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Review of The Most Reluctant Convert: The Untold Story of C. S. Lewis (movie)

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Max MacLean as C. S. Lewis, in *The Most Reluctant Convert*.

Film Review

The Most Reluctant Convert: The Untold Story of C. S. Lewis, by Max MacLean, directed by Norman Stone, starring Max MacLean and Nicholas Ralph. New York City, NY: Fellowship for Performing Arts, 2021, 1 hr., 13 min.

The Fellowship for Performing Arts premiered a new film in 2021 about C. S. Lewis entitled *The Most Reluctant Convert: The Untold Story of C. S. Lewis*. It is a wonderfully entertaining movie that provides a revealing portrait of the great man and his fascinating faith journey. The movie features the superb actor Max McLean as the mature Lewis, the story's narrator. McLean is also the executive producer, along with Norman Stone. Certainly, McLean's fingerprints are all over this production, and his touch is deft. The movie was originally intended to have a one-night limited theatrical release in over 400 cities, but it proved to be popular, exceeding the critics' expectations. Due to positive reactions from audiences, it was given an extended theatrical run of fifteen additional days. The film is now available through Amazon on disc, on-line streaming, and digital download.

The casting is excellent. The lead role is played by Max McLean, who has portrayed Lewis in a number of stage productions: *The Screwtape Letters* (which began in 2008), *The Most Reluctant Convert* in 2016, and *Further Up, Further In* in October 2022. With warmth and candor, Max McLean projects an accessible C. S. Lewis that immediately draws us in.

McLean humanizes C. S. Lewis and makes his faith journey and intellectual maturation credible. For him to emulate Lewis's deep tonality and Irish-tinged Received Pronunciation would be virtually impossible, but he does a credible job of diction. McLean's inflections and phrasing, coupled with his poetic style of enunciation, reflects Lewis's actual manner of speaking. The dialogue is effective—not just the words that comprise the script, but the words as articulated by Max McLean. One never has the sense that this is an actor “playing” C. S. Lewis, for Max McLean quickly establishes that he is C. S. Lewis. Welshman Richard Harrington plays Albert Lewis, a superb choice. He plays Lewis's father exactly as I envision him. Nicholas Ralph, from the Scottish Highlands (seen in the lead role in the PBS production “All Creatures Great and Small”), was thoroughly engaging as the young Lewis. The movie depicts the influence that William T. Kirkpatrick had on the young Lewis's mind far better than the one-man stage play could possibly do. To that end, Scotsman David Gant played William T. Kirkpatrick to a “T.”

Max McLean (and other writers) did a masterful job of weaving together disparate thoughts from different books. The dialogue is intellectually engaging, emotionally moving, and humorous. Most of the script comes from four writings—*Surprised by Joy*, *The Problem of Pain*, *Mere Christianity*, and the sermon, “The Weight of Glory.” McLean also draws from *Collected Letters* and from a few shorter essays in *God in the Dock*, *Present Concerns* and *Christian Reflections*. McLean begins the dialogue with a lengthy monologue extracted mostly from the Introduction of *The Problem of Pain*. It sets the stage for what is to follow and frames some of the questions this “weltanschauung voyager” was to face. Moreover, it establishes the subject's piercing intellect right from the get-go. McLean weaves phrases from various sources into this riveting opening monologue. For example, he makes a seamless transition from *The Problem of Pain* to an extract from *Surprised by Joy*. Even experienced Lewis readers will not likely note the mixed and intermingled sourcing. It works exceedingly well.

McLean cleverly weaves a tapestry of textual extracts from various sources. In a way, they seem to serve different purposes. The background context comes from *The Problem of Pain*. The compellingly rational arguments—such as “The Trilemma” and “the Argument from Desire”—come from *Mere Christianity*. And the best part, the imaginative lines, come

from what many consider to be Lewis's most eloquent and imaginative writing which is the sermon, "The Weight of Glory."

The storyline for *The Most Reluctant Convert* is essentially gleaned from *Surprised by Joy*. The screenplay effectively introduces the dismay Lewis felt about his accepting confirmation and taking his first communion as a total nonbeliever. The story incorporates the young Lewis's loss of faith and growing atheistic leanings, sufficient to reveal the mindset of a young and committed skeptic. It paints a clear picture of the intellectual barriers the "faith journeyman" would have to overcome. The opening sequence, like Lewis's later conversion, is unexpected. Max McLean seamlessly steps from the world of acting and film production, into a wholly different world of C. S. Lewis's faith journey. It was rather like transitioning from the world of Shakespeare to the world of Hamlet—an analogy Lewis uses in the script. Another technique used by the producer was to insert the mature Lewis into a number of scenes from the past in close proximity to the young Lewis. All in all, the staging was very effective.

It is interesting to note that the telling of the story where a young Lewis happened upon *Phantastes*, a book by George MacDonald, is precisely at the center of the film. That is entirely appropriate, for this unanticipated discovery of "holiness" was central to Lewis's faith journey. It was at this point that the young Lewis, who had been steadily moving away from Christianity, began to turn back in the direction of his childhood Christian roots, though the return trip would be lengthy and labyrinthine. Also in the center of the film, we find a discourse on "desire." This, too, is fitting, as this was paramount in Lewis's growing awareness of something "further up, further in." Additionally, there is a scene featuring Lewis debating the rationality of cognition with Owen Barfield. This is important, not only because it led Lewis to realize that materialism was inadequate, but also because it gives the viewer a glimpse of the brilliance of Owen Barfield. Barfield was a great friend whose influence upon Lewis was as great as any other person with whom he associated while at Oxford.

Certainly, there is much more to the story that Lewis aficionados would find interesting. For example, the full gamut of Lewis's faith journey is only partially revealed. While the movie conveys how the young man moved from Christianity to materialism, to occultism and to idealism, there were steps along this journey that are not fully explained. The "New

Look” (Enlightenment Rationalism) that ruled over Oxford immediately after the Great War, and George Berkely’s Immaterial Idealism, might have warranted a few minutes of attention. The movie does introduce the “argument from desire,” but has nothing to say about the other arguments, such as the argument from morality, the argument from reason, or the argument from the numinous. A bit more about “joy” and “Sehnsucht” would be nice.

This film will be loved by Lewis experts and aficionados alike. But, in a way, I consider it to be ideal for Lewis neophytes. This film might be considered a central component in a comprehensive knowledge set about C. S. Lewis. Readers new to the works of C. S. Lewis would be well-advised to undergird their initial readings of Lewis’s works with a solid foundation on the “untold story” of C. S. Lewis. With this beautiful movie, they will see Lewis in an entirely new light.

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Theater Review

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, based on the book by C. S. Lewis, directed by Mike Fentiman (based on the original production by Sally Cookson). Produced by Elliott and Harper Productions, and Catherine Schreiber. London, UK: Gillian Lynne Theatre, 30 October, 2022.

A new adaptation of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, first brought to the stage in Leeds by Sally Cookson, then toured by director Mike Fentiman, arrived at the Gillian Lynne Theatre in the West End in the summer of 2022. Previous adaptations include those by Glyn Robbins (RSC, 1998), Joseph Robinette (1989), Don Quinn (1968), and an off-Broadway one-act production by le Clanché du Rand (2011). Like them, Fentiman’s version both adds and omits material (saddest of all was the omission of Mrs. Beaver’s sewing machine), and thereby offers new insights into Lewis’s classic tale as well as deviating in ways which startle us out of our own ideas