

## The Screwtape Letters



**By C. S. Lewis. Adaptation by Hailey McQueen. Clock & Spiel Productions. Bakehouse Theatre (SA). April 18 – 22, 2017**

C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* is an exchange between two Demons, uncle and nephew, about the best way to corrupt a man's soul. Possession of the soul is a common theme in the works of C. S. Lewis, including *The Narnia Chronicles*.

Clock & Spiel Productions' adaptation, written and directed by Hailey McQueen, is delightful – if at times a little confusing.

The sense of being enchanted and engaged begins the moment you enter the auditorium. The set design by Isabella Andronos is absolutely terrific, complemented by the effective and stylish lighting design by Christopher Page. This is the best use of the Bakehouse stage space that I have seen. Part of the success is due to the large backdrop of a cloudy sky that dominates the upstage wall, thus framing the downstage action. As well as being relatively simple, it is also extremely stylish and dramatically effective.



The pleasures of this production continue with the engaging performances of Yannick Lawry as the Demon Uncle, Screwtape, and George Zhao as Toadpipe, his 'Igor-type' servant. Both actors are dynamically expressive, engaged and engaging – and fast. The pace of the scenes being relatively quite fast, it is to the actors' great credit that the clarity of the work remains intact.

George Zhao is absolutely mesmerising – a truly wonderful performance. As well as the servant Toadpipe, Mr Zhao plays multiple other characters that are mentioned in the narrative. His physical transformation into these respective characters occurs on-stage, and is done with fantastic authority; imaginative, skillful and dynamically expressive. My only criticism is that when this happens he is facing upstage so the audience is robbed of his face, which is (as his body) part of the complete and extremely successful physical and vocal transformation.

This is a piece of 'philosophical' theatre. It is not so much a drama, but a theological debate, or a lecture, some of which is enacted by George Zhao's Toadpipe – thankfully.



There were a number of times that I lost the thread of the argument in a particular scene, there being far too much talking, and 'talking at' rather than 'talking to' another character as well as the audience – and there is a lot of talking. Whilst the actors were engaging, nonetheless, one story sounded pretty much the same as the other, all done with great energy and expression, but with relatively little adaptive emotional range, depth and flow – it all 'felt' the same.

This is not the kind of theatre that has universal appeal – it's a 'talk feast', and about the best ways to corrupt a man's soul – a subject matter with questionable interest these days. You may need to begin with a belief in a soul in the first place. The theological debate that once was a major issue in the theatre (Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, Miller's *The Crucible*), and the context in which Lewis wrote this work, has significantly altered. It is now more the domain of 'horror' films.

In this production of *The Screwtape Letters* it could perhaps be made clearer that we are actually in Screwtape's university-type room – in Hell.

Nonetheless, there are aspects of this stylish 85-minute show- within the design, lighting and acting- that make *The Screwtape Letters* well worth seeing.

*Tony Knight*