

PERUSAL SCRIPT



PRODIGAL SON

by James Goldberg



ZION THEATRICALS

Newport, Maine

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Prodigal Son

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Artwork by Steve Morrison for the New Play Project as published in “Out Of The Mount.” Used by permission.

“Prodigal Son,” by James Goldberg, was originally performed in April 2008 at The New Play Project.

Director: Katherine Gee

Assistant Director: Ben Crowder

Son: Dave Dixon

Girlfriend: Katherine Way

Dad: James Goldberg

“Prodigal Son” has been previously published in *The Best of Mormonism* 2009.

The winner of the 2008 Association for Mormon Letters prize for Drama.

CHARACTERS — 2m 1f

Daniel Pratt — SON

CHRISTY Chang — the girlfriend

Mr. Pratt — DAD

PRODIGAL SON by James Goldberg 2m 1f About 30 minutes. Simple Settings, if desired, an open space will do, with a few small props. Contemporary Costumes. After having been groomed throughout his young life by his father in anti-Mormon sentiment, the Son, Daniel, meets a girl, Christy, and falls deeply in love. He asks her out on a date — on Sunday, then on Monday — he soon realizes she is a Latter-day Saint. But he would rather be with her than not be with her. Daniel has college plans, then is soon baptized. He attends school until he can go on a mission. Very much against anything that his father has wished for him. Through that mission, Dad is not converted, but he loves his son and ... he accepts his Son's decisions. The Prodigal Son story is somewhat turned on its head so cleverly here. There are two Prodigal Sons in this play — they are both Daniel. He is a prodigal to his Father, as he does return home after his mission to his accepting and loving Dad. But he is also a Prodigal Son to the Church, a lost son returning to his spiritual home. It was first produced by The New Play Festival and published in their volume “Out of the Mount,” which contains many great plays from their first several seasons. It is also the winner of the 2008 Association for Mormon Letters prize for Drama. **ORDER #3313**

James Goldberg — James was a co-founder of New Play Project, and served as its Artistic Director from 2006-2008. He is also the author of three blogs: goldbergish.blogspot.com, mormonmidrashim.blogspot.com, and caucajewmexdian.blogspot.com. His primary claim to fame is having once written a letter of recommendation for award-winning Bollywood screenwriter Abhijat Joshi.

PRODIGAL SON

(In the darkness.)

SON. Scene One. First encounters.

(Lights up.)

I first heard of the Church when I was a kid. We went to visit my grandparents in Salt Lake and they took us to visit what I initially assumed was just a really big, stony church. Or maybe a castle? The next encounter I had with the Church was substantially more aesthetically pleasing. In one of the most courageous acts of my life to that point, I had actually found a moment alone with Christy and asked her if she wanted to go out with me that Sunday. And she just looked at me, I mean really just—wow. I probably could have picked up a car at the time if she'd asked me to, there was so much adrenaline pumping through my veins. But she didn't. All she said was:

(Lights up on her.)

CHRISTY. I can't.

(Beat. He's crushed.)

I mean, not Sunday. It's just . . . I'm Mormon, and so Sundays I can't . . . What are you doing tomorrow?

SON. What was I doing—? Like it mattered what else I had planned.

(Back to her.)

Tomorrow is good.

(To audience.)

Saturday, as it turned out, went miraculously well, enough to turn into some other days, and before too long it was . . .

(Crosses to her, covers her eyes.)

What're you doing tonight?

CHRISTY. *(Smiling)* I can't. It's Monday.

SON. Are you Jewish, too, or something?

CHRISTY. No . . . that's Friday nights. Mondays I'm definitely Mormon. There's this thing we do called family home evening, so . . .

SON. Right.

CHRISTY. Do you want to just come?

SON. Umm . . .

(To audience.)

Put yourself in my position. Christy or no Christy . . . two Sabbaths? This was sounding more and more like the kind of cult you're trained to expect.

(To CHRISTY.)

I don't think—

CHRISTY. C'mon, it'll be fun.

SON. And then she smiled, so I was pretty much doomed. Ended up talking to her dad afterwards till like 11:50 about everything remotely gospellesque. Looking back, I misunderstood ninety percent of the things he said, but I came home with a Book of Mormon and a Bible hidden in my backpack. You've got to understand, Christy's dad is as notoriously thorough as her family is notoriously late. My dad never gave me a curfew or anything, but midnight's not exactly typical for me to be wandering in on a Monday night . . . he was still up when I came in, though I doubt he ever would have admitted to waiting.

DAD. Hey.

SON. Hey.

DAD. How was school?

SON. Good, good.

DAD. Get a lot of studying done?

SON. I was out with Christy.

DAD. Ah. Okay, that makes sense. You gonna bring her over sometime, or is it not that—

SON. We'll see. I'll try.

DAD. Whatever. No pressure.

SON. Thanks.

(He heads up to his room.)

DAD. Daniel?

SON. Yeah?

DAD. Just . . . remember rule number two, okay? I know you're a good kid, just . . . remember.

(Lights change.)

SON. Okay. Stop there. This probably isn't making sense. You need to know that we have two rules in my

family. That's important. The first is "Take care of your feet." And I do. The second goes: "Don't do anything stupid." Sometimes my dad finishes the quote and says, "Like getting yourself killed," but usually he just sticks to the "Don't do anything stupid" part. I don't know exactly what he was referring to when he brought it up that night, maybe reminding me not to get anyone pregnant, but I almost wondered if he knew. Knew that thanks to Christy Chang, I was about to start investigating the religion he'd left in his youth. And that, thanks to Christy Chang's father, I felt distinctly like I was smuggling contraband into the house.

(Lights out.)

DAD. Scene Two. Bad news.

(Lights up.)

CHRISTY. Hey. Does your dad know they're coming?

SON. Yeah.

CHRISTY. And he's okay with that?

SON. He respects me.

CHRISTY. Where is he?

SON. He's not staying. He told me to call when we're through and he'll come home.

CHRISTY. If he feels that way—we could have had the discussion at my house.

SON. What, you were hoping he'd stay and listen?

CHRISTY. Well, yeah . . . I mean your dad's a great guy. And how cool would it be if—

SON. Christy. You don't know my dad.

(Beat.)

This is the last required discussion, right? I mean, I'm ready after this?

(Lights out. Spot up on SON elsewhere.)

(To audience)

When I told my dad I wanted to get baptized . . . it was like something went out in his eyes. I'd already told him I was investigating, so I'd seen him angry. And he'd found out that Christy was a member and I'd been hiding that from him, so I'd seen him disappointed. But I'd never seen him— We'd fought about it, a lot. By the time I got baptized I knew more about the dark side of Church history than most people learn in their lives, like—

DAD. Some of those things he talks about as background to the first vision didn't happen until 1822 or '23.

Think, Daniel, why would he lie about the year it happened unless he was making stuff up?

SON. Or—

DAD. It's very convenient of Mr. Chang to say that racism is only in the church's past, but it's also right in their scriptures . . . unless they've edited even more out since the last time I read them.

SON. Or—

DAD. She honestly told you she thought polygamy started with Brigham Young? If anything he toned it down! Let me tell you about Joseph—

SON. And every time he'd ask—

DAD. You're a smart boy, Daniel. I didn't raise you to— Why are you still doing this?

SON. All I could say was: They told me I would feel some kind of gentle, comfortable feeling or a still small voice or something. But when I started reading and praying and stuff, it was more like— Like there was something standing right in the room. I wasn't expecting that, you know, so I don't see how I could have been making it up. And then came this feeling like fire, Dad, not like soft, happy feelings but like Elijah-calling-it- down-from-heaven kind of fire. Like our-God-is-a-consuming-fire kind of fire. How can I not believe it when I've felt that? It's not about Christy, it's not something I can just think through, it's—

DAD. Yeah. Yeah, I get it. The fire of the Spirit. Look, I don't know what that really is, but I've felt it, too. I've felt it and guess what? In the end it just leaves you feeling burned out.

SON (*To audience*) I couldn't tell it to him, then, but . . . all my life. I'd been waiting for something, you know? And I never knew what. But I'd have these feelings sometimes like when I went to my friend's Bar Mitzvah, and it was like God was driving by on a train but there weren't any scheduled stops to pick me up. And maybe I could have run, maybe I could have jumped up there in front of everybody and said, "Hey, can it be my turn now? I know I'm not Jewish, but . . . Bar Mitzvah me, too!" But, you know, obviously I didn't. And the train went on by. Until I felt fire from heaven reading the Book of Mormon. And even though my dad talked me through it till I knew in my mind it couldn't be historically true, even though he told me all the ways the institutional church was going to use and twist me if I joined—I figured, if God's a train, and fate didn't leave me any stops . . . maybe I've gotta stand on the tracks. I can't get on smoothly like everybody else, but if I take that step out onto those tracks then God'll have to hit me. And I'll know then whatever it is the prophets and saints used to know.

(*Pause.*)

So on November 9th, 2005, I told him. The light went out in his eyes, his face fell just a little, and then he said:

(*Lights change.*)

DAD. You're eighteen.

SON. So the answer's yes?

DAD. The answer is you're eighteen. I don't get a say in it.

SON. Dad, I don't want to hurt you.

DAD. And I don't want you to get hurt, but you haven't exactly been open to that message, so . . .

SON. So?

DAD. So you're eighteen.

(Pause. DAD turns to exit.)

SON. That's it?

DAD. That's it.

(Pause.)

SON. Are you gonna come?

DAD. No.

SON. I don't want . . . I mean, it'd be nice to have family there, you know?

DAD. If your mom were alive, she could probably handle it. I can't, okay?

(Exiting.)

You do whatever the hell you want but just leave me alone.

(Dark.)

SON. Scene Three. Distance.

(Lights up on DAD.)

DAD. We're far too casual, I think, in the way we talk about losing. "I've lost my keys," for example, really means you've mislaid them. We say we're "lost" when we're just disoriented. And we "lose" our tempers all the time, only to find them again a few minutes later—I wish we wouldn't dilute the best word we have for when things are truly and permanently gone. "Lost cause" is a good phrase. It's a cold, hard dose of reality. No one goes out to find a lost cause. It's just lost. That phrase understands the power of the word's finality. It's a finality we need. When you lose a game . . . after the clock has ticked away all 48 minutes of sweat and adrenaline, when that last-second three- ball bounces off the rim:

Victory isn't just missing somewhere, waiting to be rediscovered between the couch cushions. It's over. An opportunity is gone and there's a certain comfort to the clinical finality of the word "lost." The word helps you accept a thing which you have no possible ability to change. So when I tell you that a long time ago I lost my faith, I don't want you to imagine that I've misplaced it or that I could be capable of finding it again. Lost faith is like a lost limb . . . if it's broken and bleeding, if you try to patch it up and it ends up inflamed and infected . . . at some point you have to cut it off. And after you've lost it the only thing left is the occasional flash of phantom pain. I lost my faith. Twenty years later I lost my wife. And now maybe I'm losing my son. Don't take away from me the only word I have to cope with all that.

(Lights slowly shift.)

SON. Being just the two of us—I mean, since Mom died—we were close, my dad and I. You know, a lot of people felt sorry for me, not having a mom, and yeah I missed her, but how many sons get to hang out with their dads so much? We'd do something almost every weekend. But now, Sunday afternoons go:

DAD. Hey.

SON. Hey.

(Long pause. Directly to audience.)

You know, it used to be I felt alone a lot. Hated malls, the way all the people wander past like zombies, so you can hardly tell where the people end and where their reflections in the storefronts start. There were days I felt like I was stuck in some weird sci-fi movie where I'm the last man on earth, but it's a thousand times worse because there are all these empty bodies still wandering through the mall. And the only thing on earth I have to identify with is a print I see in a storefront of that famous painting with the scream. But then I found out that we're all children of God. And suddenly it was like everywhere I go I'm surrounded by shimmering hidden pools of light. When God is everywhere, and his children are everywhere, how could I ever feel alone? *(Pause.)* Except at home. It's like my life is an inverted photograph. Everything that used to be hard is easy and everything that used to be easy is hard. Knowing I have a Father in Heaven, I feel for the first time like I could be just fine going anywhere in the world. But it can be so lonely Sunday afternoons.

(Lights out.)

SON. Scene Four.

CHRISTY. Decisions.

(Lights up.)

You're not even gonna apply?

SON. No.

(Beat.)

Is that a problem?

CHRISTY. No, no, it's cool . . . it's just I always kind of assumed I'd end up going to BYU.

SON. So go.

(No response.)

What?

(She doesn't answer.)

You wanted to go to school the same place?

CHRISTY. I know it's probably stupid to be worrying about, but . . . yeah.

(Beat.)

Yes. I did. Do...

SON. There are phones. And we both have Gmail accounts, which is practically like living together.

CHRISTY. *(Holding him)* That is so not the same.

SON. I don't know . . . I keep waiting for the bishop to ask if I've been cohabiting with anyone on chat. My palms get so sweaty, at the end of the interview I have to make up excuses to avoid shaking hands—

(She kisses him. Beat.)

You're right. It's not the same.

CHRISTY. See.

(Pause.)

SON. Christy?

CHRISTY. Hm?

SON. I want to go on a mission.

(She smiles.)

Maybe you were already taking that for granted, but—I didn't grow up with it, so I really had to think it out. I'm gonna put in my papers early enough to leave next summer. That's why I don't want to risk a BYU acceptance letter showing up in the mail. I'm probably gonna stay home and go to OSU.

(Beat.)

I can't stand to make my dad think I'm leaving him twice.

(Lights change.)

DAD. OSU's a good school. Well, it's a big school, and statistically speaking any school that's big enough ends up accidentally good at something.

(Beat.)

You sure that's what you want?

SON. Yeah.

DAD. I saw the acceptance letter from Northwestern. Don't tell me that was your safety school.

SON. Well, I'd have to go somewhere if Ohio State didn't let me in.

(Beat.)

DAD. This doesn't have anything to do with Christy, does it? You're not staying for her?

SON. She's not staying. She'll be going to BYU.

DAD. Ah. Yes, of course.

SON *(To audience)* Looking back, I probably should have told him then. But "I want to stay at home with you" just didn't seem like it would go over well with "because next year I'm leaving on a mission" tacked on to the end of it. So I told him a half-truth instead.

(Back to DAD.)

It's simple economics, Dad. Northwestern may be a better school, but does the increased marginal utility justify the costs? Not only is OSU cheaper, I've got scholarship, I can live at home—

DAD. *(Laughing)* Well, I'm glad you've learned something in AP Econ. But you've got to take into account that education isn't just an expense. It's an investment.

(Brief pause.)

Why do you think your mom and I decided to match every dollar you put in your savings account with five? That money's for your education. You might as well use it.

SON *(To audience)* I probably should have told him. I probably should have told him then. But:

(Back.)

Dad,

(To audience.)

I said, and this was the truth,

(Back.)

Where else am I gonna buy the quality of tutoring I can get right here for free?

DAD. *(Sighs)* Just remember that flattery is not going to win you every argument in your life . . . even if it's winning you this one, okay?

SON. Okay.

(Fade out.)

CHRISTY. Scene Five.

ALL. Goodbyes.

(Lights up.)

SON. Sunscreen? Did you remember that? I've heard that out West the sun does actually shine in the fall. That might just be some kind of urban legend—

CHRISTY. I've got sunscreen. I've got everything.

SON. Okay.

CHRISTY. Okay.

SON. Just watch out for all the hot Mormon guys out there, all right?

CHRISTY. There really aren't that many unless you convert them.

(Beat.)

Dan?

SON. Yeah?

CHRISTY. I want to give something to your dad, before I go. But I thought I'd better ask you first.

SON. What?

(Pause.)

What is it?

CHRISTY. I wrote my testimony in a Book of Mormon. I know you think it's a long shot, but I want to give it to him. Even if it doesn't make a difference. Even if he never reads—

SON. He's read it, Christy.

CHRISTY. Yeah, I know. So have I, but it's always different if you read it again. And he's a really bright guy. Maybe this time he'll see—

SON. I don't want to talk about it. Do what you think is right.

CHRISTY. It can't really be wrong, can it?

(Beat.)

SON. I don't think you realize how much the Book of Mormon is God's middle finger to anyone that proud of his intellect.

(Lights change.)

She gave it to him. Last thing she did before her dad drove her to the airport. He just took it and nodded.

After she was gone . . . he waited until the car was all the way out of sight before he turned to me:

DAD. She's a nice girl, Daniel. And I'm not going to hold this against her. But if you end up married to a Latter-day Saint,

(Beat.)

just make sure she understands I have boundaries. All right?

SON. I nod, and I try not to let my jaw set in an inherited stubbornness. There's a knot in my stomach now. I've developed a whole tangle of them over the past year.

(Lights shift.)

DAD. I try to always be the kind of person who logically thinks things through. I think there'd be a lot less pain in the world if more people would just do that. I try to be objective about things; I try to be honest with myself. But I still held out that elusive glimmer of hope that maybe the whole thing would be over after she left. That their relationship would fizzle out and maybe his new religion with it. He's not in it for her, though. Too bad, but it's true. And I'm not about to start now, pretending things are different than they are, just because that's the way I want them.

(Beat.)

Things get better, though, with Daniel in college. He's taking a helluva course load, doing things I never would have dared as a freshman, and we'll work through tough material together, sometimes stuff I haven't thought about in years, sometimes theories that are as new and intriguing to me as they are to him. I haven't felt this way since Danny was a little kid and I was teaching him the constellations . . . we'd be out camping, memorizing the night sky, and he started asking questions about why you can see different stars in different seasons, and how stars burn, and pretty soon I'm talking this nine-year-old kid through the raw power of hydrogen fusion and—I never thought I'd feel that way again. But he's young again and his mind is so hungry and even though I still can't get over the way he leaves every Sunday morning, we wind up staying up way too late talking about life, the universe and everything Sunday nights. I feel so exhausted one Monday morning I end up being late to work for the first time in a long time. And that night—I'm always a little annoyed Monday nights because instead of studying like he should be he insists on going to a student FHE. If he wants to spend his weekends at church, fine. Institute Thursday nights . . . whatever, you know? At least he's not at the bar drinking. But c'mon, a bunch of college students getting together to hold a fake family home evening? Doesn't that seem just a little wrong to you? How many hours of social pressure and indoctrination do you need before it's enough? I've got no problem with family time, but those kids aren't a—I'm sorry. I'm just making excuses for myself. What is done is done. What happened that night happened. I can't change it, but at least I can accept responsibility.

(Lights add to reveal SON entering.)

SON. *(Like a child)* Dad?

DAD. That tone probably isn't accurate, but in my memory he sounds like a kid again. Like he's getting up

from bed to ask for a drink of water.

SON. (*Regular tone*) Dad, we need to talk.

DAD. Or like he's waking up from a very bad dream.

SON. (*Like a kid*) Dad!

DAD. What? What is it?

SON. (*Back to normal*) Nothing much, it's just . . .

(*Beat.*)

Let me start over again, okay?

DAD. Is something wrong?

SON. No, no.

(*Beat. Deep breath.*)

I just thought I should tell you— Yesterday I put in my papers. To go on a mission.

(*Beat.*)

(*Beat.*)

(*Beat.*)

(*Long pause.*)

DAD. You did what?

SON. I'm going on a mission, Dad.

(*Beat.*)

DAD. How you gonna pay for that?

SON. I've got plenty of money in the bank. I've been on a full-ride scholarship, even my textbooks have been covered.

DAD. That money was for your education.

SON. The way I see it, that's part of what a mission is.

DAD. No. No, not in my eyes. I can't believe you turned down Northwestern to go on a—

SON. I stayed home because I wanted time with you.

DAD. Oh? That's supposed to make me feel better, is it? 'Cause right about now I'm feeling pretty damn

great.

SON. Dad.

DAD. That is not the way you're going to use that money.

SON. It's my bank account. You guys helped, but it's based on my savings from my jobs; it's in my name—

DAD. You think you're gonna remember all the things you've been studying after two years of not being allowed to touch a textbook?

SON. Missionaries get blessed, the Lord will help—

DAD. Half of them don't even remember how to speak English when they get home! How are you possibly going to retain all your Organic Chemistry?

SON. There are more important things in life than O-Chem.

(Pause.)

DAD. Everything I have given you, you've turned your back on . . . do you realize that? I taught you to value your intellect, I taught you to work toward your potential . . . I taught you to have some pride and I never once told you that's a sin! Sometimes pride is the only thing you've got. That was my gift to you. That was your inheritance! And now you want to throw it all away: your intellect, your independence, everything.

SON. Dad, I—

DAD. I will be damned if you also throw away your mother's money.

SON. She's dead! And since you don't believe in a life after death, I don't see how you can claim to know how she would want me to use it.

DAD. *Shut up!* Just . . . shut up and go to your room.

(Beat.)

SON. I'm not five years old.

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