Reviews

Lauer, Rob. *Three Plays for Latter-day Saints.*

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Rob. Lauer's new collection, *Three Plays for Latter-day Saints*, attempts what few playwrights in the Mormon canon have achieved: creating LDS drama that is truly, actually, for everyone. Through the three plays—*Digger*, *The Beehive State*, and *The Blessings of Jacob*—Lauer seeks to depict characters ranging from non-Mormons in Salt Lake City to a turn-of-the-century polygamist family to a young Joseph Smith himself as nuanced, passionate, contradictory, and, crucially, human. He largely succeeds in this endeavor.

Despite drawing from one of the most unique origin stories in American history, Mormon theater—even Mormon storytelling in general—has long struggled to present the history or teachings of the faith as more than "faith-promoting" pageants intended for an audience of faithful members. Meanwhile, playwrights and performers outside of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints treat its story as little more than material for satire and surface-level parody. (For many theater-goers, the long-running Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* remains their primary exposure to Mormon culture and doctrine.)

Digger is the flagship production in this collection, and in some ways the most successful in bridging the divide between the satirical and the saccharine. Told with humor and care, it places the audience in the home of the Hale Family: Isaac, Elizabeth, and their quick-witted schoolteacher daughter Emma. The parents' concerns over Emma's unwedded state are quickly interrupted by the arrival of their elderly neighbor, Josiah Stowell, accompanied by three backcountry treasure diggers: Jesse, Esau, and a gallant, 19-year-old Joseph Smith. Joseph's skills as a seer are put to the test as Josiah seeks to convince both the Hales and his cynical son Ahad that Joseph's visions of a Spanish silver mine on his property are genuine. Emma's skepticism at Joseph's seeing routine—involving a small stone and a white top hat—eventually blossoms into romance.

This budding affection gradually moves her to defend him against her father and Ahad, who refuse to see him as anything more than a swindler.

Placing the audience into Emma's shoes is what makes this play so immediately and uniquely engaging. It invites the viewer to suspend their preconceptions about the boy prophet, and get to know him, along with Emma, on his own terms: an uneducated, fiery, and deeply sincere young man who is desperately trying to do what is right. His family's poverty—which drives him to hunt for buried treasure—weighs heavily on him, as does his calling from above, a calling that constantly urges him toward *something* more. The play's only potential flaw is that Emma's initial calloused cynicism feels exaggerated for her young age, which causes her transformation to Joseph's lover and defender to feel slightly abrupt. Ultimately, however, even this rapid change aids in what is perhaps the play's most impressive achievement: demonstrating the effect the young prophet had on those who encountered him. His charisma never reads as forced or overwrought, and the little miracles that follow him are arresting.

Lauer presents Joseph's treasure seeking, his faith, his relationship with Emma, and his ultimate trial for disturbing the peace and fraud with straightforward candor and authenticity. Events from Joseph and Emma's young lives that may seem contradictory and strange to our modern sensibilities are here shown simply as things that happened. For many readers, this book might be their first exposure to some of these occurrences, as the majority have rarely been written about or discussed—let alone portrayed onstage—apart from recent church essays. But for all the newness of the source material, it is Joseph's simple, straightforward account of his first vision that stops both Emma and the reader in their tracks. Every member of the Church is no doubt familiar with the details, but the manner of delivery—not as written in a book of scripture, nor as recited from memory by a missionary, but spoken with guileless conviction by a young man who knows heaven is watching him—will leave most with at least a modest tingling in their bosom.

The second play, *The Beehive State*, transports readers to one of the most enigmatic periods in the Church's history. Set in 1903 Provo, the Manifesto banning "The Principle" (polygamy) is

thirteen years old, but Talmage Cannon's life still revolves around his three wives: Evangeline (the first wife and matriarch), Beulah, and Reba (the youngest), their children, and, above all, his devout faith. Moroni—Talmage and Evangeline's oldest son—seeks their blessing to marry the daughter of the polygamy-repudiating Joseph and Helen Fly. Talmage's defense of "The Principle," and his desire for his son to continue living it, despite the stance the Church has taken against the shibboleth, is colored by his admission that he is actively pursuing a potential fourth wife. This revelation comes much to the chagrin, anger, and sorrow of the sister-wives and Moroni (and eventual threats of excommunication from his bishop).

The events of *Digger* may be unfamiliar to many readers of the play, as this period of Mormon (and Utah) history will be positively alien to most non-history buffs born after 1950. Casual discussions of multiple heavenly mothers (462 is Talmage's preferred estimate), children all named after increasingly esoteric scripture characters, and wives giving each other blessings by the laying on of hands are treated as normal and everyday, and may cause confusion in readers who aren't already acquainted with some of the more obscure details of turn-of-the century Mormon life. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—Lauer's vivid depictions of the family's crises of faith feel all the more familiar. Modern-day readers will readily identify with the struggles of individuals striving to follow a gospel that promises so much good, yet can present so many apparent contradictions. The ending of this play is worthy of particular mention. Without giving away any secrets, it is the most thought-provoking conclusion to a piece of theater—Mormon or "Gentile"—that I have been exposed to in recent memory. Readers of this journal will find it, and the play as a whole, especially engaging.

The final play in the volume, *The Blessings of Jacob*, deals with the heaviest subject matter of the three, but struggles to reach the same heights as the previous two. Living in Salt Lake City during the early depression, 46-year-old Mattie (a deeply less-active member of the faith) lives with her expressly non-Mormon son Billy, his wife Theda, and their young son Mickey. Their lives are upended when Jacob, a devout member of the Church in town from California for the annual General Conference, stops by for purposes of his own,

which recontextualize and transform the family's struggle for peace and existence in post-polygamy Utah.

After the depth of *Digger* and *The Beehive State*, the characters in *The Blessings of Jacob* come off as disappointingly one-dimensional. This is primarily due to the sheer number of difficult subjects that Lauer makes his characters grapple with all at once: inherited generational trauma, domestic abuse, abandonment, loss of faith, and even a brief portrayal of racism. This is plentiful material for any full-length play, let alone a one-act that's well under half the page count of both Digger and Beehive. The tone of the play reflects the weight of its themes: there is significantly less comedy than Lauer's other two offerings, and some of the scenes do start to feel a bit like interminable shouting matches. Despite its faults, however, *The Blessings of Jacob* is a worthy addition to the volume, and it certainly feels the most modern in its message. Lauer's fascination with the parent-child relationship is stated in his introduction to *Blessings*, and it is evident throughout this and the other plays in the compilation. Exploring that relationship is perhaps where his writing shines the brightest, especially due to the central role it plays at the deepest levels of Mormon belief.

Overall, Lauer's plays are tremendous additions to the regrettably thin canon of Mormon theater. *Digger* is especially worthy of the praise given to it by the godfather of modern Mormon writers, Orson Scott Card, who called it "One of the few good Mormon plays" (p. 13). Lauer's depth of knowledge, both of history and human nature, make this book an enthralling read for dramatists of any faith, and disciples of (or without) any theatrical ability. *Three Plays for Latter-day Saints*, with its collected works and the accompanying prefaces, introductions, and reviews included by the author will be a worthwhile addition to any bookshelf, and will cause the reader to reflect on their own beliefs like vanishingly few other plays—Mormon or not—have managed to do.

Three Plays for Latter-day Saints can be purchased exclusively at mormonplays.blogspot.com.