

The Argus

Henfield players bring true-life drama out of the Shadowlands

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By Mike Beardall, community correspondent

Difficult to believe that the lead actor in Henfield Theatre Company's production of *Shadowlands* had not been on the stage since he was 12.

But Digby Stephenson superbly carried off the difficult and emotional role of Oxford professor C.S. Lewis and his love for the doomed American Joy Gresham (nee Davidman), wonderfully captured in a heart-rending performance by Margaret Gore.

With nearly 600 lines and a monologue at beginning and end, this would be a daunting task for a seasoned professional actor – but for a man formerly in his comfort zone of flying military jets it was a massive undertaking.

And a tremendous supporting cast put this story of the creator of *The Narnia Chronicles* and the academic's late discovery of love into total perspective – particularly Joy's small son Douglas, played with total conviction by Thomas Law, whose father Steve played a wedding registrar and also a fellow professor.

There was not a dry eye in the house as Joy (Margaret Gore) lay dying and her son, an avid reader of *The Narnia Chronicles*, went into a wardrobe to come back with a magic apple to make his mother well again.

The doctor, played with professional conviction by Dr. Robin Norman, brought much-needed relief to an emotional production – and words of medical comfort in a hopeless situation.

Director Di Norman, Robin's wife, had spotted potential in Digby when he mentioned – at a social gathering - that his own mother had died when he was young and that he empathised with C.S.Lewis (known as Jack). He auditioned and the part was his . . . daunting though he suddenly discovered it was to be.

Lewis taught from 1925 to 1954, as a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, and became the first Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge.

He was a well-known author, poet and broadcaster and lived with his brother 'Warnie' (Major W.H.Lewis) in Oxford, having served in the First World War and returned home wounded, having survived the Somme nightmare.

Richard Oswald captured the essence of Warnie perfectly, offering constant support to Jack and being the rock on which Jack's relationship with Joy was able to develop.

A strange wedding of convenience (following Joy's divorce from her American husband) was beautifully executed without emotion.

It was then that love developed and they sought a Christian marriage – proving the outrage of the period when divorced women were frowned upon by the Church. But a friendly priest performed the wedding at her hospital bedside in 1957.

The cancer went into remission and the couple lived with Warnie and Douglas until her relapse and death in 1960.

A heart-rending scene after the death (sympathetically done with lighting and hospital screens) in which Douglas collapses into Jack's arms had the audience in tears.

The performances were faultless from a cast devoted to the story, from a play by Sussex-born William Nicholson – and turned into a film starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger.

Notable Henfield players in their production were Ken Jones (as the judgemental Professor Christopher Riley), and Tony Hawthorne as the Rev. Harry Harrington, with John Pursglove who played both colleague Alan Gregg and a priest.

Assistant director Malcolm Harrington took the brief light-hearted non-speaking role as a Greek waiter - welcome humour in a tough play that raised issues of faith, love, death, friendship and devotion.

A thought-provoking play that left the audience as emotionally drained as the actors.

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