

DESERET
Morning News

FACING EAST PRESENTS TOUGH SUBJECT FLAWLESSLY
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Facing East is definitely a "word-of-mouth" drama, one that is bound to generate plenty of debate about an issue some people might prefer to simply bury.

The setting is a cemetery. Most of the friends and family who have attended the funeral of suicide victim Andrew McCormick have either gone home or headed back to the church for a meal that will certainly include "funeral potatoes."

But Andrew's bereft parents, Alex and Ruth, have stayed behind. The still-open grave in the center of the stage is a constant reminder of the hole — the sad void — in their lives.

Facing East may well be the best thing Carol Lynn Pearson has ever written, at least for the stage. It raises plenty of questions and concerns but doesn't offer any pat answers. There are lots of "what ifs" and "coulda-shouldas" as the three central characters — Andrew's parents, and his not-so-longtime companion Marcus, confront Andrew's losing battle with homosexuality.

Andrew, too, is a major presence. There are a few masterfully handled flashbacks that bring bits and pieces of his life to the forefront, adding some interesting aspects to the confusion surrounding his puzzling sexuality.

Director Jerry Rapier's cast for Plan-B Theatre Company's world-premiere production is flawless.

Jayne Luke continues to be one of our community's finest actresses in a beautifully honed performance as Ruth, constantly beating herself up for failing as a mother, for letting down one of her children who may not be present for her family's "roll call" in the next life.

Charles Lynn Frost — who was very open during a post-play discussion on opening weekend about his own journey as a gay "recovering Mormon" — brings strong insight to his role as Alex, a family-oriented radio celebrity and former bishop now struggling to confront his youngest son's suicide.

At the cemetery, Alex prods Ruth into enacting an all-new funeral service (with the trees as their congregation), because their son's obituary and funeral "were all lies."

They are joined about three-fourths into the production by Marcus, who has come to the cemetery to pay his respects — thinking everyone would be gone. In a powerful performance by Jay Perry, Marcus brings yet another dimension to what is already a fairly complex situation. He is angry that Andrew's family and church would leave him dangling.

Facing East cannot be simply categorized as "pro-gay" or "anti-Mormon." There are pro-and-con elements on all sides of this multifaceted sexual quagmire, and Pearson's eloquent, tightly written script manages to touch most of the bases. There is very little finger-pointing, but there is plenty of fodder for healthy debate.

Randy Rasmussen's simple, yet highly effective set design, and Cory Thorell's dramatic, sometimes moody lighting, both draw the audience directly into the lives of the intricately drawn characters.