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"The Season of Eric" at Plan-B Theatre

A Milestone in Mormon Drama

Callie Oppedisano

When I learned that Plan-B was considering an entire season devoted to my work, I think I was outwardly composed. I may have said something like "Well, that's very flattering. Thank you." Or something equally bland. Inside, though, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was playing.

—Eric Samuelsen¹

It is rare, even for the most successful contemporary playwrights, to have a full season devoted to their work at a major theatre company. That is one reason why a full season of five Eric Samuelsen plays at Salt Lake City's Plan-B Theatre is noteworthy. Another reason the so-called "Season of Eric" is noteworthy is because it marks an important milestone in contemporary Mormon theatre. Never before has a Mormon playwright so successfully partnered with a professional theatre company to produce so many new works. These works are influencing the Mormon theatre canon and assisting in the evolution of the Mormon theatre aesthetic. Samuelsen is demonstrating that Mormon theatre is becoming more dramaturgically diverse. His work is influenced by other countries, languages, and genres; it takes a hard look at politics and economics and the culture from which they come. His art form is capable of playing to a seasoned critical audience, one that leans toward the belief that theatre can and does lead to social change.

At first glance, Samuelsen and Plan-B Theatre's decade-old partnership is rather unexpected. Samuelsen is a retired Brigham Young University professor who proclaims a devout belief in and loyalty to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Plan-B Theatre is a secular theatre company in Salt Lake City devoted primarily to nurturing new

1. Eric Samuelsen, "Announcing Plan-B's 2013/14 Season!" *Plan-Blog*, May 6, 2013, <http://planbtheatre.org/wp/?p=2983>.

work by Utah dramatists. Together they join forces in their common desire to expose what they see as social and political ills. “The Season of Eric” demonstrates the width and breadth of what this kind of artistic collaboration can bring to a Utah audience: theatre that is relevant, thought provoking, entertaining, and, at times, igniting.

Anyone acquainted with Utah or LDS theatre is at least aware of Samuelsen’s work. Expertly structured, his plays are well researched and known for their natural dialogue and intricately woven humor and pathos. He has garnered numerous awards, including three Association for Mormon Letters (AML) awards in drama for *Accommodations* (1994), *Gadianton* (1997), and *The Way We’re Wired* (1999).² In addition to receiving critical acclaim, he is one of the most prolific dramatists creating new work for Utah’s stages.³ He is known, too, for his long career as professor of playwriting at BYU, nurturing such LDS playwrights as Melissa Leilani Larson and James Goldberg, and for his position as AML president from 2007 to 2009.

Growing up in Indiana, where his father (a Norwegian immigrant, Mormon convert, and opera singer) taught music at the university level, Samuelsen experienced an early exposure to the arts, but it was not until the July 1977 issue of the *Ensign* arrived at his home with President Spencer Kimball’s talk “A Gospel Vision of the Arts”⁴ that he realized that “we could and should write about conflicts in our culture, about difficulties and struggles, about ‘apostacies and inner revolutions and counter-revolutions.’” He reflects, “I knew that day that I needed to write about my own culture. And that’s what I’ve been drawn to.”⁵

Samuelsen’s many dramatic musings on Mormon culture are often, in his own words, “critical.” In a 2008 interview, he said, “I’m much

2. After three AML wins in the same category, individuals are not eligible for further consideration. Instead, Samuelsen was awarded the Smith Petit Award for outstanding contribution to Mormon letters in 2012.

3. Samuelsen has had over two dozen plays professionally produced across the country.

4. The article was an adaptation of Kimball’s 1967 address titled “Education for Eternity.” Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” September 12, 1967, Brigham Young University, <http://education.byu.edu/edlf/archives/prophets/eternity.html>.

5. Eric Samuelsen, interview by Mahonri Stewart, “An Interview with Eric Samuelsen,” *A Motley Vision: Mormon Literature, Criticism, Publishing, and Marketing*, May 2, 2006, <http://motleyvision.blogspot.com/2006/05/interview-with-eric-samuelsen.html>.

more interested in work that's critical of the culture or challenging to the culture within the culture," adding that as a playwright, he's "less interested in what happens in sacrament meeting than what happens in those conversations in the car ride home from sacrament meeting."⁶ Samuelsen's interest in exploring the hidden places in Mormon culture has helped situate him on the outside of mainstream Mormon drama, to the point that he has, on occasion, written plays under a pseudonym.⁷ In addition, his approach has also contributed to what can be seen as an ideological division of his work, with some plays, such as *The Plan* (2011), taking place in Provo for primarily LDS audiences; other plays, such as *Borderlands* (2011), are staged in Salt Lake City, the majority at Plan-B Theatre.

Samuelsen's deep concern for matters of politics and social justice has made him a good fit for Plan-B Theatre. One of three fully professional theatre companies in Salt Lake City, it was cofounded in 1991 by Cheryl Cluff, who now serves as managing director. With the passionate leadership of Jerry Rapier, longtime producing director, Plan-B's mission is to produce "unique and socially conscious theatre. With a particular emphasis on new plays by Utah playwrights."⁸ It was not until 2001, however, that Plan-B's current mission began to take shape, when they staged the regional premiere of *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theatre Project.⁹ Rapier recalls, "It changed our profile in the community, it changed the way we tell stories, it changed the way we decide which stories to tell."¹⁰

In 2004, Samuelsen's work was first introduced to the Plan-B audience via the theatre company's first annual *Slam*, a twenty-four hour theatre festival. These festivals are often collections of nonsensical farces, but Samuelsen's 2004 contribution to *Slam* was about a rancher-turned-beef-producer, partly inspired by Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, a scathing examination of the landscape of America's food industry. It was so well received that Rapier asked Samuelsen to turn it into a full-length work, and it appeared on stage two years later under the title

6. Eric Samuelsen, interview by Callie Oppedisano, Provo, Utah, May 2008, 5.

7. Samuelsen, interview by Oppedisano, 21–22.

8. "About," *Plan-B Theatre Company*, <http://www.planbtheatre.org/about.htm>.

9. *The Laramie Project* is a docudrama about gay college student Matthew Shepard, who was killed in Wyoming in 1998.

10. Jerry Rapier, quoted in Callie Oppedisano, "RoseXposed: Plan-B Theatre Company," *Utah Theatre Bloggers Association*, August 25, 2013, <http://utahtheatrebloggers.com/16033/rosexposed-plan-b-theatre-company>.

Miasma.¹¹ Samuelson and Plan-B established a creative and mission-minded partnership that led to the world premieres of *Amerigo* (2010), *Borderlands* (2011), and his translation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House* (2011).¹² Highly successful, these plays, in turn, led to Plan-B's "Season of Eric."

Plan-B Theatre is, by professional standards, a small company, but it maintains its size by choice in order to operate independent of funding that would dictate the type of work produced on its stage.¹³ Therefore, when Jerry Rapiere sat down to select the 2013/2014 season, he was able to do so with his own personal admiration for Samuelson's work in mind. He reflects:

Eric writes with an enviable ease about Big Ideas—he can be Truthful with a Capital T and Intellectual with a Capital I, yet still guide his audience to a soulful place, a place of passion, a place where a true marriage of truth and intellect is possible—a place where you have no choice but to take pause, reexamine and choose how best to move forward. . . . So when it came time to select the 2013/14 season, I did what I had been considering for quite some time—I invited Eric to be a resident playwright. And then I did something else I had been considering for quite some time—I asked if Plan-B could stage an entire season of his work. I wanted to celebrate his range as a playwright and let some of that been-under-a-bushel-far-too-long work see the light of day.¹⁴

This uncommon opportunity, a playwright's dream, enabled Samuelson to reach far and wide into his archives to find five plays, diverse in tone and subject, with which to display his talents. The resulting season consisted

11. In the advertisement for Plan-B Theatre's staged reading of the play at the Rose Exposed event in August 2013, *Miasma* was described thus: "MIASMA is the smell of fear, the smell of a fractured and unhealthy family, the smell of money. In 90 minutes Utah playwright Eric Samuelson touches on the grim realities of contemporary agribusiness, the evolution of the traditional American West, illegal immigration, homosexuality, apocalyptic Christianity, drug trafficking and corporate culture." "Daytime Events," *Eventbrite*, <http://www.eventbrite.com/e/the-rose-exposed-tickets-7213085533>.

12. *Borderlands* is a critical examination of Mormon fringe culture with a gay Mormon character who attempts to change hearts and minds. Plan-B chose to extend its run due to sold-out shows.

13. Jesse Hawlish, "Serious Entertainment: Plan-B Celebrates 20 Years of Socially Conscious Theatre," *Slug Magazine*, August 31, 2010, <http://www.slugmag.com/article.php?id=2330&page=1/>.

14. Jerry Rapiere, "Jerry Rapiere on Selecting The Season of Eric," *Plan-Blog*, May 20, 2013, <http://planbtheatre.org/wp/?p=3123>.

of a translation of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and premieres of Samuelsen's *Nothing Personal*, *Radio Hour Episode 8: Fairyana*, *Clearing Bombs*, and 3.¹⁵ With the plays decided, Rapier and Samuelsen set about casting the plays (by email, no less) so that Samuelsen could create final drafts of the scripts with specific actors in mind, and the creative teams began their design process.¹⁶ Plan-B then proceeded to market the season using nothing more than Samuelsen's first name.¹⁷

Translation of Ibsen's *Ghosts*

The first play of the season linked Samuelsen's academic roots with his artistry. Whereas literary adaptations are fairly common among Mormon playwrights (such as with Melissa Leilani Larson writing Jane Austen adaptations), there are surprisingly few translators. An Ibsen scholar, Samuelsen speaks fluent Norwegian, and his translation of Ibsen's *Ghosts* was a natural direction following his translation of *A Doll House*. Both plays were part of Plan-B's Script-in-Hand series, staged readings that are often co-produced by various organizations in the Salt Lake Valley.¹⁸ Samuelsen's translation of *Ghosts*, which he also directed, is Ibsen's most controversial work, and it was billed by Plan-B as "quite possibly the most radical play in history."¹⁹ As Samuelsen explains, *Ghosts* is "an excoriating attack on the Victorian sexual double standard" and the physical consequences that come primarily to women through male

15. *Ghosts* premiered on August 25, 2013, in the Jeanne Wagner Theatre at the Rose Wagner Theatre in Salt Lake City. The rest of Samuelsen's plays appeared in the Studio Theatre at the Rose Wagner Theatre. *Nothing Personal* ran October 24 to November 3, 2013, *Clearing Bombs* ran February 20 to March 2, 2014, and 3 ran March 27 to April 6, 2014.

16. Samuelsen worked very closely with the design team, directors, and actors throughout the season, attending rehearsals, answering questions, and adapting the script to their needs when necessary.

17. The administrators of Plan-B Theatre Company are masters of social media marketing. They maintain an active blog with posts by actors, directors, playwrights, designers, and audience members. In addition, they post performance teasers on YouTube and effectively utilize Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Radio advertising is also a strong aspect of Plan-B Theatre marketing; for nearly every Plan-B production, KUER Radio West hosts an interview with members of the artistic or design team.

18. The production starred Jason Bowcutt as Pastor Mandors, Topher Rasmussen as Oswald Alving, Christy Summerhays as Mrs. Helene Alving, Jesamyn Svennsson as Regina Engstrand, and Jason Tatom as Jacob Engstrand.

19. "Ghosts," *Plan-B Theatre Company*, <http://planbtheatre.org/ghosts.htm>.

licentious privilege.²⁰ Samuelsen's translation draws attention to these thematic workings of Ibsen, and he makes the play more relevant to the twenty-first century.

A prominent trademark of Samuelsen's plays is his witty and notoriously difficult-to-memorize realistic dialogue—dialogue that is peppered with colloquialisms and pauses found in contemporary American speech. While Ibsen's classic writing is not altered by Samuelsen to reflect current discourse entirely, it is given a certain familiarity that is not found in other English translations of Ibsen's work. For example, in Samuelsen's translation, Oswald calls his mother "Mom," a current term of endearment absent, for example, in seminal Ibsen translator Rolf Fjelde's *Ghosts*. Similarly, Samuelsen's translation boasts contemporary brevity—it is not that he is "cutting" Ibsen, but, given the opportunity to use a shorter phrase to communicate meaning, Samuelsen takes it. These stylistic translating preferences are in keeping with Samuelsen's own dramaturgy, as is his focus on character. Accordingly, Samuelsen retains a strong sense of melodrama, which was highly influential to Ibsen's work, and he focuses on the play's inherent humor, which is often glossed over in other translations. Samuelsen's fully blocked reading elicited laughter but did not interfere with the gravity of the work, a difficult task for such an infamous play.

Religion and Politics in *Nothing Personal*

The gravity of Ibsen gave way to Samuelsen's own weighty subjects with the premiere of *Nothing Personal*, a play with recognizable political relevance, infused with questions of faith identity, and one that essentially borrows from history to create a drama that is anything but historical. On the surface, the play is about Kenneth Starr, the independent counsel in the Whitewater controversy during Clinton's presidency, and Susan McDougal, who, along with her husband, partnered with the Clintons in their failed Whitewater real estate venture.²¹ At its heart,

20. Eric Samuelsen, quoted in Barbara Bannon, "'Ghosts' Kicks Off Plan-B's Season Dedicated to Utah Playwright," *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 18, 2013, <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/entertainment2/56739470-223/samuelsen-eric-plan-rapier.html.csp>.

21. Susan McDougal was jailed for eighteen months for contempt of court after refusing to answer three questions before a grand jury, which independent counsel Kenneth Starr had empaneled to investigate the Whitewater scandal in September 1996 (she cited a fear of later perjury charges if she answered

however, *Nothing Personal* has little to do with Kenneth Starr and Susan McDougal. As Rapier, who directed the production, asserts in a *Salt Lake Tribune* interview, "Most of what happens in the play never happened. Kenneth Starr never questioned Susan McDougal in prison." The play is "Eric's view of the impact of Susan and Kenneth, not a history lesson."²² While not a historical account, the play does require the audience to reflect on recent history (and events in the making) as it "explores the loss of civil liberties and the violations of human rights."²³ *Nothing Personal* also compels the audience to address fanaticism, racism, politics, and truth, all weighty subjects in contemporary America. While Mormonism is not a direct theme in the play, religion is. Just as he does in his other works, Samuelsen invites audiences to reflect on how faith influences the identity and actions of individuals and nations.

Critics point to Samuelsen's tendency for contriving characters and situations that tend to ambush audiences and drive them toward certain conclusions. While that criticism may or may not be fair, it is likely more so with *Nothing Personal* than with other Samuelsen works. The play opens with Susan (played by April Fossen) pacing her minimally designed jail cell before the audience takes their seats.²⁴ Susan is deeply affected by her imprisonment, unable to think or speak clearly. Her lines are full of verbal hesitations, peppered with colloquial phrases, profanity, and anger-induced vulgarity. Her speech is in marked contrast to that of Kenneth's character (played by Kirt Bateman), who enters her cell and speaks with clarity, precision, and intelligence. Kenneth immediately begins the process of interrogation, and Susan responds with ongoing refusal to answer his questions. Their exchange is witnessed by the prison matron (played by Dee-Dee Darby-Duffin), who remains silent for the majority of the play.

the questions). During jail time, she was placed in solitary confinement and shuffled to various prisons around the country. (This practice, known as "diesel therapy," often involves shackling the prisoners as they are transported for days and weeks.)

22. Jerry Rapier, quoted in Barbara M. Bannon, "Plan-B's 'Nothing Personal' Takes Personal Look at Torture, Abuse of Power," *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 25, 2013, <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/mobile3/56973981-219/mcdougal-susan-samuelsen-kenneth.html.csp>.

23. "Nothing Personal," *Plan-B Theatre*, <http://planbtheatre.org/nothingpersonal.htm>.

24. The set designs for all of Plan-B Theatre's plays during "The Season of Eric" were done by Randy Rasmussen.

The opening conversation between Kenneth and Susan imparts information related to the historical grand jury investigation, but their dialogue quickly veers in other directions and transforms *Nothing Personal* into a play about physical and mental torture. Over the course of seven scenes, Susan is shackled, subjected to waterboarding (after accusations that she is connected to al-Qaeda), put in solitary confinement, and sexually harassed. She also engages in conversations with Kenneth about religion and the nature of truth and reality. Appropriately, some events in the play hover between truth and reality in Susan's mind, reinforcing the mental anguish of her torture. This is all witnessed by the matron, who also participates in inflicting agony; however, there is one moment of what appears to be compassion, when, in response to Susan's frenzied appeal for recognition, she gives an impassioned speech in glossolalia.²⁵ Kenneth, on the other hand, never waivers in his belief of Susan's wrongdoing. Even at the end of the play, when he has lost his battle and Susan is free to leave, he bemoans her immoral actions and the actions of those who will lead to the "destruction of America."²⁶

Nothing Personal engages the audience in a political and social reflection of the last two decades. The battle between Susan and Kenneth is a political metaphor for the battle between Democrats and Republicans. Susan, the protagonist, is a Democrat, and the victor. Kenneth, the antagonist, is a Republican, and the loser. Kenneth is the outwardly religious "moral" character whose behavior demonstrates his immorality, while Susan is the crass adulteress whose honesty and steadfastness demonstrate her decency. Her ordeal signifies the abuses of power inflicted on the American people and foreign prisoners of war by a Republican congress and president.²⁷ Kenneth, in fact, prophesies this:

25. Regarding the matron and her part in the play, Samuelsen writes that the matron "represents for me the law enforcement establishment, the soldiers at Guantanamo, the bailiffs in the courtroom, the jailers and cops and foot soldiers. She'll go along with Starr, but when he loses her, he's done. And she's deeply, personally and genuinely religious, which I have symbolized by having her speak entirely using glossolalia." Eric Samuelsen, "Eric Samuelsen on Creating *Nothing Personal*," *Plan-Blog*, September 30, 2013, <http://planbtheatre.org/wp/?p=3389>.

26. Eric Samuelsen, *Nothing Personal*, unpublished draft, 2013, p. 73, in possession of the author.

27. Despite his political support of Barack Obama, Samuelsen does not turn a blind eye to human rights abuses that have taken place during his presidency. In a *Plan-Blog* post, he asserts, "The same arrogance and self-righteousness and contempt for rule of law continues today. I supported Barack Obama's

"I think you're the first. You're the prelude. I see it pretty clearly. You're the precedent. To save this nation, there will be a time, soon, when we're going to have to suspend . . . certain . . . procedures."²⁸ In addition to this prophecy, Kenneth foresees the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the presidency of Barack Obama.²⁹ As the play ends, Susan leaves her cell, and the following exchange takes place:

Kenneth: Just remember. It's called the White House for a reason.

Susan: Uh, what?

Kenneth: You'll see. You'll see who makes the destruction of America complete.³⁰

This reference to President Barack Obama and the racism directed toward him effectively cements Kenneth's role as the vilified Republican. It also cements Samuelsen's willingness to take tremendous dramatic risks, in this case using the name and likeness of a living national figure and linking him to acts of brutality and torture that he did not, in fact, commit. The only question left to answer is, to what end?

candidacy because I saw in him the possibility for genuine change. But as our country continues drone attacks that kill non-combatants, and Guantanamo stays open, that assault on civil liberties continues. I supported the President in both his political campaigns, with both time and money. But friends tell friends the truth, and this President has also succumbed to fear, with its attendant violence." Samuelsen, "Eric Samuelsen on Creating *Nothing Personal*."

28. Samuelsen, *Nothing Personal*, unpublished draft, 69.

29. During his debate with Susan about truth and reality, he uses the concept of gravity to prove a point, noting, "What if we're on the roof of a building, a very tall building, a tower say, on fire and about to collapse to rubble, what if gravity, as you call it, is about to kill us? There would be no recourse from gravity, no alternative to death. We'd fall, we'd jump, we'd die." Samuelsen, *Nothing Personal*, unpublished draft, 25.

30. Samuelsen, *Nothing*, 73. Following this line, the matron says to Susan, "Go ahead and leave, I'll watch him for you." At this point, the stage directions note that the matron looks down at Kenneth with "a feral smile." Rapier cast Dee-Dee Darby-Duffin, a black actress, as the matron, which gives a certain perspective to her character's actions at the end of the play. After months of witnessing the abuse of Susan, the matron is suddenly confronted with Kenneth's racism, and, like Susan, she takes it personally. It should be noted that there is no character description for the matron in the script, although Samuelsen did suggest to Rapier that she "could be black." Rapier liked the idea and "ran with it." Eric Samuelsen, "Re: Nothing Personal Question," e-mail to author, April 24, 2014.

While many will reasonably see *Nothing Personal* as an obvious attack on their political party, the strongest message in the play speaks incisively to people on both ends of the political spectrum. That message has to do with the perils of corrupted faith. Just as Kenneth accuses Susan in the play of rationalizing her sin of adultery, so, too, Samuelsen makes it clear that Kenneth is using his faith to rationalize his treatment of Susan. Just as Islamist fundamentalists use their faith as an excuse to terrorize whole nations, Kenneth uses his faith as an excuse to personally terrorize Susan in an attempt to “save” his nation.

The experience of watching *Nothing Personal* makes it difficult *not* to take things personally. The performances of Kirt Bateman and April Fossen drew empathy and fear from the audience. Many audience members found it difficult to watch, and a few left early.³¹ This was not because the torture elements were graphic; in fact, they were not shown on stage but suggested as scenes went to darkness. Samuelsen’s ability to make things personal is at its peak in this play. No longer are foreign prisoners of war in Guantanamo a news story; they are suddenly people standing before the audience in real flesh and blood. The staged representation in *Nothing Personal* of Samuelsen’s humanist message about the gravity of human rights violations ultimately supersedes any political pandering that might be evident when the script is merely read.

The humanist message in *Nothing Personal* is also tied to a spiritual message that might appeal to Samuelsen’s Mormon audience. Although the representation of religion in the play is not favorable per se, it is in reality the lack of spiritual concern that ultimately leads to physical mistreatment. Whereas in most Mormon drama, and in the vast majority of Samuelsen’s other plays, characters struggle with their faith or struggle living out their faith, Kenneth and Susan have no such difficulties. Kenneth is entirely self-assured in his personal salvation through Jesus Christ, and Susan is almost dismissive of her similar professed acceptance of salvation and unconcerned with the particularities of any dogma. The matron, too, spiritually gifted enough to speak in tongues, cannot bring herself to live out Christianity in action. Samuelsen’s insightful and troubling suggestion is that when people stop wrestling with their personal spirituality and stop sincerely questioning how their behavior reflects their faith, personal and political crisis ensues. This

31. Eric Samuelsen, “Nothing Personal: Opening Night,” *Mormon Iconoclast*, October 25, 2013, <http://www.mormoniconoclast.com/nothing-personal-opening-night/>.

spiritual theme is crafted into the play so that it is not overpowering, and *Nothing Personal* serves as a prime example of how Mormon theatre can set its religious roots within a drama that appeals to a wide audience.

Film Noir Echoes in *Fairyana*

In contrast to the historical fiction of *Nothing Personal*, Samuelsen's *Fairyana* for Plan-B Theatre's *Radio Hour Episode 8* is a campy fantasy with a little bit of spoof and thematically devoid of religion. Samuelsen had written the stage play over six years earlier, but he reflects that "it never felt right; never felt finished."³² However, adapting it to radio, a medium with which Samuelsen has little experience, gave the play new life. In addition, its peripheral Christmas theme suited its December 3 broadcast. Directed by Cheryl Ann Cluff and performed in front of a live studio audience, the radio play featured live original music composed by David Evanoff and sound effects by Foley artist Michael Johnson.

Fairyana is unlike anything Eric Samuelsen has written for the stage. Its characters are not taken out of history, nor are they products of his observations of local culture. They are taken straight from stereotype and thrown together in a silly scenario that brings fanciful humor. Samuelsen notes that his inspiration for the script started out with his love of "hard-boiled detective fiction," and with Donald E. Westlake's Dortmunder novels in particular.³³ The novels are full of New York crooks besieged by bad luck, and Samuelsen reflects that he had always wanted to see if he could "capture at least something of their language and attitude in a play." This, combined with a chance encounter of a *Barney* episode on television, led to Samuelsen's creation of *Fairyana*'s scenario: amoral cynics working in children's television. The result is a play that is well suited for radio. Unlike most of Samuelsen's work, which is characterized by realistic contemporary dialogue, the characters in *Fairyana* speak in exaggerated voices of their character stereotypes, and there is a hilarious disparity between the tone of the television show characters and the tone of the writers working behind the scenes.

The setup is simple: a television producer named Max (Jason Tatom) is desperate to please the star of a long-running children's show called *Fairyana*. He is tasked with coercing his writers, Viv (Teresa Sanderson)

32. Eric Samuelsen, "Eric Samuelsen on Writing Children's Television for Radio—Radio Hour Episode 8: *Fairyana*," *Plan-Blog*, November 18, 2013, <http://planbtheatre.org/wp/?p=3545>.

33. Samuelsen, "Eric Samuelsen on Writing Children's Television for Radio."

and Stan (Jay Perry), into creating a very long storyline that will lead into a history-making Christmas special. He convinces them to bring back a forgotten villain, Snoogums (Santa's favorite elf), into the world of *Fairyana*. Viv refuses until Max tasks his favorite cousin and Italian mafia member, Guido, into kidnapping and roughing up Viv's lover, Carl. When Viv relents and starts writing the Snoogums storyline, she becomes possessed by Snoogums to the point of death. She is resurrected just long enough to almost bring the story to an end when Max threatens to shoot Stan if she doesn't come through. During her effort, Viv is once again possessed by Snoogums and tries to take the gun from Max. In the struggle that ensues, Stan gets hold of the gun and kills Viv. Max then gains possession of the gun and forces Stan to finish the story at gunpoint. Stan does so and also becomes possessed by Snoogums. The play ends with the closing lines of the finished episode of *Fairyana* and the sudden discovery of a dead body backstage.

If *Nothing Personal* is a play in which Samuelsen hopes to move audiences to consider the human damages of abuse and torture, *Fairyana* is a play that asks audiences to dismiss them in favor of a laugh. Max is particularly abhorrent. A tough guy of Italian descent, his lines are profuse with contractions and incomplete sentences. This recognizable stereotype found in Max is placed alongside Viv, described in the play as a "chain-smokin' alcoholic like everyone in children's television," and Stan, a hypochondriac, "maybe forty, maybe sixty, a man who life defeated years ago, hangin' on like a death row inmate waiting for the governor's reprieve."³⁴ During the performance, the actors gave exaggerated life to the characters, with Sanderson embodying Viv with the husky voice of a chain-smoker, Perry nasally suggesting Stan's perpetually runny nose, and Tatom giving Max's New York Italian Mafia speech perfect rhythm. They were definitely characters meant to be heard, and their animated onstage performance incited much laughter among the audience, whose attention was also drawn to the fascinating Foley.

Samuelsen's radio hour relinquished any meaningful messages in favor of amusement. Whereas his dramas are usually fodder for thought and interspersed with humor, *Fairyana* is a well-made comedy only interrupted by momentary woe. Near the end of the play, Viv makes a case for killing Snoogums and Santa Claus, arguing that "Santa's about presents. But Santa's also Mom and Dad. . . . And if they're poor, what're

34. Eric Samuelsen, *Fairyana*, unpublished draft, 3, in possession of the author.

their kids get? All-a-dollar crap? While rich kids get like iPads?"³⁵ This is followed by the following monologue: "They may be kids, Max, but they're gonna grow up. And they're gonna be out there, in the world, with rapists and serial killers and landlords. And they won't be ready, they won't be prepared. They'll think bad guys are pink. They'll think you can cuddle 'em. Loan sharks and tow truck drivers and the lady at the DMV. And don't even get me started on real estate agents."³⁶ Although humorous, Samuelsen makes a case that Viv's valiant fight against Snoogums "has a serious point to make," that "the meaning of Snoogums is that villains are cute and cuddly. . . . Children need to be told the truth—that life can be tough and violent and mean and damaging."³⁷ This all may be true, but it is certainly not the crux of the play. It is, in fact, periphery at best to the character studies in an implausible situation that make *Fairyana* the film noir comedy that it is.

Clearing the Bombs in Macroeconomics

In *Clearing Bombs*, Samuelsen returns to subjects that are serious and socially conscious. The play is a staged debate of economics, and while theatre and economic deliberation are not usually captivating bedfellows, in this production, the partnership works. Like Samuelsen's *Amerigo*, in which historical figures Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz debate politics, religion, and race, the debate in *Clearing Bombs* is more than a history lesson as it becomes a captivating examination of humanity's interworkings lightened by humor (including a wink to Samuelsen's Mormon audience).

The impetus for the play began on a trip to the library when Samuelsen was browsing the shelves for any book about any subject that looked interesting. On this particular occasion, he found Nicholas Wapshott's 2011 book *Keynes Hayek: The Clash That Defined Modern Economics*. In it, he briefly mentions that the two famous economists, British Etonite John Maynard Keynes and Austrian immigrant Friedrich A. Hayek, spent the night on the roof of King's College Chapel together as part of a faculty assignment to extinguish any German incendiary bombs that might drop in an air raid. Very little is known of what happened that night, but Samuelsen was fascinated with the thought of what

35. Samuelsen, *Fairyana*, unpublished draft, 38.

36. Samuelsen, *Fairyana*, unpublished draft, 38.

37. Samuelsen, "Eric Samuelsen on Writing Children's Television for Radio."

might have occurred when two great economic minds were placed in such a situation. The outcome of the war was still uncertain at that time, and the two economists engaged in heated debates about what should be done in its aftermath.³⁸

Directed by Samuelsen himself, *Clearing Bombs* starred Mark Fossen as Keynes, Jay Perry as Hayek, and Kirt Bateman as Mr. Bowles, a fictional English middle-class everyman who serves as fire warden, supervisor to the two economists, and judge of their respective theories. The play opens on the rooftop of King's College Chapel. The set was simple: the location was suggested with a sloped wall behind the playing space, and behind the scrim there were inconspicuous firelike tongues stretching from the sky (these "tongues of fire" would light up at the end of the play during the attack). Mr. Bowles enters first, keeping his eyes on the sky. Keynes and Hayek arrive, and Bowles instructs the academics on how to extinguish and contain fire if there is an attack. The men get comfortable, preparing themselves for a long night. Their comradeship starts slowly with a discussion of each other's part in the war. This discussion leads to Keynes's first stab at his colleague's opposing economic theories. He informs Bowles that Hayek has just written a book titled *The Road to Serfdom*, in which he predicts that too much government interference in national economics will lead to further war.³⁹ Hayek questions Keynes's motives for instigating argument on such a night, asking, "You want to argue? Now? Under these condi—" He is interrupted by Keynes, who replies, "You know me, Freddy, I would rather argue than breathe."⁴⁰

Mr. Bowles is a hesitant audience to the argument that takes place that night, only agreeing to be judge of their theories to "pass the time."⁴¹ For the audience, Bowles is the means through which macro-economic theory becomes accessible. Keynes and Hayek put their ideas of government stimulus and *laissez-faire* into layman's terms. As Keynes succinctly puts it to Hayek, "What you fear is too much government;

38. Eric Samuelsen, "Playwright and Director Eric Samuelsen on Creating *Clearing Bombs*," *Plan-Blog*, January 27, 2014, <http://planbtheatre.org/wp/?p=3694>.

39. *The Road to Serfdom* was published in 1944. Samuelsen acknowledges that he "fudge[s] it a bit" in respect to the timing of their night on the roof and the completion/publication of Hayek's book in an effort to reference both men's important works in the script. Keynes's celebrated work *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* was published in 1936.

40. Eric Samuelsen, *Clearing Bombs*, unpublished draft, 15, in possession of the author.

41. Samuelsen, *Clearing Bombs*, unpublished draft, 23.

what I fear is too little. You're against it, as a matter of principle. . . . I think you're dangerous. I think you're wrong. And you think the same of me."⁴² Hayek agrees. The two then proceed to defend their positions to Bowles. Keynes argues that government stimulus can and should save depressed economies by offering jobs to keep citizens working so that they can earn money to spend on goods, which then creates more jobs. Hayek, on the other hand, thinks that government intervention leads to debt, which burdens taxpayers and takes away their freedom. Of course, both men agree on some economic points, making some allowances to their opposition, but both also think the other's economic theories in action will lead to mass poverty and, in turn, restlessness and war.

This synopsis is a simplification, of course. If it were that simple, Samuelsen's play would not be as compelling as it is. The reason why *Clearing Bombs*, a play in which two characters debate macroeconomic theory, gripped audiences is that the economic theories they debate are not simplistic at all. In Samuelsen's own words: "But if [*Clearing Bombs*] works, and I do think it might, it works because ideas matter. Because we human beings, irrational and emotional and arbitrary and prejudiced and foolish and biased and culturally blinkered though we are, are sometimes, every once in awhile, capable of thinking at a very high level, and expressing quite profound ideas in prose that crackles. And ideas can change the world. And Keynes and Hayek were thinkers on that level."⁴³ To the "everyman," the high ideas of Keynes and Hayek are complex and perplexing. And, as both economists point out, there are very dire human consequences if the wrong economic theory is "chosen." In fact, the citizen's responsibility to make an educated vote is a strong message in the play.⁴⁴ In an effort to convince Bowles of the importance of economics in the day-to-day life of all citizens, Keynes says to him,

42. Samuelsen, *Clearing Bombs*, unpublished draft, 24.

43. Eric Samuelsen, "Opening Night: *Clearing Bombs*," *Mormon Iconoclast*, February 21, 2014, <http://www.mormoniconoclast.com/opening-night-clearing-bombs/>.

44. Samuelsen writes, "Their debate, over macro-economics and politics and policies and debt and stimulus, the debate these two men may have had on that roof (and certainly did have in their published papers), remains relevant today. The last Presidential election probably turned on some version of Keynes v. Hayek. It was fascinating to me to watch this election, to compare the President's economic plans and compare them to the plans offered by Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan, and see resonances of Keynes and echoes of Hayek." Samuelsen, "Playwright."

“When you vote, Mr. Bowles, bear this in mind. You believe you’re voting for a chap, a good bloke. . . . [But you] are voting for a set of economic principles. . . . If you vote the wrong way, for the agreeable chap you could imagine sharing a pint with, but who, as it happens, believes in a bad theory, an unworkable theory, a chap who will, if elected, attempt to implement a foolish economic programme based on an untenable theory, you could, in very short order, drive your nation off a cliff into disaster.”⁴⁵ Bowles responds to this warning by asking what he should do, to which Keynes responds, “Learn economics, preferably.” Bowles then protests that as a laboring middle-class man he hasn’t the time. Once again, Keynes fires back, insisting that he does, indeed, have time to “read a book or two.”⁴⁶ The only question is, which one? The economic theories pushed by Keynes and Hayek in the play sway Bowles one way and then the other, and when, in the final scene, he is asked to say who won the debate, he is interrupted by bombs falling from the sky.

Economic theory aside, in the script and onstage, if one wanted to vote for “a good bloke” as Bowles would say, “a chap you could share a pint with,” Keynes would be the victor. He is, quite simply, more likeable than Hayek in the play (though both Fossen and Perry gave superb performances). Keynes’s sense of humor is stronger, and his wit is sharper. Moreover, Hayek becomes less likable when he accuses Keynes of having a shortsighted vision of economics due to his homosexuality. He asks, toward the end of the play, “Is it not at least somewhat possible that you, as a childless man, are not . . . inclined to consider the future? That you tend to overvalue the short term?”⁴⁷ This accusation is the climax of *Clearing Bombs*, the point at which the economic debate becomes more personal. The accusation is also unexpected (there is certainly no indication prior to this point that sexual orientation of any person is of any consequence to the discussion), so it was somewhat jarring to the audience.⁴⁸ This is

45. Samuelsen, *Clearing Bombs*, unpublished draft, 22.

46. Samuelsen, *Clearing Bombs*, unpublished draft, 23.

47. Samuelsen, *Clearing Bombs*, unpublished draft, 73.

48. The inclusion of homosexuality as an issue in the play would, at first glance, seem to be a labored inclusion of what is a recurring theme in Samuelsen’s work (it is most prominent in *Borderlands* but also appears in other plays, including *Miasma* and 3). However, the inclusion of this accusation is taken from recent history. In May 2013, celebrated Harvard history professor Niall Ferguson was asked about Keynes’s famous phrase, “In the long run, we are all of us dead,” to which he suggested that Keynes’ homosexuality contributed to flaws in his economic theory. Ferguson was blasted by the press and

not to say that the plot development was misplaced. In fact, all tension between the economists comes to a head at this moment, only to dissipate as the play comes to a close, the two men achieving some understanding of their shared concern for democracy as the bombs start to fall.

The damage is done, however, and despite Samuelsen's intention for an even-handed approach to character, Hayek is somewhat diminished, no matter what virtues are found in his economic theories. Hayek is not the only one with faults, however. There is a strong sense in the play that both economists hover in a space above life's reality. In contrast to the "two old agnostics," Mr. Bowles is a Bible-reading, believing Protestant more grounded in the moment. While the economists are busy philosophizing and clearing theoretical bombs, Mr. Bowles stands ready to sacrifice his life when real ones fall.

Relationship Tensions in 3

In *Clearing Bombs*, faith is peripheral to economy, but Plan-B's final production in the Samuelsen series was a play focused on faith, featuring three vignettes that each have three main female characters, played by three actresses; the play is appropriately titled 3.⁴⁹ Directed by Cheryl Ann Cluff, all three vignettes address issues of sex and gender among Latter-day Saints and examine how women, specifically, often suffer in a culture that sometimes unwittingly encourages perfectionism. Started over a decade ago, 3 is a return to Samuelsen's roots in LDS drama, of writing about the hidden corners of his faith community. He asserts, "Mormonism is my lifelong spiritual home. But loving a culture does not mean blinding oneself to its limitations." He sees problems when there is a "culture of sexism" and when some engage in a kind of "patronizing patriarchy." Above all, he says, "Mormonism can be obsessed with public relations, with how things seem, with appearances."⁵⁰ Appropriately,

subsequently apologized, as Hayek does in the play. Samuelsen does contend that he had "qualms" about putting "some version of Ferguson's notions into the mouth of Hayek," but in the end decided to give Hayek the line because he believes that Hayek could have conceivably believed that everything about Keynes, including his homosexuality, prevented him from seeing the long-term effects of his economic views. Samuelsen, "Playwright."

49. Samuelsen explains that he deliberately tied in the numerical title of the play with the significance of that number in Christian theology, and specifically LDS theology. Eric Samuelsen, "Eric Samuelsen on Writing 3," *Plan-Blog*, March 3, 2014, <http://planbtheatre.org/wp/?p=3828>.

50. Samuelsen, "Eric Samuelsen on Writing 3."

the set design that greeted the audience was industrial-looking shelving, piled high with boxes, water barrels, and white buckets, set on their sides, upright, and stacked on top of each other. These containers of food storage, a staple in any devout LDS home, were all empty. This design concept visually introduced the theme in “Bar and Kell,” the first of the three vignettes in 3 and the one most concerned with Mormonism and outward appearance.

Bar (Theresa Sanderson) and Kell (Christy Summerhays) are two devout LDS women who befriend Brandie Jacobs (Stephanie Howell), a new neighbor and ward member, but one who does not share their standards for homemaking or spirituality. With three children and one on the way with her abusive boyfriend and few qualms about discussing her tattoos or sexual indiscretions, Brandie is, as Kell remarks, “the very definition of ‘less active.’”⁵¹ Bar immediately sees Brandie as a “project” and enlists Kell’s help to make her over.⁵² The two women help her unpack, paint, coordinate rides to her GED classes, watch her kids, and ultimately convince her to marry her boyfriend and the father of her children. In the process of their “progress” with Brandie, Kell realizes that her feigned friendship actually means something, and she begins questioning how “helpful” she and Bar actually are, and, specifically, whether convincing Brandie to marry her abusive boyfriend is such a good idea after all.

“Bar and Kell” is a simple vignette about the pressures women sometimes put on each other while striving for perfection. It is an examination of how good intentions are not always good. While Brandie benefits from the help she receives, there is no talk of the gospel during Bar and Kell’s service, no talk of Brandie’s spiritual growth. Rather, Bar and Kell work on the external aspects of Brandie’s life, only lightly touching the surface of her inner turmoil.

“Community Standard,” the second vignette in 3, also exposes the pain Samuelsen believes is hidden deep within some LDS women. He ingeniously explores this topic using events from over a decade ago, when the news in Utah was dominated by headlines of a video rental store editing out “offensive” scenes in the movie *Titanic* and of a jury tasked with deciding if certain pornographic films violated a community’s standard. These two stories are cleverly intertwined in the lives of

51. Eric Samuelsen, 3, unpublished draft, 2012, 7, in possession of the author.

52. Samuelsen, 3, unpublished draft, 8.

Janeal (Stephanie Howell), Christine (Theresa Sanderson), and Bertine (Christy Summerhays).⁵³ The three women find themselves serving jury duty, deciding if a video rental store violated the community's standards by renting out pornographic videos. From the beginning of the play, it seems as if Janeal is the most conservative of the three, the most likely to vote against the defendant. In the process of viewing the pornography, however, Janeal finds that she can relate to the women acting in the offensive films because she is objectified in the same way by her husband. She asserts that what the people in her community and within her faith profess and what they actually believe are two different things. In the end, Janeal votes to acquit the defendant and will not budge on her position, creating a hung jury. The vignette ends with Janeal and Christine parting ways after running into each other years later at the grocery store. Christine questions Janeal's marriage, only to find that she is still with her husband, despite his possession of a laptop computer that offers instant access to pornography.

"Community Standard" is a scathing examination of sexism in Mormon communities that could potentially divide audiences—similar to the way the women in the play are divided. Samuelson makes it clear in the play that healthy marriages are prevalent in Mormon culture but that the couples, and specifically women, in those healthy marriages may be blinding themselves to the reality of some unhealthy marriages in their midst. In this way, "Community Standard" is as much about those who hide their depressed and troubled spirits behind a front of perfectionism as it is a play about harmful relationships.

Following the exposition in "Community Standard," the third vignette in 3, titled "Duets," explores the potential hazards in what are meant to be eternal partnerships in the LDS faith. In the play, two women, Candace (Theresa Sanderson) and Sherilyn (Stephanie Howell), try to enlist the help of Sondra (Christy Summerhays) to improve their ward choir after they hear her sing one Sunday at sacrament meeting. Sondra is new to the ward, however, and seems hesitant to get too involved or get too close. Months pass before she finally does arrive at choir practice with her husband, Mark. Together, they transform the choir and seem to enjoy themselves, but the next week they retreat into their private lives, refusing callings and visiting teaching.

53. Christine is the only major non-Mormon character in 3.

Sherilyn does eventually forge a friendship with Sondra, and it is during their chats that Sherilyn gleans that all is not well between her and Mark. The suspicion is confirmed Easter Sunday when she sees Mark arrive at the house in the wee hours of the morning and then notices a rift between them during their Easter duet. Later that night, she visits Sondra to find out the cause of their marital discord and to offer support, only to discover that Mark is gay. Sondra reveals that she knew of his sexuality before they were married, how he had tried to overcome it without success, and how he had finally succumbed to adultery with another man. Before any more information is revealed, the women are startled by the sound of a gunshot. Mark has killed himself just behind the study door. In her bereft devastation, Sondra professes her love for him. Meanwhile, Sherilyn is unable to feel compassion or empathy and does nothing to comfort her, but, in fact, turns away.

Samuelsen's talent for controversy again sparkles (and bristles). To say nothing of same-sex-attracted men and women in successful marriages, some audience members will be uncomfortable as the play interposes Easter worship with the horrors of suicide—and the marital covenant itself seeming implicit in the tragedy. Samuelsen, however, wrote “Duets” from a personal place. He asserts, “I’ve had many friends who had suffered the heartache of such misalliances. I’ve seen it end in tragedy, as it does in this play. Not always, thank heavens, but often enough.”⁵⁴ Unlike “Community Standard,” in which Janeal erects walls around herself, disallowing the women around her to see her anguish or bolster her spirit, Sondra pleads for understanding and support for her situation, but it is withheld under a guise of protecting personal purity. In neither play do the women operate as authentic sisters in the faith.

The performances of the seasoned actresses in 3 were both moving and funny. There is usually abundant criticism for plays about women written by men, but Samuelsen is too keen an observer of human behavior to invite such condemnation. The women in 3 are complex character studies, only falling into stereotype for occasional humor. In some ways, 3 is closest to *Peculiarities* (2003) of all Samuelsen's other work. *Peculiarities* comprises six vignettes that explore LDS youth and sexuality. 3 could easily be seen as a sequel to what happens to the young women in *Peculiarities* in adulthood, exploring how they adjust their lives to meet the expectations of their culture.

54. Samuelsen, “Eric Samuelsen on Writing 3.”

Final Curtain Call and New Beginnings

In scouring the Internet, one is hard-pressed to find a negative review of Samuelsen's plays in Plan-B's "The Season of Eric." This leads to the question: How does one measure success? Audience attendance for this season was good, to say the least (the season played to 93 percent capacity with *Clearing Bombs*, and 3 completely sold out).⁵⁵ However, it is clear that Samuelsen realized his professional triumph when he learned that a season was to be devoted to his work, and he is vocal in his gratefulness to Plan-B Theatre.

On their blog in December 2013, Plan-B Theatre Company gave their artists and patrons a chance to publically describe what Plan-B Theatre is or means, to which Samuelsen contributed, "Plan-B means a life buoy thrown to a drowning man."⁵⁶ These are strong and meaningful words from someone recently retired from his life's work and struggling with serious health concerns. To Samuelsen, the season was not just show business. It was personal. In his final "farewell" comments about the season, he reflected, "Obviously, the greatest five events in my life were when I married Annette, and when each of our four children were born. I'm not kidding when I say this: The Season of Eric comes sixth."⁵⁷ With an entire season devoted to his work, no doubt Samuelsen looks forward to even greater recognition in the Utah theatre community. He certainly can count on continued production opportunities for his plays elsewhere and at *Plan-B*, where his recent work *Canossa*, about the Investiture Controversy of 1077, began the workshop process in 2014.⁵⁸

The notable success of Samuelsen as an individual Mormon playwright may be self-evident, but the question remains as to what "The Season of Eric" means for Mormon dramatists as a collective. The Season of Eric has certainly added to the canon of accessible LDS drama (Plan-B has made an ebook available for purchase).⁵⁹ More importantly, however, it has added to the critical and cultural conversation of

55. Jerry Rapier, personal e-mail to author, April 14, 2014.

56. Eric Samuelsen, quoted in "Plan-B Is/Means . . ." *Plan-Blog*, December 3, 2013, <http://planbtheatre.org/wp/?p=3603>.

57. Eric Samuelsen, "Eric Samuelsen Bids Farewell to the #SeasonOfEric," *Plan-Blog*, April 8, 2014, <http://planbtheatre.org/wp/?p=3965>.

58. I attended the first workshop of *Canossa* at Plan-B theatre on April 7, 2014. Although still in its first draft, it is in keeping with Samuelsen's work: impeccably researched, funny, and humanistic.

59. Jerry Rapier, editor, *#SeasonofEric* (Plan-B Theatre Company, 2014), Kindle edition.

what LDS drama is and what an LDS dramatist can be. While there is a pervasive Mormon theme present in 3, Samuelsen's other plays make it clear that his personal aesthetic is informed by his faith, not defined by it. His individual understanding of LDS belief influences the political and social messages in his work, and the themes align with the mission of Plan-B Theatre. In finding artistic common ground, the playwright and the production company have created one of the best examples of theatrical partnership the state has seen. And while their approach to activism may not bring about a revolution, it makes for good drama—Mormon or otherwise.

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