

Moving *Shadowlands* at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas

by Martha Heimberg

Shadowlands is based on a true love story. Novelist, critic and Christian scholar C. S. Lewis was born at the turn of the century in Ireland, took firsts in English and Classics at Oxford College and taught at Oxford for 30 years, and died in 1963 on the same day JFK was assassinated. A self-declared atheist as a teenager, Lewis converted to Christianity in his 30s and became a respected proponent for the Christian belief in the divinity of the Christ at a time when many scholars were questioning the miraculous basis of the faith. He is best known today for *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a series of children's fantasies based on a love of nature and myth, a little like Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. (Tolkien and Lewis were colleagues at Oxford.)

British playwright William Nicholson's drama *Shadowlands*, written in 1990 and now onstage at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, is based on Lewis's life in his late 50s and his friendship and marriage to Joy Davidson Gresham, a forty-year-old American poet and journalist, former communist and convert to Christianity from Judaism.

Marianne Galloway beautifully directs CTD's production with a light hand, finding the humor in even the hardest moments, and never drifting into sentimentality. We first meet "Jack" (a nickname Lewis gave himself at 13 when his pet dog of the same name died) in an opening monologue about why God permits his creatures to suffer pain if He truly loves them. "God loves us, but he does not write us letters saying 'I love you madly,'" he explains. Lewis (a sweetly stuffy *James Crawford*) goes on to explain that God is less interested in human happiness than in our worthiness to be loved. And we become worthy of God's love through suffering, which is "God's megaphone to wake up" and realize that we are not self-sufficient and that "this life is the shadowlands."

Then the apologist for God steps into the club, and we see him in the company of four other Oxford colleagues and his brother Major W. H. "Warnie" Lewis (a superbly British and quietly perceptive *T. A. Taylor*) as they discuss the nature of the universe, friendship, the intelligence (if any) of women, and other weighty matters. One man notes that their married colleague "hardly speaks of his wife at all," while the single man talks of nothing else. "What should we deduce from that?" asks the witty Prof. Riley (a perfectly annoying *Scott Milligan*). "That women are more interesting in theory than in practice?"

Jack is about to find out, because a woman he's been corresponding with for some time suddenly writes that she will be in England and wants to drop down to Oxford to meet him. Jack and his brother, another confirmed bachelor, live contentedly together in a house close to the college. "She'll ask you where you get your ideas," Warnie says. But when Lewis agrees to meet Joy Davidman Gresham (a vibrant and forthright *Diane Worman*), he's in for a setting-straight about women -- in many areas.

This handsome, independent woman brings not only her young son Douglas (a bright-eyed, obedient *Taubert Nadalini*) with her, but an emotional and intellectual honesty Jack has never before confronted. The shy scholar is both flattered and embarrassed by Joy's obvious adoration.

"Your work has been the most important thing in my life," she tells him about two sentences into their first conversation." What's a poor virgin bachelor to do?

When Joy's faithless husband divorces her, she and Douglas show up in Oxford, where they've rented a house! Much to his surprise -- and delight -- Jack discovers a true soul mate in Joy, and their friendship grows. He admires her poetry, although she dismisses it as slight compared to his work. She tells him about her life-changing religious experience, and he understands precisely what happened. Her young son is charming -- and a huge fan of Jack's *Narnia* series. Jack even agrees to marry her -- "just technically" -- so she and Douglas can stay in England.

Then the vital Joy is diagnosed with terminal bone cancer, and is suddenly bedridden and in wrenching pain. Jack's belief system and his ideas about his own life are challenged as he realizes how much this dying woman means to him. "Look at what it takes to make me see sense!" he tells the woman he loves. Weakened but seeing humor even in catastrophe, Joy replies, "You think I overdid it?"

Love can work miracles -- or sometimes a reprieve. When the couple goes to Greece after a "church" marriage, he tells her that because he has only discovered life in their union, he is just a few months old. This rebirth in love rejuvenates them both. When the inevitable approaches -- it is Joy who tells the distraught Jack that life goes on, and that suffering is simply part of the deal that also includes joy.

The funny, loving and touching scenes that define the budding and blossoming of this extraordinary love story are played just about perfectly in the current production. Everybody in the nine-member cast is good, and Worman and Crawford are utterly touching as friends, lovers and people you're glad to know have lived. Tissue is furnished on theater tables.

Randel Wright's sturdy set facilitates easy movement of the cast in quick, multiple scene changes, and *Christina Dickson* does a good job with costumes-- especially with all the tweedy suits.

Shadowlands runs Thursdays through Sundays through March 4 at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, 5601 Sears, a block off lower Greenville Avenue. Tickets are \$22 - \$27; call 214-828-0094 for reservations or check www.contemporarytheatreofdallas.com.