

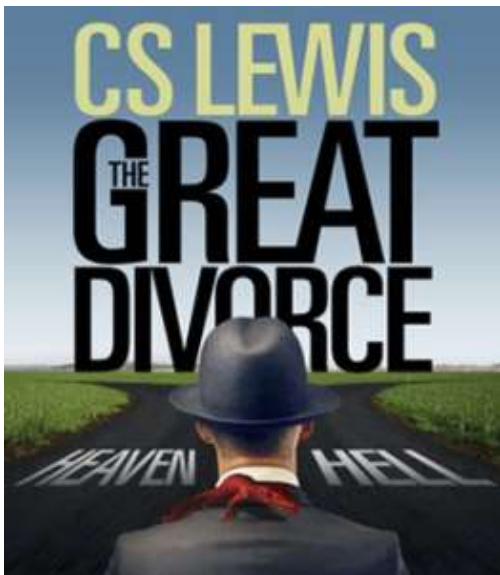
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"The Great Divorce" of Heaven and Hell: Spiritual Theater at the Pabst

APRIL 14, 2015 BY [ANALISE PRUNI](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Despite technical difficulties with the lighting, a system reboot and a ten minute delay last Friday at The Pabst, the theatrical adaptation of C.S. Lewis's "The Great Divorce" was a hit. Producer and artistic director Max McLean called it "spiritual theater for a secular audience." "The Great Divorce" is a visual and virtual journey from a bus stop in Hell to the outskirts of heaven (and sadly, sometimes back again).

Incredibly the entire play, composed of over a dozen roles, is performed by just three actors: Michael Frederick, Joel Rainwater and Christa Scott-Reed. It opened in the ever raining "Grey Town" where rows upon

rows of empty houses continue on as people move ever further away from each other. The narrator witnesses the quarrels of Grey Town residents and their individual reasons for making the trip there; money, recognition, or to get what "they really deserve." By scene three when the bus finally arrives, the projected backdrop on stage that had featured the dismal hell street, exploded with psychedelic colors reminiscent of something out of a 70's acid trip.

The narrator encounters a medley of characters in various states of the journey between Heaven and Hell. When the bus reached Heaven, the previously dimly lit stage was flooded with soft yellow light and the backdrop filled with flowing rivers and far off mountain-scapes of heaven. At points the audience easily forgot they were not in a fly-along viewing of a soul's moral dilemmas and grudgingly remembered the tangible theater seats beneath them. The play challenges one to think about, given ultimate free will to choose between Heaven and Hell, what will we really do? It presents forgiveness as a journey and your own choice.

Upon entering the outer reaches of Heaven, the souls realize their plight. "I can see through them," they say. "I can see through my feet! I am a ghost!" Producer McLean adapted a 1945, strongly religiously messaged story into an engaging present day experience that was not only thought provoking but comical. Heaven's newer visitors could barely walk on the grass, a large illuminated circle of turf on stage. As they gained acceptance and solidity through each painstaking step through heaven, the grass became easier to walk upon, but cynics challenged the narrator at every turn. One such exasperated critic said "Oh, there's no question of staying, (or going) it takes all of your time just to walk on the grass!"

Souls with different earthly sins and unresolved fears are confronted with different spirits to guide them. Between Lewis and McLean, "The Great Divorce" manages to enthrall one in the sometimes dry and serious matter of religion and captures the audience through kindred stories and characters. One of Scott-Reed's conflicted artist characters quips to her spirit guide, "Ugh religion? This is hardly the time."

The narrator is finally presented with the image of his immortal soul and all the choices that could've been, will be, and simply are. He then wakes to realize he can still make humble choices, and begins to write the account of his wild journey from the apparently unlocked gates of hell to the borders of heaven. "I saw myself as clearly as I ever had," he said. "I seemed to be standing by a bus queue; by the side of a long, mean street."

McLean did a short Q and A after the show. One of his biggest challenges was cutting characters and scenes out to pick the most effective ones for the time allotment. He has produced other C.S. Lewis plays such as "The Screwtape Letters," and was asked how he became so enthralled with C.S. Lewis's work? "I read one page," McLean replied.

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