

A Playwright with a Passion for Unvarnished Depictions: An Interview with Tom Rogers

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One day when my BYU Greek class was awaiting the arrival of our teacher, Tom Rogers popped his head in the doorway and talked to us for ten or fifteen minutes or so. (One of my fellow students must have been a friend of his.) At that point he was well known for his plays *Huebener* and *Fire in the Bones*, which dealt with two conflicted tragic heroes in Mormon history, Helmuth Huebener and John D. Lee. Someone asked him why he wrote about such problematic figures. His answer, as I remember it, was, “Those kinds of situations are just so interesting!”

Recently, I've been preparing an article on problems in Mormon history as an avenue toward faith. That made me think of Tom Rogers's response, and I thought it would be worthwhile to probe further, in an informally written email interview (summer 2006), how he came to write his three plays on Mormon subjects—*Huebener* (1976), *Fire in the Bones* (1978), and *Reunion* (1979).¹ These plays show the dramatic power of problem issues in Mormon history. Leonard Arrington, in his essay, “The Search for Truth and Meaning in Mormon History,” warned against the “theological marionette” bias in Church history: “One gets the impression from some of our literature and sermons that the prophets and their associates in the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles were pious personages who responded somewhat mechanically, as if by conditional reflex, to explicit instructions from on high, and that God manipulated the leaders much as marionettes in a puppet show.”² Instead, I believe, a mature Mormon history (or literature) must deal with real people in conflict, sometimes Church members or leaders in conflict because they have differing views of what the gospel or the Church means. Another major flaw of the marionette fallacy is that it results in non-stimulating, sometimes sentimental history. Rogers's plays show how examin-

ing problems can bring history to vivid life. They also show how almost indescribably painful tragedies can both challenge and affirm our faith.

Todd: Tom, were you raised in the Church? Could you give us a little information on your Church background?

Tom: I was born in Salt Lake City in a Mormon family with multiple pioneer and early convert roots, of which for some reason I was only slightly aware until I had married and founded my own family—not perhaps until I was forty. On my mother’s side are both handcart pioneers from South Africa and converts from Herefordshire who were among and were related to one of the ministers of the United Brethren, preached to and baptized en masse by Wilford Woodruff. One of these, Daniel Collett, was later one of Joseph Smith’s bodyguards in Nauvoo. Also, from the Isle of Man and Liverpool and, along with the Herefordshirers, were Thomas Karren and Ann Radcliff Karren. This couple was among the earliest settlers of Lehi. Thomas participated in the Mormon Battalion and, with George Q. Cannon, served an early mission to the Sandwich Islands. From their and the Herefordshirers’ union stemmed a great-grandfather, Sylvanus Collett, who was the constable of Lehi, an Indian agent, colonel in the Utah Nauvoo Legion, close cohort of Orrin Porter Rockwell, and the lone defendant in the 1878 trial in Provo regarding the Aiken murders which shortly followed the Mountain Meadows Massacre in the fall of 1857. On my father’s side are some of the Church’s early New York state converts, particularly Isaac Rogers and Susan Mills Rogers, who received patriarchal blessings from Joseph Smith Sr.

My South African progenitors were handcart pioneers. Alexander Sims, one of Utah’s and Idaho’s first burr millers and a former spiritualist, was born in Aberdeen, Scotland. His wife, Elizabeth McDermott Sims, had truly exotic ancestry. Her father was Irish and her mother’s lineage extends through generations of mostly Dutch Boers, with some German, Austrian, and possibly Portuguese antecedents and—due to the Dutch East India Company’s ruthless exile of its local competition in Indonesia—a smattering of Indonesian Muslims, East Indians from Calcutta and Ceylon, and one Chinese, Bao Shen Ke.

In more recent times most of our Rogers line has repudiated the Church—even though its patriarch, my grandfather, had once been the young David O. McKay’s colleague and possible supervisor at the Weber Academy. I suspect that the constant, self-sacrificing devotion of my mother’s family and the more independent and skeptical position of my

father and his line have to some extent influenced my own tendency both to appreciate and to serve, as well as to sometimes engage, perhaps too critically, in the work of the Church. In practice, I have always deferred to my mother's example of faithful adherence to the gospel and am pleased to see the same pattern and attendant blessings in the lives of most of our children.

Todd: How did you get interested in being a dramatist? Your field of study, Russian literature, focuses more on novels.

Tom: I was, as an actor, already involved in plays while in high school and at the University of Utah. At the time, I was bent on majoring in international relations and a likely future career with the foreign service. Debate seemed like good training, so—along with my peers Gene England, Bob Bennett, Doug Alder, and Steve Covey—I was active in debate both at East High and during my freshman year at the University of Utah. Meanwhile, I had a few roles on the U of U stage and even more challenging ones at the Barry Lynn theater on Salt Lake's lower avenues. However, scheduling conflicts finally forced me to choose between debate and theater, and I opted for the latter—eventually fulfilling the requirements for a B.A. in both theater and political science. I think what led me to prefer the stage to debate was the sense that we get closer to real life when we involve ourselves in its affective side rather than in often equally staged polemics on a more abstract and theoretical level. The psychological and often irrational emotional causes of human action struck me as both more intriguing and more enlightening.

I also started Russian studies as a freshman, considering that particular language a critical and useful adjunct to political science. It was during the outset of the Cold War and the nadir of the McCarthy era, and we knew so very little about our former World War II allies, by then our demonized enemies, the Russians. The current parallel with Arabs and the Muslim world seems obvious. Russian was at least being taught back then in the Salt Lake City public schools. It seems unbelievable that the same cannot be said as yet for either Arabic or Mandarin Chinese.

Only after my mission to Germany and while I was in graduate school did I become fully aware of the wonders of classical Russian literature. Again, it was in an aesthetically intuitive way more than a rationally didactic discipline. It further underscored for me the universality of all human experience rather than its purported divisiveness, and it eventually served as the core subject matter I ended up teaching.

Earlier, simply because it was offered then, I took my first course in playwriting during my initial freshman quarter from the incomparable Robert Hyde Wilson. Out of it came my first full-length script, later directed by Professor David Morgan at the U of U's small "auxiliary" theater, the Play Box. Although this play, *Nest of Feathers*, was an inferior script and far too imitative of William Inge, the attempt and its production whetted my appetite to try again—particularly with submissions to a playwriting competition then sponsored by the Church's MIA. Later, due to a fluky misunderstanding of my qualifications for studying Russian on the graduate level, I applied for Yale's DFA program in playwriting and dramatic literature instead of Russian, which I pursued for the first two years there, again turning out more uninspired scripts because I hadn't yet connected my writing with my own psyche and truly fascinating Mormon concerns. In the meantime, I more fully discovered the profundity of Russian literature, which prompted me, while only a year away from completing that DFA, to switch disciplines. I've never regretted it, though it cost me another six years in graduate school.

Todd: I'm sure any list of the top ten plays written by Mormons would include your Huebener. How did you get the idea for writing about Helmuth Huebener?

Tom: My first mission was in northern Germany, with headquarters in Berlin. Hamburg, Huebener's home town and the site of his clandestine activity, was one of our cities. I recall a fellow missionary there mentioning Huebener's story on one occasion. He'd heard about it from a local member. This was fairly unusual, since our members and investigators were rather tight-lipped about their personal experience during World War II, which had ended just a decade earlier. I was only dimly aware that a number of those we worked with then had been members of the Nazi Party.

After my mission, I put the whole thing out of my mind. It was almost two decades later, as I served on the BYU faculty, that my colleague Alan Keele gave a presentation to our college faculty about Huebener's impact on important post-war German authors, notably Nobel Prize winners Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass. Knowing of my interest in writing plays, Alan singled me out during the same lecture and challenged me to write a play on the subject. Alan and history professor Douglas Tobler were about to publish a book about it and generously shared their research, which became the play's principal source.³ Till that moment I'd al-

most forgotten I'd ever written plays—so immersed had I meanwhile become in my career discipline, Russian literature.

Alan's unexpected challenge forcefully re-released the creative juices. The gracious interest and support just then of the BYU theater faculty was also an important catalyst.

Todd: Could you tell the basic Huebener story for readers who might be unfamiliar with it?

Tom: Helmuth Huebener, who, during his show trial in Berlin was characterized by the prosecution as having the mind of a thirty-year-old professor, was—despite the existing law protecting minors—condemned to death and beheaded at the age of seventeen. While listening to BBC shortwave accounts of the war (itself an illegal act), he'd become convinced that Hitler's propaganda machine was lying to the German nation about the war's progress. He was also strongly persuaded of the Nazi regime's tyrannous aggression against other peoples. As the trusted clerk to the LDS Hamburg District presidency, Huebener had access to a mimeograph machine, which he subsequently used to run off leaflets attacking Hitler and official Nazi accounts of the war. Recruiting two other young Latter-day Saints, Karl-Heinz Schnibbe and Ruddi Wobbe, he then proceeded to distribute the leaflets throughout Hamburg.

Later, he approached other youth to assist, including a co-worker at the state welfare office who eventually informed their supervisor, a loyal Nazi. The young men were arrested and brought to trial. To protect Schnibbe, who was technically no longer a minor, Helmuth took full responsibility for their deeds. Clearly, their discovery placed the Church, which was already viewed as an American entity, in great jeopardy. Huebener's conflict—to choose between his conscience and the loyalty required of him by those in power—is the common dilemma of classical tragedy—perhaps its most notable exemplar being Sophocles's *Antigone*, whose fatal heroism closely resembles Huebener's own. In part to protect the Church in Germany, Huebener was immediately excommunicated by his local priesthood leaders. After the war, when his story came to the attention of the General Authorities, Huebener's membership was reinstated by the First Presidency.

Todd: What themes attracted you in the Huebener story?

Tom: As I've suggested, it had the depth and proportion of a classic tragedy. I find similar dramatic impact in Mormonism's still most imposing novel-to-date, Maurine Whipple's *Giant Joshua*, whose plot uncannily

resembles the Hippolytus myth, first treated by Euripides, then brilliantly reworked in Racine's *Phaedra*. In a historical setting that would surely interest Mormon audiences, Huebener's story simply cried out for dramatic treatment. That was my only consideration at the time. It was also a story of which few Latter-day Saints were aware.

Todd: In the actual writing stage of the play, did you ever think, Oh-oh, my bishop (or brother, or conservative colleague) isn't going to like this?

Tom: No. Unlike Huebener and the outcomes he doubtless anticipated from his own authorial projects—his anti-Nazi pamphlets—I all along presumed that the play would receive a positive reception, which for the most part it, in fact, did. My bishop was actually one of its most enthusiastic viewers.

Again, the play was written during the heady period when LDS historians, particularly Arrington and company, were boldly moving forward with their own stimulating account and interpretation of our culture's past. Deseret Book had, for instance, just brought out Jim Allen and Glen Leonard's *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, intended, I'm told, for courses in the Church's seminaries and institutes and only subsequently critiqued and not reprinted because of its allusions to nineteenth-century polygamy.

At the same time, in almost unprecedented fashion, my views as BYU Honors director were featured in a two-page centerfold of the university's alumni magazine, *BYU Today*, under the heading, "Mormon Scholars: Thoughts from a Person Who Believes in the LDS Intellectual," and with a large cover photo of yours truly sporting his ubiquitous Richard Nixon four-o'clock shadow. Even the otherwise extremely cautious theater faculty were, at that time, strong champions of new plays like *Huebener* that dealt with LDS heritage and present-day Mormon life. The department sponsored a student production of *Reunion*, and, along with Lael Woodbury, then dean of the College of Fine Arts, both Charles Metten, department chair, and Ivan Crosland, *Huebener's* director, eagerly petitioned Academic Vice President Robert K. Thomas for permission to move ahead with a campus production of *Fire in the Bones*, a first-ever literary treatment of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. In a two-hour discussion, Thomas, who had keen instincts about political correctness, explained to the four of us why it would be imprudent to perform this play at BYU. At the time, even allusions to historical polygamy, which prominently figures in the play, proved taboo. *Fire in the Bones* was subsequently

produced in the Salt Lake Valley by the short-lived Greenbriar Theater, made up of former BYU student thespians. I was out of the country at the time and never saw it.

Todd: Just out of curiosity, were your wife and family supportive of plays like this? (Juanita Brooks's sister was angry with her when her book on the Mountain Meadows Massacre came out.)

Tom: Again, there was no sense or suspicion in those halcyon days that, in our explorations, we were at all dissident. In their *Story of the Latter-day Saints*, Allen and Leonard constantly reassure the reader of their faith and fundamental commitment to the Church. In the same spirit, I wrote my plays, enjoying all the good will and trust one could ever ask for. It was truly a Camelot, not unlike the Arrington group's history-writing enterprise.

Todd: Tell us about the first performance of Huebener [fall 1976, Margetts Arena Theater, BYU, Provo, Utah].

Tom: I certainly didn't expect the sensational response we got. As few plays ever do, it became a true "happening." After the penultimate dress rehearsal, I turned to our director, Ivan Crosland, and exclaimed, "This is *Danton's Death* warmed over! It's so heavy, so somber." From the opening curtain, the actors representing Huebener's family all felt so sorry for themselves because they could already foresee the play's dismal conclusion. Recognizing this, Ivan encouraged them instead to be elated about the pending arrival of Huebener's half-brother Gerhard, on leave from the front. They had to be cheerful and optimistic because they were oblivious at this point about Helmuth's clandestine activity. That made all the difference.

For both the premiere performance and the anniversary of Helmuth's execution, about a month later, we had intentionally rigged what proved to be an extremely dramatic "postscript." After the initial applause, a line of three equally placed spotlights again lit the stage. In the first stood the real Karl-Heinz Schnibbe, in the third the real Ruddi Wobbe—Huebener's two principal teenage LDS co-conspirators. The middle spot remained empty, commemorating Huebener's own unavoidable absence. The effect was to bring events portrayed through artistic representation vividly into the audience's awareness—almost into their laps in the tiny Margetts Arena Theater. Two others who had known Huebener—the sister who had been his Sunday School teacher and to whom he had written one of his last letters, which we quote in the play, and the brother who had



Russ Card as Huebener, and Margaret Blair Young as Huebener's mother, in the 1976 premiere performance. Courtesy of Mark A. Philbrick University Photographer, Brigham Young University.

replaced him as the Church's district clerk—were also present and introduced to the audience, together with Lotte and Siegfried Guertler, professional thespians who, before their own post-war emigration, had as local Church members in Hamburg also known the young Huebener and the other principals. (Karl-Heinz and I had both played roles together on the stage of the Guertlers' Deutsches Teater, Salt Lake City.)

The effect was stunning, and word quickly spread. The play's initial run was extended for a number of additional weeks, so that its small experimental theater venue (with a seating capacity for at most 250 persons) finally accommodated, by my estimate, an approximate 5,000 viewers. Aaronic Priesthood advisors brought their quorums to it and so forth. On the Monday of the final advertised week, students sat in long serpentine lines on the Fine Arts Building's main floor, already queued to purchase the last batch of tickets, as normally happens only for athletic events at the Marriott Center.

Its Pardoe Theater main-stage audiences during the 2000 BYU revival were equally interested and enthusiastic. More recently, I directed a production for the Bountiful Fine Arts Theater, which was acclaimed by the *Deseret News* as among the state's five best for that year's season.

Todd: You compare the moral conflict in Huebener to the conflict in Antigone where she had to choose between two admirable ideals: loyalty to family and loyalty to state. I was struck by how sympathetic and reasonable you make both Huebener and his branch president Zoellner, and their ideals. You can argue that both are completely right and completely wrong. What Huebener did by supporting the principles of honesty and liberty went against the Church policy of supporting local governments; he endangered the Church in Nazi Germany and all Mormons could have been sent to extermination camps as a result of his actions. On the other hand, Zoellner, being loyal to a local government in accordance with Church policy, was thereby supporting a state practicing pre-emptive war, mass murder, and open racism, which the play brings out in the scene when a Mormon Jew is prevented from attending church. Would you say your play treats the difficulty of finding absolute right or wrong in many situations?

Tom: That is what makes the situation such an intriguing dramatic dilemma: competing "goods," only one of which one can be settled on. I agree that I probably idealized both Huebener and, for sure, his branch president to some extent. I've been told the branch president was a fanatically loyal Nazi and would have been far less sympathetic toward Helmuth, had he at all known about his activities prior to the latter's arrest. I've been told on good authority, in fact, that, when the branch president did find out about Huebener's activities, he exclaimed, "If I'd known, I'd have shot him myself!" Some have suggested that the play's Helmuth is almost too fearless and self-composed. Sensing this, I've tried to encourage those who portray him to reflect with body language, furtive looks, etc., what would be normal apprehension about what he was undertaking.

I also gave him a line in which he admits his fear. On the other hand, our best source about Helmuth's truly unusual personality, his still-living, close friend Karl-Heinz, who has, over the years, generously attended and fielded questions at a number of post-performance discussions in Provo, Bountiful, and elsewhere, has always contended that Helmuth *was* unusually determined and courageous—clearly a motivating inspiration for Karl-Heinz to this very day.

Todd: My last question was a bit awkward. Perhaps better: In Huebener

and Antigone the protagonist has to choose between conflicting loyalties and conflicting truths. Would you say that some truths take precedence over other truths?

Tom: I'm sure they do, but as often as not from a very limited personal and unavoidably subjective perspective—as with faith itself. There is no question that Huebener's position vis-à-vis Hitler and Hitler's war machine was the only morally correct one. What he could have ever really accomplished that would make a lasting difference by so openly defying it is, nevertheless, moot. I suppose those of us who so oppose the relentless Karl Rove machine and our present government's ongoing and, in my view, both unfounded and counter-productive actions in the Middle East may be a further instance—and we believe ourselves to belong to a democratic and not a totalitarian society, where enough people's collective views still have some influence. Doubtless, the unpopularity of the course our leaders took in Vietnam eventually helped bring about the belated conclusion of that particular debacle.

Huebener's prospects were far more limited and, in turn, put the Church and its members in great jeopardy. But who can fully foresee such things? His cause was both noble and extremely heroic; but its outcome, where both he and others were concerned, was as disastrous as where our present government's myopic hubris and incompetence have now led us.

Todd: I recently saw *Night and Fog*, a great short documentary on the Holocaust by Alain Resnais. Though I knew all the facts about the Holocaust and have met people whose close relatives survived it, the documentary was still really shocking. At one point, they talked about the people in leadership in the death camps. After the war, these people said, "I'm not responsible." Over and over: "I'm not responsible." The torture, the mass murders—all open and widely known; but the administrators saying, "I'm not responsible." It made me realize that Huebener did the right thing morally. If you tacitly support the Nazi government, you're partially responsible. No question here, but I'm sure you have a comment.

Tom: Only to add, Todd, that we see such denial everywhere, don't we—in ourselves and in a variety of contexts? Think of Enron, etc. Or the alibis almost all politicians resort to, figuratively or not, when they're caught with their pants down: "I never inhaled." Or "As a youth, I was abused by a priest."

Todd: You say that in 1976, you (including Alan Keele and Douglas Tobler) were asked to desist from further productions or publications on the subject of Huebener. Could you talk about that?

Tom: Of course, a few religious dissidents have here and there made

more of it than they should have (much as some have done regarding Richard Bushman's excellent and faithful biography, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*), but the play had immense appeal for the general public. Glowing reviews in the Salt Lake newspapers apparently alerted certain General Authorities to possible unfavorable fallout affecting certain members and the Church's welfare in distant places. I've never been sure why in 1976 we were asked to desist from further productions or publications on the subject. Some have speculated that it might have somehow interfered with plans to erect a temple behind the Iron Curtain in Freiberg, Germany. I've looked into the matter with those East German Saints of my acquaintance to whom authorities of the DDR (Deutsche Demokratische Republik) first recommended the Church's doing so. However, the timing doesn't exactly coincide. We will never really know.

Todd: Who contacted you? Could you describe how that happened?

Tom: BYU's president, Dallin Oaks, conveyed the request to the three of us. It had come from members of the Board of Trustees responsible for Church affairs in Europe, including East Germany, which was still under Soviet occupation. We also had a number of members in Allende's Chile, which was at that point a socialist nation. It seemed possible, if unlikely, that one or more well-intentioned members in those countries might be inclined, if it came to their attention, to emulate Huebener vis-à-vis their own regimes, with dire consequences for the Church. I and others have speculated about other possible reasons. Suffice it to say that, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a BYU main stage revival of the play proceeded without any official complaint or censure—as have other productions of the play since then.

Todd: I was struck by that quotation from BYU President Rex Lee on the back of Huebener and Other Plays with reference to his ancestor John D. Lee, the only person convicted and executed for participating in the Mountain Meadows Massacre. He said: "I have always struggled with why any rational human beings could have done what my great grandfather and others did on September 11, 1857. I still don't understand it. But I get more of an insight from your play than I ever had before. It's not that you present any more facts. I knew them all. . . . I doubt you could have written an essay that would have recreated the dynamics that may have existed in Cedar City on that Sunday evening quite as helpfully as did your play." How did that blurb on your book come about? Did Rex write you a letter?

Tom: I had the temerity to share the play with President Lee when I read about the conciliatory event he had helped organize at Mountain

Meadows between his own clan and that of the Fanchers. His response was the gracious letter of acknowledgment you cite, which he then gave me permission to use on the anthology's back cover.

Todd: How would you advise Mormon playwrights to deal with problem issues? Will this be healthy for the Mormon community?

*Tom: We constantly need to remind ourselves—despite our idealistic striving—of our humanity, our flawed natures. We need existential humility as much as others, maybe even more so as we represent the restored gospel and its fulness to them. Such narratives can serve us in a cautionary fashion, both individually and as a society. All that we have to share, which is so vital and precious, would have even greater appeal if we operated on a more horizontal level, both with one another and with everyone else. Otherwise, we are less than genuine: we play a hypocritical role and are self-deceived. As a Polish non-member visiting professor put it to me after seeing my play, *Reunion*: “The people here [in Utah] are sincerely trying to be artificially better than they are.” In this regard, the Savior was, as in all else, our finest, purest, most reliable role model.*

*Todd: One theme I noticed in my recent re-reading of your plays is the danger of complete, morally unexamined obedience. John D. Lee (who, as you say in the introduction to *Huebener and Other Plays*, is a more ambiguous protagonist than Huebener, but still heroic in some ways) might be an example. On the one hand, he followed the orders of his leaders (Haight, his stake president, and Dame, also a stake president and his commanding officer in the militia), and participated in the massacre. By the principles of “mechanical” Church obedience, he was right. But on another level, the massacre was terribly wrong, and Lee should have rejected obedience in that situation. In some ways, he strikes me as more comparable to Zoellner, in Huebener, than he is to Huebener. Would you agree?*

*Tom: In his *Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn pointedly argues: “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” The hero of Solzhenitsyn's novel, *The First Circle*, in turn comes to realize that “not by birth, not by the work of one's hands, not by the wings of education is one elected into the people. But by one's inner self. Everyone forges his inner self year after year. One must try to temper, to cut, to polish one's soul so as to become a human being. And thereby become a tiny particle of one's own people.” I think this perception also has application to our*

own individual authenticity or lack of it as Latter-day Saints and members of Zion.

I also resonate to the following: “The belief in God does not guarantee the knowledge of God’s wishes. This is the most elementary lesson of the history of religious faith. The believer lives in the darkness more than he lives in the light. He does not wallow in God’s guidance, he thirsts for it” (Leon Wieseltier).⁴ “The spirit of liberty is the spirit that is not too sure that it is right” (Learned Hand).⁵ “With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion” (Steven Weinberg).⁶ “Any religious symbol, so interpreted that it refers not to a thought-transcending mystery but to a thought-enveloping social order, misappropriates to the lower principle the values of the higher and so (to use a theological turn of phrase) sets Satan in the seat of God” (Joseph Campbell).⁷ And, finally, from my wife, Merriam: “Consideration can’t be any more legislated than morality.”

Todd: Would you explain, then, how you see Lee as a scapegoat, and heroic?

Tom: I doubtless use the term “hero” in more than one way: first, simply, as a protagonist or principal character. Then (not always the same) as noble in character. I view Lee more in terms of the former definition—like Arthur Miller’s Willy Loman, circumstantially more sinned against than sinning but certainly not of flawlessly saintly stature.

Lee’s sacrifice and service as an early missionary and as the chief provisioner of the first Mormon pioneers was nevertheless valiant and truly noteworthy. On the other hand, his involvement in the Mountain Meadows debacle was unfortunate and deeply tragic; there, his response was confused and weak because he lacked what Solzhenitsyn elsewhere refers to as an essential “individual point of view” or conscience, which we might relate to what we call the influence of the Holy Ghost.

I very much doubt that, in the strained circumstances of 1857, the voice of the Spirit was sufficiently sought or listened to. Then, again, there’s the matter of competing goods or, in tragedy, vicissitudes, where choosing the high road is fraught with loneliness, pain, and more immediate peril. The branch president in *Huebener* is less flawed because he has not, in fact, betrayed that play’s protagonist but only disagreed with him. The actual person on whom he is modeled was also not involved in Huebener’s arrest, though, after learning of the event, his response was far less empathetic.

After all the time that has elapsed since the initial production of

Huebener—thirty-two years, in fact—it only now occurs to me why the story and the play’s treatment of it have had such universal appeal. Plot-wise, the reason is almost purely situational. Although there is a decidedly external enemy out there—the Nazi regime—the play’s real conflict occurs within an otherwise ideologically unified Church congregation and, beyond that, within individual characters. The presumed dichotomy of more righteous Mormons versus less enlightened or less valiant nonmembers isn’t even implied. Instead, we witness a welter of confusion, disagreement and viewpoints—as in any body of believers. The same dynamic also takes place in both *Fire in the Bones* and *Reunion*.

Such an approach is, I believe, closer to real life and something with which viewers, whether insiders or the uninitiated, can more readily identify. Such an approach to religious subjects also avoids preaching or special pleading. Any spiritual “lesson”—or sense of inner struggle on the part of earnest believers—comes through subtly and between the lines and is therefore less annoying and more forceful. Such treatments of ourselves and our religious tradition strike me as far more winning in the long run—sparking both broader and keener audience interest because, again, they are that much truer to how things really are.

Todd: Turning again to Fire in the Bones, how closely would you say your play follows the actual chain of events in the Mountain Meadows Massacre and its aftermath?

Tom: That play is a fairly faithful account of John D. Lee’s involvement in the Massacre. I based it almost wholly upon Juanita Brooks’s critically acclaimed history of the event and her biographies of both John D. Lee and his youngest wife, Emma. For dramatic effect, its beginning and concluding scenes reprise the moment of his execution. (Curiously, the noted author Judith Freeman used a similar narrative frame in her recent novel on the same subject, *Red Water*.) Lee, of course, is a complex character because, while he took a principal part in the massacre, he is generally regarded as having been unjustly singled out in 1877 for punishment. Interestingly, as I mentioned before, my own great-grandfather, Sylvanus Collett, went to trial in Provo in 1878, accused, in concert with the recently deceased Orrin Porter Rockwell and two other men, of having dispatched, in all, four ill-fated emigrants from California, the Aiken party, a month or so after Mountain Meadows. I’ve written a play on that subject entitled *First Trump* (not yet produced) and also recently completed the draft of a related first novel whose working title is *The Book of Lehi*. How-

ever, when I wrote *Fire in the Bones*, I was but dimly aware of my ancestor's escapades. So there was no personal motive in writing a play about the Mountain Meadows Massacre—only that, like *Huebener*, it struck me as, in addition to its historical interest and fascinating moral complexity, ideal material for dramatic treatment.

Todd: You said that Fire in the Bones was performed at the Greenbriar Theater after its BYU performances. What did you hear about the production? Has it been performed since then?

Tom: Fire in the Bones had won a cash award in a Utah State Fine Arts play writing competition. The award gave the competition the right to offer it for a production to any performing group in the state. The short-lived Greenbriar Theater, based in Sandy, was founded by several recently graduated BYU theater alumni. At the time of my play's production, I was directing the BYU Study Abroad program in Vienna and was unaware of its disposition to that theater. I first got wind of it when the State Fine Arts division mailed me pre-publicity notices from the Salt Lake newspapers. Their tone made the play sound like an anti-Mormon tract, and I wondered if there might be repercussions since I was in the Church's employ. Compounding this concern was the fact the play's performances would coincide with another LDS general conference—as had the premiere performances of *Huebener*. I returned from abroad after the play's run had ended, so I never saw it. This time there was, to my knowledge and considerable relief, no public controversy. The production appears to have died a quiet death and is, as far as I know, the only one thus far. However, the play was recently reprinted in the Association for Mormon Letters journal *Irreantum*.⁸

It has always amazed me, parenthetically, that at the time of their premieres in, respectively, Dublin and Rome—and not unlike the initial reception of Stravinsky's *The Rites of Spring* in Paris—two of the plays I was privileged to direct for the BYU Department of Theater, both by now tame enough pieces in the classical repertoire, actually provoked public riots—Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* and Pirandello's *It Is So If You Think So*.

Todd: Just incidentally, I'm writing a biography of Jacob Hamblin, who is viewed fairly unsympathetically in your play. He's a lot more complex than people realize.

Tom: I'll be eager to read your account. The scene in which Hamblin berates Emma Lee for not divorcing John D. after his excommu-

nication derives from Juanita Brooks's biography, *Emma Lee*, based on her journal, published by Utah State University. I took a certain dramatic license in suggesting that Hamblin wanted to woo Emma to become another of his own wives. However, the fact that Hamblin gave damning hearsay testimony against Lee at the latter's second trial—asserting that Hamblin's Indian boy had witnessed Lee cutting the throats of Fancher women—is on record.

Todd: I read over your first three plays recently; and in the first two plays, I was struck by the theme of excommunication. The experience of actual excommunication, for a true believer like Huebener, must have been overwhelming. One of the problem themes in those two plays, for a person with an institutionally conservative point of view, would be that excommunications can be carried out at one time and rescinded years later (though after death, in our two cases). This certainly detracts from the moral force of excommunications. Was this a theme that you were drawn to, or would you say it simply happened to occur in both Huebener and Fire in the Bones?

*Tom: It was strictly coincidental that the protagonists of my first two important plays—Huebener and John D. Lee—were excommunicated and, in both cases, had their membership posthumously restored. Naturally, that very circumstance added special poignancy to their stories. Only after both plays were written and received productions did I in fact realize that, plot-wise, I'd fallen into a rut. It was then, in order to right what seemed like a kind of thematic imbalance or too limited focus in what I'd so recently explored as a playwright, that I conceived of the play, *Reunion*, in which two brothers square off at each other regarding their diametrically opposed viewpoints about life and the gospel. They were, if you will, the thesis and antithesis whose synthesis—articulated and personified by their dying father, a former institute teacher—is that ultimate truth transcends both their passionate and so universally human positions.*

Incidentally, I had a passing acquaintance as a Danforth Fellow with John Danforth, the former Missouri senator and U.N. ambassador who is also an Episcopalian minister. (His family, the Ralston cereal-Purina chow magnates, sponsored those fellowships.) John Danforth has recently brought out a book similarly arguing that, while allowing our moral and religious concerns to influence our response to government and social issues, none of us ought so smugly to equate our strong political biases, whether conservative or liberal, with God's omniscient will.⁸

Todd: Was Reunion easier or harder to write than your former two plays?



Members of the BYU English faculty and others giving a staged reading of *Reunion*, 1979–80. Courtesy of Thomas F. Rogers.

Tom: *Reunion* wrote itself. I recall having heard practically every line out of the mouth of one or another acquaintance. Or having said it myself on some occasion.

Todd: Could you summarize the main characters and main dramatic conflicts in the play?

Tom: *Reunion* is mostly an *agon* [Greek: competition or contest], an argument between two brothers who represent what the LDS historian Richard Poll suggested were the Iron Rod versus the Liahona mentalities among Church members.⁹ It's a sort of dialectic in which the Robison family's dying patriarch transcends his sons' bickering with a more Christ-like perspective, insisting that ultimate truth and wisdom surpass the partisan disputations we are so prone to as we mutually contend about our righteousness and which moral stance is correct. Instead, Arthur Robison urges reconciliation.

Intuitively, his less articulate wife conveys the same transcendent perspective. A younger brother is momentarily dissuaded from serving a mission; but during a blessing requested by their father, he is possibly persuaded to reconsider his options—as is a hitherto wayward sister. I've rather facetiously called this play the first Mormon “soap.”

Todd: You performed in Reunion, and so did some of your personal friends, such as Marden and Harlow Clark. Can you tell us about those early rehearsals and performances?

Tom: I recruited the cast largely from the BYU English faculty. They all felt a quick affinity with the play's characters and the issues it explored—which, I believe, made their acting so persuasive and credible. They were wonderfully supportive during the play's frequent staged readings in the BYU law school auditorium. Harlow had recently returned from a mission, and his father Marden read the part of the father with deep and sensitive understanding—reflecting, I suspect, his own past experience with students and members of his own family. For ten years after his retirement, he served as a campus bishop in a married student ward.

Todd: On the phone, you told me about varied reactions to Reunion. Could you repeat what you told me?

Tom: At the end of each reading, we held a lively discussion with audience members. Quite often someone would first say that he or she found the characters artificial and a caricature of real Latter-day Saints. Invariably, someone then popped up and declared, "No. That's my family." Or "That's my mother," etc. For most, the discussion seemed cathartic—a recognition that we are all flawed and vulnerable and limited in perspective, even as we earnestly attempt to live gospel-oriented lives. Acknowledging our common human detritus seemed to encourage those present to feel they were on an even playing field with everyone else, that they were more accepted, more capable of persevering and fighting the good fight. During one such discussion, an associate dean from the School of Business disparaged the play as "a slur on the Mormon family," but his response was atypical. The fact that the play so viscerally involved its audience was, I felt, an indication of its effectiveness as a "think piece."

Todd: I'm really struck by how idealized we want our lives and our history—and our ancestors—to be. It's a very human desire. I remember once a family friend told us we (my family) were the "perfect family"; we just laughed heartily at that one. We knew all about our painful moments and our moments of conflict. But it raises the question: What is the value of looking at dysfunctional families and relationships?

Tom: To humble us and help us recognize that dysfunctionality and find encouragement in the realization that we all partake of the same human condition. As that visiting professor colleague from Poland put it to

me after viewing the play, “The people here [in Utah] are sincerely trying to be artificially better than they are.”

Todd: Sam Taylor tells the story of having characters in his fiction that were widely criticized as unrealistic. So in his next novel, he included a character drawn totally from life. And the critics pounced on that one as the least lifelike character of all!

Tom: Truth, as we often say, is indeed stranger than fiction—to which some wag has quipped that art is less strange than real life because art has to make a certain sense. I suspect, however, that there are readers and viewers (including some critics) who are only comfortable with stereotypes and would therefore tend to react in the way you describe. For me, an effective idiosyncratic trait or gesture individualizes and consequently brings a character all the more to life.

Todd: That person called your play a slur on the Mormon family, yet I know many families where some members are active Mormons and others are less active or actively disbelieving or apathetic. It’s a difficult challenge for the active Mormons, who can easily come off as judgmental. The liberals can be just as judgmental, in a different way.

*Tom: Are there possible limits to our so thoroughly “institutionalizing” the Spirit? We all know jack Mormons with hearts of gold who are less smug and far more generous and giving than many of the rest of us. (Now that he has left us, I can perhaps mention that the otherwise circumpect Leslie Norris once conveyed to me a similar impression of many Mormons, using that same adjective, “smug.”) We need to be more aware of how others see us. For all that, I both acknowledge and am inclined to believe what a partially disaffected member recently wrote in an anonymously authored letter to *Dialogue*: “It [the Church] contains some of the most wonderful people we have ever met, and it does more good in the world, ‘pound for pound,’ than any other organization we know of.”¹⁰*

Todd: I liked the ending of Reunion, where the very active son (flawed) and the liberal, inactive son (flawed) come together under the leadership of their (flawed) father. Why did you choose a ritual to end the play?

*Tom: It wasn’t calculated. It just occurred to me and felt right—much as I often feel uncomfortable hearing actors mouth prayers on stage. On such occasions, I’ve even seen BYU audience members close their eyes and bow their heads in unison. Claudius’s vain prayer in *Hamlet* is certainly an exception, but it is highly dramatic—ironically self-accusing and far from pious. You’ll notice that, in *Reunion*, the stage directions indi-*

cate a dimming of lights and “Curtain” before any words can be spoken. I will admit an instinctive penchant on my part to conclude this and other plays with a kind of ritual. As I wrote in the preface to the first anthology of my plays, *God’s Fools*: “The ritual—be it a toast [as in *Huebener*], an execution [*Fire in the Bones*, also *Huebener*], or a blessing [*Reunion* and *God’s Fools*—is foreshadowed early in each play and, in each case, concludes it. The nature of this ritual, or at least the use made of it in its particular dramatic context, serves and was motivated, I’d now like to think, to affirm some transcendent, post-mortal connection between the hero and his eternal destiny.”¹¹

Todd: Would you say that the ending of the play leaves us with a family that is not necessarily different in their Church activity, but is more loving?

Tom: Yes, probably so. But that’s already a great step forward, wouldn’t you say? As important as a formal commitment or any amount of affirmative rhetoric. Words alone are cheap.

Todd: You could interpret Reunion’s ending as a statement about Church activity versus love. How do you see the interplay of love and the institutional church at the end of the play?

Tom: Well, the blessing by a patriarch (in this case, husband and father) is, as such, prescribed and encouraged by the Church. Without such an institutional incentive, I doubt it would even occur to the principals, let alone take place. But note this particular blessing’s intimacy, its spontaneity. Although impelled by Arthur’s desperate calculation to bring his children together, the home teachers, for instance, who also appear as characters in the play, did not recommend it. Nor did any other ecclesiastical leader.

Todd: As a writer of Mormon history, I see the need to look frankly and carefully at problems in Mormon history, practice, and scripture, in order to view them with full, authentic faith and come to resolution with them. Would you say that’s a dramatic theme in all three of the plays we’ve discussed?

Tom: By its very nature, drama deals with conflict and with what is problematic—if successful and relevant, addressing real life, not necessarily offering solutions but raising issues and related questions. In a Mormon context, therefore, dealing with such problems is unavoidable. And, yes, I agree with you that awareness of the facts as we can best know them is a firmer and more honest foundation for faith. If we appear to have something to hide, doubts readily arise.

Besides, the historical or biographical nitty-gritty, once you delve

into it, is far more fascinating than air brushing or spin. If properly apprehended, it also fosters even greater admiration for the very human struggle all men and women, including our idols, have been through. Think of President Kimball's marvelous biographies, Elder Busche's refreshingly candid autobiography,¹² the Bible's frequent depiction of personal flaws in Old Testament patriarchs and kings as well as Christ's apostles, the confessions of youthful waywardness by various Book of Mormon prophets, not to mention Joseph Smith's self-effacing personal history in the Pearl of Great Price and the reproaches and admonishments he receives from the Lord in various revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. These unvarnished depictions encouragingly help us identify with such figures and render them even more heroic—as do the circumstances and portrayal of character that underlie all viable tragedy and realism.

I was called to serve as a director of BYU's Honors program about the time I started writing these plays. I was also, simultaneously, a campus branch president. Perhaps I was naive at the time, but in those days there appeared to be a seamless relationship between free intellectual inquiry and faith. That was, of course, before the culture wars and before more widespread radical dissent descended upon us. I will add that, in the late sixties, I was induced to further pursue my teaching career by moving to BYU from a state institution, in part because I felt that my students at the latter school were extremely self-assured and their minds were already fairly well made up, often skeptically, about life and its ultimate purposes. In contrast, it seemed to me, many a more committed LDS young person, as at BYU, was in considerable need of humanistic broadening—which, in turn, gave me a personal sense of "mission" I felt less at the University of Utah. Though largely subconscious, I think that same impulse underlay my urge to write the plays we've been discussing.

Todd: Here's a general one. If you were to pick the five plays that have influenced you the most, what would they be? Feel free to add other plays, but start with five.

Tom: That's hard. I'd rather just mention particular playwrights. In my early years I fell under the sway of the three leading contemporary American playwrights, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and William Inge. With my penchant for biographical and historical subjects, I am probably closer to Miller, whose Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is based on an uncle of his, whose *After the Fall* revisits his marriage with Marilyn Monroe, and whose *Crucible* is, as we know, an allegory for the

McCarthy era “witch hunts.” Of the more recent English language playwrights, I have often cited as our finest the British absurdist Harold Pinter (*The Homecoming*, *The Caretaker*), the Irishman Brian Friel (*Dancing at Lughnasa*), the late American black August Wilson (*Fences*, *The Piano*, etc.) and the, for me, utterly amazing Sam Shepard (whose actual surname, incidentally, is also Rogers) (*Buried Child*, *Fool for Love*, *Lies of the Mind*).

For me, Shakespeare has always been something of an enigma. I admire him from a distance but more readily relate to his earthier contemporary, Ben Jonson. Late in the day, critics like Yale’s Harold Bloom, Harvard’s Stephen Greenblatt, and Oxford’s late A. D. Nuttall have helped me better fathom from the subtle clues that relate various plots and seemingly disparate characters the pattern of Shakespeare’s ultimate sympathies and world view. As Nuttall keeps insisting, “Shakespeare did everything. . . . It is remarkably hard to think of anything Shakespeare has not thought of first.”¹⁴ Everyone should read Nuttall’s very recent *Shakespeare the Thinker*.

Of the classic Greek triad, I prefer and resonate most with Euripides, who, with his larger number of extant plays, was also clearly the most popular of the three in the ancient world. If more sensational than Aeschylus and Sophocles, he is also, psychologically, the most profound, the most modern. In a number of respects, Euripides is, for me, a supreme model. I believe that his frequent female protagonists are also emblems of his beloved city-state, Athens, and that, in ways hard to fathom, their tragic destinies reflect that nation’s decline. His last play, *The Bacchae*, is an amazing commentary on political hubris as well as on the perils of both spiritual and artistic pretension.

Back to Shakespeare: As Harold Bloom has observed, the Bard was the very first writer in all human history to portray characters debating within themselves a course of action. That strikes me as, in turn, what playwrights do when they assign this or that opposed viewpoint to various characters. They are really just debating within themselves the issues that so fascinate and compel them.

Allow me, in conclusion, to say just this much more about truly serious literature—realistic fiction and tragedy—which, despite Aristotle’s claim for its “purgation of the emotions,” seems so off-putting to many. Just recently, in fact, another emeritus scholar chided my enthusiastic endorsement of Cormac McCarthy’s latest profound if predictably stark novel, *The Road*, indicating that, as a patriarch, he could not recommend

it to others. His declaration was a reminder that temperamentally we are all different, but it left me wondering how he handles the Book of Mormon's depictions of slaughter and carnage—whether he sees in them any elevating purpose? Or how he would respond to Joseph Smith's "Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss."¹⁵

For me, anyway, if not for everyone, the honest depiction of tragic events has important spiritual-ethical import. Besides serving as an object lesson, it arouses Christlike compassion for those less fortunate and also conveys to us—even in its default and frequent absence—the nobility of self-sacrificing behavior as, when necessity dictates, the greatest of goods and the most beautiful thing imaginable. If we can catch tragedy's transcendent vision and allow it to inspire us, then we, too, will strive for that same nobility and cherish its beauty above all else that self-indulgently lures us. If we can respect it sufficiently, it might just "save" some of us.

Todd: Many thanks, Tom. This conversation has been very interesting and enlightening.

Tom: Thanks, Todd, for your questions.

Notes

1. Both have been published in *God's Fools: Plays of Mitigated Conscience* (Midvale, Utah: Eden Hill, distributed by Signature Books, 1983) and *Huebener and Other Plays* ([Provo, Utah]: Poor Robert's Publications, 1992).

2. Leonard J. Arrington, "The Search for Truth and Meaning in Mormon History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1968): 56–66; reprinted in D. Michael Quinn, ed., *The New Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 1–12. I use the Quinn source. The quotation is on p. 6.

3. Blair R. Holmes and Alan F. Keele, eds., *When Truth Was Treason: German Youth against Hitler: The Story of the Helmuth Huebener Group Based on the Narrative of Karl-Heinz Schnibbe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995). See also Alan F. Keele and Douglas F. Tobler, "The Führer's New Clothes: Helmuth Huebener and the Mormons in the Third Reich," *Sunstone* 5, no. 6 (November-December 1980), 20–29.

4. Leon Wieseltier, *New Republic*, November 22, 2004.

5. Learned Hand's swearing-in speech before some 150,000 new U.S. citizens in New York's Central Park, 1944, in Gerald Gunther, *Learned Hand: The Man and Judge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 549.

6. Steven Weinberg, "A Designer Universe?" *New York Review of Books*, October 21, 1999, 46–48.

7. Joseph Campbell, *The Flight of the Gander* (Washington, D.C.: Gateway Publishing, 1960), 206–7.

8. Thomas R. Rogers, *Fire in the Bones*, *Irreantum* 8, no. 2 (2006): 34–85.

9. John Danforth, *Faith and Politics: How the "Moral Values" Debate Divides America and How to Move Forward Together* (New York: Viking, 2006).

10. Richard D. Poll, "What the Church Means to People Like Me," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1967): 107–17; rpt. in Richard D. Poll, *History and Faith: Reflections of a Mormon Historian* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), chap. 1, also online at <http://www.signaturebookslibrary.org/history/chapter1.htm>.

11. Name Withheld, "Shall I Go or Shall I Stay?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2006): vi.

12. Thomas R. Rogers, *God's Fools: Plays of Mitigated Conscience*, xi.

13. Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball: The Early and Apostolic Years* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006); Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005); F. Enzo Busche, *Yearning for the Living God: Reflections from the Life of F. Enzo Busche*, edited and compiled by Tracie A. Lamb (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004).

14. A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), 265.

15. Joseph Smith Jr. et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980 printing): 3:295.