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Cheryl Ann Cluff

Jenifer Nii

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Jenifer Nii. *Suffrage*. Directed by Cheryl Ann Cluff.

Salt Lake City, Plan-B Theatre Company,
Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center, April 2013.

Reviewed by Melissa Leilani Larson

Jenifer Nii's new and original play *Suffrage*, set in 1880s territorial Utah, is the story of Frances (played by April Fossen) and Ruth (played by Sarah Young), two plural wives in a household under siege by the federal government. Their husband, Benjamin, is in prison awaiting trial, and his five wives and numerous children must find ways to make ends meet. Frances is stalwart and traditional, loving her sister wives' children as she does her own and thinking constantly of her dear husband and his welfare. Considerably younger, Ruth is a firecracker of high ideals and modern thought, getting deeply involved in Utah's suffrage movement.

In Frances and Ruth is found a bastion of belief, despite their contrasting personalities. Theirs is a bare, solid faith that makes an unfamiliar family structure comprehensible to modern audiences. There is nothing odd or off-putting in Nii's depiction of these women and their way of life. The play does not condemn or commend polygamy; it simply portrays it. Frances and Ruth work to feed themselves and their family; they struggle to raise and discipline their children; they defend and practice their faith.

Frances and Ruth are the only visible characters in the play. They are an unlikely pair, and Nii skillfully writes subtle tensions into their interactions, such as having them refer to each other more by the title "sister" than by name. Despite their differences, they are incredibly devoted to each other. More than anything, that is what the play is about: a family unit surviving as best its members know how, despite looming opposition.

The production of the play I attended was successful on a number of levels. One was the effective choice to position Frances as a potential mother figure for Ruth, allowing the audience to be educated alongside her. Another was Nii's elegant dialogue, lean and lovely and carefully

constructed. Her words, well chosen and never wasted, instantly transported the audience to the Utah of 1887. Part of that sense of transportation was due to Phil Lowe's fine costumes. He designed them to be neat and cared for, though on the verge of fraying—just as the clothing would have been in those austere times. Randy Rasmussen's sparse scenic design spanned the bridge between pioneer and modern Utah. A dramatically frozen swirl of silver mesh far upstage gave the play a contemporary current and also a strong sense of movement, particularly when struck by Jesse Portillo's simple and warm lighting.

The performances of the two actresses were fine and fascinating. Sarah Young as Ruth was appropriately brash and naive, frustrating yet admirable in her passions. Sarah Fossen's performance was a *tour de force*; she captured the essence of Frances, who is a mother figure and, to an extent, a martyr figure. Fossen came across as subtle and strong, converging seamlessly with the subtlety and strength written into her character.

Director and sound designer Cheryl Ann Cluff did a wonderful job bringing all the pieces of the production together into a cohesive and moving whole. Thankfully, there was no overblown concept to get in the way of the affecting story. Cluff's direction was as simple and clear as the play itself, highlighting the absorbing characters rather than any agenda, and aptly applying Fossen and Young to the task of bringing these women to life. In less skilled hands, the play could have easily been an exercise in bashing or preaching.

This premier of *Suffrage* was about people rather than politics, and that was why it succeeded. The play is an important piece of Utah theatre, one of the best to ever touch on the difficult topic of polygamy. It deserves to be embraced and studied by Mormons who need a better understanding—a human understanding—of this enigmatic principle.

Melissa Leilani Larson holds a BA in English emphasizing creative writing from Brigham Young University and an MFA from the Iowa Playwrights Workshop. She is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter, who has been commissioned to adapt *Pride and Prejudice* for the stage; her adaptation will premiere on Brigham Young University's Pardoe stage in March 2014.