

2022

Review of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (play)

Sarah Waters

University of Buckingham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal>

 Part of the [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Waters, Sarah (2022) "Review of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (play)," *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 24.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/1940-5537.1286>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal/vol16/iss1/24>

This Theater Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

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.

JAMES A. MOTTER
Suwanee, Georgia

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

about the text, as all adaptations ought to do.

There are some similarities and alterations in this production which deviate from previous depictions of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Like the 2005 film, this production figures Edmund (Shaka Kalokoh) as “bad” from the outset.¹ Grumpy and petulant, he seems set apart from his siblings on the train journey out of London. This sets up his humbling recognition of his treachery. It also, of course, makes clear the distinctions between Edmund and Lucy (especially their responses to Narnia) for younger audience members or anyone encountering the story for the first time. Damning him from the start felt rather unfair; after all, we are all rather more like Edmund than Lucy (Delainey Hayles). As the production progresses, it is clear that this facilitates later cuts such as the incredible speeding up of time. The Pevensies, for example, barely seem to settle into the Professor’s (Johnson Willis) house before the children are all off to Narnia. This accelerated movement is explicitly visualized by designer Tom Paris’s monumental clockface which dominates the set.²

Perhaps this production is most indebted to the stage adaptations of *The Lion King* (1997) and Michael Morpurgo’s *War Horse* (2007) because of its skillful embracing of puppetry, most obviously in Aslan who had both puppet (Oliver Grant, Sean Lopeman and Shaun McCourt) and human (Chris Jared) form. This dual nature may suggest a gesture towards the God/man whom Aslan represents for some, although this should not be overemphasized since the production makes much of the pagan as well as the Christian imagery Lewis weaves into Narnia. More importantly, perhaps, to push this too far is to misread, since Aslan in puppet form is also very much *not* God-like. He seems inherently mutable rather than unchanging; the “un-puppeted” Aslan faces his stone-table sacrifice more

¹ In the Walt Disney/Walden Media adaptation directed by Andrew Adamson, Edmund is figured as an unthinking (although unthinking due to deep grief, rather than necessarily intentional vindictiveness) young boy whose sadness in coping with the absence of his father (away fighting) and later further forced distancing from his mother leads him to rush back amidst an air raid for a portrait of his father. Even as the audience are invited to sympathize with this action, they are also called upon to criticize it—not for Edmund endangering his own life, but rather for the risk he then puts his older brother Peter in as he comes to rescue him as bombs fall in Blitz-ridden London.

² The space where the clock resides also later transforms into a stone table space where Aslan is (almost off-stage) killed by the White Witch.

like a deer caught in the headlights than a messiah drinking a foreordained divine “cup” of suffering.

Two other puppets are especially notable. Both are additions to the story, but they draw out further meanings already latent in Lewis’s text: Schrödinger the cat and the cubistic illuminated dancing Turkish Delight, recalling Henri Matisse’s *L’Escargot* (1953) but with added movement and neon pink glow. Played by puppeteer Oliver Grant, Schrödinger (the Professor’s cat) was a striking comic addition to the story, and, I’d like to think, it was an intentional sly nod to the reality that Lewis and Noble Prize winner Erwin Schrödinger’s paths really did cross at Magdalen.³ Although it was the *cat* who was explicitly named “Schrödinger” throughout, both the Austrian accent of the *Professor* and the fact that Susan was reading Schrödinger’s book *What is Life?* (1944) during the production, hint that the Professor himself was Schrödinger. Schrödinger’s presence in the play brought his famous cat quantum superposition paradox (1935) into dialogue with Lewis’s wardrobe and the question of what might be seen beyond their respective frames. Both may contain more than one reality, but its presence is questionable until one opens the door; until that moment, it is potentially both there and not there.⁴

Edmund’s encounter with the Turkish Delight offered a fascinating dramatization of Mr. Beaver’s assessment that Edmund “had the look of one who has been with the Witch and eaten her food.” As Edmund journeyed towards Cair Paravel, his stomach (and slowly his whole body) began to convulse as he regurgitated huge luminous cubes of Turkish Delight which then multiplied with Turkish Delight cuboid puppets onstage slowly forming a humanoid form. Although at some level this was simply a nod to the sickly sweet squidginess of Turkish Delight, this physicalization of his guilty conscience, and his gradual sickening realization that he had

³ On the same day Schrödinger’s election was marked (November 9, 1933) he received a telegram notifying him that he would receive the 1933 Nobel Prize in Physics [with Paul Dirac]. For more on Schrödinger and his time at Magdalen see David C. Clary, *Schrödinger in Oxford* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2022), who notes that amongst those who “voted in three-quarter majority” for his election was one by the surname “Lewis,” 74.

⁴ Schrödinger’s cat quantum superposition paradox was a thought experiment conceived of in dialogue with Einstein and written primarily to illustrate the problems he had with the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics.

been poisoned by the evil he had eaten, also provided a rich exploration of Edmund and his fight with and against the evil control of all “under her thumb.” Racked with stomach-squirming and conscious-burning pain, his road to redemption commenced, and while still under the control of the White Witch, he began to painfully expel her influence away from himself.

Also worthy of mention are the ever-lovable Beavers (Julian Hoult and Christina Tedders), particularly this adaptation’s self-chastising Mr. Beaver and, added in this production, his catchphrase “Deep Sorrow,” expressing belief that he has once again misunderstood or failed. Among other magical pleasures, the play features fantastic music and choreography, full of scenes with talking animals dancing and carrying cellos and double basses.



The White Witch (Samantha Womack) faces Aslan (Chris Jared) in the London production of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

The audience represented an impressive cross-section of ages from the very young to those who had grown to love fairy stories again, and the production seemed pitched to such a cross-section. Occasionally, however, there were choices which were rather more “adult” and indeed at odds with Lewis’s text, such as the sadomasochistic spiked costumes of the White Witch’s (Samantha Womack) evil followers. Presumably this was intended as a further indication of their evil, but the overly eroticized

costumes seemed excessive. Evil was already evident in the Witch's camp without embodying it in this way, particularly when considering younger audience members for whom the White Witch alone and her commanding presence seemed evil enough. On the other hand, the decision to cast adult actors for the Pevensies did not negatively affect the childlike qualities of their characters, and the cast doublings (especially the Professor/Father Christmas, the White Witch/Mrs. Macready, Maugrim/White Stag) are bound to provoke further discussions. On a broader scale, the culturally diverse cast delivered a magical performance. Ultimately, this was an adaptation which pointed beyond as well as back to Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* text, inviting us to see more of the wonder of a world which might be there (see Schrödinger) for those who have eyes to see it.

SARAH WATERS
University of Buckingham