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mormonartist

COVERING THE LATTER-DAY SAINT ARTS WORLD

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EDITOR'S NOTE

As mentioned in last issue's editor's note, we're trimming things down. After we published that issue, in fact, we found yet another reason to cut things down: MagCloud doesn't let you print magazines longer than sixty pages (we had one hundred). While we're primarily an online magazine, we do like to offer the hard copy for those who love print, so we're down to a slim forty-four pages in this issue. We're also printing shorter interviews now. Let us know what you think.

Shorter interviews mean more space for other types of content—more feature articles, more essays, and more reviews. We also want to print more artwork, and as part of this we've expanded the submission guidelines (see the next page). Not everything can go into the PDF—music recordings and videos being the obvious examples—but all published submissions will still be available on the website.

Staff-wise, we've done some shuffling around with the position descriptions to streamline things. I'm also pleased to announce that we now have a full complement of section editors: Katherine Morris (Literature), Megan Welton (Visual & Applied Arts), Annie Mangelson (Music & Dance), and Brittany Pacini (Film & Theatre).

Remember our "Events & Announcements" section? Probably not, because it never really got off the ground. It's still important, though, so we're merging it into our news blog on the site, which will become a place to post all the interesting Mormon arts stuff we can't fit into the magazine.

To pull all of this off, we need more volunteers: specifically, we need more writers (to write those feature articles and essays and reviews), more copy editors (one of our bottlenecks), and more contributors (to post to the blog). If you're interested, check out <http://mormonartist.net/volunteer> and let us know. (Volunteers in other areas are still very welcome.)

We're aiming to publish our special contest issue in June, with details on the next contest coming sometime soon as well. Also, we've given both the site and the print edition some design love.

— Ben Crowder



SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

LITERATURE

PERSONAL ESSAYS, POETRY, SHORT STORIES
NO LONGER THAN 1,500 WORDS

SUBMIT WORD/PDF TO
LITERATURE@MORMONARTIST.NET

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SHORT PLAYS, SHORT FILMS
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GENERAL NOTES

WORK IN ANY GENRE IS FINE AS LONG AS IT'S APPROPRIATE FOR AN LDS AUDIENCE.
ANYTHING YOU SUBMIT MUST BE YOUR OWN WORK.
SIMULTANEOUS SUBMISSIONS ARE FINE.
IF YOUR SUBMISSION HAS BEEN PUBLISHED BEFORE, LET US KNOW.

QUESTIONS?
EDITOR@MORMONARTIST.NET

THE ART OF FRIENDS, NOT RIVALS: SHANNON HALE & STEPHENIE MEYER



BY MAHONRI STEWART



A little over a year ago, my lovely wife, Anne, and I had the privilege to go to a retreat hosted by the Mormon Arts Foundation. Founded by James Christensen (rightfully famous for his art of fantasy and his fantastic art) and Doug Stewart (playwright of the groundbreaking *Saturday's Warrior*), it's always one of the chief highlights of the year for my wife and me. An uplifting experience, not because of the number of recognizable names on the roster (which was a little intimidating at first, until their relaxed manner and cheerful camaraderie told me that they were only human and weren't looking down on my comparatively pitiful contribution to Mormon arts), but because of the focus it brought to the spiritual aspect of our art, and the complicated ways our religion informs and doesn't inform our art. It was a true inspiration to see all of these gifted Mormons from the visual arts, literature, film, drama, and music band together for a weekend of reminding each other why they're artists and why they're Mormons, and what a wonderfully strange and beautiful mixture that is.

The last time we attended, however, something stood out to me that I believe will remain with me for the rest of my life. This epiphany centered on Shannon Hale (author of young adult fantasy novels such as *Goose Girl*, *Enna Burning*, *River Secrets*, and the Newbery award-winning novel, *Princess Academy* — not to mention my wife's favorite writer) and Stephenie Meyer (bestselling author of the wildly popular *Twilight* series and also the sci-fi thriller/romance *The Host*). It seemed as if there was a spotlight on them during the entire

conference. I was intrigued, not only by the two women themselves, but by what was happening between them. They were attached at the hip, eating together, constantly chatting up a storm, and even breaking the rules a bit by attending all of the same group discussions with each other (people were supposed to be assigned to different groups in each session so it wouldn't be cliquey and so we would get to know a wider, interdisciplinary range of people). They were like two junior high BFFs (Best Friends Forever, for those who haven't kept up on pre-teen lingo). And this almost claustrophobic closeness was, in my mind, absolutely, remarkably *refreshing*. To see these two accomplished writers — both established and famous in their respective fields and markets — cling to each other was like what it would have been to see the scriptural David and Jonathan choosing friendship over rivalry.

To give you a better picture of what I was seeing, I think it's important to learn how both women conducted themselves in this setting:

Shannon Hale was exuberant, an absolute ray of sunshine. Warm, talkative, opinionated (I mean that in the most positive of terms), confident, animated, intelligent, beautiful, and really, really *funny*. I mean, she was absolutely *hilarious*. She never hesitated to throw in her opinion on a subject or to give someone a good-natured ribbing. She was the kind of person who looks you straight in the eye — she was not afraid you were superior to her, but neither was she looking down on you. You felt like you were on equal ground with her, if not in talent, then as a human being. I was surprised that after one of

the chats, she took a good deal of time to talk to my wife and me, relative nobodies compared to others in the room. She never talked down to us, never seemed impatient to get away — just a lovely and charming woman, which made my wife’s day as well as my own.

If Shannon Hale was the sun, then Stephenie Meyer was the moon. Quiet, polite, slightly hesitant in her speech, kind, shy, with a gentle beauty. Quite the opposite of what one would expect from the woman who knocked J.K. Rowling off the New York Times bestseller list. She was not only one of the humblest *writers* I have ever met, but one of the humblest *people* I have ever met. After talking with her privately for a few minutes, I discovered she prefers to talk one-on-one, which is when she opened up. Away from the stares of the public, I found her to be what I had only assumed her to be before: a wonderful, goodhearted, insightful individual. I asked her about the then-upcoming film version of *Twilight*, and she was very open with me, talking about the initial fears she had, especially with the first draft of the script (which, I later found out, had butchered the story and wasn’t a faithful adaptation at all), but how a different script saved the day and how she’s quite pleased with the outcome.

It could have been my imagination, but what struck me as ironic is that Stephenie Meyer seemed almost intimidated to be among this group of Mormon artists. Perhaps it was because she felt she was among “Artists,” with a capital A. What I mean by that is that certain artistic personalities can look down on anything that they perceive as popular, populist, or — excuse the term — for the “unwashed masses.” That’s an exaggeration, of course, a stereotype, but that’s the sense I got. She seemed to be afraid that she was at a conference full of people who were critical of her work, despite its overwhelming popularity and unabashed fans. Again, I could be projecting this on her, but whatever the case was, she certainly wasn’t broadcasting her fame, nor using her bragging rights, nor even holding her chin up high. Instead, at the beginning of the conference she seemed almost embarrassed, as if she didn’t know what to do with herself. Of course, I don’t believe this particular group thought any less of Stephenie Meyer. If anything, they were feeling the same thing — intimidated by this very famous person in their midst. I certainly know that’s how I felt at first.

And then came Shannon Hale. She literally took Stephenie Meyer by the arm and was instantly her bosom buddy. Not that their friendship hadn’t been created before this moment, mind you. How Shannon Hale told it, if I remember correctly, is that she saw the success that Mrs. Meyer was having and said to herself, “She’s going to need a friend.” So she e-mailed her and they became instant friends. I think Shannon Hale was very perceptive in this. Sure, it’s obvious that fame can be heady and thrilling and tantalizing. However, it also must be awfully lonely, for as soon as Stephenie Meyer made a name for herself, jealous individuals tried to take her name, tear it down, and humble her beneath their cruel heels.

This is one of the reasons I was so impressed with Shannon Hale. Here she was, a Newbery winner, an established, prolific author, and a darn fine writer, whose sparse but poetic (almost elemental) prose and well-realized characters seem to spurt fire and wind and water and life from the page. And then came Stephenie Meyer, a first-time writer who admitted to *Time* magazine, “I don’t think I’m a writer; I think I’m a storyteller. The words aren’t always perfect.” She was an obscure Mormon housewife from Arizona who catapulted into fame and fortune simply because she had a vivid dream about a vampire romance and decided to write it down. It would have been tempting to any writer to say, “Oh, I’ve struggled for my reputation as a writer, worked hard to perfect my craft, and here comes a freshman author who woos the world on her first try. Does she really deserve it? Is it really *literature*? Is she *deserving*?” Not so with Shannon Hale. Instead of being a jealous-hearted spoilsport who can’t identify with any work that falls out of her narrow definition of “art,” she looked at this other vulnerable woman who had been thrust into a whole new world and said, “She’s going to need a friend.”

This, I think, is something that deserves attention, quiet and intimate as it may be. Artists can be a contentious, avarice-eyed lot if they feed their insecurities and egos too much. However, at this Mormon Arts retreat, I found that the vast majority of this group of Mormon artists had something else entirely in their hearts — they had truly let their religion seep into not only their art but into their relationships as artists. And there were no better examples of this kind of love that weekend than Shannon Hale and Stephenie Meyer. ■



Janette Rallison

INTERVIEWED BY AMY BAUGHER

WEB: JANETTERALLISON.COM

How did you get started with your writing?

My mother wanted to be a writer. Some of my earliest (and only — she died when I was six years old) memories of her were of her sitting in front of a typewriter typing. So I grew up thinking writing was a normal job, as opposed to a really time-consuming way to torment yourself. Very often it is the latter.

Describe a typical day for you.

I get up earlier than I'd like to, swear I will start going to bed before midnight, and get several children off to school. I tell myself I'll spend half an hour going over e-mails before I devote the rest of the school day to writing. Three hours later, I realize the time and wonder where it all went and why I still have 127 unread e-mails in my inbox. I turn on my laptop and reread what I wrote the day before. Then I go get something to eat. I type a page and then go get something else to eat. Repeat until the children get home from school.

What's the easiest part of being a writer? The most difficult?

The easiest is reading other authors' books — it's all research! Writers are supposed to read in their genre. That makes reading *work*, not goofing off. The most difficult is getting revision letters. On my current manuscript, the first draft came back with 435 comments from my editor. Basic message: "Change everything!" The second draft came back with 407 comments. Basic message: "Change everything again!"

What do you enjoy most about writing?

The moments when the writing flows and my characters are doing and saying things that I think are funny. It's also pretty neat when you get the book in its published form. It's sort of like having a baby, but without the morning sickness or stretch marks.

How has your writing evolved since you started?

I think I'm getting away from stories that are about everyday kids doing everyday things and writing more about things kids wish could happen in their lives — whether that's having a fairy godmother or having a celebrity fall in love with them.

How do you research your projects?

Each book is different and so needs a different kind of research. For *My Fair Godmother*, part of the book takes place in the Middle Ages, so I read books on the subject. I talked to a professor at BYU about what sort of explosives would be available to my characters and had another professor read it for any blatant inaccuracies.

For *Just One Wish*, the main character has a little brother with a brain tumor. I called the Phoenix Children's Hospital and talked to an oncology nurse for that. It was hard to do because I just cried through the whole interview. Part of the story takes place on a TV set in Hollywood. It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to research, because you can't just call up producers or actors and ask them about that sort of thing. Luckily, I finally did talk to a couple of insiders — one who happened to be my teenage crush/idol, Richard Hatch, who played Apollo in the original *Battlestar Galactica*. I have a picture of him with his arm draped over my shoulder. This is why it so pays to be an author.

What do you do when you get stuck?

I eat chocolate. It helps with writer's block. (At least that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.) I will also take a break and read something or write in my journal.

How has the gospel influenced your writing?

Young adult novels have become really sexual in the last few years, and many authors don't skimp on the details, either. Every time I see an author out promoting one of these books, I want to say, "Hello, you're writing this book for kids who aren't responsible enough to turn in their library books on time. Should you really be encouraging them to have sex?"

My main characters don't even date until they're sixteen. They also don't smoke or drink

coffee or tea. There are no swear words in my books. This is another rarity in teen books lately. I've actually had several readers e-mail me and ask me if I was LDS. My editors don't want me to have any of my characters be LDS, so I get a kick out of it when people pick up on these clues anyway.

On another level, and perhaps a more important one, my characters have hope. They triumph over trials. They find meaning in them.



Tell us about getting your first book published.

My first book ever published was *Deep Blue Eyes and Other Lies* with Deseret Book. Deseret Book had my manuscript for *nine months* before they decided to give me a contract. But I didn't get an acceptance letter or a call from an editor or anything. It was actually the accounting department who called me because they needed my social security number and that sort of miscellaneous information. I gave it to them and then asked if this meant I was going to have a contract. The woman on the other end of the phone was surprised I didn't know. She said, "Your editor didn't call you and tell you the news? Oh, in that case let me be the first to congratulate you." After I hung up with her, my editor did try to call, but the line was busy because I was calling all my friends and relatives to tell them the news.

What part does your audience play in creating your story?

I have two daughters who love to read and who started reading novels at an early age. It's been a hard task to find them appropriate books. So I've always written with them in mind. I want to give them engaging stories that are also G-rated. I mean, how could I tell them with any authority that they shouldn't swear if I do it in my books?

What's it like balancing your writing and your family?

When my kids were little, I only wrote during naptime, and then during their favorite TV show time, which then progressed to preschool time. I didn't get a lot done, but I found that if I could still write one or two pages a day, I could have a novel written in a year. Now the kids are all in school, so I try to have my writing/marketing/networking done by the time they walk in the door. I'm not always perfect at this, I admit, but I still try. I feel very strongly that my first job is being a mom (with an emphasis on nagging kids about doing their jobs). That's my real career.

What other writers have influenced your desire to write?

Growing up I loved to read Ellen Conford books. They always made me laugh, and it was such a treat to read them. I wanted to write for people and give them the same experience.

You teach writing to children in schools—what advice do you give them?

1. Go to college and get a degree in something else, because being a writer is a very unsure career and it can take you a long time to make any money in it. Most writers I know have another income to support themselves.
2. Read, read, read!
3. Learn everything you can about the craft of writing. You'll save yourself a lot of time and grief when it comes to revisions.

What's your favorite of all the books you've written?

I used to tell people I couldn't choose a favorite because I loved them all—which is still true. I think they're all great books. But I have to say that writing *My Fair Godmother* was the most fun I've ever had with a book. That one turned out really well and was optioned for a movie pretty quickly.

What's next for you?

Lots of revisions, I'm afraid, for a novel I'm working on right now. Revisions are like juggling cobras while walking over live coals. You may get through it, but you know you're going to get burned and bitten along the way. Hopefully it will be worth it in the end. ■



Just One Wish

CHAPTER ONE OF THE NOVEL BY JANETTE RALLISON

I would have expected to see this sort of line if, say, Elvis had returned from the dead to give a concert. Or if some eccentric yet ultra-cool billionaire was blessing the lives of deserving teens by handing out free sports cars. But I hadn't expected to see this many people lined up in the dark waiting for the Day-After-Thanksgiving sale at Toys "R" Us. Really, whatever happened to good old-fashioned procrastination? Apparently every resident of Henderson, Nevada, had come out, and it was still only 4:50 a.m. The store didn't even open for another ten minutes.

Madison zipped her jacket up higher as we climbed out of my minivan. "This is a prime example of commercialism run amok."

I didn't answer, because I was too busy rushing across the parking lot to the end of the line. Besides, Madison really shouldn't talk — every year she gets so many gifts you have to listen to her complain until New Year's about how she has to reorganize her room to fit them all in.

Madison is not only my best friend, but probably the only friend I could convince to get up this early to track down a Talking Teen Robin Hood action figure for my six-year-old brother. I myself wouldn't have woken up at four-thirty if it weren't so important.

Madison folded her arms around herself for warmth. We'd only worn light jackets because we hadn't expected to wait outside very long, but even the Nevada desert is cold at ten to five in the morning. Madison's usually tidy shoulder-length hair — she calls it strawberry blond, but it is way more strawberry than blond — looked as though she hadn't even combed it. I'd thrown on sweats and shoved my hair into a ponytail. Now I wished I'd thought to bring a hat.

Madison peered at the line in front of us. "You know, Annika, if you can't find a Teen Robin Hood, I'm sure Jeremy would be fine with a different gift. Maybe you could get him a real bow and arrow set like yours."

I thought about my compound bow, but I couldn't imagine Jeremy with something like that. It was nearly as big as he was, and he might not have the strength to pull it back all the way. The thought made my throat feel tight.

I shook my head. "It has to be Teen Robin Hood."

Jeremy had said he wanted the Teen Robin Hood action figure, and kept saying it every time he watched the TV show, so that was the toy I had to get him.

The husband and wife in front of us were busy planning their buying strategy. "I'll call you as soon as I have the PlayStation in my hands. You grab one of those bikes that's on sale. Throw yourself over it if you have to."

I pulled my sleeves over my hands to keep out the chill. Why did Jeremy have to love Robin Hood? Why couldn't he still want to be Hercules? I bet you no one was throwing themselves over the Hercules toys.

At five o'clock the doors opened, but it took us another twenty minutes to get in. By that time the aisles buzzed with people grabbing toys from shelves, and lines had already formed at the registers.

I told Madison, "Why don't you go stand in line while I look for action figures. It will take less time that way."

I didn't wait for her answer, just weaved my way down an aisle. I wanted to hurry past people but continually found myself trapped behind carts with mammoth toys that blocked the way.

I cut across the Barbie doll aisle and momentarily considered picking up a girlfriend for Teen Robin Hood, one who was a little more suitable for him than Maid Marion. I'm sorry, but the actress who plays her is a total flake. All she does is flutter, cry, and wait for rescue. She never would have made it two days in the real Middle Ages, which is why I started rooting for Robin Hood to dump her after the third episode. I bet even Barbie could have taken her on in a serious smack down.

Finally I found the action figure row. I walked up and down, scanning the shelves for the green boxes of the Nottingham characters. The four-inch set Jeremy already owned sat prominently on the shelf, but I didn't see the new, larger twelve-inch version, which was supposed to be available starting today.

Where were they?

The store couldn't be sold out on the first day at five-twenty-five in the morning, could they? Shouldn't they have a large shipment sitting around? I went to the next aisle. Nothing. And then I saw the endcap and the shelves of Nottingham green boxes.

A man with a dozen boxes in his shopping cart stood sifting through them. He wore a fake leather jacket that stretched over his stomach and an opal ring so large you could have used it as a serving tray.

I jogged over to the display, my eyes scanning the boxes for a Robin Hood. Maid Marion, Maid Marion, Little John, the Sheriff. . .

"Are there any Robin Hoods left?" I asked.

He didn't glance at me, just kept picking up boxes and checking them.

"I think I got them all."

"What? I need one for my little brother."

Now he glanced at me, his gaze sizing me up. "Then you're in luck. I'll sell you one for a hundred and fifty dollars."

"A hundred and fifty? They cost thirty-nine."

"Not once they go in my shopping cart. Then they're a hundred and fifty." He sent an oily smile in my direction. "That's the free market, kid."

I could see the boxes in his cart. They were so close.

I turned to the man, finally giving him my full attention. My mother claims I have a sixth sense about people. I know right after meeting someone what they're like, how perceptive they are, and what makes them tick.

When I was little, I used to wish I had some sort of superpower. I wanted to fly like Superman or climb up buildings like Spider-Man. But when you come right down to it, there aren't a lot of practical applications for superpowers. Being able to read people, however, comes in handy. It helps me deal with teachers and navigate through high school. I pretty much know what I can get away with.

Looking at this man now, I flipped through the possibilities in my mind. He wasn't the type — even if I had been wearing makeup — that I could swish

my long blond hair around and he'd relent on his price because a pretty girl asked him. Money motivated him, and nothing but. I didn't detect even an ounce of sympathy circulating through his heart, but still I tried. I would tell him about Jeremy and hope for once I was wrong.

With my hands out pleading, I said, "Look, my brother is sick; he has cancer, and he really wants a Teen Robin Hood. Can't you let me have just one?"

"For a hundred and fifty dollars, I can."

I took out my wallet, and pulled out four twenties. "This is all I have, and I'm going to need forty dollars to buy it at the register."

He snorted and went back to the boxes. "Then maybe your parents can find one on eBay. Of course they might be more than a hundred and fifty there. Robin Hood is the hot toy this season."

I shoved my wallet back into my coat pocket and turned to the shelf. If he was still looking through the boxes, then so would I. There might be one left.

There had to be one left.

I flipped through King John, Friar Tuck, Maid Marion — even her plastic figurine looked like it was about to faint momentarily — the Sheriff, another Friar Tuck, and Robin Hood. Robin Hood! I gasped and grabbed the box.

Unfortunately the man reached for it at the same time and yanked it out of my hands.

"Hey!" I yelled. "That was mine."

"Sorry, kid. I was here first. Besides," he smiled as he grasped the box, "possession is nine tenths of the law."

I peered around the store to see if any employees stood nearby — anyone who had seen him tear the box from my hands and who could help me. But all I saw were other shoppers who were too busy to notice me. This is one more reason why real life is nothing like the Robin Hood series.

The man went back to sifting through the rest of the boxes, chuckling, but he kept one hand on his cart, protecting it.

Madison is a big believer in karma. She doesn't think she ever needs to take revenge because sooner or later bad deeds catch up with people. I have my doubts about the concept. If it were true, wouldn't guys like this get struck down by meteorites?

Anyway, I figured it was time to hurry karma along. I took a step toward him. "Have you ever played football?"

He glanced at me suspiciously. "Sure."

I let my gaze fall on his bulging stomach. “But I bet you haven’t played for a while.”

“What does that matter?”

“Because I can outrun and outdodge you, especially with that shopping cart.”

He caught my meaning as soon as I spoke. I faked to my right. He moved to block me. I spun left, grabbed a Robin Hood from his cart, and dashed away.

My older sister, Leah — who has never touched a football because it might break her fingernails — says I’ve wasted most of my adolescence playing sports, but this is obviously not true. Running through the store toward the checkout line was just like running for a touchdown, except the other shoppers didn’t try to tackle me. Only the man in the fake leather jacket barreled toward me, but he wouldn’t let go of his shopping cart, so he kept getting caught up behind other carts.

I lost him long before I found Madison. She stood in the checkout line, now within sight of the registers.

“Here, buy this.” I shoved the box and my wallet into her arms. “And don’t let some overweight, half-psychotic man in a black jacket take it away from you. Start screaming if he tries.”

Her eyes widened in panic, and she clutched the box to her chest. “Annika, what did you do?”

“Nothing.” I checked over my shoulder for any signs of him. “Well, nothing Robin Hood wouldn’t have done. I’ll wait outside.”

Then I ran to the exit before she could ask more questions.

I waited in my minivan with the doors locked. Not that I expected the man to come outside looking for me. I knew he wouldn’t leave the store without his stash of Robin Hoods, and there was no way he’d get through the checkout line before Madison.

Still, it always pays to be cautious.

I sat huddled in the driver’s seat, looking at the dark sky and wishing that clouds hadn’t covered up the stars. Clouds always made it seem more like winter and less like Nevada.

Madison came out twenty minutes later. I unlocked the door, and she slid into the front seat, then relocked her door. She handed me the shopping bag and sent me a long gaze. “So do you want to tell me why an angry man pushing Robin Hood boxes around the store kept yelling, ‘Come out and show yourself, you punk! You can’t hide forever!’”

“Not really.” I looked inside the bag, just long enough to make sure it held Robin Hood, then I started the van.

“You risked my life for a stupid toy, didn’t you?”

“No. He didn’t know I gave you the toy. Besides, he wouldn’t have hurt you with all of those witnesses around.”

Madison fastened her seat belt. “The veins were popping out of his neck. A couple of employees went over to talk to him, and he yelled about thieves in the store, then threatened to sue them for their lack of security.”

I pulled out of the parking lot, checking to make sure no headlights suddenly flicked on and followed me. Only a few cars moved through the street, and I pressed down on the gas, urging the van to go faster so I could zip around them. “Technically I didn’t steal from him. It’s like he told me when he ripped the box out of my hands first. Possession is nine tenths of the law.”

Madison folded her arms, her disapproval clearly etched on her face. “You don’t need to turn shopping into some sort of extreme sport, Annika. It’s not supposed to be a duel to the death.”

“Jeremy wants the Talking Teen Robin.”

“He also wants to live on Sesame Street, you can’t just —” Her expression softened. In the space of one breath, her voice changed from berating to reassuring. “Jeremy is going to be okay. Lots of people with cancer recover completely. He probably has better odds than, say, anyone who rides in a car with you.”

I took my foot off the gas and let the van slow down but didn’t answer her. People kept telling me that Jeremy would be okay. He had top-notch doctors. Cancer treatments improved all the time. He was young and resilient. My parents were unfailingly optimistic in front of me — which was perhaps why I had my doubts. I knew they were faking it. Jeremy’s situation was more serious than they let on.

They were especially worried about his upcoming surgery next Friday to remove the tumor from his brain. Mom could hardly speak about it without tensing up. This is the downside of being able to read people. Sometimes it’s better not to know when your parents are lying to you.

Madison glanced at me, her voice a mixture of frustration and sympathy. “Look, Annika, no matter what you get Jeremy for Christmas, he’ll still know you love him.”

I shifted in my seat, looking determinedly out at the traffic. I didn't want to talk about Jeremy or his cancer anymore. I didn't want to think about the fear that daily found its way into his eyes, or the way he automatically panicked when you mentioned doctors. A month and a half of chemo treatments had made him hate hospitals. Last night he told my mom he didn't want to go to bed, because if he did, it would mean surgery was one day closer.

Out of the blue, he said things like, "Do people get to fly after they die, or only the angels?" Other times he swayed back and forth with worry and told us he didn't want to get buried in the ground. He knew it would be cold and dark there. I don't even know where he learned about cemeteries. None of us talked about that sort of thing. But now he refused to turn off the light when he slept.

"Besides," Madison went on, "he probably won't care about that toy two days after he opens it. If you want to do something nice, then spend a few hours playing with him. That would mean more to him than anything you could buy at a store."

She made me sound like one of those neglectful parents who ignores their children and then tries to buy their affection.

"Just drop it," I said. "You don't understand about this."

"What's not to understand? It's a textbook case of trying to shop away your feelings. People do it all the time, and I'm just saying —"

Right. I refused to believe someone could flip through a book and come to the chapter on how I felt. "Stop it," I said. "Until your little brother has cancer, don't tell me how I feel."

Neither of us spoke for a few seconds. Madison looked out the window with her lips drawn into a tight line. "Sorry," she said in a clipped tone. "I was trying to help."

I knew I had overreacted. It seemed like I'd done nothing but overreact since we'd gotten the news in mid-October. I snapped at people who reassured me. I argued with people who offered me comfort.

I knew I should apologize to Madison, but I couldn't do it. We drove through the streets of Henderson watching the darkness fade away, pierced by the rising sun. We still didn't speak. Madison turned on the radio, but the music didn't chase away the silence between us. I pulled up in front of her house.

"Thanks for coming with me," I said.

She reached for the door handle. "No problem. It was fun. Especially the part where I had to shield your action figure with my body so Mr. Gargoyle wouldn't see it as he stormed around the store."

I let out a sigh. "Just because the guy was unbalanced doesn't mean he would have killed you."

"Of course not." She flung the door open. "Besides, I think it's a good thing to face death every once in a while. It makes you appreciate life all the more." She paused halfway out of the van and looked back at me, her face ashen. "I'm sorry, Annika. I didn't mean that."

I hadn't even connected the two subjects in my mind, and my heart squeezed painfully in my chest. "Stop apologizing. Jeremy's not going to die."

"I know. That's what I keep telling you."

"I'll talk to you later," I said. I just wanted to leave.

"Right. We'll get together and do something."

"Right."

She shut the door. I pulled away from her house too fast, which was usual, and gripped the steering wheel white-knuckled, which wasn't. As I drove home, I took deep breaths and glanced at the shopping bag on the seat next to me. This would work. I'd read dozens of stories about how positive thinking had saved people's lives. I'd read studies saying the same thing. *Cancer Research* magazine said that reducing stress could slow the spread of some cancers.

And even researchers who doubted the link between positive thinking and healing couldn't deny the placebo effect. When doctors give participants of drug tests placebos, there are always a certain percentage of people who get better simply because they think they're taking medicine. Their belief heals them.

If a sugar pill can make an adult get better, then Jeremy could get better if he really believed it. All I had to do was to convince him he'd come through surgery with flying colors, and he would.

If the surgery was successful next Friday — if they were able to take out the entire tumor — then everything would be fine. But if they couldn't remove it all, or something went wrong — I didn't even want to think about the fact that sometimes people died on the operating table. I had to think positively too. ■

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Howard Tayler

INTERVIEWED BY ALLISON ASTON

WEB: SCHLOCKMERCENARY.COM



How did you get started with art?

I've been an artist of some flavor or another for as long as I can remember. A little over nine years ago, I realized that I wanted to write a comic strip and simultaneously convinced myself that the art part wouldn't be that hard to pick up. So I taught myself to draw. If you look at Schlock Mercenary strips from June of 2000, it should be immediately apparent that I was both misguided and untalented. Fortunately, I loved it enough to stick with it, and I'm just barely smart enough to figure out where to focus my practicing.

How did you become a cartoonist?

I guess I became a cartoonist by deciding one day that was what I was. I looked at the work of other cartoonists and modeled my processes and output after what I thought they must be doing. As it turns out, my modeling was flawed. But my process worked rather spectacularly, if not flawlessly.



What other cartoonists have influenced your work?

Bill Watterson (*Calvin and Hobbes*), Berkeley Breathed (*Bloom County*), Gary Larson (*The Far Side*), and Bill Amend (*FoxTrot*). I suppose I could ramble for 5,000 words about where I see their influences in my own work, but I shall force myself to summarize: Watterson showed me movement. Breathed showed me the satirical form I would adopt. Larson epitomized cognitive humor. Amend wrote a tutorial on the web, long since lost to link rot, which gave me the fundamentals from which my own process would evolve.

What's your work process?

Hah! Another 5,000-word essay forced into a summary: I muse upon the overall story I want to tell (about a year's worth of comics) and then start breaking it into chunks. These may be arcs,

character arrivals, iconic moments, or lists of things that have to be foreshadowed. Then for the next year I write and illustrate comics along the outlines of those chunks, refining the outline as I go. I write a week of scripts, print them on 8.5x14" paper with the panels and dialogue in position, and then pencil right on the scripts. I ink over the top of my pencils, erase the pencil lines, and then scan the resulting black-and-white line art into Photoshop for coloring. Once strips have been digitally colored, they're uploaded into a queue, so they'll appear on the appropriate date once that date arrives.

Tell us about being a full-time web cartoonist. What's a normal day like?

"Normal" depends on what day of the week it is and where I am in the book release schedule. I guess that means that "crunch mode" days aren't normal, nor are days in which I have to sign and sketch a hundred books. Monday mornings, I sit

down to script a week of comics, and then Monday afternoons I set out to pencil them. On Tuesdays, I try to get those pencils all inked. By Wednesday afternoon I should have an entire week of comics scripted, penciled, inked, colored, and uploaded. The remaining three days of the week get spent on various business tasks, including re-coloring old strips for print collections, knocking down a second week of comics so I can take the occasional vacation, or (as was recently the case) frantically drawing pictures for the Tracy Hickman RPG supplement I agreed to illustrate.

How do you balance work and family obligations?

How does *anybody* balance work and family? Family comes first, but sometimes family activities need to be scheduled around less flexible scheduling demands of work. I'm kind of a workaholic, so I have to remind myself not to feel guilty when I ditch work for a couple of hours to flop down with the kids on the couch, or go see a movie, or hit the park or something. That's really the only trick — telling my Type A, overachieving hindbrain that the current non-work activity is critical because it's what the work is there to support.

What does it take to make ends meet as a cartoonist?

At the outset, you must learn to live in such a way that the ends begin closer together than you perhaps think necessary. The remainder is what I've described in the past as a recipe for Grizzly Bear Soup. First, kill a grizzly bear. Second, any old soup recipe will do, since you'll be using the bear.

In non-metaphorical terms, the grizzly bear is the tens of thousands of readers who like your work enough to spend money on it. Finding those readers is the hard part. Once you've done that, the rest is easy: just run a decent business. There are a zillion books out there on just that. "How to Make Webcomics" is probably the definitive tome for my industry. If you're not

business-minded, though, you'll want to learn from somebody who is.

Tell us about creating Schlock Mercenary.

Well, I like science fiction, and I figured a good science fiction comic strip would need a regular cast of characters with an excuse to do exciting things, so I made them mercenaries. The rest just grew out of the process of creating interesting characters and finding out that they were mapping themselves onto the voices in my head.

What advice would you give to aspiring LDS cartoonists?

My advice for aspiring LDS cartoonists is the same as my advice to aspiring cartoonists of any creed: be a cartoonist because it's what you want to do, not because you want fame or fortune. Draw the pictures you want to draw, tell the stories you want to tell, and if that resonates with an audience large enough to support you, then you will have the opportunity for a happy and fulfilling career. If not, well, you're still doing something you like with your



free time, right? I'd hate to see anybody trying to be a cartoonist with a strictly commercial approach in which they target some niche or another and end

up writing comics they hate in order to collect a paycheck.

Tell us about going to conventions like Life, The Universe, and Everything (LTUE). What are the highlights for you?

My favorite part of conventions is the wads of untraceable cash that people spend to buy books. Wait, no, I stole that line from my friend Phil. My favorite part is going to panels and talking about stuff. I love a good discussion. I also enjoy meeting with fellow professionals, especially those with whom I've become friends, because when we talk about stuff, we laugh a lot. I like laughing. My favorite moments from this most recent LTUE had laughter in them.

What influence does gaming have on your work?

Gaming is an imagination outlet. It's a form of shared storytelling, and it forces me into a different mindset. Role-play is what you make of it, and I believe it to be an inherently good thing. I remember doing role-play in the MTC and not having the heart to tell our instructor that this was basically a game of Dungeons & Dragons in which we were pretending to be missionaries.

How do you feel about your Hugo nomination for Best Graphic Story?

I feel simultaneously humbled and exalted. My work is being held up for examination alongside the

work of a dozen other professionals, and the attention is wonderful, but I honestly believe that their work is quite a bit better than mine. I'm thrilled. I love to read stories in which justice, truth, and honor take the prize, but I'd also like to actually win the award myself. So let's add "hypocritical" to the list: humbled, exalted, and at least a little bit hypocritical.

How has the gospel influenced you in your work?

The biggest help has probably been that I'm happy. Knowing something to be true, knowing that life has purpose, knowing that my family will be with me forever — these and other gospel gifts are meant to help us to live happily. I do, and my work reflects that. I write to make people laugh and to help them be happy.

How do you see your art helping build the kingdom?

I try to avoid any sort of direct proselyting in my work, and the only subliminal form I'm capable of is "Hey, look, the cartoonist seems like he's a nice enough guy: upstanding, good family man, hard worker. Oh, and he's a Mormon. Maybe there's something to that after all." It's the weakest sort of attractor, but I believe it's also the longest lasting. It's like gravity: on the subatomic level it is insignificant, but when you stand way back it's what causes planets, stars, and galaxies to happen.

Where do you see your work going in the future?

I plan to be cartooning for decades to come. I hope to see my audience grow to the point that those who like good science fiction have at least heard of Schlock Mercenary and decided for themselves whether the strip is any good. How many people is that — ten million? Fifty? How far in the future are we talking about? I've already shipped books to customers on all seven continents. I guess my next goal needs to be getting the guys on the ISS to read Schlock online. Do they have internet access up there? From there, the moon. ■







A close-up, low-angle shot of a person's shoulder and hair against a textured blue wall. The person is wearing a dark purple or maroon t-shirt. The wall has a rough, stucco-like texture. The lighting is soft, creating a calm and intimate atmosphere.

Amy Van Wagenen

INTERVIEWED BY AMY BAUGHER

WEB: AMYVANWAGENEN.COM

What is your first memory of music?

When I was a child, I had the opportunity to record for the Church on a Primary album. I still own the original record. That was my first time in a recording studio, and I remember thinking it was pretty cool. I also remember singing for President Spencer W. Kimball when I was about eleven years old. We got to meet him afterward, and it was a wonderful experience.

How did your musical career begin?

This is something that I've wanted to do since I was about fourteen years old, but I never thought that I would make it a reality. Then, a couple of years ago, I started taking vocal lessons from Dean Kaelin. He encouraged me to write music, so I thought that I would give it a try. The first song that I wrote was "Rain." I was really nervous to share it with Dean — I thought for sure he would think it was weak — but he actually liked it and encouraged me to write more, so I did. Things just fell into place after that.

What has been your greatest challenge in starting your career?

Making a name for myself and trying to get myself heard. You don't usually pick up a CD in a store unless you've heard it before or you know the artist. Hopefully as people hear more of me, they'll like what they hear!

What keeps you going?

My family. My husband is so supportive — he loves to google my name. It's pretty cute. My children think I'm a rock star — they think I could totally win American Idol. Blinded by love!

Why did you choose "Waiting" for the title song on your album?

"Waiting" has special meaning to me. There have been times in my life when I have distanced myself from my Heavenly Father. I've been too busy to pray, or too prideful to turn to Him. But I am always humbled to know that no matter what mistakes I make or how far I stray, He is always there, "waiting for my return." I also thought that it was a

fitting title — I have waited a long time to make this dream a reality.

Tell us about your choice to cover James Taylor's "Shower the People."

I'm a big James Taylor fan. I grew up listening to him, and this is one of my favorite songs. I love the meaning behind it, and I loved having my children sing on my CD. They are the ones that I shower with love, and they give it right back, so hearing their little voices sing is pretty powerful. It was also a great way to involve them and make them feel a part of my music; they are ultimately my inspiration.

What inspired you to write "Tiny Graces"?

I'm not usually a morning person, but for some reason I got up early one morning to watch the sun rise. It was spectacular. I immediately grabbed a piece of paper (I'm pretty sure that it was the back of a receipt) and wrote down the first verse to that song. I sang it for my husband and he hated it! So I shelved it. As we were finishing up the CD, I took another look at it. I loved the idea behind the song, so I finished it up.

Sometimes we fail to look around us and recognize the small things that bless our lives and make life so meaningful. It's these "tiny graces" that help us see God in everything. I see Him everywhere, especially in my children's faces. This song has actually become my favorite song on the CD — and my husband's favorite as well, go figure!

What musicians influence your musical style?

James Taylor (of course), Mindy Smith, Amy Grant, Nichole Nordeman, Natalie Grant, and Hilary Weeks. I'm sure there's a little Sting and Peter Gabriel mixed in there somewhere as well.

Who or what has been your greatest inspiration?

When I was a young girl, I loved listening to inspirational music. It helped shape my testimony and helped me feel the Spirit. The music of Hilary Weeks probably had the most impact on me. I would love to meet her someday and thank her for sharing her music and having such a tremendous impact on my life.



How do you see your music building the kingdom?

One of my favorite things to do is give firesides. I love combining my experiences and testimony with my music. I love watching the Spirit work in people's lives and seeing how different songs impact people in different ways. I hope that as people listen to my music and my message, their testimonies will be strengthened, and they will recognize who they are.

What part of your new career do you enjoy most?

I love both writing and performing. Every song is like my baby. It's so amazing to watch an idea turn into something melodic and stirring. Some songs seem to jump onto the page, and others take time, patience, and a lot of prayer. I also love being on stage and sharing my voice with others. I would perform every night if I could — although my children would not approve!

What advice would you give to other LDS mothers who long to begin a career in music?

Being a wife and a mother is the most rewarding thing that I have ever done. I wouldn't trade that for anything. My family will always come first. I think that as mothers we pour everything into our children — as we should — but sometimes we forget about ourselves. It's okay to have dreams and aspirations, to continue to grow and progress. That's what we're here for, after all. It might have taken me longer to achieve this dream, but there is a time and season for everything. Life is full of possibilities, and we just need to reach out and grab them. It may seem scary and impossible — it certainly did for me — but if I can do it, anyone can do it. Just keep reaching and just keep trying. You never know what the Lord has in store for you. ■

How does the gospel influence your music?

I definitely rely on the Spirit as I write. There have been times when the message I needed to write about was as clear as day. Each song has strengthened my own testimony and helped me to recognize that our Father in Heaven is truly looking out for each of us.

Where do you see your music career going in the future?

Hopefully in the near future I will be recording another CD. I'm working on several new songs, and I'm constantly trying to find new places to share my music.



Shaun Barrowes

INTERVIEWED BY DAVID LAYTON

WEB: SHAUNBARROWES.COM





How did you get started in music?

I started with basic piano lessons and stuff when I was six. I started songwriting when I was fifteen, and that's really when I started in music. My piano teacher — I still remember his name, David Brookes — encouraged me to start songwriting. It was at a point where I was almost ready to give up on piano because I was just getting tired of playing note-for-note classical music, and I think he noticed this. I think he decided to try a different route and see if I would be more creatively expressive, so I started songwriting when I was fifteen. Cut my first album a year later. Cut the second one a couple years after that. Went on my mission, came back, and got right back into it. I decided that this could lead to a career when I was

about twenty-two, and I started to record more and more demos. I decided to move to LA and try out the industry out there. I joined a rock band, and I started to see some responses to my music and to my abilities. I think that's where I started to get some validation for what I wanted to do, and that probably pushed me.

What was your inspiration for “When I Take Your Hand”?

I actually haven't decided yet if I want to tell the story — most people think it's a very romantic song. It's a wedding song, your “first dance” song. But the story behind it is not really romantic. I wrote this song when I reached one of the lowest points of my life. Because I had reached so many brick walls and so many dead ends, I had basically given up on everything. After being in LA for so long, you get treated like a number. I was kind of done with it all, and ready to give up on everything. I was lying on my back in the middle of a parking lot, wondering what I was going to do with myself. In despair, I decided to try to write one more song. All the songs I had written before that time were frustrating, or angry, or something along those lines — they were rock songs. I decided to try a different approach this time, and write a song that actually had some hope and optimism to it.

So, I went to the piano, and I wrote this song to save my career. I thought, “If this song doesn't take off, then I'm throwing in the towel and moving on to something else.” As soon as I wrote that song, I started getting responses from all kinds of people — from celebrities and big names to fans and people who just liked the song. That changed things around for me completely. I based a tour around that song and created an album (*Big Bang Theory*) with “When I Take Your Hand” as one of thirteen original songs on it. That was the song that really began my music career.

What was it like creating *Big Bang Theory*?

It was really a fun experience, and that's probably where its title comes from — everything just came together like a big bang. That's my own “big bang theory.” I got all the right players, I happened to find all the right people, and it came together just perfectly. Every time I listen to the album, I think, “Yeah, I did it right. I actually did it right

this time.” With every other recording — and I’ve done at least twenty or thirty other recordings before this — there was always something missing; it wasn’t quite there. Those feelings were another step in the learning process. I hoped that with each of those demos, someone would hear, and they would fill in the blanks with their imagination. But, I was finally able to put together an album that doesn’t require any imagination; everything is there.

Where do your songs come from?

Most of my songs come from moments of reflection on previous years or specific experiences. There are other ones that will come from someone else’s experience. I can usually put myself in someone else’s shoes and write from their perspective. That’s actually why I’ve gotten into film theme songs. When I read a script or read a book, I can usually come up with a really good song for what I read.

How did you make the transition from popular music and concerts to composing for film and advertising?

Because of all the touring, I had a fan base that I built from the tours. Among those fans were some film directors, and they were the ones who approached me with the idea of writing a theme song for their movie. From there, I decided that would be a good idea. I started proactively contacting other directors, saying, “Send me your scripts, send me your films! Let me write a theme song for them.” I eventually started getting requests to do songs for films and to work as a music supervisor. I received requests to compose new orchestral scores as well. It just expanded from there.

Right now I’ve got ten films that I’m working on and two or three TV shows. For someone who is just getting into it, it’s piling on me pretty quick. I think part of it is the fact that my music is very different — it’s very unique, and there’s not really anybody who is doing what I am doing, musically. There’s good and bad to that. The good side is that it definitely makes me stand out a lot easier. At the

same time, it’s harder for me to get a lot of these gigs and a lot of these jobs, because people are always looking for a specific sound, one that sounds like someone who’s already out there. When people say, “We’re just looking for something new and original,” I get those jobs. It especially works with the comedies and romantic comedies, because my music is pretty romantic. It’s just blossomed from there.

As an artist, who do you look up to?

I’ve had some mentors on the business side of things. There have been a few entrepreneurs who have helped me put together some ideas, business plans, and things like that. It’s pretty easy in Utah to find people to help you, but it’s pretty hard to find musicians who are professional here. For the most part, I’d say my mentors have been successful businessmen rather than actual musicians. Being a musician is a lot like being an entrepreneur; our product is the album. There are a lot of similarities. The musicians that I look up to I haven’t actually met in person. Two of them are film score composers: Danny Elfman and Hans Zimmer.



There are definitely influences like Billy Joel, Sting, and a few others. These are all guys that I plan on meeting at some point, but I just haven’t had a chance to, yet.



What brings you the greatest amount of satisfaction as a musician?

There are a few different things. It's usually the reaction I get from the audience or from an individual who is really touched by a song. I get a lot of e-mails from people saying something like "It changed my day," or "It put me in a good mood," or "It completely pulled me out of this depression that I was in for like the last few weeks" — I've gotten that quite a few times. Obviously, the joy for me is boosting my fans: bringing them out of depression, just picking up their spirits, putting them in a good mood — that sort of thing.

Working in the music industry, have you ever had a time when your beliefs were challenged?

Oh, yeah, very often — with the very first offer I got, actually. I was a twenty-two year old

ambitious musician, and I got an offer to be in the top ten — right then and there. The thing is, people can put you in the top ten — it's just a matter of money. Without going into specifics, I got an offer to be in the top ten if I would do something very immoral. So, I turned them down and walked away. I think I got blacklisted for that. That experience was my introduction to the industry. I turned that down, obviously, and I left. I never heard back from them again — and they are very powerful people. That was probably the most extreme case.

When I was in the rock band, I had groupies who weren't used to my standards. The pressure of that was the fact that they were really pretty. They wanted to do things that I wasn't ready to do; things that would go against my standards. The long and the short of it is, there were definitely plenty of times when I was tempted and offered something really great in return, as far as the world is concerned. But it didn't matter enough to me,

because in the end the whole reason why I'm doing this is for the spiritual aspects of it. It's not for the money. I'm not doing this for the fame. I'm doing this because I want to improve the world through inspiring music. It would defeat the whole purpose of that if I were to give in to one of these temptations.

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

That's kind of my goal — to build the kingdom. Music is therapy. It's like medicine for the mind, or for the heart, I guess you could say. The Greeks understood that. They would always say it was the way that internal objects correlate. You might face some traumatic experience, but you can't really quite come to grips with it until you hear the right kind of music that explains what just happened. Music can sway people emotionally, and right now it does — but a lot of times it sways them in the wrong direction.

So one thing I like to do with music is to sway them in the right direction. If people listen to inspiring music, they will be much more receptive when missionaries come around, or they'll just be more motivated to do what they know is right. Whenever you can uplift someone somehow, or convince someone to feel an inspiring emotion, that person will generally choose the right choice. With whatever decision they happen to be faced with, music can help sway them to make the right choice. That's probably where I'd say my music really helps build the kingdom; it sways people to make those right decisions.

How does your knowledge of the gospel influence your work as an artist?

It definitely influences it. I guess there are two answers to that. One is on the creative side — obviously I look for inspiration when I write music. But the main influence has to do with endurance. When you know that Heavenly Father is behind you in your career, you have much more drive. All the times you get knocked down, you get right back up, because you know that what you are doing is what you are supposed to be doing.

I think that the principles of faith, endurance, patience, and trust are certainly things that you learn to a greater degree. You also receive protection and guidance. There have been many times when my life has been threatened, but I've been kept safe because of the protection we receive when we keep all the covenants we make in the temple. I was going to the temple regularly, every three weeks or so, to keep myself up on it, because I was walking through some pretty ghetto streets and hairy situations. In addition, the Holy Ghost has definitely inspired me creatively — just with some good common sense at certain times, as well as comforting me when the constant rejections beat me down. There are so many applications, and I really wouldn't be here without the gospel. ■







Rob Gardner

INTERVIEWED BY ASHLEY PACINI

WEB: SPIREMUSIC.ORG

How did your upbringing make you who you are today?

I grew up in Mesa, Arizona. There are nine children in my family: five boys and four girls. I'm number six. My mom plays the piano and sings a little bit, and my dad sings, but I wouldn't call us a musical family. I wasn't heavily involved in music growing up. My mom required us all to take an instrument starting in fifth grade, which we were required to play until we got to high school. Because my two older brothers had both played the trumpet, it wasn't really a choice, so I picked the trumpet. I played from fifth grade until eighth grade. In eighth grade some friends convinced me to try out for the musical at our junior high, *The Wizard of Oz*. At the end of the show, the choir director recommended that a friend and I join the choir. We did, and we had a lot of fun. We continued doing it in high school as well. During our senior year, seven of us decided to sing an a capella song for the talent show. For some reason people thought we were good and started asking us to perform everywhere. Our a capella group, which we called 2-5-9, ended up being a way bigger deal than we ever intended it to be; we ended up recording five albums and touring the States. We did it before our missions, and then we all went to BYU, so we recorded three more albums after that. I credit that experience — being able to make several albums and do performances — to giving me the confidence and the know-how how to be able to go off and do some of my own albums and be able to produce. Other than three years of piano in high school and an orchestration class I audited at BYU, I don't have a lot of other formal training.

What is Spire Music Company, and how did it get started?

It began when I was in college, probably my second year at BYU; we were still doing the a capella stuff at the time, and I had written one piece called *He Is Jesus Christ* on my mission at the request of my mission president. When I came home, I translated *He Is Jesus Christ* from French into English and performed it around here before I went to BYU. When I got to BYU, a few friends who were there recommended that I do *He Is Jesus Christ* in Utah. The friends actually happened to be in the music program, and they were able to

find some good soloists. We started performing *He Is Jesus Christ* in the Provo Tabernacle and in the de Jong Concert Hall on campus. We were doing performances all the time because people really responded to it. We just had volunteer choirs and volunteer orchestras, and the places were packed. It was really cool to see these things happening.

Because there were so many volunteers, concerts only cost a couple hundred dollars in the beginning. It wasn't a huge expense, but it kept getting more and more expensive. I really wanted to record an album, but that is extremely expensive when you've got a full orchestra and all that involves. So, I had this naive thought: "I should just start a non-profit, because then people would give us donations." I talked to a couple of friends who agreed. I sent out a letter to a bunch of my friends' parents, explaining what I would be doing, and asking for donations. A few of those friends' parents wrote back saying, "Good luck, because this is not going to happen — it's difficult to do a non-profit." But we filed with the IRS and got approval. A lot of those friends' parents were able to write us checks, and we were able to raise a little bit of money. That was the beginning of Spire Music. We started there and nine years later we're still growing; we've proved our naysayers wrong. People have continually responded positively to what we have to offer. It's been an interesting road.

What kind of music do you write?

I personally don't have a lot of love for "sacred music" that doesn't sound sacred. There is a place for that, and obviously there's a market for it, so more power to those artists. But for me, personally, I respond to sacred music that sounds sacred — that can be performed in sacrament meeting without feeling funny. I feel that there is a want and a need to have something more sacred, and that I can provide it.

At the same time, I like to salt-and-pepper things; I'll do a sacred project, and then I'll do something different. As a composer in the sacred niche, I have a love of writing sacred music, but there's only so much you can write. I played in a rock band in high school and in college a little bit with friends, and I really love that kind of music. I've done some film scores, and I've also done a musical called *Blackbeard*. My goal now is to make my money in the secular world and be able to

consecrate some of my time to doing some sacred projects as well. Secular music also gives me an outlet. If I were writing sacred music all the time, it would not only get dull, but I wouldn't have enough topics to deal with. In some ways, I look at it as a really great way to do missionary work. Those who hear my secular music inevitably find my sacred music. It's cool to see that music in the hands of people who normally wouldn't ever listen to something like that.

What have been some of the challenges you've run into trying to pursue music and composing?

It's nothing but challenges when it comes down to it. The hard part with the sacred music is that it is difficult to even get your stuff out on the store shelves. I've been told that classical music doesn't sell. We've had a distribution deal for a long time, but because of some business things and just the way some things were handled, I pulled back recently, and we're doing it on our own again, now. There's good and bad to that, but it is a challenge. For independent artists like me, it's really just down to word of mouth. In a normal music world, you could do all sorts of marketing things; but in the sacred music world, there's not really an outlet to get the word out there. In spite of this, we've had excellent word of mouth, and we always pack our concerts. We've definitely sold a good number of albums of everything we've done, and my goal is always, whenever I put money into something, to make every penny of it back. I've proven that there are people who thirst after this kind of music. I love that the Mormon Tabernacle Choir has their own label and they put out tons of really great music that's definitely "classical." They have also proven that there's a major hunger for what we're doing. It makes me really happy to see that others are taking on that goal as well.

In addition, there are always financial challenges to getting things done. "Do I charge an admission price or do it for free?" I'd like to do



concerts for free, just because I want everybody to be able to come; but sometimes when you spend as much money as you have to, you've got to charge an admission price, or else there's no way you would make it. I'm lucky to have a lot of support from donors to make the concerts possible; but at the same time, those are challenges to overcome. There's also a really difficult fine line to walk when you're dealing with sacred stuff, because people are concerned about commercializing sacred things. That's why I started Spire Music as a non-profit in the first place — I wanted it to feel as pure as possible; I didn't want it to be a commercial venture. But in the end, the money has to come from somewhere. Even non-profits need money, or they're not going to last very long. So there are a lot of challenges, but they're usually overcome through a lot of work and dedication, and they're usually ultimately worth the pain that we go through.

Who do you see as your audience?

As a composer, I don't really write with a specific audience in mind. I try to take off my marketer hat when I do that. When I write, it's not

really worth my while to sit down and write unless I enjoy what I'm writing — unless what I'm writing speaks to me. In that sense, I'm writing to myself. If I don't like it, chances are no one else is going to like it, either. I think we all are very alike in the end. For some reason, the stuff I've written seems to appeal to a major cross-section of the population, and that speaks to the power that music can have. It is the marketer's major no-no to say, "My market is everybody" — you're supposed to focus on the demographics; but I really love that it does speak to everybody, no matter their age, no matter what kind of music they love. Maybe that's the Spirit. For some reason, the four year olds all the way up to eighty-five year olds just really soak this up, and I love that, personally.

You play to a certain group commercially, but in the end you hope your stuff goes to everybody. That's when I feel successful, when someone says, "I hate this kind of thing," and then they love yours.



How do you prefer to have your music performed?

When I did *Blackbeard*, it was a fully-blown production with costumes, makeup, and sets. There are a lot of stakes and institutes that have done my sacred work like that as well. Sometimes there'll be a little vignette acted out, and that works; some people feel like that makes it even more powerful. But with sacred music, I tend to like to do it as a concert, where people are in concert dress. I want to get rid of anything that could possibly distract

the audience from the message itself. What I've found is that there's so much power in just standing up there and singing your testimony. With the full choir, the full orchestra, and everything, there's already enough to fill the senses that anything else just gets in the way. So it makes it simpler, and it makes it a little more pure, in my opinion; but that's just my opinion, again.

Tell us more about *Blackbeard*.

It's actually the third musical I've done. It happened right before I quit my job; I had just finished *Saints and Pioneers*, and I was really itching to do something totally different from the things I'd done before. I was watching the History Channel at lunch one day, and they were doing this special on the real pirates of the Caribbean. One of them was Blackbeard. I'd heard the name Blackbeard before, but I didn't even know if he was a real person or a legend. The ten-minute segment they did on him was fascinating. It was just the greatest story I had ever heard, and I started researching it. It had all the elements of love, and good vs. evil, and pirates, and all this fun stuff, and I said, "Okay, this has to be done. Someone has to make it — it's such a great story." I went down to BYU, and within an hour and a half I had basically flushed out four or five different songs and melodies.

Whenever that happens, I think, "Yeah this is something I need to work on." I quit my job a few months later, because I felt that strongly about working on it. I still do. So, I came back home to Mesa and started working on it. I have a relationship with the college here — they've premiered a couple of my other pieces — and they premiered it, and they loved it. This year I rewrote it, changed some things, and produced it myself through Spire. We have done fifteen performances, we've spent a gazillion dollars running it, and every time it's been a great experience. And again, we've gotten a great response from it. So we're trying to raise money to get it to Broadway. I'm really excited about it.

Where do you see yourself in the future?

I just found out that I've been accepted to the University of Southern California for their film

composition program. That's always been an ambition of mine; I love to write dramatic music. If that leads to a career in writing for film, that would be wonderful. If it doesn't, no big deal. I don't have just one thing that I want to do. I'm not dead set on writing music for film or writing something for Broadway — there is no end-all project for me; I'd love to try it all.

But I will always come back to sacred projects. I've made that commitment to myself and to God, and I know my talents are given to me for a reason. There's just nothing like standing in front of an audience of 2,000 people with a choir and orchestra on the same page presenting something like *Joseph Smith the Prophet* or *He Is Jesus Christ*, and turning around to see the audience's reaction and to hear them afterward express the feelings they had. I just love knowing that, at the end of the day, I did something for somebody that's positive. I made them forget about their troubles or made them have a stronger testimony of the truth. It's wonderful to make people's lives a little better, even if it's just for a couple of hours.

How does the gospel influence both your art and you as an artist?

Last year I got the amazing opportunity to do *Joseph Smith the Prophet* at the Salt Lake Tabernacle. President Monson, President Uchtdorf, and Elder Nelson were there and had an amazing experience. Just before that, I met with the head of music at the Church, David Warner, and he said to me, "You know, we have to be careful as artists, because we have a power that God and Satan both know is extremely powerful: to be able to influence people through music. Satan knows that, and he will go after us really hard."

The gospel influences what you write and how you write. I've thought about the potential for difficulty, especially when I'm doing secular stuff. If I bring something to Broadway and producers suggest the pirate should be swearing more, or there should be anything more like that, I'll be able to say, "You know what? We don't have to have that in there to make it an interesting show, and to make it marketable." You have to be able to say, "We can create something that's not vulgar." I haven't really run up against that because I've produced all my own shows, but I know that those sorts of debates will come up in the future.

At the same time, I get the benefit of being able to perform sacred stuff, and I don't want to get rid of the power of the music itself. There's an additional layer of power in that what we're presenting is truth, and what we're presenting is supported by the Spirit. The feelings you experience performing that kind of music are just otherworldly. It's so much more emotional than something about a pirate could be, no matter how much drama you throw into it. You just experience it on another level. And because it's so satisfying, I'll always come back and do sacred music.

How do you see your work helping to build the kingdom?

I'm pretty dang lucky in that regard. Missionary work as a missionary was really difficult, and I'm not the best member missionary. What's amazing is that I can do what I love, and the Lord has given me a talent to help build others' testimonies. Sometimes it's difficult when I'm writing sacred stuff, because there are times you're just not feeling it, if you know what I mean. I might be in the middle of writing something about Joseph Smith or the pioneers, and my testimony might be a little weak about it, so I try to borrow strength from others, or just do my best in studying. But when you get up and perform it and you feel the Spirit there, it resonates; and I know it does with other people, too.

I've had thousands of people share with me experiences they've had. This is such an easy way for me to be able to share the gospel with people — to put on a show and invite people to it — because it's entertaining and not threatening. They come and they have this experience, and it's just so undeniably powerful for them. They leave, and their lives are changed. I'm really blessed to be able to share the gospel that way and to not have to knock doors anymore. To go from my mission, where I knocked on hundreds of doors a day and didn't have anyone talk to me, to filling an auditorium with 3,000 captivated audience members and spending an hour with them sharing my testimony through music — it changes their lives in ways that knocking on a door would never have accomplished. I don't have a clue how many people have benefited from what I've done, but I know it's a lot, and that, to me, makes my life more worthwhile. It's a unique blessing to be able to do that. ■





Mahonri Stewart

INTERVIEWED BY DAVID HABBEN

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Although you have experience in many forms of writing, playwriting has been a major focus for you. Why is that?

Many types of writing are a kind of love affair with your computer. You're stuck by yourself, typing away, and the most contact you'll have with an actual human being is with an agent or an editor or maybe, if you're lucky, a writing group. I'm a more social person. I love to be with people and just drink up their personalities. Theatre is a very community-based art.

In theatre there is more of an immediacy in the performance. Those fictional characters are just several rows right in front of you. They're not words on a page, or a painted illustration, or ghosts in your mind, or even a flickering image of light on a screen—they're right in front of you! There's something very satisfying and magical about seeing your imagination take flesh and blood. That's why I love writing for the stage.

What is the greatest challenge that you face, and how have you confronted it?

One of my greatest strengths is also my greatest weakness: my love for the English language. In my period pieces, it usually works in my favor, but it also comes back to bite me sometimes. I'm wordy. Certain friends have affectionately termed some segments in my plays as "Mahonrilogues." I'm starting to become more aware of that, though.

In the play I'm currently writing (*Manifest*) for my friends Danor Gerald and Jaclyn Hales (who will produce and act in the piece in January 2010), I'm trying to be more sparse, more elemental and visual. It's been tough at some points, but also refreshing. And we're creating some real wonders in the piece, where we'll use some strong multimedia, special effects, and practical theatre magic. Where I once used words, now I'm using visions. It's really fun and very different from anything I've ever written. I'll never give up my love for language, and

there will always be that element somewhere in all my work, but it's been interesting disciplining myself and forcing myself to try something new. The result may be one of my best plays so far.

Tell us about writing *The Fading Flower*.

I'm sometimes nervous telling people the origin for this play, because it can sound kind of presumptuous: it started with what I felt was a very inspired dream. Now, my experience writing the play has no relevance to how it's received — there's no obligation there. But to understand the process of writing the play, one has to understand its origin.

I was on the last leg of my mission when I had a dream where I saw a black-and-white photograph of Joseph and Emma Smith's family. Joseph was a kind of ghost standing to the side, and Emma and the children were all very somber-looking, except for Julia, who was in bright color (which is significant because she becomes a kind of truth-teller in the play). I woke up with this very intense, beautiful feeling and had all of these thoughts tumbling into my head. I had to grab a pencil, and then I was writing down all these things that really surprised me — things about Emma, things about Joseph F. Smith visiting her while he was on his mission, a whole slough of things I had no clue about but (when I did my research later) ended up being true.

When I came home from Australia, I dove into Church history and ended up writing a play called *Friends of God*, about Joseph Smith's martyrdom. But I wasn't done. I found a book about David Hyrum Smith (Joseph and Emma's youngest child), called *From Mission To Madness: The Last Son of the Mormon Prophet*, which was an absolutely fascinating read and which tied directly into the stuff I had learned about Emma on my mission. The result became *The Fading Flower*.

It's a heavy play in some ways — polygamy, madness, spiritualism, conflicts between the LDS and RLDS factions of Mormonism — but it also has required a lighter touch (romance, gentle humor, very personal heartbreaks). I have a lot of myself invested in this play. My testimony, my personal struggles, my heartache — they found their way into these historical characters. It's been one of my most personal and spiritually invested plays.

What was it like writing *Swallow the Sun*?

Another favorite, *Swallow the Sun* is a play about C.S. Lewis's conversion to Christianity. I've been passionately in love with C.S. Lewis's work for a long time. I read *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a kid and then when I was a young teen, I stumbled upon a book of his poetry that totally took my breath away. That poetry book was the real gateway for me into his world. As I dove into the rest of his work for the next several years — *The Screwtape Letters*, *Till We Have Faces* (his best book), *The Great Divorce* — I ate it all up. It was meat and drink to me for a while. So, after my mission, it was a natural thing for me to start reading up on his life.

Swallow the Sun is also a very personal play for me on a couple of levels. After my son Hyrum Irving was born, and I was with my wife at the hospital for a couple of days, she finally sent me home. I was nearing the end of the play at this point, and I sat down and finished it when I got home from the hospital. I was filled with very poignant, spiritual feelings as I finished it and, unconsciously, placed my son's initials into C.S. Lewis's final line: "I am HIS."



The play is also very connected to my dad, George Stewart. The play talks a lot about the relationship between C.S. Lewis and his father, and elements of the relationship between my dad and me found its way into *Swallow the Sun* — the



positive elements, not the negative (there was plenty of conflict between C.S. Lewis and his dad, but I've actually had a really positive connection with my dad). And then my dad helped fund the play, so in my mind it's connected to him and to my son in very strong ways. In many ways, it's a play about fathers and sons, including C.S. Lewis's (and, consequently, my) relationship with his (my) Heavenly Father.

What advice would you offer to aspiring playwrights?

A few things: 1. Be proactive. No one is going to fulfill your dreams for you — and, even if they do, it's usually after you've put in some elbow grease. I've had to learn to contribute to my own plays, physically and financially. I've been a producer, an actor, a director, a scene painter, a dramaturg, and a kind of assistant stage manager in my own shows. I definitely think learning to produce your own shows is important, especially in this economy. Utah Valley University, BYU Experimental Theatre Company, and New Play Project have all been important institutions in helping produce my plays, but they usually only helped set up the shows after I brought them a viable plan.

2. Network. A play is not created in a vacuum. Learn to act, to direct, to jump in and volunteer in a theatre department or a community theater, so that you can get to know the people who could eventually direct, act, and produce your plays. Also, it can make you a valuable replacement, should your play have an actor drop out or your very talented director become dreadfully sick (both have happened to me). And there's also a good side benefit to making those kinds of professional connections: you make good friends along the way.

3. Be humble but true to your vision. My plays have benefited incredibly from a good set of eyes. If someone has a criticism of your play, especially a director, a dramaturg, or someone with a good deal of experience whom you trust, by all means, listen to it. I mean this. There are a couple of my plays that would have been complete embarrassments if I hadn't listened to good advice on how to fix them (and even then there are a couple of

my plays where I wish I had kept more of that good advice). That said, it's also important to realize what your vision of the play is — what you ultimately want from it. Once you know that, take the advice within that context. There are some things you're just going to disagree on, because you and the critic have different worldviews, expectations, and tastes. At that point, stay true to your vision.

How do you see the gospel influencing your work?

Some Mormon artists and writers try to distance their work from their religion — they try not to “preach.” I understand that impulse, but even my more secular work has lots of Mormon and Christian undertones and themes, if you know what you're looking for. Sometimes it's blaring. One of our best theatre critics, Nan McCulloch, in reviewing one of my plays, once called me “thoroughly Mormon Mahonri.” I thought that was clever, but it was also spot on. I really can't separate my beliefs from my work, even when it's disguised. It's too much infused into who I am.

Some people have called me out on that. They seem almost embarrassed for me at times, and a little patronizing. One of the times that happened was when *Farewell to Eden* went to the KCACTF regional festival in California. We had hugely positive responses from the non-Mormon audiences and judges. The playwriting chair for the festival, a professor from NYU named Gary Garrison, even went so far to say that it was one of “the most intelligently written plays [he had] read in a decade.” Ironically, however, when I approached a professor from BYU about it, he was extremely critical. The Mormon elements were too much for him. That jarred me and I've thought about it a lot since then.

Why are we so embarrassed to present our religion plainly in our art? It doesn't have to be didactic or heavy-handed, but why can't we lace it elegantly in our work? Now, I've crossed that didactic line on a couple of occasions, but I believe that's better than being shy. We've been commanded to let our lights shine, and I take that seriously. I've never had someone who wasn't a member of the Church tell me that one of my plays was too Mormon (quite the opposite — they've been fascinated by those elements).

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

We believe what we believe, and we don't apologize for that. But that doesn't mean that bridges can't be built, that we can't share with the larger world at least part of our vision. There is a lot of our theology and belief system that will resonate with people who we may now see as strangers and foreigners.

Part of building Zion is not only building our central Zion, but building outposts throughout the whole world, including the arts world. If we don't represent ourselves, then other people will represent us — erroneously. They'll present us with an agenda, an edge, a hostility, all to diminish our influence, to silence our voices. We need to provide an alternative to that. That's how I hope to build the kingdom — to be that alternative, if even for a small group of people, if even to my own family and friends. ■

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