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Review of Lewis & Tolkien—of Wardrobes and Rings (play)

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J. R. R. Tolkien (Gordon Tett) and C. S. Lewis (David Payne) discuss myth in *Lewis & Tolkien—of Wardrobes and Rings*. Photo courtesy of Bird and Baby Productions. Used by permission.

Lewis & Tolkien—of Wardrobes and Rings, by David Payne, starring David Payne and Gordon Tett. Tempe, Arizona: Sun Valley Community Church, 8 March 2019.

The year is 1963, the place is the Eagle and Child pub. The scenario is an imagined meeting between C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien during the last year of Lewis's life. Any imaginative recreation of their complex relationship must reckon with two things—the often paradoxical nature of their multifaceted relationship and, most importantly, the estrangement between Lewis and Tolkien at the end of Lewis's life. This estrangement is facilitated by Lewis's move to Cambridge that effectively ends the Inklings' weekly meetings, but it primarily occurs because of his marriage to Joy Davidman in 1956, an action Lewis initially kept secret from Tolkien.

The discomfort that must be present in such an imagined episode is illustrated in Lewis's (Payne) and Tolkien's (Tett) initial interactions.

The exchange starts with some historically accurate context—Tolkien remarks on the erroneous report of Lewis's death earlier that year, and Lewis quotes Mark Twain ("Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated"). But the tension is palpable throughout the first act, in pauses and small sharp exchanges. Payne's Lewis sports the trademark tweed jacket, and Tett's Tolkien is bald with the bright waistcoat that was also a distinguishing feature of his dress. Payne's Lewisian persona is by now familiar; it concentrates on Lewis's reputation as assertive raconteur and his relationship with Joy Davidman. In contrast, Tett's Tolkien is relatively quiet for the first act. The opening dialogue recalls the general high points of the relationship's biography: Tolkien's support of Lewis's appointment to the Cambridge professorship, their conversation on Addison's Walk with Hugo Dyson (a key point in Lewis's journey toward Christianity), Lewis's rejection of a C.B.E., and Lewis's public celebrity as the "academic dinosaur" of Cambridge through his speech "De Descriptione Temporum."

Before the intermission, the interaction concentrates on various personalities and social issues in the "dramatic present," which includes Lewis's responses to T. S. Eliot and a description of Lewis's and Eliot's first meeting, as well as Tolkien's 1959 retirement from his professorship (he did not move to the Bournemouth area with his wife Edith until the late 1960s). Lewis's failure to secure an Oxford professorship is covered, as are his relationships with a number of twentieth-century literary figures—Maurice Bowra, W. H. Auden, John Betjeman, and C. Day Lewis.

The midpoint of the piece is a confrontation between Lewis and Tolkien over the issue of Joy Davidman. Historically, there were specific reasons for Tolkien's dislike of the relationship: he seems to have received an initial bad impression of Davidman in an early meeting; he believed that it was a sin to marry a divorced woman; and he felt that Davidman might have had in mind a romantic relationship with Lewis from the very beginning.

This presents an issue for the way Payne has portrayed Lewis in the past: the actor's sympathies are with Lewis and Davidman's relationship, as is clear from the history of his fascination. He originally played Lewis in a stage adaptation of *Shadowlands*, and, after reading *A Grief Observed*, authored his first one-man Lewis show, *Mist in the Mourning*. This perspective is evident in the way the disagreement is fictionally resolved, with

Lewis conceding some minor elements, but standing fast to the value and legitimacy of his romance and marriage.

The fictional reconciliation leads to a more voluble second act, in which a number of elements of the relationship and Tolkien's biography are explored. Though initially disagreeing (Tolkien described this initial disagreement in a poem, "Mythopoiea," in 1931), Lewis and Tolkien ultimately came to share a common view of myth, one which the production explores. The likenesses and differences between Narnia and Middle Earth are also explored (though Tolkien's dismissal of Lewis's imagined world is not emphasized). The show comes to a climax with Tolkien's explanation of his ideas about the effects of the fairy story.

Not every interesting facet of Lewis and Tolkien's relationship is explored: missing are any mentions of Charles Williams and the fact that Lewis was a facile writer while Tolkien was obsessive and painstaking (a source of some tension). There is one chronological mistake regarding the date when Tolkien actually formulated and communicated his theory of fantasy: it was originally given as a lecture at St. Andrews University in 1939, so Lewis would have been familiar with it. Most interestingly, Tolkien's assertion of the effect of "eucatastrophe" and the fairy tale's relation to the Christian gospel is not mentioned.

This production is well worth seeing, for the familiar pleasure of seeing Payne's Lewis in character and getting a good introduction to some key aspects of Lewis's and Tolkien's relationship. There are few real surprises to the performance, but there is value in dramatically exploring one of the most intriguing literary relationships of the twentieth century.

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