

---

---

PLAY

MEDITATING ON  
SUFFERING AND INSPIRATION

BURDENS OF EARTH

By Susan Howe

*Reviewed by Thomas F. Rogers*

Joseph could not have been perfected, though he had lived a thousand years, if he had received no persecution. . . . You may calculate when this people are called to go through scenes of affliction and suffering, are driven from their homes, and cast down, and scattered, and smitten, and peeled, the Almighty is rolling on His work with greater rapidity. (Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 2:7-8)

This spring, the debut of another new play in the BYU Pardoe Theatre belied the appearance of one of the few truly provocative scripts on a Mormon subject thus far. The play in question, Susan Howe's *Burdens of Earth*, may be the most penetrating psychodramatic treatment of the Prophet Joseph Smith to date.

Howe's play derives considerable force from the author's thorough research in historical sources, including journal accounts by Joseph Smith's contemporaries. It is surely not coincidental that the play was written during the recent "Renaissance" in writing of Church history.

*Burdens of Earth* addresses the Prophet's state of mind during one of his most trying times, during the winter of 1838-39 when he was imprisoned with four other Mormons in Liberty Jail. It explores the very human and understandable despair which so beset the Prophet,

---

THOMAS S. ROGERS is the author of the play *Huebner* which is collected with his three other plays in *God's Fools: Plays of Mitigated Conscience*.

as attested in the first verses of D&C 122. At that time the Saints were severely persecuted and, separated from them, their leader was helpless to assist them. Whether this in fact led Joseph for a time to question his own inspiration and to blame himself for his people's suffering is not known. But the possibility of doubt in no way detracts from a prophet's stature, as President Kimball's own remarkable autobiography has shown. If anything, such "humanization" of other human beings, however elect, further ennobles them, lends subtle if ironic credibility to the claims made for them, and, perhaps most important, enables us to identify with them and to more readily emulate their notable spiritual qualities. (Is this perhaps why, even in the account of the Savior's passion, we are privy to such utterances as "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me" and "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?")

Equally remarkable is the Howe script's fine balance between the opposed views of Joseph and his recently excommunicated First Elder, Oliver Cowdery. In the best tradition of classical tragedy, the position each takes seems tenable and persuasive, even heroic. In Cowdery's view Joseph is a fallen prophet, leading his people to needless persecution. "I've been fighting to save the Church," he argues, and, to one of Joseph's loyal followers: "I'll be praying for you." Despite his differences with the Prophet, Cowdery is represented as still an unflinching witness to the Book of Mormon and anything but vindictive. He refuses to assist the Missourian conspirators in bringing legal action against Joseph without sufficient

grounds.

Howe's Joseph expresses the perplexity we read of in the Pearl of Great Price account of his earliest persecutions. He puzzles over "the hatred of good people who can't understand what you're trying to do." He concludes that the Saints are so viciously maligned "because we're never satisfied with people as they are" and thus are easily, if mistakenly, perceived as self-righteous. In the script's replay of an encounter with two mobocrats, Joseph changes his tack and avoids returning their insults. (Which of the two, one wonders, was Joseph's actual manner when confronting his enemies? Or were such face-to-face encounters either all too few or, when they did occur, overly charged with hostility and mistrust by both parties?) After the fact, Howe's Joseph painfully questions whether Cowdery deserved excommunication and if, in dealing with him, he shouldn't have been more solicitous and long-suffering. During their imagined confrontation he exclaims, "You expected me to come to you," then pauses, reconsidering his earlier response. His cellmates, who, instead of "Hope for eternal life," have reaped so much unadulterated "misery," implore him to assure them that all will end well; but he hesitates, himself uncertain. That, like Cowdery, he refuses to pretend otherwise only enhances his stature and our sense that he knows when the Lord has spoken through him and when not. The mounting turmoil finally leads him to pose the question asked at some point by all tragic heroes and, with them, each of us: "Who am I?" By contrast, Howe's Hyrum seems rather too confident and unruffled, though at one point he too prays: "Father. When and how are the burdens shared?"

The play's most colorful and possibly most poignant character is the mainstream convert Hanson Jacobs, whose wife is subjected to multiple rape by the Missouri mob, but because of her ongoing faith in his priesthood is subsequently persuaded to bless their ailing child. The miraculous healing which follows not only restores Jacobs' faith; it triggers Joseph Smith's recognition that "sometimes the truth asks us to suffer" and that his fellow Mormons have "suffered for the gospel" rather than on his account. To the Prophet's "I though I'd destroyed you," Jacobs replies: "I can only destroy myself." Whether a flaw in the script or the direction, Joseph's reversal of mood seems terribly sudden. Perhaps a longer pause would have allowed him sufficient time to register this important new insight and the audience to take in such a crucial transformation at the protagonist's most critical moment and, as such, the play's climatic resolution. But that is a

# Grondahl CARTOONS

matted and framed \$125.00 each.

SELECTED,  
ORIGINAL,  
SIGNED

In case of conflicting orders, priority is assigned by date of check.

SUNSTONE FOUNDATION, 331 South Rio Grande, Suite 30; Salt Lake City, Ut 84101.

BE SURE TO INCLUDE CARTOON NUMBER WITH ORDER.

1



"QUIT TORTURING YOURSELF ELDER, THERE'S NOT A MCDONALDS WITHIN FIVE THOUSAND MILES OF THIS PLACE."

2



"HE WAS 'DEAR JOHNED' THIS MORNING."

3



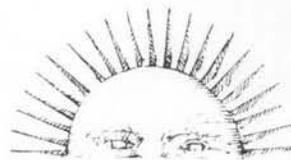
"WHEN EVER YOU'RE DOWN THINK OF THE PROPHETS AND THEIR EXAMPLES OF COURAGE. THEN AGAIN NEPHI NEVER FLUNKED OUT OF COLLEGE."

4



"WE CAN COME BACK LATER IF THIS IS AN INCONVENIENT TIME."

# SUNSTONE



SUNSTONE FOUNDATION  
331 S. RIO GRANDE, SUITE 30  
SALT LAKE CITY, UT. 84101-1136  
(801) 355-5926

SUBSCRIPTION FORM

Please send my issues to:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

ZIP+4

PHONE

Total enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_.

- \$18.00 - 6 issues
- \$32.00 - 12 issues
- \$60.00 - 24 issues
- Enclosed please find my tax deductible contribution in the amount of \$ \_\_\_\_\_.

5

ELDER, I'M GETTING SICK AND TRED OF YOUR STUPID DOOR APPROACHES.



6



" ELDER, PLEASE, SHE'S NOT INTERESTED."

7



"WE'RE FASTING ...!"

8



" IT'S A MIRACLE ELDER! YOUR PAMPHLETS AREN'T EVEN WET!"

9



" I WOULD INDEED BE UNGRATEFUL IF I DIDN'T STAND ON MY FEET THIS DAY & ASK SUCH A GORGEOUS GIRL TO DANCE."

10



" MRS. NEWCOMB, ARE YOU REALLY INTERESTED IN OUR MESSAGE ?"

11



12



" WELCOME TO SOUTH AMERICA , ELDER !"

minor reservation about a production which in almost every other scene was skillfully and compellingly realized.

Director Bob Nelson, whom we can also thank for BYU's surprisingly controversial revival of Bob Elliott's powerful play on missionary life, *Fires of the Mind*, wisely settled for the "less is more" concept. Phillip Haslam's correspondingly minimal two-tiered set and suggestive lighting conveyed the sense of intimacy the play requires, even on the Pardoe's sizable proscenium stage, thereby allowing the audience to concentrate without distraction on the characters and on the generally fine acting. Carma Anderson's authentic costumes were a further asset. Howe's script requires the actors who portray Joseph's cellmates to double as the personae of various flashbacks and Joseph's imagined confrontations with Jacobs and Cowdery, which keeps the cast appropriately small for the chamber piece it essentially is. The alterations in the characters highlight the actors' versatility.

Reed McColm, Alex Starr, and Kyle Sumpter were particularly impressive in their secondary roles as, respectively, Hanson Jacobs, Oliver Cowdery, and Phineas Hobart. Daniel Hess was more evenly impressive as both Lyman Wight and Major Sam Burris, in part, doubtless, because both characters are temperamentally so similar. Robert Nelson played Joseph Smith with just the right conviction and charisma, while McColm's Hanson Jacobs delivered the account of his wife's violation, the play's most gripping scene, with an intensity that held the audience without ever lapsing into melodrama or bathos, as it well might have with a less gifted actor.

The script itself provides considerable comic relief, and the earthy texture of its characterizations doubtless typifies the devout but rough-hewn early Mormon frontiersmen who, as the transcript of many a nineteenth-century sermon attests, were far less thin-skinned than those in our time who insist on the too heavy censorship of otherwise important and edifying plays. The director's decision to keep faith with the playwright deserves commendation. Moreover, the play's conventional and clearly orthodox audience took in its stride the play's frequent mild swearing; judging by the general titillation, they may have enjoyed it. The salty language, snoring, scuffles over blankets, and complaints about being awakened helped bridge transitions and rendered the Church's legendary Elders—we need to remember that they were all young men—all the more real, more human.

A pervasive metaphor both suggests the hardship and savagery which Joseph and his

fellow Saints endured and gives the play its most literary metaphor—the theme of insects. In his opening dialogue Joseph comments on the persistence of a beetle he once observed, clinging to a stick. Now the Saints are themselves driven off like some fearful pestilence. The Missourians call Joseph a cockroach and vow to "exterminate you like the insects you are." Joseph in turn remarks when accosted by one of them that "in God's eyes a major is no more impressive than a stink bug." Elsewhere Joseph tells Hyrum, "When I first learned the work the Lord had for me, I dreamed of being the size of a bug so I could disappear under a rock or leaf."

What makes Howe's play so memorable is what distinguishes any good drama or literary expression—that, from a basic situation, historical or otherwise, it imaginatively extrapolates and expands our perception of the implications for the persons involved, including the audience. This play addresses the affliction and momentary despair of well-intentioned, even inspired individuals. Sooner or later we each experience this despair. In *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, Joseph Campbell insightfully commented on the way drama enlightens us and

what it can teach us about the contingencies we all must face:

In a work of "improper" art, such an assassination as that of Martin Luther King would have to be represented either as justified or as reprehensible. In a tragedy, in contrast, it would appear as the culminating revelation of the character and value of a lifetime; and since a work of "proper" art cannot say nay, but only yea, to life in life's celebration, such a death in high career would be, beyond the sorrow of it, affirmed (p. 133).

Likewise, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Campbell noted that "every one of us shares the supreme ordeal—carries the cross of the redeemer—not in the bright moments of his tribe's great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair" (p. 341).

*Burdens of Earth* is a thoughtful meditation on Mormonism and "a tragic sense of life"—one of the very few in Mormon theatre. Maybe that is why—for all its spiritual insight, or because of it—the Pardoe auditorium was still only half full on the production's final Saturday night.

