

Straight to the Heart

C.S. Lewis never looked more sympathetic than in *Shadowlands*

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If you can't quite remember what the stage can do that film can't, go see the new production of *Shadowlands* at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas. Back in the 1990s, Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger starred in the movie about C.S. Lewis and his wife, based on the script by William Nicholson, and it was a good film. What's startling is how much better the play is, superbly acted by the cast and beautifully directed by Marianne Galloway.

James Crawford, who plays Lewis (known to his friends as Jack) and Diane Worman, who plays the American poet Joy Gresham, give moving performances, capturing dimensions of Lewis's character and Gresham's struggles that it's difficult to see in the same way on film.

Part of the reason for that is the intimacy the audience has with the actors on stage, the way we enter into these scenes of comedy or joy or sorrow.

Lewis, the prolific scholar, Christian apologist, and novelist, helped millions of people with questions of faith in the contemporary world. The entrancements of his Narnia series have shaped several generations of children — but he could also get lazy. One of the first things that Joy Gresham does in *Shadowlands* is to expose Lewis's rhetorical trick of countering an argument with a memorable image or analogy and pretending that it's enough.



That includes the title *Shadowlands*. In one of Lewis's lectures, he speaks of this life as the land of shadows, where things have an incomplete reality that will be fulfilled in heaven later. In Nicholson's script, Joy complicates Lewis' confident assertions. What he describes from afar at first, he is then required to live.

Lewis has corresponded with Gresham, but it's a shock to meet her in person. She requires him, as it were, to incarnate his faith and to challenge all of his pristine dogmatic assumptions. Gresham is married to a man named Bill, the kind of alcoholic who broke a liquor bottle over their son's head and remembered nothing about it two days later and who has also had a series of affairs with other women.

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Lewis's friendship with Gresham deepens the more time they spend together. When she visits him at Oxford, he begins, almost insensibly to himself, to fall in love with her. She divorces Bill — but can he marry a divorced woman?

Lewis is surrounded by a commenting chorus of Oxford friends, including Scott Milligan as Christopher Riley, and T. A. Taylor as Jack's brother Warnie. They provide the perspective of disgruntled academic English bachelorhood on Lewis's gradual descent into the complications of a woman they don't particularly like.

Then she falls ill. Smitten with bone cancer, she begins a decline that reveals the depth of Lewis' engagement with her and eventually leads to their true marriage. I won't spoil the beauties of the last third of this play.

Diane Worman as Joy keeps things lively with the forceful American spiritedness of the way she approaches everything. James Crawford, for his part, manages to register every British subtlety of emotion, every noble thought or dark doubt that goes through Lewis — and we come away thinking more of Lewis than we did when we started.

This is a play that rivals last season's *Visiting Mr. Green* for its pure emotional impact. But it's much more than that. It addresses the range of emotion that's never accessible until the question of God is taken seriously, not simply treated as a joke.

If you ever want to understand what the art of lighting is, watch Russell Dyer's final fade on James Crawford. This is C. S. Lewis in the valley of the shadow of death, and he never looked less glib or more important.