

SCENES FROM THE BOOK OF MORMON

Carol Lynn Pearson

"A Day, a Night, and a Day." A three-act play by Doug Stewart. Mrs. Pearson is a script writer for the motion picture studio at Brigham Young University and has written a number of plays. Her first book of poetry, *Beginnings*, was reviewed in the Winter 1967 issue.

As Mormon writers search their background for subject matter unique to their religion, one source that offers almost unlimited possibilities is the Book of Mormon. The most recent effort to dramatize a Book of Mormon episode is "A Day, a Night, and a Day," presented October 19-30, 1967, by the Brigham Young University Theatre under the able direction of Charles W. Whitman.

"A Day, a Night, and a Day" was written by Doug Stewart, a graduate of Brigham Young now working for a master's degree in communications. The play has caused a good deal of talk around campus, and a variety of critics have passed judgment on it, labeling it "the finest original drama I've seen" or "actually a rather badly written play" or something in between. No one person's judgment of a play should be taken over-seriously. Much of it can't help but be a personal reaction. Certainly that is the case with the following comments.

This play is Mr. Stewart's first. For anyone's first play to be passably good is an achievement, and, in the opinion of this writer, Mr. Stewart's play is not only passably good but demonstrates considerable merit.

The basic situation is a good one—one of the most dramatic to be found anywhere in the Book of Mormon. The believers in Christ, led by Nephi, are threatened with death if they do not deny their belief in the coming Savior and in the sign they have looked for, the day, night and day without darkness, signifying His birth. The choice between conscience and life has been the conflict of many a great dramatic character, Sir Thomas More and Joan of Arc, to mention only two. In "A Day, a Night, and a Day," we do not find one splendid hero pitted against an overpowering foe, but rather we see the collective struggles of the Prophet Nephi, his family, and friends as they prepare to meet the death sentence.

Perhaps the strongest character in the play, the one who seems to shape the action most, is Nephi's wife, Esther. She is the pillar of strength, even when toward the end of the play Nephi is absent, and many think he has deserted them. Many of the believers are clamoring to sign denials, when Esther steps out crying:

Stop! In the name of the Almighty, stop!
Does your strength rest in Nephi, or in Christ?
How quickly you fall from grace.
How swiftly you turn on the Son of Man.
Is the shame of this world too much to bear
for this one hour?

Nephi too has occasion to demonstrate his strength. The scene in which he tries to persuade the wavering Isabelle is a moving one. Isabelle cannot bear

the thought of letting her children die—"God couldn't be so cruel." Nephi exclaims that he himself, Esther, and Isabelle's own husband Amulek are prepared to die and to let the children die if necessary—and they are not cruel.

Nephi

If we are not cruel, what is it then that drives
us to do what we must do? You tell us, Isabelle.
What is it?

(A pause. Isabelle does not speak)

I'll tell you. It is love. It is the pure love of Christ.

This concern for the children is one of the strongest elements of the story. Nephi and Esther have, besides a teenage daughter, two young children, Kib and Sarah. It is these two children who inject a certain amount of warmth and even humor into the play. Kib says that he wishes he could see an angel as his father has—then he would be stronger. Sarah, whom we later learn has actually seen an angel, suggests that Kib pray to Heavenly Father to send one.

Kib

But you have to be a prophet to see an angel.

Sarah

But I'm not a prophet.

Kib

And that's why you haven't seen an angel.

(Sarah doesn't look up)

You haven't seen an angel, have you, Sarah?

(no response)

Sarah, have you?

Sarah

Why don't you pray to Heavenly Father, Kib?

The language in the play is fairly contemporary, and makes no attempt to imitate scripture. Occasionally, especially with the children, the language seems a bit too contemporary, with words such as "darn," "okay," "yeah" and "shut up." Less modern equivalents of these words would likely sound more true to the time.

One fault of the play, in several instances, seems to be a lack of preparation for what could be a very meaningful moment. For instance, the final line of the play is uttered by Zelom, nephew to Nephi, who has rejected the Church as the play opens. Finally, when the sign does come and the believers are vindicated, Zelom sinks to his knees, crying, "I have denied my God!" This could be wonderfully effective, but unfortunately we have not come to know Zelom well enough to be much moved by it. Only in a few brief scenes has he been shown as a non-believer with the stock Book of Mormon reasons: "Foolish believers. There is no Christ. Christ is a myth."

Hampered by a similar fault is a scene in which Jacob, once strong, then denying, then reconverted by Nephi, begs a group of his fellow Church members to forgive him and take him back. With venom quite as great as the non-believers show, these “good Church members” lash out at Jacob for his fall which took many others with him. Unfortunately, however, this seems rather a bigger show than we’re prepared for. We’ve never seen these believers before, haven’t come to care about them, and don’t much like them now. Also, we’ve not been given a chance to develop much of a bond with Jacob. It’s clear what he represents, but he’s not given much time to involve us with him as a person. The answer in both cases seems to be either to cut out a few characters, or else to make more of them.

There are characters too whose motivations seem hazy. Emron, the judge who is chiefly responsible for the “anti-Christ ultimatum,” is pure villain, but somehow we want a little better reason for what he’s doing. In one of the final scenes he deliberately tries to drive the now-frantic and half-repentant chief judge Lachoneus mad, even to suicide. Much is made of this. But why? Perhaps Emron has designs on Lachoneus’s power, but there is nothing in the script to indicate that.

All in all, “A Day, a Night, and a Day” is an acceptable and frequently moving fictionalization of what *might* have happened between the lines of Third Nephi, chapter one. The only thing that *could not* have happened was the violent death of Lachoneus, for we find him still hearty in later chapters.

There are flaws in the play, but through them comes a ring of sincerity and an honest emotional impact. More important than the opinion of any one critic is that of the audiences. Tickets to the play were sold out quickly and each night found dozens and dozens of people waiting for a possible seat. During the play, the audience’s interest did not lag, and their emotional response was intense.

Doubtless many other dramas will emerge from the pages of the Book of Mormon, some likely from the pen of Doug Stewart. “A Day, a Night, and a Day” serves as a good beginning for his future work.

SHORT NOTICE

History of the Relief Society, 1842-1966. Salt Lake City: Published by the General Board of the Relief Society, 1966. 140 pp., \$4.00.

This is a public relations picture book presenting a collection of photographs from the *Improvement Era* and *The Relief Society Magazine*, with portraits of Relief Society Presidents, past and present, and one or two interesting old prints. There are pages of respectable elderly ladies posing for portraits or engaged in handwork. Indeed, the text emphasizes handwork, although all of the early leaders were also involved in countless strenuous public causes, from the suffragette movement to the Red Cross. One wonders if all that activity was made possible by the division of labor inherent in polygamy, but, of course, polygamy is not mentioned.

One is impressed by the seeming autonomy enjoyed by the early Relief Society, whose members manufactured silk, maintained stores, educated nurses and doctors,