

# Mormon Artist

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# MormonArtist

COVERING THE LATTER-DAY SAINT ARTS WORLD

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# LDS Film Festival Reviews

## Cricketless

Review by Elizabeth Rhondeau

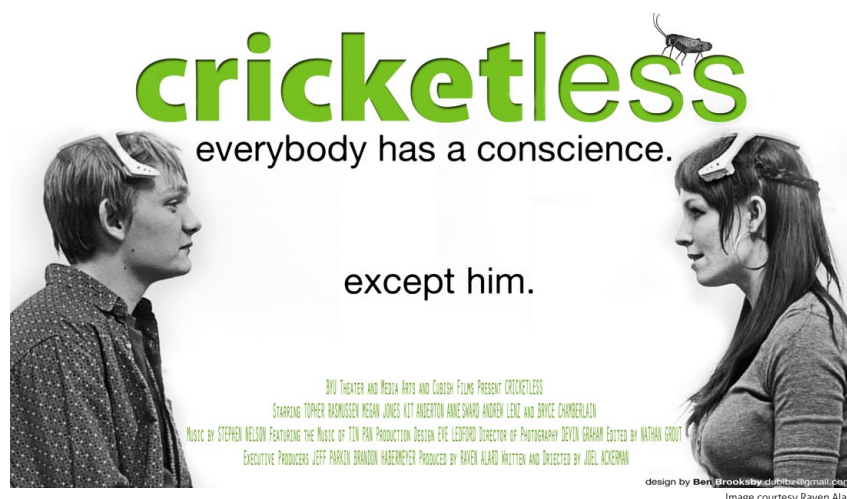
Writer, Director: Joel Ackerman

Producer: Raven Alard

Envision. Create. Illuminate. For an entire decade now the LDS Film Festival has called to creators everywhere for the fulfillment of their mission—and in Joel Ackerman's 2011 entry *Cricketless*, they got it.

I will warn you now that I went into this screening a little more than slightly biased; while most of the masses were intent on catching the Festival's international fare at *The Book of Life* in the Grand Theater, I had chosen an afternoon in Showhouse II based solely on the fact that I had seen some of Joel Ackerman's work before, and through those experiences had generally come to the irrefutable conclusion that whatever he touches turns to gold. His capstone film for Brigham Young University's film program did not disappoint, as might be noted from my own notes of the evening—a reveling, scribbled mess of departure from my more careful thoughts on previous films. *Crazy fantastic!* I wrote across the page, two sizes larger than practical or necessary. *Restored all faith in humanity! Cricketless makes me want to hug a film major.*

No, really. I sang my way home and ran immediately to my roommate (conveniently working on a capstone film herself), attempting to put into that hug what I could not find in words: *Thank you for capturing the deeper depths of beauty in this world and sharing it for all the world to see.*



Confusing her at first, I only had to say the word *film* to gain a mutual understanding, after which we reveled silently, smiling, in the glow and warmth of creativity's victory.

So now you're thinking I am either overly excitable or very simply insane. Let me explain.

The story structure may itself be simple; it's boy-meets-girl in what the filmmakers call a "poignant romantic comedy." But *Cricketless* redefines the meet-cute when the opening scenes have boy Adam O'Dea (Topher Rasmussen) literally running into girl Natalie Endicott (Megan Jones)—in his car. On purpose. Because he'd really like to get to know her. It's yet another point against him in Adam's life-long list of strange offenses, and as an eighteen-year-old this last strike could send him to a fifteen-year stint in jail or an indefinite future in the mental hospital if no one can find Adam what he seems to lack: a conscience. With a week's leeway, Adam's mother Lil, attorney Greg Gregerson, hit-and-

kiss victim Natalie, and acclaimed psychologist Dr. Noah G. Carmoly set out to do just that through a series of unconventional experiments in search of signs of moral life. Despite disbelieving the existence of Jiminy Cricket himself, Dr. Carmoly's shock tests and shell recordings lead to the ultimate revelation that Adam does indeed have a conscience—it just speaks to him in a foreign language.

Envision? Director Joel Ackerman explains that the genesis of the project stemmed from a common dismissal he heard in response to news of this-or-that horrific happening—robberies or rapes or murders. Attempting to explain the inexplicable, Ackerman would hear most people excuse the committers of crimes as simply not having a conscience. To Ackerman the answer seemed slightly more complex. "They probably do have a conscience," he concluded. "It just speaks Armenian."

Stemming from that idea alone he went on to then create a story not





Photo courtesy Raven Alard

only beautifully crafted from script to screen but one that illuminates our understanding of right and wrong, the consideration and consequences of choice, and ultimately, how the Spirit speaks to us individually. “If you’re living life right it will hurt when you do something wrong,” Ackerman explained. But what if you don’t have the language to differentiate between the two in the first place?

Intentionally playing on the name of Adam, *Cricketless*’s main character embodies the innocence of the Garden of Eden, naïve and childlike with no thought between action and reaction. But *Cricketless* is set in the lone and dreary world, and through Ackerman’s eyes we begin to understand the consequences of innocence and the essential quest to understand the Spirit’s stirrings. Just as Adam in the Garden needed to learn the language of his Father in order to make righteous decisions, so is Adam O’Dea required to learn the language of his birth father (an Armenian love his mother met in Paris) before he can understand the difference between right and wrong. He needs to learn, essentially, what we all should take time to study: how the Spirit speaks to us, and then to act accordingly.

It’s a risky reveal and almost precocious plot line, one that flirts dangerously between soul-swelling perfection and Sunday School pedantic, but *Cricketless* is unquestionably—and seemingly effortlessly—the former. In only twenty-six minutes the film leaves

you not only with a sense of pure satisfaction in entertainment rightly done but also with the unparalleled edification of Truth illuminated. Watching the film, you have plenty of time to enjoy the aesthetic of it all. Clever but never over-written, the script is succinct with enough space to lead and leave you to your own expanding thoughts. The acting was superb and spot-on, the art direction a dream of clinical whites and honeyed warmth. While fictionally fantastical, the story stays believable, and each character is emotionally rewarding. In the entertainment essentials, *Cricketless* is good to go. But then, once it’s over, you have the added joy of extended satisfaction in a film that leaves you to dwell on the more eternally important principles of the soul’s aesthetics, a film that not only fortifies an existing testimony but builds upon it. And that, in five paragraphs or less, is why I reserved my exclamation marks for this film in the Festival. You won’t need Jiminy on your shoulder to know that experiencing *Cricketless* was a good choice.

Envision. Create. Illuminate. Hug a film major. 🍷

## ***My Girlfriend’s Boyfriend***

**Review by Elizabeth Rhondeau**

Writer, Director: Daryn Tufts

Producers: Rick McFarland & Alyssa Milano

It’s a romantic comedy claiming to be everything every other romantic comedy has ever claimed to be—but then

in a rare moment of cinema sustainability actually lives up to it. Girl? Boy? True Love? *My Girlfriend’s Boyfriend* has got it all and then one-ups all the rest with a story finally worthy of both romantic and comedy to its title.

In a twist true to the film’s tagline, this is the story of a girl who meets her one true love . . . twice. Alyssa Milano plays the girl, a classy sass named Jesse whose confidence opens a conversation with boy Ethan (Christopher Gorham), a writer with no publications to his credit and yet another rejection letter in his hand. He’s on the brink of ultimate surrender when Jesse’s abrupt arrival plays muse to his artist and life starts looking up. Pocketing her number and promising to call, Ethan exits Act One and the scene is set for another hour of the usual silver screen romanticizing until—mere moments after finally finding the perfect guy for her—in walks Mr. Right.

Contrasting Ethan’s nerd-passion and sweet sentimentality, Troy (Michael Landes) arrives on the scene with more suave than all fifteen seasons of *The Bachelor* combined. A successful ad exec with all elements of tall, dark, and handsome, he is Prince Charming personified and proceeds to sweep Jesse right off her feet with every expected accoutrement: roses, candlelit dinners, afternoons of golf at the club and evenings at souped-up soirees. Jumping between scenes of Jesse’s dates with both boyfriends, it seems a clear-cut win for Troy in the game of love—and yet Ethan isn’t about to give in either. So now you’re thinking this is just another predictable write-off. Well, that’s what you think.

The ensuing dilemma and ultimate happily ever after make *My Girlfriend’s Boyfriend* exactly what it proposes to be: the sweet fluff of romance for the perfect Friday night escape. For those looking for a few hours of light entertainment and a sugary aftertaste, this film fits the bill. It’s endearing, engaging, and, though not thematically Mormon, espouses solid values and appropriate humor, all providing for a

classic, clean story that epitomizes the feel-good. From the Latter-day Saint filmmaker's perspective it is a triumph: well-shot, well-written, big-name actors. By all accounts it's a movie for the masses made by a Mormon. But unlike more mainstream fare of the same genre, *My Girlfriend's Boyfriend* will leave you with a little more than mere entertainment. A romantic comedy with twist enough to add some real intelligence, this film also gives you something to think about.

And that, for me, is what bumped this story up to A+ stuff. To watch Jesse caught between two equally intriguing loves but left with only one choice was crash-course in What Really Matters 101. Being able to contrast the typical Troy story with the more realistic and haphazard Ethan plot seemed to me an excellent study in what romance has become today—and maybe what it really should be. In a world defined by vampire romances and Hollywood's monopoly on what's hot and who's not, *My Girlfriend's Boyfriend* is a refreshing return to the realm of a much more edifying reality. It's a gentle reminder of the difference between reel love and, well, *real* love, what sells and what *stays*. It's Friday night fodder for some serious Saturday thought that, in my house, spilled over into Sunday afternoon discussion. Romantic comedy going where no romantic comedy has gone before? Yes, please. 🍷

## The Book of Life

Review by Meagan Brady

Writer, Director, Producer: Marco Lui

With a narrative style reminiscent of *The Princess Bride* and physical comedy that rivals the best of Charlie Chaplin, *The Book of Life* is a treat for audiences of all ages.

The film, written by, directed by, and starring Marco Lui, has the distinction of being the first foreign entry screened at the LDS Film Festival—and it has set the bar for future foreign film entries very, very high.

The plot is comparable to earlier Mormon classics such as *Saturday's*

*Warrior* and *My Turn on Earth*, with scenes of pre-mortal, mortal, and post-mortal life. Lui plays a young man who falls in love with Chiara, a beautiful pianist who never seems to smile. He makes it his pre-mortal life's mission to make her laugh; a quest that continues on earth when he, now a religion teacher, joins the faculty of the school where Chiara teaches music. Through his antics he is finally able to coax a smile to her lips, but things are not quite what they seem.

Despite this rehashing of a familiar plotline, the comparison to early plan-of-salvation productions really ends there. The doctrine is a little shaky in some areas, but *The Book of Life* offers a fresh take on several eternal truths that will resonate with Mormons and non-Mormons alike.

Beneath the surface love story that serves to drive the plot are deeper elements that combine to create a richly layered film. Lui's character works as the professor of religion in the small school, and the film highlights several of the lessons he gives to his students. Mormon audience members may recognize allegories and object lessons from primary lessons, yet these familiar scenes somehow translate to a much broader audience in *The Book of Life*. A segment where Lui describes the elements of the soul as body and spirit using a glove for a prop is a textbook LDS object lesson, but the idea is presented so simply and beautifully it seems accessible to any viewer.

Then there is the matter of the cinematography.



Image courtesy Ugo Perego

Lui shot the entire production on location in Italy on an extremely tight schedule of only three weeks, yet the movie doesn't play that way at all. The shots are rich and varied, and the lighting is fantastic. The pacing doesn't feel rushed, and is perhaps even a bit too slow in parts. I only wished I spoke Italian so I could spend less time reading the subtitles and more time soaking in the beauty of the film.

It's undeniable that Marco Lui carries this film. His superb acting provides nearly all the comedic moments, but he is also the heart of the picture, and it is his testimony on which it is based.

Several other actors give fantastic performances as well, most notably Alice Rosolino, the famous Italian child singer who plays Chiara's precocious niece and a student in Lui's classroom. Her bold manner and contagious enthusiasm for life serve well to draw the viewer's interest.

Lui funded the *The Book of Life* completely out of pocket, and it is obvious this beautiful piece of art was truly a labor of love. 🍷









# Stephanie Black

INTERVIEW BY KATHERINE MORRIS

WEB: [WWW.STEPHANIEBLACK.NET](http://WWW.STEPHANIEBLACK.NET)

## How did you first get started writing?

I've always loved books. My mother reports that even when I was tiny, I'd look at books for a long time (which was probably a nice break from my hanging on her leg and crying, a favorite activity of mine). As a child, I enjoyed make-believe games—my favorite game was playing Barbies with my sisters. We also enjoyed pretending we were Charlie's Angels or the Bionic Woman, and we would run around outside having adventures. For me, I

think writing is a grown-up version of playing Barbies or playing pretend—I outgrew the desire to play with a doll or pretend I was someone else, but I didn't outgrow the desire to make up stories about fictional people.

When we were kids, my sister and I wrote a couple of plays for ourselves and our younger siblings, and when I was twelve I won an award for a story I'd written. That was exciting—I think it helped give me an inkling that writing was something I was good at.

## Tell us about the process of getting your first novel, *The Believer*, published. What did you learn about writing and publishing from that first experience?

When I was a senior in high school, I took a creative writing class. For my last short story assignment, I wrote a snippet of a futuristic thriller. On my story, the teacher wrote "Interesting—don't stop!" I didn't stop. I played with that idea for years, writing various scenes and thinking I wanted to write



a novel. Finally, I decided to actually try writing that novel, start to finish. I got a couple hundred pages into it and realized I had a plot going off in too many directions. At that point, I read my first fiction technique book—Jack Bickham’s *The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes (And How to Avoid Them)*. That book was an eye-opener for me; now I could see what I’d done wrong in my partial draft. I set that first attempt aside, hammered out a new outline, taking many ideas from the original story, and set to work again. This time, I completed the first draft of my dystopian thriller, *The Believer* (by this point, it bore very little resemblance to that original seed of an idea from my creative writing class). For years I worked on that manuscript, rewriting it. I read a lot of fiction technique books—there was far more to writing fiction than I’d realized when I first started working on a novel! I got feedback on the book from my family; I was far too shy to show my manuscript to anyone else.

After so many drafts that I lost count, I finally felt I was ready to submit my manuscript to a publisher. That first trip to the post office felt momentous—my kids even made a sign to stick in the window of the car, saying something like “World’s Greatest Writer.” Three weeks later, a rejection letter landed in my mailbox. Reality check! Intellectually, I knew that rejection was part of the business, but now I’d experienced it—the dreaded form rejection letter. I tried again, submitting the manuscript to another publisher. This time, it took over six months before I heard back. They liked it but were skittish about the science fiction elements of the story—science fiction can be a difficult sell in the LDS market. They also wanted it more directly targeted to an LDS audience.

I spent nearly a year rewriting the book to make it less futuristic and more LDS and submitted it again. What a great moment that was when I read the email telling me my book had been accepted for publication. My

dream was coming true! In January 2005, *The Believer* was released by Covenant Communications.

I learned a lot from that first experience, both about the work and the technique involved in writing a book, and about the publishing world. I fear it might unnerve new writers when I tell them how long it took me from when I started the first draft of *The Believer* to when it was accepted for publication (somewhere around ten years), but I wasn’t just writing a novel—I was learning *how* to write a novel. I also learned it wasn’t enough to write a good book—it had to be a marketable book, something the publisher thought could sell successfully in the current market.

**You write mystery/suspense. What drew you to that genre? What have you learned about the genre since you’ve started writing in it?**

I’ve long enjoyed reading mystery and suspense novels. When I was a young child, I loved Nancy Drew. When I was a little older, Mary Higgins Clark became a favorite. I’m not an adventurous person, but I enjoy the vicarious excitement of likable characters in danger and the satisfaction of a solved mystery or a thwarted evil plot (gotta have that happy ending!).

*The Believer* got great reviews, but sales were disappointing, and my publisher suggested I try writing in a different genre—something not futuristic. Since I’d always been a fan of contemporary mystery and suspense, it was a natural choice for me. I’d written the beginning of a suspense novel a few years back, so I took that beginning and set to work. That book was published in 2008 as *Fool Me Twice*.

In writing mystery/suspense, one thing I’ve learned is that readers like being surprised. They enjoy twists and turns, and they don’t want the solution or the course of the plot to be obvious—if they suspect whodunit early on, either you’d better make it tricky enough that they’re proud of themselves for nailing it, or you’d better toss things at them to make them question

their prediction. An obvious villain is disappointing to readers.

I’ve also learned that it can get tricky to plot new books after writing several of the same type of novel. I’ve published three suspense novels (*Fool Me Twice*, *Methods of Madness*, and *Cold as Ice*) and have a fourth scheduled for release sometime in late summer or early fall (working title is *Rearview Mirror*—I don’t know if that will be the final title). As I recently started brainstorming my fifth suspense novel, I was making lists of things I’d done before—this villain killed for revenge; that villain killed out of pride, or what have you. Reusing motives is fine—countless mysteries have the villain killing for, say, greed—but things need to be fresh with each new book.

**You’re a stay-at-home mother with five children. When do you write, and how much writing do you get done on an average day? How do you balance your roles as a mother and as a writer?**

When my children were little, naptime was my golden writing time. Once the littlest one was asleep, I’d race for the computer. My children were all good nappers, for which I’m very grateful—they’d take a long afternoon nap up until around age three, when they’d start to phase it out. I really treasured that naptime!

As the kids have gotten older, I can be more flexible in when I write. My youngest child is now in school all day, so I have more potential writing time than I ever could have dreamed of when they were tiny—but ironically, I struggle with productivity. With my first book, I was so excited about it and loved working on it so fervently that I didn’t need to discipline myself—the excitement carried me, and I would work on it whenever I got the chance. Now, I really need to develop writing discipline, and I haven’t achieved that yet. I find myself frittering away far too much time—Oh the lure of the Internet to distract me when I should be writing! I don’t have a set amount of writing time each day—some days



I make good progress and other days little or none. Which reminds me... I really need to get to work on that new novel...

Balance can be a struggle. When I'm excited about a project and things are going well, I can find it difficult to set the laptop down, even when I really need to focus on other things. And it's easy to use writing as an excuse to procrastinate—"Oh, I want to work on this first before I (fill in the blank with some task that I'm putting off)." The areas of discipline and balance are ones where I really need to improve.

**What is the most common reaction you get when people find out you're a Mormon stay-at-home mom who writes mysteries and suspense?**

Sometimes I get funny comments from people who've read my books—like the sister in my ward who said I must have a "dark side." It was all in good fun, but I think it does surprise some people at first when they find out what kind of chilling stories I can create (but bear in mind I'm not creating anything too horrible—this is LDS fiction we're talking about!).

**So far, you've published exclusively in the LDS market. What do you like about writing for the LDS market and what are some of the challenges you've faced?**

I like the comfortable feeling of being "at home"—I'm so accustomed to being in LDS settings that writing for an LDS publisher is a natural fit. I never have to worry that my publisher will wonder why I'm so strict about not including certain content that I'd find offensive. I'm grateful to be with my publisher, and I've had two editors who are both wonderful to work with.

Challenges? The vast majority of writing-related events in the LDS market take place in Utah, and I don't live there, so I miss out on some of that association with other authors and readers. While I don't feel this hurts my writing career, I do admit to jealousy (this sounds petty, doesn't it?). It would be fun to be able to more

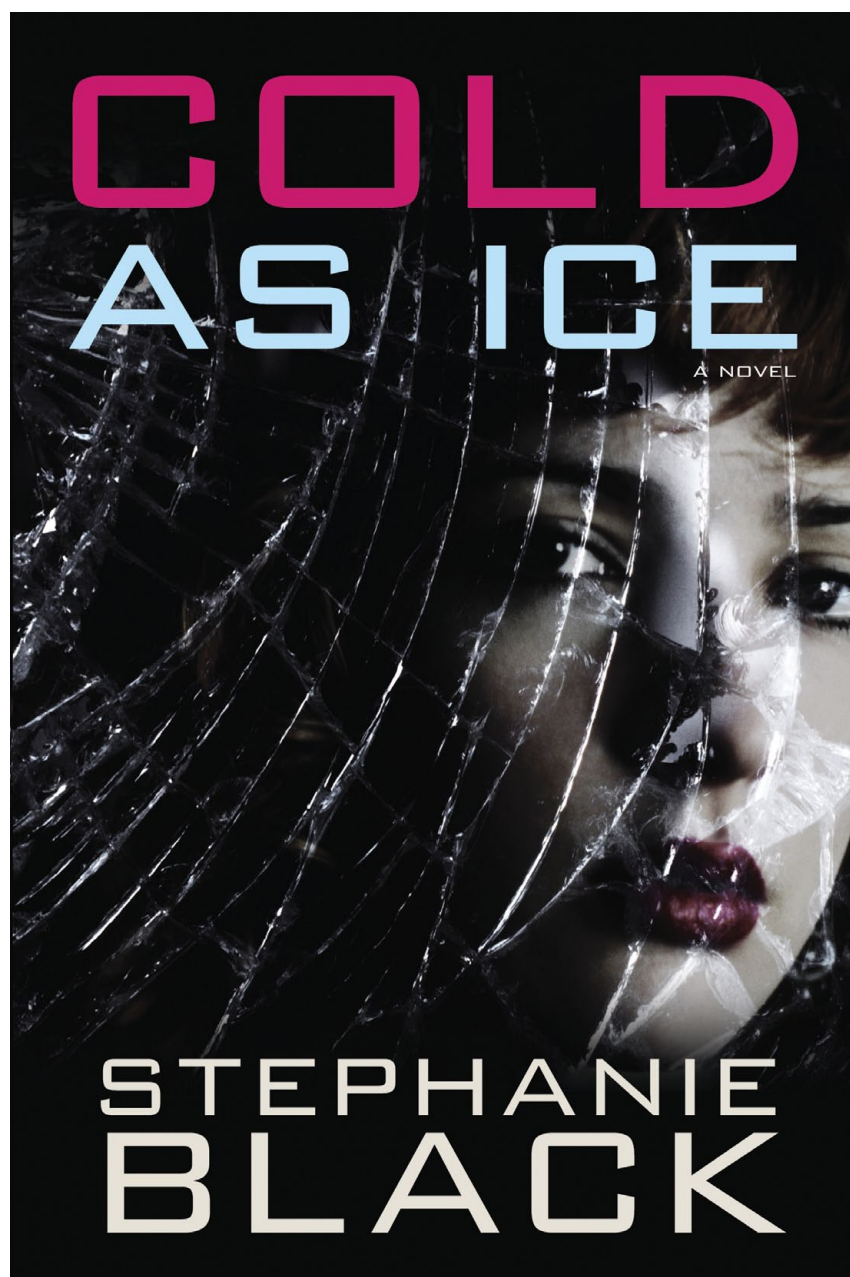


Image courtesy Stephanie Black

easily attend writing events with LDS authors and readers, like the recent Life, The Universe, & Everything symposium at BYU, or the LDS Booksellers Association Convention. The good news is that the Internet is such a blessing for networking with other authors and readers—even if I can only connect in person once or twice a year, I can build connections and friendships online.

I haven't gotten involved in my local writing community, fearing, I suppose, that I'd feel out of place and

self-conscious as an author writing LDS fiction, but intellectually I know I shouldn't be so shy—just because I write for a different market doesn't mean we're not all writers, and I really should get involved.

**Talk about your process now that you've published four novels. How does an idea for a story start? How long does it take to write a first draft? How much research do you do? Do you outline, or are you more of a discovery writer?**



Photo courtesy Stephanie Black

My first two novels grew from ideas that had been percolating for a long time. After I submitted my second novel, I faced a new and daunting challenge—starting a manuscript when I had *no idea* what it would be about. All I knew was that I wanted another contemporary suspense novel with a young female protagonist. From there, I started brainstorming. That’s how I started the books that followed as well—brainstorming. I type ideas into a brainstorming file, listing possibilities and working with ideas until finally, a story idea starts to take shape. Once I have enough of a plot to work

with, I try to create a rough outline. I need that outline to get me started, but it’s very broad. It contains the general story (though I might change my mind on some points later) but doesn’t contain details of how scenes will unfold.

Research is not my favorite thing—it’s plain that I’ll never be a historical fiction writer! For instance, I always set my novels in fictional locations. Suspense readers won’t care that the town doesn’t really exist, as long as the feel of the area is right; and with a fictional location, I don’t have to worry about making every detail of the town

match reality. For instance, I used to live in a small town in Massachusetts, but when I wanted a Massachusetts town for my story, instead of using that real town, I invented one. That gives me maximum flexibility. Do I need a hill leading down to a pond? Here it is. A dark, winding back road? I can invent one—I invented the town. The Internet is a fantastic resource for a writer. And people with expertise in various subject matters have been a great help to me—my daughter knows a lot about police work, and I’ve asked her countless questions on police procedure.



A writer friend who worked in a bookstore answered my questions when I created a protagonist who owned a bookstore. A kind ward member gave me many helpful details for creating the college professor in my upcoming release. And so on.

I'm a combination of outline and discovery writer. I need a broad outline to get me started, but I won't know the details of the story until I actually write the book. There's no way I could come up with all those details and twists and turns in an outline—my brain doesn't work that way. My first drafts are an inconsistent mess as I work my way through creating the story, and I brainstorm a lot along the way. If I change my mind about something I've written earlier in the draft, I usually don't go back and fix it—I'll leave myself a note, but I want to push through to the end of the draft. I'd much rather have a draft to work with than a blank screen! How long it takes me to draft a book will depend on the book and how fast I'm working on it—I think my last one took me just under seven months to draft. And it was another seven months before I finished revising it.

**Writing mysteries and suspense requires you to weave together some pretty complicated plots. How do you keep yourself consistent and make sure that the threads tie up nicely in the end?**

I do a lot of rewriting—going through the story multiple times. In fact, I love revising a manuscript; I enjoy revising more than drafting.

On my recent manuscript, one of my test readers pointed out that I'd never resolved a red herring issue that I'd raised. I'd completely forgotten about it! Thank heavens for test readers.

**What kind of feedback has been the most useful to you as a writer (from readers and from reviewers)? How do you take criticism? What is the biggest compliment you've ever received?**

The most useful feedback has come to me from my test readers, my publisher's readers, and my editors. Specific feedback is by far the most helpful, such as pointing out where a character needs work, or when something is unclear or not credible or repetitive. When I get feedback, it can be daunting to dive in and see what my reader/editor said needs to be addressed, but once I read the feedback, get over any initial discomfort, and start seeing ways I can improve the book, it's exciting—I love to see a book getting better, and I'm glad to get honest feedback that allows me to strengthen a book before it goes to press.

When a reader or reviewer criticizes a book after publication, it does sting. As a writer, you need a thick skin, but I'm not sure many of us actually develop that defense. You pour so much into writing a book that when someone posts a negative comment or review, it hurts, even though you know no author has ever written a book that every reader likes. Readers and reviewers can have such vastly different opinions on the same book that if you took every bit of criticism to heart, you'd drive yourself insane. Some people simply won't like your style, or your story, or your characters or what have you. You can't please everyone.

It would be impossible to single out one particular compliment as the biggest I've ever received. One thing I've discovered since being published is how much I appreciate it when someone takes the time to say, "I loved your book." I'm delighted when a reader tells me my book kept him up late, or distracted her from other tasks because she just *had* to finish it—I figure if the reader is that involved in the story, that's definitely a good sign!

**Tell us about your involvement in LDStorymakers. What have you gained from your participation there, and what suggestions do you have for new writers who are thinking of attending?**

I joined LDStorymakers a few years ago and am so glad I did—it's a

marvelous organization. The support and camaraderie in Storymakers is amazing. We cheer each other on, help answer each other's questions, commiserate when someone gets bad news, and generally uplift and support each other. The LDStorymakers Writers Conference is a superb event, and I've enjoyed the opportunities I've had to participate in the conference as an attendee, a workshop presenter, a panelist, and a "boot camp" instructor. I'll be attending the conference for the third time this year, and I hope I can attend every year. The conference is top-notch, with fantastic workshops filled with information for both aspiring and established writers. It's also a great chance to network with other authors and industry professionals. In addition to the workshops, the conference organizers offer pitch sessions with agents and editors, both LDS and national market. I just can't say enough good about the conference—I highly recommend it. If you're a new writer thinking of attending, my advice is—go for it! You'll have a great opportunity to both develop your craft and network with a wonderful group of people who love writing as much as you do. And at the conference, don't be shy—introduce yourself to people and have fun.

**You've won two Whitney Awards for your novels *Fool Me Twice* (2008) and *Methods of Madness* (2009). What has that meant to you as an author?**

Insecurity is a common ailment for writers—you worry if a book will be accepted for publication, worry what readers will think of it, worry what reviewers will say and what sales numbers will be, worry if your next book will live up to your last one or if fans will be disappointed, and so on.

Winning two Whitney Awards was an incredible dose of validation—a group of industry professionals thought my books were award-worthy! That means so much to me, to know they thought well of my work.



**Talk about what you have done to promote yourself, particularly through your website and through your group blog, *Six LDS Writers and a Frog*.**

My website contains news announcements and information about my books, including sample chapters. At *Six LDS Writers and a Frog* ([www.sixldswriters.net](http://www.sixldswriters.net)), we have a great group of authors—Jeffrey Savage, Robison Wells, Julie Bellon, Kerry Blair, and Sariah Wilson. I blog on Wednesdays, sometimes on writing-related topics, sometimes on what's going on in my life.

Unfortunately, I am the world's slowest blogger—it takes me a *long* time to write a single blog post (heck, it can take me forever to write an email), so once-a-week blogging is all I can handle. Being part of a group blog is perfect for me—I only have to cover Wednesday. I'm also on Facebook and Twitter.

**What are you working on right now?**

I'm in the brainstorming phase right now, trying to create the basics of the plot and characters for a new suspense novel. I hope to be ready to start writing the story very soon.

**What are some of your long-term writing goals? What are some things you hope to accomplish through your writing?**

I'd like to write a novel for the national market someday—I have an idea for a science fiction story. It would be fun to stretch and try something new.

Through my writing, I hope to tell good, clean, engaging, suspenseful stories. I've always enjoyed reading novels that grip me so hard that I don't want to put the book down, and I hope to write stories that will grip my readers, giving them characters they want to root for and plots that keep them turning pages.

**What advice do you have for aspiring writers, particularly those who are looking to be published in the LDS market?**

Study fiction technique. There are tons of fiction technique books available. Two of my favorites are the aforementioned *The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes (And How to Avoid Them)* and *Scene and Structure*, both by Jack Bickham. There are books on dialogue, books on self-editing, books on description, and so on. Study, study, study!

Read a lot of fiction. Become familiar with the market you're targeting and what's being published in that market. Research publishers—which publishers would be the best fit for your book? If you're targeting the LDS market, you don't need a literary agent; publishers deal directly with authors. If you're targeting the national market, research agents and figure out who would be a good fit.

Revise your manuscript. Polish it. Get outside feedback. Some writers find critique groups extremely helpful. I call on "test readers" to read my manuscripts and let me know what's working and what isn't. Make your manuscript the strongest it can be before you submit it.

Writer's conferences can be very helpful as well as provide great opportunities to network with other authors and publishing professionals. And you can easily connect with other authors online and start getting established in the writing community—you don't need to wait until you have a book published.

Be prepared to be patient and flexible and to persevere when things get tough. The path to publication—and after publication—can be rocky. But if you love to write, it's worth it.

**What do you think are some of the greatest strengths of the LDS market as it is right now, and what are some changes you would like to see in the future?**

The LDS market fills the niche of offering books specifically targeted to an LDS audience—books with LDS characters or LDS themes, as well as books that are simply clean reads, devoid of offensive content. A variety

of fiction in many genres is now available from LDS publishers, and the amount of LDS fiction available has vastly increased over the last couple of decades.

In the future, I'd love to see the LDS market continue to grow and for the genres available to continue to expand—I'd enjoy seeing more science fiction.

I'd like to see LDS fiction become more widely known in areas where LDS brick-and-mortar bookstores aren't available (which is most of the world). With the Internet, that's a greater possibility than ever before.

I'm excited to see LDS publishers getting involved in the e-book market—my recent novel is available for Kindle. Even though I don't live near an LDS bookstore, I can now download LDS fiction instantly at the click of a mouse.

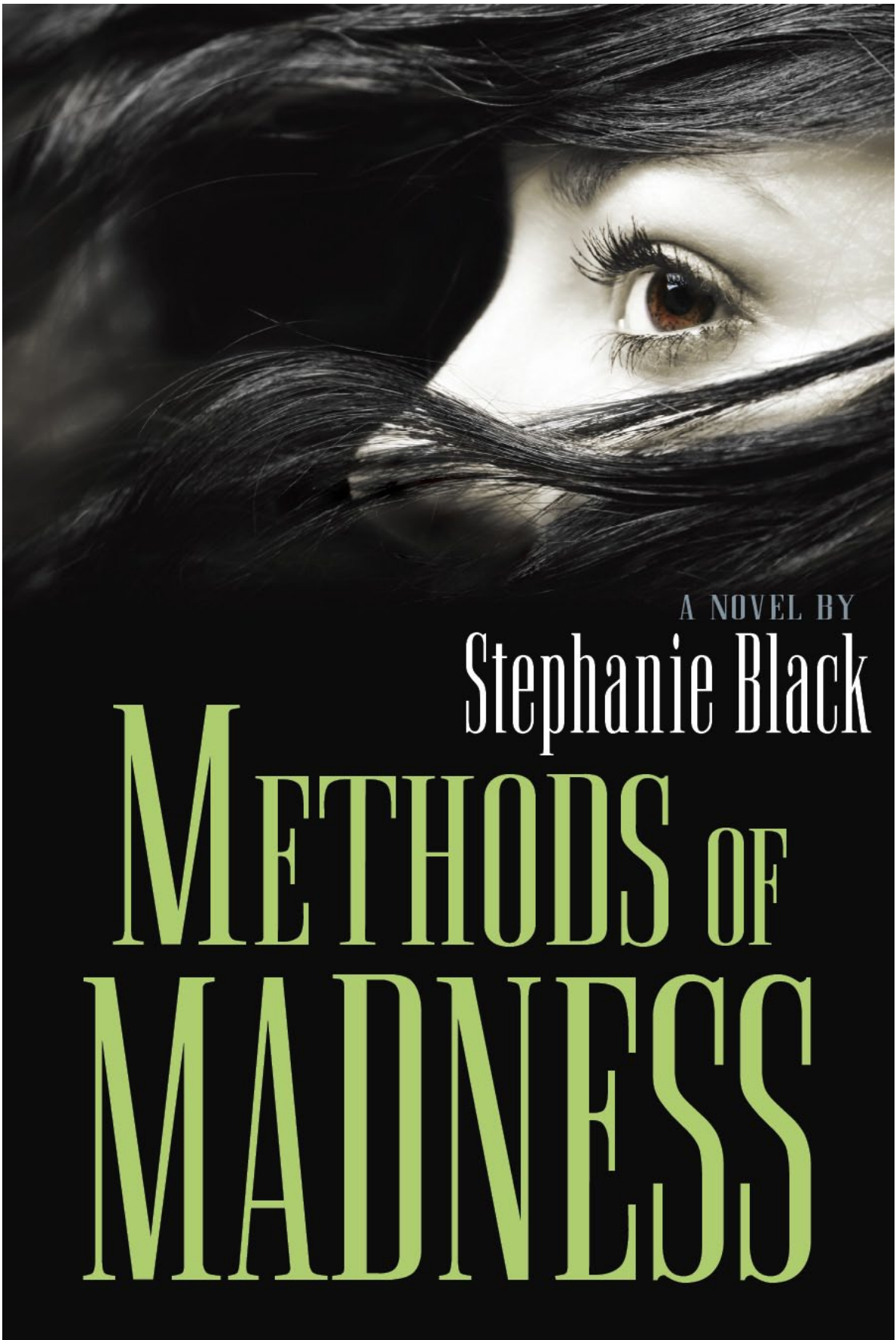
**How do you see the gospel affecting your work?**

Because of my faith in Jesus Christ, I don't want to write anything that endorses evil or makes it look attractive. I think it goes back to Moroni 7, where Mormon teaches about the way to judge—if something invites us to do good and to believe in Christ, it's of God; if it persuades us to do evil and not believe in Christ, it's not of God. That standard applies to everything, even fiction.

I don't think this means my books all need overt religious content, but it does mean that whatever messages I end up conveying in my novels need to endorse good, not evil.

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

I think there is great value in good, clean entertainment. My first novel, *The Believer*, dealt with some deeper themes, but my contemporary mysteries are meant more as simply light, fun reads. If I can provide a source of entertainment that is fun and exciting while keeping the standards outlined by Mormon, I think that would be a worthwhile contribution. 🙏



A NOVEL BY

Stephanie Black

# METHODS OF MADNESS

Image courtesy Stephanie Black







# Ashley Smith

INTERVIEW BY ELSIE BOYER

WEB: [ASHLEYASMITH.COM](http://ASHLEYASMITH.COM)

I noticed that on your website you say “#1 illustrator recommended by gypsies, and a close #2 by pirates.” I’m curious—how does one become recommended by gypsies and pirates?

It is a very draining and difficult process involving intensive creative and physical tests. Normally the code of silence should never be broken regarding the details of said tests, but because I passed them with such high marks and have given back to the gypsy and pirating communities through portraiture and ransom notes, I feel I can be a tad more open about it. Let’s just say it calls for pillaging, plundering, and drinking lots of rum. Although they let me off on the rum bit, seeing as I was Mormon and all.

Is there a particular piece that you consider your personal best? Why?

Usually I consider the very last piece I have done as a personal best because



Image courtesy Ashley Smith

it carries an accumulation of all I have learned and struggled through in its structure and core. If I don’t get that feeling, it’s probably because I didn’t put enough of myself in the piece or

work hard enough to attain the best I am capable of.

But looking back, a few pieces are more meaningful than others—like the fireflies piece or the one with the













Image courtesy Ashley Smith

girl looking to the sky with stars in the shape of the Star of David.

That last one was a book cover idea for my favorite book as a kid, *Number the Stars*, which became a very meaningful book to me. It's very lyrical and calm while also portraying a sense of innocence.

The fireflies piece captured the essence of childhood and the imagination that always abounded inside of me when I was a kid. Fireflies are wonderfully whimsical.

**In your illustrations you seem drawn towards creating vibrant pieces with heavy outlines around most of the objects. What do you like best about creating and designing in this style?**

I am obsessed with color. I love the way that hue, temperature, and intensity of any pigment can change

dramatically just by placing it beside another color. I am enraptured by the outcome of combining warm and cool hues in artwork and what it does to your brain and your emotions. Somehow the contrast can create this amazing harmony that all humans relate to. Opposition in all things, I suppose.

Most of my work is just furthering the experiment with color that is constantly playing out in my brain and transferring my thoughts or conclusions on the matter to paper. I think some of the strongest emotions, learning opportunities, and knowledge I have gained were influenced by color. It constantly fascinates me.

As far as the line weight goes, I was fascinated with the silhouettes of objects for a while. I think I used it to help draw attention to the things I thought were important in a piece.

I am veering further away from it now, but I still find myself using it from time to time just for fun.

**Several of the illustrations on your website seem to be references to fairy tales. What drew you towards this particular subject matter?**

I was mostly interested in getting into the children's book genre and felt that that subject matter was a good way to practice illustrating stories that kids would enjoy. Taking a well-known story and putting my own twist on it helped me stretch to see if I could expand a child's mind. Books always did that for me as a kid, and I love how I could escape into a whole other world just by picking up a picture book. Also, most fairy tales are ridiculous stretches of the imagination, which my brain can relate to.



### When did you begin to define yourself as an artist?

I defined myself as an artist very early on. I wanted to be one as long as I can remember, pretty much straight from the womb. My grandmother was a great artist along with a few of my sisters. Along with very supportive parents and friends, they always encouraged and indulged my creative tendencies. I have sketches from when I was really young and would always draw in class all over assignments, books, and worksheets. The stegosaurus was a common theme in elementary school, and then that grew to other fanciful creatures, giraffes most recently being a favorite. Being an artist has always been a big part of who I am and what I strive to become.

### What have been some of your inspirations in your work?

Music is a big inspiration factor for me. I am always listening to something and I find that inspires the most creative juices to start flowing. Also, clever filmmaking, photography, and painting outside of my genre are things that feed me. I love art in all forms and like to saturate myself with it.

### How have you been able to balance everyday concerns with artistic creativity?

Finding the balance of work and life with creative endeavors is a never-ending struggle. I work to keep as much structure in my life as possible so that stress is not getting in the way of being able to find inspiration. Also, keeping a vast supply of chocolate and Cary Grant movies on hand seems to calm any and all of my concerns. Everything is easier with chocolate. And everything is easier (especially on the eyes) with Cary Grant in the room.

### What's your artistic process?

I begin in lots of different ways, gathering reference and information and inspiration from lots of various sources and then I just start sketching. I call it sketch vomit. Gross,

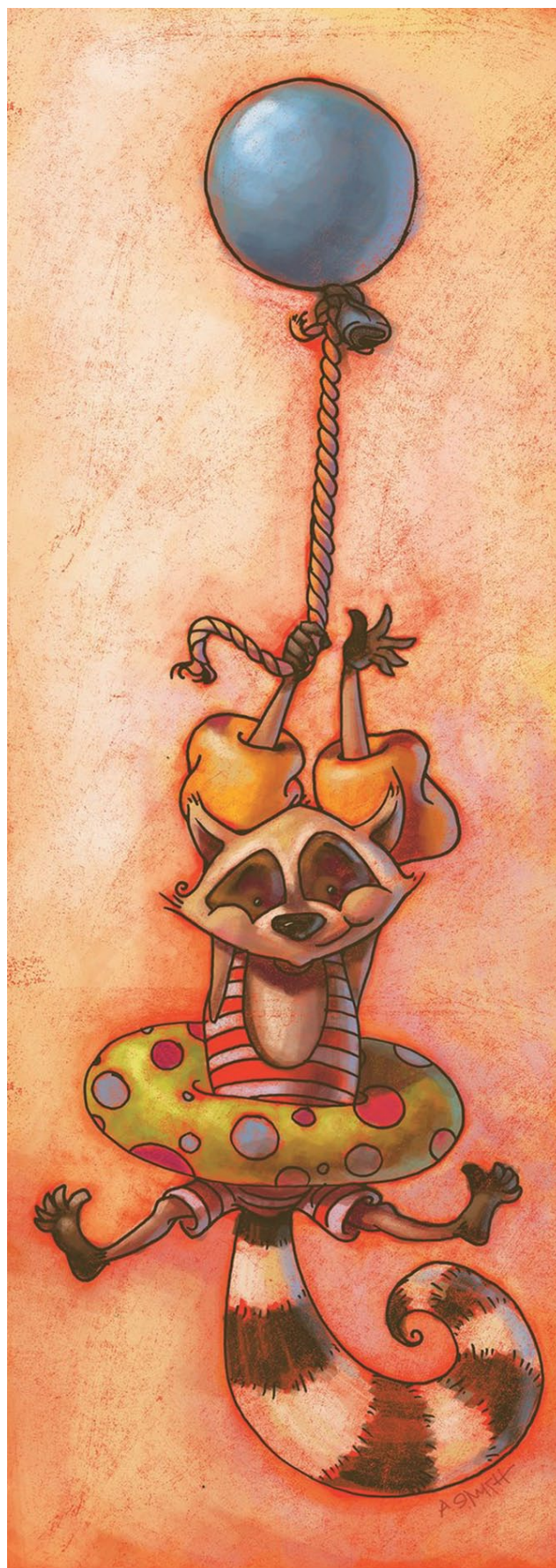


Image courtesy Ashley Smith













Image courtesy Ashley Smith

I know, but usually it takes a bunch of really bad ideas to get out of my head before I can grasp at any of the good ones. After they spill out all over my sketchbook, I can then narrow it down to something pretty. Then I take that idea, feed it, nurture it, sometimes sleep on it, and develop it until it produces wonderful idea children that are better and more beautiful versions of their parents. This usually involves lots of tracing paper or a light board. When I get to a final sketch I either scan it into the computer to be painted in Photoshop, or my favorite, I transfer it to a board and paint directly on top of it with acrylics. I will usually finish it off digitally or with some oil paints if I need a little extra push.

Somewhere in the middle there are explorations with color, which helps me pick a scheme, and also a value study to make sure the mood and lighting are just right. It looks really ugly until about the last 10% of the job. That's when the magic happens and the illustration fairy comes in and tweaks it all. I pay her the big bucks.

#### Could you explain what it felt like to sell your first design?

Glorious. Like eating mint choc chip ice cream right after riding my favorite rollercoaster. The best part was seeing the happy recipient's joyful face. That is worth more than the money.

#### How has the gospel influenced your work?

Knowing the things I know, living the way I do, and making the constant decisions to try and align my life with

God, influences every decision I make, especially the creative ones. I had a professor in college who taught me that everything I express through my art is connected somehow to me, and that in that expression I should strive to always define on the outside who I am on the inside. I believe that wholeheartedly.

I feel that being true to myself and my core beliefs is what I endeavor to show most in my artwork. I guess that just shows what a kid I am still at heart.

#### What other artists or paintings have inspired you?

I absolutely adore the golden age of illustration from the masters Norman Rockwell, J.C. Leyendecker, Howard Pyle, and N.C. Wyeth. Their ability to tell a story has always been inspiring to me. Also modern illustrators such as Jimmy Pickering, Robert Mackenzie, Jim Madsen, Guy Francis, Brandon Dorman, Dani Jones... the list could go on and on. I also have always loved John Singer Sargent for his ability to express just exactly the amount of information necessary with the minimal amount of brushstrokes. His work is beautiful.

#### How do you balance being Mormon and being an artist?

My beliefs in the gospel are parallel to many of my beliefs about the process of creation; therefore, I find the two weave throughout the core of my character. Being a Mormon and being an artist are intertwined as much as eating and sleeping into my life, so

I find it incredibly simple to balance the two. In fact, if I didn't have the inspiration and influence of the Spirit, I don't think I would have nearly the amount of knowledge or motivation that I have. I attribute all those things to God.

#### How do you see your art helping build the kingdom?

I use to plague myself with the question of why God has given me the desire, motivation, and drive to be a creating soul. Why, of all things to be blessed with, have I been given this? Is what I am doing really helping bring about his work or is this desire a selfish motivation of mine to pursue happiness?

It was a difficult question to answer. But then I decided that creating beautiful things has slowly become my way of glorifying God and giving back to Him in an aesthetic, albeit small way that I can. What I do is considered, by some, a frivolous or luxurious part of life—that art is not a required aspect but just something nice to have around. We aren't doctors, teachers, or politicians, who have such an obvious effect on people and the world. We are, however, creators, which can have a tangible effect on the soul. I think that can sometimes be more important. A lot of my beliefs about God and the gospel are strengthened and reassured through art because I feel it brings a connection to Him that I cannot materialize in any other way. And if I can create that feeling for someone else, then I consider my life's work successful and a good way to show God my devotion. 🙏









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# Robert DeRosa

INTERVIEW BY LIESL HANSEN

WEB: [DEROSAIMAGES.COM](http://DEROSAIMAGES.COM)





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**You mentioned that you're a career changer. How did that happen?**

I had photographed since I was ten years old and had a steady interest in it over the years, taking continuing education courses when time and money permitted to further develop my skills. I had always hoped that one day I might be able to pursue photography as a career. A combination of factors (most of which I would not have chosen) made that possible.

The financial crisis hit the firm I worked for particularly hard, and large

numbers of people lost their jobs. I was one of them. The obvious path would have been to look for another job in financial services, but many other companies were in a similar situation and my age would have added to the difficulty of a search for a new job.

During my career I had reinvented myself several times, so rather than dwell on the problems, I decided that this would be a good time for one more reinvention.

Knowing my love of photography, my wife and daughter encouraged

me to pursue my passion and my dream. I decided to go back to school and earn a master's degree in digital photography at the School of Visual Arts. Because I had thirty-two years of service at my last job, my severance package was sufficient to put me through school.

During the same period, my father passed away and there were two family members he cared for who no longer had caregivers. We moved to his home to assist them. An unintended by-product of that was that it brought me





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physically closer to school and reduced my commute and other expenses.

Finally, the chair of the department I applied to in grad school decided to take a chance on me based on my life experience and my portfolio even though I didn't have an undergraduate degree in photography. I'm deeply grateful for her faith in me.

So the stage was set for me to go back to school, earn a graduate degree, and build the skills and the contacts necessary to launch a career in photography.

### What was going back to school like?

Quite the adventure! I was older than most of the students by at least a factor of two and older than just about all of the instructors.

I hadn't been in a formal academic setting in almost thirty-five years. But I had done a brief stint in graduate business school and continuing education in photography as well as ongoing professional training, so I wasn't entirely out of practice.

My thirty years of working with youth and young adults in the Church helped a lot, too—it helped keep me current with my computer and social networking skills, and it taught me to how to establish fun, productive relationships with folks many years my junior.

I did have a lot of catching up to do with classmates whose photography skills were more developed than mine, so I had to put in some very long hours to read and apply the skills we were being taught. It was not uncommon for me to spend sixty to seventy hours a week or more to complete my class work and assignments. My parents and the Church taught me to work hard and I have always been a high-energy person, so the grind was tiring but not overwhelming.

### How did your photography help you cope with the loss of your job?

Instead of dwelling on the negatives of losing a job and all the challenges of finding a new one in a down market at the age of sixty, photography helped

to inspire me, energize me, and focus my attention on work that I loved and had long dreamed of doing. Attitude is critical at a time like this.

### How has your pursuit of art changed your life?

My workday is more solitary and more under my control—two things I enjoy in my work. Since I shoot fine art urban and industrial landscapes, most of my work is done in the early morning hours before and after sunrise so I can capture the essence of a place

without the distraction of the traffic and people that will fill the area during working hours. The streets of the city are quiet and mostly empty. It is contemplative work that is renewing and energizing.

Whether I am shooting beauty that is often passed by or decay and the seamier side of the city, the work is an act of creation in a small but significant way. And when I do my job well, people want to talk about it and debate what they saw in it and what it means to them.



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### How did your background in finances and political science influence your art?

My experience in financial services has mostly helped with the business of the art—the marketing and promotion of my work and the development of a business plan. I think that if I succeed in this business, it will have as much to do with my business skills as it will my talent for creating interesting and beautiful art.

My political science background has informed some of my recent work as I explore the love/hate relationship that we have with industry and consumption.

### What was the most challenging aspect about completely changing your career?

Being self-employed was perhaps the biggest change. All my life I have worked for either large corporations or government. I learned how to lead and succeed in large organizations, both public and private. Now I do not have the infrastructure around me. If something needs to be done, I am the one who has to find a way to do it or get it done. It is both empowering and a little overwhelming.

### Tell us how you came to join the Church.

Looking back from the vantage point of thirty years later, it is easy to see the Lord's hand in my coming to the Church. I can trace some of the beginnings of it to many years before I actually came into contact with the Church.

A close friend who I first knew in college joined the Church several years after graduation. He was the first to talk to me about the gospel. I was slow to respond for a variety of reasons, mostly having to do with pride. This friend also got to know one of my roommates, who was more receptive to the gospel and was baptized rather quickly. Both of them patiently and persistently kept talking to me about the Church and invited me to participate in Church activities.

Eventually, two missionaries were transferred into the area where I lived and I struck up an instant relationship with them. We are still in touch today. They taught and boldly challenged me to be baptized much earlier than I thought they would. I was faced with a decision. I chose to fast and pray and I received my answer. Long story short, be patient, be persistent, and don't give up on your friends.

### How has the gospel influenced your work?

It has helped me to trust that I can turn to the Lord for help in making decisions and seeking inspiration regarding my career, my projects, and even the individual images I create. I feel very strongly that he is a loving and supportive partner in my artistic creation. I believe he has placed among my circle of acquaintances teachers, mentors, friends, and most importantly family who have influenced me in positive ways and encouraged me in my work.

Specifically, the Lord is helping to shape my vision of a new project I'm currently researching related to some of the Savior's teachings and the visual imagery he used.

### Is there a particular piece you consider your best? Why?



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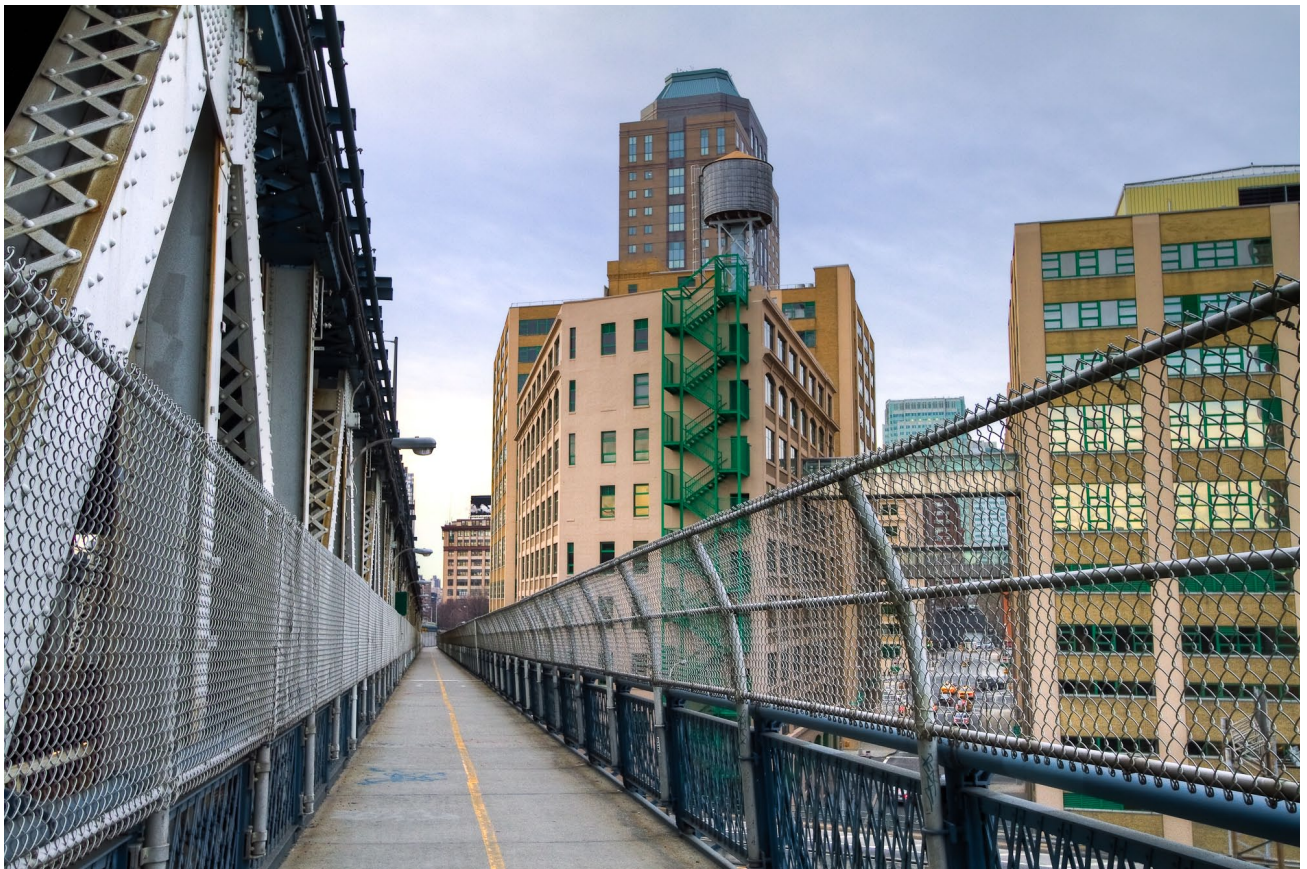


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That's a little like asking which of my children I love the most. I love them all for different reasons. People have responded very positively to the images "Two Bridges" and "Field of Dreams—NYC." The first because of the many different aspects of the image that attract your attention: the tessellation, or repeated forms, in both the lower and upper fences, the horizontal rails that lead the eye up to the Brooklyn Bridge, and the triangular hole in the fence that mirrors the pyramid formed by the tower and cables of the bridge.

I particularly enjoy the lesson this image taught me: to continue to observe. I came across this hole in the fence that someone had cut to shoot pictures of the iconic skyline of Lower Manhattan. I took several pictures through it. Then, as I was packing up my gear, I turned and saw that the hole was more interesting than the pictures I was making. Keep observing, keep looking even as you are leaving a location.

The second seems to touch people with the contrasts of this colorful and quiet baseball field surrounded by the densely packed buildings and flanked by the FRD Drive leading our

eye to the congested skyline of Lower Manhattan.

### What made you decide to do urban photography?

I have always been a landscape photographer. I knew that from my earliest years. I would come back and show my pictures to my parents and my mother would say, "That's nice, dear. But where are the people?" I live in New York City and so my landscape is made of concrete rivers, glass and steel mountains, mechanized wildlife, and tumbleweeds of litter. My landscape is the urban landscape. That's where I live and that is what I shoot.

### What inspires you in your work?

Seeing and observing. I mentioned earlier that I seek inspiration for my projects through study, research, and talking with the Lord. Then I get out and visit locations over and over again. The first visit gives me an idea of the main subjects I'll start the project with and what equipment I'll need. The easy images come from these visits. They are rarely the ones that make the final cut. Then the work comes in. I start shooting and more carefully observing the scenes—wide angles,

close-ups, details, panoramas, bracketed exposure of the same scene that will later be combined to get a more faithful representation of what my eye saw than a single exposure can communicate. I climb on top of things, crawl under things, hang from fences and lampposts and enter any industrial location that people will not chase me out of. I follow where the work leads me and persist until the body of work feels right—feels complete.

### What are your favorite subjects to photograph?

The infrastructure that supports the city: the industry, its architecture that lifts our vision, the bridges that connect us, the transportation that delivers the goods, the refuse and byproducts—all the stuff that is the lifeblood of a large metropolitan area that we pass by and ignore as we go about our busy lives, oblivious to what supports densely populated cities. It has its own beauty. In the early morning light of sunrise when the streets are empty and we can see more clearly, it is alternately beautiful and a little creepy.

### Are there any particular parts of New York that you just love to go to?

I keep coming back to Brooklyn, where I was born and spent the first twelve years of my life. It is so diverse, vibrant, and complex that I never seem to run out of material to photograph.

### What are some challenges that come with doing urban photography?

The things that I love to photograph are usually obscured by traffic, people, and the day-to-day chaos of the workday. So if I want unobstructed views, I need to do it in the hours just before and after sunrise. Saturday mornings are best. I do not shoot on the Sabbath. The Lord knew what He was doing in creating a day of rest. It refreshes and recharges me. I concentrate on other spiritual things and service that fill my reservoirs of creativity. So Saturdays are prime time. Of course, Saturdays are also prime time for household and family chores,



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so I need to push through the fatigue of having risen at 4:30 and photographing for two to three hours and make sure that there is enough time for the family.

#### **What are you working on now?**

I am working on two things. One project is called “Industrial Strength” and deals with the love/hate relationship that we have with industry and consumption. I shoot these images in the sixteen Industrialized Business Zones of the city. The other project is still in the research stage and deals with the visual imagery used by the Savior in his teachings.

#### **What kind of camera do you use?**

A Canon 7D. It’s light, quick, and shoots stills and HD video, so it gives

me the flexibility to do many different things.

#### **What’s the most rewarding part about your work?**

The reaction of visitors at an exhibition or the discussions my images generate when I post them to my blog or Facebook or Flickr. I am fascinated to hear what others see in my images and how they cause people to think about or see things in a new way.

#### **How do you see your art building the kingdom?**

I hope my art connects people and teaches gospel principles without being “preachy.” For example, my thesis project, “A Walk Across Time,” dealt with the enduring beauty, resilience, and evolution of buildings that had

survived and thrived for more than 100 years in a cityscape that seems to change every day. Calling people’s attention to these structures spurred some thought and hopefully became a metaphor for how we can be resilient, endure through trials, remain confident and beautiful even when the world sees us as old-fashioned or out-of-date, and evolve throughout our lives. The project had many lives as large prints and even fine art postcards that were sent to people around the world to share their thoughts and messages. One project with a simple theme connected people around the country and on four continents to share thoughts that were exhibited for many others to see. So teaching gospel principles and connecting people is what I hope my work ultimately does. 🙌







# Janice Kapp Perry

INTERVIEW BY MYRNA LAYTON

WEB: JANICEKAPPERRY.COM

## What was the first song that you wrote?

The first thing that I wrote was just for my son Steve to sing in church. He said, “I’ve been asked to sing in sacrament meeting and I don’t like anything.” The only pieces then by Church authors were kind of old-fashioned and he was fifteen.

So one day when Doug and the kids left, I decided to try to write one. I wrote a poem called “I’ll Follow Jesus” and wrote the music before they got home. Steve liked it and sang it in sacrament meeting.

And I thought, Oh, that was fun, I want to keep on. I just started writing. I had my training at BYU earlier, but I had been so heavy into sports my whole life until that point, that if I had any extra time I was pitching softball or playing volleyball or racquetball.

About that time I had an injury that was kind of serious. I was getting older—I was almost forty—and my husband felt like maybe I shouldn’t play ball anymore. He had been very supportive, but my injuries were getting more serious.

While I had my foot in a cast from a broken ankle from playing basketball, the bishop asked me to write our ward roadshow music. It just sounded like a fun challenge. I did it. I knew by then that I wanted to write music and that it was time for a change. So I just looked at that little piece “I Am a Child of God”—how much I loved it, how much it helped my testimony—and I set a goal to add to the simple music of the Church.

I happened to get a lot of assignments right then to write children’s music in my own ward or stake, so I did that. And then the stake Young

Women started asking me to write a theme song for them every year, so I did that. And then the women for Relief Society.

Right now I am totally immersed in writing a Book of Mormon musical fireside that choirs can put on. It’s an hour long, and it’s for CES choirs and youth choirs. Sometimes I’ve written musical stage plays—we’ve toured the U.S. for three years. That’s how I got started: just writing that roadshow and writing a song for my own son to sing in sacrament meeting.

## How did it morph from that to having songs in the Children’s Songbook?

That’s a good question, because I think a lot of people felt impressed to write children’s music before the new Primary book in the 1980s. We didn’t know it was coming—we just felt that impression to write.



In my case, when I had several songs written, I sent them to the Church and said, “Does the Church have any use for these?” They get so many things, and the Church music chairman wrote back and said, “Just brighten your own little corner of the world. Work with your family, your ward, and your stake.” So that’s exactly what I did. He said, “If they should have value, we’ll hear about them.” And that’s what happened, too. People who I wrote the songs for sent them in to the church and said, “This really worked well for us. All the Primary children should sing this.” That’s how it started.

I think other people were sending them in, and—I don’t know—they started looking at them seriously, and when they had the Children’s Songbook, they used all the ones that I had written. Plus they asked me to write a few more for it, so there are ten in the Primary book. And that was a big part of what I did at first.

Elder Maxwell said not too long before he passed away, “Back in my day, we used to sing ‘Little Purple Pansies,’ but these are the latter days, and now we’re singing ‘I’m Trying to Be Like Jesus.’ We’ve got to get serious.” Without a doubt, six of my Primary songs are what I am best known for.

And then I started writing for Young Women every year and sent

some of them in. We did a Young Women’s album. Then Ardeth Kapp asked me to write the theme song for the values. That was really kind of a turning point, where I focused on Young Women for quite a while. I wrote a song for every value after I did “I Walk by Faith.”

Then the Primary, just before our mission, asked me to write two more songs for them: “Holding Hands Around the World” and “I’ll Follow Him in Faith.”

I thought, well, the General Relief Society has never asked me to write a song for them. Then they did—just after I thought it! Sister Parkin asked me to write a new song for women and it was sung on two satellite broadcasts: “When I Feel His Love.” They did it two years in a row for some reason.

When you write for the Church, you have extra help. It just really happens. It’s sweet when you get those assignments, but they are few and far between.

#### Do you ever get writer’s block?

Yes, almost all the time. The lyrics are the hardest part for me. I’ll spend a week or two, sometimes, writing the lyrics, and then two hours writing the music—because when you are writing the words, the music is taking shape in your mind, too.

#### So that’s usually the way that you do it? You approach the words first?

Most people do. Unless you have the words, how do you know what kind of music to write?

There are a few people, like my sister, who do the music first. But she doesn’t write her own words—someone else does. Maybe that’s why it works that way.

#### You and your husband served a Spanish-speaking mission. Was it a music mission?

It was a proselyting mission in Santiago, Chile, and there were three aspects of it. We visited inactives, because Elder Holland was there stressing that at the same time. And my husband was in leadership in the district.

But then we started developing choirs and teaching music classes, keyboard, and conducting, and I’d say for the last nine months of our mission, that was pretty much what it was, just getting all the music into them that we could.

Because they didn’t have keyboards, they’d developed their own way of singing the hymns, which was interesting. When they asked us to form a choir, we could hardly get them singing unison, because they would sing it a cappella in a low key, and they couldn’t go low enough, so they would invent a melody, and they had kind of settled on it.

We got keyboards in all the classes and graduated twenty-four from our conducting course and our keyboard course. By the time we left, all the wards in two stakes there had people who were playing the simplified hymns and conducting. And we had four choirs that we developed—a youth choir, a young adult choir, a district choir, and a missionary choir. It was just our mission from then on.

And then we came back here and we missed it so much that we just begged for a call to a Spanish ward here, so we were there three years and we did the same thing—we taught the conducting course and the piano course, and we developed a nice ward



Photo by Tiffany Tertipes



choir, which was really exciting. They love to sing! You tell them there is a choir practice, and you've got forty people there without batting an eye. That's not how it is here.

When we were going to leave that ward, and I knew we were going to be released, I thought "Who is going to play for primary?" because I had done it. So I chose four really sharp little kids—they were about eight and ten years old—and I told their parents, I will give them free lessons from the Church course if you will make sure that they come every week and that they are prepared. I won't charge you anything. I will even buy their music.

So I simplified the eight pieces for the Primary program, and at the end of that year, those four students played for the whole sacrament meeting program. They just played very confidently. It was one of the most rewarding things that I've ever done, and I don't mean monetarily. This is three years later and they are playing right from the hymnbook, and the Primary songbook. Some of them are in English wards now, but they are playing for sacrament meeting and for the Primary program. In fact, they were even featured on the front of the Church News. I just love those four kids so much. They are like my own grandchildren. I'd still like to be on another mission somewhere doing that—teaching music. We'll see how our health is.

**Did your work on your mission and in the Spanish ward have anything to do with your songs being translated into Spanish?**

Several years before we left on our mission, we realized that Spanish was the coming language here. And they had none of their own LDS music. We hadn't thought about our mission being Spanish yet.

So, we just hired a wonderful translator from the Church, Omar Canals, and we had translated and recorded four albums in Spanish before our mission, using all-native singers. There is a wealth of really wonderful



Photo by Tiffany Tertipes

singers in Spanish here—we really have good vocalists.

After the mission, we knew we needed to continue, because we knew their need of it there. And so we've done four more albums. We market them here somewhat, but we also take them down—we have people in Mexico, Chile, and some other places that market them at a very low price for their people. The albums pay for themselves, and that's all that we care about. We don't try to profit from them. We use our same English soundtrack so it's not as expensive, we just add the singers.

Yes, our hearts are in things Spanish. I go to the Spanish temple session every Saturday, just to keep up, and I read my Spanish Book of Mormon

every night. I read the *Liahona*, all the talks in Spanish, between each conference. Sometimes we give firesides here, too, in Spanish, because Doug is fluent in Spanish. I recorded just one album in English where I did the singing, which was an act of bravery, but later, I did it in Spanish, after our mission, too. We hope to keep getting more things in Spanish.

**Are any of your songs more dear to your heart than others?**

Oh, I definitely have my favorites. I think the one that means the very most to me is "A Child's Prayer." It's the one I get the most reaction from other people, too. There are days in everyone's life, when you feel like, "Heavenly Father, are you really there?"











Do you hear my prayers?" I hope it is answered well in that piece that, yes, when you pray, he is there. When I first wrote that song, I wrote it in first person—the Lord was saying, "Pray, I am here." Then I thought that it was going to limit who could sing it. The Church wanted me to change it, too—they said to have it be like a parent answering the child: "Pray, he is there." That was a good suggestion.

I love the Primary songs. "I'm Trying to Be Like Jesus" means a lot to me.

"The Test" means a lot to me, too. I lost the use of my left hand when I started writing music. My three middle fingers pull under and the wrist pulls down when I try to play, so I went to forty specialists, and no one had an answer for it—they just didn't know. So I've had to play that way for about thirty years.

The last person I went to was a blind doctor and I kept complaining to him. He was an osteopath, trying to figure out some kind of physical therapy. One day I realized the irony of my complaining to a blind man. He said, "Well, I wanted to help your hand, but I guess I can't. But I can help you learn to accept it more gracefully, and to know that someday there will be a restoration, whether it be in this life or the next." He helped me so much that I wrote the song for him. "Please tell me, friend, why are you blind? Why doesn't he who worked miracles send light into your eyes?" And then his reply, "Didn't he say he sent us to be tested?"

So, personally, that song means a lot to me. I wasn't even going to put it on a CD, and then someone said, "Oh you should do it—everyone has trials." I do three verses on different subjects: the first one is about him, the second verse is about me and many others who pray for healing and it doesn't come, and the third is someone who loses a loved one. There was an LDS station here at that time, and they'd have the LDS hit parade, and it was number one for almost two years. So it really filled a need for somebody. It did me. I wrote it to help me understand.

And then I had a stroke in 2006 which affected my right arm and leg. I still can't even feel when my foot's on the pedal for sure, but I do have feeling in my extremities—my arm and leg are numb, but my fingers are fine, and I've just developed a way to play. It looks weird—people comment on it, "Is that a new technique?"

### **What about music for the non-LDS audience?**

We did one album of gospel music, where we made sure we didn't put anything strictly LDS into it, and that was fun too. It was "My God is Love."

Earlier I did a collaboration with Greg Hansen, in which really I did nothing, but I took all the old gospel songs—somehow I grew up knowing them, many of them from the Baptist hymnbook, and some others—and he orchestrated them and had people sing all those old-time religion pieces. That's still an album that people enjoy. It's not for just our Church—we didn't put anything on it that conflicted with our beliefs, but most things don't.

The patriotic albums really hold a special place in my heart. I loved writing them. And they've probably been sung at bigger places than any others. "Heal Our Land" was sung at George Bush's second inauguration by a black minister at the National Prayer breakfast. It was even sung on the Oprah show on 9/11. And the Mormon Tabernacle has done it, too, arranged by Mack Wilberg. I love the patriotic songs.

### **Are you satisfied with what you've done with your talent?**

Yes, I am, except that I want to keep going.

You know, the music business has really changed. Many composers and people involved in any aspect of the music business have really been affected severely, like everyone else in the economy. With digital downloads and people burning discs for friends, and Deseret Books promoting primarily their own artists, we haven't even been able to record for a couple of years.

I started applying for grants. I did get one grant that allowed me to record a brand new album at the end of last year. I just really feel good about that. I am working on a grant to cover this project we're working on, trying to have faith, because we have our things out on digital downloads and that helps a little bit, but it doesn't provide the income to pay for your next project. It just doesn't.

So I'm trying to do things now with no thought of making income or profit. But I'm having to find a way to get them financed. And to me, they can just be a gift. We can retire—we are in our seventies, and we've been wise in saving our retirement, so we can just quit. But if I can get a grant to continue—and I have gotten one—then I will continue, because what else would I do? It's what I love. And it's what my husband loves. This morning he took my scribbled copy of a new arrangement of a Book of Mormon piece for this project down to his office, and he entered it in the computer—they call it engraving—and engraved it beautifully for publication. And this is what we love, so much that we will continue doing it, even if it's a donation somewhere. That will be fine. We're trying to do more of just donating whatever we can, for the Church, or to these piano students. Just whatever we can, which is fine, but I won't quit writing. I hope I have another decade to write.

There have been so many albums made during the last few years that are one-time albums, because they can never recover the costs for them. With ours, we started when almost no one was writing, just Lex de Azevedo and I, essentially, and it was a novelty to have music out by LDS composers. People bought it, and it made it possible for us to do another and another and another. We have almost eighty albums and it was never a problem for us to finance them, because we recovered the money and went on to the next one.

We can never do that now. We're all having to try to find other things to do. People buy CDs if they see them there in the store—they won't special

order, how will they even know about it if they don't see it? People need to be able to see that something is available, and then they do impulse buying. We do all the advertising that we can afford to do, and so we recover partial cost on that album. I wish that stores would carry even our top twenty. Before things changed, even our first album was still selling after thirty years, but if the albums aren't there on display in the LDS bookstores, then . . . we're done. People buy what they see. It is really hard.

One thing that helps us to get things out expeditiously is that our son John works for us full-time. He does all the business side of things. I write the music, my husband takes it down and prepares it for publication, and John designs the covers and does all the duplication, the publishing, distribution, taxes—everything that the business entails. We have it all right here, so all we need to do is take our master to have the CDs duplicated. It helps us that we've always had our family totally involved in it. We've done eleven different albums for our son Steve and two for our daughter Lynne, who is a wonderful writer/composer. So it's very much a family thing, where everybody has the talents to get a whole project done. We used to have to go to a design artist for the covers, but John now does it all on his computer. It's really beautiful.

I just have such a feeling about what the music means to people. After literally thousands of letters saying "this song helped me in this situation, this song helped me come back to the Church," it's just constant—you get a sense of mission. And that's the reason I don't want to stop. There will always be a need for people to have good music that uplifts them. I hope we can find a way to keep going.

When I started out, here is my goal that I wrote down: "I hope someday the Primary children will sing one of my songs." That was my goal.

A couple of years ago Craig Jessop called from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and said, "Would it be alright



Photo by Tiffany Tertipes

if we used your song 'Love Is Spoken Here' as the title song for our new album? And we'll also put 'I'm Trying to Be Like Jesus' and 'A Child's Prayer' on it. Would that be alright?" I said, "Craig, I've got to share with you my original goal: it was that the Primary children would someday sing one of my songs. I could never have imagined this!" I write for Meridian Magazine, and this year I wrote on setting goals and how it helped me to write down and have that thought in my mind and work toward it. I was just dumbfounded to think I had come that far—to have the title song on a Mormon Tabernacle Choir album!

I love just writing about my experiences in my own life, because when you have experienced something, you can be pretty sure that a whole lot of other people have, too. And when you write about something real in your life, there is a difference from if you sit down and try to write a nice song.

I've done five little volumes of hymns in the last while. My husband said one day, "I feel strongly that you should write a hundred hymns." I was dumbfounded, and I said, "How about

one hymn? They're hard. They're different. You've got to get all the voice leadings and . . ." and he said, "I'm just telling you. It's up to you—take it or leave it." I was singing in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and a friend, John Pearson, started giving me his poetry, which was really hymn text poetry. He and I wrote eighty hymns together, and sadly, he passed away last September of colon cancer, and so that's the end of that. I think he was the best hymn text writer in the church. Man, I miss his beautiful writing. But we have these five little hymnbooks, each with thirty-five hymns, so I've gone way over the hundred, and we keep the price really low so that choirs can afford them.

I loved writing hymns. I'm kind of through with that phase, and now I'm doing this hour-long Book of Mormon program with a sister from Colorado who is writing the lyrics—very scriptural lyrics—and Merrill Jenson is going to record it. I finished the last arrangement this morning just before you got here.

So, different times I like to go different directions—they're all good. 🌸





Photo by Lizzy Bean

# Eric Samuelson

INTERVIEW BY MAHONRI STEWART

**Tell us how and why you got involved in theatre, specifically playwriting. What was that journey like? In what ways do you think you have matured and changed as a dramatist since your beginning days?**

My father is an opera singer so I grew up with theatre in my blood, really. I made my stage debut at a very young age—six or seven, something like that. I played a street urchin in a production of *Peter Grimes*. I got to wear body makeup, and I remember sitting in the bathtub after each

performance and watching all the water turn brown from my makeup. I remember thinking how cool that was.

In junior high I was a total mess—that's not unusual of course, but I had the horrible experience bad junior high experiences measure themselves against. I remember vividly the day two thugs took me behind the gym and carved a swastika on my arm with a switchblade. I couldn't tell a teacher or my parents, I thought, because they might think I *wanted* a swastika on my arm. So when I got home from school,

I cut away the rest of the skin, so it wouldn't look like a swastika anymore.

But when I got to high school, two teachers saved my life. One was an English teacher named Kenneth Mann who thought I had potential as a writer and put me in a creative writing workshop he taught. The other was the typing teacher—yes, high schools used to offer typing and filing as a class—who was an opera buff and knew of my father and got me involved in the school choir. So I got involved with choir, went from there to theatre,



wrote a column for the school newspaper, and became editor of the school creative writing magazine. Basically, I found my niche. So when I went to college, playwriting seemed like a natural next step.

After my mission I enrolled in Charles Whitman's playwriting class. Apparently the department chair, Charles Metten, had an idea for a play and asked Dr. Whitman if he could recommend a writer. So I was called into the principal's office—that's how it felt, anyway. I was scared to death, but Dr. Metten said I'd come recommended as the best young writer in the department, and he had this play idea. He'd provide the storyline and I'd fill in the dialogue, then he'd put it on the season and direct it. The result was a play called *Letter From a Prophet* and was about Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail. I pulled it out a year or so ago and reread it—it was shocking to me how little I remembered of it. I kept thinking, "I wonder what's going to happen next?"

The play was pretty bad, of course, but that didn't matter much. I learned so much from the experience. I learned how to build a scene, how to create a character through dialogue and action, how to connect moments to create suspense and interest. I've always been grateful to Dr. Whitman and Dr. Metten for a tremendous learning experience.

Anyway, in college I worked with both Dr. Whitman and Max Golightly, who taught playwriting, and then I took an advanced writing seminar from Orson Scott Card. Scott was a tremendous structuralist—he felt that if you got the story right, everything else would fall into place. That's still how I teach playwriting today. I wrote a play for Scott about college football players called *Playing the Game*; it got on the BYU season and went on to a Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival regional production and was another great learning experience. Then my composer friend Murray Boren said he wanted to write an opera about Nauvoo in the immediate wake of Joseph Smith's death, so

I wrote the libretto for *Emma*, which the music department produced and which eventually made its way to a New York production and a rave review in *Opera News*. So BYU kind of launched me.

I then decided to go to grad school. I went to Indiana and worked towards a Ph.D. in Theatre History and Criticism. It took me nine years to complete, during which time I worked at a pizza restaurant and became a radio guy working for the local PBS station, WFIU, as an announcer. I had a sports show on Saturdays, and I also wrote and hosted an on-air call-in game show called *Ether Game*. I can well imagine an alternate universe where I went into radio professionally.

I also took all of Sam Smiley's playwriting classes. Sam wrote the book *Playwriting: The Structure of Action*, which was then a standard textbook in the field; it took a very Aristotelian approach to playwriting. I liked Sam personally a lot, but I didn't really connect to his approach for some reason. One of my fellow students, Ron Dye, started a theatre in town called Bloomington Playwrights' Project, which is still going strong today. I did a few things for them, though mostly as a director, not really as a writer. They did one play of mine, *Sex and the New York Yankees*. There's a story there—three of us writing students at BYU had made a pact that we would all write a play with that title on the subject of "things that are overrated." Turns out we all did it, too. But otherwise, I felt really lost as a writer. I couldn't find my bearings.

I did love theatre history though, and ended up getting hired at BYU in '92. I loved my classes, and one day I got an idea for a play about an LDS family trying to decide what to do about an elderly relative. The result was *Accommodations*. It got produced and won an award from AML and that kind of relaunched me. So I was publishing in theatre history and teaching those classes and meanwhile also writing plays. My wife, Annette, and I had a young family so it was a busy and exciting time. In 1999, Tim Slover, who

taught playwriting, moved up to the U of U, and I became a full-time playwriting teacher. Then, around 2003, I discovered Plan B Theatre in Salt Lake, and I've written for them quite a bit as well as for LDS audiences in Provo.

**Tell us about your personal worldview. In what ways do you feel like you are in sync with your Mormon culture, and in what ways do you feel like you diverge? How is that reflected in your writing?**

Well, frankly, I'm kind of a boringly conventional Mormon in most respects. I love the Church. I love the gospel. I love the idea of eternal progression. I love the atonement. I love the possibility for repentance and change the gospel provides.

The thing is, I'm a writer and a theatre guy—an artist. My brother's a businessman; he's a very conventional Mormon, but he also sees the world from a business point of view, so his worldview is a mixture of the gospel and business. I'm an artist, so my view is sort of half-LDS and half-artist. Does that make sense?

So for me Art is tremendously important. I tend to think that there's no such thing as "worldly" art, or art that's inherently damaging spiritually. Most works of art that some people in the Church might regard as "questionable" I tend to embrace. Often works that my brother might find troubling really speak to me. Art is testimony. Art is one person saying "this is what world looks like from where I stand." I just can't see how that could ever be morally damaging.

Now, some art is bad, but usually it's just badly executed. There are certainly works of art I haven't responded to positively, but usually it comes down to ineptitude. I'll often hear people in my ward saying things like, "Hollywood is trying to corrupt our youth," and I'll sit there thinking, "Well, first, there's no such thing as 'Hollywood,' and second, what specific film are you talking about? Because I saw *Little Fockers* too, and at its heart it's a film about two mismatched

families trying to get along. It just wasn't done very well.

**You've invested a lot personally into the Mormon artistic community. You were even president of the Association for Mormon Letters for a while. If you were to give a State of the Union address about Mormon arts, what would be your main talking points?**

The state of our Mormon arts is... uncertain.

I presided over AML for two years, and my one accomplishment frankly is that we didn't go under. That's it, that's what I got done—I kept the organization from disbanding. I still believe in it, in creating a space where those of us who care about good writing by and about Mormons can get together and talk about it. But in a time where Mormon Studies is an increasingly valid academic discipline, we fight for any institutional support at all. I went to the Mormon Arts Retreat this summer. Retreat is right—this organization, which is so important and valuable, can't pay its bills.

But at the same time some terrific Mormon writers are becoming huge players in national markets. I just finished reading Brady Udall's *The Lonely Polygamist* and it's amazing, a wonderfully written book about our culture. I'm writing this while listening to a Killers album—Brandon Flowers is great. I loved Neil LaBute's latest movie. Scott Bronson's doing a terrific play at the Covey Center while Chris Clark is emerging as the most exciting stage director in the Church.

**And how about Mormon drama, specifically? How have we done, how are we doing, what do we need to do for our future? What do you think we need to make a more vibrant and lasting legacy?**

What I've always felt is that we need a space. I look at Plan B, for example. It's amazing; a small independent theatre in Salt Lake that's sold basically every seat for every performance for five years running doing nothing but new plays. They're not doing plays by and

about Mormons, but they have a business model that's been very successful, and that we should find encouraging.

Good plays don't matter if they're not produced, and good plays need to be produced multiple times. It's not enough to do a play once, what matters is the second production, and the third. The New Play Project is doing great work in Provo—*Little Happy Secrets* and *Prodigal Son* won the last two AML awards and are both wonderful plays. They're in rehearsal with a play of mine right now too, but they're constantly on the brink of financial extinction. Davey and Bianca Morrison Dillard are great people, but how long can they hang on?

When I talk to the Plan B audience members, they look forward to the new Plan B play with great anticipation. They put it on their calendars wondering, "What will they dazzle me with next? What new insight will they bring, into this state, this culture, this world, this time and space?" The reality, though, is that our audiences don't always trust us. They don't know much about drama anyway, and for a lot of Mormons "conflict"—which is a completely essential element of drama—equates with "contention," which they spend a lot of time trying to avoid in their lives—and with good reason.

When I was in grad school, Annette and I had these good friends and one night we decided to invite them to a production we were going to see. A director I knew was doing a *Twelfth Night* set in a Club Med. Our friends had never seen anything like that—they'd never been in a 150-seat black-box, they'd never seen Shakespeare done that way, they worried about the intimacy of the space. They were really leery about the whole thing, but it was great, a very funny, smart production, and they were entranced. A few months later, the same director decided to do a version of *Julius Caesar*. We mentioned it to our friends and they were excited to go. We went and it wasn't very good; it just didn't work as well and our friends would never go see a show with us again. One bad

experience can destroy progress made with good productions. We can't really flop in this business, and that's tricky because sometimes, with the best of intentions, we do sometimes blow it. As William Goldman said about film, "No one knows anything." People can see a bad movie without it turning them off movies forever, but, unfortunately, a bad play can turn them off from theatre forever. Of course, bad movies are often sort of fun. Bad theatre is excruciating, so that may be a factor.

**A lot of your plays (not all) are Mormon-themed and/or have strong Mormon characters. What drew you to focus on your immediate culture and religion?**

Honestly, it's just what I know. I write about other subjects, of course, but the fact is, I'm a Mormon. I'm in this culture and I'm interested in exploring it. It's such an interesting culture. Sometimes people outside our culture think it's this very middle-American white bread culture. That's so not true.

**That being said, you also seem to be branching out into more national issues. Recently, you wrote plays criticizing the meat industry (*Miasma*) and dissecting historical American identity (*Amerigo*), among other plays. Your plays for Plan B seem to have a decidedly different audience in mind than your plays at BYU. What brings you to write for/about the wider world? How can Mormon artists intersect with the larger national and global communities effectively? How can we make the world a better place?**

Discovering Plan B was a tremendous thing for me because I love the people there and I love the opportunity to write for a different audience than I had been writing for. I've enjoyed writing plays with a bit more political edge; it's really been liberating for me. I haven't abandoned LDS audiences, not at all. I have three new plays coming out in the next three months and two of them are overtly and directly LDS, so I've hardly left my roots





Photo by Lizzy Bean

behind. And this new audience I'm writing for is, after all, just 40 miles north in Salt Lake City. But Salt Lake is a pretty liberal town, and I feel like I'm among friends up there.

The second part of your question is an intriguing one. How do we connect to larger national and global audiences? Well, by telling great stories, with characters who are honest and real and true. That's all. Good writing crosses borders.

I just got back from Sundance and one of my favorite films there was a film called *Mad Bastards*. It's about a small aboriginal community in Broome, Australia. Very narrow cultural subject, in other words, and one that I knew nothing about going into the theatre. But it was great precisely because it was so immersed in its culture. Most of the actors had never acted before—the leading actor showed up on the set hoping for some work as a grip. They liked him and cast him as the lead and his performance was nakedly honest and real.

We can do that. Just tell our stories with insight and imagination and compassion and truthfulness.

**In recent years, which of your plays have felt most personal or important to you? Which ones drove you to finish them and finish them well?**

Well, heck, they all feel personal and important while I'm actually writing them. Let me see. *Family* was really important to me because it was based on my family somewhat, and my family is my life—I'm nothing without Annette and our kids. *Borderlands*, which opens at Plan B in April, was really difficult for me. It took six years to write because I was so close to the characters it was hard to be ruthless with them, hard to get the perspective I needed to sit back and fix the scenes that didn't hold together. *The Plan*, which is in rehearsal now at the Covey Center, is really important to me—my entire testimony is in that play.

So that's three pretty important ones. But really, it's like asking which

of your children do you love the most? All of them, obviously.

**What's in the pot right now? What projects are you currently working on and why?**

I'm in the middle of a play about the worldwide financial crisis and it's completely kicking my butt. It took me forever to figure out what a credit default swap really is and how you can use triple-B rated mezzanine tranches of subprime mortgage bonds to create a triple-A rated CDO. I mean seriously, how do you package together a pile of crappy mortgages and persuade bond rating agencies that the package is worth more than any element in it? But also, you know, where's the story, where are the characters? I've got an outline and most of a first draft, but it's slow slogging.

I reread *Gadianton* the other day and was amazed at how naïve it felt. Fred Whitmore, the play's villain, wouldn't lay people off for a living anymore, he'd be a bond trader for Goldman Sachs and he'd walk away at the end with \$30 million in his pocket.

Anyway, when that gets too depressing I'm working on a novel and I'm also doing a play about the Book of Mormon. My daughter's my stage manager for *The Plan* and she said, "Daddy, this is so good, you should do it some more." So fair enough.

Some friends have urged me to write about my illness. But so far I haven't been able to do that. Maybe someday.

**You're also an educator—a professor of playwriting at BYU. From that perspective, what do you see in the rising generation of Mormon playwrights and thespians? In what ways are they different than previous crops of Mormon artists you have seen?**

I love the kids I work with—they're just amazingly unafraid. I was so much more afraid when I was their age, but these kids seem so much more grounded, so much more sure-footed. Every semester in my beginning playwriting class, I just marvel at

the level of work they're doing. And the thing is, they're not that innocent, they're not that naïve. They've struggled for their testimonies and they've come out the other end of the struggle really grounded. I find them inspiring.

The kids keep me young. They keep me grounded. I don't like to think of what a cranky old curmudgeon I'd be if it weren't for the kids I work with. And there's a real possibility that I might have to leave BYU. I was diagnosed two years ago with polymyositis, an incurable muscular-degenerative auto-immune disease, and my illness makes it increasingly difficult for me to get around, to keep my focus for a two-hour class, to just physically get to the classroom. I don't know how much longer I'm going to be around so I treasure the time I have with them.

I think they're going to do great work. I'm optimistic about the future.

**How do your faith and your art intersect?**

Wow. Basically everywhere. I love the gospel. I write plays that I hope will help people connect with their Heavenly Father and with their brothers and sisters. I owe everything to my Savior.

**In an age of Playstation, Netflix, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, why does theatre matter?**

Great final question. Theatre matters because nothing can quite compete with the experience of seeing artists create something live, for you, in that moment—just for you and other audience members. Theatre is the most ephemeral of art forms—it disappears as it's being created, leaving behind nothing but the lives it's managed, however briefly, to touch. That's an experience that nothing else on the planet can match. I love all the electronic media you mention above; I think they're all valuable and important. But live theatre can compete just fine, because there's nothing else like it. 🌟





# Kymberly Mellen

INTERVIEW BY SHELIA COSPER

WEB: [MELLENHEADPRODS.COM](http://MELLENHEADPRODS.COM)

## What was the motivation for dedicating your life to acting?

It was something I knew I was good at and that I felt great doing! Joseph Campbell talks about finding and following your “bliss”—the thing that makes you excited to wake up in the morning and engage in the day. It is an activity that provides a cyclical energy by refueling you physically and emotionally while you serve and work so very hard. That’s what acting, directing, and teaching does for me. I continue to receive as much from these activities as I give. I love the amazing, generous people I have the opportunity to interact with in rehearsals. I think actors and artists are amazingly charitable, empathetic, astute, and knowledgeable people.

## You recently appeared in the Joseph Smith movie. What was that experience like?

It was an amazing experience. The director/writer, Gary Cook, wrote the part for me. Although most of the other characters in the film are

readily identifiable from Church history, he wanted at least one storyline that wasn’t instantly recognizable or predictable—a story that included moments of doubt and conflict in relationship to the Church. He combined several journal and Church history stories that are not attached to specific names and crammed them into one family’s storyline. I play the unnamed blacksmith’s wife who receives a Book of Mormon from Joseph Smith. I marry a widower with small children, many of whom are burned to death by the mob. Our last child falls ill as my husband is faltering in his faith and Joseph Smith’s blessing restores the child to health.

It was filmed over the course of a year, trying to match the seasons with the actual locations as much as possible. We filmed in Nauvoo and Springfield, Illinois, and in several lots in the back of the LDS Motion Picture Studio in Provo, as well as Upper Canada Village, Canada—a fully functioning frontier town. It was a unique experience in that the script was under

the supervision of many individuals, all of whom had power to cut dialogue, so we often didn’t have dialogue until the morning of the shoot and much of it was also improvised. We started and ended each day with a prayer on set. Every actor with a speaking role was required to be LDS and temple-worthy. The spirit of cooperation and mutual respect was overwhelming. Multiple miracles occurred every day as weather cleared, sicknesses abated, accidents were averted, and all of our talents were magnified beyond our natural abilities.

I developed a strong kinship with the pioneers as individual, struggling people. The last day of filming we were on the bank of the Nauvoo River in the heat of summer with mosquitoes galore, reenacting the cholera epidemic. We had over a hundred extras all donating their time and energy so willingly in those trying circumstances; you can see them in the wide shots. We all felt some idea of what the pioneers were actually going through—although we were only









on that location for twelve hours and the pioneers camped there for weeks in the mud with meager supplies and illness all around. Our mud was makeup, the sweat trickling down our faces and staining our clothing was glycerin, but it's the closest I've come to viscerally relating to their challenges physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It was wonderful to be surrounded by so many actors whose work I admire and who are professional and spiritual mentors to me: Gary Cook, T.C. Christensen, Tayva Patch, Rick

Macy, Nathan Mitchell, and Katherine Nelson.

**You are not only an actor but a director as well. You directed *The Turn of the Screw* at the Covey Center two years ago and Shakespeare's *As You Like It* last year at BYU's Pardoe Theatre. How does your approach to acting change as a director?**

I try to direct others the way I want to be directed. I expect the actors to do thorough research and bring a specificity of thought and clarity of events

through the eyes of their character to the table. I strongly rely on a sense of ensemble and group input. I consider myself the lead collaborator and final decision maker, not the originator of all brilliant ideas. I try to approach the performances as an extension of the rehearsal process—we should all still be trying to clarify and experiment and affect our partners more deeply as the run progresses instead of recreating an exact performance night after night.

I had just performed in the two-person Jeffrey Hatcher version of *The Turn of the Screw* for a six-month run the previous year, so it was very fresh in my mind. I had a \$200 production budget to transform a cement room into a theatre, build a set, find props and costumes, etc. With my husband as my co-designer and director, we decided to build a set that reflected contemporary fears and included the sights and sounds of modern psychological horror movies. We paid homage to shower curtains, body bags, grimy windows, masks, bare light bulbs, and rotting wood floors in our production. As a director, I think the cardinal rule is not to bore your audience. I don't want them to "sit back and enjoy the show," I want them to "lean forward and engage." So we tried to layer in as many subliminal sound effects and startling surprises of sound and performer proximity as we could. My actors were fantastic and I think we confused and scared the average audience member. Mission accomplished!

With *As You Like It*, again my central mission was to make the play accessible and applicable to a younger contemporary audience. We set it in modern times, began with an on-stage coup as the framing story and added in cover songs from current bands, all performed on stage with acoustic guitars and live singing. It was definitely not what you would find on the stage of the Utah Shakespearean Festival's Adams Theatre, but a fun, valid interpretation nonetheless. My goal was to demystify Shakespeare's words and relationships so that the student actors always knew what they were saying



Photo by Karl Hugh. © Utah Shakespearean Festival 2010

and what they wanted and the audience could identify with the struggles of people like themselves.

#### **What is your preferred type of role?**

I want to be challenged; I want to do something that scares me to death. I want a role that I don't understand with a scene partner or ensemble that I feel completely inferior to. If I feel fully prepared and fully confident, I won't be learning. I always want to be advancing in my craft and knowledge, not sitting back on my laurels.

#### **Your family is an artistically centered one; you are an actor, your husband an artist. How are you bringing your children into that artistic circle?**

We consciously try to make them aware of the beauty and complexity and contradictions of the world around them. We talk about feelings. We take opportunities for discussions in inopportune moments. For example, when my daughter helps me run lines, I love the dialogue we have about strange vocabulary and character choices. We bring them to rehearsals. We read lots of books and create songs, mini plays and performances on a daily basis. We take them to plays and performance art, galleries, art exhibits, concerts, libraries, and museums. My husband sets them up with their own art materials and projects while he paints. We try to purchase learning-based and imaginative gifts that demand creative and problem-solving thinking. We share with them the joys and challenges that making art brings to our lives.

This past summer I was lucky enough to have my children acting on the stage with me at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. My nine-year-old daughter Ellie was a MacDuff child in *Macbeth* as I played Lady Macbeth and my two younger children, Brookie (six) and Vance (four), were dancing village children in *Much Ado About Nothing*. I really enjoyed spending rehearsal and backstage time with them. Their dressing rooms were right next to mine; it provided some nice one-on-one time.

I think they understand me better as a mother when they see me in my element. They also learn the sacrifices required for this job; when we got home, they were just as tired as I was.

This past year, my entire family was involved in my production of *As You Like It* at BYU. I directed and my husband and all four children were in the ensemble. I loved that process. I remember saying at one of the rehearsals, "Everything I love is in this room: my family, eager students itching to learn, and the words of the master playwright William Shakespeare." I wish all facets of my life could overlap and infuse each other in that way. At first I thought that having the children on stage would be difficult, but it created an immediate community of believable relationships. It necessitated "being in the moment" and spontaneity on behalf of the adult performers because you never knew what the kids would do.

After the stage production closed we took the same cast out into the forests surrounding Provo and shot the entire production in HD. We are in the process of editing that footage to create a full-length, low-budget film version of *As You Like It* to be used as part of an educational software package for high school theatre teachers.

#### **Balance is so important and it is sometimes difficult when we lead active lives. How do you maintain a spiritual balance with your work, your time away from home, your husband, and your children? What links you to home?**

"Theatre is about life, life is not about theatre." That's one of my favorite creeds, though it is difficult to apply to everyday life since this is such a time-demanding profession. To be honest, sometimes that balance is completely lacking in my life. There's a saying within the acting community, "I can't, I have rehearsals," and that's what it often feels like. I miss out on a lot of family time and events. Each day I try to realign my priorities, organize my schedule, and simplify. My patriarchal

blessing promises me that if I make time for my husband and children and express my love often and freely there will be great joy in my home. My husband is constantly reminding me to do just this: to leave my business at the office and when I am home in person to be present and engaged with the children. I have never missed attending sacrament meeting more than two Sundays in a row, no matter the inconvenience or rehearsal and performance schedule. I specifically ask for callings so that I will develop service relationships in my ward and feel needed.

#### **How do you see acting influencing the lives of others?**

I was reading *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens lately and I am always struck by Jacob Marley's anguished outburst, "Mankind was my business!" Mankind is my business too; it is my job to understand people and their actions at a deeper psychological level. I need to feel and empathize deeply and have the courage to portray those lives with truth, accuracy, and insight. Leo Tolstoy said that theatre has the opportunity to be more effective than any pulpit. There is a captive audience, with an open mind, ready to be entertained, and unaware that they might actually be inspired by the end of the performance. The chance we have as performers to hold the mirror up to life and help audiences become more aware of their interactions with others, the direction their choices are leading, the consequences of self-destructive and unkind actions, and their current relationship with God—these are amazing opportunities.

#### **What do you feel is the importance of art (performance, visual, and literary) in the lives of members?**

Other than the audience that reads this sort of magazine, I don't feel there is much importance for art in the perception of members and that saddens me. I think they believe it is a cultural exposure that their children would benefit from; that participating in performing teaches self-discipline,











social skills, and increases self-esteem; and that art is useful as entertainment. However, I'm not sure that art, as a career, is respected or encouraged because it is not a stable profession nor financially lucrative. I think we're such busy people that we don't make or take time for the arts. We promise as part of our temple covenants to feed our spirits as often as our physical bodies and to me, participating in the arts is an excellent way to feed our spirits—to reconnect with our emotional life and learn from others' lives.

### **How does theatre and acting enhance the experience of the gospel?**

Doing the research, suspending personal judgment, really trying to understand the *why* behind a character's actions is the closest I come to Christ-like empathy for another human being. I might not condone the behavior of the characters I play, but I understand why they do the things they do. We rarely give any other human being that kind of benefit of the doubt.

As members of the Church, we are familiar with vicarious work for the dead. I feel like acting is doing vicarious work for the living. I am vicariously living another's life, real or imagined. I am helping my audience to vicariously view the world through another lens or prism, to experience the blessings and trials that come from making certain choices, to see others in an empathetic light.

### **How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?**

It depends on the trajectory of my future professional life. Thus far, I feel I am building the kingdom in two distinct ways.

First, I am unashamedly a working Mormon actor, willing to discuss anything with anyone in the industry. I have many, many spiritual discussions with others not of my faith. I am a strong promoter of marriage and the family and having children. I love seeing my non-member friends have the courage to commit to one another

and start a family, despite the prevailing trends. I hope my example has something to do with their decisions. I hope my friendship and good humor and transparency in discussing all things I hold dear makes me a non-confrontational ambassador of my faith.

Secondly, specifically while teaching at BYU, I have the opportunity to train future performers, not only in their craft, but also in their approach to the profession and ways to incorporate their faith into all they do. My influence on these young adults will have a ripple effect in the performing community as they go on to both worldly success and raising their own families. I'm helping to train a performing workforce that will represent BYU and the Church as compassionate, non-judgmental, inquisitive, and generous people.

### **An actor's life is heavily dependent on their appearance. What do you do to keep yourself fit for your work?**

Invest in a teeth-whitening system. As a mother of small children with a full-time job I'm not as regimented in this area as I should be. If I have to choose between sleep and exercise, sleep always wins out! Then, at least I will be healthy and sane, if not skinny. Being in a show with upcoming publicity pictures or a gorgeous costume that I want to look good in are great incentives. I memorize lines while I work out on the elliptical. When your blood is flowing, your brain is working! My husband and I try to go to yoga twice a week and I love Zumba!

### **Tell us about your current projects and what you hope to achieve for yourself and for the broader community.**

This past December I filmed an independent film, *Boy with Blue*, directed by David Thorpe and written by Matthew Greene—two recent BYU graduates. It's about a couple dealing with the recent death of their teenage son in a drunk driving accident. I think it's a terrific plug for film festivals because the 108-page script was filmed in a

two-day period of two full takes. There were lots of long shots and tricky shots traveling back and forth between the present time and past memories with real-time choreographed camera moves and quick set dressing. We rehearsed it similarly to a theatre piece with continuous action. It deals with the unpredictable and complicated process of grief and forgiveness. Two of my current BYU students are also in it—Heidi Smith and Benny Isaacs. Being married to a low-budget filmmaker, I love to support other fledgling filmmakers whenever possible.

I just finished recording some voices for a BYU Radio version of *A Christmas Carol*. I will be directing a conservatory play winter semester at BYU, which means that tickets will not be sold. It is primarily for the actors to concentrate on the craft of character development without the distractions of major technical elements. I have chosen *Fefu and Her Friends* by María Irene Fornés. It was written in the 1970s but is set in the 1930s and is a strongly feminist piece with elements of realism and absurdism.

I will be performing at the Utah Shakespeare Festival this coming summer, but they haven't made any casting decisions as of now. As I mentioned I had an amazing past summer playing Lady Macbeth and Beatrice with three of my children also in the cast.

I am writing a one-woman show dealing with the sinking of the Titanic and Irene Colbert, the only known Mormon to die aboard. She was an LDS midwife from Provo who defied her husband and ecclesiastical leaders to go attend midwifery school in London. I hope to perform the show sometime next year to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the tragedy. It deals with the conflicts between motherhood and career, social consciousness, and the support we can offer one another during the transitions of birth and death.

I also have until April left on my BYU contract. I teach beginning and intermediate acting, auditions, voice, and speech and ethics.



Photo by Tiffany Tertipes

**In a perfect world, with no monetary or time limits, what would you be doing?**

If I had more money, I would finance my husband's films and artwork. He is the most creative, talented individual that I have ever met; all he needs is some serious financial backing to really get off the ground.

I would love to run my own theatre and hire the amazing actors, directors, playwrights, and designers I have worked with over the years. I would star myself in a few independent films.

If time were not limited, I would study to become and serve as a

midwife. I find as much pleasure in teaching childbirth classes and attending births as a doula as I do performing, but the two careers both require so much time away from the family. I would also spend far, far more time with my children.

**How do you want to be remembered?**

In the long run I want to be remembered as a loving wife, mother, daughter, and sister who did her best to serve others and improve herself in this life by following Christ's example. I realize that what I do for a living is

of lesser importance than how I raise my family.

However, I have the added blessing and responsibility of touching many people's lives through my teaching and performing.

I hope I can help audiences re-examine their choices and relationships and do what is necessary to come closer to those they love. I hope I can help them identify and personally avoid some of the tragic choices the great characters in literature have made. I hope I can bring not only entertainment, but also perspective, inspiration, and healing to their lives. ❧





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