

On Theater: Beauty shown in subtleties



By Tom Titus - Daily Pilot

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The works of British author C.S. Lewis are widely read today, especially among younger people and those of a religious bent, but the author's personal story overshadows his popular fiction in terms of dramatic impact.

In William Nicholson's semi-biographical play "Shadowlands," now on stage as the American Coast Theater Co.'s second summer production at Vanguard University, Lewis's life rather than his work is brought center stage in a production calculated to bring a tear to the hardest of eyes.

Lewis, known to his friends as Jack, already was firmly established in the literary world when his path crossed with that of Joy Gresham, an American writer visiting London with her young son and who is on the verge of becoming a divorcee. They married — as a convenience so she could stay in England — but convenience soon turned into genuine love.

It's a heartwarming story — except that Joy was stricken with cancer and died within a few years of the marriage. This is the tale which the ACTC dramatizes at Vanguard in a beautifully realized production under the detailed direction of Marianne Savell.

Amick Byram, who has directed several productions at Vanguard, delivers a superbly layered performance as Lewis, the confirmed intellectual bachelor whose views on the Almighty are challenged by his personal developments. His gradual affection for the visiting American is finely tuned and splendidly accomplished.

Taking on the task of Joy, the self-described Jewish-Communist-Christian, is Susan K. Berkompas, producing artistic director at Vanguard. It's a marriage made in theatrical heaven as Berkompas (with a fine New York accent) penetrates the snobbish world of English intelligentsia in a bravura performance.

Both characters are cerebral champions in their respective fields, and the affection that develops between them is cautiously portrayed by a pair of pros at the top of their game. The fact that they fall in love so late, with death looming, is the play's most gripping factor.

Leading the dissenting camp among Lewis's cronies is professor Christopher Riley (a contentious Jef Canter), whose distaste for Gresham is undisguised. David Macy-Beckwith renders a solid account of Lewis's older brother Warnie, who flows docilely with the tide of events.

Completing the company in a variety of assignments are James McHale, Ryan Miller, Peter Senkheil and Melody Zephyr. The role of Joy's young son is divided between Christopher Huntley and Tristan Steward.

Director Savell has done an outstanding job of tempering these two literary lions into creatures of genuine warmth and humanity. Paul Eggington's unit setting allows for swift alterations, aided by James Mulligan's artwork, David Pecoraro's lighting effects and Lia Hansen's 1950s period costumes.

"Shadowlands" is one of those rare plays that touches the head and the heart with equal pressure. The production at Vanguard explores its myriad subtleties beautifully.

TOM TITUS reviews local theater for the Daily Pilot.

If You Go

What: "Shadowlands"

Who: American Coast Theater Co.

Where: Vanguard University, 55 Fair Drive, Costa Mesa

When: Fridays & Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m. through Aug. 29

Cost: \$15 to \$20

Call: (714) 619-6424