





# Eric Jensen

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Performing has always come naturally for Eric Jensen. Ever ready and willing to perform for a crowd, Jensen relished opportunities to speak in church as a kid, and in high school it wasn't long before his fellow student body officers began having him write and direct skits for their pep assemblies.

His college years found him taking acting more seriously—studying Shakespeare and acting methods, among other things—and after serving a full-time mission, he did a couple of plays with some friends.

That led to the creation of a brand new theater, the Deseret Star Theater in Murray. There Jensen worked for a time, doing just about everything that needed to be done—writing, directing, props, and plenty of help with producing the plays they performed there.

He thought he'd gone about as far as he could go in the theatre industry. Then a friend pointed out that the only thing he hadn't done yet was to personally own a theater. Jensen pushed the idea away. It'd never happen, he thought.



A couple of years later, however, it did happen, when he and some of his friends opened the Off Broadway Theatre (OBT) in downtown Salt Lake. Jensen had been asked to put on a medieval play for an Arts in the Park program in Layton, Utah. He wrote a piece called *Robin Hood* for the outdoor performance.

When opening night came around, a mere thirty people showed up, but the next night sixty came, and the actors noticed people in the park stopping by to see what was happening, especially when the crowd was roaring with laughter. That Saturday, the audience had grown to about 150 people, and by closing night a few days later, almost four hundred people were watching. Jensen learned an important lesson that night:

*Theater can be done simply and relatively cheaply anywhere you want to do it. What you need to have is a good story and good actors telling that story.... It's nice to have great costumes, it's nice to have great effects, it's nice to have good lighting and good sound and everything else, but really, if you have a good story, and you have really good people telling that story, you've got a good show.*

After *Robin Hood's* success, Jensen and the other cast members wanted to keep performing the play for a wider audience, specifically families, and it wouldn't hurt if they made a dime or two off the show, either.

So they found the building where the OBT is currently located—272 South Main Street in Salt Lake City—and got a lease on a week-to-week basis. Eventually those leases turned into six-month contracts, and now the theater has put on shows every week for the past fifteen years.

For the first few years, Jensen and his wife ran the theater along with two other couples, but other job opportunities have led the others in different directions, and now the Jensens run the theater by themselves.

The OBT is known for its improv group, Laughing Stock, which performs every Friday and Saturday night. Since they needed something to pay bills during the off months while plays were being rehearsed, they decided to go with improvisational comedy because it was easy to prepare and lots of fun:





*You simply need to know what the games are, practice them, and get good at them. Then you perform a made-up scene in front of people who are happy to see it. And when you do it, it's amazing, because it's the first time that people have ever seen that, and now they're in on a private joke that you, the audience, and the actors have together.*

After fifteen years of doing improv every weekend, Jensen says, the members of Laughing Stock are on a par with other improv groups around the nation, including those that perform in larger cities like Seattle, Chicago, and Las Vegas. Jensen's theory is that once you get to a certain point in your improv ability, you can play just about anywhere, because funny is funny no matter where you are.

Most of the plays produced at the OBT are parodies. "We're not going for dramatic effect. We're not trying to change people's lives. This is a haven

for rest and for stress relief—for building families, because you can laugh at things together." Jensen's goal is to make plays that will appeal to audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

When writing parodies, he looks for legendary, bigger-than-life tales, and once he finds one he thinks will work, he starts pulling on it, trying to find ways to twist it or weave it into something a little different. That's the recipe for comedy, he says. For example, take his play *Utahoma*, which played at the OBT during this past June and July. Jensen took the format of the classic musical *Oklahoma!* and reworked it into a story of how Utah became a state. Some of his characters, like Timpanogos, Father Escalante, and Brigham Young, were based on fact and used to move the story along, whereas the fictional characters usually ended up being the comedic relief.

Being an LDS actor and writer, Jensen tries to be very Mormon-friendly, but he tries to create plays that attract both those in and out of the faith,



not just to appeal to a larger audience but also so non-Mormons and Mormons can come together and enjoy watching something in the same room. But “not everything is a joke about Mormons,” he says. “We do a couple of shows like that, but most of the time I try to make it so people can come and see that we’re laughing more at Utahns in general or laughing at some idea we’re portraying.” Our history of persecution for religious beliefs has some Mormons hesitant to laugh at these jokes, he says, especially when they might feel they’re being made fun of, but:

*What I’ve tried to do is make something that both non-Mormons and Mormons would be comfortable watching, and hopefully they’ll gain greater respect for each other, and hopefully they’ll have a greater love for each other.*

Jensen’s advice to aspiring Mormon actors and comedians is threefold:

First, remember our pioneer forefathers and the amazing things they did.

Second, make sure our art reflects our beliefs. “Although Mormon showpeople may be naïve about the wicked things of the world that other comedians often use as subject matter, we do have knowledge about endowments, covenants, and eternal families,” Jensen says, “and this knowledge should influence how we act.”

Third, we should be proud of our abilities and put them to good use. One way Jensen does that is by teaching others his craft, and in doing so, he passes on the gift of entertainment and laughter to many other people.

No, he is not a doctor, and no, he doesn’t provide services absolutely necessary to life, but even so, Jensen’s work is vital: he gives families opportunities to gather and to laugh together. ■