

# Theater Review “Shadowlands”

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By Ben Miles

Written by William Nicholson in 1985, “Shadowlands” began as a teleplay. It was initially aired by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in Wales. Later Nicholson adapted the script to the stage. In 1993, the story was re-worked as a screenplay and made into a film starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger (both screenwriter Nicholson and lead actress Winger won Oscar nominations for their efforts on the project).

Now, So Cal audiences have the rare chance to see an insightful, albeit, small-scale production of “Shadowlands,” by the American Coast Theater Company, at the Lyceum Theater in Costa Mesa. Confidently directed by Marianne Savell, it is Nicholson’s use of language—well-voiced by the ample and capable cast—that is the prime focus in this “Shadowlands.”

And why wouldn’t it be? After all, “Shadowlands” is based on biographical details from the life of acclaimed Christian wordsmith C.S. Lewis (“The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe”). In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Lewis was an Oxford academic—committed to scholarship, children’s books, lay religious texts (“Mere Christianity), and bachelorhood. Deep into middle-age, however, Lewis finds love with American poet and self-proclaimed Jewish-Communist-Christian, Joy Davidman Gresham.

Avoiding revelation of too many plot points, suffice it to say—in the words of Ernest Hemmingway—all true stories end in death, and “Shadowlands” is a fact-based tale. But here it is the dramatic journey, along with the wise turns-of-phrase, not the destination or denouement that is the point.

As C.S. Lewis, Amick Byram inhabits the character as if it were his own life. From carriage to cogitation, Byram owns this embodiment of Lewis, and he is often mesmerizing. Susan K. Berkompas successfully incarnates Joy Gresham. Berkompas’s interpretation of Gresham lends credibility to the character’s frankness. Unaffected and direct, Berkompas’s Gresham seems like a real person.

Jef Cantor, as Professor Riley; David Macy-Beckwith, as Lewis’s brother, Major; and Christopher Hunter (alternating with Tristan Steward), as Joy’s young Boy, Douglas—all perform with a journeyman’s dedication (as do four other actors). Moreover, designers Paul Eggington and James Mulligan (set and scenic art, respectively), along with costumer Lia Hansen and lighting-meister David Pecoraro, make the most of what they have to work with. The results are admirable.

In a thoughtful final monologue, C.S. (he preferred to be called Jack) Lewis asks us—as if we were students seated in an Oxford lecture hall—“Why love if losing hurts so much? I have no answer,” he continues, “(But) the pain now is part of the happiness then. That’s the deal.” This somber truth is a clarion call for our attention: It asks us to live present-mindedly in the here and now. This—along with a tenacious troupe of nine thespians, and inventive production values on a low, low budget—makes “Shadowlands” a show worth pondering.

*“Shadowlands” is presented by the American Coast Theater Company at the Lyceum Theater—55 Fair Drive, Costa Mesa—through August 29. Show times are Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.*

*Matinees are Sundays at 2 p.m. For reservations, dial (714) 619 – 6424. For online ticketing, visit [www.ACTickets.com](http://www.ACTickets.com).*