

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."