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The Mantle of the Prophet and Other Plays Clinton F. Larson

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CLINTON F. LARSON. *The Mantle of the Prophet and Other Plays*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1966. \$3.50.

Ever since I began reading Clinton F. Larson's poems I have expected much of him each time new products of his pen appeared. When I heard that he was writing verse plays and having them staged here and abroad, I admired him also for his courage. To write poetry drama in an unpoetic age is hazardous. To write religious plays is even more venturesome. Many persons in a young, zealous Church might be expected to view with uneasiness the efforts of an imaginative writer dealing with the most cherished and awe-inspiring events in scripture or Church history. The essence of creativity being freedom to create, the creative writer must be granted a generous latitude. This freedom presents both poet and critic with problems. For the poet the question is: How valid is my intuition? The critic similarly should question any criteria that offer themselves. As Karl Jaspers suggested, an innovation can scarcely be judged adequately, for it is part of the future that is coming into being. We need time to determine which creative works are to be discarded and which, woven into our traditions. Is the creative artist to be rated on rigorous fidelity to sacred writing and authoritative history, or on his creativeness? Can the Word—which is often beyond words—be voiced in individual ways that depart from customary expression?

So much for difficulties which Dr. Larson faced as he wrote *The Mantle of the Prophet* and the other dramas in the volume. In one sense, however, his problem was eased by the fact that we cannot compare these plays with Broadway or Hollywood drama but must see them in a class by themselves. They do not belong in the category of secular verse drama of the Elizabethan period or our own. Rather, we must examine them as potential religious experiences. Dr. Larson wished to use the vivid devices of the theatre to lift significant moments out of the matrix of print and give them compelling life on the stage, but these moments are those of spiritual crisis, and we cannot lose sight of that fact.

Because the playwright has chosen to work within the scope of relatively few words and because his audiences will for the most part know a good deal about his subjects, he can employ

a highly concentrated or elliptical treatment. Since many of his characters already possess substance and color in the viewers' memories, he can venture to recall traits or suggest salient features with a few evocative strokes. He accomplishes motivation in the same rapid manner.

How do the plays rate as potential religious experiences? They are, I imagine, highly effective. Nonmembers of the Church would probably need a bit of preparation (except for *Mary of Nazareth*) which could be done through an introductory talk or an explanatory preface in the program. Otherwise a play such as *The Brother of Jared* might seem overcryptic and unfocused until the rays begin to concentrate on the climax. But for persons with some degree of preparation, most of the plays, particularly *The Mantle of the Prophet*, should afford spiritual experiences of a high order. Moreover, they would gain by repeated viewing. The best poetic passages will have, I predict, a perennial freshness. As Marden J. Clark warns in an admirable foreword, many of the passages are not transparently simple. Their contributions to worship resemble those to be found in harmonies of rich music which do not become trite but continue to unfold. There are, of course, many lines which are limpid and clear but worth cherishing in memory, as when in "Third Nephi" Lacey, mourning the death of Rachel, declares

Death is as smooth as the sea,
Soft but unyielding and dark,
And I can never speak to her again!

Only a little later, however, Nephi describes the coming of the Savior thus:

He came like the steel of our conscience of truth
Quietly, His voice the urgency of life.

And a few lines farther on, speaking of loved ones believed dead in the disaster to the city, he says:

They are as the stalks of wheat
That dry golden in the fields. Though they die
Unto God, they do not die in Him, for the germ
Remains, the spirit that is eternal.

The overtones in this are above the simple renewal of life in the spring, or resurrection as we customarily visualize it.

It is in such ways, besides the effects of stage spectacle, that Dr. Larson lifts the climaxes of the plays to religious experience superior to that obtainable from a quotation or ritualized expression repeated so often that it may become only a dying echo of its original significance. The poet's courage is not only in his willingness to write poetry drama in an unpoetic age but in his ability to startle the imagination awake with freshness of images and phrases. Many of these yield up their better values only after we have time to ponder them. Thus readers of these plays, although they will miss much that the stage spectacles can give them, will have their own special opportunities for enjoyment and inspiration.

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