



James Arrington

INTERVIEW BY **MAHONRI STEWART** | PHOTOS BY **GREG DEAKINS**

James Arrington has been a fixture in Mormon drama since the late 1970s, drawing audiences for decades with his popular one-man shows such as The Farley Family Reunion, The Farley Family Christmas, Here's Brother Brigham, and J. Golden, among a host of other shows. Having been professionally trained at the Actor's Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, Arrington has made his career as a playwright, director and actor for film and screen. He's currently department chair for Utah Valley University's Theatre Arts Department.

Tell us about your beginnings as an actor, a director, and a playwright.

Performer: Apparently others saw talent before I ever did. I was cast as Hansel in *Hansel and Gretel* in sixth grade (and was asked to put my arm around the prettiest girl in school, which I declined, dangit.) But when I was fourteen I went to a National Boy Scout Jamboree in Pennsylvania. In those days I was urgently trying to find a way to be “cool” and had discovered that I could do an English accent, hence my nickname “Crumpets” or “Crumps” for short. On the way out I was using the accent to chat with my fellow Scouts and another Scout chimed in with his English accent. We commenced a little game of it and a strange little comedy team was born: “The Adventures of Irving and Seymour.” We entertained on the bus, at campfires, and with other troops, and we were finally nominated to represent our troop at our area talent show. We won first place. My mother said I went away one little boy and came back another.

That very fall my church put on *You Can't Take It With You* and I was asked to read for Kolenkhov, the Russian ballet teacher. I did so on a dare. I carefully explained I knew nothing of a Russian accent. The woman in charge just said, “Follow me,” and began reading the lines in her Russian accent. Within 30 seconds I was reading with a Russian accent too. I was thunderstruck! And then, on opening night, Kolenkhov comes on-stage in the first two acts very loud and funny, while in the third act he simply creeps in. When I crept in, the audience started to laugh just because of my presence. Boom! I was hooked. Power over an audience was the greatest feeling I'd ever had. I think that's still true.

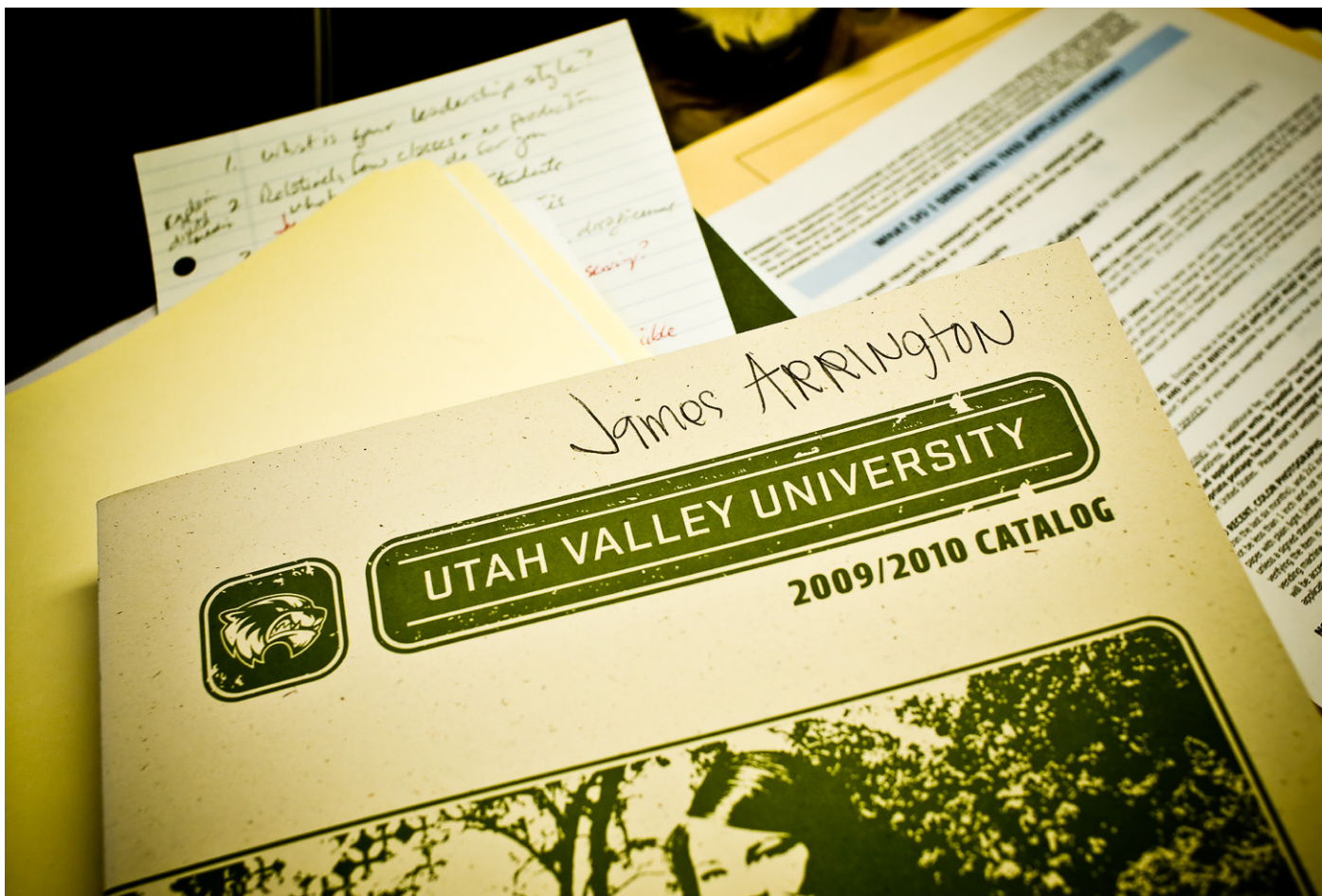
Director: I had made a vow to be in every play my high school produced. In my senior year the

chosen musical was Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* and I had been cast in the wonderful role of Ko-Ko. Because of some early issues with casting, the director (a music teacher) had decided to drop the play. In a fit of emotion I went to her office and insisted—no, demanded—that the play be presented. I assured her that if she didn't want to direct it, I would. I wound up directing probably eighty percent of the finished product... and received no credit, but the play did go on and was very well received.

Playwright: I didn't know I could write plays. It never occurred to me till I was serving my mission in Brazil. It came to me in my first area that I could wrest control from my senior companion (who didn't seem to want to work) and help the branch youth unify as well as earn some money for their youth conference if we put on a play. I had no knowledge of Brazilian dramatic literature, but it didn't even enter my mind to do a Brazilian play. I wrote a little kind of fractured fairy tale called *The Most Complicated Christmas* and had it translated into Portuguese by someone in the branch. I directed it (in my very poor Portuguese) and put it on to whoever showed up with the \$2 ticket price. It was a huge success. A triple win. The mission president—who, when he found out what we were doing, nearly squelched the whole thing (it didn't occur to me to ask if we could)—called after our two-night run and asked if we could put it on in another branch!

What inspired me to go ahead and pursue these fields? I was just having so much fun. I enjoyed every aspect of the theatre, forged new relationships, and found a remarkable way of self-appreciation, and I couldn't really find the “edge” of my newfound talents. Since I found that I could, I went out and did. It seemed that I was destined

I've always felt that my talent was given to me for a purpose, and purpose is what religion is all about.



to do it because I continued to succeed and enjoy the experiences immensely. For the more part of my career, the audience applause did more for me than anything else. I worshipped it, lived for it, and, you psychiatrists out there, yes, I obsessed about it. But as the years rolled by it simply became necessary for me to direct more often and finally to write seriously. It was actually a matter of necessity for me. When asked, I felt I had no other choices at the time.

You are famous for your many one-man shows, such as *The Farley Family Reunion* (and its various spin-offs), *Here's Brother Brigham*, and *J. Golden*. What circumstances led you to that particular genre of theatre? What are the practical and creative benefits of a one-man show? What are its drawbacks?

What circumstances? For the most part necessity. I couldn't seem to get people to see me as the broad character actor I was. I was always looked at as a second-rate leading man. I wasn't physically distinctive for an obvious character actor—not skinny, not tall, not stout (I've taken care of that one now), no big adam's apple or nose. I was also alertly looking for some way to make my way in the theatre, an opportunity that was unique to me.

When I was about twenty-three, I went to see (kicking and screaming, actually) my first one-man show, *Will Roger's USA* with James Whitmore, and I was again thunderstruck. I realized that here was an actor onstage alone (low overhead) who had the audience completely in his control (power) and *he* determined the action, pace, rhythm (art) *and* didn't have

to share his paycheck with anyone else (a living)! Wow. The combination was irresistible.

The question was who to pick. I had been wondering more and more about writing and had done little of it. A one-man show was daunting, *but* (and that's a big but) if I was doing a character of the past, I could rely on their own words to write the play. It didn't take long for me to center on Mormon history, and of the characters in Mormon history perhaps none has been as carefully documented as Brigham Young. So there was plenty of material—in fact, way too much, I found out later. I also was very lucky in choosing a character that had some controversy surrounding him, plenty of documented speeches about all kinds of things, and an audience base that would be quite interested, possibly



even enough to get over the idea of watching one guy for two hours.

Drawbacks: At a certain point the audience disappears or moves on. Life on the road can become grueling, and having the same haircut for thirty years has been annoying. Not too many drawbacks, but the original challenge is to find the right person and then capitalize on him. Again, I think I was lucky to come along when I did. One-man shows were not around in Mormonism in those days, so I was an anomaly. I managed to hit the timing of it just right for my audience.

Benefits of a one-man show: all contained in the word “one.” An actor can single out a character, write about them, perform, even direct it, produce it, and start a career. That’s more or less what I did. Since there was no one else to help, it was literally all on me. Eventually the show was able to travel easily and over the years I stripped it down to its very most elemental parts so it could be done around campfires, at luncheons, and special events.

As a bearded resident Brigham Young I have appeared to accept a sculpture at the capitol building, awakened teenagers on the old Mormon trail, appeared on radio, television, and in film, led the 24th of July parade, and addressed countless congregations. I have done versions of the play in Hawaii, Alaska, Canada, England, the “Fringe” festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, the Hasty Pudding Club of Boston, Massachusetts, and on horseback and buggies all over the West. It’s been a great ride for Brigham, and I’m still occasionally doing “gigs.”

The Farleys are your most recognizable creation. Can you tell us who the Farleys are, how they came into being, and how they have been received?

After the major success of *Here's Brother Brigham*, I was still not seen as doing my greatest love, character acting. Although Brigham could certainly be seen as a character, and was, I just wasn't fulfilling my ambition to do broader characters. For years at parties I would arrive with my instrument (the actor's body is his instrument) on my back, so to speak, and would be asked to improvise characters and situations. Though I enjoyed those opportunities I always had this nagging feeling that there was something more substantial in it for me.

Some of these improvisations began to recur, much like my early Scouting experience, and I began to look for ways to use them in a more artistic effort. It wasn't till I read Don Marshall's wonderful little character book *The Rummage Sale* that I realized all these characters were in a family, and, literally, I was the patriarch. Drawing from that, my improvisations, my real family, and my observations of Mormon culture over thirty years, I sat down and tapped out what was originally presented as a two-person show. Necessity again entered when I couldn't find enough work to hire an actress to work with me and I took it over, making it into the one-man show that is so recognizable today. I still think the earlier two-man show is a funnier script and concept, but a one-man show sure travels easier and pays the bills.

The Farleys have been received by countless audiences just how I meant them to: as a warm satire. However, I have learned that some people just aren't born with a satire gene and those individuals have a very rough time with the Farleys, thinking they are entirely too simplistic (caricatured, cartoon-like) or that they are a mean-spirited judgment on Mormon society and should be avoided. I've had

people in the audience stand up and demand their money back. What they don't realize is that the moment they leave, I have the last say. "Them's there cousins from (whatever miniscule town leaps to mind), they're never satisfied, but now we can all speak frankly!" And we go on. *The Farley Family Reunion* isn't meant as a final judgment on my society, more of a mirror.

Many of your one-man shows and plays deal specifically with subjects in Church history. You've covered a lot of ground ranging from Brigham Young to Wilford Woodruff to J. Golden Kimball. Your father, Leonard Arrington, also happened to be one of the Church's most famous historians. Is there a story behind this shared connection that you and your dad have with Church history, or is it simply coincidental that you ended up telling many of the same stories, just with different mediums? What else draws you to these great figures in our religion's past?

I tried to get my father to help me with my first major effort in writing Brigham Young. Who better than my father? What I didn't see at that point and have come to understand since is that he couldn't help me—I was completely ignorant. He'd forgotten more than I knew and he remembered almost everything. He knew too much.

So when I went down to his office to ask for help he simply selected about twelve (big, heavy, dusty, thick, small type, no pictures) books from his library and asked me to go ahead and read them. I was devastated. I'd never really been hot on books (except science fiction) and now I had to read history? I kept them at arm's length in my BYU apartment until I was compelled by guilt and timeframe to start. I started with the thinnest one, with photos and larger type. But as I continued to

Artistic endeavors civilize us, teach us, and give us formulas and thoughts to live by.

read, I started making connections and soon became quite conversant with Brigham, his life, mission, family, and the overview of his destiny and viewpoints. Then and only then, could I talk with my father intelligently about Brigham's world.

I found that getting my father's help only required me to be very specific in my questions: "Dad, in about June of 1856, Brigham had a meeting with the Indians in Southern Utah. Some say this was the start of the Utah War..." and without even a blink, a correction: "Well, James, it was May 20th at 4:30 in the afternoon of..." and then he'd give the date and what was spoken about and who was there and why it didn't matter as much as some people thought, etc. It was like asking for a drink of water and getting a waterfall. That isn't to say I didn't enjoy it, but I had to get to a certain capacity to understand first.

After that, I learned that he was an extremely valuable resource when I was lost, upset, and concerned, but he always allowed me to make my own way. Later on, my mother once said to him, "Leonard, have you noticed how many new books and articles there are about Brigham Young? (Including my father's seminal *American Moses*.) "Why, yes," he replied offhandedly, "what do you think the effects of James' play were?" A greater compliment was never paid me.

The fact is that in Mormon society, at least to this point, we've really only allowed ourselves to go two places for our drama: history is more or less safe, and missions are more or less safe. I say "more or less" because these areas have also been problematic as well, but less than other parts of Mormon society. We are only now beginning to open up and look a little more intimately. I believe this is because our culture has been rather insular, and looking too closely appears

to be judgmental, prejudiced, or, at worst, anti-Mormon. We're not fond of "disgruntled" members.

Secondly, our missionary status and zeal as a church has not allowed us to really look hard at the difficulties and dramatic internal struggles of our people except in melodramatic terms: good vs. bad, righteous vs. unrighteous, followers vs. upstarts and ne'er-do-wells. In our culture we like to "put our best foot forward." There is a second foot there, of course, but bringing it "forward" and analyzing it is difficult and rather untidy.

For instance, some of the brethren and others have called for artists in the Church to write a *Fiddler on the Roof* type show about Mormonism. We simply can't. Look what *Fiddler* is about: A man whose three sweet daughters who he deeply loves, stray ever further from his beloved traditions. It creates the drama and a unique and real sympathy for his character. Now imagine that dynamic in Mormonism: A man whose children stray further and further from the truth of the gospel? Hmm. Can't do it.

Oh, yes, it happens all the time, but as a missionary church we don't want to air our dirty laundry—we just don't want to show that our society is subject to less than perfection. Criticism and realism is best kept to oneself. Paraphrasing Cyrano de Bergerac, "I can say these things lightly enough about myself, but I allow no one else to do so," and then out comes the sword. The Farleys are in there somewhere...

Here's Brother Brigham is one of your Church history plays that has made the most impact. What drew you to Brigham Young specifically? What connections have you felt to him while performing?

Aside from what I have said above, I have to say that among the

luminaries of Mormon history, the two choices were Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. I wasn't sure there was enough original material I could find about what Joseph said to make a thorough play, and I also thought it would be akin to writing new words for the character of Jesus, which no one would be serious about. Joseph's revelatory nature you wouldn't want to goof around with. Also, I didn't look at all like Joseph Smith, so Brigham it was.

The "connections" part of this question is very hard to explain. I have come to admire and respect Brigham Young in a wonderful and personal way. He was simply one of the greatest Americans we've ever had, and I go so far as to say one of the great men of the world. It's hard to argue with his insight, capable management, powerful personality, and astonishing wisdom and knowledge considering that he had only eleven days of formal schooling. He was an amazing guy. I've been thrilled with his life and accomplishments and it's been an honor to "stand in his shoes," so to speak, for modern audiences.

I will say that I've had moments when I felt like what I was saying went entirely off-script and I felt prompted to say things that were powerful at the time. In those moments I felt strongly that I was influenced into a certain way of thinking or a point of view that definitely wasn't what I'd expected. Occasionally I've had what I consider to be miraculous interventions. Where did it come from? Not certain, I can only say that I think it's from above. In such circumstances I go to my own personal beliefs, and they shall remain private.

You had the chance to perform Brigham Young for President Hinckley or President Kimball (or was it both?), didn't you? Can you tell us about the circumstances of that

experience and what it was like to portray a prophet for a prophet?

Both. I performed for President Kimball in a post-conference dinner where I did a shortened version for all the brethren and their wives, a frightening and astounding experience. At the climax of that short show, the lines say, “Stand to your faith, straighten His paths, for the Lord’s coming is nigh!” This phrase is at high intensity and volume, and when I say it I point my finger into the audience. This night I looked down my randomly pointing finger and there I was pointing straight at President Kimball, whose widened eyes and intense concentration made him look completely convicted! I nearly fainted. I was grateful that he came up after the show and thanked me personally for the presentation.

I performed with President Hinckley in the group on several different occasions, both before he was president and afterwards. He was always congenial and appreciative, though it’s always a little nerve-wracking.

I have also managed to perform in several circumstances where members of the leading brethren were in attendance. Once, in St. George, one of the apostles was present and had to make a quick announcement at the pulpit before my talk. He sat with me and asked specifically that I not begin until he’d gotten back to his seat so he could “enjoy the whole thing.” As complimented as I was, here was such an irony: Me, the ersatz Brigham, was speechifying while one of the Lord’s actual prophets sat quietly watching. A strange juxtaposition for sure. He winked at me from the audience when he was settled and ready for me to begin.

I actually think that overall, the brethren are grateful for my Brigham Young. He can approach topics and say things quite powerfully that they would feel restrained from discussing. Odd, huh?

What other unique experiences have you had performing your one-man shows?

The war stories of touring and producing shows all over the world include what you might expect from such kinds of strange instances, everything from arriving at a show dressed and prepared for the wrong character, being picketed (*Here’s Brother Brigham* in Orange County), being shut down by a thunder and lightning storm, and having my costume and makeup (beard) not arrive on the plane with me for a show that night.

I think one of the most memorable experiences was performing the role of Matthew Cowley in the play *Tumuaki! Matthew Cowley of the Pacific*, which I wrote and presented on the hundred-year anniversary of BYU–Hawaii. Many people who attended knew Brother Cowley personally, and at one point, a group of about thirty Maori men invited themselves up on stage to perform the haka (their cultural war dance) with me. I’ve never had an experience quite like that... except in the second act, when a high priestess from their culture came up and presented me with a priceless antique

bird-feather cloak and tied it around my neck. I performed the rest of the show in that cloak. It was amazing—I still have it.

On occasion, I have been told fascinating stories by those who had specific and hidden information about some of the characters I’ve portrayed. For instance, everyone has a personal favorite J. Golden Kimball story and I hear a new one or at least a take of an old one every time the show is done. I have been adopted into the Brigham Young family and continue to receive their family e-mails, and *Wilford Woodruff: God’s Fisherman* has played at Oxford, England.

What practical and creative advice would you give to those who want to make theatre their career?

Practical *and* creative? Wow. I guess I have learned that when you want to do something, you must continue to do it under any circumstances that allow you to do it. It means, especially in the early years of a career, you must do things for free and any time you can. It’s not easy to get productions together, but the best learning actually happens when there is a combination of rehearsal



and performance combined. This would include those not-so-perfect venues and opportunities that pop up. You can't afford to be picky at an early stage. You learn something from each performance opportunity about audiences, about your own abilities, about your approach, what works for you and what doesn't. It doesn't matter whether you get the role you want or not. I've learned that picky performers usually wind up not working very much. Those who'll take anything and approach it intelligently will learn something useful in every outing and will work often and find out if they have what it takes.

As a famous actor (Richard Chamberlain) once told me, "Work, work, work. Just work all the time. Work whenever you can." Excellent advice.

You have been a professor at Utah Valley University for a number of years now. What have been the major differences between being a full-time professional actor and a full-time theatre educator?

The major differences are: A) Steady paycheck *and* insurance! Thank the Lord. B) Working with the same folks, more or less, on each production. C) Running a season-type environment as opposed to running something worthwhile into the ground for cash. D) Loss of "fame," and by that I mean that when I backed away from promoting myself to promoting the school and department, I stopped being a celebrity, whatever that's worth. E) I have stopped looking for the next job and am looking at the next season. F) Working with students is exhilarating and inspiring, but it can be a little rough or elementary. I've stopped thinking about how far I can go personally and concentrate on how far I can get the students to go. G) I am now



much more a director/producer than either an actor or playwright. H) I think it keeps me young and young thinking, but it has all but halted my professional experience as a playwright. I just simply don't have time, and I am now bent on passing on what I know as opposed to practicing it.

Those are the major differences that occur to me at the moment.

What's your preferred hat: actor, playwright, or director? Why?

You know, it completely depends. It depends partly on the outcome and partly on the process and who's involved. Just last summer I was with the Utah Festival Opera in Logan playing both Merlyn and Pellinore in their wonderful version of *Camelot*. Hey ho, an actor again without having to manage the movement forward of the project! Well, it was splendid, but it wasn't entirely fulfilling—something vague in the back of my mind about doing someone else's work and only being the instrument, not the meaning. And at my age I've also discovered that I don't memorize as well as I used to. In fact, quite a lot worse! It's scary.

Frankly, I like to do the project I'm involved in at the moment

I'm asked. Right now I'm all about producing *Big River* at Sundance this summer. I bend all my effort to its success and feel confident in its eventual outcome. When projects are gone and finished I remember them fondly—like children.

I do get a kick out of saying, "I wrote that," but what a lot of work to get to production! I do like to say I directed that, but it's someone else's work. And I love to act, but I find my abilities fading a bit. So, looking at it from that direction, I guess I rather enjoy the fruits of playwriting the most. Notice I said "the fruits" and not the process. The process is prolonged and rather lonely and doesn't get very exciting until you have your first readthrough. Sometimes that's a long wait.

You've often worked as a collaborator with other writers, actors, and musicians on your plays. What are the joys and challenges of the collaborative process?

I'm like anyone else about collaboration. Some of my very best experiences were working with other artists in combined effort. *The Trail of Dreams* is still one of the greatest pieces I was ever involved in, working along with Steven

Kapp Perry and Marvin Payne—a wonderful memory and still one of my better works. I’m dying to remount it.

I loved working with my former student Mahonri Stewart on the blessed but under-produced *March of the Salt Soldiers* two years ago.

On the other hand, I have set out several times to work with people who somehow didn’t understand what I was saying or I didn’t get them. They refused to budge or discuss things that I thought were important, and opposed to the happy kind of collaboration that grows and stimulates from the friction of two different minds working along on the same project, the project simply died. Most of those have been in a very early stage, thankfully. One must trust one’s collaborator, both their taste and their work ethic. Either of those can be a killer.

What’s on the horizon for you right now?

Unfortunately (or fortunately) I teach the writing classes, and as such, I must read all of my students’ scripts. In the case of our advanced writing class, each of them has to produce a full-length (90 pages or more) work. I read them all and critique them, which amounts to about 1,200 to 1,500 pages of original works and three to six pages of careful critique on each piece. It completely takes over my life and I’m hard-pressed to finish every time, so time is precious.

I have two particular projects I’d like to finish if I can ever come up with any time to do so. Both projects are in varying stages of research and draft. The first is called *Hell’s Beelz!* and is a one-man show that I’ve been trying to write for literally years. It’s the rantings and comic insights of a devil named Beelzebub who’s come to do a one-man show to get

some glory before it’s too late. I’ve enjoyed writing it, but it’s been interrupted numerous occasions. I already have a terrific actor picked for *Hell’s Beelz!* who is anxious for me to finish the draft. That’s good. Motivation is good.

The second is called *Behold!* and is an episodic and collected treatment of interactions between man and deity in the Old Testament. It’s meant to have a rather epic sensibility. I think they’re both wonderful pieces that I would dearly love to see on stage.

What is your writing process?

Ha. Who knows? It seems to depend completely on the project and who’s involved. In some cases I have written by merely sitting down and trying out a new software application. In other events it has taken a great deal of research, hard work and careful organization. I have occasionally felt like my writing is like English playwright Tom Stoppard when he says something along the lines of, “First draw a finger and then a hand and then an arm and pretty soon you know what kind of an animal it is that you’ve drawn.”

I guess my process fits the situation I find myself in. Sometimes when I write and I’m very busy I have to be meticulous about planning a time to write and sticking to it. Sometimes a collaborator splits the work out with a date at which we’ll return with research or written parts, but my favorite process is when I just sit down and let the imagination fly. *The Farley Family Reunion* was something along that order, while *Here’s Brother Brigham* took months and months of research and careful cataloging to put it together.

How do your faith and your art intersect?

I’m not sure I know how to answer this question satisfactorily. They

are so intertwined that I can’t have either of them without it leading to the other.

I know that must sound a little strange, but I’ve always felt blessed and felt the hand of the Lord, if nothing else, giving me a slight push forward. I’ve always felt that my talent was given to me for a purpose, and purpose is what religion is all about—thus, they are deeply intertwined and hardly separable.

Obviously, if I had to make a choice, I would know to separate the two and I’m clear about the answer: theatre is the temple of man, but it’s not a saving institution. I’m very clear about the difference.

To you, why does theatre matter?

This should be Theatre with a capital “T”, meaning all theatrical endeavors from movies to pageants. Artistic endeavors civilize us, teach us, and give us formulas and thoughts to live by. I’d like to quote Brigham Young who said, “Upon the stage of a theater can be represented in character, evil and its consequences, good and its happy results and rewards, the weakness and the follies of man, the magnanimity of virtue and the greatness of truth. 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 thorns and pitfalls, its gins and snares can be revealed, and how to shun it.”

And, by the way, men who taught out of the wonderful priesthood manual about him discovered that they had to lead with the idea or thought, gather a little discussion and *then* finish with Brigham’s quote or there was nothing anyone could discuss, only everyone nodding in approval. When Brigham laid it, it stayed and it does here, too. ■