
REVIEWS

A GOOD CAST AND GREAT LINES

WILFORD WOODRUFF—
GOD'S FISHERMAN

written and directed by James Arrington

written and acted by Tim Slover



Reviewed By Bob Nelson

Attending theatre is an act of faith, much like going to church. Although you may have to endure lots of disappointing sermons, you never know what sermon might change your life. So you keep going—faithfully, hopefully, even charitably.

Wilford Woodruff—God's Fisherman, a full-length one-man show recently performed in England and Provo, is one of those rare theatre events that can change your life. A youthful, cheerful, guileless Wilford Woodruff prepares to enter the valley of the Great Salt Lake, and on July 23, 1847, he reminisces with us. In recalling his experiences with figures from early Church history, his wife, and the thousands he taught and converted, he reminds us of the simple trust in God and the selfless service that characterize the faith of all true believers.

The young prophet-to-be comes compellingly to life in Tim Slover's skillful portrayal. He and co-author James Arrington season their show with plenty of historical detail—indeed, virtually every word is documented. But Slover always seems to effortlessly master the material, and makes the quaint language feel contemporary, conversational, spontaneous. His lucid, lean performance rings with the persuasiveness of an eyewitness account.

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The audience is welcomed into the theatre by bouncing, folksy music of the period, and by the stage's simple outdoorsy setting: bushes, stumps, logs, and sand. At center stage is a well-used wooden trunk, from which come a number of costume accessories and other properties. The most prominent items are the box of flies and the fishing rod from which Woodruff derives such great pleasure.

Fishing is the play's central metaphor. At one point Woodruff lists several dozen varieties of fish, many of which he came across during his mission to the Fox Islands, off the coast of Maine. Experience has taught him that his "dreams of fishing always mean baptism." He is moved by Jeremiah's account of fishers and hunters, and by Habakkuk's illustration of what God can do with the weak things of the earth, such as Woodruff, if they'll allow him to. He sees himself as useful to God's kingdom simply because he has learned to fish, literally and figuratively.

A one-person show is surely a most difficult acting challenge, since there is no one with whom to share the burden of performance. Likewise, knotty problems arise for the writer: How much time passes during the action of the play? Where and how does "stage" time differ from "real" time? Is the character alone? If so, how is his speaking aloud for two hours justified? If he is not alone, does he interact with

imaginary others? Does the audience itself become a "character" in the play?

Here, the strategy is simple. Woodruff acknowledges the audience's presence and addresses them directly. Even though Woodruff is always Woodruff in this production, he often relishes "playing the roles" of both speakers in conversations he recalls, just as an excited friend might report what "I said" and then what "he said." As a result, with each episode, and Woodruff's wry asides along the way, we become more fully acquainted not only with the facts, but also with Woodruff himself.

This Woodruff is an interesting, thoughtful person. He has sparkling eyes and a keen, self-effacing sense of humor. He offers homespun advice: since the Devil is always at the elbow of God's servants, if he is not following us we must be unrighteous. Woodruff's interests extend to concern over social injustice: he is angered at the rampant poverty he has seen in industrial England amidst the incalculable wealth of the nobility.

Slover and Arrington have successfully surpassed saintly stereotypes and have created a believable individual in Woodruff. As he pulls off his boots in order to wade out to free his line and save a precious fly, we see that his socks are mismatched. He speaks movingly of Relief Society members who bless their children and others by the laying on of hands. He enjoys chewing tobacco—for medicinal reasons, of course, to relieve the discomfort of canker sores. Such humanizing details, far from weakening him in our view, give us hope in our own struggle for personal growth and progress.

The last fifteen years have witnessed an increasing number of theatre productions with overtly LDS content. While this phenomenon is generally laudable, much of the material we have seen sheds little light beyond an occasional random spark. Happily, *Wilford Woodruff—God's Fisherman* is a gently luminescent gem.

Unhappily, we found ourselves sharing Provo's intimate Town Square Theatre with only eleven others in the audience. The sad fact is that those who provide our community with indigenous theatre for the love of it will eventually burn out. They cannot forever share the best of their creative and artistic endeavor without patronage. What an incalculable loss it will be if our best craftsmen and artists finally tire of their simultaneous struggle both to eat and to reveal to us the treasure of their visions.

If ever again you get the chance to see Tim Slover as *Wilford Woodruff—God's Fisherman*, buy at least a dozen tickets!

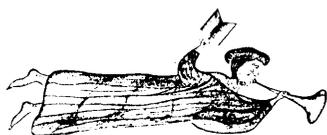
B. H. ROBERTS'S VOICE FROM THE DUST

STUDIES ON THE BOOK OF MORMON

by B.H. Roberts, Ed., Brigham D. Madsen

University of Illinois Press, 1985

Hardback, 375pp., \$21.95



Reviewed by Richard Sherlock

BY NOW THE essential content of this book will be known to many SUNSTONE readers. It was a bestseller in the Mormon market and stirred up a firestorm of controversy in the Church's more conservative circles. Essentially, these works represent previously unpublished and little known studies of the Book of Mormon that Roberts undertook in the early 1920s, partly at the behest of the First Presidency.

The first study, "Book of Mormon Difficulties," was Roberts's attempt to answer questions of a linguistic and archeological nature that investigators put to the First Presidency. As the "in house" intellectual who had earlier discussed some of these issues in his *New Witness for Christ in the Americas*, Roberts was given the task of preparing a response.

At about the same time, Roberts also undertook a longer and more potentially explosive study of the possible origins of the Book of Mormon. Entitled "A Study of the Book of Mormon," this study involved a detailed comparison between the Book of Mormon and Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*. Roberts argued two points in extensive detail. First, he claimed that Ethan Smith's book was probably known to Joseph prior to the production of the Book of Mormon and that if it was not, the general theory of the Hebrew origins of the American Indians was so well known in the area where Joseph came of age that he was almost certainly familiar with the basic story-

line. Second, Roberts showed that there are extensive similarities between Ethan Smith's work and Joseph's in the general stories and even in specific events. From these observations, Roberts concluded that the Book of Mormon could have been produced by a religiously fertile, biblically saturated mind (such as Joseph's) working on the basic storyline provided by Ethan Smith.

For Mormon orthodoxy this is dynamite. Roberts was not an outsider like Thomas O'Dea or an apostate like Frank Cannon or the Tanners. By this time, he had been a General Authority for nearly forty years, and a decade later he died in the firm embrace of the Church and gospel. But the conclusion which he reached was simply not the orthodoxy of his church or its people. It is little wonder these studies have remained unpublished until recently nor that he was troubled by their contents.

Despite the claims of some critics, these studies are well edited by Brigham Madsen with a trenchant introductory essay by Sterling McMurrin. For the most part, Madsen's introduction was as good as it could be under the circumstances, since he was denied access to the extensive Roberts papers held in the Church Archives. He did not need to report on everything that Roberts said about the Book of Mormon. He did what a responsible editor should do and let Roberts speak for himself through his work. Furthermore, it would have been irresponsible to try to argue with Roberts's conclusions in this work, even if he thought

Roberts was wrong. The reader should be allowed to confront Roberts directly and form his or her own conclusions.

The real problem in *Studies of the Book of Mormon* is not with the editorial work but with Roberts's argument and conclusions. He does not argue that the Book of Mormon *must* be a nineteenth-century product, or that Joseph copied Ethan Smith. Rather, he concludes that there is a paucity of serious evidence to support the Book of Mormon and that a fertile religious imagination like Joseph's *could* have used Ethan Smith's story line to create a different book, i.e., the Book of Mormon. Essentially, Roberts believed that, on the basis of the best evidence available, one could not be certain that the Book of Mormon was what the Church claimed it to be. The archeological and linguistic evidence did not support it; the story could have been adapted from other sources; and the theology was heavily reminiscent of Christianity in early nineteenth century America.

These possibilities that so troubled Roberts cannot be answered by the sorts of research that Mormon scholars have traditionally done. At best, the studies sponsored by the Foundation for Ancient Research in Mormon Studies (FARMS) demonstrate one possible scenario that would place the Book of Mormon in an ancient American setting. But no hypothetical reconstruction such as this can lead to any degree of certainty about the origins of the Book of Mormon. More significantly, once Roberts admits that Joseph could have written the Book of Mormon by himself, he has broken in a fundamental way with the traditional view of the text. However, Roberts never lost his testimony of the gospel or his commitment to the Church. He tried to get some of his brethren to confront squarely the issues he raised, but when he failed he simply continued to instruct the Saints and preach the gospel in every way he could.

What he seems to have been searching for was a way to remain committed to the Book of Mormon as a definitive religious text while not knowing for sure whether it has any ties to the history of ancient America. Roberts never resolved this tension between historical evidence and religious commitment, but out of all the work of the new Mormon historians, the questions Roberts asked are clearly the most seminal of all. By asking the questions that few have even contemplated, he pointed the direction in which an intellectually committed and faithful Mormonism must go. For this reason his work here will be read in a hundred years when much of the history we have written today is ignored.

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