

Max McLean

Max McLean is an award-winning actor and the founder and artistic director of Fellowship for Performing Arts, a New York-based company that produces theatre from a Christian worldview with the goal of engaging diverse audiences.

The nonprofit organization's first project was an audio recording of the Old and New Testaments known as *The Listener's Bible*. FPA now focuses on new and adapted works for the stage. Many of their productions were adapted by McLean himself, and he has starred in some of them as well.

Three of FPA's shows have come to the Tulsa PAC in recent years: *C.S. Lewis: The Most Reluctant Convert*, *Martin Luther on Trial* and *The Screwtape Letters*. This month, FPA presents *The Great Divorce*, which, like *Screwtape*, is based on a novel by **C.S. Lewis**, best known for his fantasy series *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

In *The Great Divorce*, a group of people take a magical bus ride from a cheerless gray town to the lush foothills of heaven. There they are met by familiar people who offer to help them make their way up the mountain to eternal joy. For many, it's an offer they surprisingly (or not) can and do refuse.

FPA's adaptation has been called "infinitely thought-provoking" by *The New York Times* and has been recommended by *The Washington Post* as "a Christian fantasy without the sermonizing."



Alex Barker

Why are so many of the shows your company produces based on works by C.S. Lewis?

C.S. Lewis had a rare ability to take the Christian worldview and express it in a way that is winsome, engaging, nuanced, imaginative, passionate and often funny. So, it was a natural choice to dramatize his writings.

How do you recreate the fantastical landscapes of *The Great Divorce* on stage and make some actors appear ghostly and others solid and bright?

That's a good question, because *The Great Divorce* must depict both the gray town, Lewis' metaphor for hell; the outskirts of heaven; and the bus ride between the two in an imaginative and dazzling way. To execute that, we acquired a stage-wide LED screen that delivers a new level of stagecraft. Images are both vivid and expansive — just what the story needs. As for the "ghosts"

and "solid people," we're able to realize those characters through costuming, lighting, the inventiveness of the director, and our amazing actors.

How many actors are in this show and how many characters do they portray?

There are four actors in our production of *The Great Divorce* — **Jonathan Hadley**, **Carol Halstead**, **Joel Rainwater** and **Tom Souhrada**. Joel plays the narrator that Lewis speaks through in the book — in fact, he's a stand-in for Lewis. The other three actors bring 21 different characters to life.

Some reviews of the TV series *The Good Place* have said it contains elements of *The Great Divorce*. Are you familiar with *The Good Place*, and if so, do you see the similarities? I've never seen *The Good Place*, so I can't really comment. I've also heard the same

comparison to that older series *Lost*. All borrow from **Dante's *Divine Comedy***. The concept of a person bound for hell with a chance to go to heaven allows for a strong dramatic arc. Lewis' message is about spiritual warfare and how we humans resist the promptings of our conscience or more specifically the Holy Spirit. Lewis develops **John Milton's** argument that we would rather "reign in hell than serve in heaven," that "all who are in hell choose it," and that those who are in heaven are there not because of merit or good deeds but grace.

Is there a message to *The Great Divorce* that you think is particularly relevant in 2020? A theme you find in all of Lewis' fiction is the eternal value of our choices. He would say every choice we make moves us in one of two directions — toward hell or toward heaven. In these very polarized times in which

we live, I think the idea of the seriousness of everyone's individual choices is most relevant. There's a reason Lewis sells more books year by year even though he died in 1963.

There are so many thought-provoking — and occasionally humorous — lines in *The Great Divorce*. What is one of your favorites? I'm reluctant to name a favorite, because they are funny in context of the play but may not resonate independent of the action. Lewis had a particular way of developing humor. He speaks of humor as “not jokes, or flippancy — that I cannot endure — but rather as the bloom of the argument.” You will see that in abundance in *The Great Divorce*.

George MacDonald, a real 19th century preacher, is an important character in the play. Why do you think Lewis decided to use this real person in the play rather than come up with a fictional character who was similar, perhaps, to MacDonald? George MacDonald was Lewis' spiritual guide

from the moment he read MacDonald's *Phantastes*. MacDonald's writing influenced several mainstream authors beyond Lewis, including **Lord Dunsany** and **Madeleine L'Engle**. MacDonald is to Lewis as **Virgil** was to Dante.

What do you think Lewis was saying in *The Great Divorce* about the relationships between good and evil, and heaven and hell? Lewis wrote *The Great Divorce* in a response to an idea expressed in **William Blake's** *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Blake tried to describe a point at which the differences between good and evil would somehow be resolved. Lewis himself wrote that he found the notion “a disastrous error.” In the preface to *The Great Divorce*, he wrote, “Evil can be undone, but it cannot ‘develop’ into good. Time does not heal it... If we insist on keeping Hell (or even Earth) we shall not see Heaven.”

Regarding heaven and hell, I think Lewis was getting at hell being the absence of God, that if you reject God, you are choosing to experience what exists

is like without him. If you desire God, by grace, you will experience an eternity of growing steadily more like him, which is what we were made for. MacDonald says in *The Great Divorce*, “There are two kinds of people in the end, those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, *thy* will be done.”



Presented by
Fellowship for Performing Arts
March 27 at 8 p.m.
March 28 at 4 p.m.
March 29 at 3 p.m.

JOHN H. WILLIAMS THEATRE
 Tickets at tulsapac.com and 918-596-7111



Carol Halstead, Jonathan Hadley, Joel Rainwater and Tom Souhrada in the Fellowship for Performing Arts production of *THE GREAT DIVORCE*