



Joseph Riddle as Hugo Huebener and Blaine Sundrud as the Interrogator. The BYU Theatre production of Thomas F. Rogers's *Huebener*, directed by Ivan Croslend, 1992.

Whither Mormon Drama? Look First to a Theatre

We need drama that looks with clear eyes at the Mormon world while occasionally seeing beyond to celestial glory. But such a drama would require a subsidized theatre to nurture it.

Eric Samuels

The history of Latter-day Saint involvement in the fine and performing arts is long and distinguished. While American Puritanism was almost unanimous in its rejection of the stage—particularly in New England—both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young held remarkably enlightened views of dramatic art. Nauvoo boasted a small hall called “the Fun House,” which was used for performances, and the lower room of Nauvoo’s Masonic hall was likewise used as a stage.¹ Brigham Young often mentioned church opposition to “pastimes and amusements” as a distinguishing feature of the apostate Protestant tradition of his youth.² Brother Brigham was a great fan of the theatre, even appearing in Thomas A. Lyne’s Nauvoo production of a popular melodrama of the day, August von Kotzebue’s *Pizzaro*.³ President Young’s support for the theatre led to the 1861-62 construction of the Salt Lake Theatre, one of the most important theaters of the period in the American West. And of course, Church presidents ever since have strongly supported various kinds of youth theatre, road shows, pageants, drama festivals, and other similar theatrical and quasi-theatrical activities.⁴

Given this remarkably supportive history, LDS playwrights have in recent decades begun to entertain thoughts of creating a more substantial body of dramatic literature. In fact, this dream of a Mormon drama was prophesied by Elder Orson F. Whitney, who talked of the coming of a “Mormon Shakespeare” and spoke of a dramatic literature “whose top shall touch heaven,”⁵ a prophecy

which has been echoed by Elder Boyd K. Packer, President Spencer W. Kimball,⁶ and others. As a result, a number of Mormon writers and scholars—myself included—have dared to share the hope that someday we will be able to point with pride to plays of genuine substance and interest, written by and perhaps, but not necessarily, about Mormons; plays which unapologetically demonstrate the richness and profundity of the teachings of our prophets, while honestly and forthrightly exploring elements of our culture which fall short of those teachings. We hope in time to have a drama with sufficient universality and power to become as much a part of the canon of world drama as the plays of Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Shaw, or, perhaps more accurately, we hope that as the canon expands, room will be found in it for plays with Mormonism at their center, as, in fact, Elder Whitney's prophesy suggests. With characteristic Mormon optimism, we have managed to cling to the hope, in the face of all existing evidence, that such a drama will someday be written and performed.

At the same time, when we honestly and objectively assess the present state of Mormon playwriting, we must admit that we seem to be as far as ever from realizing such a dream. I remember my astonishment and pride when, as an undergraduate playwriting student at Brigham Young University, I attended a production of Tom Rogers's fine play *Huebener*; and my dismay when I realized that for most of the Mormon public at large the apex of our achievement in this field was *Saturday's Warrior*. When I joined the faculty at Brigham Young University in 1992, my colleagues pointed with pride to a recent revival of *Huebener*, while acknowledging with dismay the commercial success of the recent videotape of *Saturday's Warrior*.⁷ Small wonder that a flyer advertising the 1993 conference of the Association for Mormon Letters suggested that someone take up the question: Mormon Drama, Whither or Wither?

Certainly, the Mormon Shakespeare will come in God's good time; we must have patience, and we must continue to hope. But we must also begin doing what we can to prepare the way for future genius. Perhaps we must serve in the role of artistic Eliases for the Shakespeare who will come. Yet, when I look at the question of building a Mormon drama today, I feel a greater sense of urgency than ever before. As the Church moves into greater prominence in

American and world society, I am convinced that we, as a people and a culture, must begin defining ourselves dramatically.

The difficulty is not, I acknowledge, that we lack dramatic and theatrical forms that express our culture. All those road shows and pageants do serve to define us; some aspects of Mormon culture have indeed produced their dramatic double. But the culture such works reveal—a culture of kitsch, spectacle, and bombast—poorly represents either the genuine spirituality of the gospel or the kind of profound insight into the human condition the gospel provides. Surely we can do better. If we do not at least make the effort, I am concerned that Mormonism could be perceived as trivial and sentimental or, worse, that outsiders might view the childishness of Mormon drama as masking something genuinely oppressive. I am arguing for a drama educated adults can take seriously.

Such a drama could well include searching examinations of Mormon society—plays that explore the culture while affirming the faith. By the same token, one of the more significant recent Mormon plays, James A. Bell's 1993 award-winning *Prisoner*, does not directly deal with Mormonism at all. Bell's fine examination of the lives of American prisoners in Vietnam is nonetheless a “Mormon drama” because it clearly reflects Bell's beliefs as a Latter-day Saint. Thus, I am arguing for the emergence of two kinds of Mormon drama: first, plays written by Mormons that deal with specifically Mormon characters, situations, or issues and second, plays that do not use Mormonism as subject matter, but do reveal thematically the values and ideals of their Mormon authors.

Of course, a third kind of “Mormon drama” also exists: plays which are written by non-LDS playwrights and which treat Mormon themes or characters. Generally, we ought to welcome the searching examination of our culture and beliefs from those outside both. But human nature, as well as wisdom, prompts us to view such works with a humility tempered by skepticism. Surely we are justified in looking at plays that attempt to define us and seeing how well the definition fits.

This question of cultural definition and the future of Mormon drama becomes even more urgent when we consider the recent, highly publicized success of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning two-part epic *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on American Themes*.⁸



“Shiblon, thou art avenged.”



Welcome to Zarahemla.

Scenes from a road production of *Corianton*. The play, written by Mormon Orestes Utah Bean, opened in the Salt Lake Theatre in 1902 and was presented there annually for several years. The play was a great success locally but, when taken to New York, was panned by critics. A flowery melodrama, *Corianton* was more pageantry than significant drama. The photographs are from a poster for a proposed movie, which was never produced. Courtesy Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

Angels in America: A Case Study on the Need for Mormon Drama

Angels in America is perhaps the most celebrated American play in recent memory. The first half of Kushner's seven-hour marathon, subtitled *Millennium Approaches*, won nearly every major award or honor available: Drama Critics Circle Award, a Tony, and the Pulitzer Prize. While the second half, *Perestroika*,⁹ generally was not as well received, it likewise won the Tony, and much of the criticism of the play was based on a premature and unsuccessful preview in Los Angeles; its New York reception in December 1993 was far more positive. While it has become axiomatic to say, as Robert Brustein did, that the two parts together have "received unanimous critical praise at every step in [their] journey,"¹⁰ this perception is not true; a great many critics have been ambivalent toward both plays, and a few (most notably the acerbic John Simon of *New York* and Richard Grenier of *The National Review*) have been actively hostile. Nonetheless, even those critics who have disliked *Angels* have agreed that *Angels'* critical and popular success has established it as a genuine phenomenon: "a landmark in American theatre";¹¹ "the most important play in a generation";¹² "the biggest, most intelligent, most passionate American play in recent memory";¹³ and "the most thrilling American play in years."¹⁴

The play's success has been particularly remarkable given the subjects with which it deals: AIDS, homosexuality, legal and political aspects of gay rights, Reagan Republicanism, New Age theology, and Mormonism. Unlike such important American plays as John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*, whose two Mormon characters are dealt with in a perfunctory fashion,¹⁵ Kushner weaves his version of Mormon history, Mormon theology, Mormon cosmology, and Mormon social attitudes into the essential fabric of his play. Three of the play's main characters are Mormon, and they talk directly about their beliefs—or lack thereof. One of the central characters is an active LDS attorney whose main conflict is the struggle between his faith and his homosexuality. Several key scenes in the play take place in the LDS visitors' center in New York. Finally, much of the plot of *Perestroika* paraphrases the

Joseph Smith pamphlet: a young man, confused about religious issues, is visited by an angel, who gives him a holy book, the contents of which are intended to form the basis for his prophetic message. Mormon themes and concerns make powerful dramatic material in the hands of a skilled playwright.

Nevertheless, Kushner's cosmology is, to a large degree, a distortion of LDS cosmology, although the play is not anti-Mormon in the sense that, say, the film *The Godmakers* is. And while some scenes in the play would certainly cause most Mormons to wince, to say the least, Kushner treats his Mormon characters compassionately and their beliefs sympathetically. At the same time, Kushner is a self-proclaimed leftist gay activist; his obvious agendas and his sometimes offensive misunderstandings of Mormon theology and culture serve as a prime exhibit of the need for a rich and perceptive Mormon drama. In order to grasp both the problems and the potentials presented by this situation, a basic understanding of Kushner's efforts and errors is needed.

Angels centers on two groups of characters living in New York City. First, the play discusses the complex relationships between three gay men: Prior Walter, the play's central prophetic figure, who has been afflicted by AIDS; his lover, Louis Ironson, a sensitive Jewish intellectual who finds himself unable to deal with the pain and mess of Prior's illness and yet is racked with guilt when he leaves his friend; and Belize, a wisecracking Black nurse, close friend and confidant to both men. The second group consists of Joe Pitts, an LDS attorney and conservative Republican, who is struggling with his own homosexuality; his wife, Harper, a desperately lonely Mormon woman who has become a Valium addict; and Joe's mother, Hannah, a strong-willed woman who sells her home in Salt Lake and moves to New York when Joe tells her of his sexual confusion. These two groups are tied together by two other main characters, one actively evil and one good. First of these characters is the historical Roy Cohn, former attorney to Senator Joseph McCarthy. Over the course of the play, Cohn battles and succumbs to AIDS. Portrayed as an amoral, monomaniacal power grubber, Cohn is Joe's mentor and friend. He also becomes a patient under Belize's care. The second linking character, particularly in *Perestroika*, is an angel who becomes a focal point of the play as she visits both Prior and Hannah.

These characters interact in a number of ways; some interactions are realistically portrayed, and others involve fantasy, dream states, and other elements of magical realism. On the mundane level, Joe leaves Harper and meets Louis, who is distraught over having left Prior; Joe and Louis have an affair. Joe has a number of scenes with Roy Cohn, in which Roy tries to persuade Joe to take a job in Washington, D.C.; Joe refuses because of his concern over Harper's health (a concern which does not prevent his relationship with Louis). Later Belize nurses Roy, who has used his contacts to acquire a personal hoard of AZT; Belize and Louis steal the medicine, and use it to nurse Prior. At the visitors' center, Hannah meets Prior, who has become very ill indeed, and in her best brusque, sergeant-major fashion, nurses him back to health.

Other meetings and connections are less prosaic. Early in *Millennium Approaches*, for example, Harper and Prior meet in each other's dreams, and have the following conversation:

HARPER: Valium. I take Valium. Lots of Valium . . . It's terrible. Mormons are not supposed to be addicted to anything. I'm a Mormon.

PRIOR: I'm a homosexual.

HARPER: Oh! In my church we don't believe in homosexuals.

PRIOR: In my church we don't believe in Mormons (*Millennium 1.7*).

Later in this scene, each has a revelation about the other: Prior, that Harper's husband is gay; Harper, that Prior will be visited by an angel. Both of these revelations turn out to be true.

While the dream-like, visionary quality of the play gives it much of its theatrical interest, Kushner is perhaps even more appealing in his exploration of the mutual misunderstandings and attempts at genuine communication between these flawed but richly human characters. In *Perestroika*, when Prior discovers that his formidable but loyal friend Hannah is Mormon, she tells him a somewhat distorted version of the Joseph Smith story. They then have the following conversation:

PRIOR: . . . that's preposterous, that's . . .

HANNAH: It's not polite to call other people's beliefs preposterous.

He had great need of understanding. Our Prophet. His desire made prayer. His prayer made an angel. The angel was real. I believe that.

PRIOR: I don't. And I'm sorry but it's repellent to me. So much of what you believe. . . .

HANNAH: What do I believe?

PRIOR: I'm a homosexual. With AIDS. I can just imagine what you. . . .

HANNAH: No you can't. Imagine. The things in my head. You don't make assumptions about me, mister; I won't make them about you.

PRIOR: Fair enough . . . (*Perestroika* 4.6).

Kushner creates a cast full of interesting, fully fleshed-out human beings who are quite unforgettable in their humanity. The Mormon characters, on the other hand, while perfectly rounded, are much less convincing as Mormons. Kushner is, for example, remarkably successful in describing a close-knit, mutually supportive gay community in New York. But he seems to discount the possibility of an equally supportive, close-knit support system among Mormons in New York. Joe and Harper seem to live in a vacuum; not only their beliefs, but their lives form in complete solitude. Joe talks like an active member, but without reference to Church callings or service. The depressed and Valium-addicted Harper is a compellingly drawn woman. Compelling, yet not altogether convincing. While I do not mean to suggest that lonely Mormons do not exist or that loneliness is not a Mormon problem, for her to be left so completely alone as Kushner describes it would, to put it in the most banal of terms, require that at least seven people in her ward have not been doing their jobs (bishop, Relief Society president, elder's quorum president, visiting teachers, and home teachers). Of course, such a thing is possible; there are wards where the organization struggles. Nor do I mean to imply that a deeply disturbed woman would be all right if only her home teachers would visit her regularly. But when Harper declares that she is *completely* alone, that *no one* ever visits her, she is not describing the usual

experience of Mormon communities outside the Wasatch Front. One wonders, in fact, just why Kushner so strenuously avoids any depiction of the larger Mormon community.

These are not Kushner's only cultural errors. Hannah, for example, is described as an active LDS woman, at least active enough to be employed by the LDS visitors' center, but Kushner also describes her smoking. In an early scene with Roy Cohn, Joe asks Roy to stop taking the Lord's name in vain. But both Joe and Harper regularly profane the name of the Savior. Hannah sells her home on the east bench in Salt Lake City for forty thousand dollars. Given that location and the mid-eighties Salt Lake City real estate market, a sum four or five times that amount would be closer to reality.

These errors call into question how well Kushner knows Mormon culture, a crucial point, given the remarkably subtle distortions of Mormon theology that become part of his cosmology. Certainly in the one scene of the play that most members of the Church would find the most difficult to take, Kushner blasphemes quite knowingly. In this scene, a sexual encounter between Joe and Louis, Joe wears nothing but his temple garments, which he calls his "second skin" (*Perestroika* 3.3). Again, Kushner seems to understand Mormon theology, without understanding the culture. The image of the temple garment as a second skin is an insightful one, especially when equated with a lifetime of belief. But what Kushner does not seem to understand is the seriousness, for a Mormon, of any sexual encounter outside of marriage. Kushner misses the significant fact that Joe, an endowed member of the Church, has violated his covenants in his affair with Louis and could very well be excommunicated.

Perhaps most significantly, Kushner creates (especially in *Perestroika*, in which Prior encounters the Angel) a very peculiar and specific cosmology for the play which echoes and distorts LDS doctrine. The Angel gives Prior a book to read and asks him to make the book the basis of his doctrine. Briefly, the Angel tells Prior that God abandoned heaven immediately following the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. The angels have been trying unsuccessfully to run things in God's absence; and as a result, humans have been sliding gradually downward towards a final catastrophic destruction.

The angels' message to Prior, therefore, is one of stagnation—stasis. He (and through him, everyone) is told to stop moving. Kushner's heaven is more than a little tongue-in-cheek; and in a play with so many LDS references and connections, it is difficult not to see a kind of vestigial Mormonism in the cosmology as well. While Kushner's intention is clearly part and parcel with his political agenda—showing even heaven under the thrall of malign 1980s conservatism—it jibes poorly with Mormon theology, for one of the remarkable differences between Mormon and other Christian concepts of the afterlife is precisely the Mormon insistence that Heaven is *not* static, but a place of eternal progression.

Even more offensive are the depictions of the Angel herself. Kushner seems unable to imagine heaven or heavenly beings in any other than sexual terms. Every time a character in the play is visited by the Angel—Prior frequently and Hannah once—they immediately have what Kushner describes as an enormous orgasm. The Angel herself is described as having multiple male and female sex organs, and heaven is portrayed as a place of ceaseless sexual activity. This echoes a typical anti-Mormon distortion of Mormon cosmology. Such distortions have, of course, no scriptural justification, and, to his credit, Kushner does not describe it as a Mormon idea. It is nonetheless disturbing to see so crude an anti-Mormon theme appear in a play which claims to treat Mormonism evenhandedly.

In many ways, *Angels in America* is an exceptionally difficult play for a Mormon to assess. But in other ways, the play preaches a remarkable compassion and forgiveness for all its flawed human characters and ends in a note of optimism and charity. Prior's last line, "Let the great work begin," could very well serve as a clarion call for LDS ideals of freedom, progression, and change. Tony Kushner is a genuinely brilliant playwright and one whose intentions seem basically benign. His distortions of Mormon cosmology are all part of his larger political agenda and are not directed toward the destruction of the Church. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that non-Mormon viewers of the play would gain any kind of a positive appreciation of Mormon theology or culture from it. Indeed, the play's distortions and blasphemies could seriously damage the mission of the Church.

I have not belabored this point in order to wring my hands over Kushner's artistic liberties or to offend by spelling out the realities of this situation in some detail, but only to argue that such productions show clearly just how important is the creation of a genuine Mormon drama. While I don't know just how much Kushner has read in Mormon scripture, he has been exposed to at least one Mormon attempt at cultural self-definition: the visitors' center dioramas. And his parody of one diorama skewers it precisely. Lacking any more substantive Mormon theatrical expression as a frame of reference, I am not surprised that Kushner assumed that the dioramas express Mormon culture as a whole and found Latter-day Saints such convenient sitting ducks for his dialectic. Nor can I blame him for not taking seriously a culture which, if judged solely on the face of existing theatrical evidence, does not take itself seriously either.

To me, the distortions and blasphemies of *Angels in America* profoundly illustrate our need for a drama that offers a counter vision, a more culturally accurate frame of reference for audiences and playwrights both. But that drama should also have a richness and subtlety to match or even surpass the talented work of the Kushners of today. It should be a drama of genuine insight, a drama that looks with clear eyes at the world while occasionally seeing beyond to celestial glory.

The Possibility of Great Mormon Drama

Can such a dream become reality? Or is great art based on equivocation and iconoclasm? Does the very fervor of our religious commitment hinder a genuine artistic expression or accomplishment? Certainly the makers of dioramas and pageants do so with earnest sincerity and devotion, with the very best of intentions. Is their devotion a barrier to more substantive expression?

The question is an intriguing one. While such Jewish novelists as Chaim Potok and Isaac Bashevis Singer are able to represent their faith and culture unapologetically without lapsing into sentimentality or dogmatism, they are also not afraid to be poignant and critical; their task is not to promote Judaism, but to explore the beauty and spirituality as well as the tensions and difficulties

within Jewish lives and communities. Drama intended to proselyte has its place, but drama by its very nature deals with the beneficially molding pressures of struggle and strife. Our Mormon dramatists, when they arrive, will not write works with a direct missionary purpose or application, nor should we expect them to do so. Perhaps we can find a way to balance works that serve a valuable missionary function, such as the *Hill Cumorah Pageant*, with works more like that essential Mormon Ur-drama, the temple endowment ceremony, which includes chastisement, conflict, and renewed commitment.

The Development of Playwrights

In fiction and in poetry, we can point to LDS works of genuine accomplishment: Patricia Nelson Limerick's recent Tanner lecture at the 1994 meeting of the Mormon History Association cited "a remarkable and impressive flowering of Mormon literature," as evidence for the creation of "a clear cultural identity," all expressing what she called "Mormon ethnicity."¹⁶ I find it significant, however, that so perceptive an observer as Limerick could point to few if any works of Mormon drama to prove her point.

Once again, drama—an art form that is unusually indicative of culture—remains the poor stepchild of Mormon letters. And so we must ask the question, Why have none of the writers who have shown promise in drama ever progressed beyond mere potential? I am convinced that the fault lies neither in a lack of talent nor in an excess of religiosity. Rather, our best writers in this field have, in my view, suffered from the lack of a sustaining theatrical environment in which they could flourish.

Playwrights, unlike composers or romantic poets, tend to develop in their middle to late thirties. Aside from the occasional Georg Buchner, there are few examples of theatrical Mozarts astounding the world as child prodigies. Playwrights seem to require a greater knowledge of the world and their own societies, of how human beings are likely to behave and what they are likely to say in response to the universal travails of the human experience, than artists in other fields. Ibsen's first masterpieces, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, were written when he was thirty-seven and thirty-eight

years old. His great prose dramas, beginning with *Doll's House*, were the products of a man in his fifties. Chekhov wrote *The Seagull* at thirty-six, and Shaw wrote his first play, *Widower's Houses*, when he was thirty-six as well.¹⁷ Playwrights who produced their first masterpieces after the age of thirty include Strindberg, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, Molière, Shakespeare, and even Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripedes. Apparently, the crucial period in the development of a playwright is the years from the age of eighteen to thirty-five; mature playwriting follows.

In the playwriting program of Brigham Young University's Department of Theatre and Film, we see a constant stream of young writers who show tremendous promise in their early twenties. I assume the same is true of LDS students at other universities. But when we look at their subsequent careers, we find they turn to writing novels or movie scripts if they are lucky, while most pursue other walks of life. The environment we have tried to create at BYU has no corollary outside our program. While we can provide playwrights with a fairly rigorous theatrical education, we cannot provide career opportunities for them following graduation. And no outlets exist with professional actors and directors capable of, or interested in, communicating the mature vision of a major Mormon playwright while remunerating such an artist sufficiently for him or her to survive. Those few LDS playwrights who have attempted careers in this difficult field—Neil Labute, Elizabeth Hansen, Julie Boxx Boyle, Tim Slover, Susan Lewis—would all, I think, attest to just how difficult mere professional survival has been and just how many professional compromises have been necessary.

Great Drama Emerges from Theatre

What such playwrights need is a theater. The great eras of the world's dramatic literature have tended to come after the establishment of theaters and theatre companies sufficiently robust to support them. Further, those theaters have always been subsidized to some degree—either financially underwritten or politically supported—and the reality is that the need for such subsidies is greater now than ever. In short, we will never develop a satisfying Mormon drama until we have established and supported a theater

from which such drama might emerge. The Mormon Shakespeare needs a Mormon Globe.

This point has ample support from theatre history. I have mentioned Shakespeare, but similarly, can we imagine Marlowe without the Rose? Can we think of Shaw without Archer, Grein, and the Independent Theatre? Would Molière have been possible without the Hotel de Bourgogne? Would Eugene O'Neill have emerged apart from the Provincetown Players? Can we think of Synge and O'Casey without the Abbey Theatre? Chekhov without the Moscow Art Theatre? Even today, the lifeblood of the American theatre is such developmental theaters as New Dramatists or Playwright's Horizons or the Eureka, which have been instrumental in nurturing and supporting such outstanding contemporary playwrights as Wendy Wasserstein, August Wilson, Terence McNally, and Kushner.

As we seek historical blueprints for our own efforts, three great theaters seem to me to be particularly instructive: Den Norske Scene, Ibsen's theater in Bergen, Norway; the Abbey, the Irish theater of the early part of this century; and the Moscow Art Theatre. All these theatre movements came from societies which seem strikingly similar to Mormon society of today. Each of these explosions of dramatic significance was the product of what had been regarded as a cultural backwater; each came from an area and culture from which a renaissance must have seemed most unlikely. In each of these periods of dramatic achievement, the major artists quite specifically and intentionally sought to explore and represent their own cultural heritage, just as our Mormon self-consciousness must certainly find expression in our drama. Such writers as Ibsen, Chekhov, and Synge wrote plays of universal appeal and truthfulness; that is why we continue to study them today. Yet each did so within the confines of very specific cultural matrices. And in each of these eras, the playwrights of consequence were the products of theaters specifically created with the intention of encouraging them.

To a very large degree, the establishment of those theaters represented something of a leap of faith. When Frank Fay, William Butler Yeats, and Augusta Gregory established the Abbey, they did so in the hope that such playwrights as Synge and O'Casey would

emerge, as in fact happened. By the same token, Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky hoped their Art Theatre would attract talented young playwrights such as eventually emerged in the persons of Chekhov and Gorky. Chekhov had decided to give up playwriting altogether when *The Seagull* failed in an 1896 production by the mainstream Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, but his career revived with his storied partnership with the Moscow Art Theatre.

Both the Moscow Art Theatre and the Abbey were equally fortunate financially. The Abbey, of course, succeeded only because of the largess of the wealthy and eccentric A. E. Horniman. By the same token, the Moscow Art Theatre was saved by the generosity of Savva Morozov and other wealthy patrons. While both the Abbey and the MAT were intended as financial ventures and the hope was that both would become economically self-supporting, the fact remains that both theaters received significant patronage in their early years and survive today through state subsidies.

Ibsen strikes me as the exception that proves the rule. Although he did not write for any specific theater during his mature period (his primary source of income throughout his life was the sale of his plays as books), he was sponsored and supported as a young writer.¹⁸ Ibsen would almost certainly have been condemned to the life of an obscure country doctor or university pedant without the fortuitous intervention in 1851 of an eccentric, self-taught violin virtuoso, Ole Bull. Bull became obsessed with the idea of establishing a Norwegian national theatre, free from the pervasive influence of Danish culture and language and decided, on the scantiest of evidence, that the young Ibsen was just the man to serve as artistic director. Bull founded his theater and shortly thereafter lost interest in it, moved to the United States, and attempted to found a quasi-religious communal society with himself as prophet and mayor. Nonetheless, Bull's money and other private donations kept the theater solvent, and Ibsen spent the next six years learning his craft as a writer and director. Both of the main Ibsen biographers, Halfdan Koht and Michael Meyer, agree that it is nearly impossible to imagine Ibsen's success as a playwright in later years without the experience he gained as a young man in Bull's theater.¹⁹ During the crucial years of his development

as a writer, he was employed as a playwright and director. He was able to make ends meet while perfecting his craft.

Of course, the idea that Mormonism might produce playwrights of the quality of Ibsen, Synge, or Chekhov seems arrogant or preposterous today. But could the impartial theatrical observer of 1870 have possibly predicted the course of the subsequent half century of dramatic history? Could it have seemed likely the exhausted and impoverished Ireland of Synge's youth would ever have mustered the resources for any real theatrical achievement? Given the brutal czarist censorship of Russia's previous half century, who would have imagined the Moscow Art Theatre would transform the world's theatrical practice? When Ibsen wrote *Catiline* and submitted it to the Christiania Theatre in 1850, it was the first new play that theater had received from a Norwegian in eight years. Could anyone have foreseen that the author of *Catiline* would today be lauded as the Father of Modern Drama? I would like to believe Mormon drama may be standing on a similar threshold.

While theatrical practice has changed a great deal in the past hundred years, the change is towards heterogeneity, developmental theatres, and theatres of cultural self-definition, with an explosion of Hispanic theatre companies, African-American troupes, and other theaters serving an increasingly diverse theater-going community. While these theatres often appear in their infancy somewhat narrow in focus and strategy, they often not only move into, but redefine the mainstream as they mature. There is no reason why Mormon drama cannot do likewise.

For all these reasons and more, it is evident that, if there ever is to be a Mormon drama, the members of the Church—and especially those of some means—must consider the need for a Mormon theatre. Specifically, there needs to be a professional repertory theatre company, charged with the task of discovering and nurturing new playwrights, capable of supporting the best and most creative of our theatre artists, and dedicated above all else to furthering a mature Mormon drama. Certainly no Mormon drama—or any drama of cultural self-definition—can ever arise from the present commercial theatrical establishment, either in Utah or elsewhere. Utah's only professional repertory theatre company, Pioneer Memorial Theatre has received grants from the LDS Foundation for

years, as have most other arts organizations in the state. Yet Pioneer Memorial Theatre has never produced any plays of significance dealing with Mormon culture or society or indeed any original scripts other than adaptations of classics. Even the justly revered Hale Center Theatre has done only three plays in its history dealing with Mormon topics. Drama of lasting quality cannot come from even the most dedicated amateur theatrical ventures. Such a drama only comes from a professional theatre dedicated to discovering it.²⁰

Is such a theatre really necessary? Shouldn't we simply hope that playwrights who happen to be Mormon will write such fine plays that playhouses throughout the world will want to do them? Such a dream is a worthy one. It is also hopelessly naive. Great plays and great playwrights simply do not rise out of a vacuum. Most contemporary plays—in fact, nearly all contemporary theatrical successes—are either commissioned by a theater or come out of playwriting workshops sponsored by theaters.

Again, Kushner's *Angels in America* provides an outstanding example of the kind of nurturing an outstanding but previously unknown contemporary playwright requires. Kushner first workshopped the play at the New York Theatre Workshop, then at the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum in 1990. It was subsequently performed at the Eureka Theatre company, the British National Theatre, and at the Mark Taper Forum prior to its Broadway opening. Along the way, Kushner received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Gerbode Foundation, and the Fund for New American Plays.²¹ This is the gestational process of a new play—not just long hours spent hunched over a word processor, but equally long days workshopping in small theatre groups funded by grants.

Film Can Emerge from Successful Drama

In addition to its stage success, one hears persistent rumors that the noted director Robert Altman is planning a film version of *Angels*. Whether or not the Altman film project succeeds, the very fact that it is being discussed at all indicates the way in which a successful stage play can transfer to other media—film or video—that might reach broader audiences.

Another possible model for a Mormon theatre might be found in the work of the famous Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. Bergman began his work as a theatre director and playwright at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm (popularly known as Dramaten). He staged his own works at Dramaten and then used the summer months to direct those same works again as films, using the Dramaten company of actors in both projects. I can see many advantages to this approach, including the ability to work with an acting troupe with a cohesive sense of ensemble, the ability to polish material out in one medium before transferring it to another, the relatively low cost of failure on stage as opposed to film, and the fact that a successful play will have already created an audience for a subsequent video or film.²²

Theatre is a literary art form, built on the spoken word. Film is a visual art form, built on the moving image. Film, therefore, provides a very poor platform for the creation of dramatic literature of genuine merit; it tends not to lend itself to a very writer-friendly environment. And the reality is that film tends to be prohibitively expensive, which makes the cost of a single failure enormous. On the other hand, I believe that a successful theatre company can lay a solid and impressive foundation for later successes in film and/or video.

Creating a Mormon Theatre

Cannot the universities provide such support? Could not a Mormon drama arise from professors or students at BYU, the University of Utah, Utah State University, or many other campuses? I think it unlikely. I do not mean to imply universities in our community can do nothing to foster such a drama; on the contrary, I believe they can and ought to do a great deal. But university support can take a play only a certain distance. Nor do I believe that our great writer, when he or she emerges, will be either a student or university faculty member. Teaching is a full-time job, and my experience has been that even in the best of times it is difficult for anyone at a university to spend more than two or three hours a day playwriting. And those hours are usually stolen from family and religious responsibilities in the evenings, at times when would-be writers are hardly at the peak of their artistic powers.

I am quite aware the creation of such a theater involves a certain leap of faith. But I am not invoking the image of *Field of Dreams*—“If you build it, they will come.” Rather, history convinces me that if we do not build it, they will not come. I fully anticipate that starting such a theater will involve a great deal of difficulty, require enormous dedication, and entail considerable sacrifice. And I do acknowledge that the financial support for the establishment of a theater must remain a formidable obstacle. William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen’s 1967 book, *The Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*,²³ Harold Vogel’s more recent studies of *Entertainment Industry Economics*,²⁴ and particularly Wallace Dace’s *Proposal for a National Theatre*²⁵ suggest that even the most prosperous and successful repertory theaters require an annual subsidy of 50–75 percent of their annual budgets, beyond the initial cost of construction. As Baumol and Bowen conclude in their ground-breaking study twenty-five years ago, “The economic pressures which beset the arts are not temporary—they are chronic. If things are left to themselves, deficits are likely to grow. Any group which undertakes to support the arts can expect no respite. The demands upon its resources will increase, now, and for the foreseeable future.”²⁶

Time has confirmed these conclusions, yet how can Mormon theatre find such subsidies? While the LDS Foundation, a philanthropic arm of the Church, gives grants to several art organizations in the Salt Lake City area, these monies are limited, and direct financial support from the Church is not likely. At the same time, hardly a general conference goes by without some expression of General Authorities’ concern about the deleterious effects of the images and ideas of pop culture. On this score, the concerns of the General Authorities and the concerns of the serious Mormon artistic community are not as far apart as they might seem on the surface.

Finally, a theatre is more than just a building and an acting troupe. A theatre is an audience. Seemingly, there always exists a theatre audience hungry for modestly priced family entertainment. The question is whether an audience exists for a drama that would inevitably treat challenging or difficult subjects or take an unsentimentalized view of Mormon history and society. Effort will be needed to build an audience that will tolerate, even applaud, such challenges.

How can we build this audience? First we must establish a theoretical basis for such a theatre and state it in terms accessible to the Mormon reading public. Numerous books are published providing a gospel perspective on managing one's personal finances or food storage. Little if any writing attempts to find a basis in scripture for a Mormon aesthetic. Even so basic a topic as "protecting one's family from the bad effects of bad television" has seen little scholarly or informed discussion.

Second, of course, Mormon playwrights will need to stretch the boundaries of audience understanding without exceeding the limits of audience acceptability. Such playwriting might not result in the Mormon *Hamlet*; it may, however, result in a Mormon *Cambyses*, *Gorbaduc*, or *Spanish Tragedy*—dramatic Eliases all. True learning usually involves a degree of discomfort: being corrected by a piano teacher, unlearning bad habits, or admitting prior ignorance. Even Joseph Smith had to first learn that the churches of his youth were wrong. Mormon playwrights, too, as they build an audience, must make room for tough-minded, challenging works and not shy away from inevitable controversy. At the same time, they also need to combine both faith and talent and give no quarter for the impression that Mormon artists are by nature rebellious, at odds with the authorities of the Church. The fact remains that Mormon novelists, essayists, or poets can generally push the boundaries of audience acceptability far further than playwrights can, for, as a popular art form, drama cannot offend too greatly and still survive.

Language and subject matter will be two major pitfalls. The Mormon audience has a strong language taboo; even relatively mild profanity and obscenity are disproportionately disturbing to the Mormon public. While I have enormous admiration for such forthright contemporary playwrights as David Mamet and Sam Shepherd and while obscenity can sometimes serve a legitimate artistic purpose, artists must acknowledge audience concerns. Thus, the use of language solely to shock sets back the cause of Mormon drama as a whole. Likewise, plays that attack or question official Church doctrines are at odds with the objectives of a Mormon theatre. Certainly Mormon playwrights can and ought to deal with tough or controversial cultural subjects. For example, a play dealing with the

plight of battered Mormon women strikes me as responsible and engaging. I would welcome plays discussing suicides among Utah teens; the odd propensity Mormons seem to have for being taken in by con artists; the crowded condition of Utah public schools, or the challenges faced by isolated LDS youth in a non-Mormon high school; the struggles of the single parent Latter-day Saint, or the older single adult; even the issue Tony Kushner explored—the wrenching dilemma of a Mormon homosexual. These all strike me as remarkably rich and promising topics for dramatization. But if charity is the guiding value, then even these topics need to be handled with sensitivity to audience concerns.

The dream of a Mormon drama must be realized step by step, line upon line. If that dream is to become a reality, we must do more than simply write plays, sponsor contests, or deliver papers—although those are helpful steps. Efforts must first be concentrated on the immediate task at hand: the building of an audience, the building of a theatre. Years from now, when a Mormon drama does arise, it will not only articulate, but also constructively transform Mormon culture. It will be a drama of prophetic power and courage. If a Mormon drama is not created within the household of faith, the dramatic role of Mormonism will remain a bit part oddly cast on the stages of strangers and foreigners.

Eric Samuelsen is Assistant Professor of Theatre and Film at Brigham Young University.

NOTES

¹Harold I. Hansen, *A History and Influence of the Mormon Theatre from 1839-1869* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1967), 5; Noel A. Carmack, "A Note on Nauvoo Theater," *BYU Studies* 34, no. 1 (1994): 95-100.

²See, for example, John A. Widtsoe, ed., *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 238-39.

³Hansen, *A History and Influence of the Mormon Theatre*, 6. Kotzebue's play was translated into English by Richard Sheridan.

⁴For previous discussions of Mormon drama in *BYU Studies*, see Richard G. Ellsworth, "Pro-Mormon Drama," 12 (spring 1972): 336; Eugene England, review of *God's Fools: Plays of Mitigated Conscience*, by Thomas F. Rogers, 26 (summer

1986): 114; Preston R. Gledhill, "JB: Successful Theatre versus 'Godless' Theology," 3 (winter 1961): 9; Arthur Henry King, "Some Notes on Art and Morality," 11 (autumn 1970): 37; Jean Anne Waterstradt, "Making the World a Home: The Family Portrait in Drama," 19 (summer 1979): 501; Lael J. Woodbury, "Mormonism and the Commercial Theatre," 12 (winter 1972): 234; Lael J. Woodbury, "A New Mormon Theatre," 10 (autumn 1969): 85; and Lael J. Woodbury, "A New Mormon Theatre," 16 (autumn 1975): 65.

⁵Boyd K. Packer, "*That All May Be Edified*" (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 276.

⁶See, for example, Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 393.

⁷I do not mean to denigrate the remarkable popularity of *Saturday's Warrior* nor the genuine impact it has obviously made on the lives of the many for whom it was the first introduction to the gospel. But its clichéd and flatly drawn characters, overt sentimentality, and contrived happy ending disqualify it, in my mind, from genuine distinction as a work of dramatic literature.

⁸Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part One: Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992).

⁹Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994).

¹⁰Robert Bernstein, "The Great Work Falters," *New Republic*, December 27, 1993, 25.

¹¹John Lahr, "Beyond Nelly," *The New Yorker*, November 23, 1992, 126-30.

¹²William A. Henry III, "Celebrating Gay Anger," *Time*, November 23, 1992, 72-74.

¹³Jack Kroll, "A Seven-Hour Gay Fantasia," *Newsweek*, November 23, 1992, 83.

¹⁴Frank Rich, *The New York Times*, February 2, 1992.

¹⁵Guare does not, in fact, even identify his characters as Mormon, only as being "from Utah."

¹⁶*Deseret News*, May 29, 1994.

¹⁷While Strindberg wrote *Master Olof* in his twenties, his breakthrough plays, *The Father* and *Miss Julie*, came when he was thirty-eight and thirty-nine. Arthur Miller was thirty-two when he wrote *All My Sons* and thirty-four when he wrote *Death of a Salesman*, and Tennessee Williams did not produce his first stage triumph, *The Glass Menagerie*, until he was thirty-four. While Eugene O'Neill began in his mid-twenties, his first major success, *Beyond the Horizon*, came when he was thirty-two. Molière was forty when *The School for Wives* became his first masterpiece, and Shakespeare's greatest works date from the early years of the Globe, 1599-1608, his thirty-fifth through forty-fourth years. Aeschylus did not win the Festival of Dionysus until he was forty or forty-one, and all of the extant plays of Sophocles came after he was fifty. Euripides was at least forty-three when he first won the competition.

¹⁸In addition to his salary as artistic director of the Bergen theatre, he repeatedly received government and private grants which enabled him to research and work, and he received a government pension throughout most of his career.

¹⁹Halvdan Kont, *The Life of Ibsen* (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1931); Michael Meyer, *Ibsen: A Biography* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971).

²⁰The recent opening of the Tuacahn Arts Center in St. George could well lay the foundation for just such a Mormon theatre. The first announced production of Tuacahn, a mammoth pageant-type play called *Utah!* complete with a huge cast and special effects by Disney, is certainly a discouraging sign. But Tuacahn has a number of important advantages, including a superb theatre complex, lavishly funded, run by able people with the very best of intentions. The Tuacahn project is certainly a venture worth watching.

²¹Kushner, *Millennium Approaches*, v-ix.

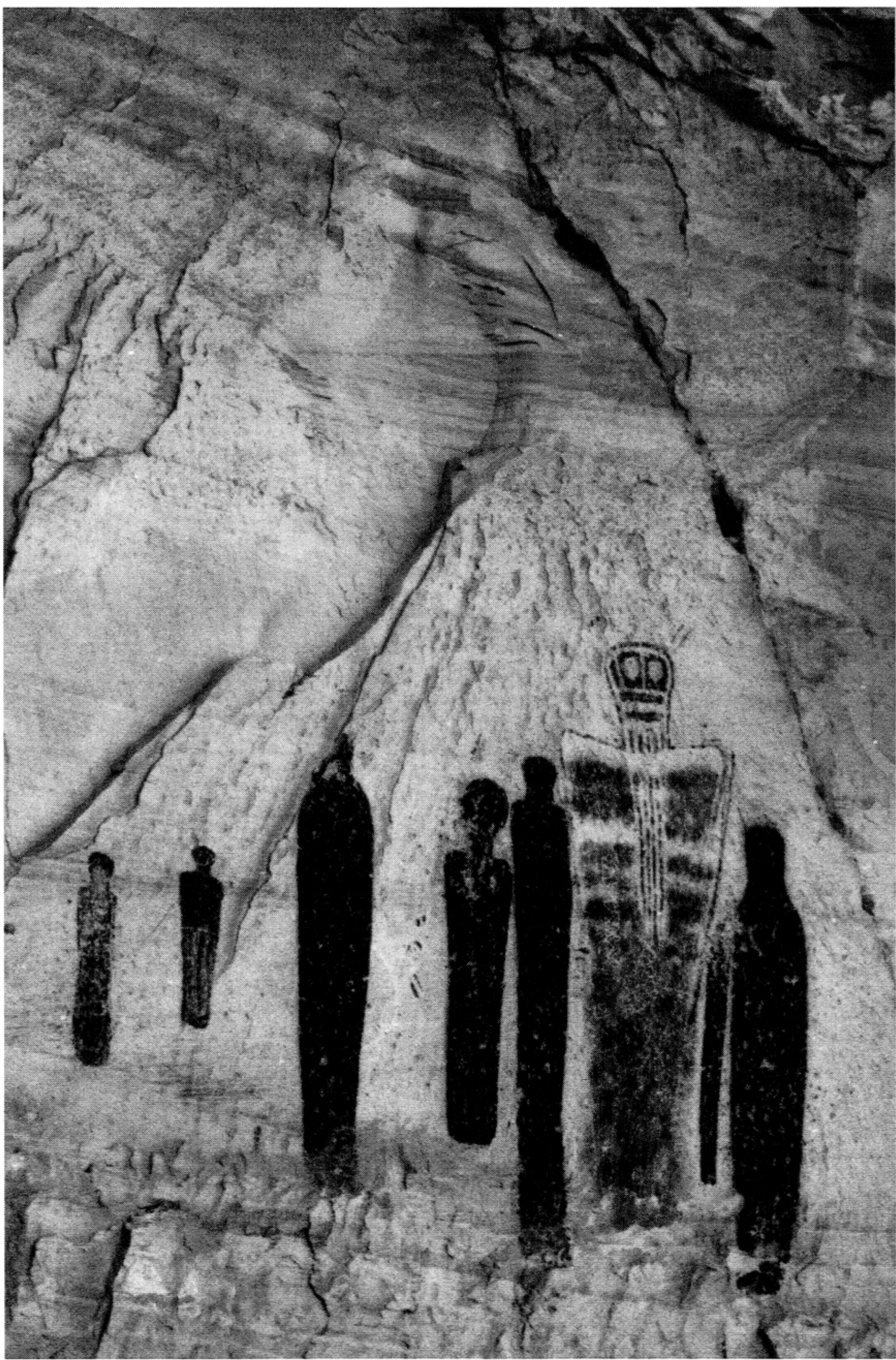
²²I might mention the financial success of the video version of *Saturday's Warrior* in this regard, which has succeeded despite the fact that the video itself is of generally poor quality.

²³William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen, *The Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1966).

²⁴Harold L. Vogel, *Entertainment Industry Economics: A Guide for Financial Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

²⁵Wallace Dace, *Proposal for a National Theatre* (New York: Richards Rosen, 1978).

²⁶Baumol and Bowen, *The Performing Arts*, 10.



Pictographs in Canyonlands National Park, Utah. Courtesy Lynn M. Radeka.