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The Screwtape Letters:
The Play

a review by JOSÉ MARIA J. YULO

C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. Staring Max McLean and Karen Wight. Adapted for the stage by Max McLean and Jeff Fiske. Produced by the Fellowship for the Performing Arts, Morristown, New Jersey. Performed at the Lesher Center for the Arts, Walnut Creek, California, on October 1, 2009.

The French natural-law philosopher Jacques Maritain described the problem of evil in this way: to deny or ignore a standard of right, creating an absence, and then to act in conformity with this absence. In this light, or absence thereof, a devil of a play came to town on this quiet, unassuming Thursday night, thanks to the Fellowship for the Performing Arts, a Christian theatrical company that aims to integrate faith and the arts and present it to a diverse audience. This dramatic presentation of C. S. Lewis' bestselling work, *The Screwtape Letters*, began in 2007 as an off-Broadway production, where it played for twelve sold out weeks. With its glowing reviews and masterful performances by leads Max McLean and Karen Wight, it soon moved to equally popular productions in both Washington D. C. and Chicago. In 2009, *Screwtape* embarked on a nation-wide tour that has generated considerable public interest and glowing reviews.

The Screwtape Letters, as readers of Lewis' works already know, is a short, but piercingly insightful, volume on the nature of temptation and evil. Lewis dedicated the work to his friend and fellow Inkling, J. R. R. Tolkien. It was said that Tolkien himself was concerned with the work, inasmuch as one would have to delve too deeply into the diabolical craft of the enemy in order to complete it. Lewis was equally sensitive to the spiritual dimensions of the task, and it was per-

haps this awareness that enabled him to complete *Screwtape* while avoiding diabolical entanglements. His results have a habit of surprising the unwary.

McLean, with his rich baritone voice, plays the part of His Abysmal Sublimity, Screwtape. He charms at a distance with his affected gentility and scarlet smoking jacket. At his velveteen feet, and ever ready to draft his master's correspondence to the unseen nephew, Wormwood, is the sometimes comedic—at other times protean—demon, Toadpipe. Wight's extensive training in mime is craftily exhibited in Toadpipe's episodic transformations into the paragons of vice and virtue that Screwtape is able to conjure up with a flick of his fingers. For his part, McLean's combined skill lies in his ability to draw the audience in by his considerable charm; yet, it is this same quality that ultimately leads to a growing sense of surprise—sometimes even revulsion—among the audience as the characters draw closer to the finale. After all in Hell these demons literally do eat souls, and each other.

Lewis' message regarding evil is not readily forgotten by the Fellowship for the Performing Arts. The audience is amused when Screwtape receives a memo from the infernal bureaucrats censuring him for having revealed to Wormwood that *love* (excruciatingly exclaimed by McLean!) actually *does* exist, and that it is the Enemy's chief weapon against which Hell lies defenseless. Love inevitably produces true pleasure, such as when the human "patient" Wormwood takes country walks, falls in love, or becomes a part of a fellowship of Christians. Moreover, Screwtape reveals that pleasure itself has eluded Hell's most brilliant researchers and their alchemical attempts to produce it. As McLean crescendos his dictation, we discover Hell's true intention: to redirect human longing away from love of God and onto self, spawning the false promise of human pleasures that deliver neither satisfaction nor joy. These false pleasures fail to slake human thirst because they direct a mortal's desire inward, ultimately wrapping him in a cocoon, far away from the light of Heaven and the fellowship of his own kind. Thus, as Screwtape exclaims, hellish satisfaction ensues when humans treasure themselves above all else, and in so doing lose both themselves and paradise. Maritain's perceptive observation on the nature of evil is now made obvious.

All being said, the performance was a rousing success. The audience received a bonus by way of a continued discussion of the nature of evil that suggested that we all should be wary even of success, since it may slowly contribute to pride. As Screwtape reminds us, the path to Hell is best achieved slowly.