Mormons, Musical Theater, and the Public Arena of Doubt

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"Hi, I'm Brother Jake." An image of a smiling white man in white shirt and tie flashes across the screen as I watch yet another edition of the "Brother Jake" YouTube video channel. Brother Jake, described by one YouTube commenter as "the Stephen Colbert of Mormon satire," carries a growing audience through fallacious explanations of controversial or historically problematic aspects of Mormonism. These explanations are presented as "Brother Jake Explains:" followed by video titles covering a number of dicey issues including "polygamy," "Mormonism is not a cult," "Church discipline," "Mormons are not racist," and "Prophets are awesome." Similar to other satirical explanations of church culture from within the Mormon ranks (such as the "Dictionary of Correlation" by anthropologist Daymon Smith), Brother Jake's material jocularly occupies a liminal space, protected by online anonymity, where questioning, frustrated, or transitional Mormons dialogue with one another and true believing members (often labeled TBMs for short).[1]

The particular video I am watching this day mockingly refers to that latter demographic. Entitled "True Believing Mormon Dude," this video is a departure for Brother Jake. Rather than his typical fast-paced narration and hokey collages, Brother Jake sets this story to the tune of Gilbert and Sullivan's "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General" from *Pirates of Penzance* (1879).[2] Images flash across the screen as Brother Jake patters:

> I feel weird when people talk about my Mormon underwear
> And when I go to church I dress real nice and shave my facial hair.
> And even though you might be thinking "this guy is a giant prude,"
> It's no big deal because I am a true-believing Mormon dude.[3]

Gilbert and Sullivan's "modern major general" is a bumbling and laughable buffoon whose naïve, self-deprecating words have charmed audiences for generations. Brother Jake's caricature of faithful Mormon men exploits Mormons' special affinity for musical theater. In other words, if Brother Jake's video complicates an easy response, it's because Mormon cultural offense is mixed with a Mormon cultural virtue. Mormons and musical theater have long maintained an open courtship. From local ward roadshows to the Hill Cumorah Pageant and from the Polynesian Cultural Center to *Saturday's Warrior*, Mormons have found in musical theater a remarkable means of self-expression and identity that is probably unique among American faith traditions.

Why is this so? What is it about the musical stage that Mormons find so attractive, so natural a space in which to explore religious identity? And what does it then mean when Mormons like Brother Jake begin using musical theater to challenge that identity? Moreover, what of the spectacular satire writ large on the Broadway stage in *The Book of Mormon: The Musical* (2011) or in the online "viral picket sign" *Prop 8: The Musical* (2008)?

The Book of Mormon's creators, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, clearly voiced their reasons for portraying Mormons on the musical theater stage:

> To us there's [*sic*] so many things about Mormonism, even the way they present themselves, when you go to Salt Lake City, the temple, when you go to some of their things, they present themselves in a very kind of Disney kind of way.
>
> And we would have this running theme. We would always say when we're working on either the sets or the costumes or whatever, we'd say: No, make it more Rodgers and Hammerstein. Or make it more Disney. Or make it more Mormon. And they're like:
>
> Well, which one is it? And we're like: No, it's all the same word for the same thing.[4]

These outsiders saw in Mormonism an immediate connection with the overstated optimism and wholesome demeanor of musical theater. From Golden Age musicals to the late twentieth-century

launch of Disney into the Broadway industry, Mormonism, at least according to Parker and Stone, remains remarkably associable with the entire evolution of American musical theater. Yet at first consideration, a musical about Mormons is an unseemly proposition. Indeed, displaying Mormonism on the musical stage would seem laughable (which the show definitely is!). For some reason, though, it just makes sense. More to the point, such a display has been happening for a long time.

Nevertheless, the more recent satirical works have arisen in this particular moment and through this particular medium for a reason. My task here is to examine this phenomenon and explore just what it is about musical theater and Mormonism that make them such successful if unlikely, bedfellows, and what these recent satirical works may have to say about modern Mormonism and its association with musical theater. A complete accounting of Mormons and musical theater is beyond the scope of this essay, but I would like to open up the possibility of using musical theater as a lens through which to view Mormon culture and identity in order to better understand through the musical stage the inherent *theatricalities* of Mormonism and its community of believers.

Theatricality and Mormon Beginnings

Mormons have long been a theatrical people. Harold Hansen has written that while the Saints were in Nauvoo,

> planned leisure became a part of the well-ordered Mormon life. There was time to participate in debating societies, adult educational programs, music, and the theatre. . . . It was during this period that the Prophet gave his permission and influence to the production of plays. The Mormons had for some time a small hall that they referred to as the Fun House, where music, recitations and dances were held.[5]

This embrace of the theater would immediately have set the Mormons apart from other nineteenth-century religious groups, most of which demarcated the theater as a space of immorality. Kenneth Macgowen similarly argues that "of all the churches

that have welcomed back their prodigal son, the drama, none has given him so royal a welcome as the Latter-Day Saints of Utah."[6]

Pitted as they were against continual harassments, early Mormons might be justified in lacking a sense of humor or possessing an aggrandized self-importance. Yet early Mormons seem to have been willing to engage in theatrics and various amusements in spite of (or perhaps to spite) the mounting challenges they faced. Joseph Smith's reported lightheartedness smacked some as an attribute unbefitting a self-pronounced prophet. As Davis Bitton writes in *Wit & Whimsy in Mormon History*, however, Mormons "were not insufferable bores." Rather, moments of theatrical celebration and other festivities demonstrated that, "like their Prophet, the Mormons saw themselves on an eternal journey, but they did not mind enjoying some good times along the way."[7]

Indeed, early Mormons took their recreation—particularly their theatrical entertainment—seriously. The dedication of the Salt Lake Theater in 1862 embodied the fervor and seriousness with which Church leaders embraced and understood the role of the theater among the Mormons. Although the building was not yet complete, in the dedicatory prayer, Daniel H. Wells of the First Presidency petitioned that the theater "may be pure and holy unto the Lord our God, for a safe and righteous habitation for the assemblages of Thy people, for pastime, amusement and recreation; for plays, theatrical performances, for lectures, conventions, or celebrations, or for whatever purpose it may be used for the benefit of Thy Saints."[8] Wells continues:

> As the unstrung bow longer retains its elasticity, strength and powers, so may Thy people who congregate here for recreation, unbend for a while from the sterner and more wearying duties of life, receive that food which in our organization becomes necessary to supply and invigorate our energies and vitality, and stimulate to more enduring exertions in the drama of life, its various scenes and changes which still in Thy providence still await us.[9]

Wells's prayer alludes to both the literal dramas to be performed and enjoyed in the theater as well as the figurative association

between the theater and "the drama of life." It might seem, then, that Mormons had already begun viewing their life in theatrical terms. The theater was to be a holy space of recreation, invigoration, and stimulation. "If I were placed on a cannibal island and given the task of civilizing its people, I should straightway build a theater for the purpose," Brigham Young once proclaimed.[10] So it was not surprising that he focused on building the Salt Lake Theater at the same time as he was building the Salt Lake Tabernacle—twin spaces for refining the Saints.

Brigham Young's apparent interest in the theater dates back at least to May 1, 1844, when he played the role of the "High Priest" in Thomas Lyne's play *Pizarro*. This role would prove prophetic. On June 27, less than two months after the performance of *Pizarro*, Joseph Smith was murdered and, following the ensuing succession crisis—which included people claiming to have envisioned Young accurately *portraying* Joseph Smith, as it were—Young became the second president of the Church. Perhaps Young understood the providence of such casting the way others did. According to actor Joseph Lindsay, Thomas Lyne humorously "regretted having cast Brigham Young for that part of the high priest" because "he's been playing the character with great success ever since."[11] Inasmuch as John Taylor, who was with Smith when he was murdered, would proclaim that "Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it," Young's prominence took on a definite theatrical legacy, at least in the eyes of some.[12] Perhaps echoing Taylor's remarks, Philip Margetts called Young a "champion of the drama and friend of the actor," adding that the Mormon prophet "did more to elevate the drama and encourage the histrionic art, in his day, than perhaps any man in America."[13]

Theatricality lies at the heart of the Mormon experience. Joseph Smith's various tellings of his storied first vision, in the latter versions of which God and Jesus Christ appear before Smith in a grove of trees near his home in Palmyra, New York, lend a decidedly melodramatic quality to the Church's genesis story. Megan Sanborn Jones has most persuasively argued for this very interpretation, claiming that "Smith's entire life and eventual death

were melodramatic rather than tragic if his calling is read as a miraculous event that intervened in his life."[14] Moreover, Smith's writing of received revelations, as Claudia Bushman and Richard Bushman have written, "reenacted the writing of the Bible."[15]

The temple rite, emerging in prominence at the end of Smith's life, can be viewed in light of its dramatic qualities, being described by one scholar as "a staged representation of the step-by-step ascent into the presence of the Eternal."[16] The performative nature of the temple ceremony becomes even more apparent when studying it in its evolution to the version taught in temples today. In earlier versions of the endowment ceremony, the character of a sectarian minister functioned as a theatrical straw man against which Mormon faithful could perform their restored religion. This satirical and laughably one-dimensional representation of religious thinkers outside of Mormonism curiously creates an inverse scenario to the satirical theatrical jokes that Mormons today find themselves the butt of (a topic to which I'll return below). For now, it is enough to point out that satire, like theatricality in general, has a long history within Mormonism. From the live-action (or pre-recorded) drama of the Mormon endowment ceremony, where selected members of the audience can even break through the fourth wall to perform the lead roles of Adam or Eve, to the concept of "performing" baptisms for the dead—another opportunity for Mormons, like stage actors, to don alternate identities not entirely their own—the Mormon temple is a space of the theatrical. It isn't too much to say, then, that a faithful Mormon is and has always been a performing Mormon.

Mormonism Meets Musical Theater

In many ways, American musical theater and the Mormon faith seem cut from the same cloth. Both the musical genre and the Church emerge in New York State in the early decades of the nineteenth century and, as uniquely American entities, both musical theater and Mormonism have served as useful lenses through which to analyze cultural trends and dispositions in the country at large. For this reason, it seems prudent and potentially fruitful to

follow the histories of musical theater and the Mormon Church and note their moments of intertwining as significant and productive moments of cultural analysis.

At least one Mormon-themed musical, *An Aztec Romance*, had had a six-performance Broadway run as early as 1912. But it took until 1951, when Alan J. Lerner and Frederick Lowe created a Broadway musical with a Mormon character, before Mormonism was auspiciously introduced to The Great White Way. Set in 1853 in the wilds of California, *Paint Your Wagon* follows the ins and outs of a miner, his daughter, and their neighbors—all men—living in a mining camp. When a Mormon man named Jacob Woodling moves into the camp, along with his two wives, the rest of the men demand that Woodling sell one of his wives, which he does for $800. Woodling's importance in the plot—which was ancillary from the start, other than the story needing another woman to carry it through—ends there. The relevance of a polygamist Mormon in 1951 was a cultural stretch to begin with. So tenuous was the polygamist connection to Mormonism in post-war America that in modern revisions of *Paint Your Wagon*, the Mormon and his wives play a significantly diminished role.[17]

If the transition from Mormon representations in theater to musical theater hinged on tired polygamist rhetoric, the Church was already preparing a revision of a musical drama with a decidedly different purpose. In 1953, Harold I. Hansen, who was the artistic director of the Hill Cumorah Pageant in Palmyra, New York, visited a young doctoral student named Crawford Gates at the Eastman School of Music. According to Gates, Hansen "disclosed his own hopes and plans for the long-term development of the pageant. Before I knew it, he had informally asked me to compose the original musical score he had in mind."[18] Although the pageant had its first official performance in 1937, officials had undergirded the work by using existing music, such as material taken from Richard Wagner's operas *Lohengrin* and *Die Walkure* or Tchaikovsky's *Pathetique* symphony. Gates would go on to create an original score used from 1957 until 1987, then revising a new score in 1988 that is still in use today.

While the pageant tradition in Mormonism arguably derived from the children's pageants of Mormon Sunday Schools in the nineteenth century and modern Mormon temple-related pageants have cropped up at various sites—including the Mesa, Arizona, Easter Pageant; the Nauvoo, Illinois, Pageant; the Oakland "And It Came to Pass" Pageant; and the Manti, Utah, "Mormon Miracle Pageant"—the Hill Cumorah Pageant remains the flagship in that genre. Even the HBO television series *Big Love*, which follows a fictional family of polygamists living in suburban Salt Lake County, set an entire episode around the family's caravan across the country to visit the pageant. Meanwhile, when researching material for *The Book of Mormon: The Musical*, its creative team travelled to Palmyra to experience the pageant. Trey Parker recalls that he, Matt Stone, and co-writer Robert Lopez "went to the pageant, and we're like, wow, okay, we gotta make our musical better than this one, and they've been working on that one a long time."[19] The team found the story so compelling that they open both acts of the show with the story of Mormon, the golden plates, and Joseph Smith—"our own miniature version of the Hill Cumorah Pageant," Parker adds.[20] And, as Michael Hicks has pointed out, the creators even borrow a musical fanfare from Gates's score and insert it into the song "I Believe," which is the character Elder Kevin Price's witness-bearing moment of complete Mormon conviction.[21]

Mormons Make Musicals

There was an explosion of religiously themed musicals with a pop/rock score being produced both in America and abroad during the early 1970s, some with enormous success. The immediate triumph of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, evolving from a 1970 concept album to a 1971 Broadway production, seems to have encouraged the creation of other religiously-themed musicals (most notably *Godspell* in 1971), though it was not the first. It was more of the evangelical, rather than the popular humanist and quasi-satirical musicals, however, that mostly paved the road to Mormon success and interest in musical theater. Larry Norman, close friend of Ted

Neeley—whose later appearance as Jesus in the 1973 film version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* catapulted his career in theater—had been writing musicals and rock operas with a decidedly evangelistic bent since 1968. Lex de Azevedo, composer of the hit Mormon musical *Saturday's Warrior*, has written that attending a Los Angeles performance of his friend Ralph Carmichael's early Christian rock musical *A Natural High* gave him the idea to write "a 'contemporary musical' for [Latter-day Saints]."[22]

With these and other musical influences abounding, Mormons began creating musicals in 1970, dozens of which survive today, and most of which were written with a Mormon audience in mind. Zion Theatricals—a licensing company for Mormon plays and musicals—displays a lengthy, though not exhaustive, list of musicals written by and for Mormons. As of this writing, there are thirty-seven musicals listed on the company's website.[23] In his short article "The Theatre as a Temple," Zion Theatricals owner and theatrical composer C. Michael Perry argues for the sanctity of the theater, going so far as to claim that "the theatre is the best place for the exploration of belief."[24] Even more, Perry writes of the power of the theater and its particularly Spirit-filled place in building the Kingdom of God:

> Theatre is one of the greatest missionary tools ever invented. Minds are enriched, hearts touched and spirits enlivened through the power of the spoken word on a stage. Seeing—witnessing—the experiences of others on stage brings us closer to understanding, empathy, and compassion in a non-threatening atmosphere. It is all a fiction. Nobody is in real peril. There is no real danger, immediate or otherwise, of someone really losing their testimony, or life, or principles. The stage is a supposition. The actors are players in a match of wits and wills. They are imitators of life, not life itself. This is the loving atmosphere we can create within the walls of the second type of Temple—a Theatre.[25]

After pointing back to the temple ceremony as a performance in itself and overlaying the theatricality of the Hill Cumorah Pageant with twelve-year old -Jesus' confounding of religious leaders in the temple, Perry concludes by asking, "What more of a Temple

experience is there than an audience seeking enlightenment, even if it is through the means of an entertainment?"[26]

Perry's high valuation of theater readily amplifies what has already been noted about Mormon reliance and love for the theater as a unique space for spiritual edification. He even refers to Brigham Young in the matter, quoting him as saying that "the stage can be made to aid the pulpit in impressing upon the minds of a community an enlightened sense of a virtuous life, also a proper horror of the enormity of sin and a just dread of its consequences. The path of sin with its throne and pitfalls, its gins and snares can be revealed, and how to shun it."[27] As much as the temple is a space for instruction in matters timeless, the theater likewise complements the temple in that it creates a space where that instruction and the challenges of modern life can be easily negotiated.

Zion Theatricals, whose stated purpose is "enlightenment through entertainment," thus offers Mormons a one-stop shop for wholesome musical theater. In addition to licensing various musicals and plays, the company also takes submissions for new works that are "Family Friendly, yet challenging," further adding to the understanding of Mormons as both consumers and producers of musical theater.[28] With these rather loose parameters, the plots for such musicals have an understandably broad range. Some dramatize biblical or scriptural stories or draw upon patriotic themes as moralizing opportunities, while others focus on issues surrounding contemporary family life.

It is within this latter group that the Mormon sensation *Saturday's Warrior* was born. Written in 1973 and then later released on film in 1989, *Saturday's Warrior* follows the story of a group of children born into a Mormon family. Based on Nephi Anderson's 1898 novel *Added Upon*, *Saturday's Warrior* depicts a pre-mortal existence in which social relationships are formed, and where that same sociality then carries over into mortality. As the children prepare to be born on Earth, they make promises to keep true to the commandments and their convictions of the true Gospel so that, after death, they may be reunited in heaven. The oldest sibling, Jimmy, encounters temptation on Earth, however, and his

actions threaten to compromise his eternal place among the rest of his family. While much more could be stated about *Saturday's Warrior*, suffice it to say for now that its effects on Mormon culture have been substantial. Matthew Bowman attends to this best when he writes that *Saturday's Warrior* introduced "folk doctrine appealing to Mormons seeking assurance that divine intentions were deeply woven into their lives and that though these beliefs set them apart from the world they were indeed fulfilling God's plan."[29] Although the musical suggests a vision of pre-mortal life that was theologically unsubstantiated, its grip on Mormonism remains tight still today, with many members conceptualizing their familial and romantic relationships in terms introduced by *Saturday's Warrior*. And, with a new film adaptation scheduled for release in 2016, the musical seems positioned to gain traction for a new generation of Mormons.

Mormonism Enacted through Musicals

While *Saturday's Warrior* remains part of a long-standing cultural craze in Mormonism, it is, of course, only one of many Mormon musicals (e.g., *Open Any Door* [1972] and *My Turn on Earth* [1977]). But musical theater has taken root in Mormon culture in other, more localized ways. The ward roadshow, which has been described as "a mini-musical, a song-and-dance production," is a feature of local wards, often produced in contest with other wards in stake or multi-stake competition.[30] Evolving from impromptu musical performances that often cropped up along the westward trek across the Rocky Mountains, the roadshow has long been considered a means of uniting ward members in "an activity of unity, love, and cooperation."[31] In her 1984 *Ensign* article "Get that Show on the Road: How to Stage a Roadshow," Kathleen Lubeck plays up the importance of the roadshow, offering the following advice to local roadshow organizers:

> It's also important to base roadshows on wholesome values, and not to mimic the immoral or less-than-uplifting attitudes and styles often portrayed on television or in the movies. At the same time,

> sacred topics should be avoided, so as not to trivialize the sacred aspects of the gospel. Roadshows should generate the positive value system that we as church members espouse, while at the same time not becoming didactic or preachy.[32]

Anxiety about secular entertainment likely bolstered the importance of roadshows in contemporary Mormon life. Indeed, as much as Brigham Young encouraged song and dance while the Mormons trekked across the country often under harsh conditions, roadshows and other Church-sponsored cultural activities were designed to help keep the modern Mormon mind off the troubles of the world and focused on issues of greater worth, such as solidarity, cooperation, and wholesome entertainment. These activities also fostered proselytizing, as Pat David of the General Church Activities Committee said in 1983:

> Much in the entertainment world is trying to pull people away from the gospel in subtle ways. Television, movies, music, rock concerts—all are being used as tools for the adversary, to some degree. The freshest faces tell us to be immoral; beautiful people tell us it's okay to do things we've been told all our lives we shouldn't do. Too often we've been so busy watching television in the front room that we haven't noticed Satan slipping in through the back door. This is one major reason that Church activities are so important. We can offer an alternative entertainment to our people. And very often, through the informal door of activities, we bring many people into the front door of the Church and to a testimony of the gospel.[33]

Not only did roadshows bring people into contact with the Church, but their ubiquity offered members frequent opportunities to gather and enact a cultural performance of faith promotion. To this end, roadshows are perhaps the more pronounced experiences members have with Mormon musical theater, many Church members having been introduced to, and regularly involved with, the roadshows at a young age—and some under extraordinary conditions. In 1978, for example, the Los Angeles Ward for the Deaf placed first in their stake roadshow competition, despite having a

cast almost entirely composed of hearing impaired persons. The on-stage actors signed their lines, while offstage actors read those lines into a microphone. When the problems of bringing music and dance into the show became apparent, the solution was to place a hearing normative performer on stage to dance and thus visually align the music with the choreography for the rest of the cast. Although the Los Angeles Ward for the Deaf may have succeeded in their roadshow under unusual circumstances, one ward leader's reaction likely echoes what many Mormons might say about the lessons learned putting on their own roadshow: "When I saw the roadshow in performance, I said, 'Hey, that's no roadshow; that's a miracle!'"[34]

Roadshows, like many children's pageants and, particularly in Utah, Pioneer Day pageants, help Mormons celebrate their heritage while also deepening their roots within their faith community. Mormons continue to maintain a rich legacy of musical dramas, only a few of which are mentioned here. Although early depictions of Mormonism occurred in the secularized space of the musical stage, Mormons have constructed an impressively rich and varied musical theater culture within their own cultural traditions, thus producing a relationship between faith and performance that is unique among American Christian faith traditions. From Donny Osmond's portrayal of Joseph in Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* to the recent and official Church productions *Faith—The Musical* and *Savior of the World*, Mormon resonances with musical theater remain strong. Yet this legacy of musical theater within the Church has, in recent years, provided fertile ground for various works of satire to emerge, clothed in the familiar garb of musical theater. As much as Mormons identify with the theatrical, and even filter their faith through drama itself, the theatrical is a serious means of dissent both within and without the Mormon ranks.

Taking Mormonism to the Stage

The 2008 debacle surrounding California's Proposition 8—which defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman—

prodded the Mormon Church into the national spotlight when Church leaders encouraged its members to contribute time and resources to the campaign for the proposition's passage. The Church reeled from the public outcry against its role in the campaign, and its members suddenly became contestants in a fierce debate over the consequences of unpopular political involvement. When composer Marc Shaiman heard that Scott Eckern, the Mormon artistic director of the non-profit California Musical Theater, had contributed $1,000 to support the campaign against gay marriage, he immediately set to work on *Prop 8: The Musical*. The musical theater community—heavily reliant on gay creators and performers—was outraged at Eckern's contribution, seeing it as an act of betrayal. Jeffrey Seller, a Broadway producer, was among those angered by Eckern: "That a man who makes his living exclusively through the musical theater could do something so hurtful to the community that forms his livelihood is a punch in the stomach."[35] For his part, Eckern eventually resigned from his position at California Musical Theater and, as a gesture of good faith toward the gay community, contributed $1,000 to a gay rights group. Still, ties between Mormons and Proposition 8 were strong, and Eckern's position thrust musical theater into the mix in a satirical representation of religious infringement on civil rights.

Shaiman wrote *Prop 8: The Musical* in one day, filmed it with a cast of Hollywood regulars like Jack Black, Neil Patrick Harris, and John C. Reilly, and, through the site www.funnyordie.com, the video became an instant hit—what Shaiman later called a "viral picket sign." Although the musical is just over three minutes long, it characterizes the gay community as complacent and naively optimistic in the wake of Barrack Obama's 2008 presidential election;[36] it also colors religious figures (who are dressed in various forms of religious clothing—the prominent dark suit, white shirt, and tie of Mormon men chief among them) as hateful and scripturally selective in their condemnation of homosexuality. When Jesus appears to the gathered multitude, he condemns the religious zealot's selectivity, telling them that if they are going to pick and choose, they should choose love instead of hate. Finally, Neil Patrick Harris enters the stage and

suggests to those gathered that there is money to be made in gay marriages, which finally unites the two divided groups in a common goal of using the surplus money from gay marriages to save the faltering American economy.

The drama surrounding Proposition 8 and the Mormon Church did not wane easily. After the outcome of Proposition 8 was overturned in the Ninth Court of Appeals, a new drama unfurled, though this time a staged one. Entitled *8*, the play was a direct reenactment of the court proceedings in the case *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*.[37] A Los Angeles performance of the play took place on March 3, 2012, and, as with *Prop 8: The Musical*, it featured a lineup of some of the most prominent stars in Hollywood, including George Clooney, Kevin Bacon, Brad Pitt, Jamie Lee Curtis, and, again, John C. Reilly. A lesser known actor also took the stage that night, but one already associated with playing out the difficulties of identifying as a gay man in a culture unready for change. Rory O'Malley, a Tony-nominated actor from the original Broadway cast of *The Book of Mormon: The Musical,* was primarily known for his role as Elder McKinley, the closeted missionary who sings of suppressing "gay thoughts" in order to avoid feeling sad. O'Malley provides just one possible hinge between the vitriol surrounding Proposition 8 and the crass jocularity of *The Book of Mormon: The Musical*. Indeed, given that *The Book of Mormon* opened on Broadway precisely three years after Proposition 8 was up for vote, one could consider the parodying of Mormons on stage by a host of gay or gay-advocate performers a form of cultural retribution. If the Mormon Church had enough power to sway legislation against the gay community, then the musical theater community could do one better by imagining on stage a version of Mormonism where openly gay men could don the label of Mormon missionary, preach a particularly queer gospel of inclusion, and through the magic of musical theater challenge the power of one of the fastest-growing religions in the country.[38]

How did *The Book of Mormon* accomplish that? In the comedic song "I Believe," for example, Trey Parker explains that the humor was not fabricated but rather comes from existing Mormon doctrine so unfamiliar as to seem outrageous. Comedic routines

are frequently done "on a rhythm of one, two, three, and three is always the joke," and so with "I Believe," "we just put the weirdest Mormon beliefs in the third slot and they become jokes even though they're just facts."[39] Thus in *The Book of Mormon,* the cosmology of the planet Kolob, the lifting of the priesthood ban in 1978, and the improbability of ancient Jews sailing across the ocean to America become punch lines. As Matt Stone relates, *The Book of Mormon* prods the necessarily ridiculous quality of faith which, by definition, does not assume plausibility. "There's a catharsis in being able to really laugh at some of the goofier ideas of religion, without necessarily laughing at the people practicing them," says Stone. "I think it feels good to in some ways acknowledge that certain aspects of religion are just silly. But whatever anybody's religion is, we should be able to laugh at it and at the same time understand that we should accept people who believe and have faith, without dismissing their lives as unserious." Stone later adds that he and Parker "never wanted the musical to pretend it had any answers. We wanted to be funny and put on great numbers and get some of our ideas out there."[40] Stone and Parker's satire, in other words, derives easily from the subject matter provided by Mormonism, its truthfulness self-evident and readily apparent.

Musical satires like *Prop 8: The Musical* and the stickiness with which the Proposition 8 campaign remains associated with Mormonism have exacted a cost on the Mormon experience of the last decade. Likewise, if the Mormon Church in 2011 had one wish, having a musical sharing the same name as its key religious book would likely be far from it. Nonetheless, the Church has found itself in the strange position of needing to distance itself from *The Book of Mormon* while also blushing from all the reciprocal media attention it brings. The same attributes that once made the Church easy fodder for faith-promoting Mormon musicals—the promised "enlightenment from entertainment"—have become digested by popular culture and excreted as a profane inversion of itself. Yet the fact that the Church continues to buy full-page advertisements in the playbill only adds another dimension to the odd relationship the Church maintains with its musical Other.[41] Try as they may, Mormons seem perpetually attached to musical

theater in all its guises, even when the theater becomes the space for Mormon lampooning. How else could Michael Hicks have written about *The Book of Mormon* that, "even without the words, the show would feel like a Mormon musical"?[42]

Musical Theater and "Exquisite Bufoonery"

So, now to return to Brother Jake. In addition to "I am the Very Model of a True Believing Mormon Dude," Brother Jake has created two other satirical videos that use musical theater to tell the story. One, entitled "Meant Symbolically" and set to the tune of the song "Defying Gravity" from the hit 2003 Broadway musical *Wicked*, treats the traditionally literal interpretation of historical events in the Mormon past. For Mormons, history is so tightly woven with theology as to make the two nearly inseparable. In 2002, President Gordon B. Hinckley made this point very clear with his statement: "I knew a so-called intellectual who said the Church was trapped by its history. My response was that without that history we have nothing."[43] As more evidence suggests that such tidy views of history are problematic, however, Mormons are faced with an impossible interpretive dilemma: either transform some of the literal past into a figurative one or jettison it altogether which, as Hinckley has stated, is tantamount to throwing out all of Mormonism. Brother Jake spoofs the dilemma:

> This new approach is so exciting
> I feel a huge sense of relief
> Don't have to turn my back on reason
> In matters of belief. [. . .]
> I'll just say it's meant symbolically
> So I can justify it logically
> That way I'll reconcile all my beliefs
> And never be pinned down!

It seems fitting that Brother Jake chose to base his satire on "Defying Gravity," a song with connotations of Elphaba (the green-skinned Wicked Witch of the West) breaking out of the confines of a judgmental society. As much as the Wicked Witch's delusions

of acceptance are betrayed by her eventual watery demise in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, so too might the Mormon conscience be pricked by the difficult position of defending theological notions rooted in a literal history no longer tenable. As with Elphaba, so too with Mormon history: a splash of pure insight threatens to melt it all away.

In another of his videos, Brother Jake satirically sings of the promises of correlation, which is the systematic quasi-normalizing of Mormon doctrine, policy, and theology that began in 1960 under the guidance of apostle Harold B. Lee. With his satire set to the tune of the title song from *Oklahoma!*, Brother Jake opines that correlation has been used by the Church both to whitewash troublesome aspects of its history and to choke out dissidence. With Church disciplinary actions against two prominent Mormon activists—Kate Kelly and John Dehlin—making headlines in 2014 and 2015, Brother Jake's satire hits a particularly sore spot on the Mormon conscience. While images of Kelly and Dehlin flash across the screen, Brother Jake sings:

> Correlation, where sharing doubts just doesn't fly
> And where every hour's
> Run by priesthood power
> Which is really great if you're a guy.

Brother Jake continues his unbridled critique of Church policy, concluding the song with the following lines:

> But if you don't know what to do
> Just go pick up a manual or two
> Cause when we say
> Only white shirts on Sunday
> We're saying we could use some homogenization:
> Correlation's the way.
> And if you say
> "Hey, there's a better way,"
> Just remember we're your only way to salvation,
> So shut up and obey.

This sort of criticism may not be uncommon, or even unexpected, in a church of fifteen million members. It is the medium of musical theater, though, that seems to make Brother Jake's satire sting a little harder. Even more, such an association already seems so familiar. When asked why he uses musical theater in his video satire, Brother Jake gave a response that perhaps almost any American Mormon could agree with: Mormonism and musical theater "were both intimately intertwined in my upbringing." He continues,

> Brother Jake is a character who operates in the Colbert-like nether space of imitating the heuristics of an ideological "in" group while taking no pains to soften or gloss over the harsher/more bizarre implications of the ideology itself . . . Musical theater, with its cheesy, cheery tone and generally straightforward messaging seemed like a perfect fit. It struck me as a great vehicle for taking something that externally appears harmless and marrying it with the uncomfortable, like playing "happy birthday" in a minor key.[44]

This *modus operandi* fits easily within the general theory of satire, which P. K. Elkin argues is "a catalytic agent" whose function "is less to judge people for their follies and vices than to challenge their attitudes and opinions, to taunt and provoke them into doubt, and perhaps into disbelief."[45] "Satirists can provoke by challenging received opinion," adds Dustin Griffin. "They can also provoke by holding up to scrutiny our idealized images of ourselves—forcing us to admit that such things are forever out of reach, unavailable to us, or even the last things we would really want to attain."[46]

Of course, these are dangerous qualities for an institution to tolerate and, as such, the Mormon Church in recent years has argued precariously that members have the right to voice opinions, but to not lead others into disbelief. Following her public campaign for the ordination of women, Kate Kelly's excommunication by her bishop was explained in his letter: it was not that she had wrong-headed questions or beliefs, but that "you have persisted in an aggressive effort to persuade other Church members to your point of view and [therefore] erode the faith of others."[47]

Similarly, the stake president of prominent Mormon blogger and podcast host John Dehlin wrote in his letter of explanation regarding Dehlin's excommunication that "this action was not taken against you because you have doubts or because you were asking questions about Church doctrine." Rather, it was because of "categorical statements opposing the doctrine of the Church," widely disseminated online.[48]

Ironically, it may be precisely this seemingly draconian attitude that births satire in the Church. Griffin has argued that "it is the limitation on free inquiry and dissent that provokes one to irony—and to satire," noting that if openly challenging orthodoxy were tolerated, then people would simply take their frustrations to the newspapers and debate openly there.[49] As has been the case with both Kate Kelly and John Dehlin, however, it is unclear where free speech ends and inappropriate criticism begins. To that end, satire emerges only in environments of repression and heavy-handedness, where conceptions of free speech are curtailed and uniformity expected. Shaftesbury put it well: "'Tis the persecuting Spirit has raised the bantering one. The greater the Weight is, the bitterer will be the Satire. The higher the Slavery, the more exquisite the Buffoonery."[50] Arguably, this is what Mormonism risks today and, until that risk dissipates, one can expect only more exquisite buffoonery and musical lampooning directed toward the Church from both within and without the ranks of membership.

Conclusion

In the inaugural issue of this journal, Eugene England shared these words:

> A dialogue is possible if we can avoid looking upon doubt as a sin—or as a virtue—but can see it as a condition, a condition that can be productive if it leads one to seek and knock and ask and if the doubter is approached with sympathetic listening and thoughtful response—or that can be destructive if it is used as an escape from responsibility or the doubter is approached with condemnation.[51]

England wrote those words in 1966, a half-century ago. In that year, Walt Disney died, John Lennon proclaimed his band more popular than Jesus, David O. McKay was the president of the Mormon Church, and Crawford Gates's beloved score would be heard for only the ninth time at the Hill Cumorah Pageant. So much has changed since that time, yet the single issue plaguing Eugene England then remains unresolved now, and is playing out on an even grander scale on YouTube channels and theatrical stages around the world.

Musical theater has thrived in Mormon culture for generations, and will likely continue to do so. What effects the impervious satire of musical theater exact upon Mormonism, however, remains to be seen. As Mormons confront satirical attackers they do so at a disadvantage, since the medium of musical theater seems so expertly chosen to cause the most damage. Inasmuch as musical theater has been for Mormons a balm and entertainment, a means of self-expression as well as identity, it has lately taken the shape of the legendary horse left outside the gates of Troy. The horse was the emblem of the city, Odysseus remembered, and could easily deceive with its flattery. If Mormon culture had an emblem, then perhaps it would be the musical stage and, like the horse of the Trojans, a means of understanding itself.

Destruction need not ensue, of course. It is the favorable environment for satire that chokes true discourse—discourse not left awash in a sea of falsely dichotomized conceptions of belief and doubt. "There was belief before there was doubt," Jennifer Michael Hecht has eloquently argued, "but only after there was a culture of doubt could there be the kind of active believing that is at the center of modern faiths."[52]

The atmosphere that encourages the satirical is a polluted one and in need of refreshing. Given the connection between Mormonism and the musical stage, one can imagine things being quite the opposite: musical theater and its unique space for the humorous being a vehicle for healthy discourse about any number of particular prickly issues, rather than a site where the Church's penchant for damaged or quashed rhetoric forces the satirical hand. "Humor can serve as a release or escape by releasing accumulated

tension," writes Davis Bitton. "Seeing different parts of life in juxtaposition, it can recognize incongruities and complexity. It is thus closely related to a sense of perspective. It is also akin to humility. And it is a way of defining problems so that they do not appear overwhelming."[53] Musical theater, with all its rich ties with Mormonism, may offer just the means through which productive dialogue emerges, problems can be defined with less anxiety, and the air can be cleared of its pernicious impurities. At least it is one place to start.

Notes

1. See Smith's "Dictionary of Correlation" and other writings on his blog, daymonsmith.wordpress.com.

2. Admittedly, this is one of the most popular parodied songs in popular culture, with references coming from as varied a group as television shows like *Frasier*, *Mad About You*, *Babylon 5*, and *Family Guy*; video games *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*; and films *Never Cry Wolf*, *Kate & Leopold*, and the Veggie Tales film *The Wonderful World of Auto-Tainment*. Additionally, mathematician and musical theater composer Tom Lehrer has penned several songs based on "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General," including his breakdown of the periodic table in "Elements Song."

3. All lyrics taken from the videos on Brother Jake's YouTube channel, "B Jake." https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0u7ZMWqkr7cKD_rvEXZUuQ. (accessed Jun. 25, 2015).

4. Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "'Book of Mormon' Creators on Their Broadway Smash," Interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air from* WHYY, National Public Radio, May 9, 2011. http://www.npr.org/2011/05/19/136142322/book-of-mormon-creators-on-their-broadway-smash.

5. Harold I. Hansen, "A History and Influence of the Mormon Theatre from 1839–1869," PhD diss. Brigham Young University, 1967, 5.

6. Kenneth Macgowan, *Footlights across America, Towards a National Theater* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1930), 233.

7. Davis Bitton, *Wit & Whimsy in Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), ix.

8. *Deseret News*, vol. 11, no. 37, Mar. 12, 1862 (quoted in Hansen, p. 49).

9. Hansen, 50.

10. Ibid., foreword.

11. John S. Lindsay, *The Mormons and the Theatre, or The History of Theatricals in Utah* (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1905), 6–7.

12. Doctrine and Covenants 135:3.

13. "Early Theatricals in Utah," *The Juvenile Instructor*, vol. 38 (1903): 290–91.

14. Megan Sanborn Jones, *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 34.

15. Claudia Lauper Bushman and Richard L. Bushman, *Building the Kingdom: A History of Mormons in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), xi.

16. Andrew Ehat, "'Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord?' Sesquicentennial Reflections of a Sacred Day: 4 May 1842" in *Temples of the Ancient World*, edited by Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Books, 1994), 49.

17. Discomfort with the prospect of selling human beings likely played as significant a role in this change as any sensitivity surrounding Mormonism. In a 2007 production by the Pioneer Theatre Company, for example, Woodling and his wives only "pass through town but it's a very quick appearance." Artistic director Charles Morey added that the Mormon characters in the original production, "even for me, a non-Mormon, [were] off-putting." Ivan M. Lincoln, "Some New Colors for 'Paint Your Wagon,'" *Deseret News*, Sept. 23, 2007. Meanwhile, on *An Aztec Romance*, see Ardis Parshall, "'Corianton': Genealogy of a Mormon Phenomenon," at http://www.keepapitchinin.org/archives/corianton-genealogy-of-a-mormon-phenomenon/.

18. Crawford Gates, "The Delights of Making Cumorah's Music," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies,* vol. 13 nos.1–2 (2004): 72.

19. Steven Suskin, *The Book of Mormon: The Testament of a Broadway Musical* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2012), 48.

20. Suskin, 48.

21. Noting the transformative moment Elder Price experiences while on his mission, Hicks writes that linking the pageant's score with Price grounds the missionary's testimony within the framework of the pageant's celebrated Mormon genesis: "As if to validate that transformation in 'I Believe,' each chorus begins by asserting the words 'I am a Mormon' to the five notes of the opening fanfare for the Hill Cumorah Pageant, the annual commemoration of Joseph's excavating the plates." Michael Hicks, "Elder Price Superstar," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 44, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 233.

22. "The Writing of *Saturday's Warrior*—Part II," posted on Saturday's Warrior 2016—The Motion Picture Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/saturdayswarrior/ (accessed Jun. 25, 2015).

23. See www.ziontheatricals.com/alpha-listings-musicals/ for descriptions of many of the musicals.

24. C. Michael Perry, "The Theatre as a Temple," www.ziontheatricals.com/the-theatre-as-a-temple/, Jul. 21, 2014, (accessed Jun. 25, 2015).

25. Perry, "The Theatre as a Temple."

26. Ibid.

27. Quoted in Perry, "The Theatre as a Temple."

28. See www.ziontheatricals.com/submit. (Accessed Jun. 25, 2015).

29. Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (London: Routledge, 2012), 208.

30. Kathleen Lubeck, "Get That Show on the Road: How to Stage a Roadshow," *Ensign* (August 1984): https://www.lds.org/ensign/1984/08/get-that-show-on-the-road-how-to-stage-a-roadshow?lang=eng.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Quoted in Kathleen Lubeck, "Activities That Change Lives," *Ensign* (Aug. 1983): https://www.lds.org/ensign/1983/08/activities-that-change-lives?lang=eng.

34. Kim R. Burningham, "Heard through the Heart," *New Era* (Nov. 1978): https://www.lds.org/new-era/1978/11/heard-through-the-heart?lang=eng.

35. Quoted in Jesse McKinley, "Theater Director Resigns Amid Gay-Rights Ire," *New York Times,* Nov. 12, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/13/theater/13thea.html.

36. Shaiman originally toyed with the idea of basing the musical around the poppy field scene in *The Wizard of Oz*: "I said, 'Well, maybe that first section should be all of us on a hill, with poppies, and it snows and we're put to sleep, and then the Proposition 8 people are looking through the crystal ball, like the Wicked Witch of the West in 'The Wizard of Oz.' Because that's what happened. We stupidly allowed ourselves to be lulled into a sense of, everything's fantastic now, look—everything's changing. And this couldn't possibly be voted into law. This is just like some little pesky thing that we're swatting at, and it will go away immediately." Quoted in Dave Itzkoff, "Marc Shaiman on

'Prop 8—The Musical,'" *New York Times,* Dec. 4, 2008. http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/12/04/marc-shaiman-on-prop-8-the-musical/?_r=0.

37. *Perry v. Schwarzenegger* (later changed to *Hollingsworth v. Perry*) was the federal case that resulted in Proposition 8 being ruled unconstitutional. The plaintiffs were same-sex couple Kristin Perry and Sandra Stier, who in 2009 were denied a marriage license in Alameda County, California, because they were gay.

38. *The Book of Mormon* was not the first time Trey Parker and Matt Stone musically lampooned Mormonism. In 2003, their *South Park* episode, "All about the Mormons" musically dramatized Joseph Smith's First Vision, subsequent visits from the angel Moroni, and Smith's methods of translating The Book of Mormon using seer stones tucked inside his hat. As off-camera voices narrate the story, the continuous trope "Dum, dum, dum, dum, dum" is eventually revealed to be a homonym for "dumb." The off-camera voices thus are conceptualized as a singing Greek chorus, moralizing the errancy of Smith's claims and the naiveté of his early followers.

39. Trey Parker and Matt Stone, interview by Terry Gross.

40. Suskin, 55.

41. These advertisements frequently feature representative images of men and women with the words "You've seen the play . . . now read the book," "The book is always better," or simply "I've read the book," followed by an image of the actual Book of Mormon. In 2011, Liza Morong became the first convert to the church directly resulting from the musical and, as at least one article pointed out, missionaries patrolling outside theaters have found an engaging and curious audience of theater-goers eager to meet real Mormons. See Danielle Tumminio, "Don't Judge a Book of Mormon by its Cover: How Mormons are Discovering the Musical as a Conversion Tool," *Huffington Post*, May 13, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/danielle-tumminio/dont-judge-a-book-of-mormon-by-its-cover-how-mormons-are-discovering-the-musical-as-a-conversion-tool_b_3267252.html.

42. Hicks, 228.

43. Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith," *Ensign* (Oct. 2002): https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2002/10/the-marvelous-foundation-of-our-faith?lang=eng.

44. Personal email correspondence with the author, Mar. 5, 2015.

45. P. K. Elkin, *Augustan Defence of Satire* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 201.

46. Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 60.

47. See link to pdf of the letter in "Ordain Women Releases LDS Bishop's Letter Giving Reasons for Kelly's Excommunication," *Deseret News*, Jun. 23, 2014, http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865605659/Ordain-Women-releases-LDS-bishops-letter-giving-reasons-for-Kellys-excommunication.html?pg=all.

48. See pdf link to full letter in "Mormon Stories Founder Dehlin's Spread of 'False Concepts' Results in Excommunication from LDS Church," *Deseret News*, Feb. 11, 2015, http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865621576/Mormon-Stories-founder-Dehlins-spread-of-false-concepts-results-in-excommunication-from-LDS.html?pg=all.

49. Griffin, 139.

50. *Characteristics*, edited by J. M. Robertson (London, 1900), 1:50–51.

51. Eugene England, "The Possibility of Dialogue: A Personal View," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1966): 10.

52. Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), xxi.

53. Bitton, vii.