God's Army: Wiggle Room for the Mormon Soul

David G. Pace

IF YOU CAN GET PAST the unfortunate title of Richard Dutcher's *God's Army*, you will find the first commercial film of what might be a new era in Mormon art. Dutcher's creation likely spikes interest in Mormons as much because of the dearth of Mormon-related material in American culture as for the film's skill at creating real Mormons (a circumstance that made Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* startling—even revelatory—to Mormons when it was staged in the early 90s).

Unlike Kushner, who co-opted Latter-day Saint characters and their iconography for narrative purposes of his own, Dutcher made *God's Army* about the Mormon world. What Terrence McNalley's 1989 play, *The Lisbon Traviata* did for gay men, *God's Army* has done for Mormons or, more specifically, the Mormon missionary in the year 2000. Just seeing yourself represented respectfully is enough to celebrate. It is also an opportunity to reflect on what missionary and Mormon life mean and where Mormon art can go.

Mormon playwrights and film makers have struggled for years to free themselves from the cloying schmaltz in films like *Legacy* and from the cult of big thunderous, but ultimately empty pageants like *Promised Valley*. Film maker Trent Harris has built a cottage industry on celebrating the provincial pieties of his Mormon heritage, an industry anchored by his funny but decidedly irreverent *Plan 10 From Outer Space*. And Neil LaBute, in his Off-Broadway play *Bash* (later taped and shown on cable television), treated his Mormon characters, however capable of evil, with respect and even a kind of perverse awe.

LaBute and Harris are both much more overt stylists than Dutcher, whose motivation is clearly to imbue his marginal subject with the kind of dramatic dignity that will appeal to mainstream America. At the same time, he gives the obligatory nods to what has become a hallmark style of independent film making: under-directed acting, protracted moments where there is no dialogue, and a musical score that has a life of its own.

The film is narrated by Elder Brandon Allen (Matthew Brown), a passive young man who arrives in Los Angeles to begin his two-year proselyting stint. He is paired with Elder Marcus Dalton (Richard Dutcher, the producer/writer/director of the film), an irascible 29-year old trainer missionary who goes by "Pops." Pops forces Allen to go door-to-door before he's even dropped off his luggage. Later, as a practical joke, he is terrorized by his missionary roommates, who, we discover, also tell leper jokes, display dead cockroaches as trophies, and take surprise snapshots of each other on the toilet.

By two o'clock the next morning, we find Elder Allen at the bus station, ready to hightail it back home to Kansas. When Pops and another missionary, Elder Banks (DeSean Terry) arrive, the AWOL Allen tells them, "At least no one can say I didn't try." Pops rattles Allen by characterizing him as immature, deftly working a kind of reverse psychology. Elder Banks, meanwhile, speculates about the greenie's sexual orientation and weakness for liquor. Not surprisingly, Allen, his pride wounded, agrees grudgingly to stay.

God's Army is a conversion story in which the protagonist elder is the one who gets converted. In the meantime, he is exposed to a variety of other missionaries who range from the doubting Elder Kinegar (Michael Buster) to a condescending Sister Fronk (Jacque Gray), who baits him by calling him a jock and otherwise suggesting he's a dolt. In the course of the film, we meet a bear of a mission president who used to play football and sports a sign on his desk, "Thou Shalt Not Whine"; taunting prostitutes who slouch near a graffiti-covered wall (one of whom eventually reads the Book of Mormon and joins the church); and a disabled young man, enamored of missionary work, who is preparing for baptism.

As described, the scenario may sound hackneyed, but *God's Army* is not descended from the corporate films, often crude, churned out by the BYU Motion Picture Studio of yesteryear, films like *And Should I Die* or *Johnny Lingo*. Instead, Dutcher inflects his movie with the kind of cinematic integrity one has come to expect of "independent film."

There has been some discussion about the fact that *God's Army* has carved out a new niche market for a specialized audience. But to me that is not the ultimate—or even most desirable—potential for Dutcher's film or other works of art like it. The film maker may, in fact, have been interested in honoring his own people with a film that dignifies their life and beliefs. But there is more at stake for Mormon culture than just making our own private art directed to an insulated market—much as, say, the work produced on the Chitlin Circuit of nightclubs and theaters simply mirrors the African-American morés of its audience.

"Outing" Mormons into the broader culture through mainstream artistic forms is essential. More than half of the LDS population no longer participates in LDS church services. Perhaps less than one half of

that number is "temple-worthy." One anecdotal report indicates that up to 200 individuals are asking for their names to be removed from church rolls every day.[1] We are on the verge, perhaps, of Mormon art coming to reflect the actual diversity of its population—within and without the institutional church—including those who, like me, having abandoned their membership or church activity (or having been ousted by ecclesiastical courts), view themselves as ethnic or tribal Mormons. Seeing our reflection in—and connection with—the broader world establishes a relationship between a culture and the sub-culture of Mormondom and initiates or at least tempers identity.

Despite (or perhaps directly in line with) the vast missionary program and aggressive public relations, the institutional church and many Latter-day Saints aligned with it have an interest in keeping flesh and blood Mormons in the closet. What would others think of America's most successful indigenous religion, or what, for that matter, would its own members think if they were to appear un-idealized in the world's marketplace of images and narratives? Any text has the potential to germinate different interpretations. Difference threatens loss of control. That is why the imperative of Mormon art—especially in film and theater—has always been instructive rather than expressive. Until now. With *God's Army*, semi-church approved by its appearance in video form at church-controlled Deseret Book, Dutcher seems to have cracked open a hermetically-sealed pod of prescribed Mormon identity to allow wiggle room.

The film's objective is clear if paradoxical: make Mormons seem real, but minimize the weird stuff. Consequently, unlike real Mormon missionaries who play Nerf football in distinctive, symbol-bearing undergarments, Dutcher's missionaries wear surgical scrubs inside the apartment. There are no priestly robes used to dress the corpse of a missionary being shipped home in a casket. And, for all the talk of testimonies, we are spared the formulaic expressions of collective belief that take place like clockwork in testimony meetings and from which even some devout church members shield potential-convert friends.

At a 2001 Sunstone Symposium panel on Mormon film making, the affable Dutcher, sported the irony many of us wished he'd put into his film's title. The man is actually and admirably doing film rather than just talking about it. And he's wise to know his audience, to pick carefully the peculiarities of his culture and faith that he will portray. For example, the caffeine sin of coffee consumption is humorously massaged in

1. The story comes from the website of Recovery from Mormonism <www.exmormon.org>, which features stories of people who have left the Mormon church. One woman writes that in her efforts to have her name removed from church rolls, she was told by an assistant at the Name Removal Office at LDS headquarters that they were processing the number quoted.

Brother Rose, a professional investigator, as we used to call them, who has agreed to give the missionaries a ride in his car for every cup he drinks. So far they're up to sixty-seven. The call for abstinence from certain substances along with cultural kitsch (like the miniature gold statue of Moroni in the elders' apartment) is the kind of peculiarity Mormons are fond of fronting to gentiles (and to each other). Dutcher seems to run comfortably with this level of Mormon exposé. You can almost hear him say to his pouty, in-the-fold nay sayers, "Oh, get over yourself."

More risky is the measured way in which Dutcher takes on many disjunctions in a religion regularly seen by its practitioners as the ideal. There is Elder Kinegar, who bolts from his mission because he can't get over the doctrinal and historical shadows of the faith presented in anti-Mormon literature; there is the proud Catholic who never obtains a sufficient conviction to convert; there is the narrator who, we learn, has a mother who has resigned her membership and a father who is in prison; there is the sister missionary whose newfound testimony of the church's truth claims is still insufficient to mend her heart, broken by a fiancé who has left her.

This is not the way that Mormons have seen themselves portrayed. Dutcher has risen to the task of sculpting in three dimensions. There is, for example, Pops's violent explosion at the suggestion that his ardor as a true believer might possibly have a less-than-admirable motivation (in his terminal illness). And there is also the textured play of the missionaries in ensemble with talk of how eighty baptisms in Mexico trumps twelve in LA and with a zealous, brown-skinned elder standing on a wall overlooking the city and screaming repentance in a comical reconstruction of the Samuel the Lamanite episode in the Book of Mormon. It is in scenes such as these as well as when Elder Allen, in conversation with Pops, confesses that he doesn't know how to separate the darkness of his step-father, incarcerated for pedophilia, from his Mormon upbringing by the same man, that there is a strong feeling we are in new artistic territory. These missionaries are not the molded-in-plastic icons tacked onto in-house seminary and institute films. Nor are they stock characters out of such films as *Orgazmo*, by non-Mormon Trey Parker, a satirical outing in which an unwitting Mormon missionary is recruited into the LA porn industry.

It is in these fully-realized characters that the wiggle room appears for Mormons who identify with them, and the orthodox and church hierarchy may well be nervous because of this. In a sense, they should be. Art which has its own voice is art with its own destiny. In its potential for meaning, it is malleable, diverse and beyond control—in short, not orthodox. This is not to say that *God's Army* does not toe the line of respectful engagement. It does, a fact which, unfortunately, marketing at Zion Films (Dutcher's production company) has rendered as "faith-promoting," a poisoned term like "family values" which in the public consciousness means "a sure snore."

There are two other effects that stem from an artistic approach that has produced what one movie critic is calling a Mormon *Glengarry Glen Ross*. One is that Mormon missionary practices are laid bare in such a way as to invite criticism. Second, the questionable character of the space, culturally and morally speaking, in which Dutcher's full-blooded characters exist is cast in high relief.

Having been a missionary myself, I cringed during the film, not at the peculiarities of my culture and childhood faith, but at the stark dualism of right and wrong that grips the missionaries as they ply their trade and, in more ways than one, leaves them utterly alone when they go to bed at night: whining vs. stalwartness, faith vs. doubt, obedience vs. apostasy. In *God's Army* as in church circles, Truth is spelled with a capital "T"and must be circumscribed by the vague notion— presented but never clearly defined in the film—of "the Gospel" with a capital Mormon "G." That Dutcher, nonetheless, still manages to dramatize the politics of getting a testimony—be it Sister Fronk's fusion of heartbreak and faith or Elder Allen's decision to jump on board after wrestling his demons in prayer—is a tribute to Dutcher's skill as a film maker.

Connected to this dualism, of course, is the disturbing way in which the newly converted Elder Allen and his companion interact with a Catholic man whose blessing—not to mention conversion—they both seek on behalf of his eager-to-be-baptized daughter. "The Lord's spirit is with us right now," they say to the doubtful but sincere father. "But I'm Catholic," he keeps repeating. "Can't you feel it?" they implore. When the man tentatively nods, Elder Allen suggests they close their meeting with prayer and recommends, as he kneels to the floor himself, that they all kneel. "Will you say the prayer?" he asks.

These sorts of rushed, aggressive tactics—first defining spirituality (and religion) as emotion and then manipulating the "investigator" not only into kneeling, but into offering the prayer to galvanize the experience through ritual—typify my missionary days. Back then we not only used the identical tactic with unsuspecting New Englanders, we also scoured the obituaries to find those survivors who might currently be "sensitized" to our message of the Plan of Salvation.

Perhaps the most disturbing revelation in the film is the very Mormon, black-and-white way Dutcher addresses the issue of men of African descent having been banned from the priesthood prior to 1978. Elder Allen and Elder Banks are teaching an attractive young African-American couple who want answers. The angry couple will only talk to Elder Banks, who is black and who responds with the rationale that, historically, God gave his priesthood only to a select few, that the policy wasn't racist, only selective and on the Lord's timetable. The fact that blacks were the only race of people to be excluded is not mentioned, nor is there any hint of institutional *mea culpa* for an overtly racist policy.

Instead, the couple is made out to be racist themselves. "It is about race. It's always about race," they intone before they snap at Allen, "Hey, nobody cares what you think." The subtext, of course, is that with such attitudes it's no wonder these people didn't get the priesthood until 1978.

This sort of demonizing of the "Other" has its counterpart in whitewashing the "I"—in this case, the Mormon "I." To draw an ironic comparison, early forms of cultural expression produced by gays and lesbians or those sympathetic to same-sex orientation, insisted on the utter innocence and universal victimhood of homosexuals. Mormon art has a similar history, largely maintaining the utter innocence, if not outright victimhood of church members. *Legacy* provides a good example. Not only are the Latter-day Saints simply driven from their homes because of local religious bigotry, but the Prophet Joseph is remembered by the historical female narrator as motivated purely by otherworldly directives, when, according to historical records, his impression on her as a twelve-year-old was clearly marital if not sexual.

Mormons and gays are not alone in being defensively whitewashed in film and theater. Native Americans are just beginning to emerge from representations that followed a trajectory from savagery (both "noble" and not-so-"noble") to victim-hood and finally to individualism in a complex community with varied and complicated personalities. In Christopher Sergel's 1993/94 stage adaptation of *Black Elk Speaks* at Denver Center Theatre Company, American history was told through the eyes of the Native American. Every role was played by an Indian actor in blue-washed buckskin, including Christopher Columbus, Queen Victoria—even Colonel George Custer. Epic in scope and cathartic in its formulation, the play, which moved to the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, was nevertheless staged as a shocking exposé of genocide perpetrated against Native Americans, a chorus rather than an oratorio. Shortly after *Black Elk Speaks* came the film *Smoke Signals*, in which Indians are subject to the vagaries of real life and to their own deep flaws. The 1998 film reminded me of what fiction writer ZZ Packer recently wrote of the black writer James Alan McPherson in *Poets and Writers* Magazine: "Here was someone, finally, who wrote black characters whose happiness came from the same fount as their misery. . . ."[2]

It would seem that there is a natural, tentative progression in presenting new and misunderstood sub-cultures, and in that sense perhaps Dutcher is on schedule. Though by the end of *God's Army*, it is clear that Mormon missionaries are, in fact, real folks with blood in their veins, the moral and cultural space in which they are allowed to exist is very small. So is the amplitude of transformation in that life space. There is no nu-

2. ZZ Packer, "Mad Hope and Mavericks" *Poets and Writers Magazine* 30, No. 1 (Mar./Apr. 2001): 54-56.

ance when someone changes in the course of the film. Instead, characters flip from one side to the other, black to white, and in the case of Elder Kinegar, who leaves his mission early, white to black. Perhaps unwittingly, Dutcher succeeds fabulously in portraying the pressures both within the mission field and without to live by the terms of strict duality. It is quite acceptable, even applauded, for the Mormon to suffer the binary oppositions of his or her world, but quite unacceptable to question the system or linger in those areas of gray ambiguity from which one's own soul—scrupulously unique—might emerge.

By the end of *God's Army* I recognized that what appeared as a spiritual journey did not even attempt the depths of a St. Augustine, a Martin Luther, or even a King Benjamin of the Book of Mormon. The spirituality was of a kind dictated by a system. When we learn that Elder Allen and Sister Fronk end up together back at Brigham Young University, it's understood that there is nowhere for these two former missionaries to go except further into the correlated landscape of Mormondom. Unlike *My Name is Asher Lev*, the Jewish novel cited in this film, *God's Army* does not show us how the journey contributes to, shapes or colors the associations of the main character(s) with the broader world of which Mormonism (like orthodox Judaism) is culturally a sub-set.

This is why *God's Army*, though groundbreaking in its shaking loose of the rusty old tropes ploddingly employed by generations of "faith promoting" Mormon artists, is not the best expression of the new level of artistry it is calling on. Highwater marks in art often become valuable more as a new model for other artists than as the quintessential expression of a new way of doing that art. This is true of *God's Army*, which still panders, at times, to the orthodox fears. Nevertheless, the film is a heartening arrival. I didn't even mind the miraculous healing nor the allegorical use of Pops as a Savior figure who gives his life for the spiritual life (and physical survival) of a young disabled man badly beaten by thugs. Moreover, I liked the physicality of the missionaries, played out in practical jokes, reminiscent of apocryphal stories of the robust Joseph Smith pulling sticks in fierce competitions with his disciples. I liked being faintly embarrassed by the adrenalized Elder Allen's whooping it up after performing a miracle. I found absorbing the way music (by Miriam Cutler) constituted its own comment on the action instead of just being background scoring. I was moved by the bold singing of "We are all enlisted till the conflict is o'er. . ." by kneeling missionaries in a military moment, shot brilliantly from an angle high up in the room, an angle of irony that presented the little band as far from home, alone in the world but somehow still resolute.

I was moved to reverence during those quiet scenes in the hospital where, awaiting news of his sick companion, Elder Allen sits next to a statue of Christ in brilliant red, arms outstretched, the sacred heart—uniquely Catholic—red itself and raised above the icon's breast. It was a

needed moment wherein Mormonism seemed to defer to larger (and potentially competing) religious and cultural claims as if our tradition borne of simple means, not unlike the Jesus Movement of the first century, was a part of something larger with which the world could identify.

In short, while viewing *God's Army*, I identified with the characters and was buoyed by the possibilities of Mormon art. What will this wiggle room allow future Mormon film and theater to do? Will we get more of the films and plays of Neil LaBute, which, for the most part, have little if anything to do with Mormon characters or Mormonism but are shaped by issues often played out in Mormon realms? Will we take the model of Chaim Potok, the author of *My Name is Asher Lev,* and find that nothing in our culture, not even temple secrets, can be too sacred to become material for the artist? How will such material be presented? In good-humored satire as in *Plan 10 From Outer Space*? In exposes like Deborah Laake's memoir *Secret Ceremonies*? Or in Ed Decker's "religious pornography," *The Godmakers*?

And what of Richard Dutcher, the darling, now, of Mormon cinema? Will he be co-opted by the institutional church, like a poet laureate, consigned to reify orthodox messages in the flat facility of institutional film work?

My own suspicion is that Dutcher will find himself running up against the power structure of his beloved church, which is profoundly committed to controlling its public image. He will be forced into the old dualisms, the most powerful of which is obedience to authority vs. apostasy, apostasy being a catchall term. If Dutcher's testimony is a conventional one, we will find him jettisoning his art (and, I would argue, his artist's soul) for the approval of the collective. That his next project, following the equally compelling murder-mystery *Brigham City*, is a bio-pic of the enigmatic Prophet Joseph Smith may hasten what seems inevitable.

I remember reviewing the premiere of the outdoor musical *Utah* at Tuachan Art Center near St. George, Utah. It was the summer of 1991. During intermission, I sat and looked at the audience in the huge amphitheater shoehorned into Snow Canyon, one of several beautiful "box" canyons in the area. Perhaps I just imagined it, or perhaps I was projecting onto the faces of the largely Mormon audience, but there was disappointment there as big as the canyon we sat in, a "fierce, grieving thing," to quote Mormon novelist Levi Peterson. It was a longing that had finally arrived at that sad point of realization that there is not likely ever to be fulfillment. As a part of that restless group, I felt both sadness myself and a sense of injustice. These people, my people, deserve better than this, I thought. They deserve a film called *God's Army* and fifty million more like it and another fifty million that improve on it.