

FELLOWSHIP CIRCLE

A publication of Fellowship for the Performing Arts

Fall 2011

Fellowship Circle is a key building block to help Fellowship for the Performing Arts achieve its mission of presenting Christian worldview theatre that engages the culture. As a Circle Member your gift provides the financial foundation for producing meaningful, compelling theatre from a Christian perspective that speaks to a diverse audience.

The Key to Telling Good Stories C.S. Lewis Inspires FPA to Engage the Imagination

By Max McLean

There's a major difference between communicating ideas on stage and communicating ideas from the pulpit. A common objection in mainstream culture is that Christian theatre comes off as preachy. This is certainly a challenge for FPA. But we believe that we have overcome this objection by modeling our work on the great writer, C. S. Lewis.

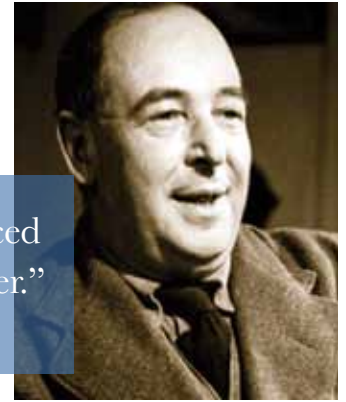
Lewis' story is worth telling. He was thirty-two years old when he converted to Christianity. His conversion came later in life because before that, Christianity's doctrines held no appeal or fascination for him. He wrote in his autobiography that he had Christians "placed and disposed of, forever."

The turning point for Lewis came when his friend J.R.R. Tolkien showed him that he was looking at Christianity through the wrong lens. Both Tolkien and Lewis loved the stories of gods and heroes from ancient mythology. These stories filled Lewis with desires and longings they knew came from another world. One of my favorite Lewis quotes is, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

Yet, when these longings came, Lewis did not look to Christianity for their source and meaning. This changed after Tolkien showed Lewis that his failure to believe was

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— C.S. LEWIS



a failure of his imagination. When Lewis approached the gospels he read it like a textbook. Tolkien encouraged him to read the gospels with the same imaginative lens with which he read the great mythologies that engaged his imagination. Then he would see Jesus in the same way the gospel writers saw him. But there was one huge difference: the story of Jesus is not a myth. It *really happened!*

Continued inside

The Great Divorce, From Page to Stage FPA to adapt Lewis' classic novel for the stage

After delving into the wickedly witty, morally inverted universe of the *Screwtape Letters* and C.S. Lewis' depiction of what lies beneath, FPA's next project is setting its eyes on Lewis' illustration of what hails above.

An epic fantasy of Heaven and Hell, *The Great Divorce* pairs contrasting landscapes with brilliant storytelling to explore the crisis of conversion, creating theatre that captures the psychological drama of 'counting the cost' before making the decision to go up the mountain towards Heaven or return to the Grey Town of Hell from which they came.

A modern take on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, *The Great Divorce* is a fantastic dream sequence where our protagonist, Lewis,

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AN EPIC FANTASY OF HEAVEN & HELL

THE *Screwtape* LETTERS NATIONAL TOUR

Memphis Orpheum Theatre, Nov 5
Miami Olympia Theater, Nov 12
Dallas Majestic Theatre, Nov 19
Boston Cutler Majestic Theatre, Dec 2-3
Orlando Plaza Live Theatre, Dec 28-30
Los Angeles Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, Jan 14-15
San Francisco Herbst Theatre, Jan 21
Salt Lake City Kingsbury Hall, Jan 28
Phoenix Ikeda Theater, Feb 4
San Diego Balboa Theatre, Feb 18
New cities added regularly. Visit ScrewtapeOnStage.com
for up-to-date tour information. Dates as of October, 2011.

The Washington Post

By Celia Wren

That smoldering scent wafting along Penn Quarter is not exhaust that's drifted over from traffic on Interstate 395. It's a whiff of infernal brimstone, courtesy of "The Screwtape Letters," the diverting, talky, handsomely produced dramatization of C.S. Lewis's book running at the Lansburgh Theatre.

Dominated by actor Max McLean as the eponymous demon, who'd pass muster in any Oxford University faculty lounge, the 90-minute show stays fundamentally true to Lewis's vision of Hell as a cutthroat bureaucracy. But Jeffrey Fiske, who directs the piece -- mounted by Fellowship for the Performing Arts, which creates theater from a Christian worldview -- prudently adds a few Dantesque touches, too.

Best known for writing the children's series "The Chronicles of Narnia," Lewis also penned books that more directly expounded his Christian faith. "Screwtape" is one of these, and audience members interested in spiritual reflection will certainly find food for thought -- and mortification -- in this dramatization. But the fiendish reality the production conjures is colorful enough to appeal to theatergoers of any, or no, religious persuasion. The Devil is an equal-opportunity entertainer. ■

Colorful enough to appeal to theatergoers of any, or no, religious persuasion. – THE WASHINGTON POST

dcist

By Chris Klimek

Man, if the Vast Right Wing Conspiracy had C. S. Lewis on the payroll these days, we'd all be in trouble — er, *worse* trouble. Lewis, the World War I vet, Oxford and Cambridge academic, uber-prolific author, and all-around intellectual heavyweight, converted to Christianity in his early 30s. He's probably most remembered for the hugely popular evangelical *Chronicles of Narnia* novels he penned chiefly for young readers, but he was equally adept at proselytizing to adults. A clear and elegant thinker who played the English language like a fine instrument, Lewis was and is so good, you'd hardly know you were being preached to. Exhibit A would be *The Screwtape Letters*.

Fellowship of the Performing Arts — a group devoted to producing "theater from a Christian worldview that is engaging to a diverse audience," as their mission statement

goes — has hit the bullseye, making a *Screwtape* for the stage that's nearly as incisive and funny as it is on the page, and one that should appeal to the aesthetically-discerning atheist as well as to a wide swath of religious folks.

This is a show — if you'll pardon the expression — without sin. ■

HOUSTON ArtsWeek

By Marlene Weyand

Max McLean's stage production of C. S. Lewis' "The Screwtape Letters" played to sell-out crowds in Houston this past weekend. McLean's voice, coupled with his robust acting abilities, made for a superb *Screwtape*.

The power of Lewis' work is in its raw observation and the readers' subsequent realization that there is a spiritual plan by unseen forces whose most powerful tool is keeping Truth from humans: "It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out."

The Houston audience comprised two worldviews: the intellectual and the Christian. From the feedback during the post-production informance with McLean, it appears the intellectual was grateful for a comfortable characterization of the incredibly evil *Screwtape*, with lots of tittering and snickering at the protagonist's observations. Regarding the Christians' expectations (trying to avoid falling into the trap of spiritual pride that *Screwtape* aptly pokes fun at when speaking of Christians), I will say that their worldview is not of this world. Subsequently, the straining of Lewis' work may have left them, shall we say, hungry for more. ■

TheaterJones

Performing Arts News in Dallas/Fort Worth

By Kris Noteboom

A story about Christianity told from the perspective of a demon? What a novel concept—and exactly the idea famous Christian apologist author, C.S. Lewis, thought when he wrote *The Screwtape Letters*. A recent stage adaptation is presented in a tour by Fellowship For the Performing Arts at Dallas' own cathedral for the arts, the Majestic Theatre.

Having received multiple adaptations since its publishing, this version is one of the few to resist the temptation to assign a more narrative storyline. Making the letters interesting, and often humorous, was centered in McLean's delivery.

FPA has hit the bullseye that should appeal to the atheist... and to religi

McLean's Screwtape oozes cool menace...His specific cadence and pacing lend a peculiar, and ever so slightly disturbing, humanity to the demon. He is logical and matter-of-fact in his letters, only losing his temper when Wormwood shows himself to be too concerned with the more vile sins than the mundane day-to-day variety which Screwtape argues are the easiest pathway to Hell.

C. S. Lewis was known for his unique approach to Christianity. Having come to the faith kicking and screaming, his writing takes on the tone of a converted skeptic not afraid to try with all his might to poke holes in the belief system. And this is what makes his writing so lasting.

Screwtape is a good watch for all audiences, Christian and non. From a performance standpoint, McLean is a powerfully commanding presence and eloquent villain. And, as any artistic expression should have something important to say, Lewis' words transcend simple religious application and lay out a pretty good model as to how to live a good life. That he relates these tenets in such a creative way is the icing on the cake as to why this performance is not to be missed. ■

Chicago Stage Review

By Venus Zarris

Playwright/actor Max McLean takes us on this riveting excursion into the underworld with the kind of verbose charm seldom allowed, much less achieved, in conventional theater. His Screwtape is on par with Shaffer's Salieri or Dickens' Scrooge...a perfectly pompous and ostentatious officer of the netherworld; hell bent on aiding and abetting the deviate pursuit of acquiring souls for the ravenous flames of perdition.

The brilliant design team realizes this suspended nightmarish realm with exceptional skill and conceptual creativity. Hell might be bottomless, but this is a classy little minimalist shelf, located on the way down. The visual details are deceptively simple and gradually unfold as the letters are exchanged.

But one can't help but view things, at least to some extent, through personal filters and from where I sit the heavy-handed Christian sermonizing of C. S. Lewis' source material is overtly distasteful. It is a true testament to the success of the production that it overcomes this dogmatic propaganda to the point of delivering a delightful theatrical encounter.

There is always something thrilling about listening to the elucidations of a strong intellect pontificate on a subject for which it feels passionate, even when the thoughts expressed

run contrary to one's own opinions or beliefs. Still, the sheer beautiful theatricality and devilishly playful wickedness of this gorgeous production overcomes Lewis' audacity and makes for a uniquely entertaining event. ■

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The Key to Telling Good Stories

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This approach to the gospel engaged Lewis' imagination, and led to his complete conversion to Christ. And it unleashed a literary flow in him that did not end until they day he died. Lewis never forgot Tolkien's advice. From that point on, he wrote dozens of great stories such as *Narnia*, *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce* that would capture the imagination of millions, while expressing great Christian truth. As a result of Lewis' imaginative storytelling, he is considered the most influential Christian writer of the 20th century.

Fellowship for the Performing Arts (FPA) is inspired by the legacy of writers such as C. S. Lewis. We want to tell good stories from a Christian worldview through imaginative story, narrative, characters, wit, humor and emotional intention. We want to give our audiences an experience that can be translated as "Aha! I get this. I understand what this means. Could it be true that unseen powers like Screwtape are at work in my life and affecting my choices? How do I resist him? Should I explore this a little further?"

Throughout history, the Christian faith has been the inspiration for the greatest art in the world. It is only recently that Christian artistic expression has been in retreat. On the one hand, churches have been too fearful of art to foster it in the right way. On the other hand, Christian perspective has been stigmatized as too preachy and reactionary to contribute to the cultural conversation.

The *NY1* theatre critic described FPA as a "genuine curiosity: unabashed Christian theatre tackling weighty moral issues." *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* observed that, despite FPA's Christian worldview, its productions "appeal to theatregoers of any, or no, religious persuasion." The fashion magazine *Elle* described *The Screwtape Letters* as a "soul scraping therapy session."

We target skeptical theatregoers, the mainstream press and especially thoughtful Christians who seek a winsome and provocative 'third space' between the workplace and the church sanctuary where one can bring friends and colleagues to an enjoyable theatrical event and engage

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The Key to Telling Good Stories

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in fruitful dialogue about faith issues.

Our impact is unique. Valerie Hunt said “I support FPA productions because I can confidently bring friends and colleagues who are not Christians and engage in conversation about it afterwards.” People like Valerie trust us to provide a powerful, meaningful experience that reinforces faith and will nourish a hungry soul.

Several hundred thousands of people have seen our production of C. S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters*, which ran in New York City for nine months, outlasting 90% of all Broadway shows in 2010. The *Chicago Tribune* called it the most successful show in the history of the Mercury Theatre, where it ran for six months. It, also, ran for ten sold out weeks at the famed Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D. C. Currently *The Screwtape Letters* is on a 25-city tour to premiere performing arts venues from Seattle to Miami and Boston to San Diego. Virtually every major media source that covers theatre has covered this production.

Producing theatre from a Christian worldview in this highly competitive entertainment marketplace is expensive.

“A genuine curiosity:
unabashed Christian
theatre tackling weighty
moral issues” – NY1

The expectations are very high, and due to the stigma of having the name “Christian” attached, means our quality must be even higher so it is not dismissed.

Since April 2010, FPA has spent \$3.7 million to produce in New York and on national tour. Each time we take our show on the road, our small staff of six has to outsource up to seventy-five people to execute all the elements of a successful production. It requires good planning and fiscal responsibility. FPA has been a member of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability since 1996. We audit our finances and have operated with a balanced budget for the past ten years.

We trust the LORD to keep us on mission and on message as we winsomely express a Christian worldview to a diverse post-Christian audience. We ask that you partner with us to continue this great work of capturing the imagination for Christ through the power of theatre. ■

The Great Divorce, From Page to Stage

Continued from front

finds himself walking the mean streets of the Grey Town, “Hell.” It’s ghostly residents are given an opportunity to take a bus to the outskirts of Heaven, where they are met with the bright, solid Spirits of those they least expected to see. The ghosts are faced with the opportunity to go up the mountain where they will become their truest selves with God, or hold on to the pride, desires, and annoyances they are allowed to hold on to in the dismal Grey Town. With Lewis’ convicting insights in a landscape of breath-taking fantasy, *The Great Divorce* is sure to be an imaginative adventure worth experiencing.

“What attracts me to *The Great Divorce* is how it forces us to consider the cost of Christian commitment.”

– MAX McLEAN

President and Artistic Director, Max McLean, says *The Great Divorce* is the perfect choice for FPA’s next theatrical project. “Theatre is so labor and resource intensive that one must take the greatest care selecting a story to put on stage,” says McLean. “What attracts me to *The Great Divorce* is how it forces us to consider the cost of Christian commitment. Lewis writes in his preface to *The Great Divorce*, ‘If we insist on keeping Hell (even Earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we insist on Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenir of Hell.’”

The Great Divorce is currently in development. FPA plans to hold its first staged readings in New York this fall. ■

If you’re passionate about seeing C.S. Lewis’ *The Great Divorce* hit stages nationwide, please partner with us in our work. Your name will be included in our playbill as a member in our Fellowship Circle. (See insert for details)