

Mormon reckoning

Plan-B Theater Co.'s 'Facing East'

by Richard Dodds

Facing East is a sad play, one of the saddest I've seen in a long, long time. And in that sadness, it thrives.

Plays rooted in tragic events often bring qualification in pre-show publicity, that the darkness is "leavened with humor." That's not the case here. While the characters in Carol Lynn Pearson's play make a couple or three attempts to let themselves smile with a small joke, their hearts are too heavy to invest much in the effort.

Note that there is a significant dramatic difference between the sad and the maudlin, the latter of which *Facing East* avoids to a surprising degree. The setting is a graveside where the parents of a young man linger after the invitees have departed following the official eulogy. But while his wife is content to let matters proceed, in this case to a reception where the food won't keep fresh, the father wants to speak the truth of his son's life and death out loud at least once. To put it simply, their son Andrew was a 24-year-old ex-communicated Mormon living with another man when he put a gun to his head.

The father, a radio personality whose specialty is parenting, suggests his wife might even be relieved that Andrew's suicide has resolved an issue that has rocked her world to the breaking point. Mormonism has defined her life, her marriage, and her family, and something so fundamentally upsetting as the acceptance of homosexuality would unravel her world. But her husband persists in the notion that a kind and loving man like their son is, at least possibly, not an abomination in the sight of God, and is determined to speak his ideas aloud.

Pearson is a well-known Mormon writer, first gaining fame in the Mormon community with her progressive, feminist poetry before breaking through to a larger audience with her 1986 book *Goodbye, I Love You*, the account of her marriage to a gay man, their divorce, and then her aid and comfort when he contracted AIDS. Her gay mission continued, albeit unwillingly, when her daughter married a man who also turned out to be gay, Steven Fales, who went public with his own sometimes salacious journey in *Confessions of a Mormon Boy*.

While most anyone can relate to the parent-child drama involved in a coming-out scenario, *Facing*

East finds special resonance in its Mormon backdrop, where the sinner isn't so much damned to hell as denied a front-row seat in heaven in the family hierarchy that Mormonism emphasizes. The 75-minute play takes a sharp turn when Marcus, who had been Andrew's partner for a year, arrives at the graveside to say his own private goodbyes. To both his surprise and the mourning mother's disgust, Andrew's father invites Marcus to stay and participate in this unofficial post-funeral ceremony.

There are flashbacks to Andrew's boyhood, as his parents worry about his sensitive nature, and to Andrew and Marcus' budding relationship that is constrained by Andrew's worries that he is disappointing his parents, God, and a church community that he still wishes to be part of. The discussions are intelligent, heartfelt, and only occasionally manipulative or didactic.

Plan-B Theater Company, based in Salt Lake City, first presented *Facing East* in its hometown in 2006, and with underwriting from a gay philanthropist who was excommunicated by the Mormon church, the production traveled to New York earlier this year before arriving at Theatre Rhino.

The original Salt Lake City cast has continued with the play from the start, and their polish does not hinder the necessary emotional connections. Charles Lynn Frost as the father, Jayne Luke as the mother, and Jay Perry as their late son's partner, in addition to playing themselves in the present, also take on different roles in flashbacks that provide further context for the emotional and spiritual struggle unfolding before us.

There is a high level of sensitivity in Jerry Rapier's direction, avoiding the kind of tear-jerking machinations that might undermine the sincerity so necessary to this kind of play's ability to connect with an audience. Even so, tissues were being passed among many first-nighters before a glint of healing finally breaks through in the final moments.

Facing East will run at Theatre Rhino through Aug. 26. Tickets are \$20. Call 861-5079 or go to www.therhino.org.

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