Mormonism and the Commercial Theatre

LAEL J. WOODBURY*

"Polygamy is an attempt to get more out of life than there is in it," said actress Mary Shaw in a curtain speech at the New York Playhouse following the opening performance of *Polygamy Or A Celestial Marriage,* on 1 December 1914. Written by Harriet Ford and Harvey O'Higgins, and "Founded on the Mormons' Secret Practices," the play was a scurrilous attack upon The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It epitomized the commercial world's practice of depicting in art only the most sensational aspects of Mormonism.

At the same time, however, art—a metaphor for thought and feeling—documents how much society's attitude has changed in the last fifty years. Particularly, do the voiced language and lifelike action of theatre present especially clear evidence of those changes; and it is possible there to trace the evolution, from rejection to respect, of the nation's posture toward the Church.

Polygamy was not the first play about Mormonism; a number of turn-of-the-century dramatists exploited its troubled history. Several scenes in *An Aztec Romance,* presented at the Manhattan Opera House early in the century, treated Mormon themes. *The Girl From Utah* was essentially a romantic melodrama which did not even attempt to analyze the Church or its problems. *The Danites,* written by Joaquin Miller for actor McKee Rankin, depicted the Mormons' alleged thirst for vengeance against those who had abused them. An effective drama, it was popular for several seasons. De Wolf Hopper briefly

*Dr. Woodbury is assistant dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communications, Brigham Young University. A recipient of the Karl G. Maeser Creative Arts Award from BYU, he has lectured and published extensively on the theatre and its history.

turned the humorous possibilities of polygamy to his profit in *One Hundred Wives,* a comedy written by William Young; but the production did not endure.

It was, however, the 1914-15 production of *Polygamy,* a well-mounted, well-acted major Broadway production, that summarized America's prevailing negative view of Mormonism and in turn, no doubt, reinforced and confirmed that view. On the other hand, its hostility was so intense, its structure so flamboyant, and its charges so inflated, that it very likely served the Church to some extent by inviting rational minds to take an objective look at Mormonism's real history and doctrine.

Polygamy presents the thesis that, a quarter-century after the eschewal of the plural marriage doctrine, the Church still regarded polygamy as a divine institution and command which it vigorously enforced in secret, while its wealth was used subversively to control state and national legislation.

The plot is complex. It depicts Daniel Whitman and Zina, his wife, who are devoted to each other and to the Church. Zina's brother, Brigham Kemball, is an apostate who openly defies the Church and its supposed hypocrisy and who loves Annie Grey, a young lady who was compelled by the Church to marry an elderly apostle. Against the backdrop of a power struggle within the Church hierarchy, and Brigham Kemball's taunts that polygamy is still practiced by the Church in spite of statements to the outside world that it is not, Annie—now a widow—is ordered by the prophet to marry Zina's husband, Daniel. Daniel and Zina despair at this order, but fearing the financial ruin of her husband by the Church, and her separation from him in the next world if she refuses, Zina gives her consent.

Annie and Daniel are married but agree not to live together; but Annie can find no other shelter in Salt Lake City. It is emphasized to her that polygamy must be *lived;* it is not merely a nominal sealing. Annie runs away, but is brought back by an apostle's first and oldest wife, Bathsheba, a practical woman and a shrewd politician who observes that there is no way out for Annie because "all men are naturally polygamists." But, seeing the despair of Annie, Bathsheba gives her savings of twenty years to the apostate Brigham Kemball so that he can escape with Annie from their persecutors.

The play's style is highly melodramatic. One critical scene ends when, after the marriage, Zina approaches the closed bedroom door and, thinking Dan and Annie are within, falls shuddering to the floor. The production's climactic scene occurs in the temple when the apostle is confronted by his wife, Bathsheba, who turns on him and threatens to appear before the Council of the Twelve and accuse him of breaking his oath as an apostle and plotting to succeed the Prophet if he does not let Annie and Brigham go.

The play had impact in precisely the way the authors intended. In an unidentified 1915 newspaper clipping in the New York Public Library, Dr. Frank Crane wrote, after seeing the play:

> A great passion that once showed itself in terms of religion, of intense moral conviction aroused by superstition, has turned into a fearful system, hardened into an organization which, to save men's souls in the mass, crushes them one by one. . . . The American people have rather lost interest in the Mormons. Most of us think that they are no longer active, no longer a menace, and that their peculiar practice of polygamy has ceased. The only change, however, is that from being poor and defiant they have become rich and crafty. They have learned the devious ways of the corporation. They know how to crush and kill without getting the blood all over their cuffs.

Although polygamy formed the main subject of the drama, a second indictment was that the Church had become a ruthless power successfully compromising the financial and political interests of the nation. Even Dr. Crane was astonished at the magnitude of that thesis:

> And who can believe that polygamy is today a compact organization, with unlimited funds, controlling eastern banks, maintaining an active lobby at Washington, pushing its tentacles everywhere by subtlest politics, and holding in its iron grip devoted women whose sublime faith lifts them from heartbreak to loyalty, and men who move as surely and as secretly as the agents of the Spanish Inquisition or of the Council of Ten in Venice.

Equally defaming was the playwright's characterization of the Church as a "national Frankenstein" and his charge that he could not get conventional financial backing for production of the play because managers told him that "the Mormon Church would ruin them financially if they put such an expo-

sure on the stage. We had to organize an anonymous producing company whose assets could not be uncovered and destroyed."

An unidentified reviewer in *The New York Post* of 2 December 1914 related a scene that purports to take place in the Salt Lake Temple: "It appears that the Prophet, seated on his throne in the Temple, not only exercises an illimitable despotism over the families of all the saints and the apostles themselves, but, like some imperial chancellor, receives the reports of his diplomatic agents from all parts of the United States and the civilized world, and issues mandates which statesmen and financiers, at home and abroad, must obey if they would avoid defeat or ruin." The reviewer found this scene and its suggestion thoroughly unbelievable, however, and observed that "the affairs and aims of Mormondom are not altogether a closed book to the intelligent public, and nothing can be gained by making them the subjects of grotesque misrepresentation."

It is apparent that *Polygamy* was not entirely successful as anti-Church propaganda. Despite its handsome production and its manifest intent to persuade the audience that the play portrayed Mormonism's actual practice, other reviewers expressed reservations about its structure and its logic. Inasmuch as Brigham Kemball and Annie resolved their problem simply by leaving Utah, the question was raised why they did not "escape" at the beginning of their conflict rather than afterward. Hector Turnbull, writing in *The New York Tribune* of 2 December 1914 observed:

> Like most plays, however, that are built primarily to expose an evil practice or a social sore, the dramatic value of the work suffers somewhat from the eagerness of the authors to bring home their message. An elaborate web is built around the central figures in rebellion, and after it has been shown in all its menacing impregnability for three acts which are sometimes tense and always interesting, the play ends with the rebellious characters freed, to love and be happy by the simplest of devices—escape. Which method, of course, with all the material and religious sacrifices it entails, has always been the refuge of people who found their adopted faith to become incompatible with a stronger human love. Such an ending to so engrossing a situation cannot fail to cause a let down in the interest of the audience and therefore weakened the effect of the entire play, and all the shrewd and clever observations on conditions made by the authors throughout the

> course of their arraignment of the Mormons. One would infinitely rather forego the Conventional "happy" ending to so unusual a work than see its force tempered by such a commonplace expedient.

The New York Journal of the same date observed: "It somehow reminds one of the old story of the wretched prisoner who pined in solitary misery in a solitary cell for twenty years until one day when he had a happy inspiration, opened the door, and walked out. The whole play is more or less in the nature of a childish bugaboo."

Such criticism apparently motivated one of the authors, Harvey O'Higgins, to defend his play before The Drama Society of New York. There he gave a romanticized description of his encountering a man having a "most remarkably dead face." The man was "short, portly, erect, and dignified with a head of white hair like Mark Twain's." "His face," said O'Higgins, "was absolutely colorless, absolutely composed, and he spoke as from a great distance of thought." This man was Frank J. Cannon, the son of President George Q. Cannon. President Cannon had played an important role in reconciling the Church with the federal government, and Frank Cannon had been the first United States Senator from Utah. But, according to O'Higgins, Senator Cannon had become disaffected because of the Church's alleged political practices and clandestine polygamy and had eventually left the Church and had taken a position as an editorial writer on *The Rocky Mountain News* in Denver. O'Higgins had printed Cannon's story in *Everybody's Magazine* with the title "Under The Prophet In Utah"; and it was interest in this piece which had prompted him to write *Polygamy,* although the play had not been an attempt to dramatize Cannon's alleged experience.

We commonly think of the artist as a creator. It is more accurate, however, to see him as a reflector—one who mirrors the perceptions and values of his society. This play merely images the dark view and the pathetic misunderstanding about Mormonism which prevailed in the East a half-century ago. It is useful to contrast *Polygamy* with the view of Mormonism now reflected by the commercial theatre and with the degree of participation in it by contemporary artists.

No pro-Mormon drama has yet achieved commercial success, although a number of young LDS writers, such as Doug Stewart, Louise Hansen, Don Oscarson, Gerald and Carol Lynn

Pearson, and Scott Card, show promise of reaching that goal. But remarkably successful attempts to give a more balanced view of the Church and its history have been produced. The movie *Brigham Young* was criticized as essentially inaccurate, but I find its general tone laudable, and I believe that it has favorably modified public opinion. The typical American's conception of Mormonism derives from several paragraphs in a high school history text, from the beliefs and experiences of his relatives, and from the news media. To him, the *Brigham Young* movie presents a more factual description of our people.

Obviously a dramatization of Church history and principles acceptable to Latter-day Saints will probably be done only by a believer. But it is easy to underestimate the magnitude of his problem. How can the playwright picture—that is to say "make concrete," which is theatre's purpose—the warmth and optimism that characterize our culture? Our problems are inherently dramatic; yet, how does he make our serenity sufficiently dramatic to command the interest of non-Mormons? I believe that the task will be done—it has been done by others as in the movie *The Bells of Saint Mary.* But wickedness always attracts a larger audience than does goodness, and so we need not wonder that world literature is not replete with positive statements of our people and our values.

However, in 1966 Christie Lund Coles and Larry Bastian wrote a musical play entitled *The Red Plush Parlor.* It depicted a man having several wives who rivaled his son for the affection of a woman whom both wanted to marry. Unlike *Polygamy,* it emphasized the high-mindedness, the dignity, and the Christian love which these Mormons held for each other; and it painted a portrait more compatible with Christ's principles than any other play ever written about plural marriage. It is true that *The Red Plush Parlor* has little commercial value in its present form, but its premier production was unusually popular, and it encourages the hope that writers will yet successfully express our values in dramatic forms.

Equally significant is the welcome which commercial theatre now extends to capable Latter-day Saint performers, technicians, and administrators. Because of their attractiveness and the public exposure given them, these subtle ambassadors for the Church generate good will more than sufficient to overcome propaganda like *Polygamy.* I believe that their success is a fruition of the Church's traditional cultivation, beginning in

the children's Primary Association, of the performing arts. Hazel Dawn, Sandi and Salli, Melva Niles, Patty Peterson, the King Family, the Nathan Hales, Robert Peterson, Gordon Jump, Vera Miles, Tina Cole, and Laraine Day, are some of the Mormons who enjoy professional approbation in Hollywood and New York. This spring Keene Curtis, a Mormon from Bountiful, Utah, won the Tony Award for his performance in *The Rothschilds* on Broadway. Their acceptance is another indication of how far the theatre's attitude has changed since *Polygamy.*

An additional measure can be seen in The Ledges Playhouse, a professional summer theatre in Lansing, Michigan, under the co-ownership and direction of Harold I. Hansen and myself. We produced there a series of more than thirty commercial plays for reasonably sophisticated non-Mormon audiences. We did not advertise as a Mormon company but the press so characterized us, for we featured a company of LDS performers and hewed to LDS production standards. The community welcomed us into its homes and society, and our audiences encouraged us to exercise taste in selecting plays, language, costumes, and action. The venture was profitable. There are now multiple LDS companies of performers in Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and California.

The contrast between *Polygamy, Or A Celestial Marriage* and *The Red Plush Parlor* or The Ledges Playhouse is salutary and absolute. It shows how far we have come. It is a favorable omen for the spreading of the Gospel and its acceptance by our world.