



Becoming JOSEPH

I was less than enthusiastic about dramatizing the Joseph Smith story. But something happened that changed my life.

BY RICARDO REYES VILLALTA

I had been taught the Joseph Smith story my entire life. I believed it was true because I trusted those who taught me. If anybody spoke negatively of the Prophet Joseph, I defended him, not because I had a testimony of him but on principle, knowing it was what I was supposed to do.

That all changed when my ward was assigned to provide a special number for a cultural event of the San Salvador El Salvador Ilopango Stake. My friends and I thought that a humorous skit would be best; our Young Men president disagreed. He suggested that we dramatize some of the Prophet Joseph Smith's experiences.

We were not excited about this idea. My friends and I knew that everyone else would perform a funny dance or skit, and we were embarrassed to do anything different. We knew people would laugh at us when they saw us dressed up in old-fashioned clothing, performing a serious drama. I had seen that happen on other occasions, and I have to admit that I had even been one of those who had laughed. However, our Young Men president promised us that if we worked diligently to prepare the Joseph Smith story, nobody would laugh.

So for the next two months, we lived the Joseph Smith story. We saw the film of the First Vision countless times, and we memorized every word and every detail of it. We painted an enormous set that showed the Sacred Grove and the open sky. We made a stack of gold plates and found a huge Bible and a rocking chair to use as props. One of my friends who played the piano recorded the hymn "Joseph Smith's First Prayer" (*Hymns*, no. 26). We even recorded the

sound of birds singing in the grove and of Joseph's footsteps as he stepped on the leaves. When we drew for our parts, it fell to me to play Joseph Smith.

On the day of the performance, we found out that, as expected, we were the only ones performing something serious. So before our turn came, we joined together to pray that all would go well. Then something happened that changed my life.

It was time for me to go on stage. The set of the grove was before me. I walked toward it and heard the recorded hymn playing in the background. As I did, I felt something burning in my chest. Somehow I knew that the event I was reenacting had indeed happened, that a young boy just younger than I was had really had this experience. When I knelt down for the prayer scene, my lips were sealed—but not by an evil influence. Rather, I knew I couldn't talk without crying. A powerful force testified to my heart that Joseph's account was true! I felt great gratitude to the Lord for Joseph Smith, and there was born in me a great love for him.

When I opened my eyes, I realized some members of the audience also had tears in their eyes. I had no doubt that the Spirit was testifying to them of the sacred truthfulness of what we were portraying.

When I later served a mission, I still defended the Church and the Prophet Joseph Smith but not just on principle. I bore witness of him because, as the Prophet himself said, "I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it" (Joseph Smith—History 1:25). ■