

Plays about gay Mormons attracting audiences nationally

By Ellen Fagg
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Two new dramas about gay members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints - one that played to sold-out houses last month at the University of Iowa and another produced in a well-attended workshop in New York City - suggest there's still artful vigor left in mining the painful collision of faith and homosexuality.

"I'm glad to see attention brought to this issue from whatever quarter," Carol Lynn Pearson says of the mini-national boomlet of gay Mormon-themed plays. "People of every religion need to take a really strong look at how we are treating how our gay brothers and sisters - and what we tell them in the name of God."

Plays with gay themes and characters aren't a trend, of course, but a mainstay of contemporary storytelling. That's true in theater centers such as New York and San Francisco, as well as in Salt Lake City.

Most recently, Utah stages have served as the birthplace for a variety of stories about gay Mormons, ranging from Steven

Fales' one-man show, "Confessions of a Mormon Boy," to last year's Plan-B Theatre's production of his ex-

'Facing East'

A new production of Carol Lynn Pearson's "Facing East" is scheduled for May, to be performed by St. George's The Space Between Theatre Company. For information, visit www.tsbtc.org or call 435-216-5523.

mother-in-law Carol Lynn Pearson's gripping drama "Facing East." The newest wrinkle is that contemporary Mormon stories are drawing audiences outside of Utah.

The experience of the two playwrights John Cameron, 56, head of the University of Iowa's acting program, and Roman Feeser, 33, of New York City, are separated by more than a two-decade age range.

Cameron served an LDS mission in Guatemala and El Salvador, and performed as a Young Ambassador while attending Brigham Young University. After graduating

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with a psychology degree, he performed in Mormon musicals, such as "Saturday's Warrior" and Pearson's "My Turn on Earth." He left religion behind in his late 20s, when he began doubting the existence of God, before coming out as a gay man at age 34.

His harrowing, powerful play, "14," was inspired by his experience undergoing electric shock treatment in a 1976 research study at BYU. As a college student, Cameron volunteered for the experiment, conducted by then BYU-graduate student Max Ford McBride, hoping it would alter his same-sex attraction. Instead, the psychological and emotional wounds nearly crippled him, once leading him to contemplate suicide.

The play's title refers to the number of men included in a three-month study, as well as the study's follow-up period, which lasted just two weeks. But the story's more universal theme, according to the playwright, is the human condition of isolation. "We're kind of unwilling to accept that," he says. "I keep playing with the idea that maybe accepting our isolation is the healthiest thing."

The play, Cameron's first to be produced, is powerful on the page, thanks to the authority of his spare writing. "To have an autobiographical play that runs under two hours lets you know the writer is cutting right to the heart of the story," says Jim VanValen, a professional actor, theater professor at Iowa's Cornell College and

former student of Cameron's who played the lead character.

At the heart of "14" are violent face-offs between the loosely autobiographical main character, Ron, and Aaron, a younger version of himself. The storytelling is layered with snippets of LDS hymns, such as "We Are Sowing" and "When Upon Life's Billows," before building to graphic later scenes depicting what's happening as Aaron is being electrically shocked while viewing pornographic images.

Beyond the specifically Mormon references, audiences seemed to respond to the drama's dark humor and psychological questions. "That fractured self is a story that resonates for all of us," VanValen says. "We all have the need to connect with the part of ourselves that we deny or are ashamed of. Or that we want to be or can't be."

Over the course of his life, Cameron says he had tried to forget about the shock treatments and didn't want to talk about it, until he learned from a researcher that two men in the experiment had committed suicide. Later, Cameron reluctantly agreed to be interviewed by a reporter writing about homophobia at BYU in the national gay magazine, *The Advocate*. As Cameron writes in the play, it seemed the ultimate irony when his account and quotes, due to space limitations, were cut from the magazine story.

The production, which Cameron directed,

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played to eight sold-out audiences in early February at an on-campus black box theater. Since then, copies of the script have been requested by a variety of theater companies, including Steppenwolf and Northlife in Chicago, as well as InterAct in Philadelphia, and The Phoenix Theatre in Indianapolis. "What's funny is this play, it's got a life of its own," Cameron says. "I guess I'm a little thick-headed that way. I always think: 'What could be more boring than being raised Mormon?' You never think that something that happens to you was very interesting."

"14" is among hundreds of plays submitted for consideration at the Salt Lake Acting Company. Literary manager David Mong termed the script interesting, for the artful way the story explored deeper philosophical questions beyond the weight of its surface religious tensions.

In contrast to Cameron's life, Feeser grew up Catholic on Long Island, moving to Manhattan at age 18 to pursue a theater career. He came out as a homosexual and left acting at age 24. Graduate studies in forensic psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice provided the material for his first play, a pseudo thriller.

Reading a May 2000 Newsweek story about the suicide of Stuart Henry Matis on the steps of a California LDS church building was what inspired him to start writing his fourth play, "Missa Solemnis or The Play About Henry." He didn't think he knew

any Mormons, although he later found out his writing partner was LDS. One powerful detail he couldn't forget from the magazine story: the image of how the suicide victim's knees were bruised and calloused from praying.

Feeser spent several years researching the story, talking to Matis's friends, relatives and religious leaders, as well as interviewing other gay Mormons. A book-length account of his research, "Latter Gay Saints: The Mormon Church and God's Second-Class Saints," is under consideration at a publishing house.

He considers his play, which focuses on one gay man's struggle, as something of a prequel to Pearson's "Facing East," which tells the story of a faithful Mormon couple in the aftermath of their son's suicide. He is gratified at the response from Mormons and former Mormons who saw last month's workshop performances at the Manhattan Repertory Theatre, and claimed they were impressed by the play's authenticity.

"As a non-Mormon and looking into it, I don't know of any gay Catholics who have killed themselves," Feeser says. "Mormons seem really connected to their faith in their DNA in a way that's both spiritual and physical. When suicide is your only way out, something needs to be addressed."

Beyond LDS issues, Feeser also hopes the play addresses larger themes of spirituality

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among gays and lesbians. On the page, one of the play's most moving scenes tenderly envisions a flirtation between Henry, the Mormon character, with another gay man.

On a visit from California, Henry leaves his date's arms to pray to avoid sexual temptation, and ends up explaining to Todd his religious beliefs, as well as teaching him how to pray. "Being gay is a sin in the eyes of every religion's God," Todd says. "It seems to be the only thing everyone's religion can agree on."

If religious stories aren't particularly unusual in Utah theaters, local producers say they are always interested in fresh takes on familiar dramas. "I think the tragic gay Mormon story has to be over soon," says Jerry Rapier, who directed Pearson's "Facing East. "Where is the story about the well-adjusted gay man who isn't traumatized about separating himself from an unaccepting faith? Or where's the story of a gay man who finds himself inside the faith?"

Perhaps another theater trend waiting to happen might be stories, religious or not, that go beyond stereotypes in portraying characters who are lesbian. "If you look back at the AIDS crises, it was men screaming, and women caring for them," says Rapier, who has taught gay and lesbian theater classes for five semesters at the University of Utah. "There's a lot to be said about public and private ways of dealing with issues. As

for Mormon feminism or Mormon lesbianism, I've not read a single Mormon play recently that has a lesbian character."

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