

# A New Mormon Theatre

LAEL J. WOODBURY\*

We have never discovered art forms derived from and uniquely pertinent to Mormonism. Despite the axiom that a singular philosophy will generate indigenous art, we still produce neither new musical or graphic modes nor new conceptions of theatrical presentation. Rather, we try within existing forms to articulate those values which distinguish us.

Art representing those values will be affirmative, or life enhancing; illustrative of the eternal character of life, personality, and matter; an optimistic celebration of the joy of life and the goodness of the sons of God. These concepts inform our total perception.

Other more specific possible themes are: man's salvation was purchased by Jesus Christ; man is a sublime-divine creature; there must be opposition in all things; man is that he might have joy; the universe manifests a concept of eternal progression; man's exaltation derives from his ancestry and posterity as well as from his own acts.

Significantly, of present art forms only music expresses these values well. It is essentially affirmative. It epitomizes order, is typically cyclic, illustrates opposition and resolution, and depicts progression in model form.

Small wonder, then, that music is the art form most acceptable to the Church. Music is a part of every meeting we hold. The Tabernacle Choir is the single art-making unit which the Church regularly supports and promotes. We do foster graphics in temples and information centers, present pageants, roadshows, and other events such as speech festivals, but we promote no artistic activity having the same status and frequency as music.

---

\*Dr. Woodbury is professor of dramatic arts and chairman of the Department of Speech and Dramatic Arts at Brigham Young University. He was formerly director of the experimental theater at Bowling Green University.

Now this fact illustrates a paradox. We are an artistically conservative people who seldom produce or purchase art in modern forms. Our information centers depict only realistic styles of graphic art, and we publish only conventional literature. Even our Church and private architecture is conventional, as conventional as the paintings we display there. In truth, there is no regular encouragement within our culture for modern abstraction, whether graphic, theatrical, or literary.

Yet music, our most acceptable art, is the most abstract art.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, pure music—without words—is wholly abstract, consisting only of sounds structured by quality and time. How strange the paradox of a culture which encourages artistic realism finding its values best expressed in music, of all arts the least realistic!

Perhaps music is most acceptable because, being abstract, it expresses the ideal which is the very essence of Mormonism. The literal detracts from Mormon thought. That is, we are more interested in man's relationship to God, the ideal, than we are in man's relationship to his environment or even to other men, the particular.

For theatre, this fact has profound meaning, for Aristotle defined tragedy as the "imitation of a [human] action." But it is the realistic depiction of human actions—the most human of actions—which is most deplored. For us the theatre is not a proper instrument for depicting aberrant behavior, sexual deviation, or even a forum for discussion of political and social innovation. We do not look to the theatre for instruction about real life.

Yet the very nature of conventional dramatic structure requires conflict, an artistic device which is unacceptable to LDS audiences even when the playwright aims for life-enhancement or affirmation. *Life with Father*, for example, is a conventional drama about a father who loves his family and who, in this sense, depicts an important LDS ideal. The play's comic device, however, derives from his reluctance to be baptized, and so, of course, it can offend LDS audiences. *Death of a Salesman* is a superlative drama about a man's relationship to his sons within America's economic system. These problems

---

<sup>1</sup>I use the term abstract here to describe that which is not literal, realistic, photographic, concrete, or particular. To abstract meant originally to define design elements, but the term now describes that which is ideal, essential, the non-objective.

need to be explored. The conflict which structures the play, however, springs from the father's adultery and, therefore, it is unthinkable that the play might be staged in a cultural hall.

The point I mean to emphasize here is that conventional dramatic structure is fundamentally unsuitable for Mormon art, and that, despite our apparent aversion to abstraction, such an indigenous art must closely parallel musical structure.

Let's consider music again, for its example suggests other useful forms. When we attend a symphonic concert, we find that sounds, artfully arranged, somehow direct us toward spiritual values. We are not asked to discover those concepts by observing actions. The sounds we hear do not symbolize love, hate, envy, or human relationships and attitudes. The sounds mean exactly what they are, sounds artfully structured into interesting and beautiful relationships, but the perceiving of those relationships generates spiritual awareness.

Music typically consists of individual sounds arranged so as to produce an aural statement which is lead into convolutions from which the statement again emerges. In the process certain parallels between music and Mormon philosophy are obvious. How often music illustrates the awesome tension which unifies the solar system. How often in music we discover the cyclic patterns, described in Ecclesiastes, which parallel the timelessness of eternity. How often music, by juxtaposing and resolving conflicting themes, illustrates the positive principle of opposition in all things.

We now have the technology and the artistic climate with which to create comparably in theatre. Unlike traditional theatre where voice (language) and movement were the most useful ways by which the dramatic artist could appeal to his audience, we now enjoy a theatrical machine so versatile as to permit almost complete control of all audience perception. We can manipulate temperature, texture, odor, audience-actor proximity, and aural stimuli; and we can, through the manipulation of light, absolutely compel the audience to see what we want it to see.

We can, for example, lead the audience through a series of light or sound experiences and suppress all other stimuli so as to focus perception. We can do with color what Beethoven did with sound. His Fifth Symphony leads a rhythmic pattern—di-di-di-dum—through variations of form and quality.

In today's theatre we can do the same with color. It is possible through the use of light and fabrics and forms, for example, to explore the entire range of the blue portion of the spectrum, examining its chroma, its hues, and seeing how they appear when placed on objects such as metallic cloth, sawdust, the human form, aluminum sculptures, and wooden cubes. We can create a color statement, and then, following Beethoven's example, lead it through a complexity of variations and counter-colors—a color symphony. The purpose of this exercise would be to stimulate a new appreciation for the variety, magnitude, and beauty of God's gift of color and its perception.

Perhaps more easily appreciated would be a production derived from a minute examination of the constructs of matter. That is, the micro-world is marvelously ingenious and ordered, characterized, in some instances, by intense color, symmetry of form, and complex relationships. These qualities abound in living cells, snowflakes, the eyes of insects, the bee's honeycomb, the color and structure of flowers, and similar minutiae.

Now we agreed earlier that music does not mean, it is. We hear not concepts, but sounds. In that same sense, these constructs of matter do not mean, they are. A photograph of a fly's eye need not even mean a fly's eye, it is simply a photograph of a symmetrical pattern. When enlarged or projected it will depict a pleasing orderliness instructive of the Mormon concept of the universe. It appears, then, that our unique art will consist of depicting that which is for what it is—the beauty and wondrous harmony of the fundamental elements of God's world. The Mormon artist, because of his unique knowledge of God's glory, and the significance of man and the universe, will discover the elements representative of these concepts and present them in interesting and relevant forms.

The technique is not unlike that of certain poets who make a minute examination of common phenomena, and who there discover patterns and meanings of larger significance. Consider, for example, this excerpt from "A Basin of Eggs," by May Swenson:

Their cheeks touching,  
their cheeks being  
their bellies, their  
bellies being undimpled,  
dimples of dark being  
blue chinks between  
their touchings— .

Here the artist directs our attention to unobserved relationships by following poetry's conventional practice of juxtaposing verbal images. That is, after all, what a poem is—a collection of images. And we can create a poetry of the theatre by juxtaposing visual or aural or other sense images which will generate within us the same new perception which poetry produces.

The parallel between language poems and theatre poems is important. With language we create verbal images in time designed to give the reader or listener the experience of the informing stimulus. The poet who describes a tree begins by likening its pattern of light to those of a painting, its form to that of a fountain, its texture to that of a tapestry, and he concludes with generalizations about the tree as an object of beauty, grandeur, and endurance. The tree, a space object, is explored by the poet as images in time.

The aim, I repeat, is to give the reader a richer experience of the tree. We may look at it, but its beauty of form, or its texture, or its status as a symbol of enduring life will escape us. The poet directs our attention to hidden dimensions of the tree's meaning.

In theatre, with its myriad resources for controlling perception, we will create theatre poems which posit in time images which otherwise escape the audience. One theatre poem might lead an audience to experience the qualities which characterize Woman. Why? Because Woman, as a potential priestess and goddess, is the means of God's glory. She shares, according to our doctrine, a more exalted destiny than is promised by any other philosophy. She is loved, revered, made fruitful, and glorified. Thus Mormon philosophy encourages Woman as an appropriate theme for a theatre poem, because the poem gives the spectator a more comprehensive perception of what Woman is.

Woman is soft. This value can be made concrete by soft sounds, or by soft movements. Or, as has been done, the room itself can be lined and floored with plastic surface giving a warm and pleasing tactile experience.

Woman is scent. The poet likens her verbally to flowers, shrubs, spring breezes, and other pleasant odors, but these are word-pictures describing what she is thought to be, not concrete expressions of what she actually is. The Japanese, to heighten their own sensitivity and to acquire the maximum experience

of odor's beauty, sometimes hold "scent-perception" events at which pieces of pungent wood, elaborately wrapped, are slowly passed from one to another. The participant enjoys the double pleasure of the artistic wrapping as well as the object's scent. Since we are reconstructing traditional concepts of the theatrical art, why not use this and other techniques when appropriate? It is technologically possible to diffuse scents throughout a theatre.

Woman is curved. This quality, too, can be conveyed by dancers moving in curved patterns, by projections of curved linear forms, by abstract colored images which move gracefully in imitation of woman's walk or body.

Woman speaks softly. Her voice is warm, lush, and rich. Each of these qualities can be represented as projected color, as projected images, or as movement patterns. The values of her voice can be represented sequentially as intoned sound-images created by a living female chorus or by traditional musical sounds.

An interesting experience, for example, one now common in experimental theatre, is to have an actress speak into an electronic device which projects a color equivalent of the rate, force, and quality of the voice onto a screen, thus objectifying or making visual the unique characteristics of her voice. Such a device was placed in a well outside the palace for a performance of *Oedipus Rex*. During the emotional moments of his role, the king approached the well and spoke above it with the result that the personal qualities of his voice and feelings were projected on the theatrical cyclorama behind him as kaleidoscopic colors which were exact replicas in light of the sounds he made.

The notion we must first dispel is that a theatrical experience to be valid must depict an action having a beginning, middle, and an end, as Aristotle prescribed. Man is God's noblest creation. He is much more than a personality caught between the first and third level of existence. Man is complex architecture, he is grace of movement, beauty and form, an efficient machine, a spectrum of color, a musical instrument, an alert and responsive organism. Each of these qualities can be represented as visual or aural images simultaneously, as in a panoramic view, and, when necessary, time can be suspended to permit a leisurely sequential examination of each image.

An interesting example of timeless, sequential, man-movement might consist of an actor representing the human experience of death. He might, of course, simply collapse as in traditional theatre. But he also could take the time necessary to depict the inexorable course of death through the body, showing its impact upon an arm, leg, the head, the neck, a second arm, and, eventually, the moment of absolute death which occurs, presumably, in the heart or brain. He might require twenty minutes to present that experience in much the same way that an operatic tenor does when he sings a closing aria concluding with a burst of energy despite his having been mortally wounded.

Another helpful concept is the concrete metaphor. We are so conditioned to the premise that the theatre depicts action that we find it difficult to accept a theatre of ideas made concrete. In *The Bald Soprano*, playwright Eugene Ionesco demonstrated the banality of social conversation instead of merely depicting an action in which people seem to communicate, but who become misinformed and, therefore, elect unhappy actions. He made his idea concrete by presenting people who moved in everyday action, such as those observed at a tea party, but he gave them nonsense lines to deliver—vowel sounds, slogans, and cliché expressions so that the audience knew the characters believed they were saying intelligent things to each other but that they exchanged no meaningful information. His belief that modern man does not communicate was thus made concrete, was represented literally. In *Waiting for Godot* the idea that man is waiting endlessly for he knows not what is made concrete by a group of actors in a timeless place who discuss endlessly the enigma for whom they wait, although they do not know who he is or why they are there.

Several plays suggest the great transformation that awaits us when resurrected, but I never saw the idea expressed more concretely than in an exercise in which the characters performed briefly wearing plastic skins over leotards. Later and as part of movements done in very slow motion, they removed the skins which blurred their action, their freedom, and their vision. After their encumbrances were discarded they discovered the beauty of their form, their surroundings, and an elated feeling of liberation.

The Latter-day Saint concept that there must be opposition in all things is, to me, one of the most potentially fruitful con-

cepts for theatrical production. We believe that all matter and personality are rightfully and delicately poised between dynamic, opposing forces, and that out of this crucible of conflict, new forces and refined personalities arise. This idea will be expressed in concrete form by movements which conflict and then merge in new sophisticated patterns, by sounds which initially conflict but which merge so as to create richer, more complex sounds, by uncomplimentary colors which, when manipulated, merge and create new, more beautiful colors.

Envision a pattern of four fabrics placed in the center of a stage upon which light of varying colors and intensities is focused. The patterns and textures of the fabrics reflect various qualities and forms, but as they are manipulated—as an intense magenta light is reflected from aluminum, from beige silk, from green cotton, from metallic brocade, from plastic-surfaced modern fabrics, from vinyl, and from textured wool—we see directly demonstrated the axiom that there must be opposition in order to create beauty, vitality, even resurrected, glorified men.

At Brigham Young University we have begun serious experimentation in theatre poetry. In the 1968 theatre season, we produced *An Evening of Unconventional Theatre* which was a conscious attempt to implement these principles. The evening began with an effort to heighten appreciation for form and color. As I have noted, in some cultures—particularly the Japanese—objects are appreciated as much for their form as for their use. The packaging of a present is as important as the object, and the recipient is expected to enjoy the unwrapping of the package—savoring the effect of light upon color and form and the intricacy of the wrapper's technique.

Our production began with a play of light upon cubes, triangles, and cylinders, and this experience was intensified by a slow and ritualistic unwrapping of layers of packaging. The layers consisted of various colors of fabrics, and when each layer was unwrapped, the lights changed in an attempt to create a medley of orange, magenta, red, green, blue, cerise, and white so as to create contrast and tension of color and to heighten the visual appeal of each layer of wrapping. When the packages were finally unwrapped, they contained blocks of cedar and other aromatic woods which were passed among the audience so that they could enjoy the aroma—the precious aroma of some of God's creation intended, as I believe, for the

pleasure and aesthetic sensitizing of his children. Later in the evening we analyzed sequentially the beauty and the complexity of quality and rhythm which reside in the single sound emitted by one bowed violin string. The sound was first established, then it was given rhythm. We aimed to fragment time—to explore with a sequence of images all that is present in one aspect of God's creation. Eventually sound was transformed into simple music, then into complex musical patterns which resulted in a song, then into the human voice reciting a poetic narrative, then into the soft sounds of the sea. Ultimately, all of these qualities found within the original source of sound were created visually by a corps of dancers which we then illuminated in pools or deeper color. All of these images are implicit within a sound of a bowed violin string! I could not restrain a feeling of awe as I contemplated the beauty, richness, and complexity of God's creation when he gave us the gift of a single sound.

Lest the audience think us pretentious, we staged a humorous silent movie under a flickering strobe light which was highly popular, but we used the exercise as a means of freezing movement and demonstrated its effect upon a girl-figure which exercised upon a trampoline wheeled into the center of the stage. Thus we gained a new appreciation for the human form in motion, and for the gift of light which permits us to perceive relationships, color, and beauty of form.

We also created a screen and light dance in which we used four slide projectors and two movie projectors simultaneously to surround the audience with sound, moving pictures, and intense color patterns. This event began with a single figure in the darkened arena lighting a candle in the center of the floor. We then watched an elaborate display of light, color, sound, and movement as it grew in intensity and complexity until it achieved a climax, after which it was systematically reduced until only the candle remained alone on the stage. Finally a lone figure moved slowly to it and blew it out to the final strains of music. The experience was moving, designed to impress upon the audience in a very concrete and literal way the infinite dimensions of light, sound, and movement, and their perception.

I do not believe the audience must leave the theatre totally aware of the ideas which informed the selections. It is not necessary to say when leaving, "Tonight we saw Woman or

heard sound or saw light," because we perceive these elements, however poorly, without the artist's help. The aim of the artist is to bring the audience to a new awareness of the meaning and range of his surroundings, to make him appreciative of God's gifts to acknowledge that the world is beautiful, is good, is stimulating, and has order. And if this world contains these elements, then the next dimension of existence occurs where these qualities are even more abundant.

Today's theatre is, in my opinion, the superlative place to teach these concepts to our own culture and to the world. Its organic purpose is to make concepts concrete. Properly understood and used, theatre performs the function Brigham Young envisioned when he described it as the foremost civilizing instrument.