NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

A plain and winsome portrayal of Christianity

Retta Blaney | Aug. 9, 2010

Max McLean plays Screwtape in "The Screwtape Letters," now playing at the Westside Theatre in New York.

Something an actor never wants to hear is that an audience member made an association between his performance and hell.

One night about five years ago Max McLean had that very experience. He was performing his one-man play ?Genesis? at the Playwrights Theater in Madison, N.J., when Jeffrey Fiske, then a theater professor at Drew University there, approached him after a show and said he saw McLean?s potential to be bad -- really bad. As in evil. As in one of literature?s most chilling villains, Screwtape.

?I didn?t know if that was a compliment or not,? McLean says with a laugh. Wearing khaki shorts, a yellow shirt and sandals, he sits in an empty off-Broadway theater before an evening performance of the now critically and financially successful stage adaptation of C.S. Lewis? classic *The Screwtape Letters* and recalls the journey.

At first he couldn?t see how that epistolary novella, the second Christian work he read (after the New Testament) following his ?spiritual revolution? from ?marginal agnostic? to conservative Presbyterian when he was in his 20s.

?I never saw it as dramatic literature,? says McLean, now in his mid-50s. ?I saw it as devotional material.?

Fiske envisioned the potential, though, and got the rights from the Lewis estate. He spent six months grappling with it before McLean joined the effort.

?Lewis writes such long sentences,? McLean says. ?All those words don?t help us onstage. The main thing we had to do was thin it out for theater.?

Six months later they had a draft that was nearly 99 percent Lewis?s words, which was one of their goals but it was too dense. They tried it in small workshops but it was tough going.

?I wasn?t up to the words,? says McLean, a seasoned actor of regional theater and national tours of ?Mark?s Gospel? and ?Genesis.? ?The words were bigger than me.?

Over the next six months they experimented with light and sound design and narrowed the script from two hours to just under 90 minutes. The key to getting the script right was discovering the narrative arc that makes the story dramatic and isn?t always apparent in reading, and meditating on the 31 letters a few at a time. It?s a two-sided arc, actually. One shows what happens to the man the devils are trying to tempt -- his corruption and then his redemption -- and the other follows Screwtape?s command of his world followed by his loss of control.

Their persistence in getting it right paid off. ?We have twice as much content as most shows and we?re half as long,? McLean says. ?I feel audiences want to delve into the meatiness of the piece.?

So it would seem. The run at the Westside Theatre in New York has been extended twice, now planned to play into the fall. A national tour is being prepared and McLean has been asked to perform the show in Korea.

Not only has it been a hit with audience members, a large number of which are ?church folk,? it has been praised by critics as well. ?One doesn?t have to be a Christian to benefit from or enjoy ?The Screwtape Letters,? ? *New York Times* critic Wilborn Hampton wrote. ?Whatever a person?s faith may be, human failings and foibles are pretty much the same the world over.?

Before taking up residence in New York this spring, the production was a hit at Chicago?s Mercury Theater, where it ran for six months. It was also a success at The Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C., playing for 10 sold-out weeks. Last fall it embarked on a national tour, filling houses in San Francisco; Phoenix; Louisville, Ky.; Chattanooga, Tenn.; Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; Houston; and Austin, Texas.

This is a testament to the script and, of course, the original story of a senior devil, Screwtape, who, through correspondence from hell to earth, instructs his nephew, Wormwood, an inept young devil-in-training, in the ways to win souls for ?Our Father Below.? When first published in 1942, it brought immediate fame to the little-known Oxford don, landing on the cover of *TIME* magazine.

The show?s success also is a mighty testament to McLean?s characterization of Screwtape.

Strutting around Screwtape?s eerie skull-lined office in hell (devilishly atmospheric scenic design by Cameron Anderson and lighting by Jesse Klug) or pontificating in a rich bass-baritone voice from his big leather armchair, McLean really gives the devil his due. Wearing a red and gold brocade smoking jacket (Michael Bevins? costume design), his thick, salt-and-pepper hair combed back, this Screwtape is a devil in love with himself. As he dictates his letters to his appropriately reptilian servant, Toadpipe, (splendidly performed by Elise Girardin the night I was there), Screwtape clearly cherishes his every word and gesture.

?He really is pure pride,? McLean says. ?He loves the way he looks, the way he dresses. He?s the smartest guy in the room. He?s good at his job. He has the ability to compromise souls.?

While McLean says he?s having a ball portraying Screwtape -- and it shows -- Lewis had a different reaction. ?Though I had never written anything more easily, I never wrote with less enjoyment,? he wrote. ?Though it was easy to twist one?s mind into the diabolical attitude, it was not fun, or not for long. The work into which I had to project myself while I spoke through Screwtape was all dust, grit, thirst and itch. Every trace of beauty, freshness and geniality had to be excluded.?

For McLean, creating and performing the work has had a beneficial effect.

?The piece has increased my prayer life,? he says. ?It really makes me look at our tendency to pride and arrogance.?

Lewis? book will continue to hold appeal, McLean says, because of how ?plainly and winsomely? he portrays Christianity.

?We want to experience our faith as winsomely as possible and we fail,? he says. ?Lewis shows us how. He?s a writer for the half-convinced.?

[Retta Blaney is the author of *Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life through the Eyes of Actors*. Her blog, Life Upon the Sacred Stage (uponthesacredstage.blogspot.com [1]), features news, reviews and insights into the worlds of faith and the performing arts.]

Source URL (retrieved on *11/29/2015 - 18:09*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/plain-and-winsome-portrayal-christianity

Links:
[1] http://uponthesacredstage.blogspot.com/