

Depth propels RHP's 'Shadowlands'

Quad City Times – June 13, 2003 - by Ruby Nancy

"Shadowlands" is a great play with an amazing emotional depth that is impossible to ignore, and the Richmond Hill Players production of it currently running is a script-worthy representation.

Powerfully moving, simply beautiful, often intense, it is a romantic drama you can't resist being drawn into. Knowing the story of the relationship between British author C.S. Lewis and American poet Joy Gresham, even knowing how their romance ends, doesn't keep you from being caught up in the moment as this wonderfully-done show unfolds.

And don't let the cute lady in the lobby lie to you: this "Shadowlands" is NOT a three-hanky show. I'd say five is closer to what you really need (and I was lucky to attend with someone prescient enough to bring along a pack of tissue). That's not a notice that this play is a depressing one, however. It's a show with plenty of humor, too, which many will not expect, and the underlying message of love's transformative power is a positive one.

Directed by theater powerhouse Jennifer Kingry, who also doubles (possibly triples?) as technical director and set and lighting designer, the show features stellar talent in a handful of important roles and introduces brand-new performers as well. And Kingry makes excellent use of her own talent as well as that of her cast.

Larry Lord stars as C.S. Lewis, known to his friends as "Jack" and to millions of Americans as the author of The Chronicles of Narnia series, and Lord's work here is profoundly, incredibly done. It's a fantastic performance that provides an authentic center to the entire production, and the uncomfortable reserve he wears as Lewis - though generally an unlikely trait for a romantic lead -- is perfect here. For example, he lightly touches a woman's shoulder with his fingertips once or brushes his knuckles across her forearm, and he loads those slight gestures with a wealth of intimacy and emotion that you have to see to believe. Intense and understated, Lord's brilliant portrayal displays a deep understanding of both the character and the material that is rarely seen.

Angela Rathman plays opposite Lord as Gresham, and her performance is a curious mix of brash and vulnerable that I think works well. In act one, her character doesn't seem to really connect with Lewis on a deeper level -- a possibly deliberate point, since the characters also have a disconnect -- and in either case that makes the intensity of their emotional intimacy later in the play even more powerful. Her performance shines with authenticity, even through scenes of severe illness and sometimes heavy sedation, and never strikes a single false note.

As "Warnie" Lewis, Jack's brother, John VandeWoestyne's performance is one that combines some comic relief with plenty of depth as well. As THE eccentric in a family that probably had more than its share, Warren Lewis is something of a crank, but VanDeWoestyne lends him a loveable irritability and a fierce, though understated, protectiveness that greatly enriches "Shadowlands."

Young Ethan Halsall, who plays Douglas, Gresham's son, also does fine work in this show. Unlike many children's roles in adult plays (where only cutesy window dressing is required), the part is an integral element here -- and ten-year-old Halsall, who makes his community theater debut in this role, is completely up to the task. The quiet relationships Douglas develops with the Lewis brothers are strong ones, and he connects well with the adult actors -- especially with Lord in a near-final scene that is absolutely fabulous.

Some great lighting effects and the warm set details are pluses here, but a drama like this lives or dies on its performances. And this particular "Shadowlands," like those who choose to love without regard to the risk of loss, is completely, totally alive.

"Richmond Hills 'Shadowlands' engrossing, clever theater

Argus/Dispatch – June 12, 2003 - by Julie Jensen

The Richmond Hill Players' productions of "Shadowlands" is an engrossing theatrical experience.

It's the story of love and loss in the lives of C.S. Lewis, British writer and theologian, and Joy Gresham, the American poet.

Jennifer Kingry, the director, has woven the rapidly changing scenes together nicely, and she has elicited a British accent from appropriate members of the cast that is recognizable as such but not too thick to understand.

Larry Lord from Geneseo plays C.S. "Jack" Lewis with just the right mixture of reserve and emotion.

In the opening scene he delivers a lecture, asking, "If God loves us, why does he allow us to suffer?"

He answers his own question with, "Pain is God's megaphone, rousing a deaf world. Through suffering we release our toys in the world. This world is no more than the Shadowlands. Real life has not yet begun."

His colleagues who gather in the back room of an Oxford dining hall are Professor Christopher Riley, an acid-tongued iconoclast played by Mark Bosveld; the Rev. Harry Harrington, an affable cleric played by Archie Williams; and Alan Gregg, played by Ken Ohr, who also plays the doctor caring for Joy in the Hospital. John VanDeWoestyne is Lewis' brother, Major Warren "Warnie" Lewis and he brings a great deal of feeling to the role.

Joy Davidman Gresham, the American poet who has been corresponding with Lewis, appears on the scene with her young son, Douglas.

Angela Rathman does a superlative job of interpreting this complex woman who was born Jewish and was a Communist before converting to Christianity. She is clever, outspoken and proud.

Ten-year old Ethan Halsall from Galva plays the boy and he does it wonderfully well.

His mother, Lorrie Halsall, is also in the cast as the registrar who marries Lewis and Joy Gresham in a civil ceremony and the nurse who cares for Joy in the hospital.

Another actor with multiple roles is Mike Skiles, who appears as a waiter, the priest who performs the second wedding ceremony, this time strictly for love, and the bellhop in Greece, where they go on their honeymoon.

The play abounds in clever lines, and although the subjects are love, pain and suffering, there are some laughs along the way.

In the beginning and at the end, C.S. Lewis talks about the Creator sculpting blocks of stone, saying, "The blows that hurt us so much shape a perfect form." You'd have to be a block of stone to be unmoved by "Shadowlands."