

# mormonartist

Issue 1

September 2008

## in **this** issue

Margaret Blair Young & Darius Gray

J. Kirk Richards

Aaron Martin

New Play Project



# mormonartist

covering the Latter-day Saint arts world

Mormon Artist is a bimonthly magazine  
published online at [mormonartist.net](http://mormonartist.net)  
and in print through MagCloud.com.

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Front cover paper texture by *bittbox*  
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Photographs pages 4–9 courtesy  
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want to help?

Send us an email saying what you'd be interested in helping with and what experience you have. Keep in mind that Mormon Artist is primarily a labor of love at this point, so we don't (yet) have any money to pay those who help. We hope that'll change soon, though.

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# editor's note

**W**elcome to the pilot issue of what will hopefully become a longstanding love affair with the Mormon arts world. There's a lot going on out there—brilliant, uplifting work, in every medium imaginable—but much of it goes largely unnoticed. I want to change that.

Enter *Mormon Artist*, a magazine dedicated solely to covering the LDS arts community in all of its many facets. We'll showcase artists from a variety of fields—writers, filmmakers, musicians, painters, photographers, dancers, and even glass-blowers, to name just a few—and let you hear from them in their own words what it's like to be both an artist and a Mormon. In every issue we'll also print an essay on Mormon arts, starting this month with James Goldberg's essay "Toward a Mormon Renaissance." And down the road we may of course expand to include other types of content.

I see the purpose of this magazine as falling into three areas: First, to raise awareness and get the word out about what's going on with Mormon arts. Second, to inspire and encourage artists both new and experienced alike to create new work. Third, to connect people—artists to other artists and to those who appreciate their work—and build a larger community, not just in the States but across the globe. I'm sure that among the Saints there are painters in Ghana, musicians in Russia, and writers in the Philippines who are using their artistic gifts to make the world a better place and to build the kingdom. We just don't know about most of them, and that needs to change.

Ambitious? Crazy, probably. But timid, safe endeavors rarely break new ground, and the best things in life almost always involve taking a risk. The Atonement itself was a tremendous risk, placing the fate of the universe in the hands of a single Man who would then be buffeted by temptation, by the sins and afflictions of all humankind, by the jaws of hell itself. But against all odds the Savior did in fact triumph, opening the gates of heaven. Nothing will ever come close to the grandeur and depth of Christ's Atonement, of course, but the same principle holds true for us on a smaller scale: to achieve true greatness, we have to take risks.

Now, this magazine is far from perfect. I have little doubt that ten minutes after we go to press, I'll stumble across mistakes that will turn my face crimson. But we



believe scarlet can turn to snow. Line upon line, issue upon issue, this magazine will get better—better questions, better editing, better design, better everything. It's the Google beta principle: get something out the door, then tweak it until it's amazing. Great art almost never comes out perfect on the first try, which is why we toil and slave away in revision and reworking, progressively getting a little closer to our internal vision. I can't wait to see what this magazine will be like in five years.

As a general philosophy for the magazine, we're aiming for both human and heavenly—not shying away from some of the more difficult parts of life, but still completely faithful to the Lord and His Church. We're not afraid to ask questions—the gospel is rock-solid and can certainly withstand our scrutiny—but always in a spirit of belief, not in the spirit of antagonism that sours our spirits and leaves a nasty aftertaste. We're here to build the kingdom, not tear it down.

You see, I believe that the arts have a profound ability to bring us closer to Christ. Art lifts us up out of ourselves and into a grander scheme of things where we can see more clearly who we are and what God wants us to do. Let's let our light so shine.

—Benjamin Crowder

*We're interested in your feedback on this issue. Let us know what you liked and what you didn't—and if you know anyone we should interview for a future issue, let us know.*

Letters to the editor may be sent to the following address:

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# essay

## Toward a Mormon Renaissance

by James Goldberg

James Goldberg is one of the founders of New Play Project. See page 27 for an interview with him.

In 1920, while riding on a train, Langston Hughes wrote a poem on the back of a napkin. Maybe you've heard it. It was called "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and it goes like this:

*I've known rivers:*

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
flow of human blood in human veins.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.*

*I've known rivers:*

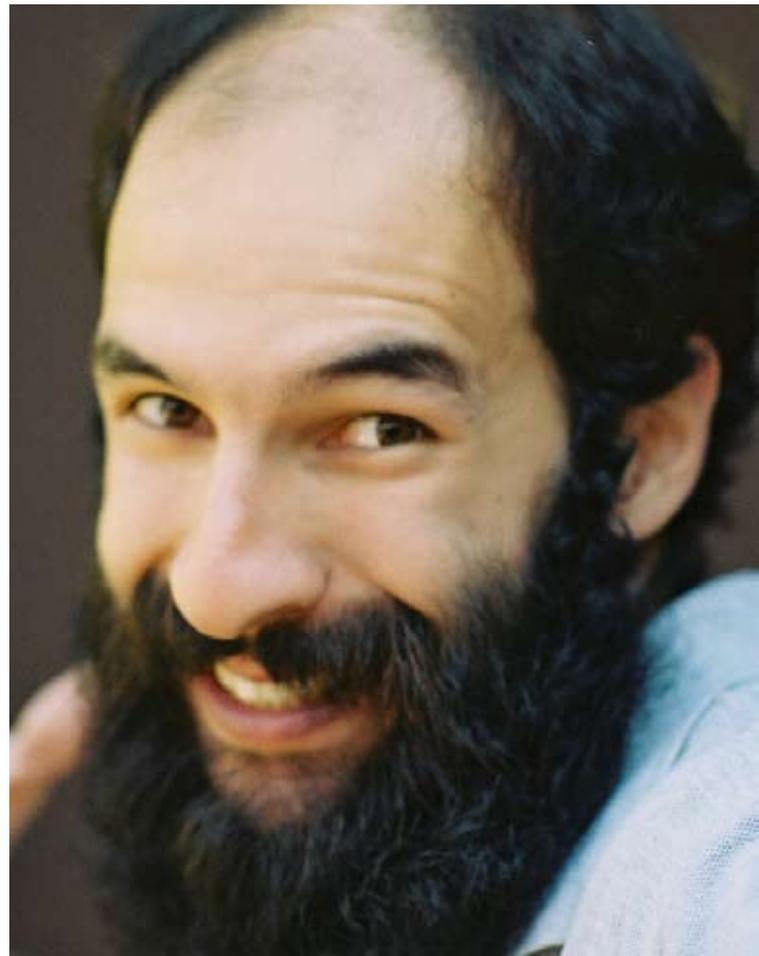
*Ancient, dusky rivers.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

It's a beautiful poem, I've always thought. And a wise poem. There's something about the way that poem reaches so far back into the past and so deep down into the soul that communicates a grounded, mature kind of confidence. You know what I'm talking about? That's a poem that can give depth and strength instead of just describing them.

It's incredible that it does that, when you think about it, because that poem was written in 1920. You know what most people thought of black history and culture back in 1920? The vast majority of white Americans and all too many African-Americans thought of

black as different, backward, inferior: the blacker physically or culturally, the worse. There was nothing to be confident about, as far as most people were concerned. But Langston Hughes wrote *my black soul is deep like the rivers* and 86 years later we remember him for it. Not because he was the greatest individual writing talent of his day, but because he had something to say. Something that went beyond himself. He wrote about the culture and heritage of his people with pride and artistry. He and other like-minded writers, not ashamed to call themselves Negro poets, gave this nation a literature of



black dignity. All those individual writers, works, and goals clumped together are remembered as the Harlem Renaissance. And I hope that long after hundreds of movements from the last century have been forgotten, the Harlem Renaissance will be remembered; because America desperately needed the gift it offered to take another step toward being whole.



So. Here we are, eighty-eight years later, in the Mormon community. Mormonism is technically a religion, but it's also a tradition and a people. (Being a Goldberg, I understand how these things work. A religion can form a people. It's been done before.) We're a people with a rich heritage that goes back far beyond the founding of the church in 1830. We've got unique institutions that have helped us keep a sense of community in an age when many communities are falling apart. And we have wisdom, a surprisingly rare gift in an age so saturated with information and opinion—we know something about how to treat each other, about our relationship to God, about the spiritual power that runs all through this world. We have an overarching gospel framework to organize and prioritize our insights within. And of course, we've also got online resources with wisdom on food storage and stuff. Profound or practical, inherited wisdom is part of who we are.



And who are we? Unlike most tribes and peoples, none of this heritage is restricted to any ethnic group or country. Anyone can choose to adopt this heritage as part of their own identity. The whole world is getting

less national and more global and Mormonism is one of the world's first great post-national cultures.

All this means that Mormon writers, like the men and women of the Harlem Renaissance, have a lot to say... if—let me emphasize that—if we have the courage to undertake the same kind of project they did. I mean, black history and black culture in 1920 were already incredibly rich. The black community already had an incredible strength, but hardly anyone had ever managed to write about it in a meaningful, resonant, artistic way. There was a black tradition and a black heritage but no body of black literature. The Harlem Renaissance changed that, and that changed the world.



What I'm trying to say is that maybe it's time for us to help change the world again. Look, I know it sounds arrogant to say that. Who am I to change the world through art? There is no shortage of better writers out there, and a lot of them don't worry about how to stay on insurance as much as many of us do. They're more experienced, going to down better marked and tested paths of expression, in a larger and more connected community of artists. Who am I compared to that? Who is Aaron Martin? Who is J. Kirk Richards?

Who are we? Well, we're Latter-day Saints. We're people who have wrestled with some of life's big and little issues and have been lucky enough to have help. We're people who think and act a little differently than most of the country does and value that uniqueness. We're people who know a little about God and a little about life. We're people who believe that's enough to say something big ... and who are trying to connect with others who share that belief and desire.

Are we going to make a difference? I hope so. And I take hope in history.

See, when Langston Hughes was sitting on that train in the evening, watching the sun set, when he wrote, with the voice of his people, "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins," he was 18 years old.

The scripture says that through small and simple means great works will come to pass. And maybe with our shared work and prayers, building from the base of the heritage that binds us, they will. And maybe, if an amateur publication can help connect and inspire us, this will be a part of a process that people can look back on some day and call a Mormon Renaissance.

So, thanks for reading. And for being a part of whatever good unfolds. ■

# Margaret Blair Young & Darius Gray

*Margaret Blair Young is a professor of English at Brigham Young University; Darius Gray is one of the three founders of the Genesis Group. Together, they've written a trilogy of novels on black Mormon history, Standing on the Promises. They've also filmed a documentary on African-Americans in the Church, entitled Nobody Knows. Interviewed July 14, 2008.*

**How did you start out as a writer, Margaret?**

MARGARET: I always wanted to do it, and around somewhere in the 1970s, I just became very serious about it. Even though I wasn't terribly good, I was tenacious. And I did a lot of reading—that's what I tell my writing students: that if you're going to write well, you have to read well.

**Describe your writing process in general—how you tackle a project.**

MARGARET: The ideas would almost always come from my own life, with the huge exception of *Standing*

*on the Promises*, where Darius and I had to partner up to do it right, to bring our talents and our knowledge into a cohesive narrative. Until that time all of my short stories and most of my novels were autobiographical. As I would read things, I'd get ideas of possibilities of how I'd create the plot, but the biggest thing was the tenacity. There was never really a day that I wouldn't do some writing. And I did not take rejection letters as being the ultimate sign that I couldn't do it, but as being motivation to do better.

**Who do you see as some of your literary influences?**

MARGARET: It'll be ten years on July 29 that Darius and I have been working together, and from that time I have a tape of Zora Neale Hurston's *And Their Eyes Were Watching God* that I listen to over and over and over again to immerse myself in the voice. And a lot of Langston Hughes, *The Invisible Man*, a lot of black literature and black films. In order for me to feel this—because this was not my childhood, this was his life—Darius made

me a tape of the music he had grown up with, that he actually recorded from record albums, music that was done in the '30s and '40s and '50s, wonderful gospel spirituals, Five Blind Boys of Alabama.

All of this wonderful music would just immerse me in it. For Mother's Day, Bruce gave me *Malcolm X*, and he's given me a huge biography of W.E. DuBois and all of his works. It is a passion in me—that tends to be where I gravitate. Even though I love all of the literature that I teach, I tend to gravitate towards black literature. It still holds me.

**When did that passion start?**

MARGARET: It started actually *after* Darius and I partnered. I had begun the books on my own, from just a complete naïve sense that I could do it. I'm very spontaneous and tend to leap before I look. And I did

it with these. However, I leaped into a place where the Lord had provided somebody to help.

When I met Darius on July 29, Gene England and I had just done a presentation on blacks and the priesthood, twenty years after, and Darius had come to hear it. Afterwards he hugged me and said, "Let's write a book." There was a little more that went on before we actually got started with it, but when he looked at what I had written from my own imagination and the little bit of knowledge I had, he said, "I can help you with this—this is the language of my childhood." So for ten years I've been immersed in this.

**Where is your family originally from, Darius?**

DARIUS: Dad was from Missouri, and Mom from Arkansas, both of them from small towns. They had deep Southern roots. The family moved up to Colorado



in 1932 and so I was raised in the West, with Southern traditions. And to paraphrase someone, having been born of goodly parents. I had both parents in the home and we had an intact family till my father's death, so I had a good upbringing.

### Tell us more about your schooling and work.

DARIUS: I love to say I'm a high school dropout. Which I am. I later was blessed to go to college. My degrees are in broadcast journalism from the University of Utah and a special professional program at the graduate school in Columbia University. I worked as a journalist for a number of years.

Then I decided I wanted to get a second master's, an MBA. I got about halfway through that and decided it was time to earn money again, so I went out and found a job with a Fortune 500 company and worked my way through the ranks. That company was one of the first to be subject to hostile takeover. I had worked my way up to regional management responsibilities, and everyone with regional management authority in the company wound up going bye-bye.

Coming back to our writing and the documentary, I think my one real artistic flair has been behind the camera and in the editing room. Writing was a chore; cinematography was a joy; editing was an absolute joy. I worked on documentaries for KSL and enjoyed it immensely. That's where I think my artistic side is, in telling a story through film.

MARGARET: Because he's not as young as I am, he was assigned to do documentaries in Africa, and it wasn't just a camera in a bag—he would lug all of this huge equipment around. So he comes to the books with his life experience, with all of the voices and phrases and everything we needed to make it authentic.

We hadn't planned on us doing the film. We went through several directors who weren't taking it where we wanted it to go, and we finally realized that for it to go where we wanted it, we had to do it ourselves.

DARIUS: Where it *needed* to go.

MARGARET: Where it needed to go, yes. Darius had that experience in documentary making. I was completely new to it and came with the writing ability and with some artistic sense.

### How did you transition from the book projects to the documentary?

MARGARET: We finished the books years ago. In the meanwhile, I had also done a play about Jane

Manning James that we had shown in several places across the nation. And in Los Angeles, one of the descendants of Jane Manning James who is not LDS but who knew what his legacy was, saw a couple of Mormon missionaries. One of the missionaries had seen *I Am Jane*—remarkably, because it's not like everybody saw that—and told him about it, and so Louis Duffy googled *I Am Jane* and found out about the play. By that he found out about the books, ordered them express mail, read them immediately, and then got in touch with us. And he continues to be a very dear friend.

As we wrote about these people, we started meeting acquaintances, descendants, and we just would get manna. We have so many precious things stored up in Special Collections right now to protect them. Because of what we've done, people have become aware, it just kind of comes out of the woodwork and we call it manna from heaven.

DARIUS: We're no longer surprised when it shows up. At least for me, we halfheartedly expect it to show up. And with that being said, that which we've done, the work which we've shared, has been more than just writing books or doing a film. I really feel we've been on a mission.

MARGARET: And we're still on it—we haven't been released. It's been so gratifying to get to know the people we've written about. For example, Len Hope has become somebody I think we both really look forward to meeting after we die. Elder Marion D. Hanks was the one who introduced us to Len. We met with Elder Hanks five or six times and he gave us a tape of Len Hope's own description of his conversion, which Elder Hanks had recorded in 1945. Len is a man who joined the Church right after World War I and confronted the Ku Klux Klan as a result of it. It's a remarkable story. The branch president had been contacted by the congregants who said, "We don't want a black family in this ward," and so the Hopes were told that they couldn't come to church. Their response was, "Can we still pay tithing?" They would hold meetings in their home, and once a month missionaries would give them the sacrament and sing and bear testimony. Elder Hanks was one of those missionaries.

Jane Manning James has become the matriarch of our project. I feel such a bond with her, and often a sense of her presence and approval of what we're doing. Not for Jane herself, but for what she means to the legacy of black pioneers into the future—all those of African descent in the Church.

DARIUS: Speaking about the mission that we're on, what is the mission? I see the mission as helping to build

bridges between communities, LDS and non-LDS, black and white—to acknowledge the past and to speak about the lives of some remarkable people who have been little known of in years past, to tell their stories. You don't have to be LDS to appreciate their stories, you don't have to be black to appreciate their stories. In the process, we hope to also address some of the wounds and be a part of the healing of those wounds, in both communities. To me that is the mission, to share the lives and experiences of some very remarkable people.

### How did the documentary come about?

MARGARET: It was not ours to start with. A couple of wonderful young men, Wayne Lee and Robert Foster, wanted to start the project. The operative word is *young*. Rob was newly married when he and Wayne wanted to do this, and Wayne joined the military. Before long, Rob was in optometry school, Wayne was at a camp in Indiana, and they just couldn't do it. I had agreed to write for it, so I had helped gather the initial funds for it. We brought Richard Dutcher in as the director, but then his projects became a little overwhelming and he asked to be put in a different position, so we have him as the executive producer. He helped us raise more of the money and helped us get a grant that was *really* important as the seed money.



It was never our idea that *we* would be the ones to do this—Darius is one of the main interview subjects. In fact, I see him as the still thread throughout the whole thing. I wanted there to be somebody whose life you could follow, and it was really clear to me that Darius was the one we would have access to—the footage and the photos and all of that—so that you could follow one life and have ancillary stories supporting the kinds of

things that he said, with the scholars making comments and all. We never intended that he would be producer/director.

One of the directors we hired quickly revealed that he was going to be putting an anti-Mormon spin on it, and we simply could not have that. That would dishonor all of the people we had brought into this. So we decided that we would do it. For months we met together with our editor. We've had two editors—Danor Gerald, who then took some acting jobs, and then we brought in Jim Hughes, who remains our editor. Danor had a senior project at UVU where he filmed the story of Jane James giving flour to Eliza Lyman, and I paid for the actors and we basically bought that footage for about \$600, which would have been \$20,000 otherwise.

With those sorts of things we've been able to have some reenactments and some really lovely footage on a shoestring. I won't tell you what we've spent, but when I told Sterling van Wagenen, he said, "You've created this for what we'd do a play for." Richard Dutcher filmed a lot of our interviews with the scholars. Other people filmed others, and because it kept changing hands, we had all sorts of different angles, and to bring everything together and try to make it cohesive was a bit of a challenge. We've had a lot of donated work, so we have scholars talking, we have ministers—Pastor Cecil Murray, who's at the Church of First AME in Los Angeles, which was founded by a former slave of Mormon pioneers, and who met with President Hinckley and who talks about that, and Martin Luther King the Third, so we have some good names. Then we have black Latter-day Saints who talk about why they're LDS and what it has meant to them to be LDS.

### How was writing a film documentary different for you from writing books?

MARGARET: In the documentary, I wanted the writing to be as spare as possible, merely transition. I wanted the people, the interview subjects, the footage, the images to tell the story.

DARIUS: That's part of the skill in storytelling, building those bridges, that transition dialogue that's necessary is a part of recognizing where the story is and where it needs to go. So while it may be spare, the concepts are as strong as in writing any novel.

MARGARET: We don't intend this just for an LDS audience. We recognize that the LDS audience will probably have more interest in this than others, but thus

far we've shown it to more black film festivals than we have to general film festivals. Most of the film festivals we've shown it at are black, and we sold out in two. At the one that we just did in San Francisco last month, the response from a predominantly non-LDS audience was extremely positive. One woman came up to my husband and said, "I've got to find out about this. I've been to Ghana, I know that your Church is doing all sorts of things there, but this is such new information—how do I found out?"

When Darius and I have gone, we sometimes get some of the Mormon nervousness about, "Do we really need to talk about the black history? That ended in 1978." But the answer is no, it didn't. If it did, then we wouldn't still have people talking about fencesitters in the pre-existence or about the curse of Cain and Canaan, and we do. Until that's taken care of, we need to address it.

What we've found with our books is we'd do a book signing at LDS bookstores and have a few people come to pick up the books. We went to an African-American conference, a family history conference, and Deseret Book said, "Well, you probably aren't going to sell very many, so we won't send very many with you." We ran out almost immediately and had to take orders for the books. We had *lines* of people, and the way that we were advertised was, "Who knew? Black Mormons." For African-Americans, it's new history.

And it's interesting for Mormons, especially those who have been troubled by the issue, or who want to have something to say about it, who really don't feel like they've been told very much about it, especially the kids who we're teaching now at BYU who were born after the priesthood revelation. And those of us who lived with the restriction, and who were taught the folklore, and then had the revelation, what do we do with all of that folklore? Since nobody has ever said, "By the way, that wasn't true." Just suddenly blacks can hold the priesthood.

There are these hanging issues, and the Latter-day Saints are especially interested in what we have to tell



them in the documentary. We walk a delicate balance. I really like what Gideon Burton said about treading the line so carefully, because we want it accessible, we don't want it to be seen as a proselytizing piece, and we definitely don't want it to be seen as a Mormon-bashing piece.

So, we're very true to the history, and we have the very best historians—Newell Bringhurst, Armand Mauss, Greg Prince, Ron Coleman. I tried to keep the gender balance, and if we have a white scholar, I'd try to have a black scholar, as much as possible. We've gathered the very best scholars to talk about the history and

then the last fifteen minutes of the film is black Latter-day Saints themselves, who've chosen to be LDS, telling how they've done it and why. We keep it with African-Americans—the Church has done films on the Church in Africa, and there are different struggles there. We simply don't talk about those, because we're maintaining our focus with African-Americans.

**With the structure of the film, how much was planned in advance and how much of it grew spontaneously out of the materials themselves?**

DARIUS: You have to work with what you have. And within that—it's not just a tape, but a body of stories and of lives—you have to go fishing and find out, "Okay, where's the balance in here? What are these people saying?" At times, when we've worked on this, there might be an interview subject saying something with which I personally would take issue. But it's *not* my story, it's his or her story.

You can see the obvious answer to your question. We did not have an agenda and say, "We're going to go out and do this." But the materials were gathered, and based on those materials, we then asked, "What do the people tell us? What are their stories telling us?" Some of it was happy and joyful, and other elements were troubling and challenging. And if that's what they're telling us, that's what we put in.

MARGARET: The other thing with making it accessible to a non-Mormon audience is that there are doctrines that we as Latter-day Saints understand. We



don't have to be told about the second Article of Faith, that men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression, but a non-LDS audience doesn't know that that's a tenet of LDS doctrine. So, we need to explain certain things that the non-LDS audience wouldn't understand—the concept of a pre-existence, and the whole idea of, “Well, since we don't believe that they would be punished for an ancestor's deeds, they must have done something themselves in the pre-existence.” That was a lot of what the narrative did, taking care of the spaces that the non-LDS person is going to need to understand, like what the priesthood is. For most people outside the Church, if you say blacks didn't hold the priesthood, they'll think, “They didn't allow blacks to be priests in their church.” There's a concept that if you hold the priesthood, you're a priest, like a Catholic priest. So we have to explain that that's not what the priesthood is in the Mormon religion.

It's one of my favorite parts of the film, actually, talking about the lay priesthood, where every young man before '78—except African-Americans—would be ordained in the priesthood at age twelve, and we have Armand Mauss talking about his own life and saying, “A family moved into our ward and all of us at age twelve were ordained to the priesthood except this one.” Catholics didn't ordain blacks as priests either for a long time, you know, but it's more significant than that, because the priesthood is everything—it's temple privileges, it's the most fundamental, most sacred things of our faith.

**Since completing the film, you've gone to some film festivals. Could you tell us more about those?**

DARIUS: They've been fun, and it's been interesting to me to see the response from the various audiences. Again, some have been predominantly non-LDS and black, and others white and LDS. The film has found favor with both groups. At the San Francisco Black Film Festival—there are some humorous points in the documentary, some laugh lines, as it were—the black audience found more humor in it than the white audience who saw it the next day. It's interesting to see where people laugh, and what they glean from it.

We had also been at the San Diego Black Film Festival a number of months ago, and one of the key points for me after the film received a standing ovation from this mixed audience, black, white, LDS, non-LDS, was there was this fellow who

was working with the San Diego Black Film Festival. We had watched him running around getting people in the right places and opening up the theaters and whatnot, and I noted that he attended our screening and stayed for the entire thing, where normally you would see him dip in and out to the various theaters. Afterwards he approached me and he had tears in his eyes, he had been very moved and was very positive about the film. So here we had a person whose primary responsibility was just to see that things worked well at the festival, but he was moved by the stories that were told in the documentary—black, non-LDS.

MARGARET: In San Francisco, the guy who was running the equipment had had a really bad day because his equipment had gone out on him and he'd had to really scramble to get things working, and the sound wasn't quite where it should have been, so he was in a really grumpy mood. Darius is just such a calming presence, he calmed him down and we showed the film. And afterwards he said, “I would really like my wife to see this.” I said, “Well, we're showing it tomorrow in Oakland.” I didn't think he would come, but he and his wife came. The people there—a fully LDS audience—asked how it was received in the film festival. We said, “Well, somebody's here from the festival.” And he said it was one of the gems of the festival. Good reactions from all sides.

**Do you have plans for more film festivals?**

MARGARET: No, except Barbados. We can't afford it at this point. The truth is, our money now has to go towards duplication and packaging. We *are* going to

go to Seattle, and we've already arranged that one—it's not a film festival, we'll show it at a theater, and that's just because there were so many requests in that area. We found a really good deal on plane tickets. And then we've got one at Fort Douglas in October, but pretty much now we're just focused on wrapping this baby up and getting it packaged and distributed. We would like to be on a PBS station. We've been working so hard on the doc itself that we haven't really moved in trying to get that other to happen, but we plan on it.

I think we'll have things ready to sell in September. We had hoped it would be August, but we're a little behind, so I think it'll be September. It's been a long project—because it started with these two young men way back there. But I actually feel that there's good timing.

DARIUS: Exactly what I was thinking. These things are occurring as they should. We're doing our part, we're continuing to try to move forward, but it's going to happen as it needs to happen. We've found that all along—that there are elements that have needed to happen at a particular time, whether it's the manna from heaven that dropped down or an individual being available. I think it's going to happen just as it needs to. So we'll keep moving forward doing our part.

#### Darius, what was it like founding the Genesis Group?

DARIUS: Considering what I think its importance was, I'm not sure we fully recognized that significance at that time. Three black male converts to the Church meeting, praying, asking God to guide us, what we can do to hold onto black members—and there were too few, and too many of that few falling away from the Church—feeling led to approach the senior brethren, and meeting with a positive response, where three junior apostles were assigned to meet with us. When you consider just that—you know, if you are privileged to be able to meet with a member of the Seventy, you're a happy camper. But a member of the Twelve? No, *three* members of the Twelve. And to meet in an ongoing way over a period of months to talk about these issues of blacks in the Church and priesthood and some of the pain.

I don't know that we realized the significance of it. Gene Orr, Ruffin Bridgeforth, and myself—Ruffin was the senior among us. He had joined the Church in 1953, he was the elder statesman. I was in the middle, I joined in '64. And Gene joined in '68, I believe. But in Gene's wife's journal, she noted that the first day we met with those three apostles—who happened to be Elders Gordon B. Hinckley, Thomas S. Monson, and Boyd K. Packer—was June 8, 1971. Now, that date is significant

if you fast-forward exactly seven years to the day, June 8, 1978: the reversal of that policy on priesthood restriction.

We didn't know what was in the future, any of us six. But God knew. And we were just trying to move forward and do that which we saw that was immediately in front of us. We were so busy watching the trees, I don't know that we noticed the forest. But indeed it was a forest.

They're wonderful men. Ruffin Bridgeforth has since passed away, in 1997, after having served as the president of the Genesis branch for twenty-five and a half years. Any time a member of the Church thinks they've been in a calling for too long, think of Brother Ruffin. Gene Orr has moved with his wife to Canada, north of Edmonton, St. Albert, active in the Church. They've raised their family in the Church, and they have seen the change that has come about.

When I joined the Church in '64, it was estimated that worldwide there were 300–400 black members. And now to hear at the recent commemoration of the priesthood official declaration #2, that Elder Child estimated that there are, worldwide, possibly as many as a million blacks in the Church. To go from 300–400 to a million, to see that growth, has been a remarkable experience for all of us. Ruffin saw part of it, Gene and I are still watching and are amazed.

And yet we know there's more to be done. We are not the people, I believe, that Christ would have us be. We haven't learned quite yet fully to respect one another as brothers and sisters, regardless of race or ethnicity. We're working at that, and the work isn't done. It likely will never be done until the return of the Savior, so we have a job in front of us.

But looking back at that, I am amazed at the growth, at the changes that have come about since 1971, and even more amazed at the changes since 1978 and the reversal on priesthood restriction. God is good. ■





# J. Kirk Richards

*J. Kirk Richards is a fine arts painter particularly known for his religious paintings. He has also illustrated a handful of children's books, recorded an album of songs with another in process, and filmed music videos. Interviewed July 11, 2008. Web: [jkirkrichards.com](http://jkirkrichards.com)*

**You do a lot of things—painting, music, videos, children's books. How did it all start for you?**

I think everything started with music. As a child, I was raised on music. I took piano lessons and French horn lessons for years and years, so that's where I learned discipline for one thing, but also an appreciation for the arts. Incidentally, my French horn lessons were at the fine arts center at BYU, so I would go to my lesson there and walk past the paintings that were on display and just really got excited about art.

**With art, how did you start?**

Like many creative kids, I used to draw as a child. Then as a young teenager I saw the movie *Dead Poets*

*Society* and decided that I didn't want to do music anymore. I stomped up to my parents and demanded that they let me quit music lessons. They were really wise and encouraged me to continue, saying that if I felt the same way after a year, they'd let me stop music lessons. So I did, and a year later, I felt the same way, and I ended up swapping—I convinced them to let me stop music lessons in exchange for art lessons. So, from about the age of 14, I had a private art teacher and was also taking art classes at school.

**How soon did you realize you loved painting?**

I've always had a love for it. But I wasn't really committed to it as a profession until my first year at BYU. I was a freshman there, determined to study something more practical—in fact, I took Statistics 222H, which for an artist has absolutely no value. But I took a figure drawing class towards the end of my freshman year from Hagen Haltern, and I loved it, and pretty much from that point I knew that that was what I was going to need to pursue.

**Did you continue taking art classes at BYU? Was that your major?**

I did. I don't think I declared one, but I was thinking about studying something in the sciences, and then by the end of my freshman year I was determined to be an artist, so pretty much from the end of my freshman year on, that was my major.

**You served in Rome, right? How did your mission affect your growth as an artist?**

My mission totally affected my artwork—anybody who's been to Rome and Italy knows how much art there is, I mean, it's just overflowing with art. You get off the plane and practically every corner you turn, you're bumping into sculptures and statues. During preparation days, we'd go to museums like the Vatican Museum in Rome, and some of the great churches that have amazing paintings—like Caravaggio paintings—but even in the smaller towns, there was a culture of art which affected my painting. Also, I think the colors in Italy are reflected a lot in my paintings—the rust browns and a lot of the color choices I use, the muted palette and the color harmonies come from Italian architecture.

One other thing: the Italians have always loved the human figure, so even in the modern era, when New York took over from Paris as the center of the art world, and the great American painters were doing very abstract things, all through that time, even through today, Italians have had a continual history of using the human figure in their artwork. That's something I love about the Italians and their artwork.

**When you got back off your mission, you finished your degree. What happened after you graduated?**

I was married two semesters before I graduated. I had sold a few paintings, and then I accepted a job to illustrate a book, *The Carpenter of Galilee and the Welcoming Door*, by Kenny Kemp. That was a big project for me—I think there were 26 paintings in that book—and I was simultaneously doing my own paintings. I don't know how many I did that year, but it became pretty apparent to me that I liked to do my own thing, and that it would probably pay better than illustrating a book—my training wasn't really in illustration. I knew that I just needed to paint the paintings and images that I had in my head and my heart.

**What's your experience been with making ends meet and making it work financially? What kind of obstacles have you run into?**

The biggest obstacle, especially initially, is just believing that somebody's going to buy these paintings. It's a leap of faith, not knowing where they're going. And then, of course, having the funds, because it costs a lot to make art. And if you're going to do your own promotions, you've got to pay for that. We tried to keep our expenses extremely low at the beginning. It takes a little while to develop both your style and to figure out exactly where you want to go, and so it's a good idea to not be paying a lot of unnecessary overhead at the beginning.

**What's a typical day like for you?**

I used to sleep in till ten o'clock, but now I have an assistant who comes at eight o'clock every morning, which is early for me. I don't set specific hours

of the day aside for anything in particular—I usually try to just schedule the week and make sure I get certain things done. I'll spend anywhere from zero to eight hours a day painting; it depends on how much other work I have, other projects I'm working on.





I spend a lot of time painting, finishing frames, installing paintings, getting images to magazines or putting them on the website. We've been doing some video and music and things that give me a break from art—interests I have that I like to learn about and pursue.

I often work at home. We just purchased a studio space down in Redmond, which is a suburb of Salina, and once a week I go down there for a day or two. It's pretty big—it used to be a salt packaging facility—and some of the walls are pretty high, almost 17 feet, so I can spread out and work on big projects down there without any distractions, then come back here and get things done in between family obligations.

### How do you balance family obligations with your art?

Sometimes it's hard, because my brain is always in this creative world. It's easy for me to not pay attention to what my kids are telling me or wanting me to look at or whatever they're doing, but we do what most Church members do—family home evening, we try to eat dinner together, I often put the kids to bed, we often do it together. Every once in a while we take the kids out on one-on-one dates with a parent, and I try to go on dates with my wife. Actually, I do a lot with my wife. She helps with the business a lot, so we are often together all

day, except when I go down to the studio, and she's an artist, too, so I work with her and help her develop her interests.

### How many projects do you do at a time?

I probably have 40 paintings in progress. Some of them move a lot faster than others—some are large, some are small. I've been consistently finishing about 25 paintings a year, but I'm trying to finish 40 this year.

### Are those commissioned, or are they your own thing?

People who commission me know what I'm known for, so even commissions these days are usually along the lines of what you'd expect me to want to do in the first place, so that's not a big issue. But I would say about thirty percent of what I do is commissioned work, and the rest are spec paintings that are either selling out of the studio here or going to galleries.

### What's your work process, taking a painting from start to finish?

I usually start with a sketch, a little thumbnail in my sketchbook that kind of looks like a doodle, maybe



*Cherubim and a 'Flaming Sword'*

three by four inches or something. I usually jump right to the painting from that; I don't do a lot of studies in between. I grid out the sketch fullscale and transfer it onto the canvas or the panel, then jump right into painting. I rarely use a live person, but sometimes I'll bring my wife in, have her hold her hand in a certain position or something, taking photos for specific information I need to put in the painting along the way. That's really it. And then I just try to finish it off the best I can.

There are some variations to that. Sometimes I won't even do a sketch, I'll just start with a panel and start throwing textures and color on it and build up layers and see what happens. Other times—rarely—I do a more thorough process where I start with a sketch, make the sketch bigger, try to fill in more details, and then do that a couple times before I go to a full-size painting.

**Is it always easy to start painting, or is it sometimes harder to motivate yourself to stir up the passion?**

If there's anything else that you need to do, that's easier than getting down to painting. Getting ready—making sure you've got the right paints on your palette and your brushes are ready and your reference is ready—there's a whole setup before you even start. And then it just takes a lot of energy, so when there are other things to do, it's easy to put it off. A lot of my best painting is done at night after the kids go to bed and I don't have distractions, when my day isn't fragmented. I don't know that there's anything specific I do, except that it helps me to have music going while I'm painting. And I'm so deadline-driven these days that I just have to get down to it.

**Speaking of music, what music do you listen to?**

I was raised on classical, of course, but I love rock music, so I usually listen to some sort of rock. If I'm sitting in a chair looking at paintings, I'm likely to just fall asleep in the chair, so it does keep me awake. And it keeps my mind busy enough to not be tormented by the visual problems I'm trying to solve, but it leaves enough room for me to be thinking about how to solve them.

**Could you expand on that a little more?**

For example, I like to have some areas that are realist and finished while other areas are abstract. One problem will be, how am I going to leave some things abstract but have them still make sense in the painting? How am I going to finish some things off in a realist way

but not take them too far? How am I going to make the eye move through the composition the way it needs to? Am I going to put colors here that relate to each other? Are my values working? Does something stick out too far? Does something not stick out far enough? And does it stick out too far in bright lights but not in dark lights? So those are all things you're trying to resolve simultaneously, not to mention the structure—is her arm in the wrong place? Is her hand way too small? Is the gesture impossible or grotesque? Things like that.

**How did “Cherubim and a Flaming Sword” come about?**

One of the things I love is a narrative as it relates to the painting—a painting that brings in a narrative in the context in which the painting is understood, or a point of departure that could fill a painting with meaning. The scriptures have always been one of my greatest sources of inspiration, and “the cherubim and a flaming sword” was a phrase that I loved. It brought feeling to me—the idea of cherubim and a flaming sword and the whole story of Adam and Eve, and these angels that were placed to guard the tree of life—and I wanted to capture that feeling visually. It was kind of a combination of beauty and power and mysticism, and these were all feelings that I wanted to put in this painting.

I have a few sketches I did which look nothing like the painting, and then I started the painting. I was painting these leaves, three-dimensional and floating around these angels, and it just wasn't working. Then I went back and sanded it down and did a flat leafy pattern, which ended up working out nicely.

**How did “Mother and Child” start?**

When I was a teenager, my teacher, Clayton Williams, had me doing these little exercises—they were basically pencil shading exercises where we did these sweeping shapes that I filled in. I thought they were beautiful designs just as little pencil studies, but I wanted to make a painting, and so I did these same sweeping designs around a mother and child. That's how it came to be, about the same time as the other painting.

**You do a lot of religious, Judeo-Christian themed artwork. Why that as opposed to whatever else you could have done?**

I've always loved the paintings of Carl Bloch, and there were some other artists I loved that had Christian

themes. And in Rome the artwork is very much church-related. Every once in a while somebody asks me if I do it because I believe it or if I do it for money. I certainly do it because I believe it and because I love the narrative. I love the principles that Jesus Christ taught. I love the feeling of those paintings of Christ—all through time there are paintings that move me, though of course there are paintings of Christ that don't move me.

I could probably do much better financially if I would abandon the religious themes. There are lots of galleries that would show my work if it wasn't religious. Almost all of the major galleries want to remain secular to some degree, and so I've had galleries say, "Yeah, I'd love to show your work if you can give me a bunch of paintings that aren't religious." And the relationship usually ends there.

### How does the gospel influence you both in your art, content and theme-wise, and as an artist?

Well, it's provided most of my themes, or at least a point of reference. It's also provided a place where I can make those paintings that I love and do it for a living—a unique place, actually, in terms of being able to paint Christ and have it provide for my family. We have the Springville Art Museum, and they even have a show dedicated to religious artwork every fall. The Church Museum has a competition they sponsor regularly. The Church magazines are always looking for great artwork to use.

I don't necessarily paint specifically for any of these places; a lot of my work is not meant for Church magazines, because it's not strictly didactic. There's a symbolist aspect—people have to read beyond the literal things that I put in, like wings and halos, and see the symbol behind it in order to understand them—and the magazines are specifically designed to focus on doctrine.

The gospel has definitely provided subject matter, a point of reference, and a community that allows me to do what I like to do.

### What is it like painting Christ?

I respond to classical, idealized imagery of Christ. And so I try to do that in my own paintings, which means not relying too much on visual reference material. A lot of artists will find a model they like who represents what Christ would look like to them. I've tried to avoid that. I do use photos to get light and a little bit of structure, but then I try to feel my way through the rest and put some of the characteristics that I feel are representative of Christ into the painting, in the image.

I also love the feeling of antiquity—I love the feeling that this painting represents someone who has been the Lord since the beginning of time. A lot of paintings have textures and glows to them, a spiritual quality to them, if that's possible in a painting.

I try not to make him look like he's Scandinavian or from backwoods America, like a fur trapper or something. I have Christ paintings I've done that I still like, and there are some I can hardly stand to look at. It's not an easy thing. Hopefully if I keep trying, by the time I die I will have done something lasting.

### Earlier you mentioned mysticism. How do you see it influencing your work?

A lot of people don't like it. I've heard people talk about mysticism as though it were in opposition to the clarity of the gospel. But for me, not everything is crystal clear. I have a lot of questions, which I think is part of growing—Joseph Smith went out and prayed and got an answer, and he and all the prophets and the scriptures have encouraged us to do the same thing. So it's not like we have every answer; we're encouraged to search.

That said, I just think there is something magical—if I can say *magical*, which kind of goes with *mystical*—about the whole concept that the gospel's built on: the Atonement. We can get a glimpse, but as much as we try to understand it, there's still something beyond our comprehension. And the power of God—I know it exists, I don't know how exactly it works, but I know that it's real. There is beauty in some of the romantic narratives surrounding the gospel, too, and I think they're great for paintings. Every once in a while there's a little bit of a grey area between what's literal and what's figurative. Even in the footnotes in the scriptures you'll sometimes see the word "superstition."

For example, this man was sitting at the pool of Bethesda, waiting for the moving of the water, because the first person to touch the pool after an angel supposedly touched it would be healed. Would God really send an angel to disturb this water every now and then so that one person out of this crowd who's waiting could be healed? I don't know. Maybe he would, but regardless, it's a romantic idea, and I think it's beautiful and has merit whether or not we interpret it literally.

### You mentioned some of the symbolic aspects of your work. Do you consciously decide to plan them in, or do they just come about as you're painting?

It works both ways. Sometimes I'll have an idea, I'll



*Mother and Child*

OK



think, “It would be great to do this, and then it’ll represent this,” but then it’s not working as an image, so I have to make changes. And then I think, “Well, that’ll mess up my metaphor.” Oftentimes it’s a compromise and I have to exchange metaphors in order to make a good picture. So the meaning of the painting at the end may not necessarily be what I anticipated at the beginning.

#### How did you get started with *I’ll Be There With Belzon* and your other children’s books?

My wife likes plays on words; she’s always mixing words up in her head, and so she and her companion in the mission field—she went to Norway—always joked about this character, Belzon, who would follow them around. They’d say they’d be there with Belzon.

So I started working on that book even before I finished Ken’s book. I liked separating the two worlds, this spiritual fine art world and the book world. It was mixed in Ken’s book, and I wanted to separate them—and to work in colors I would never use in a painting. That Belzon book is pretty much all blue.

It took me a few years to get that book finished, because I didn’t want to take it all the way myself. I wanted to hand it over to a publisher, so I sent it out to many publishers and got quite a good response. I heard immediately back from the lady who’s been doing all the Lemony Snicket books, the editor at HarperCollins, and we talked for a while. She loved the images but just wasn’t quite as keen on the story.

We ended up printing it ourselves and getting it out there. We’ve sold quite a few copies, but it’s still a hobby for me.

I do school visits. I’ve done some here locally and some in California and Tennessee, where the school has me come in and read to the kids. It’s a lot of fun. The

kids are so smart, and they pick up on things you can hardly imagine, things that I didn’t even notice or read into in my own books.

#### You’ve recorded some music as well. How did that your album *Granted* start?

We actually started it here right before we moved to Nashville, then we really got into it in Nashville. I’ve always wanted to record, and I’m about to finish a second recording project that I’ve been working on for maybe five years, *Somewhere Along the Line*. And you know, this process continues to elude me. But I love it, and I think that some of the new songs are closer to a sound that I’m happy with. I love lyrics, and I love music, and I love the process of engineering sound. It’s a very different area of art, although there are many things that are similar or parallel. But I hope maybe further down the road, I’ll really get something magical. It’s something that is still quite a learning process for me right now.

#### And you’ve done music videos.

I love working with rhythm and flow and all of the wonderful things that you think about in poetry and song lyrics. To add visuals and to play with those aspects in a visual medium is just really amazing. With a painting, you have rhythm and motion, but it doesn’t move through time. The great thing about video is that it moves through time.

#### What are your favorite and least favorite parts of life as an artist?

I love to start a new painting. And I love to finish it. It’s all that work in the middle that I don’t love

as much ... I love to start new creative projects, and I could do that all day long. There's so much work involved, and sometimes I love it, but sometimes it's just work that you've got to get through. I love that people respond to the work—I love hearing that it has really made a difference for somebody, or that it's really struck a chord with them. I love being at home. I love not having a boss—I'm an independent person that way.

The things that I don't like are sometimes having to let go of a painting before I've completely resolved everything. I hate not being able to love my finished product. My consolation there is that even Leonardo da Vinci did some pretty bad paintings, and yet the Mona Lisa's arguably the most famous painting in the world. And then of course there's always financial stresses.

There's much more that I love about it than I don't like, and that's why I'm an artist. And I wouldn't trade it.

**With your paintings, who do you see as your audience? Mormons only, or Christians in general?**

Definitely Christians. I've done a few LDS-specific paintings, but I haven't done a lot—partly because I like the timelessness of Christ imagery and angels and things like that. I don't want to pin my paintings down to a representation of the late 1800s or the 20th century. I do have an audience that hopefully is LDS and non-LDS Christians and even beyond—you know, I hope somebody can look at the “Cherubim and a Flaming Sword,” and whether they be Buddhist or Jewish or atheist, feel kind of drawn into it, and be kind of moved and curious about it.

**If you could have lunch with anyone, who and why?**

One of my last days in the mission field, I tracted down Ennio Morricone. He's the composer of the soundtrack to *The Mission*. I left a note with his doorman, and he wrote me back. But I can't find that letter anywhere. ■





# Aaron Martin

*Aaron Martin is a student at Brigham Young University majoring in pre-management. He works for both BYU Broadcasting and Mirror Films in a variety of capacities. Interviewed July 10, 2008. Web: [aaronmartin.org](http://aaronmartin.org)*

## How did you start working for Christian Vuissa?

I volunteered at the LDS Film Festival. We were watching his film at the film festival, and the film stopped. I ran upstairs to see what was wrong in the booth. That happened a couple times, and Christian saw me do that, just as a volunteer, making sure things worked out right, and he called me up about a month later and said, “Hey, would you be interested in a job with me?” That’s how it is in the film business—to get your foot in the door, you sometimes have to work for free.

## How did you get started with all this? Back at the beginning.

I was a bored teenager messing with his camera. And I started out on the computer with 3D animation—

the first thing I ever edited was this weird 3D animation of spaceships shooting each other and stuff blowing up.

Then I filmed a football game, the Emotion Bowl, and showed the video at our school talent show. The seminary teacher saw it and asked if I wanted to make a video for the dedication of the new seminary building. I made that video and it was really inspiring for me, because I felt strongly that video and film and media are so important for the Lord’s work. Not only did I want to do film, but I wanted to concentrate on the spiritual side of film. So within the span of my senior year, I decided I wanted to do film and wanted to make Church films, whether working for the Church or for an independent filmmaker.

## During those years, what did you do to develop your skills?

I developed them on my own. I’d sit down at the computer and just play with the footage. I spent a lot of time figuring programs out, teaching myself. I know a couple friends who are really good painters or



photographers, but they never do it. Just going out and doing it is how I developed it.

Having friends who loved making videos helped with that. And adults in my life—like the seminary teacher, and a computer teacher who also taught video—encouraged me. The encouragement, along with feedback and the excitement they brought to me, helped me develop my skills.

#### How did you make time for it?

Not having a girlfriend was really helpful. *[Laughs.]* It's ambition. I didn't look at it as just a hobby but as

something I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing. That sort of ambition and mindset made it easier to make time for it. We all have lots of time; it's just planning.

#### When did you decide to make films, when did it become "This is what I want to do"?

That high school desire to make Church films really solidified on my mission in Berlin, being around that spirit and influence that's so helpful to the spreading of the gospel. I saw lots of great institutional films, and I think there are ways to improve, and I feel I could help with that.

With deciding to make this your vocation and maybe even a calling, in a way, what kinds of opposition and discouragement have you run into?

In the film industry, ninety-nine percent drop out. One of the reasons is money—there's not a whole lot of money out there for independent filmmakers, and you have to be really good and have a lot of ambition to make it. People have to like you, you have to put together a good crew, find good actors, find a good script—all these things need to come together. It's hard. It's grueling and can be really rough. If you're in the middle of production, you'll be on set from seven in the morning till maybe 3 a.m. for three weeks, and you have no other life during production. You may be able to go to church on Sunday. It's pretty grueling with independent filmmaking because they're tight on budgets—it's just way too expensive to spread your production through a couple months. The intense nature of filmmaking is too hard for some to handle. It's a rude awakening sometimes for people.

#### How do you deal with the intensity?

You have to keep your hopes high, never forgetting that you can make it, that you can make a difference in people's lives. One key thing is how you deal with it. If people are impatient on set, it's not personal. You just have to roll with the punches. And when you screw up, take responsibility for it.

#### What do you consider the most valuable traits for filmmakers?

Ambition. Creativity is obvious. An open mind, open to advice and to correction. And from day one, act as if everything you do totally matters. Reliability, too. For those few weeks you're on production, you can't

do anything except dedicate your time to that. If you're not there for a few hours, it's almost like you're not even there anymore, because you've missed stuff. When I think of filmmakers I know—Christian, for example—it's ambition, knowing exactly what you want and being able to make decisions quickly.

**How do you keep the ambition alive? Because certainly there are days when it's hard.**

Some days it's really hard to keep that alive. But there are always things to look forward to when you get discouraged—it may be kind of stressful now in pre-production, but production is next, for example. And there are always opportunities to improve yourself. With filmmaking, it changes every day, so if something's hard now, you'll be doing something different later. It may also be hard, but it'll be different.

It's always good to have a life goal—what you want to be, what you're working for, never becoming complacent with where you're at, and knowing what your end goal is. It's never easy. If your ambitions are high, it's going to be hard no matter what.

**What projects have you worked on?**

I worked on a couple student films as a production assistant. One was called *To My Future Self*; the other one was *Unhinged*, written and directed by Nick Stencil. Basically, anyone can be production assistants on those, even if you're not in the film major.

On one of them I did continuity, where you make sure that when you do retake or shoot a new scene, things are in the right place when the next scene starts. I also kept track of what was shot, why they didn't like a certain shot, why they did a retake. One of the nights we had to do so many takes that it took from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. And we had church the next morning. It was just ridiculous.

**What was it like filming *Berlin*? (*Berlin* was a BYU-produced musical.)**

*Berlin* was really awesome. It was a mixture of my two loves, film and TV. I was on camera for almost two weeks. The first week I was on this wide camera that was stuck up in the corner in this cramped crawl space.





I couldn't even move the camera that much. It got the establishing shots, not a whole lot of interesting shots. Then the second week I was on a different camera.

The first week we filmed it with an audience, so we had to try to make the cameras be invisible. We had to be back off the stage a lot. It was in the Motion Picture Studio on one of their sound stages, and the set was more stylistic—they had four different sets with a road going in between them, with the sets mainly made out of rusty metal bars. The audience couldn't really see everything, since it was designed to be filmed.

None of that first week was very usable, because we had to cover our cameras in black and you couldn't get a whole lot of shots without seeing the other cameras. The second week was more controlled. We went scene by scene, spending a few hours on a scene, more like a film but still really quick. It was shot on three cameras all at once, which was efficient.

The first week, we'd come in at 5 p.m. and have a crew dinner, discussing what happened the day before, even watching the footage. The director would say what could be improved on and what he wanted for that day. A couple hours later, after everything was ready to go—tapes were in, the director was ready, and the audience was there—we'd start rolling. The audience had plasma

screen TVs in front of them, so what we were doing live with the cameras, they were seeing live on their TVs.

The second week we'd be there from morning till evening and shoot a few different scenes each day. We'd shoot a scene and then the director would say, "We need to move the cameras," or "Let's do it again because I didn't like how the camera moved." We'd wait till we had one good take—just like a film.

The rush of the camera rolling, the fun people you're around, and the fun that you have doing the productions—that's what makes it the coolest college student job in the world.

**Tell us more about your work with Christian—what you do, what projects you're working on, etc.**

When I started out, he was thinking I would be an editing assistant, overseeing a little of the post-production of this last film, *Errand of Angels*. I told I could do finances, so I started doing finances. I told him I could do computer stuff, so I started doing all the computer stuff for him. And then he said, "Okay, maybe you can be production coordinator." So now I'm doing film calls. We're in pre-production for this next film, *Father in Israel*. It's a charming film about a Mormon family where

the dad's called to be a bishop. It has a bit more humor than *Errand of Angels*, and it addresses some cultural differences—for example, one of the daughters is marrying a convert, and the parents aren't members and so they can't go in the temple—but in a very positive way.

We just got done with casting. We probably auditioned 400 different people. We're going to be filming in Provo and in Salt Lake, and we want to have it ready by the LDS Film Festival in January, then release it to theaters by Father's Day.

### What's a typical day like with Christian?

Every day is different. Some things are consistent—like finances and administrative stuff—but you just go along the process of a film. You start out with nothing in pre-production, you have to organize the casting sessions, you're on the phone a lot, talking with people, organizing things. And organizing meetings for other things, like the LDS Film Festival.

We have a script competition at the festival where the three winning scripts will be produced. Christian picks the filmmakers he wants to produce the scripts, and they pick the scripts. Then the directors and the screenwriters collaborate to make the film work. That's the process they're in now, and their short films will be produced in the fall.

I only work like four hours a day, still part-time. Christian's a very driven person, and we like to discuss exactly what's going to be done every day. With the project we have right now, *Father in Israel*, we have all these things that need to be done, and you just have to figure out the next thing that needs to be done for each item. Once that's done, you cross it off. And when it's all done, you start producing another film.

It kind of reminds me of my mission a lot because he's Austrian, so he speaks German, and I'm working in an office doing accounting stuff. And random things like calling up renting vans.

### What are your long-term goals?

I've always wanted to become a producer. The director directs the actors during production, but the producer has more of a hand in the whole thing—picking the director, picking the script, picking the crew, even. He has more influence over the whole production, whereas the director has influence just when the camera's rolling.

So, my goal is to become a producer for the Church. I'm not sure exactly where the road leads for me right

now, but that's my life's goal, and I really, really want that.

I was entertained by films like *Singles Ward*, but I don't want to make films that make fun of ourselves. I want to make films about accepting what we are—what it is to be Mormon, not trying to be anything we're not. We're not trying to make films to make other people think we're cool or that they should join our church because we're awesome. But our way of life makes us happy. We also have difficulties, but I want to focus more on displaying the positive side of things in film, not too negative—not like *God's Army* where it's ridiculously negative in a lot of different ways, although I applaud Richard Dutcher for his courage to show things that have never been shown before on film. But I think better films are more accepting of what we are and focus more on the positive.

I can't really see myself being an independent filmmaker. I think it's because I know I want to make institutional Church films, not really blazing my own trail like Christian Vuissa is. He's redefining LDS cinema and blazing the trail for a lot of really good Mormon films. I remember on my mission, people would ask what I wanted to do, and I'd say I wanted to be a filmmaker. They'd ask what type of movies I wanted to make. I'd say church films, and they'd say, "What? Are you kidding me?" Sometimes I feel like I have to defend myself. People say, "You're not going to get big," and I say, "I know." People who become seminary teachers aren't in it for the money, and I'm not either. I want to provide well for my family, but I'm not in it to become a millionaire.

That's another thing about redefining LDS cinema—in just about everything, we can't really compete with Hollywood. They have better stories, better actors, better everything. But the one advantage we have is that we're Mormon, and they can't tell Mormon stories as good as we can. I think that's the problem with the Mormon market right now. We're losing our sights a little bit, trying to please more than just the Mormon audience, which is difficult. They spent around \$7–8 million on *The Other Side of Heaven* and it didn't make that much, whereas this new *Errand of Angels* film shot for under \$200,000 and looks just as good if not better than *The Other Side of Heaven*.

I don't know if I would have ever gotten into film if I was born maybe twenty years before. There are so many opportunities out there for aspiring filmmakers—almost everyone has access to the equipment—and if you have the ambition to go out and do it, to get people to notice you and not get discouraged, you can make it. Anyone can. ■



# New Play Project

*New Play Project is a Mormon theatre company based in Provo, Utah. They produce new plays, primarily in sets of short plays but occasionally full-lengths as well. Web: [newplayproject.org](http://newplayproject.org)*

## James Goldberg

July 18, 2008

First off, tell us about your background—where you're from, family background, college, mission.

I call Columbus, Ohio, home and I love it, but it's only been my immediate family's home for thirteen years. My family comes from all over the place: one grandma's family came from the Mormon colonies, and she spent her early life in Mexico. One grandpa (her husband) is from Punjab state in India and immigrated to the U.S. in the 1950s. My other grandmother is from southern California, although I believe her parents were born in Utah. My other grandfather was Jewish. His parents came over from Romania and he grew up mostly in L.A.

Both of my parents are great storytellers. My mother used to go do it formally, and my dad's just interesting to talk to. Both my parents and three of my grandparents were in education, so that's an important part of my background, too. I started college in Ohio at a small school called Otterbein with a reputation as a great theatre undergraduate program. That's a big part of my development skills: it was a great education.

I left to serve a mission in the former East Germany from 2002–04. By the time I came back, tuition had increased substantially, so I dropped out and worked for a while as a substitute teacher, math tutor, and high school drama director, and then transferred to BYU to do the last six months of my undergrad. After that, some friends and I founded New Play Project. I've been doing that and other projects for the past two years, and I recently started work on a master's degree in Creative Writing at BYU.

How did you get started with writing?

I wrote a lot in school ... not huge, polished works

so much as random little things in the margins of notebooks while not paying attention in class. Also in high school, I got involved in a sort of student-theatre movement, editing other people's plays, acting in and directing original work. After a while, I also start writing my own things: a few short plays, a libretto for an opera a friend of mine had written the music for, whatever came my way in terms of production opportunities.

### How has your family background influenced your writing?

Like I mentioned earlier, there's a great family storytelling tradition ... by which I mean that we talk a lot. My mom likes to tell one story about when I was a kid, she says it disproves theories that language developed to communicate needs or for survival purposes. When I had first learned to talk, she tells me, I would tell long stories, but whenever I wanted something, I would point and grunt. I think I've retained a little of that tendency to the present day. In any case, I grew up in a family culture that was very verbal, where questions were encouraged and answers were both extended and interactive. We also enjoyed word play and verbal games. When we read the scriptures as a family, we'd always stop every few verses to talk about them. That tradition was important: I was raised to think of meaning as an active rather than passive process. The multicultural element was also important in the sense that it adds urgency to storytelling: every Jewish holiday is a story, with a purpose. My mother would also work hard to try to give us a sense of our heritage from both her parents ... she couldn't just leave it to the larger culture to give us a sense of identity. Having different ethnic identity and traditions made that clear.

### How has your dual Jewish-Mormon heritage affected you as an artist?

It's actually Jewish-Sikh-Mormon, three heritages. I think the biggest thing is that growing up with stories from and respect for multiple traditions, you start to see that different people explain fundamental truths in different ways. And for me, there's a sense that the stories are part of what helps us to be close to God and to do what's right. Being an artist requires a belief in art. I'm what you could call a narrative artist, I guess ... a storyteller. I have to believe in the power of narratives, of stories. There are other elements, of course, each tradition had its own strengths and perspective that's informed me, but that's a much more in-depth conversation.



### Tell us about your writing process, focusing primarily on your plays and your essays. Where does a project begin for you? How do you tackle it? How long does it typically take?

Plays usually stay in my head a long time before I really get started with a draft. A lot of times I'll jot ideas or snatches of dialogue on notecards, sticky notes, the backs of receipts ... but it's just pieces, nothing terribly organized. By the time I start writing, I usually have three things in my head: 1) a thematic concern, something I want to talk about using the play form, 2) a theatrical concept: something visually or structurally interesting that says to me that this could make an interesting play 3) a sense of the characters. If I have one piece, I just think of it as a random fragment. Once I have both #1 and #2, it's a work in progress. Typically, a lot of the percolating process is getting characters and a rough sense of the events that will bring things out in them. #1, #2, and #3 need to intersect—I've got to have a sense of that.

Then I start to write a real draft. The thinking is usually months or more, but not always. The first draft is a day or days; the revision process is typically weeks.

### What's your revision process like?

I like to have people see my work—as a writer, you always know what you're saying, but it's important, especially in theatre where people can't stop or go back to reread something like in a book, to know if what you're saying is clear to a potential audience. So, when a draft is done, I take it to New Play Project workshop sessions when possible or send it to friends. When I get their feedback, I go over my script to clarify things and make other changes. A lot of times, something someone said will also spark a whole new idea for a change to make for more than clarity, something that can really improve the play.

### Where do you write? Always at the same place or does it depend?

When I'm not pressed for time, I do like to write a first draft longhand, with pen and paper, before feeling chained to keyboard and screen. I write first drafts on the porch, on the couch, at night or in the morning in bed, etc. The process of typing it up is actually really valuable: it becomes a first revision, making me go over the whole text at my mediocre typing speed and fix things up. In many cases, I'll write part of a play, get stuck and type it, and know how to continue by the time I finish revising/typing the first part: at which point I abandon the computer for couch or porch again.

I should also add that while those are the places I *write*, they're not necessarily the places where I compose my pieces. Ideas come and the best dialogue often form while I'm walking. Or driving (without music). Sometimes I have actual places to go, and that's nice. Often, I have to just go walk around the neighborhood or pace around in my house.

In our culture, we call it writing after the recording process, but creating and telling stories is a lot more than the writing part.

I am obsessed with stories, with dilemmas, and with meaning. The obsession fuels a near-constant process of composition, and sometimes the composition gets pressing enough to get committed to an actually written form. In my writing, at least, though, the intense process of unwritten composition almost invariably comes first.

### Which of the plays you've written are you most proud of? Why?

I like "Sinners" ... which I haven't actually written yet, but will be quite good. It's about King David and his sons, also Joab, who's a nephew or cousin ... I forget. I've got the thematic idea, a decent sense of the characters, and am trying to pick the right structure and sense of the theatrical. I have lots of individual ideas, but haven't settled on a comprehensive plan.

I like most of my plays, but for different reasons. I like what I did with "Prodigal Son" in terms of creating a structure I like, telling a compelling story, and drawing audiences in emotionally. I also love "Drip-Drop," which is a short comedy about a leak under a kitchen sink. I enjoy the characters and the visual concept, it makes me happy. And that's good enough. "To every thing there is a season," right?

### Where'd the idea for "Drip-Drop" come from?

I wanted to write something light, wanted to deal with the complexity of the world around us, and how the average person no longer comprehends the first thing about the inner workings of his/her own house. And then I got this idea of watching a husband and wife work on their kitchen sink, with the audience seeing it as if through the wall. I got a sense of the characters and wrote.

### Tell us about founding New Play Project—what led up to it, how it started, what sorts of obstacles you ran into (and how you overcame them), how the project has grown, etc.

A major figure in the founding of New Play Project was Arisael Rivera. He and I were in a playwriting class together and shared an interest in telling Mormon religious stories in a human, grounded way (at the time, I was working on "Maror" and Ari was working on "Somos Sangre"). One night, after auditions for a set of short plays, which was to my knowledge the last production to go up under the name of the Provo Fringe Theatre Co., I invited Ari over for dinner at my house if he was up to the 40-minute walk.

I'm a believer in the theory that great ideas happen more often in conversation, at the intersection of minds, than when a single mind operates alone, and New Play Project is great evidence of that. Ari and I shared a lot of artistic goals and were able to hash out a plan together as to how to create a company where writers like us could

get experience writing the kind of material we were most interested in, for an audience and in a community of writers that understood our shared values and could help us get better at writing with those values. We had another long conversation with two other friends and soon a company was formed ... in theory, at least.

The initial plan had been to do our first show in June of '06, but with Ari in New York, things didn't come together. When he came back in July to recruit actors and take a generous portion of the directing load, things got rolling. With the help of Eric Heaps and the BYU Experimental Theatre Club, we were able to get space for free on campus and put up a great first show.

Another early, significant influence on the company was Bianca Dillard. She set up the workshop program for helping revise new plays prior to the script selection process and helped put together program notes and lobby displays to help the audience connect with the issues in the play texts, which in turn help us focus on producing texts that interact in some meaningful way with audiences.

In December of 2006, a board made up of several volunteers who'd been active during our first three shows voted to incorporate as an official nonprofit theatre company rather than continuing as a loosely organized group. We'd been looking at the piles of required paperwork for some time and felt prepared to take the step. The reasoning was that our vision was one that shouldn't be confined to BYU students, and to keep opportunities open for others, we would need to move off campus.

Our central financial goal as an organization was "don't lose money." We decided the best way to pursue this goal was to produce plays on a shoestring budget at first and only increase spending as we were able to build up a larger paying audience. So far, the strategy has worked: we haven't been driven out of business yet partly because we kept our business so financially easy to maintain in the early days. We've moved from the highly inexpensive and simple rooms at Provo City Library to pricier but much nicer facility of Provo Theatre Company. We're awarding cash prizes to the audience's favorite playwrights. Overall, things have been good.

A key figure in our recent expansion and financial success has been Adam Stallard. Adam first saw a show, then became a regular attendee at our workshop sessions, gradually also developing an interest in company administration. His background is in computers, not business, but his unyielding drive to find solutions to problems and alter patterns of organization to improve performance created a major shift in how we operate. Under Adam, our audience has expanded and the

accessibility of the organization to those who want to get involved has been greatly improved. Theatre is an art, but it's a collaborative art, one that is both created and appreciated in groups. Adam's interest in group dynamics actually improves the art itself.

Our challenge now is to put together enough programming to bring in enough revenue to help keep the under-used space open. It will be a significant challenge, but we have a new wave of committed and insightful volunteers to help once again move the company forward.

### Did you ever get discouraged?

Incredibly.

### How did you keep going?

First recurring issue: any kind of art gets emotional, and collaborative arts are the most difficult emotionally, because everyone's exposed emotions have more chances to collide and cause conflict. I think it's fair to say that every significant figure in New Play Project has had feelings hurt by every other significant figure in New Play Project. Sometimes we disagree about artistic matters, sometimes over business and organizational matters. Sometimes we're just not as considerate of each other as we should be. We all let each other down from time to time, and we all gradually come to know each others' weaknesses as collaborators. Often we're working too hard and not feeling respected enough and that alone can create conflict.

The way we get over those kinds of conflicts is to move on and keep going. Some people end up moving on to other projects because of artistic, organizational, or personal differences of opinion, but for the most part we stick around and keep working because we share a fundamental belief in the value and uniqueness of what we're doing. It's that vision that drives you forward when things get rough: the vision of a culture strengthened by better and more socially responsible, spiritually-oriented writers.

Other frustrations have included an unending stream of government paperwork and accounting that sometimes take time away from the art, a necessary proliferation of checklists, and bad performances.

Another source of strength: Every once in a while, there's a moment of pure magic on that stage, of absolute connection of performance with audience. Knowing that from the beginning to the end of the process everything is original and home-grown makes the finished product that much sweeter. ■

# Arisaef Rivera

August 9, 2008

## What was it like founding New Play Project?

I was a theatre arts studies major and had about a year left before I would be graduating from BYU. There were four of us in my playwriting class who went to lunch together and started chatting about plays and playwriting. Eventually, after much joking around and eating some good food, we talked about putting our own plays together. After a while, at the end of winter semester 2006, five of us got together and read through a bunch of our plays. There were many that we liked, and we found some similar themes in them.

I was heading back home to New York for my brother's wedding and the rest were splitting up a bit as well. So the end of June came by and I got back. James Goldberg and I reconvened and decided to finally put on auditions. We picked about five plays for sure and wrote two more within the next two weeks for the specific performances. We had auditions and, between James Goldberg, Jennefer Franklin, and me, directed most of plays. It was pretty insane.

The show was a huge success—more people than we thought came out to our three performances in the Talmage Building auditorium on BYU campus, which we were able to book thanks to the Experimental Theatre Club. Two more performances there led us to get certification to become a non-profit theatre organization, and in December of 2006 we officially became a non-profit theatre company with our first performance outside of BYU held at the Provo Library Bullock Room in February of 2007. We've been moving along ever since, now performing in Provo Theatre Company (since December of 2007), and we hope to continue there.

## What has your experience with New Play Project been like so far?

NPP has been a good experience. By far the best part for me is watching it grow—the audience that comes back for more, and the actors who keep auditioning. As we've grown, we find more people who keep coming back—people like Adam Stallard, who heard of us and started helping out by transporting boards of wood to the Provo Library. Now he's our managing



director. People like Jana Stubbs, who auditioned, got in, and from then on has been with us; now she's assistant directed and has also directed an award-winning show. Not to mention Melissa Leilani Larson, who jumped on board as a stage manager last December and has been with us since, and David Tertipes, who came to auditions once when I invited my ward at ward prayer and is now our technical director.

And of course my lady, Lindy Hatch, who I coaxed into performing in my play in the first show, *Love Songs and Negotiations*, and who is now our advertising director. NPP has just been a pleasure to be a part of and to see grow.

## How do you see NPP affecting and influencing the Mormon arts world?

Honestly, I like to believe it already has and will continue to do so by giving young Mormon playwrights a place to tell their stories. I believe that playwrights, actors, and directors are all storytellers, and NPP is saying we don't necessarily write books about what we believe and what we go through, we're not knocking door to door sharing the gospel, but we're writing, producing, directing, and acting in plays. We're storytellers and this is how we tell stories.

Art is an amazing place to start a conversation, and I think NPP is starting an important one about faith, about life, and about finding hope in a world that continues to get worse. ■

# Bianca Dillard

August 2, 2008

## First off, how did you get involved with New Play Project?

James and I were in a dramaturgy class together. At the same time, he and Ari and Julie and Jennefer were all getting together and talking about producing plays, and I was thinking about getting a club or a group together to workshop plays and do stage readings. I was thinking smaller potatoes than James, but we were talking and I said, “Hey, I have this great idea—we should get writers and dramaturgs together and let them know that dramaturgy’s available and that it rocks.” He said, “Come to our meeting.” So I actually went to the first official New Play Project meeting and reading of some scripts. And it was a blessed union ever since.

## How did the workshop program get started?

The workshop program is something I wanted to do from the beginning, but it got pushed aside for a little while because we were trying to do productions. But then I said, “Let’s do this. Let’s get people together reading plays and talking about plays.” Everyone said it was a really good idea and that we should do it. And so we did.

I think there have been a lot of successes. Adam Stallard is a good success story I always like to use. He called me and said, “I heard you guys were doing some workshop thing.” And I said, “Yeah, you should come.” So he showed up on my doorstep and came every week after that—he was a really faithful member—and then he started bringing in plays that he wrote, and they’ve been really good. A lot of people have benefited. People who weren’t planning on writing plays before have started to write plays, and they’ve been good, which I think is the point of workshop.

## You’re on the script selection committee as well—what’s that like?

Script selection is fun and often sort of tedious. We get a lot of scripts, though at first we had a few scripts and it was mostly us—James, Ari and I would submit around eight plays, and then we’d say, “These are the okay ones, and these are the ones that’d be fun.” The script selection committee often meets late at night, and we’re often really tired. It started off with myself as the lead dramaturg, James as the artistic director, and Ari



as the playwright-in-residence, and then we would often invite someone else that we’d been working with—Katherine Gee was on one, and Mel has done one for us—so we can get some more feedback from various people and so it’s not just our say. There’s always a lot of conflict about which plays you like, which plays work, how they go together. I’m always pushing for good, solid messages and content. And I’m always saying, “No, this play doesn’t say anything. We’re not doing it.” The others say, “But it’s funny.” And I say, “I don’t care.” That’s my thing. Ari tends to like things that are fun and that would be cool to direct or act in. James is pretty balanced, and he’s always looking for new things that we could do. That’s our dynamic, I guess.

## How do you see NPP affecting and influencing the Mormon arts world?

Oh my gosh, it’s a revolution! No, really, I hope it does, and I think that in small ways it has already done so. The reason we put this together is that we saw a lack in representation—there are all of these plays and movies that are crazy and horrible, and then it seems a lot of the Mormon art world is saying, “Yay, we’re going to tell a happy story and it’s going to be sappy and disgusting and not real, or we’re going to make fun of ourselves and parody things,” and that’s just not what I’m interested in—either of those things.

I think we found a big enough community of people who aren’t interested in those things. What they want is something that is interesting, thought-provoking, sometimes challenging, but also wholesome and of good report—content you can freely endorse. And also, to be able to use our religious views that so much influence our lives and have them influence our work and our art is really, really important. Hopefully people will see that it can be done, that you can say interesting, good, and poignant things without sap or sex. ■

# Adam Stallard

July 28, 2008

## How did you get started with New Play Project?

My sister liked to act at BYU, she'd done several shows there, and she saw the audition flyer for the show by the Nelke. She auditioned and dragged her fiancé to auditions, and the two of them got cast in *A New Leaf*.

I think she wrote an email to Bianca, just letting them know that I existed and that I might be interested. At the time I wasn't doing any plays, I was just involved with a comedy improv club, and that was it, so I had the time. When my sister forwarded an email from Bianca, I found out that they did original plays.

So the next day after I got that email, I just showed up at workshop, which kind of surprised Bianca. I guess we don't get a lot of new, random people showing up. They were workshopping one of Mary Heaps' plays, *Trapped*, and I thought it was a great play. I got to read one of the parts and it was a really fun experience. I thought, "This must be a cool organization."

I immediately started asking, "Is there anything you need help with? Is there anything else I can do for you?" James Goldberg told me that they needed someone to transport cinder blocks—because in those days, we laid out cinder blocks and put planks of wood over the top of them and set that up in the Provo Library, performing our plays on that makeshift stage. So my job was to load those into a truck and unload them and form them into the stage. And I did that every night, for every performance for *A New Leaf*.

I auditioned for the next show, *Beneath the Surface*, and ended up acting and assistant directing. I had never directed before, but I enjoyed it—it was a fun, new experience for me. Ever since then I've been acting in and directing a lot of the plays. And I've done some writing, too.

## What was it like writing *Irrational Numbers*?

That was an interesting experience because it got accepted as an outline. A lot of that play is an outline—a lot of the actual script is these interjections that the daughter makes, telling the story of the Pythagoreans. I knew that something relevant to each of those sections had to go in between, but I didn't know what it was.

I just started writing, started pouring out tons and tons of dialogue. I didn't know exactly how it was going to fit, but I knew I needed to get something out, so I just started writing tons of dialogue between the mother



and the daughter, and the daughter and the husband.

And then I took that to workshop and said, "Guys, I've got lots of pages of dialogue. I don't know what to do with it." James suggested that we take scissors and cut up the dialogue. We tried it in different places, we said, "What if we put this dialogue in front of this dialogue? What if we put it in *this* section?" and we tried it in different places till we liked it. We found the pieces that were necessary and the pieces that weren't. Some of it got scrapped, a lot of it got used, we figured out where it should go.

That pretty much is how the play got written. It was a group effort, a collage of dialogue that fit within this frame of the Pythagorean story.

## What do you do now for NPP?

I'm the managing director. Basically, I do whatever I think is going to improve our situation organizationally. So I'm in charge of finding ways to get new volunteers, increase audience awareness, get more audience, make sure that we're solid financially—everything that is going to keep us going in the long run. And I invent a lot of jobs and hand them out to other people.

## How do you see NPP affecting and influencing the Mormon arts world?

Well, I think James Goldberg put it best when he said that we have a chance to have a Renaissance of our own, a voice of our own in the world. There's a lot that unites us as Latter-day Saints, and being able to express things that are uniquely ours, having them be valid rather than having to tone this down or take that out because we're trying to appeal to other audiences, having an audience that understands that, and being able to write to them, and just being able to use our own culture in our art, I think is really important. ■

# Melissa Leilani Larson

August 2, 2008

## How did you get involved with New Play Project?

When New Play Project started, I was going to grad school in the Midwest, and I'd heard about it through lingering on the Association for Mormon Letters discussion forum—I read some of the posts that James Goldberg had put up about his show, I read some of the reviews that other AML members had written about the show, and I got really excited. I also get the newsletter from the BYU Department of Theatre Arts, and they said NPP was looking for a stage manager. I thought it was a good way to get involved with a theater that was doing something I was interested in, which is producing new plays. I also like to call shows. I moved back at Thanksgiving of 2007, and I kind of fell in the deep end and called *America*, which was the first show they did in Provo Theatre Company.

## You've got your play, *Little Happy Secrets*, coming up in a few months. How did it come about?

During my third year at grad school, one of the requirements was to take a special topics class, and that year the special topic was writing a one-act, and you could write about anything you wanted. I thought to myself, "Okay, I need to write a one-act. What do I do? What do I do? All of the things in my head are too big, too big, too big. What's going on?" And *Little Happy Secrets* came out of one night when I was just frustrated.

We were supposed to each bring in an eight- to ten-page snippet the following week to give everybody a taste of where the play was starting and where it was going, and I was freaking out because I had nothing. And then at about 1:30 in the morning the night before, I just started writing this monologue. All of a sudden the main character Claire was right there talking to me and I was putting her on the page, and in a couple hours I had the first ten pages.

The response from my class to those first pages was really strong. They liked it a lot and said, "This is a voice we haven't heard before." I went home that weekend and wrote the rest of it.

This play is very Mormon and very personal. I always have to put a disclaimer on and say it's not autobiographical—it feels like it is, because it's one person who gets up and tells an audience, "This is my story of being in love with someone."



## The topic of the play, same-gender attraction, isn't exactly typical for a Utah Valley audience, is it.

It's a very difficult topic, but the intention was to write about it respectfully and in a mature way. That's the hope, anyway. Here's a real person dealing with this situation, and she's not going to make fun of it because it's her situation. She's not going to make light of it at the same time that she's not going to let it destroy her life.

I don't think that the play is overly negative. It does have some dramatic moments, but I think it also has some parts in it that are very funny—which is, for me, like real life. The best comedies make you laugh when you're either terrified or when you're in a very dramatic situation, where you're just so there in the scene dramatically, and then there's a laugh. It's a release. It feels good.

It's a subject that people need to talk about and be aware of. People make a lot of blanket judgments, and I think that's a mistake.

## How do you see NPP affecting and influencing the Mormon arts world?

I just think that the media in general is such a powerful influence. Film and theatre and music and art and literature are incredibly influential to me. So much of what I do and say and think comes from what I read and watch and listen to. I have a pet peeve, which is where people basically write off Hollywood, saying it's the devil's land and that we should give it up. If it's the devil's land, we should take it back. I don't agree that Hollywood belongs to the devil, but I want to take it back—the media is an ongoing battle, and we can't stop fighting it.

New Play Project can, for lack of a better word, be life-changing. The theater is literally a place where lives change, on stage and in the audience. ■

# Gary Elmore

July 17, 2008

## How did you get involved with New Play Project?

I got involved through a friend of mine who was working with NPP in Provo. When I came up to go to school there, she guided me towards it. It had very good word of mouth from here and I had met James Goldberg previously on a spring break trip, and he seemed like a very interesting fellow. I decided I'd take a chance and audition with them, as I've always loved theatre, and from my very first production I just fell in love with the company, and moreso the people. I've kept coming back ever since.

## What all have you done with NPP? Which do you like the most?

I've been a writer for NPP (though, granted, none of my scripts were ever chosen, with good reason), as well as an actor in four shows, a director of three, and a producer of the seven which were in *Lost and Found*. Acting has always called greatly to me and I am truly the most happy when doing that, but I find that my skills lend me most capably towards producing.

## Describe your experience with NPP thus far—the plays, the people, etc.

I've had really good experiences on the whole, especially considering all the drama that could occur in a drama department. I guess my favorite play experience would be a play called "Maror," which was a drama about a family who goes through the loss of one of their children. In it, I played a bishop who was trying to console the grieving family but was unable to. It makes me smile, remembering all those rehearsals we had in James' garage in the freezing Provo October weather, all of us huddled around the floodlights grasping for warmth and struggling with lines on a page. But I think what was most amazing was that even though the script was some very serious matter, we always managed to laugh during rehearsals and have a good time while still being productive.

As for the people, the list is as long as the number of people in NPP. Every single one of them is such a good person who is so dedicated to helping others in one form or another.



## Tell us about NPP: Austin.

NPP: Austin is a sister organization to NPP: Provo and is dedicated to the same basic principles—to help inspire the local community to enjoy the fine arts more. We are a fledgling organization, but already there is a lot of interest from the population and we're looking forward to producing our first set of shows, entitled *The Games We Play*, in mid-August. We are starting our workshop for new plays next week as well as beginning our first week of rehearsals. It is a busy and exciting time for NPP: Austin.

The idea came to me as I was sitting around discussing theatre with all my friends in Austin and how we wished there would be an organization such as this here, which would take a play from start to finish. I realized that I had already had a wonderful experience with a group that did this.

One thing we'd like to see, which my friend Katherine suggested, is having more than just straight plays performed. I would like to see the day when NPP: Austin has dancing, live music, and all the other forms of the fine arts. Then I think we'd finally be the true organization to help further such a cause. The future looks bright for NPP: Austin and we hope to collaborate with Provo to help expand and enlarge each other's programs.

## Postscript question: How did *The Games We Play* turn out? (Asked August 28, 2008.)

We had good attendance—about twenty-five people came into the library where we performed. After the show they gave us some good feedback afterwards, the most critical being that the shows need to be longer in the future, which is an interesting difference from NPP: Provo. Our next show is entitled *Every Dark Cloud*, and we plan to perform these sometime in mid to late October. ■

# Jana Lee Stubbs

July 21, 2008

## How did you get involved with New Play Project?

I was taking an acting class my freshman year, and Katherine Gee was in my class. She told us about their performance and I went and saw it—it was *A New Leaf*—and then she told us about auditions for *Beneath the Surface*. I wanted to audition but I had to work, so I emailed New Play Project to ask if there was a different time I could audition. They didn't check their email until after they'd already cast all of the shows.

I went through kind of the same thing for the next show—I had to work during auditions, but James Goldberg and I went through this really long email conversation back and forth about when I could come audition at a different time and such, and eventually I just said, "Okay, I'll come audition on my fifteen-minute break," and he said, "Okay, just let us know who you are when you get here and we'll let you come in and audition really quick." Then I got the times wrong for the auditions—I showed up an hour early. But James and Matt actually happened to be there, so I auditioned for them, amazingly I got cast, and I've been doing stuff with New Play Project ever since. It's been about a year and a half now.

## What all have you done, as far as acting, directing, that sort of thing? Which do you like the most?

I've acted, assistant directed, and directed. And now I'm the events coordinator. My general preference has always been acting, but I'm enjoying directing. It's new to me, but I'm going to be a theatre teacher, so it's good. I enjoy it, but I prefer acting. I just love being on stage and being able to interact with the other actors. I think a lot of it is being able to get up on stage and be in the moment and be able to be nervous before, and then after the show be like, "Yeah!"

## What has your experience with NPP been like?

It's been a lot of fun. I really enjoy New Play Project. I know I need to get out and do other things, but it's



hard for me because I love New Play Project so much. I love the people. And I've gotten to be really good friends with most of the people within New Play Project. I enjoy working with them and they help me a lot.

It's been a great experience for me because they don't necessarily have the biggest budget around, and they work with what they have, and they're working within an LDS setting.

As a theatre teacher, I know that's going to help me a lot—I can see what they've done with the little that they've had, in this area and setting, if that makes sense. So it's been really helpful, it's been an eye-opener for me, and all in all I've really enjoyed it.

## How do you see New Play Project and your experience with NPP affecting you as a theatre teacher?

Like I said, I think it'll be really helpful. It's helped me get into directing, which has kind of been one of the things that's been scary for me—the idea of directing. I think that's part of the reason I love acting because I can get up on stage and have someone else tell me what to do. But it's helped me learn to be more observant and more assertive.

James coaches me a lot and he says, "Okay, if you're going to be a theatre teacher, this is stuff you need to fix, this is stuff you're doing well." Hopefully it'll help me be a more effective teacher. ■

# Katherine Gee

July 22, 2008

## How did you get involved with New Play Project?

I inherited restlessness from my maternal line, and when it gets really bad, I do something spontaneous. This spontaneous thing happened to be a meeting for the BYU Experimental Theatre Company at BYU I read about in the little Theatre Media Arts newsletter the College gives out. This was in 2006. At the meeting, they mentioned that as a playwright, I might want to get involved with NPP and gave me their email.

Right after the meeting, I emailed New Play Project asking, “Can I play?” And I volunteered to direct for their upcoming production. This was back in the good old days when NPP was so desperate they said yes to people they hadn’t even met yet. It was just a little choice that’s really changed my life forever. I think it was divinely directed.

## What have you done with NPP?

I’ve directed for *In Progress*, *A New Leaf*, *Thorns & Thistles*, and *Lost and Found*. I’ve acted in several of the plays (but since they’re not all on the archive, I don’t remember all of them). I have submitted dozens of plays to New Play Project, but they have chosen to perform seven: “The Fall,” “Pennies,” “Isolation,” “Based on True-ish Stories,” “Sunny,” “High School Reunion,” and right now they’re putting on “The Fatted Dragon.”

I think I’ve done so much with NPP because they drag me in. I tell myself I’m just going to write a play, but then I want to direct, and then acting looks like so much fun. I love being involved in every show.

## Describe your experience with NPP thus far.

My goodness. I love NPP for very selfish reasons, I must admit. It has helped me grow so much as a writer and director. Those who are familiar with all the things I’ve done with NPP will certainly agree. That’s what I love about it. NPP takes you as you are and lets you grow, and grow you will! That’s the power of theatre. The people are so friendly and diverse, and the organization is extremely open to new ideas and new approaches.

It’s fun to be a part of something that is growing and still establishing itself, because it makes me feel like I’m part of a revolution—that’s an empowering feeling. I feel like I’m changing and affecting the world for the better. Perhaps it’s just a small little world, but it’s made



a profound impact in my own life.

Oh, and I forgot to mention the plays. I could write an essay about the plays. They are moving, inspiring, refreshing, sometimes not so good, and just fun.

That’s what the whole organization is about, and I think NPP lives up to its mission statement in an effort to produce values-driven theatre that is fresh and new and just plain *good*.

## What do you see as NPP’s strengths?

I consider NPP a miracle organization (I am an optimist). It has a way of attracting dedicated people it needs the most. A non-profit organization is hard to maintain with only volunteers, and it takes a lot of different skills to run a theatre company. This means that in order for it to progress, we need lots of people. I have noticed that when we need certain skills, people arrive. If you produce it, they will come.

We just happen to have volunteers that are really good at web design, or stage managing, or business, or finances. And since NPP is so transient (being in a college town with lots of people coming and going) it’s quite impressive that people continue to arrive to fill in the gaps.

I think what allows NPP to be so amazing is that its purpose is unique, and it does things with integrity. I have heard various criticisms of NPP throughout the years, but what amazes me is how we turn those critiques into productive tools to change. We are always getting better.

I also think we strike a chord with what the community enjoys. We provide not only thought-provoking entertainment, but opportunities to do theatre and to get involved. It’s something to believe in and support and enjoy. Uplifting and enriching entertainment that changes lives—you really can’t do better than that. ■

# Christina Phillips

July 22, 2008

## How did you get involved with New Play Project?

My first experience with New Play Project was at *All's Fair*. I worked with Jana, and she invited me. And I went because I like watching theatre. And I liked it, especially "Play the Game"—I loved "Play the Game" and thought it was fantastic. Then I went out of the country, so I wasn't around for the next few shows, but Jana invited me to *Thorns & Thistles*.

After that I got in a car accident and was in rehab. When I got out, I didn't have a job or anything going on. I had no life. Really. One night, I went down to her house and met James for the first time. We went to Nicolitalia Pizzeria and were sitting around eating pizza, and James found out that I had no life and was really bored. He was going to have me assistant direct, but it didn't really work out, and by the time he responded to me it was a week before the show, so he said, "We'll just have you help out at the show." He put me in running box office, and it was a little crazy, but all the theater happenings and goings on around me were awesome.

That's how I got involved with New Play Project, and I've been really involved ever since.

## What all have you done as far as writing, acting, directing, etc.?

Well, the first thing I did was run box office. And then for *Lost and Found* I acted. For *Swallow the Sun* I was house manager. And I've done odd jobs on the side—I take minutes at the open staff meetings, I'm working on a directory for New Play Project, I'm assistant directing for this show [*Long Ago and Far Away*] and I wrote a play for this show, "Darkwatch."

## How did the workshops affect your play?

They greatly affected it—most of the critiques I got were from workshop. My play needed fleshing out because you couldn't really associate with the characters. So I did a little bit of that, mostly in the last two scenes. But then it created an imbalance; the first half was still really skeletal, but in the next half things were happening all of a sudden—"Wait, what just happened? How did we get to this point?"

But then after another one or two workshops, I got it a little more balanced, to a point where people were actually really enjoying how it was going. Workshop



helped a lot. And I loved getting ideas from people, knowing that I didn't necessarily have to use them but that they were there for me to use if I wanted. My play wouldn't be anything like what it is if I hadn't taken it to workshop.

## Describe your experience with NPP thus far, the plays, the people, just the whole overall.

I'm in love with this organization, with what this group is trying to do, with the opportunities it gives to everyone. If you go to BYU and audition for a play, if you don't have any experience you probably won't get in, because there's so many people out there who do have experience and who are better actors.

But with New Play Project, average Joe from off the street can walk in and get cast for a part. Average Joe can write a play and have it produced. If you've had even just a little bit of experience with theatre, they'll let you try assistant directing or directing. You can come and help out with tech. Anybody can get involved in any aspect of this organization.

And I love the people. Holy cow! New Play Project people are amazing. I don't hang out with anybody but NPP people right now—these are my favorite people in the world. I love them. In a very short time I feel like I got to know them very well and got to be very good friends with them. Everybody has been very accepting, very open, and just very encouraging as far as the work I've been doing with the group.

I've told other people this, but the only reason I'm in New Play Project is that I got in a car wreck. If I hadn't gotten in the wreck, I never would have gotten involved, because I've always been too busy with school and work to do anything extracurricular. But I wouldn't trade getting in the car wreck for anything, because it got me into New Play Project. ■

# Dave Dixon

July 19, 2008

## How did you get involved with New Play Project?

I got a Facebook invite from Katherine Morris for the auditions for *Thorns & Thistles*. And I decided, what the heck, so I went and auditioned. I got double cast, and there's only been one show we've done since then that I haven't been involved with.

## What have you done with NPP?

Like I said, in *Thorns & Thistles* I played two roles—I was the lead in one play and then a supporting character in another. And then it was the next show that I didn't do anything in, which was *America*. Right after that I directed “Sick Cat,” and then I was the lead in James Goldberg's play “Prodigal Son.” I acted in Mahonri Stewart's *Swallow the Sun* as J.R.R. Tolkien. And I'm currently directing Ben Crowder's play “Tree of Blood.” Aside from that, I've done a number of the workshops, I've submitted plays that I've written, I've gone to a bunch of the open staff meetings and helped set up things, I've helped to get us signed up in the National Community Theaters Association. So, some of it is, you know, acting and directing, and then another part is helping all the wheels turn.

## Out of what you've done so far, what's your favorite show that you've worked on?

“Prodigal Son” was a marvelous experience because it required so much commitment—about twenty hours a week or more. When you have that short of a time budget to work on—two and a half weeks to put the whole thing together—and there's just three main characters and the director and assistant director, there's kind of a closeness and a camaraderie. It feels good to commit yourself *that* much to something. It's not just something you're doing on the side, but you're really spending nights. One night James and I went till seven o'clock in the morning just memorizing lines. I lay on the floor at his house, and he sat on the couch, and we just ran lines from about midnight till seven in the morning, because we had to get them through.

## What has your experience with NPP been like?

I love it. I think the thing I love about it is that they want as much as you want to give.



If you want to write a play, then write a play. If you want to direct or assistant direct, then you tell them you want to do it, and if they trust you and they've seen what you've done in the past, they'll let you do it. If you want to act, then you go and audition, and if they like you, you can go act. There are opportunities to do pretty much everything—if you want to run the house, if you want to help run the lights, if you want to do stage props. You're not just a meaningless cog in an already established wheel, but you're very much a mover and a shaker from the very beginning, and *everybody* is. I think that's what I love the most about NPP.

That and I love what they're trying to do: to create a place where the LDS community can speak. Whether the plays are religious or not, everything's informed by who we are, and New Play Project provides a place to hone those skills as well as to connect with the entire community and let people know we have a voice. New Play Project's goal is basically, as Mormons, to say, “We have a voice and it's important that we're heard, because we have amazing things to say.”

## How do you see NPP affecting and influencing the Mormon arts world?

I really do believe that Mormons have the most important message in the world to give. We clearly have an understanding of what they are, and if we can inspire the rising generation of artists—including ourselves—to really master the craft and commit themselves to serve God through art—not to serve art and let God be involved, which I think generations previous have done, but to really serve God through art and to make powerful, masterful pieces of art whether it be in theatre, movies, literature, poetry, whatever, based around what we know and what is real—then I think we're doing a tremendous service to the world. And I believe we can do it. ■



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