

# Why I Can't Write My Joseph Smith Play

*Gary Stewart*

IN APRIL OF 2001 I directed ten of my students in an hour-and-fifteen-minute workshop production of the rough beginnings of a play I'd written. I'd been immersed in research and writing for eight months, planning for over twenty years, and it had been strong on my mind for half a century. I called it *The Joseph Smith Project*.

I wasn't happy with it. Not at all. My good Mormon friends were troubled. They asked why I didn't emphasize the spiritual side of the prophet. My academic friends wondered if I'd lost all perspective: You still take this backwoods conjurer seriously? A couple of hard-core Southern Baptist students were delighted by it because it suggested to them that Joseph Smith might indeed be the antichrist. My theater colleagues declared the play fragmented and uneven, just a big mess. And they were right.

Usually with my writing I've at least pleased myself—maybe a few loved ones, sometimes even an audience of other people. But this Joseph Smith thing. . . I'd almost totally failed. I sure didn't please myself or my loved ones. And audiences were bewildered or upset or just bored. So why couldn't I get a bead on this guy? This prophet who'd haunted my dreams since I remember dreams? Still, I knew that, if I kept trying, I'd drive myself nuts.

My fallback position? I'm not really a playwright, after all. I'm a director who likes to write plays to pass the time. I'll just go do another production of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Except that the upwards of seventy plays I've directed in my career feels about enough.

So I pondered. What went wrong? And I began to figure a couple of things out. First of all, you can't write a successful play unless you have a pretty clear idea of who your audience is. They certainly aren't going to produce my stuff in the new LDS Conference Center. Nor do I want to play to audiences who see demons when Joseph Smith's image pops up. There's my good and faithful and indulgent Indiana audience, who've

supported me in all my theatrical wanderings through Mormonism, but even they didn't get it. (And they've suffered enough.) Finally, there are those college kids I've taught for decades—but many had seriously given themselves to either Buddha or Jesus, and most appeared not to give much of a damn about religion of any kind. What about those really smart off-Broadway patrons for whom I might like to write? Wallace Shawn's audience, Neil LaBute's audience—I just don't have enough of a grasp on a theme that would interest them.

So I had to hope that as I wrote my audience would come into view. I'd just focus on the primary task a playwright has before him: to create coherent, believable, and compelling characters. I've had good experiences over the years with just letting characters talk to me, have dialogue with me, and writing down their words. I'd try that. I'd just let Joseph talk to me. . . . except Joseph has been talking to me all my life. And I've heard his voice so long I'm really not sure whether it's his voice or my voice. It's kind of like talking to myself. Maybe if I started with other characters in the play: with Martin and Oliver, Emma and Lucy Mack and Joseph, Sr. But I had problems with them too. They'd always been only sort of whispering attendants to my lifelong dialogues with Joseph.

I had to remind myself that I see the world differently than I did forty years ago. I'd come on a long and tortured journey. Until I was thirty, I pretty much defined my world and my understanding of Joseph Smith from an orthodox perspective. I trusted what others said about him. I trusted the matrix in which they were saying what they said. When I got into theater, which was kind of an accident, I figured I'd keep thinking about my life and my religion and Joseph Smith from that same perspective. My theater would be a highly attractive way to make a living. I'd teach and direct good and proper plays I kind of liked, maybe even at BYU—plays like *All My Sons*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *The Lady Not for Burning*, *Romeo and Juliet*.

But something happened. I started developing another way of seeing the world, another matrix. What I was teaching and doing—reading and directing plays—began to have an effect on me. I was developing what I came to call a theatrical way of seeing the world. I started getting more interested in the *is's* than the *oughts*, being more interested in what people do and why they do what they do, than what they *ought* to do. And I started being attracted to these really complex and puzzling and often decadent plays: Jacobean plays like *The Changeling* and *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*; plays like *Woyzek* and *Uncle Vanya* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*; playwrights like Sam Shepard and Caryl Churchill and Samuel Beckett. And for a great many years, my psyche was a kind of boiling cauldron. I became fascinated by the strange and anomalous choices people make, choices that are never quite clear no matter how you view them—bizarre choices, choices that often lead to despair and

self-annihilation. This began leaking into my ideas about Joseph Smith. I wanted to know everything that made him an extraordinary prophet and at the same time a flawed and fascinating and opaque human being who almost seemed to have a death wish. I began spending more time reading Shakespeare than John Henry Evans, more Eugene O'Neill than B. H. Roberts, more energy-absorbing Samuel Beckett than *The Book of Matthew*. They were telling me truths I hadn't contemplated before.

Then about twenty-five years ago, I started writing. I started with a western just to see if I could do it, if I could write anything. I wrote a genre western with a Mormon twist that I called *The Avenging Angel*. It was a finalist in the Bantam Western Writing Contest, and it rested at the bottom of a dusty drawer for fifteen years until a Hollywood friend of mine who liked my work called to say Ted Turner was looking for westerns and had I written any? I almost said no. But it did get turned into a movie, partly because they got Charlton Heston to play Brigham Young. The movie wasn't all that bad, either, for what it was. But I'd long ago tired of good guys and bad guys and shootouts and horses.

After that I became fascinated by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler and their visions of the dark sides of the societies they inhabited. I wrote a trilogy of mysteries set in Salt Lake. Saint Martins Press even published a couple: *The Tenth Virgin* and *The Zarahemla Vision*. But I hadn't much of gift for narrative detail, nor the committed cynic's eye, and I tired of those, too.

Finally I sat down one day and started a play. It came pretty fast. I directed it as part of the season for the professional summer theater that I produce. I also did a student production. Audiences seemed to really like it, even most of the Mormons. I called it *Daddy's Gone Home to Mother in Heaven*. It was produced in other places, and it did seem genuinely funny in 1985. But when the Salt Lake Acting Company did a reading in 1995, it sounded forced and dated, and I didn't like it much anymore.

My second play, *The Whitehead Family Reunion*, about a clan of contrary Southern Utah polygamists, got significant attention. Actors Theater of Louisville did a reading, and Berkeley Rep staged it. I directed some fine professional actors in a production. But I have mixed feelings now: too derivative, too much in Sam Shepard's backdraft.

Then fifteen years ago I started reading the Bible again—reading it fresh with grown up eyes—and I realized the greatest of the kings and prophets and apostles were complex and often damaged characters, and damn interesting dramatically. And there was God, blessing them in all their strange and dark complexity. I went back to parts of the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants and to Joseph's amazing final sermons, and I began to discover the biblical power and scope there. I was off on something I could claim more as my own.

The next play I wrote was called *Downwinder Dance*. It's about the awful effects of the nuclear tests on the people of southwestern Utah, about a third of whom are my blood relatives. The central character is a young man who's called by an angel to be a prophet and has to figure out just what he's supposed to do. I'd begun to find a voice. Others responded, too. It played at The Kennedy Center. I also directed a professional production with Hollywood actors, and the play was published by Samuel French. I still like that play.

For my next play, *Mary and Joe*, I went to Shakespeare and Beckett and the J Text of the Bible, and I mixed them up with my own neurotic obsessions. The play's kind of perplexing to audiences, but they seem to like it. I like it more than anything I've ever written. I felt I'd almost become a writer I could put up with.

Then this past year, I decided to jump in and grapple with Joseph Smith himself though not at first with a play in mind. I'd been working on a series of monologues and performance pieces—I read one at Sunstone in 2000 about my mission in Great Britain—and I read and reread everything I could about Joseph Smith. For half a year I did that. After three or four months I decided maybe I should try it as a play, so off I went: a plunge into serious rapids.

I figured early on I couldn't put all of Joseph Smith into a single play. Not yet. So I decided to focus on his early years, the "New York" Joseph Smith. One thing that became clear in my readings was that Joseph was, from the beginning, on a serious religious quest. He saw angels and he saw God and he read the Bible in ways nobody else ever did. He squeezed his own exalted mission out of the scriptures and out of the heavenly and human beings he encountered. Another thing that became clear was Joseph had a sharp sense of humor—certainly a sense of fun, mischief, at least a keen sense of irony. And sure, he used magic stones to dig for treasure, and he did tend to mix up his search for God and his search for ancient treasure. And the *Book of Mormon* was a remarkable coming together of these impulses. But it also became clear to me that he felt he had transgressed in serious enough ways to ask God personally for forgiveness. Most of his guilt apparently had to do with his passions, with the company he kept, and with what he described as his light and trifling mind.

All right, I'd made a couple of decisions, so I forged ahead. The first thing was to figure out how to organize the play. What plot would tie all this stuff together? I decided on the fairly obvious and (I thought) rather simple method of writing a series of scenes pairing Joseph with the essential people in his early life, the obvious ones being his mother, his father, Martin, Oliver, David, the Angel, and of course, Emma. As I trolled through early documents, several not-so-obvious figures also interested me: Reverend Lane, Sally Chase, Obediah Dogberry, Luman Walters. I

finished a way too long and seriously overwritten draft in rather a short time, but I cut more than two-thirds of it after I first heard it out loud.

At auditions I found it fairly easy to cast the secondary characters. Each had a clear place in Joseph's life, each had an agenda, a primary objective. But casting Joseph was another matter. At auditions I didn't have anyone who was even close to being able to play Joseph. A character I call "The Actor" explains this dilemma to the audience:

*The Actor*

For the most part each character in the play will be played by one actor. Except for Joseph Smith. In one scene or another Joseph Smith will be played by all the men. The writer is insisting on this because he indicated he wants to capture as many aspects of Joseph Smith as possible. What he really means is that none of us appears to him to have the chops for the role. What about the women? we asked. He says he wants at least one woman as well as the men to play Joseph Smith. . . .When pushed, the writer admits the only actor he knows who could play Joseph Smith adequately is currently in an asylum for the criminally insane somewhere in Pennsylvania.

So I had a second draft of the play, a cast of competent actors, and plenty of rehearsal time, but what I still didn't have was a plot. And I never even got close. What I finally ended up doing was adding material for several narrators, including "The Actor," each of whom embodies one of many possible points of view about Joseph Smith. My favorite is a twelve-year-old girl who approaches Joseph from a rather naïve perspective. Since only Joseph's early life is covered, she gives a rather brief biography of the prophet in the form of a book report:

*The Girl*

Joseph Smith was born December 23, 1805 in Sharon Windsor County Vermont. His mother was Lucy Mack Smith and his father was Joseph Smith, Sr. The Smith family was very poor and they moved around a lot and the mother Lucy Mack Smith worked very hard to support them. As did the six sons and a daughter. And Joseph, Sr., did too, when he was able. Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon in 1830. He translated it from golden plates an angel gave him. He started the church in 1830 and he moved his family and the church to Kirtland, Ohio in 1831 and had many revelations from God which he had people write down. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints grew very fast and gathered all kinds of followers. And there were many miracles and visitations by heavenly beings. And Joseph Smith got interested in many things, including creating a bank, rewriting the Bible, and lead-

ing a military invasion of Missouri. After Joseph Smith did hard time in a Missouri prison, he escaped and led his followers to Nauvoo, Illinois, where they built a great city and became politically very powerful. Joseph Smith continued to receive many revelations from God, which told him, among other things, to be mayor of his city, to be general to his army, to build a temple for ancient ceremonies, to run for president, to crown himself king of God's earthly kingdom, to marry at least ten virgins and lots of other women, and to begin immediate preparations to become a god. He was killed at the age of 38 by people who took exception to most of what God told him to do. There are now pretty statues of Joseph Smith all over Nauvoo and Salt Lake City, Utah, where the Mormons went after Joseph Smith was killed. There are currently over eleven million members of Joseph Smith's church, almost all of whom think he was the most important man who ever lived. With the exception, of course, of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Thank you.

There's also a daffy academic I call "The Psychologist" who utters hopeless nonsense and begins thusly:

*The Psychologist*

In order to fully account for Joseph Smith, one must apply the precise and methodical tools of science. My carefully researched clinical diagnostic conclusion is that Joseph Smith had an acute disease known as severe vainglorious personality disorder.

Then he utters a mouthful of nonsensical jargon, to which The Girl adds:

*The Girl*

Joseph Smith has also been characterized by out-of-joint twentieth century psychologists as an hallucinating epileptic, a delusional paranoid, a manic depressive wacko, a narcissistic fanatic. . .and as just a plain nut case. Thank you.

Then there's the Christian evangelist:

*The Evangelist*

Joseph Smith was a classical humanist atheist. He rejected the one true God of the Bible and in His place proposed an infinite and ever-increasing number of self-made gods who had each once been a man. . . Now brothers and sisters this is doctrine direct from the anti-Christ. And unless you accept the true and evangelically sanc-

tioned Jesus Christ into your hearts, you'll be left in your shoes looking up in pain when the rapture comes.

I developed Joseph Smith's first newspaper critic into the character "Dogberry." After Joseph's encounter with Reverend Lane, he says:

*Dogberry*

You never quite know when this Joe Smith's pullin' your leg.

And there's deeper mischief there. . . .A kind of other-world-jugler-struck-by-God mischief Reverend Lane can't fathom. Hell, I can't figure it. . . .The fellow's got things up his sleeve.

Dogberry further comments after a scene between Joseph and his father:

They're a pair, those two. . . .Wily. Dark. Pokin' fun at things. Slippery like water creatures. And they want your valuables. You see the old man comin', hold on to your watch. You see the son. . .hold on to your faith.

I'm particularly fond of "Blossom," who offers enthusiastic and extravagant encomiums to Joseph Smith.

*Blossom*

I find that most people are quite limited in their assessment of Joseph Smith. Reductionist. They're really working out their own inadequacies. Their resentments. Yes. Resentments. That captures it. Pretty much everyone who attempts to assess Joseph Smith really comes to resent him. He's too much for them. How could he dare such things? How could anybody dare such things? . . .I think Joseph Smith was an authentic religious genius. A man of stature like Moses or Zoroaster or Mohammed or Jesus. An authentic American genius. I'd go so far as to place him alongside Emerson and Whitman as one of three seminal nineteenth century American geniuses.

"Fielding" is fiercely protective of the church's proprietary right to Joseph Smith and particularly annoyed at Blossom:

*Fielding*

It's just nonsense. And it gets my blood boiling. People like you just don't have any right. Joseph Smith is *our* prophet. He belongs to *us*. To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Not to disgruntled psychologists or out of whack Christian evangelicals or Mormon intellectuals or literary critics turned religious dilettantes.

However, a potpourri of narrative riffraff do not a play make. I knew I had a problem when I found the narrators more interesting than the dramatic characters, but I went on anyway, focusing on the supporting characters. I kind of liked Oliver, who's a bit overwhelmed by it all, and Martin Harris, who sees amazing off-the-wall visions. I also wrote a confrontation with Reverend Lane, and I wrote Joseph apprenticing to a flashy Luman Walters. There's also a scene with Sally Chase, who had a white seerstone, and whom I imagined as a source for some of Joseph's guilt about his overheated passions. And I think I captured some important aspects of Emma's early attraction to Joseph:

*Emma*

My father doesn't care for Joseph. Not at all. In fact Joseph makes him very angry. "All that boy does is poke around in the dirt, trying to find some damn Indian treasure." I don't say much. I just nod. You never get far arguing with my father. "And that rock he carries around with him. What's he expect to find with a goddamn rock?" I just smile, occasionally say something impertinent. Which he doesn't care for. He calls me high spirited, my father. And not in a complimentary way. . . .

(Pause)

And he knows I was interested in Joseph from the first. I guess you could say I was. . .feeling things. Despite what people think when they first regard me, I am a woman of some passion. Yes I had my doubts. He didn't seem much of a prospect. He was unschooled. Had appalling grammar. Didn't keep himself clean. Just finishes one dream, he's on to the next. There were all sorts of warning signs.

(Pause)

But when he talks. . .well. . .you just have to listen. You're part of whatever world he's sculpting with his words.

(Pause)

And when he looks at you. . .dear God, that look. . .You're just transfixed by that look. . . .

(Pause)

And. . .and his face. . .it's never the same. That face. Another thought, another look. . . .You couldn't paint that face.

I did make some headway toward my own dramatic understanding of Joseph Smith in some of the scenes I wrote. I think I also began to get a defensible take on Joseph's relationship with his mother.

To explain this, I have to go back the summer of 2001 when I drove to Ohio to spend a weekend with my good friend Don Nigro. Don Nigro is the most important unknown playwright in the United States. There are



Nigro cults all around the world. One clue to his importance is that if you look in the Samuel French play catalog, Don Nigro has more plays currently in print than any other playwright, living or dead. Some people think he's a genius. He's certainly the smartest person I've ever met and one of the best writers. Don and I wrote a draft of a Joseph Smith play twenty years ago. I wanted to call it, *God is My Right Hand Man*. (Most of you know the inference.) Don said that sounded too much like a bad World War II movie, like Dane Clark and Dennis Morgan in *God is My Co-Pilot*. So we never got around to titling it. In fact, we didn't get past a first draft, but during this recent visit, Don and I talked about the play. And near the end of our talk he agreed I really didn't have a Joseph Smith play, but what I might have was a play about his mother, a Lucy Mack Smith play. I don't know. I somehow doubt it. But I did write a Lucy Mack Smith monologue for *The Joseph Smith Project*, which includes a version of her dream—her amazing dream. I played around some with the original, but included much of her wonderful language:

*The Mother*

The first thing you have to know about all this is it's a family matter. It's not about one special emissary being visited by an angel and all by himself bringing the true gospel to a chaotic and unenlightened world. No. This is a visionary family. My father saw lights bright as a fire on a dark night, and in those lights he saw Jesus Christ.

(Pause)

And there's my dream. Where I was carried off to a magnificent meadow to this tree that shone like burnished gold and stood beside a pure clear stream of water. And the tree bent gracefully before the wind, and its branches waved over the stream with happiness and joy. Lively as the dancing of a sunbeam. And I saw the tree was my husband. And he was pliant and flexible and ready to swell gently and recede with the breath of heaven. And it was right after that he began having visions. My husband. Seven God-inspired dreams that led him to the edge of salvation.

(Pause)

But his search just went on and on. And he closed himself up more and more. And I had to conclude he wasn't worthy. . . . So it fell to one of my sons. My fine big sons. . . . You figure, of course, the mantle's gonna fall to the oldest. Alvin, who was building his mother a nice house. But the Lord saw fit to carry Alvin away. Then there was Hyrum. Good, gentle Hyrum. But Hyrum. . . . wasn't really up to it. So I accepted it had to be Joseph. Now I love all my sons. But Joseph just isn't quite. . . . I don't know. Not sober like Alvin or

Hyrum. Always chasing this fancy or that. Off telling stories when there's work to be done. Making no account people laugh. Digging about in the dirt. Getting whiskey for his father. Oh, I enjoy Joseph. I love his stories. He's real entertaining. Joseph. But the family prophet?

In the end, she accepts Joseph and writes lucidly about him. I wrote what I saw as her discovery in the play:

*The Mother*

I have to say he did make me believe. Joseph. It's like he pulled me to my feet and shouted at me to believe. "Ma, I saw this angel. And this angel led me to these golden plates." Golden plates? Well this was something his father couldn't a done. Heavy, real, bright-as-a-sunbeam golden plates. When he told me about the gold plates, I knew he was my son.

The relationship I became particularly interested in was the one between Joseph and his father. I'd never thought much about Joseph Smith, Sr., but I found myself looking everywhere for clues to his character, getting more fascinated with each new discovery. Who was this shadowy figure moving with Joseph through his life? How did he affect his son? Influence him? Seldom is anyone more important than a father in shaping a son's life. I think Joseph and his father were very close. I think there wasn't anyone Joseph was closer to. And the three scenes I wrote with Joseph and his father have a ring of truth, at least to me. In the first, Joseph comes upon Joseph, Sr., in the woods. After some banter he tells his father what he was up to the night before:

*Joseph*

I got us a sheep.

*The Father*

Ya did?

*Joseph*

I'm over at Will Stafford's place. And I put my stone in my hat. "Will, I'm seein' treasure. And this treasure's not five hundred yards from your front door." And he gets this look in his eye. Like he sees I'm seein' things. "A treasure?" "And we'll get that treasure this very night." "We will?" "God as my witness." "Son of a gun, Joe." "Now what we need, Will, is one a yer black sheep." And he don't quite get

it. "Black sheep?" "It's part a the holy ritual, Will." "And what does that do, Joe?" "What that does is prime the treasure. So it's ready to pop out of the ground." "Well, damn!" So Will gets me this prime black sheep and we cut its throat and while it's still struggling we make us a blood circle. And I plant a hazel stick in the center and I put the shovel in his hands and I say, "I know ya got a big night ahead of you here, Will. Better start diggin'." And when he gets all caught up diggin', I take that sheep and slip into the woods. . . and right now ma's dressin' it for dinner.

Now this might not be the way in which Joseph's light and trifling mind worked, but something I haven't yet seen explored is the possible levels on which Joseph saw his use of a seer stone—and maybe much of what he did. His father might not be one of the dubious friends he begged forgiveness for, but it's an interesting possibility. Early in the scene with his father, Joseph brings up serious issues:

*Joseph*

You think there's this fire and brimstone God's got ready for us?  
This anguish and pain and burning hell for ever and ever?

*The Father*

The burning hell that counts is right here. God knows that's awful enough. Dark.

*Joseph*

I have yearnings, you know.

*The Father*

Course ya do. We all have yearnings.

*Joseph*

Real strong sometimes.

*The Father*

God put us here to be happy. To have joy. That's part a havin' joy.  
Now yer mother. . .

(Pause)

Yer mother's always had a burning. I don't find I mind that.

Then Joseph, Sr., has something for his son:

*The Father*

I had another one.

He means he had another dream. While trying to figure out the young Joseph, I found myself going repeatedly back to Joseph, Sr.'s dreams. I can't help but think they were enormously influential in creating the central images through which Joseph understood and created his world. Whatever you believe about how the Book of Mormon came about, the parallels between Lehi's great dream and one of Joseph, Sr.'s dreams is remarkable. And something else about those dreams struck me. In the scene, The Father tells Joseph of a new dream that's not unlike his earlier dreams or visions:

*The Father*

I'm travelin' on and on in this barren and desolate field. And I'm sore and lame and heavy of heart. And I tell the spirit. . .the spirit's there with me again. . . "Hold on, spirit, I just have to sit down and rest." "No, ya gotta keep goin'." So I keep walkin'. And there's this rope I'm supposed to hang on to find the way. And then I'm in the middle of this garden. And there's this wondrous building. And there's a man at the door and I ask if I can go in and he says I can. And inside's this big luxurious room. And in the middle of this room's this altar. And on top of the altar's . . .this box. . .this beautiful chest. And I approach it and this miraculous feeling comes over me. And I reach to open it. And I touch the lid. . . .

(Pause)

And I wake up.

Joseph is so moved that after a long silence between the two characters, he has to change the subject:

*Joseph*

I told Reverend Lane about the toad.

*The Father*

(amused)

He believe the toad?

*Joseph*

He don't seem real comfortable with magic toads.

*The Father*

He thinks we're these crazy conjurers.

*Joseph*

I told him maybe it was the angel.

*The Father*

That must have stumped him.

*Joseph*

He told me I was an evil boy. And I saw so many versions of the truth God's gonna damn me.

*The Father*

Ain't any way they'll figure us out.

There's another long silence, then Joseph gets back to the dream.

*Joseph*

I dream your dreams.

*The Father*

I know you do.

*Joseph*

I won't give up till I taste what's inside that box you dream about. . .

*The Father*

I did taste it. . .once. What was inside.

*Joseph*

Was it sweet?

*The Father*

Sweetest thing I ever. . .tasted.

*Joseph*

(Pause)

I have to taste it.

(Long pause)

*The Father*

And the awfulist. It was the awfulist thing I ever tasted. And I was filled with terror and I woke up in cold sweats.

Joseph keeps looking for that box, and a while later he asks the angel if the box buried in the hill is his father's box. The angel says, "I think it's more *your* box."

Toward the end of the first scene between Joseph and Emma, Joseph brings up something I found extremely interesting, something he seemed to be obsessed with from his earliest writings. It's perhaps the closest thing I could find to what Joseph's character's super objective might be—his intention, his motive, his life mission, the constant that kept him pushing ahead against incomprehensibly impossible odds. He tells Emma:

*Joseph*

When I'm right with God. With people I love. I see the most amazing things. It's like I'm carried past this veil into a world nobody else sees. And it's a marvelous world. Endless in its space. It just goes on and on. And I can wander through lush meadows and vibrant gardens, past immense mysterious trees and into great shining cities. . . .And lately I've been seeing people. People from the beginning of time. People from the end of time. People yearning from all time. . . .and. . .and they want to speak to me. . . .They want. . .they want me to do something for them. . . .

The brother of Jared saw these same multitudes. Lehi saw these same multitudes. Joseph, Sr., saw multitudes. Joseph, Jr., saw multitudes, and he had to do something about it. He had to try to tie all these multitudes together in a great universal vision of salvation. . . .But that's the great play somebody else will write.

As I said earlier, one of the things that stopped me cold on this play is the confusion between Joseph Smith, the dramatic character, and all the personal baggage I brought from my sixty-year dialogue with Joseph. Also, I worry about my qualifications. I think almost everybody who's written about Joseph Smith has somehow or other reduced him,

sometimes into a pretty much flawless Godlike icon, sometimes into a conscious or unconscious charlatan. Or they equate him with twentieth-century church leaders. Or they try to put him into some conceptual box.

That leads me to the real reason I've had to put the play away, to put it down like my father put sick animals down. I frankly enjoy being unsure about Joseph Smith. I don't want to understand his motives, the reasons he did things. Not really. I like the mystery. I like changing my mind about him every few months. I like hearing his voice layered with levels of wit and irony and pain I can't prove and can't adequately write. I just like too much the constant surprise every time I read something he wrote or consider something he did. I like to keep pondering the weird and the shadowy sides of Joseph. Ponder them without giving them form. He's just too interesting to me in his inky mystery. I also want to keep pondering Harold Bloom's odd characterization of Joseph as "a robust American humorist."

Here's a pertinent analogy: I've come to dislike with some passion those critics who attempt to describe Hamlet's dramatic action, to define his major motive, to nail his objective. It's just too reductive. It dumbs down a wondrous and mysterious and enigmatic play.

Like Hamlet, Joseph was a player. He challenged others to see him in different roles. What about all the ways he insisted people see him? What about all those roles he played? All those masks? Look at those masks. Look at that horrifying and compelling final mask: his death mask. What a remarkable character, remarkable in all his complexity and luminosity and holiness and contrariety and strangeness. What an amazing thing someone might someday do, to capture all this in a brilliant theatrical conceit.