

Ronald Wilcox, "Morality or Empathy? A Mormon in the Theater." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (1967): 15-27.

*MORALITY
OR EMPATHY?*

*A MORMON
IN THE THEATER*

Ronald Wilcox

Depending largely on his own experience, a Resident Artist at the Dallas Theater Center (a noted professional repertory company and school of drama), examines in this essay the esthetic and moral difficulties facing an actor when he is expected to portray on the stage modes of behavior radically different from his own (such as, for a Mormon, profanity, obscenity, and drinking and smoking). Ronald Wilcox has appeared in 25 plays (600 performances since 1959), including lead roles in Wolfe's OF TIME AND THE RIVER, O'Neill's LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT, and (presently) JOURNEY TO JEFFERSON, an award-winning adaptation of Faulkner's AS I LAY DYING; he is also a poet and playwright.

Late one night last November, after a visit to Utah, I was driving across the New Mexico desert. It's a long way from Ogden to Dallas, especially in a Volkswagen, but I've always found the desert a fine place to think. At the moment I was preoccupied with thoughts about the theater.

With my Mormon origins fresh in mind, I could feel the old problem reasserting itself: Where and how does the Mormon fit into contemporary theater? Or does he fit? Or should he? These were no mere academic questions for me. I was returning to my career as a professional actor and playwright at a resident repertory company in Dallas.¹

Several coughs from my Volkswagen reminded me that a desert may be a fine place to think at night, but it's a poor place to be caught without transportation. (Would my foregone, footsore pioneers have agreed?) I chugged into Carlsbad, and — stroke of luck! — I located the only Volkswagen dealer between El Paso and Dallas. With a Christian charity I was most grateful for — he was in his pajamas and it was after midnight — he replaced my four ailing sparkplugs.

He could swear with such finesse, such abandon, that I was hardly aware he was doing it. In his mouth the foulest blasphemies seemed descriptive, the vilest obscenities mere understatement; each four-lettered word reached a level of rare philosophic speculation. It was a pleasure to meet a man who had mastered his language, who handled his medium of communication with that ultimate non-chalance we call art.

My appreciation deepened when I discovered that here, in the middle of the desert in the middle of the night, was a man who not only could replace my sparkplugs with ease and hyperbole, but who had a true interest in drama. He had worked in several community theater productions during the past year, including *My Three Angels* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

It was concerning this latter play that the lightning of his insight struck me. In fact, I was so stunned with his statement, I heard no thunder from it, none at all, for several hours. It was only when I was alone again, out in the desert, that his remark finally reverberated. He had said of Albee's play, "Oh, it's a good play, I suppose, but I just don't know about all that goddam foul language."

Here was a man who managed to formulate in a phrase a problem that I, as an actor, as a playwright, as a Mormon, had pondered for more than ten years with far less illumination.

LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO CENSORSHIP

Within this brief space I would like to raise several questions which, I hope, will stimulate a few tentative answers, further speculations, and some rebuttals. Of course, I cannot within this single essay discuss in any detail the complex subject of the Mormon in contemporary theater; therefore, I shall begin with a single question about one aspect of a Mormon's experience: "Should a Mormon actor swear on the stage?"

Were the question, "Should a Mormon swear?" the answer would

¹ Established in 1959, the Frank Lloyd Wright designed Dallas Theater Center has received international acclaim, including the Special Jury Prize in the festival of plays at the Théâtre des Nations in Paris (1964).

be obvious and simple, even simple-minded. But, bring in the "actor," add the phrase, "on the stage," and it becomes a question not easy to answer and, for a Mormon, not easy to ask.

In 1963 there was a controversy at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, concerning Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Paul Baker, who was then Chairman of Drama at Baylor (as well as Managing Director of the Dallas Theater Center) was faced with this dilemma: Should he allow the language of O'Neill's play to be heard on the stage of a Baptist university?

Mr. Baker had been honored with the first rights to a college theater production of the O'Neill play. However, O'Neill's widow, who had control of these rights, had stipulated that it should be performed in its entirety — no cuts. This meant four hours of tough language.²

To do the play, or not to do the play, that was the question. Was the O'Neill drama, because of its artistic value, worth doing in spite of the shocking language? In Mr. Baker's opinion, yes. It was the masterpiece of O'Neill's career. It deserved a hearing.

For twenty-six years Mr. Baker had cut or toned down the language of plays performed at Baylor University. As the son of a Presbyterian minister himself, his position was that such cutting, specifically for a production at a religious institution, could be done within the aesthetic context of the play. University restrictions were beginning to relax, but now, for the first time, he had to choose between the entire play or no play at all. He decided to do the play. He accepted Mrs. O'Neill's conditions and went ahead with it.

During the first week of production, the moment of truth arrived. A Baptist minister decided to treat his Sunday School class of boys to an afternoon in the theater. It was to be, I suppose, a cultural experience with the famous playwright, What's-his-name. The results of that afternoon's unplanned recreation made Southwest Theater history. The minister was shocked, the boys took it calmly, the President of the University closed the play, and, subsequently, Mr. Baker resigned over the issue of academic freedom. Lack of confidence cost Baylor not only its most brilliant faculty member, but the entire staff of the drama department.³ The furor has not yet died down.

Since I was not personally involved in the Baylor controversy, I let any disturbing issues thus raised slip quietly into that part of my

² Tough, not obscene. Needless to say, *Long Day's Journey* is not a play about Mormon family night, but compared with almost any of those by Albee, Genet, or Williams it reads like an M.I.A. drama about avoiding the pitfalls of drink.

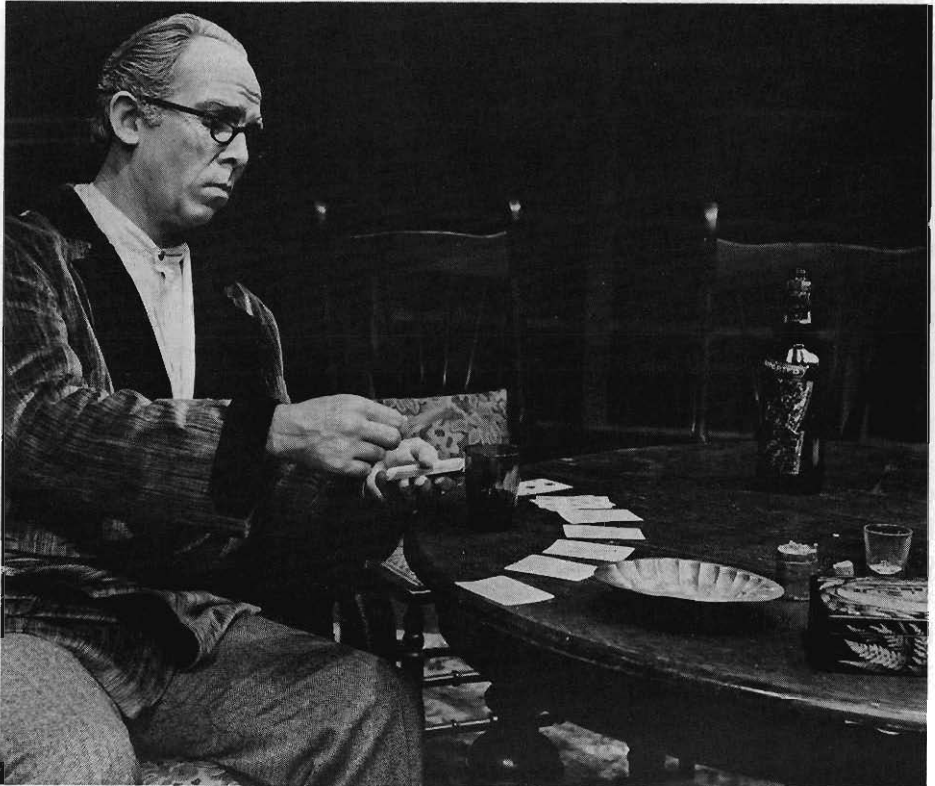
³ Mr. Baker and his staff transferred, en masse, to Trinity University in San Antonio.

mind where I keep questions I would rather not try to answer. Two years later, as fate would have it, I found myself in a position where I could no longer escape these sticky moral issues. Mr. Baker decided to produce the O'Neill play at the Dallas Theater Center. I was cast as James Tyrone, father of the Tyrone (O'Neill) family.

I soon found myself center stage in the middle of four hours of drinking, swearing, dope addiction, allusions to wenching, violent and continual recriminations, atheism, etc., not to mention two large cigars which smoked *me*. The whiskey wasn't real, of course, but that held little consolation — it was substituted with either weak tea or watered down coke. For thirty bleary-eyed nights, four hours a night, I lived in the depths of O'Neill's blackest agonies — me, a Mormon.

What do I remember most? Well, I remember compassion. Oh, I remember Mama, and Mama's abominable dope habit, and drink, and hate, and love, and goddam it to hell, but mostly — mostly, I remember compassion.

A Mormon actor in a non-Mormon setting. Ronald Wilcox as James Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT; directed by Paul Baker, Dallas Theater Center, 1965.



The final moments of the play: Mary Tyrone comes down the stairs — in her arms her wedding gown — her girlhood around her like a white shroud. James Tyrone says something to her, but

... it cannot penetrate her preoccupation. She doesn't seem to hear him. He gives up helplessly, shrinking into himself, even his defensive drunkenness taken from him, leaving him sick and sober. He sinks back on his chair, holding the wedding gown in his arms with an unconscious, clumsy, protective gentleness.⁴

The tears I shed each night were real.

WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA'S LANGUAGE?

What struck me at the time was not that the *Long Day's Journey* controversy occurred at Baylor (I have B.A. and M.A. degrees from that shockable institution), but that it could *not* have occurred where I spent my first three college years, Brigham Young University. Why? Because the play, under those same conditions, would never have reached the stage.

In the summer issue of *Dialogue* we are given what I consider to be a summation of the Mormon position on stage decorum. Dr. Harold I. Hansen calls for new scripts to be sent to B.Y.U.:

Scripts for the coming seasons are now welcomed by the Dramatic Arts faculty of Brigham Young University. Serious or humorous dramas on Mormon themes, either historical or modern, will be accepted. The scripts should not portray drinking or smoking and the language and action should at all times be in harmony with the highest standards of the Church.⁵

Human language and action — even Mormon language and action — are not always in harmony with the highest standards of the Church, so we may assume what kind of scripts will be welcomed by the Dramatic Arts faculty, and what kind will not. O'Neill, and most other modern playwrights, would fare rather badly.⁶

The position is clear: Some things are proper on the stage, some are not. I did not object to this policy while attending B.Y.U., and I have no intention of beginning at this late date.⁷ A religious institution such as Baylor or B.Y.U. does have a right to impress its own moral vision upon student theatrical experience. After all, it *is* paying the bills — why should it pay to be offended? For that

⁴ Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 172.

⁵ Harold I. Hansen, "Production of Plays with Mormon Themes," *Dialogue*, Vol. I, No. 2, p. 142.

⁶ B.Y.U. produced O'Neill's least offensive play, *Ah, Wilderness!* last season.

⁷ I wrote the script for the 1953 B.Y.U. Varsity Show, *Keynote*, and there was nary a swear word in it.

matter, why should any individual member of an audience pay to be offended? Moral indignation is not compulsory. You can always ask for your money back at the box office.

I have never questioned the right of a producer of plays or of the paying audience to exercise its own judgment concerning the nature of the drama it wishes to witness. What I do question is a mental attitude which seems to me not only aesthetically retarded, but morally untenable. My concern is that such an attitude, instilled in drama students, tends to carry over from their experience of drama at a religious institution to plays produced in the public theater. We can be too well-educated in the subject of how to be shocked.

Dr. Hansen and the Volkswagen dealer in Carlsbad have arrived at a similar conclusion about language and action on the stage, though the idioms they would use to express their respective positions are somewhat different. To Dr. Hansen the use of profanity is in itself morally repugnant in any situation, and it should not be used on the stage. To the man from Carlsbad profanity is a casual concomitant of everyday life, but it should not be used on the stage.

Both viewpoints presuppose that somehow stage life is different from real life. I agree. The stage is not life itself, but a *vision* of life. All actions which occur upon it will be shaped by some unique vision, the product of an author's imagination. Discover his vision and you explain his play.

What is most interesting to me is how disparate views can, like straight lines, cross at a common point. We could follow the Southern Baptist view, which dominates Baylor, and arrive at approximately the same position as my Carlsbad friend and Dr. Hansen. Nor would this begin to exhaust the possible list of divergent views which would agree there are some actions and remarks that should be avoided on the stage.

Drama is a social art, of course, and it is not surprising to find taboos. The theater has always reflected the society of its origin and sustenance. Life as it is represented on the stage is a matter of selection. The theater artist must select certain actions of mankind. These must be consistent with his vision, and he must present an intelligible organization of his material if he wishes to communicate with his audience.⁸ The selections made by co-operating artists (playwright, director, designer, actor, etc.) reflect their own personalities and social backgrounds:

⁸ I realize I am generalizing to an unconscionable degree, but I must avoid specific questions of modes of drama, e.g., realism, expressionism, "happenings," etc.

Look how the father's face
Lives in his issue; even so the race
Of Shakespeare's mind and manners brightly shines
In his well turned, and true filed lines.⁹

Each theater artist seeks the truth of his vision of life, then attempts to communicate that vision to his audience.

His vision, unless he claims divine revelation, is human and subjective. The artist's expression may take on the form of what he wishes life were, and we, with him, can imagine a world of fantasy and romance. Or, his vision may be what he thinks life really is, and we, with him, can imagine a world of objective reality. His vision may be what he believes life should be, and we, with him, can imagine an ideal world of values. A play is a combination of these and other kinds of human understanding.

We, as audience, respond to this imagined world of the stage with our own personalities. We place our vision of life alongside the artist's. Sometimes we feel our vision glows more brightly in the radiance of his artistry, and we are grateful for the experience. Sometimes we feel our vision has been darkened or belittled, and we may respond in anger or rejection. We may feel his vision is simply inconsequential, so we are indifferent. Or, in our greatest experiences in the theater, we may feel his vision has brought us something unique, and we are changed by it.

Whatever the dramatic experience we share with theater artists, we respond, just as they do, to the truth of a vision of life. When our visions differ, when the artist's vision seems untrue to ours, it is understandable that our dramatic experience in the theater, which is so dependent upon a delicate rapport between stage and audience, is frustrated. An audience cannot be coerced into liking, or pretending to like, that which it simply does not like. This is natural and within the realm of legitimate human differences.

However, when we respond to a different vision of life, such as O'Neill's, with an antagonism which seeks to prevent others from experiencing his vision and deciding for themselves its cogency, I question whether the motives of this response, honest as they may be, are those of the Mormon ideal of truth.

Plays encompass the entire range of man's vision of man. As long as we can acknowledge the artist's basic integrity, we should be able to accommodate different viewpoints, even when we do not agree. To question a man's basic honesty ends the possibility of dialogue, on-stage or off.

⁹ Ben Jonson, *To the Memory of My Beloved Master, William Shakespeare*.

SHOULD THE STAGE SWEAR AT MORMONS?

Art is an expression of the truth of an artist's personal vision of life. If we wish to experience the artist's vision with him, we, too, must seek after the truth he is trying to tell us, whether it coincides with our personal vision or not. Though we can only react according to our personalities, we can try to delay immediate value judgment until we understand the nature of his vision. Again, this is not compulsory. At no time are we forced to seek after a particular artist's vision. If the incidentals of his expression (swearing, for instance) offend us, we are free to dismiss his work without attempting to understand it further.

I must question not only the intelligence of such a response, but its moral basis. The Prophet Joseph Smith revealed what has become a Mormon's foremost definition of truth:

Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come.¹⁰

John A. Widtsoe adds:

... that is, truth is synonymous with accurate knowledge or a product of it.¹¹

The question of accuracy and the means to determine accuracy can be debated at length, but one thing is clear: Mormons believe that truth is *not* wishful thinking; it is not defined as what *should* be, but what *is*.

I concur that profanity is inconsistent with the highest standards of the Church. I am painfully aware of my own predilection for this easy idiom, and I must constantly guard my personal speech; but I cannot honestly believe that wishful thinking will make the problem go away.

Swearing *does* exist, and Eugene O'Neill created realistic characters who *do* swear. We may dislike it, but there it is. And to prevent the opportunity of experiencing powerful visions of life by any author of talent does no service to truth. To employ our repugnance toward profanity to the extreme of condemning a great play whose final effect, or, if you will, "message," is an intense human compassion which borders on Christian love, is like judging a fine painting on the basis of its subject. We may feel that immodesty is a reprehensible standard of conduct, but it does not follow that a classical nude painting is pornographic. One need only wander through the Vatican collection of Greek statues to realize that plaster

¹⁰ Doctrine and Covenants 93:24.

¹¹ John A. Widtsoe, "What is Truth?" *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: The Bookcraft Co., 1943), p. 3.

fig leaves are far more offensive than nature rendered in innocence and beauty.

O'Neill's expression may be neither innocent nor beautiful; this is a matter of opinion. However, it seems to me that a proper aesthetic and moral judgment of a play such as *Long Day's Journey Into Night* should not be based upon an isolated particular of O'Neill's expression (the use of curse words in the dialogue) but upon the play as an artistic unity.

It is possible to advocate evil in beautiful language, just as it is possible to advocate virtue in coarse language. Were O'Neill preaching the delights of dope addiction, I could understand (but not necessarily agree with) an immediate rejection of the play by a Mormon audience, but to cut off any hope of confronting his tragic vision because we are offended with his language or other particulars of the play is, to me, not only unintelligent, but morally insensitive.

This does not mean that I espouse the acceptance of O'Neill's vision. Personally, I reject the viewpoint of this strange and unhappy morality play, this black passion. In my opinion O'Neill is saying human action is predetermined by what men in the past have called Fate and what modern man finds masquerading as a mechanically predestined Self. O'Neill's characters are presented as the helpless victims of themselves, a vision I cannot agree with.

But the artistic vision O'Neill communicates to me lets me experience that which I could only experience in the imagination of a powerful artist. Some may reject O'Neill on this very basis, but I firmly believe we cannot in good conscience reject that which we do not understand. When we do, we raise up an idol of Ignorance; we worship our own dead image of the world. I must give O'Neill a chance to change my mind. I did, and he didn't, but at least I understand his view. I have experienced, with him, his long day's journey into night.

I cannot believe God demands that we think only certain approved thoughts. I believe He does wish us to choose only the best and try to make all things of good report a part of our lives. I feel free to understand the best of O'Neill (compassion, forgiveness, love amid hate) and to understand (though I may reject) those particulars of his vision, his bad reports, which do not lift my spirit. I do not feel inwardly stained because I have experienced that which I reject.

I demand this freedom for myself, the freedom to view the world in its entirety, and I feel sad when I see my fellow Mormons (or my Baptist friends) reject great experiences in drama, or in any of the arts, because of isolated offensive details. To censure others is al-

ways simple, but to love our fellow men, including characters on the stage, requires not only compassion, but imagination. It's easy to be offended, but difficult to understand.

We know that compassion is often painful; maybe this is why so many of us avoid it. Yet, as Mormons, we are admonished to seek after love and compassion for others, not censorship and disapproval, after understanding and sympathy, not moral superiority. If our attitude toward imaginary characters on the stage is a feeling of rejection, what is our attitude toward our real-life neighbors? Do we shun those who do not meet our high standards of conduct, or do we try to understand them, share with them our view of life, even gain from the better side of their personalities?

If we feel "dirty" when we witness human fallibility (the subject of all drama), if we feel contaminated by human expressions, human experiences, are we not retreating from the truth of what *is* into the fantasies of our wishes, noble as these wishes may be? It is not easy to hate the sin and love the sinner.

That which *should* be can only become reality through our actions, and our actions cannot bring to pass our higher ideals until they are based upon enlightened and informed habits of mind. I am not virtuous because I never heard of evil; were that possible, I would not have had to enter this mortal life, which as a Mormon I understand was designed to provide real knowledge of good and evil and growth through real choices. I am virtuous only in the same degree that I recognize the good among many less desirable choices, choose it, and then try to make it a part of me. I cannot believe I have sinned because I have witnessed sin, nor that I am a sinner because I understand a sinner. I am responsible for my personal actions, not for my knowledge of the actions of others. I must be able to see the possibility of all men in myself before I can realize my own potential.

It is just this knowledge of human action which the art of drama so powerfully communicates to men. We become poor theater artists and insensitive members of the audience when we cannot view our fellow human beings except through a scrim of immediate value judgment. Premature moral rejection brings down the final curtain on any play.

The theater presents a vision in which we experience vicariously the lives of other humans. We can gain insight into the lives of the characters through the forms and patterns of dramatic art. We can then consider our own emotional struggles dispassionately; we can evaluate human passion outside ourselves, yet relate it *to* ourselves. We do this in light of whatever knowledge the theater artist is able

to communicate, as well as whatever knowledge we ourselves bring to the theater.

Drama's great mission is to reveal our own natures to ourselves. It does not necessarily tell us how to act upon this knowledge, or whether to act at all. It can only hold up the mirror. A dramatist can only offer his vision to his fellows. He can pray he has seen clearly, but he can only share his vision; he cannot force others to see life as he sees it.

The clearest human vision is distorted to some degree by subjective preconceptions. We may not feel that O'Neill has shown us life as it is, though we can believe he honestly attempted to do so. In *Long Day's Journey Into Night* we are witnesses of O'Neill's world, not the world itself. Yet, as imperfect as even the most honest of man-made, artistic visions may be, none are so reprehensible as deliberate distortions of life (including those which favor only virtue) which pretend to be the entire truth. Propaganda may reach the level of art in its expression, but art is not propaganda. Without honesty, art cannot exist.

It is one thing to seek virtue, but quite another to distort life. It is one thing for the theater artist and his audience to have strong tastes and preferences, but quite another to pretend that one special viewpoint reflects life as it is. If a painter portrayed a man standing in the sun who cast no shadow, and then claimed this were an image of photographic reality, such a painting might please those who love only the sun, but it would sadden those who love the truth. The complete picture must include the shadow.¹² To ignore the dark side of human nature can begin as assumed virtue, but it can only end in something less than truth. To circumscribe our vision of what *is* in order to favor what *should be* may be a well-meaning lie, but it is still a lie.

SHOULD MORMONS SWEAR ON THE STAGE?

I have no final answer for others, but I can state my personal resolution in the matter. Right or wrong, this is what I believe: Ideally, a Mormon should not swear on the stage or anywhere else. If he does so, he must be personally responsible for his actions. However, if a Mormon is an *actor* who is portraying a character who swears, he has become the instrument which brings that character to life. A Mormon actor, as an individual, is responsible for the choice itself, that is, whether to participate with others in bringing a par-

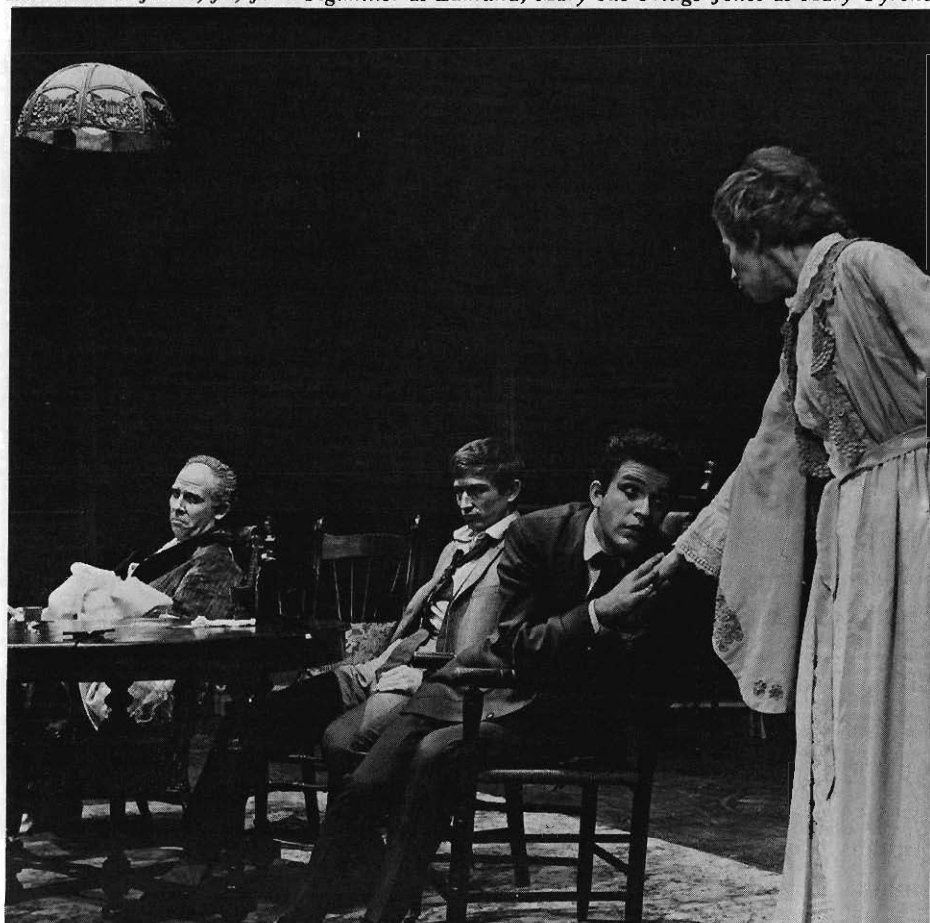
¹² Again, I must avoid modes of expression. A surrealist painting might portray just this image.

ticular play to life on the stage. My decision was that the artistic integrity and dramatic value of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* more than justified the particulars of its expression.

Once an actor has made his decision, he becomes, or should become, an integral part of the medium of dramatic art. To hold him morally responsible for every word the author has placed in the character's mouth would be, in my opinion, as logical as blaming oil pigment for being green and looking like grass after the painter has shaped it on the canvas. It becomes not a question of morals, but aesthetics.

If the actor persists in applying his own sense of morality to his character's actions, he does a poor job on the stage. He must, as far as it is possible to do so, think and act as the character thinks and acts. This is the greatest stumbling block for the Mormon actor. He

The final moments of the play. From left to right, Ronald Wilcox as James Tyrone; Warren Hammack as James, Jr.; John Figmiller as Edmund; Mary Sue Fridge Jones as Mary Tyrone.



finds it difficult to remove from his mind, even in order to portray an imaginary character, his own code of moral conduct. To the audience his portrayal will seem false in that same degree he is unable to imagine the actions of a character outside his own personality.

For instance, a villain seldom thinks of himself as a villain. The solution for the actor is to portray the character as the character sees himself, perhaps not as a villain, but as a misunderstood hero. The figure of a mustache-twirling Simon Legree is a caricature of a moralist, not a portrayal of human character by an actor. It is for the audience to determine the villainy of a character's actions; it is for the actor to portray those actions with honesty and accuracy. In the art of acting, morality is no substitute for empathy.

First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility.

Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds and not only this, but fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct; the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience.

*John Stuart Mill
On Liberty*