



## THE CHURCH'S DRAMATIC LITERATURE

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At the time of the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830, the religious world generally was antagonistic to the idea of leisure time being spent in any way other than worship or profitable social activity. The theatre was considered one particularly evil means of wasting time, money, and talent. In contrast, the L.D.S. Church, from its inception, not only tolerated the arts, but encouraged and incorporated them into its basic doctrinal philosophies. The theatre was no exception. From the formation of the Nauvoo Dramatic Company by Joseph Smith to the appointment of the Church Drama Committee which now supervises dramatic activity throughout the Church, Mormons have been actively engaged in the theatre.

Original plays have been considered an important contribution to the cultural growth of the Church membership since pioneer times. Various contests and incentive programs have encouraged the native playwright. Most of these plans have been Church-sponsored. The M.I.A. became the agent through which original manuscripts found their way into production throughout the Church. Eventually, original works became abundant enough for the Church to publish an anthology of plays expressly written for the Church drama program.

### I

Within the past twenty-five years, more than 65 plays have been written for the Church drama program, written almost exclusively by Mormon playwrights to be performed almost exclusively by Mormon participants. As this new dramaturgy has developed, some interesting questions have emerged. Upon what standards may these plays be judged as a peculiar dramaturgy? How do these plays compare with secular plays on similar themes? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Latter-day Saint drama program as it emerges as a significant contributor to the dramatic literature of the United States?

In attempting to evaluate works such as these, one quickly comes to the realization that art cannot be reduced to "scientific" measurement or subjugated to completely objective treatment, even in an authoritarian society like the Church. This becomes evident as one becomes aware of the variety of points of view from which dramatic criticism is launched and the lack of agreement among critics from generation to generation and even within a

given period. Most artists and scholars probably would not be willing to agree upon an arbitrary standard. Hence, the one meaningful standard by which these plays may be judged is that set up by the Church itself. A careful examination of Church publications reveals a set of standards developed as the drama program grew. These standards fall into two general categories: *Ethical Standards* and *Artistic Standards*.

The *Ethical Standards* include general philosophical concepts which, in the last analysis, must be left to individual interpretation on the basis of good taste, and specific standards of conduct on the stage which are acceptable or unacceptable to L.D.S. leaders. In this area, official Church publications instruct that (1) evil must never triumph; (2) that which belittles the race, color, or creed of others is unacceptable; (3) while scenes which refer to the use of tea, coffee, liquor, or tobacco may be necessary to the fabric of the play, they are never to be portrayed on the stage, but only referred to; (4) death is to be treated tastefully, and may never be without direct bearing on the play; (5) vulgar, obscene, or suggestive language, costumes, or actions are to be avoided.

Suicide and divorce were originally forbidden subjects, and, although they are not mentioned in most recent statements, they are implicitly included in the statement that "evil must never triumph." Also included in this category is the implied qualification that, if possible, Church drama should teach as it fulfills its other responsibilities.

The second category includes the *Artistic Standards* applicable to L.D.S. drama. According to these standards, a good play should (1) be entertaining; (2) provide insight and understanding of humanity, both local and distant; (3) provide food for thought and a widening of intellectual horizons; (4) be expressed in language that is pleasing and challenging esthetically; (5) contain the dramatic elements of *action, conflict, variety and contrast, strong dramatic structure, and carefully defined characterization*.

Naturally, there is no formula to indicate the proportional relationship among these various elements. That one quality may be more evident in one play than another and that some elements may be almost entirely absent from some plays does not necessarily indicate failure. Certainly the achievement of excellence in all areas would indicate a superior work.

In examining the plays written over the past quarter of a century for the Church drama program, certain artistic standards seem to achieve more prominence. One of the most often and most strongly stressed qualifications for an acceptable play is that it be entertaining. Taken in its broadest definition, this quality becomes the most universal in the plays of the past 25 years. The vast majority have elements of entertainment in them and several are handled with a degree of skill which seems to make them outstanding in this respect. A few appear to hold entertainment value for only the least discriminating theatre patron. Crude characterization, thin ideas spread across vast space, and outlandish situations which stretch the imagination beyond belief are the chief offenders in this area. Yet, compared to plays available through acknowledged publishing firms, the number of L.D.S. plays which resort to cheap entertainment seems minimal.

Under the definition of entertainment implied by Albert O. Mitchell when he says that a play should provide "entertainment values, not mere amusement only," the number of significant plays becomes appreciably smaller. Many seem to be frankly oriented toward amusement, written to allow the actor and the audience to forget the work-a-day world in an hour of inconsequential fun. This may be the result of a prevalent attitude within the Church, reflected even in official publications, that drama is a part of a recreational program. To the average Latter-day Saint, drama is thought of categorically in connection with sports events, athletics, dance, speech, and certain kinds of music, all of which are considered recreational activities. Until drama in the Church comes to be considered art rather than recreation, the quality of its entertainment is likely to remain at the amusement level rather than rising to the level of culture.<sup>1</sup>

Another factor which may serve as a leveling force in the quality of L.D.S. dramatic entertainment is the mass-participation concept. Drama is thought of as an activity for all, and, in the M.I.A. program, hardly a person reaches maturity without participating in at least one play. With this kind of democratic participation policy, it seems inevitable that the dramatic vehicle provided must sacrifice quality to numbers. The official attitude of the Church has varied from a highly selective point of view, in which the quality of the product became the criterion of success, to the democratically inclusive point of view, in which the degree of participation took precedence over the production. With the rise of the latter point of view came a rash of "family" plays in which the playwrights show concern for the average person and his domestic difficulties rather than for figurative giants grappling with the universal. This point of view is prevalent at present and seems to be one influence on the preponderance of inconsequential entertainment in current Mormon dramaturgy.

Far more L.D.S. plays seem to achieve the objective of entertainment than the goal of insight into the basic human condition or "understanding of universal humanity, near and distant." One of the greatest dulling influences to this kind of understanding is the straining for a happy ending. In some cases, the happy ending comes with such great effort as to destroy the impact of the suffering within the play. In others, the assurance that all will be well is so implicit within the action as to destroy the comprehension of the enormity of the threat. At best, the constant striving for the happy ending leaves many of the plays only innocuously pleasant rather than profoundly moving.

More serious seems to be the distortion of the understanding of basic human relations or human nature because of superficial treatment or lack of recognition of elements germane to the problem. This is particularly evident in those plays which purport to deal with psychological situations. In these plays, deep-seated problems are solved easily and promptly by the removal of the symptoms without probing into real causes. This creates a cer-

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<sup>1</sup>Morris M. Clinger, "A History of Theatre in Mormon Colleges and Universities" (unpublished dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1963).

tain fundamental dishonesty of treatment which seems to destroy rather than enhance our understanding of humanity. This same kind of spot-blindness seems to apply to antagonistic characters. Rarely do we find such a character handled with more than minute understanding and hardly any sympathy. Most of them emerge as totally and self-consciously evil, while the characters with whom we are meant to identify emerge as equally absolute and self-consciously good. This kind of categorization occurs most noticeably in those plays which attempt to convey an understanding of the historical heritage of Mormons. The enemies of the Church are almost universally portrayed as totally evil and depraved, leaving little if any justification, beyond demonic possession, for their actions. The Indian, too, generally becomes an ignorant savage until he is incorporated into settlement life and then he becomes an orthodox, albeit quaint, member of the community. It seems strange that these historical plays, otherwise among the finest produced in the quarter-century under consideration, should allow themselves almost without exception to be weakened by this kind of categorical classification.

In some of the plays, Providence seems to reward foolish behavior, or to operate for the particular well-being of an individual. This seems to oppose both Christian history and Latter-day Saint experience in which the righteous were often abused and, in many cases, sacrificed for their convictions.

Most plays seem to deny the real celebration of pain. The characters are allowed to touch pain, but are rarely allowed to embrace it; we hear them talk about it, but rarely see them experience it. Yet one of the fundamental tenets of Mormonism is that man cannot know pleasure without pain, light without dark, good without evil.

Most of the plays attempting to achieve insight into past generations seem to be content with providing the furnishings of a distant time or place. They seem to be content with presenting a sort of mass-produced "print" of a standardized idea of the times. Only a few succeed in bridging the gap between our own generation and its ancestors, bringing the past to vivid and stirring life. Yet if only one or two plays achieve this one moment of understanding, it is possible that the entire project could be deemed successful and worthwhile.

Three "pioneer" plays<sup>2</sup> seem to have achieved a sense of sympathetic understanding for a past generation, as well as offering a more profound insight into the nature of human life and its interrelationships without fixing these elements of human existence in time. These plays seem to illustrate certain human values which remain as acceptable and worthwhile in our own generation as they were in that of our pioneer forefathers. This gives them a universality which seems to be rare among the plays discussed so far. These plays also demonstrate a skill in construction which allows a mounting sense of suspense, a fabric of valid, convincing action executed by a group of vivid and colorful characters.

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<sup>2</sup>*In Time of Harvest* by Martin C. Nalder, *C Is for Courage* by Klea Evans Worsley, and *What Doth It Profit?* by Ruth and Nathan Hale.

Universal understanding, however, is deferred in most of the plays in favor of isolated personal incident. These incidents are interesting, but few offer, or even attempt, universally significant experience. Some plays hint at the need of man to know himself, but the general cry, when a cry is made, is for conformity, generally toward what seem to be Victorian standards. This need for conformity in Latter-day Saint drama is understandable in light of the theocratic organization of the Church. Yet equally integral to Church doctrine are the two principles that man is entitled to personal revelation in relation to his own life and that man has the sacred obligation to discover for himself as much as possible of the universal truth governing his life. This struggle to know and understand seems to be a main-spring of most great drama, yet remains virtually untouched in Mormon writing.

Although one of the stated standards for quality Latter-day Saint drama is that it provide food for thought and opportunity to broaden intellectual horizons, the vast majority of L.D.S. plays seem to be confined to the limited world in which the average person lives. Most of them are domestic plays, and even those without this emphasis rely largely on domesticity for stability.

In spite of the avowed wish of the leaders in the Church drama program to "grapple with truth" and "probe into the riddle of the universe," all of the plays seem cautious about questioning standard cultural or theological views. Only a few attempt abstract or symbolic treatment, and these are conservative in their imagery.

For the most part, the playwrights seem content to provide the standard answers, often in platitudes. They seem to want to touch, but do not dare to probe such vastly significant areas as adult-to-youth, man-to-man, man-to-himself, and man-to-God relationships. Perhaps the framework of religious thought in which the playwrights operate makes such exploration heretical, or at least questionable. Let us hope that the right of censorship of the central drama committee or the general board does not intimidate such writing.

A latent distrust of the theatre as anything more than a source of fleeting relaxation seems to manifest itself both in the official publications of the Church and in the text of certain plays. Serious and dedicated drama seems to pose some sort of threat to the orthodoxy of the participant. The serious theatre may be looked upon as a competing source of illumination or as a tool for the forces that would debase fundamental values.

The general trend in the plays examined seems to be toward involvement of the individual, rather than with the profundity of the idea with which the individual becomes involved. Although the official literature of the Church pays lip service to dedicated intellectual drama, the search for an L.D.S. play which might lay claim to profundity of idea or significant exploration of thought is difficult if not futile.

Another requirement of acceptable L.D.S. drama is that it be expressed in "pleasing language." For the most part, the language of the plays seems to rise to meet the subject-matter. In relation to one another, a few plays seem to be outstanding; but when compared to recognized works of literary



merit, they still seem to be merely "attempts" at effective language.

Several of the plays (such as Blanch Kendall McKey's *Proud Brother* and Luacine Clark Fox's *The Stars Hung Low*) have moments of highly effective dialogue before drifting back to only adequate language. It would seem that, with a little more experience and some careful study, several of these playwrights could achieve a high level of artistry in the use of dramatic language.

One of the most apparent weaknesses in the handling of the dialogue is the intrusion of the playwright into his work without adopting a dramatic form which allows this sort of intrusion. Pedantic and moralistic passages are inserted into a number of plays, particularly those dealing with doctrinal or historic materials. Often there is a sense of the action halting while such passages are directed at the audience. An over-abundance of narration adds to this sense of playwright manipulation. This often comes as a result of the epic proportions of the material chosen for development. Although this is especially true of the historic and scriptural plays, it is also common in many of the others, including a number of family-life plays.

Many of the plays seem to use language to expand a one-act play idea into a full-length play. This leaves a multiplicity of words in which to clothe a slight idea. Others seem to attempt to compress a full-length play into short play form, giving an abruptness that creates a shock-effect and does not allow for the action to build.

Although there are weaknesses in the language of these plays, precluding their soaring to the heights reached by certain secular works, the dialogue is generally above average and quite well suited to the subject-matter.

## II

The dramatic elements of action, conflict, variety and contrast, strong dramatic structure, and effectiveness of characterization have been listed in official L.D.S. publications as essential to the preparation of an effective play.

*Action* — In most of the plays, the action seems effective. Two general weaknesses, however, are recurrent. Many of the plays attempt to incorporate too much action. This results in a kind of diffusion of concentration that invites the danger of a confused audience failing to grasp the significance of any of the varied threads. In several others, there seems to be too much talk about action that is never brought on stage. This invites the danger of an audience that leaves the theatre frustrated because anticipation has never been fulfilled. A few allow the action to become awkward and obscure, and a rare few plays select and direct the action toward a clean, clear focus with adequate development and without extraneous sequences. The majority of the plays provide a satisfactory pattern of action.

*Conflict* — Latter-day Saint plays of the past twenty-five years seem to abound in conflict. In the majority, the conflict seems central to the development of the action, yet in a number of plays (about one-third) the conflict seems superficial, contrived, or otherwise poorly handled. Generally the conflict is limited to the personal, and there is little that allows us universal reflection or profound contemplation.

*Variety and Contrast* — As with the element of action, these plays seem to abound in variety within the individual play. Considered as a group, however, they present a series of patterns that seem repetitive and monotonous. The central figure is most often a young woman; in the overwhelming majority of plays, there is a young man as gallant and honest as she is pure. In those plays in which villains are appropriate, they are almost universally crude and self-consciously evil. In the plays of family life, which make up the vast majority, the family is usually threatened by a circumstance rather than a person, although a person is usually involved in the circumstance. And the pattern of the family structure is fairly standard. There is generally an older teenage child (usually a daughter) and a younger teenage child (also a daughter). Generally, there is a pre-teen son, who is categorically a "pest." To complete the group of children, there is usually a small child who is really charming but who contributes to many of the family difficulties. Of course, the family is presided over by middle-class, understanding, though not-too-bright parents who learn about as much from their children as they teach them. There are, naturally, variations in the family pattern, but these variations generally consist of the substitution of a male child for a female, or the exchange of a cousin for a sibling. Compared to proved works which have internal excitement plus experience and characters not found in the everyday dramatic market, most L.D.S. plays are bland.

*Dramatic Structure* — A few plays achieve artistry in their structure. These plays are given a form that grows in meaning as the play matures. As the action progresses, the form begins to be fulfilled, and becomes apparent. Most of these better plays seem to be written as "realistic" plays in which the events grow out of the relationship of characters in a set of circumstances. These events are so selected that a totality of experience is allowed the audience through the dramatic structure.

More than a dozen of the plays, however, are noticeably lacking in structure. In some, sprawling action becomes entangling; in others, a multiplicity of action-threads leaves either a sense of incomplete action or requires a tedious tying together; in others, the structure is strained by the inclusion into or the tacking onto the play of a message; in still others, incidents which are interesting but irrelevant are crammed into an already full dramatic form; and in others, the structure becomes cluttered by an over-abundance of subject-matter.

This leaves in the majority of plays a structure that seems recognizable and workable for the play, but of no great artistic significance.

*Characterization* — The characters seem to be overwhelmingly lacking in dimension. Generally, the sympathetic characters are developed as totally virtuous, while the unsympathetic characters are either villainously evil or absurdly grotesque. Many of the comic characters have a grotesqueness about them also which moves them into the realm of caricature rather than portrait or even cartoon.

The family-life plays present such a standard set of characters that it seems possible to exchange a character from one play for one from another

play without damage to either the character or the play.

Compared to recognized commercial dramatic works, the vast majority of characters in L.D.S. plays have very little personality. Those plays which attempt to arrive at psychological insight deal with surface manifestations and are satisfied with superficial solutions. These plays pull heavily at the heartstrings without truly coming to grips with the basic problems involved, finding their essential concern with removing unsatisfactory behavior. Some, in what seems to be an attempt to explore human relationships, drag us through sordid or abnormal situations without allowing us to arrive at what could be considered genuine insight. This leaves the plays essentially sensational rather than profound and flamboyant rather than impressive. Even in the best works, no real probing depth of character is achieved.

Only one play attempts symbolistic representation similar to modern avant-garde drama, in which the character becomes important not as an individual but as a symbol of a kind of humanity. *Beyond the Typha* by Richard M. Rowley presents an effective symbolic representation of the Mormon point of view of human existence, yet the characterization in this play is carefully integrated into the philosophical framework of Mormon theology.

One morality play in which characters become personifications is effective.<sup>3</sup> This is not true of the other fantasies, however, which are destroyed with inept handling of characters.

In the historical plays, which make up the strongest group of plays considered, most of the characters are surrounded by a barrier of space and time which causes them to lack verity. This increases the impression of fable characters rather than allowing a bridging of time and space to provide a genuine understanding.

Several plays are successful in providing vivid, effective characters, but even these lack the depth to let them qualify as significant studies in human personality.

Although more difficult to categorize than the artistic standards for drama, the Church standards of conduct and behavior seem to have an influence on the dramaturgy produced by and for members of the faith.

### III

Latter-day Saint drama is noticeably lacking in what is considered "avant-garde" and "absurd" drama. It is possible that this is the normal lag between the professional theatre and the Church drama. As an institution, the Church tends to resist change and to adopt innovations slowly. Hence, it has been as much as fifty years behind current trends in art and culture. It may be that the L.D.S. writers simply have not become aware enough or adept enough in the modern style to produce a work of sufficient merit for publication. More probably, the reason for this lack is the basic philosophical difference between the doctrines of the Church and the principles of existentialism

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<sup>3</sup>In *The Silver Chest*, Olive F. Woolley Burt has written a beautiful little play in which children learn the truth about life. Not to be taken literally, the play is highly effective as the concrete embodiment of an abstract point of view.



upon which much of the current avant-garde theatre, and especially the "theatre of the absurd," is based. Mormonism seems more closely identified with an idealism modified by experimentation than to other philosophical concepts. Most of the tenets of existentialism are foreign to if not directly opposed to the teachings of the Church. Thus, it seems probable that the neglect of avant-garde drama in Latter-day Saint writing represents a philosophical rejection rather than an indication of cultural lag.

The present attitude of the leaders of the Church seems to be that the drama is for the entire Church population. This point of view leads away from the concept of drama as an exceptional experience and moves it toward the mediocre. This point of view is difficult to harmonize with the doctrine that all things within the Church lead to perfection. If talent is truly a gift of God, those to whom the gift has been given should be allowed to develop it fully rather than being submerged in a sea of mediocrity and allowed to develop only so far as those around them can develop. This seems to be a concern of the present central drama committee which is now encouraging special productions for the gifted Church member. Hopefully, this may encourage the writing of special plays to be used in these productions.

These Church standards undoubtedly contribute to several other trends in the dramaturgy of the Church. The idea of mass participation, for instance, has made the "road show" popular at the expense of truly significant drama. The concept of absolute truth with the resulting understanding of "ultimate good" and "ultimate evil" helps to keep the perspective narrow and the possibility of magnificent opposition limited. The attitude that on-stage conduct of the character influences the off-stage thoughts and actions of the participant tends to further restrict the Church dramaturgy. This probably accounts for the lack of plays which genuinely come to grips with ideas which may be a threat to the security of the members' faith and for the lack of drama which experiments with ideas beyond the doctrinal limitations of the Church.

Restrictions on the conduct of characters within a play seem to have an influence on the development of a Latter-day Saint dramaturgy. Least troublesome of these restrictions are those related to the Word of Wisdom. Since the restrictions of the Word of Wisdom deal essentially with the use of tea, coffee, tobacco, and liquor on the stage, playwrights apparently have little difficulty in satisfying this requirement. These actions can easily be omitted from most plays without harm. When they cannot be omitted, they can generally be replaced; and when they cannot be replaced, the action can generally be carried off-stage and only receive on-stage reference.

In comparing L.D.S. plays with the works written for publication outside the Church, only *What Doth It Profit?* by Ruth and Nathan Hale bears favorable comparison to what might be considered a major work of significance, Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*. Although the two plays merit comparison in many ways, it is doubtful that the L.D.S. play has reached the stature of the O'Neill work. Several plays compare favorably with works which have proved popular but which seem to be temporary in their impact.

The majority of the works are like those plays which are of little or no real significance, except for their entertainment value.

Many of these works are clumsy and fumbling but they do represent a beginning. And when we consider the hundreds of plays written for the commercial theatre in proportion to the number accepted for publication, much less those which attain a certain stature, it is not surprising that the vast majority of the L.D.S. plays do not rise above the average. This is true of the dramatic literature of any time or of any people. We find vast numbers of attempts in proportion to each great work. It may be that there is no Jean Racine or William Shakespeare or Henrik Ibsen among the L.D.S. playwrights; but there may be an Alexandre Hardy or a Thomas Kyd or an Emile Zola. It is possible that none of the works of the past quarter century will achieve lasting stature, even within the Church, but it is possible that they may inspire a great work or that one of them might be rewritten into a significant work. And if only one significant dramatic work emerges from the L.D.S. Church drama program, it may be that its creative movement can be justified as an important contributor to dramatic literature.

Perhaps it is not within the M.I.A. that the Church drama program will make its most significant contribution. A number of Church members are now writing plays not intended for submission to the Church drama committee. Many of these playwrights received their first theatrical experience through the Church drama program and have developed an interest born there into a creativity which may yield a significant dramatic work to the American theatre.

Evidence indicates that Latter-day Saint drama is still adolescent. Most of the flaws in the dramaturgy of the Church stem from this adolescence. Like most other movements in the theatre, the effectiveness of the L.D.S. Church drama program will be proved through time and use. As this drama moves from adolescence to maturity, it is probable that it will continue to yield a host of average or mediocre plays, with a number of poor works, and an occasional outstanding one. It is possible that through a process of constant self-evaluation and self-improvement, this program could yield a great playwright and perhaps even make a significant contribution to contemporary religious drama.