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'Shadowlands' eases us toward dark subject matter

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Only late in life did British author and literary scholar C.S. Lewis find true love. Sadly, it was a romance tinged with tragedy.

As a don at Oxford University in the 1950s, Lewis described himself as "a comfortably situated, middle-aged bachelor" when he met Joy Gresham, an American writer and divorced mother some 16 years his junior.

What began as a deep friendship wound up with the couple taking marriage vows not once, but twice – the first a civil contract that allowed Joy and her son to maintain residence in England.

Lewis and Joy eventually fell in love and had a second wedding ceremony. By that time, though, Joy had been stricken with terminal bone cancer, which injected the couple's lives with unwelcome doses of physical and emotional pain.

Their personal story, and a more personal look at Lewis than simply studying his writings, is delivered in William Nicholson's "Shadowlands," which began as a 1985 BBC teleplay, was adapted to the stage in 1989 and filmed in 1993 with Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger.

The medium of theater, though, brings the couple's intimate story, and all the issues connected with it, right into our laps. If you can watch Marianne Savell's American Coast Theater Company staging without shedding a tear, you're made of sterner stuff than most.

For those who know Lewis only as the author of "The Chronicles of Narnia" and "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," "Shadowlands" will be revelatory, as will be the brutal irony that the only romantic happiness he ever knew was deeply intertwined with pain.

Playing like a rapid succession of brief scenes, Nicholson's text gives us two distinct and, at first, oddly matched personalities: Lewis, who is elegant and eloquent yet dry, and Joy, a blunt New Yorker who was raised a Jew and became an atheist, then converted to Christianity. It's also clear that Lewis and Joy are intellectual equals who love to debate.

Partly based on the memoirs of Joy's son Douglas, "Shadowlands" neatly navigates the complicated details of Joy's life both before and after her meeting Lewis. Equal parts documentary, character study and romance, the play stands as an elegant testimonial to love, suffering, God and faith.

Humor leavens the opening scenes, making the story's bright, articulate characters all the more appealing. Nicholson fleshes out his basic storyline with often fascinating details, including the dark truth that at age eight, Lewis witnessed his mother's suffering and eventual death from cancer. And though some of the script's handling of the couple's romance may seem pedestrian, even its apparent clichés are refreshing.

As Lewis and Joy, Amick Byram and Susan K. Berkompas bring spontaneity to their roles as well as a palpable chemistry best expressed through their characters' witty banter and an unspoken bond of affection.

Byram's Lewis is a quiet, thoughtful gent who takes all things with deliberation. His voice capturing the scholar's refined Oxford accent, Byram shows that Lewis is quietly self-confident, unfailingly polite, hearty and agreeable, and constantly absorbed in deep reflection – all of which make Lewis immensely likable.

Joy's charming, low-key cheekiness is well communicated by Berkompas. Though Joy is still delightfully blunt, Berkompas downplays her pushiness while adding singsong inflections to her character's New York City dialect.

Berkompas also shows us that the source of Joy's candor lies in her intense desire to know and understand those around her. She also does a nice job of delivering Joy's self-effacing throwaway remarks and her acuity in piercing Lewis's often impenetrable reserve.

As the 12-year-old son Douglas, Tristan Steward (alternating in the role with Christopher Huntley) delivers his dialogue so rapidly as to obscure much of it. Still, he captures the young man's precocity, solemnity and maturity.

David Macy-Beckwith lets us see that Warnie, Lewis' older brother, is similarly reserved, bookish and dry-humored as C.S., yet even more diffident.

Jef Canter's portrayal of Professor Christopher Riley, the most outspoken of Lewis' Oxford colleagues, emphasizes Riley's condescending misogyny and his envy of Lewis' fame and success.

Paul Eggington's set uses photos of row upon row of book spines to depict the vast library of Lewis's Oxford home and a fireplace stuffed not with wood but with stacks of yet more books. Lia Hansen's '50s-era costumes and David Pecoraro's lighting offer valuable visual contributions.

Ultimately, "Shadowlands" is about an intellectual forced to confront his emotions and man's mortality. This is Lewis's struggle to fathom how a just God could deliver so cruel a blow.

"If you want the happiness, you have to take the pain," he says at the conclusion of a lecture. "That's the deal. And yet, it doesn't seem fair, does it?"

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