J. SCOTT BRONSON

J. Scott Bronson is a playwright, actor, and director who is also artistic director of the Little Theater at the Covey Center of the Arts in Provo. Interviewed September 24, 2008. Website: **coveycenter.org**

How did you start off with theatre and writing?

I took a drama class in ninth grade and got hooked. Then in high school, back when roadshows were done the way they're supposed to be done—letting the youth be in charge, with adults as shadow leaders—my best friend John and I were like Rodgers and Hammerstein. For two years we wrote original scripts: I wrote the book and the lyrics and he wrote the music.

In high school I was pretty much just an actor in plays. I did one semester of junior college, went on a mission, came back, and hung around at home for about a year and a half. Then I kind of slipped into BYU and started doing theatre there. My first semester there, I was in a major production in the Margetts Theater and in three graduate shows. Three of them were original full-length plays, and with two of them the playwrights were right there, so I was watching the process of mounting original plays. In one of them the playwright *wasn't* in attendance, and when we were getting close to opening and the show was about three hours long, one night after rehearsal we decided to sit around and decide which of our lines could be cut. Some actors were completely unwilling to cut any of theirs because they thought it was all just gospel. When it came to my part, I looked at it and I thought, "Well, I can cut this, and this, but this part here I can actually combine with this part over here, because it makes more sense for this to be over here." I was actually restructuring my role. Later on it occurred to me that that was kind of a playwriting deal. *Playwright* means builder of plays.

My second semester at BYU, I took a creative writing class, and for the final project I wrote a one-act play. I showed it to one of my theatre professors, Charles Whitman. He read it, handed it back to me, and said, "Great. Write another act." This wasn't part of any class, but I wrote another act and gave it to him. "Great," he said. "You got a third one?" So I wrote another act and turned that in to him. The next semester he and Max Golightly and Bob Nelson started a new program in the department. It was then called PDA (Playwright/Director/Actor workshop) but now it's WDA (Writer/Director/Actor workshop). That play was chosen for the very first workshop. Over the course of the next few years I was in the workshop as a writer three times and as a director once.

You've also done a lot ofTV work. How did that start out?

It started when Barta Heiner in the theatre department at BYU invited her agent to come see a performance of a play I was in called *Terra Nova.* After the show, Barta's agent said she wanted to see me, so I went up to her office in Salt Lake. She pulled out her headshot book of guys, laid it down in front of me, and said, "I want you to find someone in there who looks like you." And there wasn't anybody—she had all these young guys and old guys but nobody in the middle. "There aren't a lot of guys around here who look like you," she said. "I can get you work." But I didn't have a car and I didn't have a phone, so that didn't work out for quite a while.

Then in '89, the first year that ARTE (Actor's Repertory Theatre Ensemble) got started up at the Castle Theater, I was in their production of *Lion in the Winter* with Barta, playing Henry. I had long hair and a beard, because I wasn't in school anymore, and my picture appeared in the paper with Barta to promote the show. That was the year the Church was making the film *Easter Dream.* The director saw my picture in the paper and went to his casting director, Kate. "There's an actor with hair and a beard. He could be an apostle in our movie—see if he wants to come audition."

Kate had never heard of me, but she knew Barta, so she called Barta's agent and said she wanted to talk to me. I'd been out of BYU for three years, and one day—I don't remember why—I was on campus. I just thought I needed to stop by to talk to Barta. While I was talking to some guys in the scene shop across the hall, her agent called and said these guys wanted to know if I'd audition for them. "Sure," I said. He asked if I had representation. I said no. "Okay," he said, "I'll be your agent." So I had an agent and I had a project and I put a resume together and had a friend of mine do pictures and got a headshot and started getting jobs.

You're now the artistic director of the Covey Center Little Theater. How did that get started?

I have a friend, Thom Duncan, who is also an LDS playwright. He's opened up theaters two or three times, but he always wanted to have a Mormon theatre company. In 2001 he said, "I'm going to cash in my IRA because I'm 50 and I don't want to get to 60 without saying I didn't give this the best shot I could." And he asked me to be a part of it.

I remembered that when I was on the board of trustees for ARTE, Paul Duerden—who taught the theater management class at BYU—had come to ARTE and said, "My class wants you to use your company as a project. For a whole semester, we want to analyze what you do, then suggest ways for you to improve." Free help for a non-profit.

I told Thom, "What we need to do is see if Paul is still teaching this class, and see if they want to take on a whole new company as a project." He took it to the class and they did want to do it. Then halfway through the semester, Paul said, "I want to join you guys on this—not just as the class." So the three of us became partners and we started a company, found a space on Center Street in Orem, and did one season. It didn't work out so well, but that's when Paul and I got hooked up.

Last summer he got hired to be the general manager at the Covey Center. Very soon after he got settled in down there, he gave me a tour of the place. We wound up in a room on the side that was initially going to be a police dispatch and then a music studio. It was just a big empty room. "Think we could turn this into a theater?" "Paul," I said, "I can turn anything into a theater."

That was last August. In October I spent a couple weeks converting the room and we did a show, and before I knew it I was the artistic director for the Little Theater at the Covey Center for the Arts.

Was *Dial Tones* the first show?

Yes. I chose it simply because it only had three actors, and because we didn't have any theater lights in there. It's a play that I could do by turning on the lights and turning them off. It didn't need any special sets or special costumes, so we didn't need any money. And it was my play and I didn't charge, so we were able to get started right away. Then for Valentine's Day we put together a collection of six short plays that all had to do with love, *Anthology of Love.* Then we did another play of mine called *Stones,* which we had done up at our theater on Center Street.

We were going to go into another play of mine right afterwards—because I was trying to find plays that didn't have royalties attached—but certain circumstances made it impossible for us to go on with that production, so we took a hiatus and did some restructuring. We were actually supposed to do *Wedlocked,* but that wasn't going to work out because Marvin Payne and Steve Kapp Perry didn't have any sheet music, so there was no way for anybody to learn the songs. Later we found a way to learn the songs and did the show, and now I've finally got some other people to come in and help. I'm not even directing the next show or the one after it. We're trying to build not only an audience but a group of practitioners of the arts—playwrights, actors, directors—and trying to get more people involved.

You mentioned earlier starting a Mormon theatre company. Is the Little Theater specifically Mormon?

No, this is a government-run facility, so my only real criteria—which isn't a city dictum at all—is that I have to consider the audience. As the artistic director I have to figure out who my audience is and what they want—what works and what doesn't. If I can figure out what they like, then I can give them things they never would have thought they might have enjoyed.

What are some of the major challenges you're facing with the Little Theater?

I would like to do plays that have more than two or three actors in them. The show we just did had two characters; the show we're doing now, *Turn of the Screw,* has seven or eight characters but it's written for two actors; but *Joyful Noise,* which we also did up at our theater on Center Street, has about eight actors in it. And I'm really nervous about finding eight actors, because

there's a lot of competition for actors when you've got all the theaters around here. Nobody knows us really well, so the biggest challenge is trying to get more blood into the system.

Another challenge is finding plays that we can do that will enlighten and enliven. I've got a list of plays I want to put down for the next season, but most people haven't heard of any of them. I want to do *Seascape* by Edward Albee. It won the Pulitzer Prize and the first act has this couple sitting on the beach talking about their lives, and two giant lizards come up out of the ocean and start talking to them. It's delightful, and there are great insights about life and love. And Horton Foote—who wrote the screenplay adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*—has three one-acts that go together in a nice trilogy called *The Roads to Home.* They're sad, funny, touching, and really wonderful little plays. I want to do them, but I don't know if I'll get to.

Tell us about writing *Stones*.

That first play I described—"Write another act, write another act"—became a play called *Heartlight* that was put on the main season at BYU, directed by Charles Whitman in 1984. Then I wrote a romantic fantasy that was put on the season and done in the Margetts in 1986, the year I got married. One day I asked Barta what I should write next. She said, "I've always wanted to direct a play about Abraham and Isaac."

Almost immediately four things popped into my head that I already knew about the play: first, it would just be Abraham and Isaac. Second, it would begin when they reach the top of Mount Moriah. Third, it would end when Abraham raises the knife. And fourth, it was going to be called "Altars." I don't know why I knew those things; I just did. And then I didn't do anything with that for seven years. I knew what it was to be a son, but I had no idea what it was to be a father.

Then in 1992, when I'd been a father for five years and had two children, I just started writing it. I thought it was going to be a full-length play, but I couldn't get it there—I came out to about fifty pages, maybe. I tried to team it up with a couple of other plays but there was just never anything right about that, so it sat around for a long time.

A few years ago, in 1999 or 2000, I'd been thinking that I would like to write a play with Jesus onstage, saying more than what we could attribute to him from scripture—an imagined life based on what I'd been taught my whole life, what I'd read in scriptures, commentary by other people, and what I thought. I wanted to represent him as a human being as well as a God, to try to make him approachable and understandable, instead of some faraway incomprehensible thing up in the sky.

One day I dropped my perpetually misbehaving automobile off at Doug's Auto and was walking home. It occurred to me that I should write a play about Jesus and his mom, Mary. My mind started racing and almost immediately two or three things became apparent. First, it had to be a companion piece to "Altars." Second, I had to have a single setting. What place was I going to set it in so it could be produceable? What situation would be most interesting for Jesus and his mom to be put together and forced to talk about something? How about if his stepdad, Joseph, has just died, and they're in his tomb? And I could take those blocks or whatever I'm using as the altar and turn them into part of the tomb. And then I had another one-word title, "Tombs."

Within two minutes of this idea occurring to me, a line popped into my head. Mary gets her son to tell her what his mission in life is going to be all about. She says, "How is it possible? Can you really do all these things?" And he would say, "My body will endure because God is my father, but my heart will endure because you are my mother." As soon as that line occurred to me, I started crying out on State Street in Orem. It's such a powerful idea and a tribute to the woman who bore him under terrible circumstances and who had to raise a God. And she was there when they crucified him. How many women want to watch their child murdered?

It blossomed immediately in my head and I thought, "That will be a great play to write someday, but there's no way I'm ready now." Then there was this almost physical thing; I didn't hear the words, but I definitely felt the phrase somewhere in my heart or head, "Write it now." So I started working on it right away. I had a small role acting in *Wait Until Dark* at Provo Theatre Company and had an hour and a half in between scenes, so most nights I sat there and worked on the play. It took, I don't know, two to four months to write it.

I was going to do a production of it up at the Castle, but the furthest we got was a reading here at the house. Then one of the actors got into another project that paid money, and I got cancer, so the whole thing fell apart. After I finished my chemotherapy, the girl who was stage manager for *Wait Until Dark* called me up in October '01 and said their little theater had a couple of dark weekends coming up and asked if I wanted to take them. I said to my wife, "I've got these two weekends I can put a play in. What should I do?" "Stones," she said.

I had to find two other actors, so I found Elwon J. Bakly, and I'd worked with Kathryn Laycock Little before, and I begged them and talked them into it. We've done it three times now. It's been slightly different each time.

In our second production, up at the Center Street theater, Elwon—who plays the son in both plays—went out paintballing one day and broke his collarbone. We had to cancel a weekend's worth of shows. When he was able to come back into the show, we had to reblock the whole end of "Altars" in a way that would keep him out of lifting any more blocks, because it was very painful for him.

Another major staging change was that in both other productions, I had more lights and versatility. Here in the Covey Center we just had six instruments. And in the Atonement scene in "Tombs," where he says, "Please strengthen me for this," we had a bright white light come and wash over him as if an angel came. We don't see the angel, but he does, and he gains some power from that. But we couldn't do that here. So at rehearsal I said, "Let's go back to this and I want to try something that was in the first draft of this play." Elwon did his part, and then I walked up to him, knelt down, and put my hands on him in some reassuring fatherly way. It just shocked him. I didn't warn him what I was going to do, and even though this was the third time we were running this scene that night, when he turned and looked at me and I smiled at him, boy, the tears just burst out. And I liked it more than the bright white light.

What was it like portraying Christ onstage?

I gave myself some rules. First, I didn't have to make him verbose, because he's talking to his mom and so it's a very high-context relationship, a kind of family shorthand. Second, he would be the politest man on the planet. Third, he would never lie. Everyone says, "Of course Jesus would never lie," but when you're writing something that's almost entirely made up of realistic dialogue—well, slightly elevated with a feel of the poetic in there, because they are bigger than life characters from a different era, but you want it to be sort of contemporary, too—people are obfuscating all the time. Little teeny white lies. I determined right off the bat that Jesus would never even do that. If there's something he didn't want to say, he would either say, "I'd rather not talk about that right now," or he would just go directly to something else. No lies or any forms of lies at all. And that was harder than you might think. It was a delicate balance, but a fun one to go down. It really makes me think a lot about the things that I say. Having written that play, even though it was years ago, I'm constantly examining the things that I say to see if I'm using the same kind of discourse that I wrote for him.

How has the gospel affected you as a writer, a director, and an actor?

It's part of my nature; it's my worldview. And nobody who creates anything can keep their worldview out of whatever it is they create, because it's just who they are.

Consciously, the effect that it has is in my understanding of the gospel: it's our job to help our neighbors come to an understanding of who they are and why they're here and where they're going, and to do our very best to build the kingdom. That doesn't mean that everything I write has to be, "Okay, this is how we're going to build the kingdom." I believe that if in the back of my mind my wish, my hope and my desire is to build the kingdom of God, somehow or another that's going to happen. I don't have to plot that out.

Say I'm going to write a romantic comedy. There's nothing about Jesus in it, no lectures or anything like that—it's just a play about two people coming together. Well, there's something holy about that, in a way. And maybe that helps build the kingdom a little bit, just making somebody happy the day they saw it, maybe. ▪