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'Facing East' gets West Coast standing ovation

Utah play about LDS gays opens to oversold house in San Francisco

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SAN FRANCISCO - A packed, oversold house, a standing ovation and a gush of tears greeted the opening-night performance of Carol Lynn Pearson's "Facing East," a Utah-incubated drama now playing on the boards of the country's oldest gay theater.

The Friday performance marked the latest phase in Plan-B Theatre's unusual coast-to-coast transfer of "Facing East" from Salt Lake City to an off-Broadway debut in New York City and now a San Francisco run, funded by a \$150,000 grant by Bruce Bastian, a Utah philanthropist and gay rights activist. The journey will continue into the Far East, as the company has been invited to perform in the 2009 Singapore Fringe Festival.

The opening-night audience at the Mission District's Theatre Rhinoceros appeared to be a mixed crowd, ranging from gay theatergoers to local LDS members, and Utahns, native and California transplants, all drawn by Pearson's work and the play's themes.

"I can look around this room and I swear half my ward is here," said Lane Robison, a friend of the Walnut Creek playwright who describes her work as both eloquent and hard-hitting. "Carol Lynn has such a delightful ability to deliver a forceful message and stay a very strong member of the church. This may be a small venue, but this play will get a lot of discussion."

The performance was oversold by 30 seats, so added chairs increased the cozy feeling of the 117-seat house. Advance sales hit \$6,000, about \$1,000 higher than advance sales for the New York run, said Plan-B's producing director Jerry Rapier. Ticketbuyers included former NFL football player Steve Young, who was scheduled to meet with the playwright before attending the Saturday-night performance.

The play's track record is unusual, thought to be the first Utah-made play to transfer, with set, cast and crew intact, to rented theaters on both coasts.

"Ambition is a beautiful thing," said Salt Lake City playwright Julie Jensen. "Especially ambition with money. Hats off to all of them."

"It does show it isn't just a Mormon play," said Anne Cullimore Decker, an actor and retired theater professor at the University of Utah. "It has meaning beyond this culture."

Hosting an out-of-town play - not from New York City or Los Angeles or London, but from Salt Lake City - is a first for Theatre Rhinoceros, as well, said John Fisher, the company's executive director.

"I think people from San Francisco have prejudices about people from Utah - sometimes we're more liberal than thou - and we think we're the only people who do gay theater, although we really know otherwise. We like that Plan-B is a very, very accomplished theater company coming from a city we know very little about."

"Facing East" tells the story of a faithful Mormon couple, Ruth and Alex McCormick (Jayne Luke and Charles Lynn Frost), after the funeral of their gay son, who committed suicide. At the graveside, the grieving parents poignantly face off with the son's lover, Marcus (Jay Perry).

Pearson's emotionally wrought, expositionally laden family drama received strong, mixed reviews from New York critics, including its label as a Greek tragedy, post-catastrophe, by *Variety's* Mark Blankenship. The writer praised the production's "near-sacred stillness," which served to punctuate all its grieving conversations.

"I was invited by life to address this subject," said Pearson at an informal post-show conversation.

Pearson, a Utah native who earned a master's degree in theater from Brigham Young University, was referring to her LDS temple marriage to a gay man who later died of AIDS, recounted in her groundbreaking 1986 memoir, *Goodbye, I Love You*.

The collision of sexuality and religiosity is much larger than the Mormon church, Pearson said, recounting a national study that claims gay youth are five times more likely than their peers to commit suicide.

During the post-play discussion, theatergoer Kent Nelson told Pearson: "You've finally wrung all the tears out of us."

That kind of emotional outburst characterized the conversation, which prompted praise for the complex tableau of characters - a brittle, unwavering mother, a distraught father, and anguished lover, all rotating the dead son's open grave.

One young female theatergoer said the depiction of Ruth helped her understand her own Mormon grandmother. Utahn Chad Nielson said he planned a road trip to see the show in San Francisco after missing the show's last performance in Salt Lake City. Watching the play helped him feel greater tolerance for Mormons, Nielson said, after spending most of his life angry about the culture wars raging in his hometown.

The story of one couple struggling with their faith offered a constructive way to consider the complexity of sexuality, said Craig Stewart, who described himself as a longtime friend of Pearson's.

"We're all growing in our understanding, and she's a big part of it," said Stewart. "She has a talent for that - giving a message that for some people is hard to hear."

He described the play's emotional weight as "tremendous," tearing up as he detailed a moment when Marcus tells his lover's parents about a church leader - described in the play as "the runner-up bishop" - who visited their home after the son's excommunication with the offering of a plate of brownies.

"That's what we all hope we can be," said Stewart, a Mormon priesthood leader serving in the Walnut Creek area.

Pearson said she wrote "Facing East" because of her belief in the emotional power of dramatic storytelling.

"The theater can be so many things," Pearson said. "It can be a place of communal grieving and, I hope, communal health."

She invited theatergoers to be patient and "very urgent" while calling upon church leaders across the country to embrace gay members.

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Imaginative fires

* **"FACING EAST"** , Carol Lynn Pearson's drama about an upstanding LDS couple facing the suicide of their gay son, plays through Aug. 26 at Theatre Rhinoceros, 2926 16th St., San Francisco (located one block east of the 16th Street/Mission BART station.) For tickets, call 415-861-5079 or visit www.ticketweb.com. The show plays at 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, and 3 p.m. Sundays.

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