Mormons, although a talk or lesson alludes to it once or twice a year. But it does suggest that for some Japanese Saints, at least some elements of the early "believing blood" arguments which Nielson discredits in this history still hold a certain appeal.

Despite my wish for more consideration of social and historical causes for native interest, I find this book to be a remarkable work, striking a fine balance between thoroughness and readability. Nielson provides a welcome bridge between Mormon studies and the wider world of missiology.

Notes

1. Jiro Numano, "Perseverance amid Paradox: The Struggle of the LDS Church in Japan Today," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 140–41.

2. Unit figures in Japan, www.cumorah.com (accessed July 2011); David Stewart, who maintains the Cumorah website, apparently derives these figures from the annual *Church News* for the respective years. My own observations from living in Japan periodically during the last twenty years confirm this stagnation.

3. www.cumorah.com (accessed July 2011), states: "In 2000, there were approximately 1,000 full-time missionaries serving in Japan, 18% of which were native Japanese. By early 2011, the number of full-time missionaries stationed in Japan was nearly half the number assigned in 2000." It cites Don L. Searle, "Japan: Growing Light in the East," *Ensign*, September 2000, 44 note 47.

4. Masao Watabe's series begins with "Nihon no Kiso Minzoku wa Heburai Senmin no Seiei Nari (The Founding Peoples of Japan Were the True Descendants of the Chosen Hebrews)," *Seito no Michi*, August 1961, 460–64. See also Spencer J. Palmer, "Did Christ Visit Japan," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 5 (Winter 1970): 150–58, for an English language summary of some of the theories.

Elder Price Superstar

The Book of Mormon (current Broadway musical)

Reviewed by Michael Hicks

I'll never forget the first time I heard my mother swear. I was in my thirties and had finally decided to talk to her about her second

husband, whom she'd married when I was eleven, divorced two years later, and about whom, as if by a silent contract, we never spoke. "So tell me what was going on in that marriage," I said to her. She bit her lip, paused, then said, "It was really shitty." And that was it. This woman from whose mouth I'd never heard a "hell" or a "damn," a woman who read her *Daily Light* devotional every morning, listened all day to Christian radio, and kept a pocket-size New Testament in her glove compartment, had now, deliberately and with great care, spoken a word I could never imagine escaping her lips. It was one of the great initiations in my life: With one word, I suddenly understood how deeply something must have hurt her. And the tumblers of her life turned for me. Why? Because what she said was exactly the right wrong word.

The Book of Mormon—the musical—is a very public, late-breaking initiation for the Church whose ranks I'd joined a dozen years before that experience. And, like that experience, the swearing in *The Book of Mormon* is what starts the illumination. Because if we know nothing else as Mormons, it's that we live and die by language—the right kind, the wrong kind, God's or the devil's, truth or falsehood, praise or sacrilege, the sacred and the profane. Saying the right thing at the right time is even the pinnacle event of our temple ceremony. Yet if we know nothing else as adult humans (thanks, Mom), it's that sometimes one can only truly understand our species—animal and divine—when one kind of language bleeds into another. We sing in church, "In the quiet heart is hidden / sorrow that the eye can't see."[1] Sometimes the only route to invisible sorrow is to turn up the volume.

And so here is this noisy, heartfelt, touching, gaudy, and weirdly illuminating patchwork of tenderness and blasphemy that dares to go by the name of that most Mormon book: the Book of Mormon. In that regard, this musical is to Mormonism what Bernstein's *Mass* was to Catholicism, a wildly exploitative trope on the faith's core liturgy—though, in this case, without the brilliance of Bernstein. He, after all, knew not only the classical repertoire intimately (think of the Young People's Concerts or the *Omnibus* series on TV), but Broadway (think of *On the Town* and, of course, *West Side Story*). The makers of *The Book of Mormon* weren't raised on Broadway and don't even pretend to understand it. But they

understand perfectly the trans-generic pop into which Broadway has been mutating for decades. They were raised on the music of breakfast commercials, Nick at Nite theme songs, Top Forty radio, and, of course, the second wave of Disney animated movie musicals, from *The Little Mermaid* to *Beauty and the Beast* to *Aladdin* to (especially) *The Lion King*, which *The Book of Mormon* explicitly and implicitly cites and paraphrases. It's those Disney cartoon songfests that not only resurrected Disney's fortunes but helped keep Broadway in the black—the Broadway that keeps reverse-engineering Disney-esque formulas into ticket sales.

More to the point, the makers of *The Book of Mormon* understand Mormon pop culture. If their show's songs sound painfully piecemeal and derivative, that's what perfectly attunes them to Mormon commercial music—its indiscriminacy circumscribed into one great whole: road shows, pageants, Primary songs, *Saturday's Warrior*, Stadium of Fire, Young Ambassadors, Pearl Award-winning albums, etc. What *The Book of Mormon* may lack in Broadway tradition, it more than makes up for in Mormon resonance. Even without the words, the show would feel like a Mormon musical.

But there are words. That's what will vex Mormon viewers the most. If the music is leftover casserole, the lyrics range in flavor from cotton candy to excrement—a hyper-sweet-and-hyper-sour confection spooned up for almost two hours. Latter-day Saints will love the sweet and hate the sour, of course. But if they're anything like the Mormons checkerboarded on the new Times Square "I'm a Mormon" billboard, they will differ on which is which and why.

The show's plot forms a convenient scaffold for the songs. Two mismatched missionaries—one a lithe seminary honor student pre-anointed for success, the other a chunky sci-fi fan trying to please his father—are paired and sent to the blood fields of Uganda. These two, Elder Price and Elder Cunningham, face, on the one hand, a district full of hapless (and baptism-less) elders and, on the other, a village full of foul-mouthed myth-addicted natives, who are trapped in the cyclic fear of warlords and AIDS. In time, a daunted Elder Price leaves for a dream mission in Orlando (more Disney) and Elder Cunningham (a.k.a., Arnold) takes over, inventing doctrine to meet the villagers' needs but refute their

traditions. A penitent Elder Price eventually returns to help, a tide of baptisms ensues, and the villagers create their own Arnold-based Mormon history pageant to perform in front of the mission president. Mortified, he chastises the elders and releases them for disgracing the Church. But the elders refuse to go home. The Lord has called them to Africa, they say, they're helping people, and they've resolved that doing good—doctrine be damned—is the better part of Latter-day Sainthood. And, oh yes, Elder Price recognizes that Elder Cunningham is the real spiritual stud.

The opening songs are the easiest to swallow. "Hello!"—which reimagines *Bye Bye Birdie*'s "Telephone Hour" via the *Brady Bunch* theme—could reasonably be piped into Times Square as the soundtrack for the Mormon billboard. (Its young Mormon, EFY-style diction reaches its apex in the line, "Eternal life is super fun.") Next, "Two by Two" parades the (apparently all-male) Mormon missionary "army" through a seeming tribute to TV game show themes and the title song to *Car 54, Where Are You?* With well-conceived poetic license, the missionaries receive all their assignments (companionships and destinations) as a group at the Missionary Training Center—one of the breaches of fact that have been jeered by faith-defenders who attack the show's "inaccuracy," as if imagination were a sin in the art of fiction.

The third and sixth songs sketch the character of the main companions. "You and Me (But Mostly Me)," sung by Elder Price, satirizes his radical self-esteem and, by extension, Mormon narcissism en masse, that dark sidebar of quasi-Greatest Generation sermonizing in the 1970s-1980s ("God has held you youth in reserve till this time in history") as well as the standard Primary song, "I Am a Child of God" (whose verses and chorus use the words "I," "me," and "my" fifteen times—but never the words "you" or "your"). "I Am Here for You" is Elder Cunningham's response, a plea for emotional intimacy with the Quixote to whom he's been consigned to play Sancho Panza.

As Joseph Campbell was fond of reminding us, every initiation to a higher consciousness must include an ordeal that takes us through the underworld. For the elders in *The Book of Mormon*—and certainly for Mormon viewers—the show provides what I'd call "ordeal overkill": a trilogy of mini-descents strategically placed throughout the musical. The first comes soon after Elders

Price and Cunningham arrive, and the villagers dance and chant their infectious song "Hasa Diga Eebowai," a phrase whose meaning—the ultimate epithet toward God—conveys their default response to current updates of biblical motifs: plagues (now summarized in AIDS), miraculous healing (with the rape of babies as some Ugandans' imagined cure), and circumcision (now of females, not as covenant but as victimization). What jangles in listeners' ears most, though, may not be the singers "cursing God" through profanity, but the musical setting: a mix of jubilant Disney-ethnic styles, equal parts "Under the Sea" (from *Little Mermaid*) and "I Just Can't Wait to Be King" (from *Lion King*).

The elders meet their district of fellow missionaries, who launch into the show's vaudevillian comic gem. "Turn It Off" typifies the comedic style that is one of the Judeo-Christian (but mostly Judeo) tradition's great gifts to the world: It doesn't mock, it just elbows. In this song Elder McKinley explains a "nifty little Mormon trick": "When you start to get confused / because of thoughts in your head, / don't feel those feelings! / Hold them in instead." Some of the other elders give sad (though cheerily delivered) soliloquies about family abuse and personal neglect to which the rest give the antidote for feeling less than gleeful: "Turn it off!" (or as BYU professor Reed Benson used to put it, "Snuff it out!"). When Elder McKinley confesses to fleeting gay fantasies, misunderstandings start to fly as the music (and lighting and choreography) channel-surf their way into a mugging Bugs Bunny-ish promenade (as in "Overture, curtain, lights . . . "), which melts into a chorus line of elders in red-sequined vests. It's the sort of scene that invites laughter, then compels it, as tear-jerking tragedy hardens into the steely resolve of nineteen-year-old missionaries—then cracks.

Soon the preaching begins. "All-American Prophet" fuses *Music-Man*-meets-*Elmer-Gantry* stump preaching and infomercial pitch-man shtick—a cheery confession that the American industries of proselytizing and advertising form a single conglomerate. As Elder Price spins his tale of Mormon origins, his cultural myopia constricts both to the recent past ("Let me take you back to biblical times: 1823"), Malibu looks (Joseph is "the blonde-haired, blue-eyed voice of God") and homeland geography ("He didn't come from the Middle East like those other holy men. No, God's

favorite prophet was All-American!"). Meanwhile, in an upstage backlit tableau, Joseph Smith (who has, we're told, "a little Donny Osmond flair") receives the plates from Moroni on the condition he not show them to anyone, despite the doubt that will create. Moroni explains, "This is sort of what God is going for." (Such was the explanation when I, as a non-Mormon in 1973, first asked friends about the plates' whereabouts: If we had the plates, they said, you wouldn't need faith.) When Joseph dies in another tableau near the song's end, he laments he couldn't show the plates to prove he was telling the truth—till the light dawns in him and he says to God, "I guess that's kinda what You were going for."

As in the Garden of Eden, it is not until a female voice enters the world of testosterone that something truly interesting happens. Here it arrives in the first (and only) solo sung by a woman, the young villager named Nabulungi (the role for which Nikki James rightly won a Tony Award). In "Sal Tlay Ka Siti" (i.e., "Salt Lake City") she fantasizes about how life would be in the promised land of "Ooh-tah," a place where "the warlords are friendly" and "flies don't bite your eyeballs," a heaven she can have "if I only follow that white boy." The most relentlessly serious song in the entire show, "Sal Tlay Ka Siti" draws the audience into a vision of plenty that most theater-goers long since have taken for granted: "a Red Cross on every corner with all the flour you can eat," "vitamin injections by the case," and "people [who] are open-minded and don't care who you've been." Still, she sings, "All I hope is that when I find it, I'm able to fit in." It's a stock pop ballad, yes. But if there were a machine that manufactured compassion, this is what it would sound like. And you'll understand why I choke up every time I hear the final lines: "I'm on way—soon life won't be so shitty. / Now salvation has a name: Sal Tlay Ka Siti."

When it comes time for Elder Arnold Cunningham to take up the mantle of the runaway Elder Price, he updates the catchphrase "What would Jesus do?" into "What *did* Jesus do?" then answers with a cliché from the 2010 campaign: Jesus "manned up." Arnold's solo "Man Up" offers a hard rock soliloquy (with hints of the *Greatest American Hero* TV theme) in which he gins up his courage with muttering that ranges from gender stereotypes (Jesus didn't "scream like a girl") to bodily fluid jokes ("I'm gonna man up all over myself"). Along the way, he metamorphoses from

a kind of dancing teddy bear to a Motown exec wearing shades—but one who can improvise bizarre doctrine to solve tribal problems (leading to the stuttering chorus "You're making things up again, Arnold!")

And then, the second descent into the underworld. It happens when the now-confessional Elder Price goes through a "Spooky Mormon Hell Dream," whose minor-key distorted guitar lines and growling background chorus present a Black Sabbath-style parody of the (creepy) doctrine of James the Apostle: "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). A quasi-Homeric catalogue of wicked characters appears, announcing themselves and reviewing their crimes to the next condemned man, Elder Price. Hitler: "I started a war, and killed millions of Jews!" Genghis Khan: "I slaughtered the Chinese!" Jeffrey Dahmer: "I stabbed a guy and [bleeped] his corpse!" In his self-flagellatory state, Elder Price answers: "You think that's bad? I broke rule 72!" The grandly produced spectacle ends with one more nod to *A Chorus Line*, the perfect Broadway source for a parade in the Plutonian realm.

"Spooky Mormon Hell Dream" provides the underworld from which a transformed Elder Price climbs back, resurrected into heroic stature (and voice). His solo "I Believe" is the unquestioned showstopper, a pseudo-Articles of Faith in which "line upon line" Elder Price lays out a credo of blasé truisms ("I believe that God has a plan for all of us") answered by jarring untenabilities, which culminate in "I believe that the Garden of Eden was in Jackson County, Missouri," the ultimate "all-American" revisionism that Joseph Smith espoused. Price's personal branding of the Mormon message is now clear: Sense be damned, belief has power. He moves from the scrap yard of his theology to pillaresque affirmation, telling a gun-belted warlord (before he dances with him): "I believe that Satan has a hold on you. I believe that the Lord God has sent me here. And I believe that in 1978 God changed his mind about black people." This is one of the more glorious moments in recent theater: howling at absurdity as the light-bulb of epiphany flicks on. Elder Price's mantra becomes: "a Mormon just believes" ("dang it!"). And our Thirteenth Article of Faith confirms it: "We believe all things," it says, with no exclusions offered.

Still, it's not so much the content as the assertion. One thinks of Norfolk's question to Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons*: "You'll forfeit all you've got . . . for a theory?" To which More replies: "Why, it's a theory, yes. . . . But what matters to me is not whether it's true or not but that I believe it to be true, or rather, not that I *believe* it, but that *I* believe it."[2] For More, as for Elder Price, narcissism matures into faith. As if to validate that transformation in "I Believe," each chorus begins by setting the words "I am a Mormon" to the five notes of the opening fanfare for the Hill Cumorah Pageant, the annual commemoration of Joseph's excavating the plates.

Price's "new song" works. Villagers want to be baptized, including Nabulungi, with whom Elder Cunningham performs an innuendo-filled soul duet ("Baptize Me") in the tradition of Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell, Peaches and Herb, and the Lionel Richie and Diana Ross of "Endless Love." If the music is unmemorable, the concept works, nicely showing off the patina of eros that sometimes sticks to ordinances that chaste men perform on chaste women. The song, which trumps the "boys' club" feel of the mission home, may seem crude in its pseudo-sexual teasing. But it reminds us that spiritual transactions carried out bodily between genders often feel like flirtation. (One may discern the physical-spiritual nexus in the phrase "the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost." And, let's face it, the term "missionary position" had to come from somewhere.)

A flood of baptisms leads to the pseudo-national anthem "I Am Africa"—the "We Are the World" of the show. The elders surrender to their success and, one by one, declare—not that "I am a Mormon" (as earlier) or "I am a Latter-day Saint" (which comes later)—but simply "I am Africa," each missionary self-identifying with that continent's weather, landscape, people, and animals (including "the noble Lion King"). Though one of the most heartfelt songs in the show, it gets plenty of laughs. The scene suggests that atonement for decades of Mormon race discrimination might be recompensed by adolescent bravado. The missionaries' spiritual imperialism jars with Nabulungi's yearning; she wonders how she'll fit in, while they simply gobble up the terrain ("Africans are African, but we are Africa"—with the latter two syllables separated from the "A" to make it sound like a cognate of "frickin'"). The Book of

Mormon (the book) contains a subplot (or "contained"— it's been scrubbed out of recent editions) in which white people turn dark and vice versa; *The Book of Mormon* has the same subplot, now transposed to East Africa. It's even more awkward now than in 1830.

The skyrocketing baptismal stats lead to the final ordeal—for the audience more than any of the characters: "Joseph Smith, American Moses," a Mormon history pageant that torques itself into a quasi-reprise of "Hasa Diga Eebowai" tangled with "Making Things Up Again." Performed for the mission president by the villagers, the cute tribal beatitude in music, dance, and costume almost instantly twists into a messy disgorgement of the villagers' magic worldview, now boxed and tied up with Arnold's well-meant lies. We (and the president) are forced to undergo surreal clashes of imagery, most of them gynecological or gastrointestinal (though all in one-syllable words). God stops Joseph Smith from raping a baby and gives him a frog as a substitute; God curses Brigham Young by turning his nose into a clitoris; a plague of dysentery fells Joseph (as if the chanted scatology of its description would not have done it more quickly), etc. The viewer can't "turn it off," must endure it to the (literally) bitter end. It is a catharsis that is to *The Book of Mormon* what the meltdown of the celebrant is to Bernstein's *Mass*—a soliloquy whose refrain is: "How easily things get broken." Here, though, the language continually dances with obscenity. The effect on the audience is almost chiropractic.

So what, in the end, amid their seeming contempt, do the villagers prize in the hopelessly vulgarized Book of Mormon? Hope. The book is a doorstop against warlords and a doorway to a promised land where all their day-to-day pain will be soothed. Isn't that enough?

And that becomes the real Mormon message in the show. All creeds collapse into personal feelings. But Jesus was a behaviorist. I like to think of Jimmy in David Mamet's production of *The Untouchables*. Whenever a need arises, top G-man Elliott Ness quotes the law-enforcement handbook, to which Jimmy always asks, "But what are you prepared to *do*?" That's what lovers (and haters) of religiosity have to keep asking themselves, not just "What would Jesus do?" but "What are you prepared to do?" And not even "What did Jesus do?" as Elder Cunningham asked, but "What have you done?" I

think of another cinematic scene, this one from *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. In this scene, Randall McMurphy bets his fellow psych-ward patients/inmates that he can pull the marble bathroom fixture off the floor, throw it through the window, and free them all. They laugh and jeer him on. He grabs the fixture's sides, pulls and pulls until, out of breath, his face flushed like a beet, he gives up. As they mock him, he glares at them and says, "But I tried, didn't I? . . . At least I did that."[3]

The makers of this musical celebrate Mormons because, dang it, at least they try—and indeed, try to do something that, as Elder Price says at the outset, will "blow God's freakin' mind." To do that, one has to move—as the musical's finale does— from "I am a Mormon" or "I am Africa" to "I am a Latter-day Saint," with "latter-day" not meaning "pre-apocalyptic" but "the day after this one." "The only latter-day that matters is tomorrow," the finale exhorts. Pray and work for that day, it says, that "full of joy and all-the-things-that-matter day." It's the gospel ("good news") restored indeed. The implicit message is: (1) the Old Testament is now, (2) the New Testament is tomorrow, and (3) The Book of Mormon—the show or, especially, its namesake—should be a hinge from one to the other. "We are still Latter-day Saints, all of us," Elder Price explains (after the elders have refused to go home in disgrace), "even if we change some things, or we break the rules, or we have complete doubt that God exists. We can still all work together and make this our paradise planet." Or, to put it as Joseph Smith so memorably did: "If we go to hell, we will turn the devils out of doors and make a heaven of it."[4]

As on most construction sites, language can be initiatory. But as I learned from my mom, profanity sometimes cuts a path to a truth you couldn't arrive at without it. She taught me—involuntarily, I'm sure—that sometimes cursing is the most honest speech, even though the ordeal of it can be severe. Questions arise, like a stinking Lazarus from the tomb. Can one be that honest? Can profanity be sanctified by the imagination if it's to help people to a higher consciousness? Is there an audible line between the primal and the celestial? And there are the more practical questions: What is the relevance of fastidious truth-telling that doesn't save good people? (Think of Oskar Schindler.) And what is the value of propriety if it is its own reward? (Think of Jesus.)

I think that most Latter-day Saints, especially the ones on the billboard, are learning that truth (big "T" or little "t") is more than accuracy and niceness. It is, rather, what this musical so ferociously asserts about its alleged targets: "They tried, didn't they? At least they did that." Some Mormons feel stung by the show. But *The Book of Mormon* scolds no one so much as those who dismiss Mormon zeal. So I savor this public ordeal-fest, however gritty it feels on the tongue. Because, I believe, this is sort of what God is going for.

Notes

1. Susan Evans McCloud, "Lord, I Would Follow Thee," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), No. 220, quotation from verse 2.

2. Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons: A Play in Two Acts* (New York: Random House, 1962), 91.

3. *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Fantasy Films, 1975), 37:30–39:10. Copy in my possession.

4. In Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964 printing), 5:517.