

Book Review

Thomas F. Rogers, *God's Fools: Plays of Mitigated Conscience*

By Eugene England

Review of Thomas F. Rogers, *God's Fools: Plays of Mitigated Conscience*, Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983. xiv; 233 pp. \$6.00

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Fires of the Mind, by Robert Elliot, is the best single play yet written about Mormon experience. But the best Mormon playwright, on the evidence of cumulative, consistent achievement, is Tom Rogers. The scripts of his four best plays, *Huebener*, *Fire in the Bones*, *Reunion*, and *Journey to Golgotha*, are now available through the generous efforts of Thomas Taylor, the young BYU student preparing to be a professional small press director who prepared the first edition, and Signature Books, which has republished that edition.

Rogers is ambitious. His plays fearlessly address two of the most troubling tragedies in Mormon history: the Mountain Meadows Massacre (and subsequent scapegoating and execution of John D. Lee) and the excommunication and execution of the young anti-Nazi Helmuth Huebener. Rogers also takes on two of the most devastating contemporary dilemmas: the breakdown of communication and forgiveness in a “religious” Latter-day Saint family, and the torture and corruption of citizens by their own governments. In addition, all four of these plays are patterned thematically on the perennial tragic struggle between the generations, a struggle that has energized our greatest literature in Western culture, specifically the Oedipal struggle of estranged sons with tyrannical fathers or mentors. And Rogers does not hesitate to take a firm and clear position on this dilemma: only through responding to Christ’s example and demand on us—that we as sons cease licking our wounds and “return our fathers’ enmity with understanding and forgiveness” and that we as fathers cease exercising unrighteous dominion—can we “break the curse that would have us perpetuate the same misery in our offspring” (ix).

As is apparent from these quotations from his preface, Rogers is an earnest man. Perhaps too earnest. The plays’ major fault is a persistent romanticism which, though far from insisting on a simple answer to life’s paradoxes as traditional or official LDS drama does, still wants the paradoxes laid out too neatly, with characters providing too careful a balance of conservatism and liberalism, obedience and integrity, Russian and American absurdity and duplicity. The plays need more of the surprising, unpredictable complexity *within* individual people, as well as *between*

them. But finally Rogers's earnestness is a fine resource. He is a seriously, naively religious man—as opposed to expediently, or traditionally, or wisely, or enthusiastically religious. He is one of God's fools.

A friend, seeing an early copy of this book, objected strongly to the title: "That's not a Mormon idea at all, the notion that religious faith is essentially foolish or absurd. Traditional Christian, perhaps, but not Mormon." I think he's wrong. Besides the strong New Testament theme of the gospel as foolishness to the Greek mind, and the universal scriptural idea that God will use the weak and foolish things of the earth to confound the mighty and wise, there is the startling Book of Mormon assertion that "the wise and the learned, and they that are rich, who are puffed up because of their learning, and their wisdom, and their riches" are the ones whom Christ *despises*—that is, until they "cast these things away, and consider themselves fools before God" (2 Ne. 9:42). And section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants should give a chill to anyone who has power over others—parents, teachers, church or government leaders when it warns that "almost all" who get a little authority "immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion." The only defenses against these terrible dangers are what often seem, not only to "the world" but also to Mormons and other religious people, to be forms of foolishness: "persuasion," "long-suffering," "gentleness and meekness," "love unfeigned," "faithfulness . . . stronger than the cords of death."

Huebener, the first play in this collection—and the first one Rogers wrote, some ten years ago—faces directly the dilemmas and costs of just such active pacifism. A young German becomes convinced, by listening to British broadcasts and comparing them meticulously to Nazi news, that his government is lying and eventually that it is immoral. This shakes the foundations of all his preconceptions, and, motivated particularly by his Mormon faith, he recruits other young Mormons to help him produce and disseminate anti-Nazi fliers throughout Hamburg. He is caught and beheaded, the prosecutor successfully arguing that though German law would prevent execution of a seventeen-year-old, Huebener must have a much older mind to have conceived and carried out his rebellion. These events have made Huebener a symbol of conscience to postwar Germans, particularly writers such as Gunther Grass and Nobel laureate Heinrich Boll. Huebener should also be a hero to Latter-day Saints all over the world because of his courage in finding his own resolution to perhaps the most harrowing of human paradoxes: integrity to self versus obedience to accepted authority. The paradox for Huebener—and for Mormons who are moved by Rogers's play to ponder his life—is compounded by additional facts: he used the Hamburg branch typewriter and duplicating machine to produce the fliers; his branch president discovered this and threatened to expose him; after he was actually denounced by someone else, the branch president, under pressure from the Gestapo, excommunicated him from the Church.

But what makes this play powerful drama, rather than merely challenging history, is Rogers's effective creation of devastating conflicts of loyalty within and between persons, not just between ideas:

ZOELLNER: Where the Church is concerned, I am in authority here, not you, Helmuth. And so I tell you this: if you persist in this most

unwise and totally fruitless course ... you will place the Church itself in great jeopardy....

HELMUTH: *Bruder Zoellner*, what will the Church be worth, if everywhere we have to sacrifice our Solomon Schwartzes [a Mormon Jew refused entry to the chapel by a cautious Zoellner], if we can only hold those meetings and say those things the *Fuehrer* approves of...

ZOELLNER: Don't you realize how dangerous this is—for you alone?

HELMUTH: I do. And I'm ... very frightened.

ZOELLNER: And are you sure you are justified in opposing the Church in this way? Because that is what you are doing!

HELMUTH: *Bruder Zoellner*, it is the Gospel itself that impels me to do these things. (36–37)

John D. Lee felt impelled by the gospel to what looks like the opposite conclusion: that he must obey his Church authorities even in an act he believed to be profoundly immoral. But Rogers shows us many similarities to Huebener. Lee was also a faithful Latter-day Saint who did what he did because of his faith; he too was excommunicated by his Church and executed by his government. And his story has also tended to be avoided, even suppressed, by Mormons unwilling to face the tragic dimensions of our history. Rogers's work on John D. Lee is carefully based on the meticulous, courageous research of Juanita Brooks, who as a faithful Mormon historian was the first who fully uncovered the main facts concerning the massacre of more than 120 emigrants by Mormon militiamen at Mountain Meadows during the tinderbox conditions of September 1857 when a federal army had been dispatched to Utah. Like Brooks, Rogers has helped Mormons not only to face a terrible moral failure of their own people but to do so in the healing context of art. As Levi Peterson showed us in his intelligent and compassionate essay on Brooks ("Juanita Brooks: The Mormon Historian as Tragedian," *Journal of Mormon History* 3 [1976]: 47–54), she herself, because of the quality of her human spirit and her powerful writing as well as her careful research, has functioned much like a classic tragedian to arouse the tragic emotions of loss of innocence, of pain and anguish and sympathy at intolerable loss, but in a way that is healing and redemptive. Rogers does this even more directly by taking us imaginatively into Lee's most intimate relationships (especially with his heroic, insightful wife, Emma) and his personal reflections about his own responsibility and about those who used him as a scapegoat:

These were all once my friends. They all know better. Jacob [Hamblin] too. Is it because we want so to be right, right at any cost—so that we don't know how to handle what is circumstantial or contradictory, specially in ourselves? ... Some may not believe in eternity enough for that to make any difference, but I do.... That's why I will face the punishment they insist on meting out to me—so my family can still revere my good name, even if no one else ever

does. That will be their blessing, and they will understand. And maybe I'll be blessed too—because others forced me to take on the entire responsibility, I will leave this life seeing some things far more clearly than most of them ever will. (115)

The other similarity to Huebener is that in 1961, partly through the efforts of Juanita Brooks, John D. Lee was reinstated as a Church member and his temple blessings restored. (Huebener was reinstated after the war, upon review by the Church General Authorities.) The most important idea in these two cases—certainly the most powerful force in Rogers's dramas about them—is forgiveness.

Forgiveness is also the central theme of the other two plays in this collection. Both of them seem to me less effective as drama than the first two. (Like Hawthorne, Rogers seems better at dramatizing a given past than at creating a believable present.) But *Reunion* succeeds in doing something no other Mormon play to date has done: It gives us a believable Mormon family who have real conflicts and make real mistakes and suffer and struggle with each other but who also learn, grow, love, forgive, and partially resolve their conflicts and accept atonement despite their mistakes. There is some simplistic stereotyping of typical Mormon liberals and conservatives and some awkwardly contrived explication of a host of too typical-Mormon "issues," but the harrowing dialogue is generally successful and often gripping, and the ending is courageously innovative and yet believable.

Journey to Golgotha takes on larger issues than *Reunion*, but, ironically, that very fact may be what makes it less effective as drama. Here Rogers deals with the costs of the current confrontation between superpower governments, especially the costs paid by "victims of conscience" or God's fools, those who value life above political expedience, loyalty to the divine over idolatry of the state. The story traces the disillusionment of a young Russian, who has been hired by the secret service to persecute Christians, and dramatizes his eventual conversion and his rediscovery of his Christian artist father, who had been liquidated by Stalin. The play develops some rather interesting and complex characters, especially an American who is every bit as cynically corrupted by his "democratic" country's power and reliance on the arm of flesh as his Russian counterparts are by their totalitarian country's similar idolatry. But overreliance on coincidence and on some rather hokey props (such as an icon in which the father's face appears) makes this play less satisfying overall than the others.

What can we hope, then, for Mormon drama? Robert Elliot has done nothing since *Fires of the Mind*. Orson Scott Card, whose early work was extremely promising, has turned, apparently permanently, to more lucrative genres, and other talented beginners, like Susan Howe and Robert Lowder, have not yet been given a proper production (though there is hope). Rogers himself has suffered from some neglect at BYU, where he is also one of the most talented directors. For instance, *Reunion* has not yet had the benefit of a full-scale professional production. Rogers deserves much better, and my hope for continued development of serious Mormon theater depends on my faith that he will continue to write and that his plays will be increasingly read and produced.

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