

The Plays of Thomas F. Rogers, Crises in Faith. Volume 3, by Thomas F. Rogers.
Newport, Maine. Leicester Bay Books, 2016. 266 pages.
Reviewed by B. Kent Harrison in *SquareTwo*, Vol. 14 No. 2 (Summer 2021)

Having been a close friend to Tom Rogers for many years, I could not resist the opportunity of reviewing another work by him. I had previously (Volume 10, #3, Fall 2017) reviewed a collection of writings he wrote for *SquareTwo*. Tom is a professor emeritus of Russian at Brigham Young University. In addition to being an excellent Russian scholar and teacher, well-traveled in Eastern Europe and Russia, he is an accomplished playwright. The volume being reviewed here is one of three short collections of some of his plays, just recently published. I will review three of the plays in the third volume.

The first is *Huebener*. The thesis of this play is that one should stand up for the right. While technically historical fiction, it is based on actual accounts taken from the life of Helmuth Huebener, a 17-year old youth who was, in 1942, the clerk of his CofJC branch in Hamburg. Germany. (Rogers credits Alan Keele and Douglas Tobler for their original research into Huebener's life, which encouraged him to write the play.) After receiving a radio as a gift, he started listening to BBC broadcasts and quickly realized that they were at odds with official Nazi propaganda. It was clear that the truth lay with the BBC. With courage, bravado, and a certain rashness, he wrote several pamphlets pointing out the truth, not sparing Adolf Hitler, printed them on the branch printing machine, and got some of his friends to distribute them around Hamburg. Needless to say, he and his friends were caught. After imprisonment and trial, his friends received long prison sentences and Huebener was executed. To complicate the matter, his branch president was a Nazi, and apparently believed that unless the Church collaborated with the Nazis, his branch could be annihilated, maybe along with the entire Church in Hamburg. Much of the play revolves around this branch president's interaction with Huebener. Huebener was actually excommunicated for failing to obey his priesthood leader (and perhaps because the branch president feared repercussions from the Gestapo if Huebener was not punished).

Huebener had extracted a promise from the branch president that, under priest-penitent privilege, he would not be publicly denounced. But in prison one of the guards taunted him, saying that the branch president *did* denounce him, causing him to doubt his priesthood leader. It was actually another acquaintance, whom Huebener tried to recruit, who spilled the beans about their actions. Huebener's Church membership was restored after the war, possibly as a result of Rogers' play. He is now regarded as a hero in Hamburg; a street is even named after him. In the 1970s, BYU produced *Huebener*, though some pressure was put on BYU not to produce it, probably because of Huebener's defiance of authority. President Oaks defended its production and it went forward.

Two contemporary remarks about *Huebener* bear repeating. Douglas Alder, president of Dixie College said in 1991 that "If one is allowed only a few experiences in life . . . one for me was watching the text emerge of Thomas Rogers' play *Huebener*. The work is a product of our local culture which has universal meaning. The Huebener story presents a new challenge to Mormons. It invites all to consider models in addition to their pioneer legacy, to apply our thinking to contemporary issues, in this case the competing loyalty between freedom and obedience." Several things can be read from this. The first sentence points out that the creation of a literary work takes time and thought. Another is that we need to realize that our Church has heroes and martyrs, not just among our pioneers—where we usually think of

them—but actually in our present day. Huebener is someone like Joan of Arc, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, any of the faceless victims of the Nazi concentration camps, or Martin Luther King, Jr. The phrase “competing loyalty between freedom and obedience” reminds me of Philip Flammer, who was dismissed from a military college because he defied a superior officer, considering the officer’s orders to be wrong. (He later joined the BYU history faculty.) (*SquareTwo* reprinted an article of his, on that very topic, in the Spring 2012, Volume 5, number 1 issue.) While not the dangerous matter that Huebener’s case was, there are a myriad of contemporary issues that need defenders. We *must* stand up for the right when needed.

The other remark worth noting is from a review of the play by Orson Scott Card: “*Huebener* touched us where no other Mormon play had ever reached . . . *Huebener* did what art is meant to do . . . We know more than a few artists who could die happy if they knew they had done that even once.”

Rogers did this more than once. The second play in the third volume is *Fire in the Bones*. It is the first literary treatment of the *Mountain Meadows Massacre*. Based on Juanita Brooks’ original book on the subject and other sources, the play looks at the event from the point of view of John D. Lee, the only person executed for crimes at the massacre (although several men were indicted). He is the scapegoat in the matter; many others bear more responsibility for the tragedy than he did.

The introductory remarks characterize the play as “a study in tainted conscience and mob psychology, of people’s paranoia in the wake of an anticipated extermination . . . Its characters resemble the zealots of every society and every age—such people . . . make tragedy as timely as ever.” This latter statement can be regarded as the main thesis: that mobs can arise anywhere, among any people. (I remember a comment by Patsy Limerick of the University of Colorado to the effect that about 15% of any population of people, no matter how they are classified, are jerks.) This encourages humility—we need to be on guard against pride at all times.

Early remarks in the play place the blame on the Fancher party (the victims) or on the Native Americans, and lament the fact that Jacob Hamblin wasn’t there to pacify them. (It does need to be said that some of the Fanchers taunted the Mormons about killing Joseph Smith, Parley P. Pratt, and other atrocities.) Thus blame is cast on two groups and one man, ignoring the group where most of the blame should be cast: paranoid Latter-day Saints who were willing to take matters into their own hands. Blame is often placed on Brigham Young; this play exonerates him entirely. Lee repeatedly denied that Young had ordered the massacre (Walker et al., see below, p. 228). When Young heard about the trouble, he sent a message that the Fanchers were not to be molested, but his message was received too late. Leaders that were responsible for the massacre included Lee, Elders Isaac C. Haight, William H. Dame, Philip Klingensmith, John M. Higbee, and others. Haight counseled secrecy; it remained a topic that the Saints didn’t discuss—covered up, if you will—for many years until Juanita Brooks’ book finally brought it to light. It remains a shameful chapter in CoJC history. In recent decades, serious attempts have been made by the Church to make what restitution is possible. A monument has been erected at the site and President Gordon B. Hinckley invited descendants of the Fanchers to attend a ceremony of dedication to try to make amends. A carefully researched documentary on the massacre, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, authored by Church historians Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard was recently published by the Church. It pulls no punches and clearly lays out the known facts of the disaster.

A remark by one of John D. Lee's descendants, Rex Lee, shows a typical reaction to the tragedy. He said, "I have always struggled with why any rational human being 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 have before. It's not that you present any more facts. I know them all. It is the context. Maybe it is partly your writing skill. I'm sure it is, but I doubt you could have written an essay that would have recreated the dynamics in Cedar City on that Sunday evening quite as helpfully as did your play."

The third play in the third volume is *Reunion*, a treatment of a family of Church members in various stages of belief or unbelief. The author provides a quote from Brigham Young to the effect that good and evil can be portrayed on the stage and that we can learn from them; we do not have to commit sin in order to see its consequences. This can serve as the thesis for this play. The family consists of a father, Arthur, who is dying of prostate cancer; a wife Mildred, their unmarried daughter Chris, and three sons (a fourth son, Larry, was killed in Vietnam). The youngest son, Billy, is scheduled to go on a mission, but the play makes it clear that he is not sure about it and may turn it down at the last minute. If he does, it will greatly upset the other family members, who have not only the usual family pride in a missionary son but who would have their own psychological reasons for being upset. One brother (Wayne, the younger) didn't finish his mission and would like to see his brother succeed—perhaps as a substitute for his own lack of success. The other brother (Jerrold, the older) says that his mission was the greatest experience of his life and hopes that his brother can say the same. His reasons are complex; he seems to have failed somewhat in his own family and perhaps wants to find some compensation in Billy's successful mission. Jerrold has a strong streak of self-righteousness and constantly belittles his younger brother Wayne for his lack of faith, calling it liberal and shallow. He questions Wayne's commitment to the Church, especially when he gets Wayne to admit that he is not a full tithe-payer. Thus he is incredulous when Arthur says that he wants a priesthood blessing and asks Wayne to give it. Wayne retaliates by charging Jerrold with worshipping man rather than God.

The home teachers drop in. There is the usual shallow exchange in which the family members assure the home teachers that things are fine. The home teachers do, however, leave an insightful message, including the warning from 2 Timothy 3:1 about the perilous times in the last days.

General Conference is on the radio. New Seventies are announced. Arthur is angered at the call of one of them, who betrayed him by encouraging Larry to serve in Vietnam—where he was killed. Arthur says that the man violated his trust and friendship. He says he can't forgive the man. All three children plead with him to do so, that it only hurts himself. The war killed Larry, not Arthur's friend.

In the ensuing discussion, as each family member's limitations and weaknesses are revealed, one sees, paradoxically, the members coming together. Where there was animosity earlier in the day, there is warmth, forgiveness, and love. The play concludes satisfactorily with the blessing requested by Arthur, when Wayne suggests that Jerrold be the mouthpiece instead of himself.

When my wife was still alive, we used to go to plays frequently. We often gained tremendous life insights from them. The plays discussed here show the value of the stage, as Brigham Young noted, in helping us understand ourselves and others. In each of the three plays the thesis is amply borne out. I hope Rogers' plays will see a new generation of appreciation, and am grateful these volumes were compiled for that purpose.