

FELLOWSHIP CIRCLE

Winter 2011

Fellowship Circle is a key building block to help Fellowship for the Performing Arts achieve its mission of presenting Christian worldview theatre that engages the culture. As a Circle Member your gift provides the financial foundation for producing meaningful, compelling theatre from a Christian perspective that speaks to a diverse audience.

SCREWTAPE LETTERS IN NEW YORK *FAITH IN NEW PLACES*

The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis's brilliant novel adapted for the stage and currently on national tour, completed a critically acclaimed, nine-month, 300-performance run at New York's Westside Theatre on

January 9th. The Off-Broadway theatre world, known for edgy productions that stretch conventional boundaries, may be one of the last places you'd expect the Christian worldview to be seen and heard. Yet, *The Screwtape Letters* has stretched boundaries in a new direction, attracting

more than 48,000 New York theatergoers since opening last April. (See reviews on pages 2 and 3.)

"It is almost shocking to see something so morally and ethically correct on stage," said Richard Hopkins, artistic director of the Florida Studio Theatre, after seeing the show.

Screwtape makes way for a unique dialogue that addresses questions of faith that seem difficult to bring up in other contexts. Somi Lee, who attended the production with a group of coworkers, said "the play

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**"LEWIS' INSIGHTS ARE
CLEVERLY CONVEYED."**

AP Associated Press

2011 National Tour

Fellowship for the Performing Arts' hit New York production of *The Screwtape Letters* is set to tour major cities across the U.S. in 2011.

"The theatre community in New York is an extraordinary cultural force," says Max McLean. "It creates art at the highest level that exports across the country and around the world.

FPA's success in New York has opened doors to prominent performing arts centers nationwide, furthering our mission of producing theatre from a Christian worldview for diverse audiences in mainstream cultural venues."

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BROADWAY.COM

BROADWAY
BUZZ

An interview with Max McLean

Broadway.com, an influential voice for interviews, features and buzz about the New York stage, approached Max McLean to discuss the success of *The Screwtape Letters*. The result was this interview feature, making way for a free-flowing discussion about theatre and faith.

Max McLean: I was born in Panama City, Panama, and came to America via New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty at the age of four. The first item on my agenda was to master the English language. Due to Dad's military career, "home" included many places in the U.S., Far East and Europe. I went to college in Texas and drama school in London before arriving in New York.

My work in the theater began in college as a way to overcome a mild stutter and sociophobia, the fear of being in front of people. After graduation I had a conversion experience after reading John's Gospel in one sitting. The experience was clarifying. It has stayed with me in ebbs and flows to this day.

I went to seminary because I wanted to better understand my faith, following St. Anselm's maxim, *Credo ut intelligam*, "I believe so that I may understand." A seminary faculty member discovered that I had a theater background and asked: "Why not use the skills developed in the theater and apply it to ministry?" When I read the Bible, I tend to see it theatrically. It strikes me as vivid, emotional and alive. The stakes are high. Then I saw Alec McCowan's one-man show *St. Mark's Gospel*, and it just melted

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CS LEWIS
THE
Screwtape
LETTERS
ON TOUR

Critics Respond to Screwtape

Screwtape's appeal to mainstream critics and theatergoers is one measurable indication that we are making progress towards bringing a Christian voice to the arts community.

The New York Times

Lewis's Tempters, Meticulously Paving the Road to Hell

The Devil has rarely been given his due more perceptively and eruditely than in C. S. Lewis's "Screwtape Letters," an epistolary novella that examines the Christian religion from the point of view of the other side. And in a humorous and lively stage adaptation by Jeffrey Fiske and Max McLean now playing at Westside Theater, he is every inch the cunning English gentleman he is often purported to be.

The humor of this stage adaptation is mostly cerebral, and a large part of what makes it successful is an energetic performance by Mr. McLean as Screwtape that brings some semblance of action to the stage. Karen Eleanor Wight is aptly repulian as Toadpipe.

One doesn't have to be a Christian to benefit from or enjoy "The Screwtape Letters." Whatever a person's faith may be, human failings and foibles are pretty much the same the world over.

THE NEW YORKER

Cleverly Imagined

A Christian parable dipped in mordant irony, C. S. Lewis's 1942 epistolary novel imagines Hell as a humming bureaucracy of junior and senior Tempters, each assigned a susceptible human. "The safest road to Hell is the gradual one," Screwtape advises Wormwood, urging him to play on the man's middle-class pieties. The adaptation captures the droll humor with which Lewis constructed his topsy-turvy morality lesson. Cleverly imagined for the stage, it gives even nonbelievers an amusing primer on the nuances of modern vice.



Alarmingly Identifiable

With their adaptation of "The Screwtape Letters," creators Max McLean and Jeffrey Fiske ask us to question our own paths and choices. In a more accessible sense, the modern New Yorker's version of Hell seems to stand for a life unfulfilled; our greatest fears are realized once one reaches the end without having found true love and fulfillment.

The play is told to the audience by the incredibly talented and captivating Max McLean. He is the sole speaker in the play, and his eloquent and emphatic persuasions are made all the more intriguing by his pleasing tone and delivery.

Toadpipe, played by Karen Eleanor Wight, wordlessly reenacts Screwtape's stories of temptation. Relying entirely on her body's graceful movements and actions, Wight manages to act as sporadic comedic relief, part-time (silent) narrator, animalistic angry hell-beast, and a female presence.

The performances of McLean and Wight are extremely strong. Both exhaust themselves by the end of the 90 minute show, one mentally and verbally, the other physically. Their performances are impressive, and regardless of your feelings about the material they are conveying, there is no questioning their commitment to their craft. They clearly believe in the project, and in turn, they draw us in.

"The Screwtape Letters" is an interesting and complicated journey into the twisted meditations of one of the world's most revered and well-known Christian philosophers. Although Lewis' texts may seem somewhat out of date in our modern time and city, his pondering on the state of a man's soul is ironic, comedic, and often alarmingly identifiable. There is no doubt that you will leave the theater a bit more tired than you came in, but with the exhaustion comes a sense of accomplishment, not to mention several interesting post-theater dinner topics.

**“AS ENTERTAINING
AS IT IS THOUGHT-
PROVOKING.”**

The New York Post

ELLE MAGAZINE

A Soul Scraping Therapy Session

The 90-minute play, though incredibly acted and tempered in measure by hilarious wit (there’s even a dig at the fashion industry!), puts you in an emotional place somewhere between the moment you realize you’re no longer in love with someone and a soul-scraping therapy session. Hey, nobody said self-reflection was easy.

AP Associated Press

Devilishly Funny

Many bureaucrats are all talk and no action. Apparently it’s similar in the “lowerarchy” of hell, as portrayed in the thoughtful satire, “The Screwtape Letters,” a devilishly funny theatrical adaptation of the C.S. Lewis novel about the battle between good and evil for the human soul.

McLean exudes false charm and civility in his flamboyant portrayal of a demon battling against human salvation.

Lewis wrote insightfully about how easy it was for people to be led astray by the small things in life, among them, as Screwtape drily notes, “the very small print” of the Bible, which he hopes is too hard for humans to bother reading. When the Patient falls in love with a Christian woman, Screwtape confidently tells his nephew that “courtship sows seeds that will grow into domestic hatred.”

The stage tilts downward toward hell, while fiery red glimpses beneath suggest nothing good. McLean and Wight make a diabolical duo, and Lewis’ philosophical insights into human nature are cleverly conveyed in “The Screwtape Letters.”

NEW YORK POST

Correspondence Course From Hell

A master class in evil is being offered at the Westside Theatre, where one of the devil’s chief underlings -- His Abysmal Sublimity Screwtape -- is the central character of this adaptation of C.S. Lewis’ “The Screwtape Letters.”

Screwtape’s lessons in how best to foster evil are clearly meant to be ironic, serving as a reverse primer on Christian morality that’s as entertaining as it is thought-provoking.

TimeOut New York

Tackling Weighty Moral Issues

Angels are huge in pop culture, the subject of bestselling books, paintings, tchotchkes, and the occasional landmark play. But, just as villains are more fun, devils tend to be more compelling characters. “The Screwtape Letters,” a stage adaptation of the C.S. Lewis classic, offers some wicked chuckles about the corruption of souls.

“The Screwtape Letters”... includes perverse advice about how to tempt humans into damnation. Screwtape suggests a variety of tactics: sexual temptation, worldly cynicism, spiritual pride -- anything but reason and intellectual rigor. That’s the interesting aspect of Lewis’ Christian theology. He doesn’t appeal to maudlin emotions or use guilt. For him, belief in God is eminently rational and sensible. In other words, he’s tasteful and thoughtful about religion -- a rarity these days.

Also tasteful is the general design and execution of this 70-minute production, which has a handsome set, evocative lights and crisp sound design. Every yowling demon, each flickering flame and elegant twist of prose comes through loud and clear.

Screwtape is a genuine curiosity: unabashed Christian theater tackling weighty moral issues.

Mark's Gospel Wins Prestigious Jeff Award



The Jeff Awards Committee, a longstanding institution honoring excellence in Chicago theatre, has awarded Max McLean's *Mark's Gospel* "Best Solo Performance." As a production that was initially resisted for consideration by the Jeff committee, the nomination was quite a surprise for McLean and Fellowship for the Performing Arts.

But in the end, the committee could not ignore the critical acclaim and level of excellence the play represented. "Although I was a New York actor playing in Chicago I felt very warmly received," said McLean.



Max and Sharon McLean at the Jeff Awards

"When I heard my name called I just thanked God for giving me this wonderful affirmation that our work of 'presenting theatre from a Christian worldview' was recognized by my peers in the theatre industry as worthy of such an accolade. It meant that we may not agree with the premise

of your work but we acknowledge the quality of it and that it deserves a fair hearing in the marketplace of ideas."

The vote was compiled from roughly 50 committee members, which are made up of theatre professionals and practitioners all over the Chicago area. After an initial group gave its stamp of approval as a "Jeff recommended" performance, the rest of the committee weighed in.

As one of the over 250 productions considered by the committee, *Mark's Gospel* garnered rave reviews and audience acclaim for the production's rich narrative and ambitious storytelling, and was regaled by the

"I've always found the Bible either baffling or impenetrable. Only after seeing *Mark's Gospel* did I realize what had been missing."

CHICAGO **SUN-TIMES**

Chicago theatre community as a unique and moving experience. As one Jeff member told McLean, "I've seen over 170 shows this year and *Mark's Gospel* was in the top five. You made that story so believable."

At the awards ceremony McLean was humbled and honored by the show of support amidst the nearly 1,000 audience members in attendance. "I thanked several people who made the production possible. Theatre is so labor intensive. It always surprises people how many people are involved in a successful production."

McLean went on in his speech to thank the Jeff committee for "responding to what they see on stage regardless of their own religious convictions or lack thereof," and concluded his speech by saying, "All the art that we produce on stage is at some point a product of the thoughts we think, the conversations we have and the books we read. As theatre artists we shape all that into a coherent story. My journey is to tell stories that are important to me and share that in a way that you can get a glimpse into my world." ■

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me. Those two events led me to develop one-person shows of *Mark's Gospel* and *Genesis* that have been produced in New York and across the country.

The Screwtape Letters came to me after director Jeff Fiske saw my performance of *Genesis*. He sent me an e-mail suggesting that I'd make a good *Screwtape*, C. S. Lewis' imaginary senior demon and one of literature's most chilling villains. I didn't know if that was a compliment or not! However, I was intrigued. The book had been in my consciousness for a long time. It was one of the first Christian books I'd read after my conversion. But I didn't see how it would work onstage. I didn't see it as dramatic literature but rather as a profound meditation on the banality of evil.

Screwtape first came to Lewis after he heard Hitler's Reichstag speech in 1940 as it was being translated by the BBC. In the speech, Hitler makes a final appeal to the British people before unleashing the blitz that would pummel Britain for the next nine months. "It never had been my intention to wage war, but rather to build up a State with a new social order and the finest possible standard of culture. Every year that this war drags on is keeping me away from this work." Hitler asks the British people to talk some sense into Churchill before it is too late.

The next day, Lewis writes his brother in response to the speech: "I don't know if I'm weaker than other people, but it is a positive revelation to me how while the speech lasts it is impossible not to waver just a little... Statements which I know to be untrue all but convince me, at any rate for the moment, if only the man says them unflinchingly." Lewis did not finish the letter that day but on Sunday, after attending church. He tells of an epiphany: "Before the service was over... I was struck by the idea for a book which I think might be both useful and entertaining. It would be called 'As One Devil to Another' and would consist of letters from an elderly retired devil to a young devil who has just started to work on his first patient."

"Screwtape and Lewis have a wonderful way with the half-convinced. The play tends to resurrect emotional longings that have been buried for years. That is Lewis' great gift."

The key to the character of *Screwtape* is his ability to use rhetoric for malevolent purposes. On stage, we tried to capture Lewis' indictment against manipulating people for selfish gain. Our culture is at a point where folks will believe just about anything. Consequently, the play challenges us to guard against being "played" or manipulated.

In going from a cerebral novel to action on stage, we had to make the letters work as oral text. Lewis delivers such densely packed ideas. Our show has twice the content of most scripts, and yet it is half as long. That could be a recipe for disaster. If it is too dense, the audience will simply tune out. And believe me, I know when that happens, so I'm doubly motivated to make sure the audience is engaged.

Since opening at the Westside Theatre in April, *The Screwtape Letters* has been welcomed as a unique presence in the New York theater landscape. I hear regularly from self-professed atheists and agnostics who appreciate the play's psychological insights as well as the clever stagecraft employed to tell the story. We have a fantastic design team who really committed to the project and are a large part of the play's success. I also hear good things about the robust conversations the play generates. One of my favorite comments is, "It's fascinating to spend an evening with the devil!"

What I really appreciate is the large number of what may be called "closeted" Christians who come to see the show. *Screwtape* and Lewis have a wonderful way with the half-convinced. The play tends to resurrect emotional longings that have been buried for years. That is Lewis' great gift. Christianity has been stigmatized by its association with authoritarian politics and embarrassing episodes by media personalities. Many believers don't want to be associated with that, but long to see their faith portrayed winsomely and with integrity. Lewis shows us how. His clarity of thought, imagination and his vision of joy as an antidote to humanity's bent toward banality and cynicism provide a compelling alternative. ■

Screwtape Letters on Tour Continued from page 1

You can see C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* in the cities listed at right. New cities and venues will be added soon. For up-to-date information visit www.ScrewtapeOnStage.com.

LOS ANGELES, Alex Theatre – Jan. 15
SAN DIEGO, Balboa Theatre – Jan. 29
PORTLAND, Portland Center for the Performing Arts – Feb. 12
SEATTLE, Moore Theatre – Feb. 26
COLORADO SPRINGS, Pikes Peak Center – Mar. 19
CHARLOTTE, Knight Theatre – Mar. 26 & 27

Screwtape in New York

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provided an easy medium and a safe place where I could engage in a faith-related dialogue with my colleagues,” and added that many of her friends “saw themselves in the play,” saying that the inverted morality of the play spoke to them personally. “Overall, we all loved the experience and hope that FPA does more work like this!”

“The arts can and does have a huge potential to reach out to the greater community more than any other industry because it is so unassuming, easy to access, and just very entertaining!” said Lee.

“I’m not surprised by this,” said Max McLean, founder and Artistic Director of FPA. “The theatre is a wonderful place to awaken spiritual ideas at a deep level. Audiences are willing to go on a journey with you as long as they know that the art is authentic and they are not

“The intellectual complexity and emotional satisfaction that is inherent within Christianity is often unfairly stigmatized. People think they have it ‘pegged’. Theatre allows folks to see Christianity with fresh eyes.”

being manipulated. A good theatrical experience must be both engaging and safe. Intelligent people are not afraid to engage in ideas that challenge their prevailing sensibilities. They do it all the time. The intellectual complexity and emotional satisfaction that is inherent within Christianity is often unfairly stigmatized. People think they have it ‘pegged’. Theatre allows folks to see Christianity with fresh eyes.”

WHO IS INVOLVED

Producing good theatre requires a collaborative process with many talented people. Our production employs nearly 50 people including creative, backstage, front of house, box office, marketing and management. Since most folks who work with us don’t share FPA’s worldview, it is our responsibility to set the vision and make sure that a Christian aesthetic is clearly articulated. We are also challenged to exhibit a grace that bears



Douglas Gresham (C.S. Lewis’ stepson, well-known author, and executive producer of the *Chronicles of Narnia* films) alongside **Max McLean** during a post-show discussion of *The Screwtape Letters* at the Westside Theatre.

witness to Christ within a world that is overly suspicious.

The team that we assembled for *The Screwtape Letters* – some of the most talented and experienced hands in professional theatre – have each resonated deeply with the provocative ideas found in C. S. Lewis’ satire about spiritual warfare from a demon’s point of view. They committed themselves to supporting those ideas on stage as creatively as possible. The result has been a satisfying creative expression of Christian spirituality that has held its own among the more than 100 other theatrical offerings on the New York stage every night.

WHAT IT TAKES

FPA needs to continue to produce art that engages the culture, a task that is largely dependent on your prayerful support.

Our total cost for producing *The Screwtape Letters* since 2007 has reached \$6 million. To date, ticket revenue has recouped about 80% of that expense leaving a shortfall of about \$ 1 million. We do need your support to provide an articulate and engaging Christian voice in the arts.

One of the axioms of the Christian faith is that we all have the knowledge of God within us. We just suppress it. The power of storytelling and theatre is that it hits us in our imagination, where the knowledge of God exists. Our objective is to encourage people to ask ‘Could this be true?’

Through your partnership we can continue to engage a broad and diverse audience. Will you help?

Fellowship Circle is produced by the Fellowship for the Performing Arts, 1674 Broadway, Suite 404, New York, NY 10019-5838

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