

REVIEWS

Edited by Davis Bitton



FIDDLIN' AROUND IN ORDERVILLE, OR, A MORMON ON THE ROOF

Richard Cracroft

The Order is Love. By Carol Lynn Pearson. Provo: Trilogy Arts, 1971, 97 pp, \$1.98.

Carol Lynn Pearson, in her delightful musical, *The Order is Love*, has managed to put her finger on the pulse of Mormon history and discover a vigorous throb of universality which is at times sobering and at other times wonderfully funny. Mrs. Pearson manages to skirt the temptations of in-group narrowness inherent in the provinciality of her theme to produce a fast-moving, tuneful, funny, yet thought-provoking piece of hoarhound candy — a bitter-sweet morsel, not only of Mormondom but of Humanity.

Mrs. Pearson (supported by the modern sounds of Lex de Azevedo's score) is at her best. An experienced actress, a prize-winning playwright, and author of those widely read but uneven volumes of aphoristic verse, *Beginnings* and *The Search*, Mrs. Pearson seems to have found her *métier*. As is evident in all she undertakes, she has a remarkable sense of staging, cadence and timing, and the play seems to provide her dramatic sensibility with a rich opportunity to ask and probe the questions which interest her as a young and sensitive Mormon woman, keenly aware of the implications of change in traditional Mormon society.

In fact, change seems to be the subject of the musical, which is fraught with interest for Latter-day Saints. Evoking the in-the-world-yet-not-of-the-world tensions, *The Order is Love* becomes an examination of how the idealistic Saint in each of us battles, with uneven success, against the earth-bound Mortal which exerts itself so tenaciously to cloud our vision with uncertainty and ambiguity. The play allows the viewer an opportunity for more objective consideration of his own inner battle in an age when a man's Christianity is too often judged according to his rating as a PEST (Protestant Ethic Score Tabulation).

Within this dichotomy, Mrs. Pearson asks questions which are applicable to Latter-day Saints, and others as well. She considers the problem of the group vs. the individual and the nature (and the degree) of control by the group over the individual. She gently joshes at the tendency of many to equate habits of dress and customs with the timely, unchanging principles of the Gospel. She treats, in a mature and balanced manner, the problem of hypocrisy and the ambiguities associated with living according to absolutes in a world of compromise. The result of these questionings is a play which

can be enjoyed on many levels, a play which is far more sophisticated than the fragmented and generalized *Promised Valley* or such sentimental and in-group productions as *All In Favor*.

The story, framed by an *Our Town*-type stage manager, Ezra Cooper, takes place in Orderville, Utah, between 1885 and 1886, in a setting which Professor Leonard J. Arrington, in his brief introduction to the book, assures us is "authentic." Catherine Ann Russell and her ailing father arrive at Orderville and consecrate themselves to the Order, though the young, attractive and talented Catherine Ann is loath to do so. A romance soon springs up between Matthew Cooper, Ezra's son, and the lovely Catherine Ann, who incites the previously docile Matthew to bits and fits of rebellion against the rules of the Order, though he never wavers in his allegiance. After several attempts to bring about minor reforms in the Order, reforms which would soften the harshness of life in the struggling village, Catherine returns to the civilized parlors of her uncle's Salt Lake City home, only to realize that her love for Matthew is greater than her own desires for culture and refinement. After the death of her father, who had remained in Orderville, Catherine Ann returns, only to find the Order dissolved, destroyed by the selfishness of its members. A chastened Catherine Ann and a grown-up Matthew are reunited as Ezra Cooper, *Camelot*-like, recounts his now-vanquished dreams for an Orderville which he had envisioned as the embodiment of a "world where every man's a brother." He sings:

I saw a world where every man would share.
A world where not one soul
Was left alone and cold,
A world where every man
Was loved, and clothed, and fed
A little more love
Will make it happen

Young Matthew and Catherine Ann join with him in harmony, as Orderville lapses into chaos, to sing more hopefully than prophetically, that,

A little more love
Will make it come true

A little less me,
A little more you

A little more love.

Through the play, Mrs. Pearson skillfully avoids taking sides. Catherine Ann never becomes the stereotyped bluestocking. Nor do the leaders of the Order become symbols of bigotry and tyranny. Nor do the outcroppings of destructive selfishness receive unfeeling, scathing attention. Mrs. Pearson writes of human failings with a mellowness and understanding that humanize and universalize the whole, an uncommon thing in the spotty history of Mormon letters. Mrs. Pearson threads into the play the human motivations behind all the philosophical stances in the drama, so that the play becomes, if one wishes to view it as such, a much-needed lesson in tolerance and understanding. Besides comfortably couching the action in an aura of authentic Mormon background, Mrs. Pearson has woven into her play a de-

lightful pattern of humor, a humor organic and pertinent to the theme and momentum of the play. The first major line, spoken by Ezra Cooper, sets the tone: "If I was the devil, and I owned both Southern Utah and Hell — I'd live in Hell and rent out Southern Utah." He then rehearses the old Mormon joke about his call to Orderville: Brother Brigham had called him to assist in the founding of the town; Ezra, less than enthusiastic about the call, was told to go home and pray about it. Says Ezra: "So I went home and prayed about it — damn it!"

Thus Mrs. Pearson does a great deal of spading in the field of L.D.S.-Laughing-At-Ourselves, a field which has lain fallow too long. Her vehicle is often the odd couple, Brother and Sister Alonzo Burrows. Alonzo is the town tippler and his wife the town shrew. Provided by Ezra with a convenient escape barrel in front of the Cooper home, Alonzo pauses in flight from his wife's tongue to make occasional pronouncements, such as his rejoicing that at death he will rest from his wife's tongue. He pauses, then cries, "Oh, no! I just realized — she's eternal!" Sister Burrows has her turn, as well, and comments, after hearing how much the "early brethren" had to endure, "The sisters had to endure just as much as the brethren did. *Plus* they had to endure the brethren!" Whether it be that of saucy Francis Isadore, the poet laureate of the community, or that of the incessantly arguing blacksmiths, Brother Hill and Brother Sorenson, the infectious humor seems at once both Mormon and universal.

Mrs. Pearson bravely and artistically centralizes some of the major conflicts in Catherine Ann herself. It is she who shames Matthew into his slight but significant rebellion against the society by urging him to procure a new pair of non-regulation pants from the big and corrupt city of Nephi, from whence he returns to introduce not only the new pants but also the wicked practice of dancing face to face. It is she who insists that pleasures in life often arise from things that we really don't need; and it is she who urges the brethren to provide new tablecloths for the community dining tables. ("Dining should be an experience of pleasure," she insists.) And it is Catherine Ann who ultimately demands a piano and all that such a purchase would signify for the community.

Catherine Ann is denied the community piano — and the tablecloths — by the struggling and practical though sympathetic elders, who see the impending reforms as a threat from the outside world — a kind of microcosm of the same problems which the Saints in Great Salt Lake City had already been confronting for fifteen years since the influx of traffic from the railroad. Mrs. Pearson introduces others who show more blatantly the problem of selfishness in a commune, but it is Catherine Ann who points out that the Order "doesn't make allowances for the fact that everybody is different. And the Lord *must* have meant them to be different." On leaving the Order, she complains that "It's an awful place, where you can never rise very high 'cause too many people are holding you down."

Typical of the balance of the play, Catherine Ann receives a well phrased answer from her father as she takes leave of him and Orderville. He wisely asks his daughter to remember always that eternity is a long time in which to learn to play the piano and the violin and "a dozen other instruments. . . . But the Lord sort of ear-marked this earth life for one

special learning to come first. And that's learning how to play yourself. How well you learn that, Catherine Ann, determines the kind of tunes you'll be playin' for a long, long time." In this fashion Mrs. Pearson balances the endless tension between humanism, embraced by so much of the philosophy of Mormonism, and eternalism, likewise insisted on in Mormon theology, but she gentles each argument. Thus the viewer empathizes with the ideals which led to the founding of the Order and thrills to Ezra's heartfelt statement that while living the Order "I never felt so warm, so big in all my life." Yet the viewer similarly appreciates the human foibles which led to the Order's dissolution, the ideas made vivid in the number rendered by the Orderville congregation near the end of the play, wherein a stirring counterpart is set up between the public prayers uttered by all and the private and selfish thoughts uttered by individuals:

ALL

Help us to remember
That all are Thy children
And equal in Thy sight.

3rd MAN

(*Raising head*)

Though it does seem unfair that
A skilled telegrapher like me
Shouldn't get any more reward
Than a mere weed puller
Like Brother Stolworthy.

Lest these probings prove too repelling to those who dare look for entertainment in a musical, let me hasten to add that the play is highly enjoyable, full of laughter and poignancy and good music. The story is simple and the production of the play seems very adaptable to the requirements of ward and stake theaters. Audiences love it. Children are delighted; teen-agers identify strongly with the youthful protagonists, and adults (ranging from Iron-Rodders to Liahonas) find it vastly entertaining. Sell-out audiences made the production the high point of the annual Mormon Arts Festival at Brigham Young University this past spring. The music has been recorded on a high-quality record and is available (as is the book, at \$1.98) for \$3.95 from Trilogy Arts, Box 843, Provo, Utah.

The Order is Love is a promise of things to come. It blends some of the richness of Mormon culture with the fresh trends in "gentile" music and theater. In fact, the play reflects the obvious influence of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Though a subtitle of "Fiddlin' Around in Orderville, or, a Mormon on the Roof" might be suggesting the relationship too strongly, there is, nonetheless, an influence seen in a number of parallels. The "Tradition" number, at the beginning of *Fiddler*, for example, is strongly reminiscent of the "Love Thy Neighbor" number in *Order*, and several other *Fiddler* numbers and their positions in the play are parallel to those in *Order*. Certainly the theme of a conservative religious body confronting (as infrequently as possible, but irrevocably) the onrush of "gentile" economics and materialistic "progress" lends itself to comparison at several points. However, a comparison of *Fiddler* and *Order* emphasizes, above all, the greater depth and breadth of Jewish tradition and the brilliance of Jewish humor