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## **FACING EAST FOCUSES A PROBING LIGHT ON FAITH, DEATH AND SURVIVAL**

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For a minute, the way the spotlight caresses Jay Perry's face makes the young actor appear to fade into his character, Marcus, the boyfriend of a gay Mormon man who has just committed suicide. And it's in the way Perry's eyes and his pale skin shine that the young actor who has so embodied his character looks incandescent.

"Incandescent" is how Marcus describes Andy, his dead boyfriend, in Carol Lynn Pearson's new play, *Facing East*, when he's remembering the first time they met. That was back when Andy was a Mormon missionary who knocked on Marcus' door in Minnesota.

What makes the moment so poignant is that the young man is revealing his memories as he meets Andy's parents for the first time, at the dead man's gravesite.

Andy's father, Alex McCormick (Charles Lynn Frost), is angry about the lies told at his son's funeral. In his grief, Alex lectures his faithful wife, Ruth (Jayne Luke), trying to understand the son he loved but never really knew.

That's a summary of Pearson's new Mormon passion play, a tightly wound domestic tragedy that raises questions about faith and sexuality.

It's not a new story for Pearson, a Mormon inspirational writer who wrote *Goodbye, I Love You*, about her ex-husband's death from AIDS. And it's not new to Salt Lake audiences, either. Just ask anyone who ...knows of Utah's high suicide rate.

What makes this play seem freshly relevant is how it dramatizes the aftermath of one suicide, using the black hole of Andy's grave as the metaphor around which the three actors revolve.

That's evidence of the eloquence in this production, directed by Plan-B's Jerry Rapiere. The acting, too, is mostly terrific.

What the play does well is offer a respectful portrait of Mormons in struggle. "I don't like shadows," Ruth says, in Luke's graceful portrait of a pull-up-your-nylons kind of saint. The character is frustrating in the way she so tightly clutches not only her purse but her religious beliefs, worrying that the prayers offered as she's doing the dishes weren't powerful enough to save her son.

And Perry's Marcus? He gets most of the best lines, in his remembrances of his lover's struggles to reconcile his love of God with his love of man, comparing the impossibility of trees not blossoming to the impossibility of curbing desire.

Frost's sharp portrayal of angry grief is believable, and it's his journey toward accepting Marcus that provides closure. "You can each say your own benediction, any way you want," says Alex, a fitting ending for a story that dares to ask important questions about faith, death and survival.

Bottom line: If you're gay or religious, or know anyone who is, bring a hankie.