

'The Book of Mormon' keeps the faith

Hit musical preaches to the irreverent choir

By Peter Jones

Everything you have heard about *The Book of Mormon* is true.

The musical is politically incorrect, hilarious, sacrilegious, touching and offensive. And while you won't be singing the chorus to *Spooky Mormon Hell Dream* on your way out of the theater, the music has its own fleeting charm.

As most know, *The Book of Mormon* is a fish-out-of-water tale with book and music by Colorado's *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone. The Broadway hit sees two naive missionaries travel to a remote village in Uganda, only to find that smiling proselytization is no match for famine, AIDS and tribal violence.

The two are also no match for each other. Elder Price, ambitious and self-absorbed, thinks his handsome missionary prowess would be better suited to the heathens of Orlando, Fla. Elder Cunningham, a well-meaning and insecure nerd, has never even bothered to read the text for which this musical is named.

For months, the missionaries have had no luck converting even a single native. But by virtue of sheer incompetence and Cunningham's propensity to stretch the truth, one group of unlikely village converts is soon longing for a latter day in "Sal Tlay Ka Siti" (read: Salt Lake City).

The Tony-winning mix of song, dance and vulgarity has something for everyone – to offend them, that is. And yes, even regular theatergoers may expect more for their money after all the insurmountable hype surrounding *The Book of Mormon*.

In any case, those who share the Parker-Stone brand of iconoclasm will embrace every moment of this irreverent – yet ultimately, heart-filled – musical comedy.

Response from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been refreshingly understated. Some Mormon bloggers have expressed pleasant surprise at the play's relative empathy and arguable lack of mean-spiritedness.

Mormon scholar Richard Bushman said when church members see the show, it is "like looking at themselves in a funhouse mirror." In some cities, including Denver, the LDS Church has taken out full-page advertising to encourage theater patrons to learn more about *The Book of Mormon*, arguing, "The book is always better."

LDS theology gets no shortage of doctrinal ribbing in the show's two hours. Occasional flashbacks show church founder Joseph Smith joining in fun-filled play with Mormon angel Moroni. The song *I Believe* hilariously ventures to condense an entire belief system into several minutes of earnest declaration.

"I believe that the Garden of Eden was in Jackson County, Missouri ..."

The bright side to all the buildup surrounding *The Book of Mormon* is that anyone who goes to see it has a very good idea what they are in for. For good or bad, you knew before reading this if the musical is your cup of theater. Trust your gut.



Nic Rouleau stars as Elder Price in *The Book of Mormon*. The irreverent musical comedy is at the Buell Theater through Nov. 24.
Photo courtesy of Denver Center for the Performing Arts

