

The story's a heartbreaker to the end, so why is there so much laughter throughout the evening? Well, that's the lovely thing about this play by William Nicholson. To make us cry, first it makes us laugh. In making us laugh, it allows us to work up some empathy for the main character, a stuffy British religious scholar and author. Through that empathy, we come to understand why the man finds it easy to talk to God but nearly impossible to open up to a brash American woman who's in love with him.

It's a play that so easily could slide one way into ooey-goey sentimentality or the other way into starchy piousness if the cast overdid any part of it, or if they didn't trust the audience to sense subtle shifts in emotion that ripple through almost every scene. *Shadowlands* is a smart but delicate piece that calls for the kid glove treatment, particularly in a space as intimate as the Contemporary Theatre, where the audience is arranged in twos and fours around small tables set close to the stage. Any big moves would throw everything off-kilter.

Not to worry. At CTD, they succeed on all counts. The cast in this production, under the well-tempered direction of Risk

Theater Initiative founder Marianne Galloway, gets the tone, the emotional beats, the British accents and everything else just right. The acting is as quiet as a whisper. As the story picks up momentum, we're swept right along to the tissue-grabbing conclusion. *Shadowlands* delivers one of those rare evenings of live theater that leaves you a little in love with almost everyone onstage and feeling a lot more in touch with the transformative power of love in general.

At the center of the play is C.S. "Jack" Lewis, Oxford don, Christian philosopher and popular author of the *Narnia* series of children's books. Calling himself a "comfortably situated middle-aged bachelor," Lewis, played by handsomely ruffled SMU acting teacher James Crawford, begins by delivering a short lecture on the nature of love, pain and suffering. "If God loves us, why does He allow us to suffer so much?" he asks. Good question. And this is before he goes through the ordeal of love and loss that will profoundly change his life.

The play offers a somewhat fictionalized account of Lewis' unexpected marriage in his 40s to an American, the "lapsed poet" Joy Davidman Gresham, played by the wry and wiry Diane Worman. Born into a Jewish family, Gresham had evolved into an atheist, a Communist and then a Christian, the latter conversion strengthened through her epistolary friendship with Lewis. When they first meet face to face in Oxford in the mid-1950s, she is still married to a man she describes in the play as "a writer—or he would be if he only wrote." Lewis is her literary hero. She can quote him better than he can.

Loud, opinionated and a mother of two boys (reduced to one in the play), Gresham is an odd match for the remote and reticent Lewis. But they actually have much in common. They're lonely, that's certain. And he, too, has come to Christianity as a skeptic, converting as an adult chiefly through the influence of close friend J.R.R. Tolkien, the *Lord of the Rings* author who also taught at Oxford and with Lewis was part of the literary group dubbed the "Inklings."

*Shadowlands* takes up with Lewis' life in his 40s, just before meeting Gresham. Sharing a house called the Kilns with his dry-as-dust brother, Warnie (the wonderfully distracted T.A. Taylor), Jack is flattered by Joy's fan letters but utterly unprepared when she shows up in Oxford with her young son, Douglas (Taubert Nadalini), in tow. "How do you find England?" he asks his visitor over cups of tea. Answers Joy, "Cold and dull. And I don't care much for the weather either."

On they tumble into a relationship that's as polite and passionless as the Queen's Christmas address. But they click intellectually—discussing mostly religion and literature in the play—and they grow closer. Joy soon divorces her philandering American husband and agrees to a "technical marriage" to Jack that will allow her to remain in England. Only when she's diagnosed with bone cancer and almost dies does Jack realize what it will mean to lose her. He proposes "real" marriage and, when she enjoys a brief remission, takes her away for a honeymoon in Greece. They will spend only four years together before her death at age 45. (Lewis' death and Aldous Huxley's on November 22, 1963, were barely noted by media busy covering the JFK assassination.)

That all sounds sort of Barbara Cartland by way of Evelyn Waugh, but *Shadowlands*, first seen as a PBS TV play in 1986 starring Joss Ackland and Claire Bloom, doesn't pour the pathos on too thick. Nicholson's script is admirable in its economy. Scenes never drag on too long. And just when we need a laugh, the playwright provides one. In the honeymoon sequence, Jack, blushing from another passionate night with his wife, admits to her that as a young man he thought room service meant "saying prayers in bed."

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There's a lovely glow to the connection between Crawford and Worman as Jack and Joy. Watching their characters' late-in-life romance blossom, we're happy when they're happy and sad when they're sad. These two never hit a false note. Affection infuses their playful bullying. Love scenes unfold with quiet honesty. Here are two mature actors throwing themselves into roles with real passion and no fear of looking foolish. Crawford, making his CTD debut after appearances at many other Dallas theaters, possesses the jowly, tweedy sexiness of the older Albert Finney. Worman, usually cast as a braying trailer-park mama or tweaky drug addict, is almost unrecognizable as Joy, a character smarter, sweeter and somehow even taller than anyone else she's played in recent seasons.

The next best work in *Shadowlands* comes from young Taubert Nadalini as Joy's son. The Highlander School sixth-grader is an accomplished singer and actor, with professional credits at Dallas Summer Musicals and Dallas Theater Center. His sorrowful final scene with Jack is made even more moving by the younger actor's stillness in his grief.

Contemporary Theatre is known for devotion to detail on the technical side of its productions, so it was surprising to see the shallow, almost all-black set, furnished with just a couple of simple chairs and a small desk. But like that door at the back of C.S. Lewis' fictional wardrobe in the *Narnia* fantasies, the set, once the play begins, becomes a gateway to magical other worlds. As the characters change, so does the scenery. The back wall and towering side panels provide stunning, magical images that stretch the dimensions of a small stage. Dallas' best scenic designer, Randel Wright, is a whiz at interpreting the mood of a play in three dimensions. There's a moment at the end when a door opens, a tree limb bends and...sniffle, sniffle.

They're going to need truckloads of tissues for this show.

*Shadowlands* continues through March 4 at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, 214-828-0094.