

City of Joseph: A Historical Musical of Nauvoo.
Books and Lyrics by R. Don Oscarson.
Music by Maughan W. McMurdie. Directed by Scott Eckern.
Pardoe Theatre, Harris Fine Arts Center, Brigham Young University,
Provo, Utah. August 15, 2012.

Reviewed by Callie Oppedisano

The spectacle of outdoor theatre with a cast of hundreds, pyrotechnics, and special effects is hard to reimagine on an indoor stage. *City of Joseph: A Historical Musical of Nauvoo* was an immense production performed every summer from 1976 to 2004, with its final performances in the shadow of the Nauvoo Illinois Temple, and the scaled-down version I attended at BYU's Pardoe Theatre was certainly missing the grandeur of the original. This version did, however, convey a more intimate shared experience with the audience while retaining its spirit of devotion to the LDS Church and Joseph Smith.

A labor of love by the show's producer, R. Don Oscarson, who also wrote the script for the 1967 film *Last Day at Carthage*, the pageant was initially conceived and produced by a group of Church members for a local Illinois audience. It grew to be a major event attended by thousands every year. This prompted the involvement of the Church, which saw in the production an opportunity to reach nonmembers to teach them about the faith and to build the testimony of those participating, similar to that which occurred with the pageants at the Hill Cumorah and Manti, Utah. Now that the Church has replaced the pageant at Nauvoo with one written specifically for its purposes, *City of Joseph* has been transformed into a stage play for which there is a different end in mind. Still seeking to inspire, the play feeds into the assumed nostalgia of the audience, stirring them to recall real memories of time spent at Nauvoo (perhaps as spectators or participants of the pageant) or to create imagined memories to accompany and complement those brought to life by the characters on stage.

The dramaturgical structure of *City of Joseph* is reliant on the typical conventions of storytelling. A narrator (excellently played in this

performance by stage veteran Marvin Payne) threads the oral history of Nauvoo into the scenes, songs, and movements on stage. Between musical numbers, the narrator recounts simply and chronologically important events in the early years of the LDS Church in Palmyra and those that occurred when the Saints were in Nauvoo from 1839 to 1846. The illustrative musical numbers focus on the emotion behind the various tasks and trials (for example, the account of the growing missionary effort in Nauvoo is followed by the romantic song “I’ll Think of You,” sung by the married characters about to separate). In addition, there are comic relief numbers, which are introduced by the narrator as scenes depicting the ordinary and timeless aspects of daily life in the city: “Long Time Friends” is a light-hearted duet about old friends falling in love that could easily be from any other secular American musical, and “Somethin’ to Do,” a number by the youth in the cast, is of a similar vein. Both are lyrically well penned and well performed but have little tie-in with the play’s message, which comes down to an affirmation of faith and industry. The real history of Nauvoo and the early Church is interesting enough that the musical does not need distracting embellishments, even if they are entertaining. No doubt the songs with a secular flavor were a consideration when the Church committee sat down to create a new pageant for Nauvoo.

Two misplaced numbers aside, there is a real emphasis on history in the production, often communicated through performed oral history, with characters reading and quoting from journals. Importantly, however, there are few historical figures in the play. In fact, despite the title of the musical, Joseph Smith appears in only one scene, when his initial vision at the Sacred Grove is recounted. In another scene, an experience of Parley P. Pratt is related, but the majority of historical accounts are given by varying actors without referencing the source. In the original musical, this was likely a matter of practicality. Omitting names and dates from the production allowed the nonmembers in the audience to spend less time invested in the details and more time invested in the emotionally powerful stories and songs. In the scaled-down version I attended during Campus Education Week, the audience was largely comprised of LDS members, and the absence of character identities seemed to invite the spectators to claim the stories as part of their own family history, to imagine their forebears in that time and situation, and to lay claim to the hardship and achievement for the unnamed, uncelebrated Saints.

Imagination is a very important component of this production. The original was reliant on its geographical location. Nauvoo was, in effect, the greatest character in the play. The narrator's opening solo, "Bend of the River," was a tribute to the city through which the spectators would have walked and to which they had pilgrimaged for the performance experience. In the scaled-down version of the musical, the song is problematic in that the absence of Nauvoo is immediately and strongly felt. To director Scott Eckern's credit, however, he turns the show into a historical journey that Marvin Payne admirably leads. Instead of performing "Bend of the River" as a shared experience, Payne sings the song as an invitation, and the audience becomes an active participant in the collective memory at work in the performance, recalling not only familiar stories of Church history but also contemporary stories of pilgrimages to Nauvoo.

The Nauvoo of the past and the present is visually presented in the production with photographic projections that serve as the only backdrop—there is no other set design, nor are there props. The actors effectively utilize multileveled platforms and boxes. The images alternate throughout the production, showing scenes of Nauvoo from historical and contemporary photographs. This mix of old and new is repeated in the costume design by Karen Laney. While some costumes appear more authentic than others, the overall visual impression of the actors onstage is one that suggests the nineteenth century instead of one that painstakingly recreates it. So, too, there is no true effort to disguise the short hair of some actresses. There is a pervasive sense of self-awareness in the production, shared with the audience, that this is a recreation, that the performance is not just a tribute to the city and the early Saints but also to the contemporary Saints who were involved with the production over the years and to those who came to see it.

The overall impression the production creates is one of zeal—religious zeal and the zeal of enthusiastic performance. *City of Joseph* is not a challenging musical or even a very thoughtful one, but it is an affirming, energetic production made more so by a capable and dynamic cast that ably faces the task of building up the spirit of Nauvoo in its physical absence. A true ensemble with no characters listed in the program, the actors are all strong performers with voices that are able to carry what are certainly meant to be swelling songs for a very large company. Stand-out numbers include "City of Joseph," "The Spirit of God," "Come to the Temple," and "We Believe." The energy and pace of these songs do

much to depict the ardor of the early Church members for their beautiful, temporary home at Nauvoo.

While the scaled-down version of *City of Joseph* is entertaining and enjoyable, the spectacle of the original, pervaded by the powerful influence of place at Nauvoo, undoubtedly had a greater impact on audiences outside of the LDS faith. The current version of *City of Joseph* is far better suited to LDS members who are able to contribute to the production their own sense of what “Nauvoo,” past and present, means to the Church and to their own religious identity.

Callie Oppedisano received her PhD in drama from Tufts University. She is an independent theatre scholar and has taught at Eastern Nazarene College and Tufts University. Oppedisano writes reviews for Utah Theatre Bloggers Association and continues to present her work at local and national conferences. Her reviews have appeared in *Theatre Survey* and *Theatre Journal*.