

ART AMONG A PECULIAR PEOPLE:
A REVIEW OF *BRIGHAM CITY*

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I hate when people tell me obvious answers to questions, as if assuming I'm too dull to think on my own. I've sat through too many classes where teachers gave us easy answers to complex problems. So I avoid didactic literature, where the author assumes the reader is too dense to understand the point unless it is spelled out. I feel offended. I get bored.

A lot of faith-based art tends to be too obvious, which is understandable—artists presenting a subject important to them want to be sure they are understood. Even so, to be too obvious with your theme is to underestimate your audience. I am much more stimulated by a work I have to struggle to understand. For instance, I've been working for years on W.B. Yeats' poem "Among School Children." Some day I'll be wise enough to figure it out. In the meantime, I just thoroughly enjoy the sound and feel of it. I'm not sure you have to have total understanding of a work to prove that it's worth absorbing. In fact, I am pretty sure that anything you can master instantly is not world-class art. Why do we keep coming back to Shakespeare? Perhaps one characteristic of art is that we have to keep coming back, trying to answer questions, finding new questions to ask.

One of the things I liked best about Richard Dutcher's movie, *Brigham City*, is that not only does it *not* provide easy answers—it doesn't provide many answers at all. But it's rich with questions. I agree with Dutcher's opinion, stated during his forum address at BYU-Idaho on November 21, 2002, that really good literature, movies, and probably the visual arts too, change the way you look at the world. I first saw *Brigham City* almost a year ago, and I am still excited about the questions it raised for me

Am I being naïve in taking the position that *Brigham City* is great art? I know that many people wouldn't agree with me on this; many people are even offended by Dutcher's portrayal of Mormon culture and practices. When I first saw *God's Army*, another film by Richard Dutcher, I admit that I wondered about the scene where one missionary gives another a blessing: the whole blessing was on film! Isn't that casting a pearl before people who won't understand the sacred nature of priesthood ordinances, or in some way treating the things of God lightly? But I was touched by the scene, and after much thought decided that there was nothing inappropriate in it, or in the sacrament scenes portrayed in *Brigham City*. In fact, the sacrament prayer is central to the theme of *Brigham City*; I am more alive to the meaning of the Atonement since seeing this movie. Dutcher put the entire sacrament prayers into the film on purpose—because the

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theme of his movie rests on the words of the prayers. Dutcher took the risk that audiences would reject such scenes and thereby miss his theme. He takes what he has to say very seriously: at the forum he said: The movies I make are sacred to me. A film can be like a seer-stone in other people's life when you tell your story honestly (my paraphrase). That is taking his art very seriously, and I think it is taking me seriously too.

One of the themes of Dutcher's forum address was the role and future of Mormon art. He observed that a large majority of movies, for example, are made for entertainment, or purposes less worthy (pornography, violence, etc.). What should Mormon art do? There is nothing wrong with entertaining, but there should be serious Mormon art as well. That is what we have been struggling with as a people for years (since the Church was organized). The question has always been, "What is Mormon art—is it something created *for* Mormons, or *by* Mormons, or *about* Mormons? Do we create for each other, or for the world to show what the Mormons are like?" Of course, the answer is "yes" to both questions. Some Mormons write or paint, attempting to show the world that we are good people with a sympathetic practice and doctrine. Some people write mainly to Church members, trying to avoid the justification problem that comes when you are writing to a potentially hostile or uninformed audience.

I was really intrigued by Dutcher's theory: he said that we should be writing for our own people, and that the world can accept what it likes of it. We have too long been apologetic about our religion, and have tried too hard to make the world see us as nonpeculiar people. Dutcher said that this is a mistake—we are a peculiar people, and we need to be confident in our position. He describes us amusingly as "very polite people." He wasn't being complimentary. We need to be more honest than polite, he feels. We need to "celebrate the soul in conflict." He used as an example the novel *My Name Is Asher Lev*. The Jewish people have celebrated their differences as a people in their art and elsewhere. Their differences, shared suffering, and conflicted souls are among the reasons they still exist as a people. Catholics, too, stand out as a distinct group. Do we think less of the Catholic Church for movies like *The Mission*? A discerning reader will understand in watching it that though there are corrupt people in the church, the church is not to blame for them. Can't we too be candid?

Which brings me back to defining art. One quality inevitably found in great art is a universal theme. One of the most universal of themes is the conflict between good and evil. *MacBeth*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Heart of Darkness*: titles readily come to mind where the main theme is the exploration of man's tendency toward evil. And it is also a major Mormon theme: the Book of Mormon is the story of a civilization's wrestle with

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evil. Likewise, this is the central theme of *Brigham City*. Questions raised include:

- To what degree should you trust other people, knowing the risk of trusting in the arm of man?
- Since you can't *prove* that religious faith makes a positive difference in your life, is it foolish to struggle to achieve it and live by it? Why doesn't living a righteous life keep you safe from people who are evil?
- Is avoiding all contact with sin a good idea, and will such avoidance keep you safe from the consequences of the sins of others?
- Where's the justice in having to suffer your whole life for what began as a small mistake, not even a sin? Or for other people's choices?"

I was surprised at first that *Brigham City* is a murder mystery. Talk about an overused and abused motif! You can't turn on your television without having a choice between murder movies and reality shows talking about gruesome murders and violence. I tend to not watch these movies. Why, then, did Dutcher use this overworked motif in a movie about moral choice and religious faith? A possible answer: to analyze evil, use a striking example. Murder fits the description well, especially serial-murder.

What distinguishes this film from the other murder movies out there? And what setting does Dutcher choose? This really made me uncomfortable. When I see a movie about a street murder in New York, I can sit back and think, "Well, that's what they do in New York. I don't have to go there." I liked *Jaws* because I don't have to get into the ocean. Dutcher, however, removes the comfort of disassociation by setting his movie in a small Mormon community. I was raised in Honeyville, nine miles north of Brigham City, Utah. Watching this movie, I noted early on that it wasn't about my town literally, but symbolically it certainly was about the community I lived in. I agreed with the main character's opinion: bad things like murder don't happen in little Mormon towns. So it shocked me when girls in the town start getting killed. It was as if I knew them. As a girl I knew Miss Peach City. She was a really nice girl—lived next door to me, the same age as my older brother. There was that cute redhead who worked at the store and always had a cheerful word when I came in. I felt frightened by Dutcher's fictional deaths.

Dutcher's main character, Wes, is a bishop and the sheriff. Small Mormon communities tend to blur the division between church and state, and this double role makes Wes doubly responsible as the shepherd of his flock.

So here we are, the audience, caught up in an experience that is proving more pertinent than we anticipated, and uncomfortably aware that we may be in for some pain before the movie is over. This is *not* simply

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entertainment. I am not sitting back, comfortable, trying to figure out who the murderer could be; I am on the edge of my chair, a pack of tissues in my hand, mourning for the parents of that girl, afraid that someone else will be hurt before it's over.

We go to church in this movie. I almost started singing the opening hymn when the chorister started. I actually bowed my head when the prayer started, and I hope the people on the theater row in front of me didn't hear me say "amen." We attend a Sunday School class in the movie. I know that teacher—she is Jean Brown. She taught high school, was classy and smart, had a lot of good ideas, was not afraid of taking risks or demanding that the class keep up with her.

Interesting catalysts in *Brigham City* are the FBI agents who come to investigate. The first time I saw the movie, I couldn't help but ask myself, "How does a non-Mormon audience see this?" One of the agents is a woman who essentially moves into town during her work on the case. She attends church, a character in the film who sees a sacrament meeting as we suppose non-Mormons are seeing this movie.

I won't relate the entire plot. I want you to see *Brigham City* and have the same experience that I had during the last scene. I want you to fall into your own epiphany, and come away thinking hard, and feeling, too: "That's what the atonement is for." I think this is an important movie: an example of what Mormon art can be: honest, difficult, enlightening. Scott Foundas of *Variety* called *Brigham City* "the best film . . . for the discussion of serious faith-related issues [in] over a decade." *The New York Times* described it as "engrossing . . . concise, [and] skillful . . ." It speaks for our community and asks questions that will give us better perspective of our responsibility, to the world and as individuals.

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Not everyone will like this movie—it is a disturbing film, and I hesitate recommending it to just anyone (we didn't let our 16-year-old daughter see it). But I believe that it has something really positive to say: though we live in a world of sin and are even implicated in the wickedness around us, there is a way to become clean. *Brigham City* seriously questions how our beliefs sustain us. Richard Dutcher draws us into his disturbing cinematic world, asking us to examine what protection we have in such a world, a question basic to our faith, a question equal to the other great universal questions in art. Asking the question with such skill and insight makes Dutcher an artist of profound ability.