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theater review

Late love's heavy price

"Shadowlands" is a portrayal of C.S. Lewis

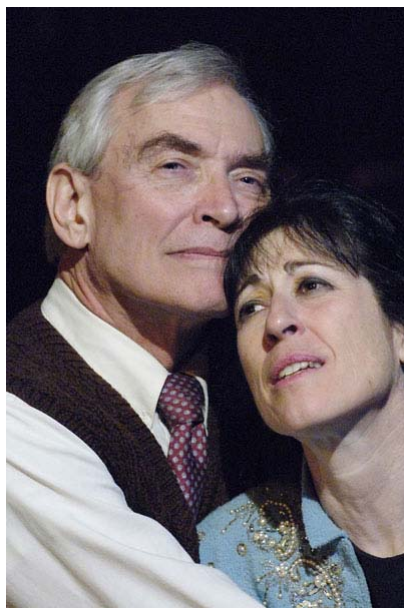
By John Moore

Denver Post Theater Critic

Fort Collins - Good evening. The subject of our talk today is love, pain and suffering.

So too are the opening lines of William Nicholson's ruminative "Shadowlands," the bittersweet, late-life love story of Irish author C.S. Lewis and American poet Joy Gresham.

Lewis, who sold more than 100 million "Narnia" children's books, was also perhaps the 20th century's most famous Christian convert. "The moment" wasn't exactly the stuff of legend or lightning - he simply had an epiphany while riding a double-decker bus in 1929. Lewis went on to become a great Christian apologist, which soon will be evident to anyone who takes in the forthcoming "Narnia" blockbuster.



Broadway veteran Jonathan Farwell delivers a performance reminiscent of Gregory Peck, co-starring with real-life wife Deb Note Farwell, in BasBleu's "Shadowlands." (Bas Bleu Theatre / William A. Cotton)

"Shadowlands," now playing at the Bas Bleu Theatre, opens with suave actor Jonathan Farwell mimicking Lewis' popular series of cerebral talks. "Suffering is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world," he tells us assuredly. It is a gift to help us understand that our real life begins in the next one. As an insulated, academic bachelor, the man speaks from intellect rather than experience.

But by the start of the second act, Lewis is considerably less sure of himself. Now well into his twilight years, he has experienced real love for the first time. And he's about to lose that love to bone cancer.

"I find it hard to believe that God loves her," Lewis now says. "If you love someone, you don't want them to suffer."

The nobility and purpose of suffering is one of the most difficult tenets for any Christian to reconcile, much less embrace. But a dying person is not ultimately made to suffer to please God. Perhaps a dying person suffers, seemingly without purpose or God's compassion, as an act of sacrifice, one that allows grieving survivors time to adjust to a world that no longer will include them. Suffering thus can be seen as an act of great, selfless purpose.

But as Lewis learns, this is easier said than withstood.

Farwell's Lewis is an endearing prig whose life is changed when he entertains a vacationing fan and her young son,

Douglas, for tea. Lewis first finds Joy to be odd. She is, after all, an atheistic Jewish communist turned radical orthodox Christian. But their affection turns to scandalous friendship after she escapes her abusive husband. He marries her, but only so she can stay in England.

Only after Gresham is diagnosed does Lewis realize he truly loves her. Alas, just as she is dying, he is more alive than ever. After three globetrotting years together, she died in 1960.

Bas Bleu's staging is inconsistently cast, its erratic accents troublesome, but it nevertheless will be remembered for Farwell's touching, nuanced

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portrayal.

This Broadway actor is a ringer for Gregory Peck with a voice as soothing as sherry, his demeanor a throwback to real stage civility. His real-life wife, the lovely Deb Note Farwell, has a more thankless job as the less-defined Gresham; she compensates by playing this perfect mother and saintly patient with her feet always a few feet above the ground. It's a bit incongruous. We expect an exuberant, eccentric radical, but Note Farwell plays Gresham as a doleful, equally lonely soul, each line delivered not colloquially but with too-knowing import.

But this is Lewis' journey. And how he ends it with respect to his God is left intentionally ambiguous. It becomes difficult to reconcile the polite stuffed shirt we see on stage with the man who created popular fantasy novels for children.

The play's only dalliance with fantasy has young Douglas wandering into Lewis' wardrobe, which transforms into Narnia. He returns with an apple, a nod to "The Magician's Nephew," in which Digory fetches an apple from the tree of eternal youth and brings it back to the real world, where it cures his mother from a severe illness. No such for luck for Gresham, who died when Douglas was 12. Lewis was 8 when his own mother died, also of cancer.

By the end, the scholar has no answers, only the life he has led. Just like the rest of us.

"Experience is a brutal teacher," he says, "but you learn fast."

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*** | "Shadowlands"

DRAMA|Bas Bleu Theatre, 401 Pine St., Fort Collins|Written by William Nicholson|Directed by Jonathan Farwell and Wendy Ishii|Starring Jonathan Farwell, Deb Note Farwell |THROUGH JAN. 7|7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2:30 p.m. most Sundays|2 hours, 40 minutes|\$10-\$19| 970-498-8949; basbleu.org