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MormonArtist

COVERING THE LATTER-DAY SAINT ARTS WORLD

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Gerald Lund

INTERVIEW BY JACQUELINE DU PLESSIS

You have bachelor's and master's degrees from BYU in sociology. What was it that got you into writing?

Actually, though I have both degrees in sociology, I never did anything with the sociology part of it. After I graduated with my bachelor's, I had an opportunity to join the Church Education System as a seminary teacher, and it was that career path that eventually led me into writing as an extension of my teaching. It really had nothing to do with the major in sociology.

What was it about your work in the CES and teaching that influenced your writing?

I found very early in my career that I just loved to teach. I loved to teach the gospel and I loved to teach youth. After about four and a half years of teaching seminary, my wife and I accepted an invitation to go to Southern California and teach in the institutes of religion.

While we were there, I began doing some research on the prophecies of the Second Coming. It was just a particular interest of mine. I would use those quotes in class or I would use them in a fireside, and when I did so, people would say, "Gee where can I get those quotes? I would like to have a copy of them." I said I got them out

of the BYU library, but that wasn't very helpful to people in Southern California. They kept saying, "Well, why don't you write this up and then we could have them." The first several times I just kind of brushed that off, but eventually I thought, why not? I love to teach, and this would just be another way of teaching.

So the first books you wrote were mostly quotes and information about the research that you did. Was *The Work and the Glory* your first fictional series?

No, I'd written four novels before that. The very first book was *The*

Coming of the Lord. Then I did a shorter group of four short stories for youth that was published but was only in one printing. Then I wrote four other novels before I went to *The Work and the Glory*.

How did *The Work and the Glory* get started?

I had finished the four novels and was interested in starting something else, and I determined I was going to write a novel set in New Testament times. I had gotten about five or six chapters of that started. By this time we had returned to Salt Lake City to work in the Curriculum Department for Church Education, and one day my boss called me into the office and said, “I have a man who would like to meet you and talk about writing. He’s from North Carolina and will be up next week. Would you take time to meet with him?” I said of course I would, and that was how I came to meet this fellow, Kim Moe, who became so instrumental in what happened next.

When we met, he introduced himself and told me that he was a convert to the Church of about twenty years. He was in his mid-sixties by this point. Long before he even joined the Church he’d visited Temple Square and they’d given him a little book by Cleon Skousen on the early history of the Church. He said, “I’m a fan of historical novels, and I thought that would make a great historical novel.”

Eventually the missionaries found him and he and his wife joined the Church, and then that began to be a much stronger feeling, because he still had this little book. He was well-to-do—he had a lighting company, a factory. He said to me, “I’m not a writer. I went to the bookstore and the Deseret Book store and picked up all the Mormon novels I could find, and I like your writing style the best. I’d like to talk to you about whether you’d be interested in writing a historical novel on the Restoration.” And I said, “Well, because of my teaching career,”—and I’ve taught a lot of Church history—“I’ve always thought that would be a

great novel, but it’s a huge project. And I’m sorry, but I’ve already started on my next project. I’m five or six chapters in.”

He told me later that I was cordial but not very open to his proposal. He was quite insistent that he felt very strongly about this. I just said, “I’m really sorry.” He went back home and he called me again and said, “I want to come out and talk to you,” and I said, “Kim, I know how you feel about this, but right now I’ve got this other project.” He was so insistent, I finally said, “All right, you know what? I’ll take a day. I’ll go off by myself. I’ll just look through everything—all the projects I have, this project, this proposal that you’ve got, and I’ll try to find out what I should be doing.”

And so I did. To my surprise, my experience was a strong feeling that I should go ahead and accept his proposal. That was the genesis of *The Work and the Glory* series.

We thought at first that it was going to be one big one-volume work. That was really pretty naïve. As we continued and it became successful, I was down in North Carolina visiting Kim and his wife, and his wife said, “I think you need to tell Jerry the story of why you felt so strongly about this project.” And he did.

In a way I was grateful that he hadn’t told me before, because it would’ve put on some real emotional pressure. Instead he had said, “I just feel so strongly about it.” But now he told me that once he’d joined the Church, he had this compelling feeling to write the novel about early Church history, and he’d tried to write it. He’d thought about it for several years and he just kept putting it off, not sure what to do about it.

One night—he was serving in the Atlanta Temple presidency at this time—he went to bed and had a dream. In the dream, a man appeared to him and said, “Kim, why haven’t you got that historical novel on the restoration of the Church done?” Kim said, “I actually argued with this man in my dream. I said, ‘I tried it and I

can’t write.’ And the man said, ‘I never said you had to write it. You just need to get it written.’ And then the man said, very soberly, ‘Kim, your years on this earth will not go on forever. You’ve been given this charge. If you do not accomplish it, and you die before it’s done, you will come to know the meaning of the agony of hell—in that you have lost an opportunity that cannot be recovered.’”

That was so sobering to him. That was why he was so insistent—why he wouldn’t take my no for an answer. It was really a quite an unusual story when it all came out.

What is your writing process like?

Up until just the last few years, I worked full-time. I was never a full-time writer, so I always had to adjust writing time into a full schedule—family and church callings and professional work and so on. Today I’m often asked, “How do you ever find time to write?” and I finally just decided the answer is that you don’t find time to write—you *make* time to write.

At least that was the answer for me. I would just take whatever time came. You know, after the kids were asleep or early in the morning or on Saturdays, if there was nothing else.

When I started on *The Work and the Glory*, where there was a tremendous amount of research—it took almost a full year just doing base research to start—I found something else developing in my writing. In historical fiction, the research drove the plot and the writing. In other words, I’m not making up the plot; I’m taking characters and fitting them into an already-existing historical structure.

I began developing the pattern of finding books that would be particularly helpful for me, and then as I started reading those and studying them and plowing through the journals and the diaries and so on, I would find things and say, “Oh, that’s great—I want to use that.” So the research became very quickly as significant a portion of my writing style as the writing.



Sometimes when I'd reach that point in the historical structure, I'd just back off from writing and spend a week or two doing research and making notes. I write hundreds of three-by-five cards because they're easy to go back and sort into a plot structure. I'll write a note that I want to do and then write the source where I can go back to find it, to document it. That's become a major part of my writing style.

The Work and the Glory books were made into three movies. What role, if any, did you play in the creative process of the films?

I was called to the Quorum of the Seventy in April 2002. A few months after that, I was approached by Russell Holt and Scott Swofford as to whether I'd be interested in seeing movies made of *The Work and the Glory*, which, of course, I was. I thought that was a great thing.

But by that point I was a member of the general authorities. I talked to my priesthood leaders and expressed the filmmakers' interest and asked if there was any objection, or if they could go ahead, with the understanding that I wasn't going to become a major part of that process. My only role would be to review the script and other major decisions to make sure it reflected what I wanted and didn't go in a direction that would end up embarrassing the Church.

That's basically all I did. Scott Swofford and Sterling Van Wagenen, who was the director for the second movie, came over to England where we were assigned at that point and we spent a couple of days brainstorming, and then they went back and did the casting and all the production stuff and so on. My involvement was pretty minimal.

And you're pleased with how all three of those turned out?

It's always a real dramatic change when you take a five- or six- or seven-hundred-page novel and condense it into an hour-and-a-half movie. There are things that a writer would say, "I wish

we could've kept that in," but overall we were very pleased with the quality of the production and the quality of the acting and how the movies turned out.

Your other popular series—*The Kingdom and the Crown*—was well received. What was the process like for it? Was it different from writing *The Work and the Glory*?

Not really. *The Kingdom and the Crown*, though it wasn't called that then, was that book I'd already started writing when Kim approached me. In that case, because of my master's study in the New Testament, I'd already studied the history of that time and age, the culture of Palestine, and so on.

When I finished *The Work and the Glory*, I decided I wanted to finally return to that project, and eventually that became *The Kingdom and the Crown*. By that time, I actually had over a thousand three-by-five cards on Roman culture, Jewish culture, Jewish religion, and all that. Fortunately I had just stuck those on a shelf in the basement, so that when I finished *The Work and the Glory* ten years later and came back to it, they were still there.

Is there a possibility we may see *The Kingdom and the Crown* adapted for the screen?

I'd love to see that, but as you know, taking a book to movie is a very long and iffy process and very high-risk for investors, so we'll see. I'd love to see it done. It would be very expensive, though, because it's a period piece with all the costuming and the set and so on.

How has writing these two series influenced your testimony of the gospel?

Profoundly. I've always had a testimony of Joseph Smith, but to immerse myself in his life for almost ten years—poring over his writings, his life, his journals, his interactions with people and how people viewed him—I came out of that with more respect and a

deeper testimony of him and what he was than I ever had before.

And the same thing happened with *The Kingdom and the Crown* and my feelings for the Savior. It's really an interesting process for a novelist because you want to stay true to the history, but there are some things that are not in historical sources that a novelist



Photo by Lizzy Bean

needs, like day-to-day conversation and motives. But to even ask yourself the question, “What was Joseph like at home? What kind of a husband was he for Emma?” and then to try to find things was a whole new way to look at him that I’d never done before. It was very, very valuable.

You’ve done your post-graduate studies in Hebrew at Pepperdine and the University of Judaism—did you study Hebrew at both of those locations?

Actually, I did New Testament studies. I got all of another master’s except for completing the thesis. I didn’t go into it for the degree; I went into it because

I wanted to study the New Testament, so I finished that and at the same time I just took Hebrew at the University of Judaism, because it was down in Hollywood and it was on the way to my classes. I’m not a Hebrew scholar in any way, but it allowed me to go in and look at the meanings of the original words in a lexicon and so on, and that



Good art is driven by vision.

was pretty valuable for some of the stuff I was writing.

You just released a new book, *Divine Signatures: Confirming the Hand of the Lord*. Tell us a little more about it.

In my youth and early childhood, I had some experiences that were not remarkable or dramatic in the normal sense of the word but which caused me to think a lot about God—that He knew me and was aware of me and blessed me sometimes, and in an unusual way. That has always been in the back of my mind.

Then, as I became a seminary and institute teacher, I began to notice there were other stories like this. People who'd had similar experiences where the Lord reached out and touched them and blessed them in a unique and sometimes very dramatic way. That interested me.

The thing that finally led me to go ahead and try to write this book happened while I was serving in the Seventy, particularly over in Europe—when we went out on stake conferences, we were asked to hold what they called “new convert meetings” before the Sunday morning session. We invited those who'd been baptized within the last year or former members who had come back to full activity within the last year to meet with us briefly so we could welcome them and tell them how much we appreciated them.

In those meetings, the mission president and the stake president would take a few minutes. I would speak to the members briefly and then ask them to bear their testimonies if they chose to. One day not long after I started doing that, I had another thought, and I said something like this to them: “It's been my experience that when you decide to join the Church or when you decided to come back to activity, in many cases there's what I call a turning point. Something happened that caused you to listen to the missionaries or made you decide to come back. If you feel so inclined, we'd love to hear what the turning point was for you.”

That proved to be a remarkable experience. Over and over and over we heard some incredible experiences when the Lord had reached out and touched people who the missionaries would never have found on their own. Other people started sharing conversion stories, and some of these were so remarkable, I began trying to find a way to describe them. These aren't just normal blessings. These are blessings that come in a unique, very unusual manner, and especially with a precise timing, that makes it very evident that God's hand is in this.

One day I thought, “It's like in some cases the Lord autographs his blessings so we'll know for sure it came from him.” I liked that concept, so out of that came the idea of “divine signatures.” I laid out some of the doctrine related to this, but mostly it's just sharing those stories told to me personally or experienced by me personally, or Church history stories.

Most writers specialize in either fiction or nonfiction, but you've done both. Why is that?

Let me go back to an earlier question, because that leads in to this one. One of the primary reasons I write is because I love to teach. And writing is just a different form of teaching, albeit to a much bigger class, if you will. Because of that, teaching fiction can reach a broader audience. And when it came to historical fiction, I could do some things with that medium that you can't do in a normal classroom. It's part of the logistics.

For example, in *The Work and the Glory*, the main characters in the Steed family are chosen to reflect how different people reacted to the Joseph Smith story. You have Benjamin, who's the skeptic. You have Marianne, who embraces it. Nathan is a doubter at first but seeks the truth and comes to it. Joshua is completely turned off by it. And so it goes. By creating fictional characters, I could explore the emotions and the reactions of people to the Restoration in a way that you just can't quite do in a classroom.

As you were naming off these characters in *The Work and the Glory*, for me it's almost like they're real people.

Many years ago, early in my writing career, I was reading a famous writer—I can't even remember who it was now—but he said something like this: “When you're writing a novel, you have to watch your characters carefully, or else they'll take the bit in their teeth and ride off in their own direction.”

When I read that, I thought, “That's crazy. I mean, these are my creations—what's he talking about?” I know now what he meant, because those people become so real in my mind. For example, take Jessica, Joshua's first wife—my original intent was to have her come into the book, this tragic little figure that gets thrown aside by this hard-hearted Joshua. But by the time I finished that, she was like, “No way, you're not getting me out of this family. I'm part of the Steed family now and you're not getting rid of me.” That's one of the joys of writing—when the characters become that real.

You've been married for forty-seven years and you have seven children and many grandchildren. You've been a seminary teacher, bishop, branch president, stake president, and member of the Quorum of the Seventy. How have you learned to manage your time between family, church work, and other responsibilities?

There was a defining point where I came to a solution on that. When Kim Moe was pressing me to go ahead with *The Work and the Glory* series, and I finally got my answer and called him and said, “Okay, this is a go.” One week later I got a call from our stake president and was called to be a bishop. I can remember thinking, “Wait a minute, Lord, didn't you just tell me to do this other thing?”

As I started the process—now I had a calling of bishop on top of my employment and family, and my family was young—I decided that I'd just grab whatever time I could. But something started to happen. For

example, I'd have a Tuesday night that was free. Once dinner was over, I'd go down and get in two or three good hours of writing. And then the washing machine would break, or one of my kids would come in and say, “Dad, I don't understand my math. Can you help me?” I found myself getting really frustrated, and actually a little sharp at times—“Can't you leave me alone?” That sort of thing.

As I was thinking about that one day, I said to myself, “Writing is not the most important thing you do.” Once I really settled on that in my heart, then when those conflicts come up, I just say, “Well, I wish I had the time, but I don't, and this is more important.” That has been a great compensating influence for me—to just say, “This is where your priorities are.” Writing comes down that list somewhere.

And yet you still wrote all those books.

Well, I don't play much golf. Any golf. I don't play chess. I don't watch a lot of sports. When I have discretionary time, it goes to my family or it goes to writing. With my family, we do a lot of fun things together, so I get plenty of recreation in that way. (And by “my family” sometimes I mean “my wife and I.”) For example, in the middle of writing the book on personal revelation, even though I was pushing for a deadline, one day my wife said, “You know, we ought to go visit the kids sometime.” Twenty-four hours later we were on our way to New Mexico and then Colorado to visit two of our children. We took twelve days to do it. But I could do that because writing's not the most important thing I do.

Are you working on any writing projects currently?

I just finished the *Divine Signatures* book. I always kind of take a break and catch up. But I'm looking at a potential project with the Church that I'm just kind of sketching out now, and we'll see if anything comes of that.

Do you have any advice for those who have dreams of making a

difference through writing or teaching or the arts?

Good art is driven by vision. You have something that you want to say with your painting or you want to express through your music or through literature or whatever it is. Normally, the really great art comes from value-driven vision. Not just Mormon but Christian or Buddhist—some of that is just great art. I worry a little about today's society with all the social networks and video games and iPods and everything—that vision comes through spending a lot of time thinking about things, pondering about things. For example, when I walk, I never take a radio or anything with me. That's great thinking time for me. Unless you're an absolutely incredible genius, the key to almost all great art is very hard work. Good books, good music, and good poetry are not written—they're rewritten, rewritten, and rewritten. You polish, you hone, and you throw out. So to anyone who really wants to do something, who is fired with that vision, I encourage them with all my heart but say, “Hunker down, because it only comes with hard work.” Somebody once said that the average overnight success takes about ten years.

Is there anything else you would like to leave with our readers?

Years ago I read a talk given by Arthur Henry King. He was a British fellow who came to BYU and taught English literature. The name of the talk was “Literature and Testimony.” He said, “Mormon artists should be people who believe in the Mormon religion, who have a testimony, and who write from it; but they need not write especially for Mormons, and they need not write especially on Mormon subjects, though the treatment will be inescapably Mormon if they are true Mormons. The task of the Mormon artist of the future is to be an artist to the world and to represent Mormon values to the world by his art, and not to be turned within on himself or on his group.” I like that. That's really been a defining quote for me. 🙏



Nnamdi Okonkwo

INTERVIEW BY SHELIA COSPER

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How did you get started with your art?

I have always loved drawing and have always been fascinated by it. However, it took a series of experiences, which I now believe to have been orchestrated to guide and keep me on my destined course, to lead me to the serious pursuit of art.

Without my mother's encouragement and support, it would have been almost impossible for me to get on the path of my artistic career. It was she who persuaded me to take the study of art seriously. My first artistic training was in painting but it was when I discovered sculpture that I felt that a profound connection was made.

What is your work about?

My work is about the beauty, nobility, and majesty of the human spirit, which I express with sculptural forms and elements that, I feel, are befitting such grandiose feelings that arise in my heart in connection to the ability and true potential of man. These feel-

ings and emotions that I am drawn to express, are those which seem to suggest a character that embodies the transcendental powers of the soul over the daily cares and worries of life. For me, human attributes such as love, resolve, serenity, and humility elevate man's soul, and allow the extraordinary powers of the human spirit to shine through.

You're also a painter, but you've stated you prefer three-dimensional work. Why?

I feel a deep spiritual connection with sculpture. I like the physical nature of the process of making sculpture, and sculpture offers me the opportunity to create art that, because it exists in three dimensions, is corporeal, and can have a life that more easily evokes reality.

Tell us about your style.

I was led to my forms and shapes through a strict obedience to my inner artistic voice, rather than to any external influence or contrived notion of

reality. Right from the beginning, there was something about volume and mass in sculpture that was compelling and arresting to me. I was easily led to render everything in a scale that was uncommonly outsized and larger than life. For me, it seemed the only natural way to create in three dimensions, so I really cannot completely explain the logic, or understand fully my predisposition to the rotund forms.

But in seeking for the logic behind these forms, it is tempting for me to see these early and still persistent artistic intuitions as a way of expressing the expansive capacity and the largeness of the human soul. Perhaps my sculpted figures are but structures or edifices which must be weighted down, and which must be large to have the capacity to house the monumental spirit of man. The abundant and expansive forms express an inner opulence and a generosity of spirit. So words like *nurture*, *love*, and *abundance* easily come to mind as one contemplates my work.



Photo courtesy Nnamdi Okonkwo













Photo courtesy Nnamdi Okonkwo

How does your work reflect your feelings about the gospel?

I believe that man, as the crowning jewel of God's creation, embodies inherent godlike attributes which can be summoned to the fore to help overcome the challenges of life. These attributes of man also point back to a reservoir or a matrix from which these attributes originate. For me, that

matrix is God, and my expression in sculpture of any human attribute I see as ideal, is an expression of divine character. So my work becomes an avenue for me to seek to capture a little bit of divine grace and perfection as expressed in the life of man. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, once said, "The soul of a man shines out when he faces with composure one heavy mischance

after another; not that he does not feel them, but because he is a man of a high and heroic temper." The high and heroic capacity of the human soul is intriguing and fascinating to me.

At what point in your evolution as an artist did you decide to make this your livelihood, not just an avocation?

Not only was it not difficult for me to decide to make my living through art, it was also not difficult for me to believe that I would be able to do so. First of all, as far back as I can remember, I have always been keenly aware of the voice within, which I believed and still believe will never lead me astray. And I have been blessed with the courage to obey this voice religiously, even when it appears to be leading me against conventional wisdom and logic. So in a sense, I did not have any choice, since the voice was loud and clear regarding the path I must follow.

Also, because of my spiritual underpinnings, I've always believed that talent is from God, and He that gave the talent, gave it for a reason, and He would also take responsibility for providing the way for that talent to be used to obtain the necessities of life. My own responsibility was therefore to do my very best in honing that talent, and as long as I did my best in the pursuit of my daily bread, He would do the rest.

Such has been my outlook, and it has proven to be a correct one. It is rather an inspirational philosophy, simple but profound, for what can be better than believing in a divine mandate in one's endeavors? I have learned not to expect an entirely rosy road without thorns, but when the challenges come, because of my perspective I am undaunted, and I don't see the challenges as a sign or reason to doubt the correctness of my chosen field—rather, I see them as opportunities to learn other important lessons of life. Experience has proven and continues to prove to me that this idea that God provides is a true and beautiful philosophy.

Coupled with this mindset is the good fortune I have to be blessed with a wonderful mother and a wonderful wife. These two have uncompromisingly sacrificed and supported me in every way on my artistic journey.

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

Just like in any other calling one feels comes from God, I believe mine is given for the benefit and service to others. As I learn to genuinely approach it in this light, and bend my mind away from pride and selfishness, not only do more opportunities arise for me, but also my mind becomes more enlightened, and I see the way before me a little more clearly. I feel that I, as an artist, am only an instrument in the hands of the real and great creator. Whatever I am able to do with my talent that is good is really that which God allows to be done through me for the edification of his name and the benefit of his children. I find hard work to be indispensable to success. However, I also, through experience, am learning that even though hard work is indispensable to success, yet it is not through hard work alone that success comes. I believe firmly that to do great things with one's talents, one must find a reason and a motivation greater than any selfish interests and wholeheartedly believe in it.

I hope that my work adds beauty and meaning to the world. From my earliest remembrances of my first thoughts about art, I have always felt that there was something noble and inspiring about art, almost as if art has within it the power to lift man's soul beyond the bounds of the physical world into an eternity of peace and joy. Like Picasso, I believe that "art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life." And in the same spirit of what Handel was reported to have said, I hope my work not only beautifies the environment, but also in a more personal way reminds and encourages the viewer towards a higher ideal, and offers him solace from the daily cares and worries of life. 🌱



Photos courtesy Nnamdi Okonkwo

Brian Kershisnik

INTERVIEW BY COREY STRANGE

WEB: KERSHISNIK.COM



What attracted you to art?

I always drew a lot, but as play, not as a disciplined pursuit. My knowledge and attraction to art was pretty typical, I think, until college. I excelled in my art classes growing up, but it never occurred to me that one could be an artist. I became interested in architecture and decided to get an undergraduate degree in art before a master's in architecture. Almost at once my world changed, and art it has been ever since.

What about painting?

My initial interest was ceramics and, while at BYU, I met Joe and Lee Ben-nion. We arranged for me to work in Joe's Pottery in Spring City for a summer. That summer I learned that I am not a potter. Lee suggested I mess about with her paints in her beautiful studio that was, at that time, in the old schoolhouse. I did a few paintings, all bad, but it was apparent to me that we were on to something.

What are your working processes—beginning, middle, end. How do you know when a painting is finished?

Work a lot, try a lot, follow a hunch. My studio is large so it accommodates my working on fifty to a hundred paintings at a time, along with drawings, monotypes, woodcuts. I don't wait for fully fledged ideas to descend upon me. I look for them with my fingers and my gut. Most ideas are not really that good—at least not good enough yet. They need adjusting and editing so I must give myself something to adjust or edit. I have started many paintings which I never finished, but I have yet to finish a painting which I never started.

What is your philosophy on making art?

I believe in a cosmos in which art, though vital, is not the most important thing. An external moral compass is critical for the art to participate in the great human drama in a significantly constructive way. That external moral compass is not always obviously



Image and image opposite courtesy Brian Kershnik



Photo courtesy Brian Kershnik



Women carrying houses

Kerasinski

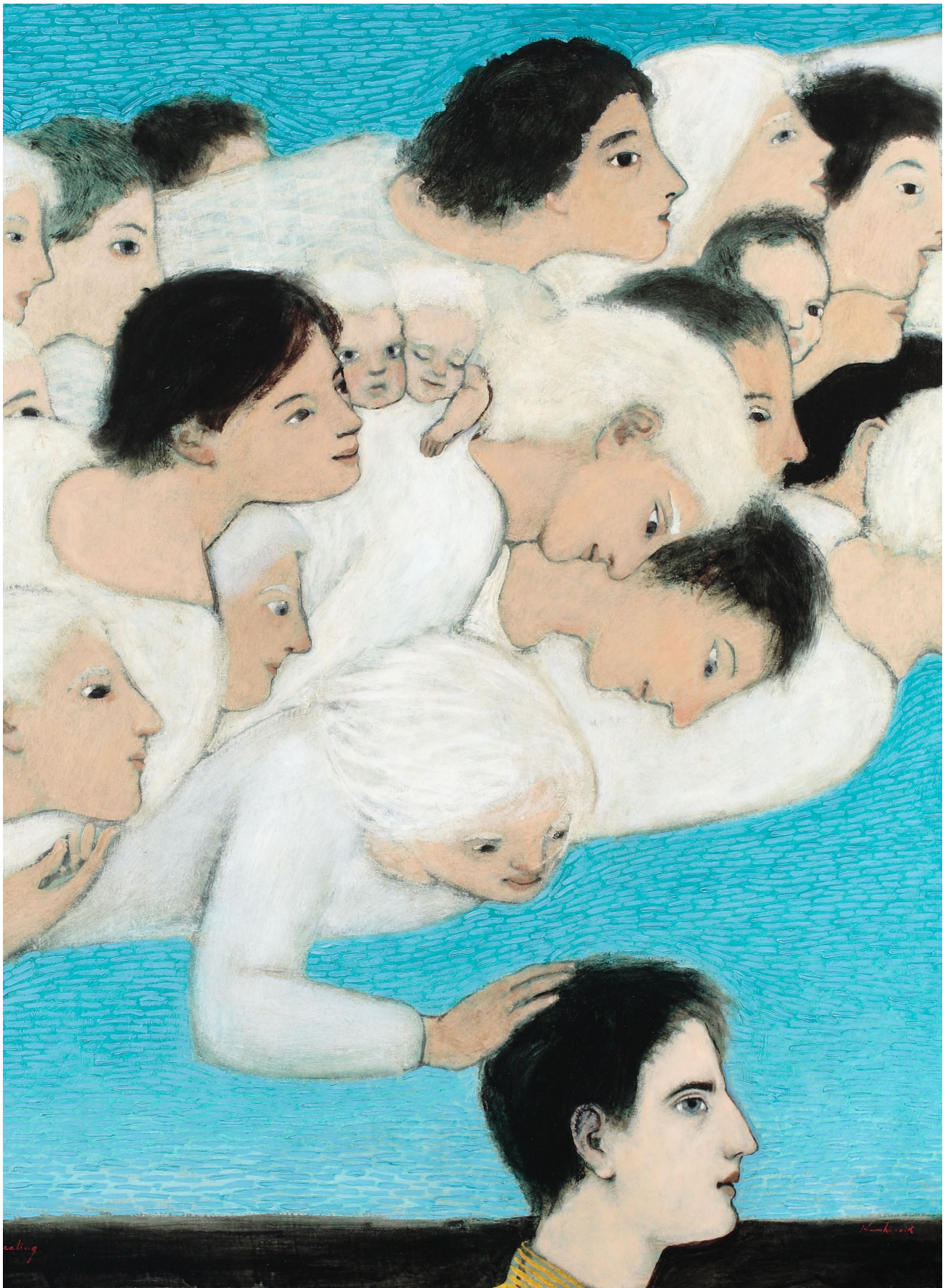


Image courtesy Brian Kershnik



Image courtesy Brian Kershnik



Photo by Spencer Hall

quantifiable, or even comforting. It is the sum of what truly is. We humans (at least this one) are horribly imprecise and things that move us any closer

to the center of the nature of things are good. If something is truly, authentically true, it is bigger than I am and independent of me. I waded in the

shallows finding amazing shells which evidence something much bigger than this present experience. Many of the shells are fragments and shards, but

Maybe this time it will work

Konstantin



Konstantin





Image courtesy Brian Kershnik

some are complete and fantastic—but only the beginning of real answers. Art would do us all a great deal more good if, rather than criticizing, whining, and bickering, or even attempting to provide the answers, it helped us refine our questions.

What things inspire you?

Right now? Food—bacon, particularly. Paper planes. Always people. My collection of life and death masks.

You've been making art for a long time. How do you keep things fresh?

Fresh? I think I just work on what feels vital to me. I don't think about freshness. I don't think vital things get stale. I don't always find the vital thing but I am always looking for it. That way I am always at least just a little bit terrified.

How do you balance home and work?

I make no claim to such a balance.

You have a strong connection to motherhood. Could you explain your fascination for us?

No, I can't explain it. It is too near the core for me. I just don't fight it.

Your work has a slippery familiarity about it. The images conjure up things that seem almost familiar, maybe forgotten. How do you do that?

They feel that way to me too. That is what I am feeling for, searching for. Why it occurs, I cannot say.

Your work is often very sensitive. How do you keep it from becoming overly sentimental?

I believe myself to be extremely sentimental and a hopeless romantic, but I feel an urgency to not lay it on too thick in my painting. I let those tendencies draw me deeply into an idea, but try to exercise enough wisdom and restraint to not bludgeon my audience. I think in a way it is utilizing a handicap to a useful end.

And, of course, I don't always get it right. The metaphors perch rather precariously on pretty delicate structures. Occasionally I indulge myself in a reverie of sentiment and sometimes it works. I think the danger lies in the work dictating a specific emotional response. Your emotions are not my toys to manipulate. To do so would be irreverent.

As a musician, how do these art forms work together or against each other?

Different ways to examine and explore similar things. Also, I rest from painting by playing music. They are both performances that require courage and skill. They don't feel very different to me.

Do you have a favorite art experience you'd like to share?

I had a dream several months ago where I was at my neighbor's house examining his collection of my paintings (in the waking world he doesn't have any, but in the dream he had five or six) when we both simultaneously realized that every painting quite serendipitously contained bacon.

Well, I had never painted bacon before, but set my hand to several pieces which do include bacon. I could not remember the images from the dream, but I could remember a few of the titles. I am working on several such pictures now. At the store in Kanosh they sell this wonderful bulk bacon. It

has become very important to me. For me it is the only real bacon. It has now worked its way through my dreams, into my work. It doesn't usually work that way. In fact, it doesn't usually work any particular way, but hopefully it works.

How has being LDS influenced your work?

Discipleship is a conversation, not an event. It is ongoing and influences everything. I actually choose to let discipleship influence the work as it will, and I don't set expectations of how they are to work together. I have loved, and been loved by, too many great examples of discipleship to name them. I feel that all of my work is religious—very religious—not because I set out to make religious work, but because I set out to be a religious man.

What reception have you had outside of Utah?

Very good. I believe that more than half of my work leaves Utah. There is no doubt that I have a great base of collectors here, but the response has been positive elsewhere too.

Do people who aren't LDS have spiritual experiences with your work?

Interestingly, yes. Although I said my work is religious, it is not usually specifically doctrinal and many people respond to it. It is a very human sort of religion in my work and so far, to my knowledge, every collector has been human, and every human is also spiritual, so that shouldn't be surprising.

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

I believe that if I seek to be good, and true, and honest, and virtuous, and hard working, it will be my privilege to participate in God's kingdom, but I try to be very careful about not dictating how my contribution will be useful. I have seen artists' convictions dashed on the rocks of their own inflated notions of usefulness to God's kingdom. I talk to God all the time. We have a very happy working relationship. 🍳

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Kunkinik



Arlen Card

INTERVIEW BY DAVID LAYTON

WEB: ARLENCARD.COM

Where did you first find your love for music?

Where *didn't* I? My mom was accepted into the Tabernacle Choir when she was eighteen. She was innately musical, even though Dad wasn't necessarily. I grew up on the great classic film scores and opera. She loved Verdi and Puccini in particular. Then my older siblings—I'm the youngest in the family—were listening to the Beatles and anything as deep as Steppenwolf and Iron Butterfly, and as shallow as whatever pop was there. I was raised in this incredibly eclectic environment of loving everything—even country and

western. Well, there was no rap in my childhood, but that would have been part of the mix too, I'm sure.

Why did you choose the saxophone as the instrument you played growing up?

That wasn't my choice—I wanted to play drums or trumpet. My parents, however, said, “No. We need to have something that sounds more musical when you start.” I said, “Okay, how about trombone?” I thought it was cool how the slide goes in and out. They said, “No, we *said* we want you to play something that sounds somewhat *musical*

when you start.” And I said, “Well, I'm out of ideas. What do you want me to play?” “How about a nice saxophone?”

So it was kind of forced on me initially, but as I started getting into saxophone lore and hearing what was being done I went, “Okay, maybe this is kind of cool.” Still, there was this frustrated trumpeter and drummer in me through all those years. I did find a lot of fulfillment in saxophone though and it didn't take long.

What's the difference for you between composing for the Church and composing other projects?

Rowdiness. For the Church, there necessarily must always be an element of reverence. Even when I score comedy for the Church, it's not a silly comedy—it's kind of a sophisticated comedy. With the sower piece I did way back when for the earlier New Testament seminary film, I had to be very careful because silly comedy just doesn't work in a church setting, so it couldn't be cartoon comedy and it couldn't be slapstick. It had to be a very sophisticated kind of comedy and I guess I used as my touchstone the score from *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World*—the strange angles and juxtapositions that sound funny, but aren't silly.

As far as drum kit and edge guitar and my rowdy saxophone, I only use those on non-Church projects. It's fun, because I'm a rock and roll kid from way back and a jazz aficionado, but I found that with my training and the broad background that I have, the more solemn, more reverent orchestral stuff comes really easily to me. So, that's the difference. Rowdiness.

What was it like working on the recent *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration* movie for the Church?

In the first place, I found a really good friend in Merrill Jensen. I had done big films for the Church before, and he had done big films for the Church before, but he was kind of the laureate grandpappy of LDS film scoring. He very graciously didn't resent the fact that whereas he had scored the first two Joseph Smith Memorial Building Theater films himself, now he had an upstart—well, I'd been in the business twenty years—he had someone younger than him and less recognized than him coming in to co-score with him.

He was very gracious about it and we ended up scoring equal amounts of music in the film, an equal number of themes. It was a completely co-equal situation as far as what we delivered to the film, and he didn't treat me like an underling. He treated me like a peer. And, in fact, I was up to it and carried my weight. I'm a good composer.

The best thing that came out of it was that he's now my golf buddy. So, a couple of times a year if we can help it, we get out and knock a ball and laugh at each other and have a blast on the links.

But as far as the experience of the film itself, it's a five-hanky film. Merrill and I got to split up various cues. He scored the surgery. I scored the First Vision. We each got some really meaty scenes to score and I was as engrossed in the film scoring it as most people are watching it. And that's kind of rare because I'm kind of a jaded old...you know, I've done over a hundred films, but it just had a special spirit about it. A little more tragic—no—a lot more tragic than your typical Church film.

Can you describe your creative process? Do you have a set routine?

I kind of do have a set routine, but it wouldn't look that way to someone just watching. I think about the project and I think about all the literature that's gone into that genre or approach before and discard the idea of copying any of it, but I do pay attention to the emotion, the colors and textures, things that have worked in the past, and then I try to do them one better in my mind.

To me, it's very foreign to think of a composer hiring an orchestrator to finish their work unless they were doing a really dense and exact sketch score that they were just breaking into parts. I think about the colors (the choice of instruments), the textures (the density of the instruments, how many and what ranges and things), and the tessitura of the instruments (how high or low, how strained or relaxed they sound in their range), just as much as I think about which chords to use and how to shape the melody, and all those other more compositional factors. So for me, the orchestration and the composition is all part of the same process.

In my training there at the Y, I was completely cut loose from an instrument. I don't need an instrument to compose. It's in my head and I put it on the paper. That's a great gift that I

received because it allows me to just sit and conceive of things and then get them down. Nowadays, however, you always have to mock it up for the client using electronics, so I have become very good at electronics, but I don't have to compose on the electronics.

I guess the short version is that I carve away all of the clichés that I don't want to use while retaining what's appropriate and right for the scene or the genre of the piece and then I try to just create something completely new that captures the essence of how I feel about the piece I'm scoring—what I think it means. It's not like I write the melody first and then the chords. I guess the first thing I do is I pick an ensemble. Am I orchestral? Am I small ensemble? What am I doing with the ensemble? Because that has a lot to do with the budget. I'm not going to conceive of a full orchestral thing for somebody who has an itty bitty budget because I know we're going to go electronic and although I simulate it well, there are certain things you can't do. You can't have fast-moving string lines and things like that on electronics. They sound goofy. So, it changes the way you approach things.

What has been your most enjoyable project to date and why?

As far as rewarding for having done it and feeling proudest of it, it's a long time ago, but *The Mountain of the Lord*—it's not that my career has declined after that, but for the point I was at in my career. That was my first really big film. And I worked my brains out and I feel like I really hit a home run on it. So that's a standout. But the process was kind of grueling.

Where do you find inspiration for your musical compositions?

It would have to be from my own experience. The music is all about emotion. So, my own emotional past is important to what I write. Every composer has a voice. We don't—at least most of us don't—try to sound similar in every piece. We try to sound different and sound versatile but there's still our





voice. It just creeps into everything you do. And that comes, I think, out of our experience and emotions.

In film, it's easy, because in film you have visuals to which you're adding a collaborative feature. I can't go off and write a rock and roll anthem for a tender little love scene. It just doesn't work. The scene narrows the parameters considerably down. Stravinsky mentioned the abyss of freedom in connection with twentieth-century music and the advent of atonality and how all of a sudden you could do anything and therefore what would you do? There were no parameters.

Well, film takes that right away. It's quite the opposite. It does get frustrating sometimes when non-musical people are telling the composer what to do, humming things that aren't even in pitch. But there are those who just hand you a film and say, "Do what you feel." Then it gets really joyful. But it's still dictated by the film.

Then when you get to album projects and my own music, that just grows out of my own experiences and emotions. There has to be a motivation for each piece written. I've written two for girls—one of which was my wife, the other was before my wife. I've written a lullaby for my kids. I've written a ballad for children who died too young. Just things that move me in the news or in my own life experience, that sort of thing for my own music. But I've written surprisingly little just for me through the years. It's usually for a client.

How do you see the gospel affecting your work as a composer and musician?

Really deeply. What I just mentioned—the whole emotional grounding that I have and experience that gives rise to these themes and melodies and approaches—is deeply rooted in the gospel. I can't remember when I haven't believed deeply in the plan of salvation. Dad always did and he was so credible to me as a kid that I thought, "Well, of course it must

be true." And then I started to realize that, yeah, even at a young age I did have a deep, deep witness of the truth of the plan of salvation, what is now called the plan of happiness.

As I've grown and matured in the gospel and different doctrines and ordinances have become part of my experience, it shapes everything I do. There are projects I won't touch. There are genres I won't get into because they're just, by nature, not the right feeling.

It's like breathing. I can't separate that from my music. I can't separate it from anything else that I do, either.

What are you currently working on?

I'm doing a couple of pieces for the Church, but they're not for general consumption. Every two or three years, I do a big Church project with little ones interspersed. I'll do industrials and albums and things like that, but right now I just haven't been a marketer.

What advice would you give to aspiring composers?

Okay, first I'm going to tell you what everybody told me: "Don't."

I disagree. It has been an adventurous ride. There have been really bad times financially, but there have been really fat times financially, too. On the whole, it's been a good living. Not a great living. Not a rich living. But it's been a good, solid living. It's comes in big waves. You get the peak and the crest and then you get the trough. The timing is in question. You never know which is going to be which. So, as long as you and your spouse can have patience with that kind of lifestyle, and then as long as you are really willing to dedicate yourself and try to be the very best at what you do.

There are a lot of people who enter this field and haven't paid their dues to get their skills together. It's not necessarily that you need degrees to do this, but I have bachelor's and master's degrees in composition plus a ton of experience in jazz, and years and years—well over a decade—as a

prime recording artist. So I have all my producer skills down, I have all my performer skills down, I've honed my composition skills down in a vast array of genres. And so, if people are going to enter this field and they only like to listen to one type of music whatever kind of rock and roll or fusion or whatever it might be, what they're doing is limiting the work they can get and they're limiting their career and it's going to be frustrating. I was blessed to have such an eclectic background because I can approach any style and already know what it sounds like.

It takes a lot of time to prepare, and if you're not willing to put in that time and prepare, then you need to be prepared for a very narrow career and narrow careers equate to less money, usually, unless you're really hungry and you can make some hits in your career.

If somebody wants to get into the business and make a go of it, they need to be a player. They need to be up to studio quality as a player on some instrument or vocals because that gives them producer skills they need to create good music. They need to be eclectic. They need to have a broad range of styles. They need to be very skilled at the compositional art, and that can be self-study or institutional study like I did, but one way or another, you'd better get the chops down.

That's my advice. Really get your foundation down. Part of that foundation, honestly, is marketing. The ability to get along with people, the ability to meet deadlines, the ability to work under pressure, the ability to never suffer writer's block. In all my creative life, I've had times when it was harder than others, but I never just sat there and said, "Oh my heck, I have writer's block." That's a fallacy. It just means you were headed in the wrong direction. So, you back up and start over. I've thrown out far more themes than were ever recorded.

The way you get around writer's block is to stop trying to compose something that is inappropriate for the end result. 🎵



David Glen Hatch

INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL YOUNG

WEB: DAVIDGLENHATCH.COM



What influenced you to want to pursue a career in music?

I've always loved music! I was told by my maternal grandparents and parents that when I was three years old, I went with them to a dance class in one of their commercial buildings in Provo (they were there to pick up the monthly rent from the teacher) and sat down on the bench to an old upright piano with my feet dangling above the floor and played with two hands the music I had just heard on the radio to which the students had been dancing. This surprised all of

the adults, who felt I should begin studying with a teacher immediately. The rest is history. I suppose you could say I was born with "music" inside me! I've known little else and it has been a fulfilling musical life and career.

Did you even consider another career path?

Yes, I loved school and was always enthusiastic about learning and often fantasized about other fields of endeavor with the main ones being: Astronomy, Human Behavior, Political Science, and Law.

Do you play any other instruments?

Yes, the French horn.

What have been your favorite venues to perform in and why?

The following concert halls have been my favorite in which to perform because each of them boasts incredible cultural history—some back to the nineteenth century on stages where some of the world's greatest performed themselves—Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, Debussy, Rachmaninoff, Prokofieff, etc. These favorite halls include Izumisano









Concert Hall (Osaka, Japan); Recital Hall (Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Shanghai, China); Music Hall of Composers (Moscow, Russia); Trolldhaugen Concert Hall (Bergen, Norway); Music Hall of the John Calvin University (Geneva, Switzerland); Villa Bertramka Performance Hall (Prague, Czech Republic); Radio Symphony Hall (Budapest, Hungary); Bulgarian Chamber Concert Hall (Sofia, Bulgaria); Mariinsky Palace Amphitheater (Kiev, Ukraine); Great Hall of the Reina Maria Cristina Conservatory (Malaga, Spain); Teatro de la Plata (Buenos Aires, Argentina); Arlington National Cemetery Amphitheater (Arlington, Virginia); Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Washington, D.C.); Bass Concert Hall (Dallas, Texas); Crystal Cathedral (Garden Grove, California); and Carnegie Hall (New York City, New York).

What other musicians have influenced you and your music?

This is easy: Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff, Artur Rubinstein, and Vladimir Ashkenazy.

Do you ever get nervous when performing? What do you do to combat nervousness?

Yes, nervousness comes with the territory, especially when you are a perfectionist. I do feel, however, that when nerves are channeled correctly, the nervous energy can actually elevate the playing to greater performances. There are several aspects to combating nervousness:

Performance confidence comes from thorough mental preparation. Approach the stage with three deep breaths and with excitement to perform the music in such a way that it communicates to the listeners. Forget yourself in the process of the music-making—it can be detrimental to consciously attempt to impress the audience rather than to approach the music with humility while striving to perform the score with honesty regarding the intent of the composer. Never contemplate possible memory

lapses and technical difficulties. Love the music while striving to communicate the message of the music to the audience. Establish effective concentration and sincere confidence in the performance process.

On your website, it says that you teach master classes. What sorts of classes do you teach?

My master classes most commonly follow the normal format: listening to pianists perform prepared repertoire in a public forum, while afterward working with each of them on various concepts of musicianship in an effort to improve the playing.

Other times, piano faculties will ask that I address specific musical and pianistic topics in my teaching such as: *Pianistic Fundamentals of Musical Communication*, *The Human Elements of Outstanding Piano Teaching*, *Developing Comprehensive Finger Technique*, and *Piano Artistry*.

Describe your creative process for us.

I cannot write or arrange without feeling inspiration. Music of inspiration comes from Deity. It is important for me to approach the creative process with more than just the theoretical, compositional, and artistic knowledge gained from years of study in the classroom and experience on stage. For me, music must communicate, must inspire, and must touch the soul.

*Music speaks what cannot be expressed,
Soothes the mind and gives it rest,
Heals the heart and makes it whole
Flows from Heaven to the soul.*

Tell us about your latest recording project.

Currently, I am arranging and recording Oscar-winning film music from different decades such as the theme from *Schindler's List*, medleys of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Atonement*, and *Finding Neverland*, "When You Wish upon a Star" from *Pinocchio*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, for example.

I have always been fascinated to work with and to discover, if possible, some of the musical genius of outstanding composers of our own time: Alan Menken, Dario Marianelli, Jan A.P. Kaczmarek, Howard Shore, James Horner, Alan Silvestri, and John Williams. This has been a rewarding project to date.

How does the gospel affect you as an artist?

The gospel affects me in almost every way—it teaches excellence. We must always strive for perfection in our work—the best and the greatest—and should never be satisfied with mediocrity. We must recognize that excellence and quality are a reflection of how we feel about ourselves and about life and about God.

If we don't care about these basic things, then such not caring carries over into the work we do, and our work becomes shoddy at best. Real craftsmanship, regardless of the skill involved, reflects real caring, and real caring reflects our attitude about ourselves, about our fellowmen, and about life.

What are your plans for your musical career going forward?

Expectantly, this enriching career that has spanned decades of abundant musical involvement will be long-lasting. It is my passion to spread righteous influence through musical inspiration by weaving an expansive panorama of intriguing music-making and colorful contributions to the musical life of our time.

For this reason, my climb persists onward and upward as I have just returned from a European Piano Teachers Association invitation to lecture at the Second Annual World Piano Conference in Novi Sad, Serbia, and the very near future brings a schedule of new adventures comprising international performances, lectures, master classes, and musical firesides this coming summer in Santiago, Vina del Mar, and Concepcion, Chile, and Lima, Peru. 🎹





Jean-François Demeyère

INTERVIEW BY CLAUDE BERNARD

WEB: MAISONDELACREATION.BE

How did you become a member of the Church?

My mother joined the Church when I was a little child. I was baptized at the age of eight. My father did not join the Church until I was twenty-one.

How did you first become interested in theatre?

My parents were teachers, but they worked in a very proactive way. They were involved in new pedagogies and included a lot of art in their work. I always performed in theatre and when I was a child, I wrote plays so I could direct them. I used to invite friends in my neighborhood to perform in plays with me during birthday parties, special occasions, and holidays.

Who are your favorite playwrights? What themes are you particularly drawn to?

As a classical author, I like Pierre de Marivaux, a French novelist and

dramatist who lived in Paris from 1688 to 1763. Marivaux was a Christian dramatist who often wrote about love—what love really is—and showed in his plays how we need to feel a deep *changement de coeur*, or change of heart, before loving with all our being.

Recently, I more often find myself directing contemporary plays and am very much engaged in a sociologic or political way. For example, in 2004 we staged a play about the September 11th attacks, and in 2008 we staged a play about the Chechen War.

Where did you study?

I studied in Belgium, in the Mons Royal Conservatory and in the Brussels Royal Conservatory. I graduated in 1993.

You direct plays, but you also write them. Can you describe your process and the main differences between these two crafts?

To direct plays is a collective project. A director needs to work with actors, to experiment with some of their feelings, to understand what information and which comments they need to receive to help them to play at their best. But the director also needs to deal with costumers, scenographers, sound and light creators, and technicians. And, of course, playwrights—when he has the chance to meet the playwright before beginning a project.

To write a play is a totally different activity. Writers work alone in connection with their own feelings and thoughts and without any constraints. I feel freer when I write, but directing actors is more exciting.

You have also expanded from theatre to coaching and communication. How did that come about?

Theatre helps us to express our feelings more easily, to feel comfortable before an audience, to work with our

voice and our body. And those qualities are receiving increasing praise in the business world. A friend of mine who is a member of the Church urged me to give some communication lessons in two communication schools. Since then I have developed a lot of tools I use during communication seminars.

Tell us about some of the major theatre projects and activities you have been involved in during the past few years.

I created an amateur dance and drama school in south of Brussels in La Hulpe called La Maison de la Création. This school is *accueille*, or home, to nearly 500 students every week. Each year, the ten teachers prepare forty plays and shows that are performed in a theatre at the end of the term.

We produced a play about 9/11 that we performed during the Festival d'Avignon in 2004 and it was a tremendous success. A lot of journalists spoke of our project with high praise,

including in *Le Monde*, *l'Humanité*, and *Les Echos* newspapers and on Radio France International.

How did your 9/11 play come about?

I directed this play, written by one of the most famous French dramatic authors, Michel Vinaver. I read the play—*11 septembre 2001*—in a library in 2003. It was a shock to me. I always desired to speak about the attacks in Manhattan and the play was exactly what I wanted to put on a stage. Working in collaboration with Michel Vinaver was a very exciting moment and we seemed to agree on everything. He was very proud of our performance and invited all his friends to come and see the result, so we met a lot of big names in the French theatre scene.

How has the gospel influenced your work?

First of all, I try to work with the spirit. This means I try to direct actors like I teach a class in the Church, with love, understanding, and knowledge. I often

tell the actors that theatre is a magic moment when the audience must feel something that they probably won't be able to identify with their thoughts or words.

After that, let's just say that I try to create inspiring projects with Christian themes. Sometimes the subjects are hard; they can deal with violence, racism, parents not filling their responsibilities, etc. But there is often an idea behind the show—we can do better, we can improve ourselves.

You are currently writing a play based on the correspondence between Joseph and Emma Smith. What was the genesis of the project? How is it currently evolving and what is your vision for the show?

I think we must speak about the love that existed between Joseph and Emma Smith. When I first read the Joseph Smith correspondence in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, I was deeply touched. I wanted to know more about this couple; I wanted to



Photo courtesy Jean-François Demeyère

partake of what I discovered. I think we should read by heart the letters as they were written, without adding anything, just as we read the scriptures. But at the same time, I would like every person involved in the project to talk about those letters—about the qualities of Joseph and Emma as husband and wife—and even to ask the audience to take part in the project.

Tell us about the plays you perform with students and amateurs in people's homes.

It is a great pleasure to be invited in people's homes to perform plays. When we play in the kitchen of a resident of my village, we are so close to the twenty or thirty persons sitting there that it creates a very warm atmosphere. It helps friends and neighbors feel closer to each other. It is always something special to speak with the visitors after the show.

Your wife is also a theatre graduate. How does that help or complicate matters professionally?

She helps me with everything. She gives me advice. We pray together when we need to make a big decision. I speak to her when problems occur. She understands because she also works in the theatre. She helps me to build scenery, to find accessories, to welcome the audience. And she helps me stay wise with the budget. Without her, I could not live my passion.

How has the gospel influenced your work?

Mormonism is a creative way of living. Every member of the Church is invited to create in his or her own life and own relationships. With the help of God, we are chef d'oeuvres—masterpieces. Art is a precious way to praise God. It does not mean to always directly preach the gospel or to convert the world.

Art has little to do with delivering specific messages. We as artists need to let the audience form their own idea about a subject, just as good missionaries do. But above it all, there is



Photo courtesy Jean-François Demeyère

a power—the creative power that can touch lives.

In this age of multimedia, how can theatre still speak to younger generations?

Theatre evolves. It now has little to do with texts only. We can create shows with sound, video, and body performances. The essence of theatre is to meet one with another in a special place to experience an emotional moment. The younger generations are

as concerned by the theatre art as the older ones.

Do you have any particular project you would like to see come to fruition in the future?

I would like to produce and direct my last play in Paris. The play is called *Youssef*. It explores racism, violence, and the difficulties *entrer en relation*—relating one with another in this world. But it also speaks about a world where we can all be brothers and sisters. 🇳🇵



la storia ti guarda

il nostro passato custodito da
sempre con amore. Anche per te

AS

Marco Lui

INTERVIEW BY KATHERINE MORRIS & MEAGAN BRADY

TRANSLATION BY UGO PEREGO

WEB: [YOUTUBE.COM/USER/THEBOOKOFLIFEMOVIE](https://www.youtube.com/user/thebookoflifemovie)

You are, of course, quite famous in Italy for the character Mr. Him. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to play that character and how your role developed?

Since I was a little child I've had a fond appreciation for things that were funny and made me laugh. I always volunteered in plays at school, church, etc., where I often had funny parts. And if they were not funny, I would make them so. When I was older, I found a summer job as an entertainer in tourist villages. People from all over the world would come to Italy to stay at these villages and therefore I needed to develop a way to make people laugh that went beyond the use of words. That is the reason I start using my body language to communicate. Eventually I started to be comfortable

with that form of comedy and gradually developed the persona of Mr. Him and made a number of short video clips and sold them to two large TV stations in Italy and Switzerland.

You are obviously very interested in children's media. Was this true before Mr. Him or is your interest a result of that role?

In the summer villages where I was an entertainer I had to create programs for families and kids, so I developed a great interest in that demographic and began to focus on creating a persona that would professionally target that age group. Of course, you don't just acquire these skills. You need to have a predisposition to be that kind of person, that for me eventually became defined as Mr. Him.

You studied at the University of Verona. Articles have hinted that this wasn't an easy path for you to take. How did you develop your passion for comedy, and what has given you the drive to see it through?

I graduated from the University of Verona with a degree in kinesiology/P.E. Studying the body and how it works/moves is something I have always been interested in.

My instructors were very influential in my career—particularly one of the professors who taught me about kinesiological development in children.

The university was Plan B after serving a full-time mission since I was not landing any interesting jobs in show business. Eventually, though, things that I was learning at the school





were helpful in bringing me back to my original passion, which was entertainment. My degree required a thesis/final project in order to graduate. I chose to make a video where children were the main actors and they were expressing themselves using pseudoscientific terms about common mistakes parents make in educating them. It was very fun to watch and very entertaining.

What exactly is kinesiology?

It is a scientific approach to sport science in general. It is the study of mastering certain techniques that need to become automatic before we can move on to the next level—just like children need to first learn coordination of the hand, and then they can take a pen in their hands and learn how to write. Writing is a more complex movement/technique that can also become creative, but without learning how to move your fingers and wrist, you can't master the more difficult art of writing. We often underestimate the need to understand and become masters of our own basic movements, so that we can then progressively learn more difficult tasks that are based on the simpler automated tasks we have already learned. For example, walking is an automatic process in adults, but it is not in children. They need to spend years learning how to do it before they can run or jump. Another example is when someone is learning to drive a

car and cannot carry a conversation at the same time.

Much of your comedy is physical humor reminiscent of old silent film stars like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Are these some of your influences? Who else?

I love Charlie Chaplin. I don't know much about Buster Keaton, but I know who he is. I also admire the work of Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy, Jerry Lewis, and even the more modern Jim Carrey (although not all that he does). I also love Antonio De Curtis, who went by the stage name Totò. He was one of the greatest actors and comedians of all times, but was not known much internationally as he could only act in the Italian language. Another actor I really enjoy is Roberto Benigni from *Life Is Beautiful*. I love the way he can tell stories through his movies. He made several movies that are not as famous and profound as *Life Is Beautiful* but that are nevertheless very fun to watch. Benigni's film structure is similar in all his movies. He builds a story in the first part of the movie and then he "harvests" the fruits of his work in the second half.

How do you get ideas for your comedy routines?

Ideas come based on the natural predisposition and character of the

individual and based on his or her personal study of the situation. Even watching a comedy is part of the study process. Some people just watch it to be entertained, but another comedian will watch it with a critical eye, trying to analyze the mechanisms of the production. These ideas are the result of meditation after much effort and work. In the LDS faith we know that a prophet receives revelation after much pondering on a particular subject. Likewise, a scientist will get intuitions after much pondering and experimentation. So it was for Charlie Chaplin who, on the set of a movie, would stay still and ponder for hours until the inspiration came on how to proceed with the scene.

I believe that a true comedian also has a strong sense of perceiving the logistics involved in comedy. Comedians are both natural and smart. They are able to understand the different steps involved in making comedy, so that they can take it apart and rebuild it as they please. Comedy is not just memorizing funny lines, but is a study of the body and language so that spontaneity can be combined with an actual story line.

How did the idea for your film *The Book of Life* develop? What was your purpose in making the film? The doctrine of the plan of salvation offers great ideas for an intelligent story. I was inspired by the way that Roberto Benigni builds the story in his movies with a frequent use of metonymy. In my movie, things happen to people in the pre-mortal life that lay the foundation for understanding and even laughter during the rest of the movie. For example, there are the funny physical exercises that the wannabe teacher was doing in heaven.

My first goal was simply to make a movie that could create strong emotions and perhaps make a lasting impression. So, I started with something really dear to me, something I know to be true: our pre-mortal, mortal and post-mortal existence. I wanted to make more than just a movie, though.



Photo courtesy Marco Lui







I wanted to make something that other people could also admire and enjoy—like a builder who builds such a nice home that everyone who walks by comments on how beautiful the work is. I believed so much that *The Book of Life* could create these kinds of emotions in people that I was willing to pay for it myself to make it happen.

It was not an easy project to pursue, especially in the Italian culture. In Italy, movies that sell a lot are those that use crude language, nudity, and poor morals. I knew that mine was going to stand against this preconceived idea of what a popular movie should be. But I wanted to do it anyway.

Tell us about some of the challenges you faced in making *The Book of Life*.

It would take a lot more than this interview to talk about them all. The biggest challenge was that since I was producing the whole thing, I was in charge of everything. So, in addition to my role as an actor in the film, I was also directing the acting of all the other actors (professional and amateur), coordinating the production, the permissions, and the choreography, as well as the post-production work. If there was a problem, I had to stop what I was doing and focus on resolving it. For example, after filming in the school, I would stay behind cleaning after everyone left so that the next day when the real students came in everything would be in order.

Can you describe the experience of actually filming *The Book of Life*?

It took me several years to be ready to make this film. I had it written and ready to go a long time ago, but I couldn't find anyone willing to produce it. So I kept doing what I was doing in the show business, keeping the goal of making this movie as a future plan. Then the time came when I had to make a choice between making the movie using my own resources (a lifetime of savings) or pursuing other projects. Nothing else felt good inside. It was as if I was directed by some greater inspiration to move in

this direction. It could have been that this was what God wanted, so I followed my feelings and moved forward to make it happen. It was not an easy path. Every single day during the filming (it was just a couple of weeks of time to get all the raw footage done) there were new problems, sometimes small, sometimes big—equipment that would break down, actors who got sick, a delivery truck that broke down on the first day of the shoot.

Who is your audience for *The Book of Life*?

This movie is for everyone. Really. It is narrated on multiple levels. It has the simplicity and quick humor that children love. It has a deeper underlying story that invites adults to ponder. I made this movie for the individual and for the family, for the young and for the old. I made it without thinking about how much money I could make from it, but as a labor of love that others could enjoy and as a gift from me to my audience. My desire is for people to watch it, enjoy it, feel at peace with themselves, laugh both with their lips and their hearts, and at the same time ponder the message of love and life.

Though the word “Mormon” is never used in your film, it’s one of the most authentically Mormon films that has been produced recently. It tells the plan of salvation, the main character reads from the Book of Mormon in several scenes, and he even teaches principles of the gospel (such as the body and the spirit being separated and then reunified when they are resurrected). Why did you choose to teach Mormon principles so explicitly in this story? How do you think these principles will be received by audiences not of our faith?

My original intention was not to make a “Mormon movie.” I wanted to make a movie based on what I knew to be true for me and share it with others. As the story was developing, it became natural to follow the beautiful narrative of the plan of salvation. I am indebted to God for all I am and all I have. Anyone

who loves him should not be ashamed to teach others to recognize his hand in all things. I tried to do that without making a preachy or religious movie. Movies like *E.T.*, for example, helped me understand principles such as friendship and selflessness. These are values that most religions embrace, but *E.T.* is not a Mormon movie. Positive principles that promote good feelings and love are usually welcomed by anyone seeking them, regardless of their religious background. There were members of the Church who did not particularly enjoy or welcome the movie, and many viewers not of our faith who loved it and watched it multiple times.

Your film has been compared to *Life Is Beautiful* and *Saturday’s Warrior*. Were you influenced by these films?

I never saw the movie *Saturday’s Warrior* because it wasn’t available in Italian, so I have no idea what it is all about. I know *Life Is Beautiful* very well and it is a completely different story, but I agree that the way the narrative is structured is similar, as I mentioned before. Roberto Benigni is an extremely talented actor/producer/director with many years of experience. *Life Is Beautiful* is the culmination of many years of success, so he had many resources to make it happen. If anyone compares me and my work to him and his movie, it is a wonderful compliment to me because *The Book of Life* is the beginning of my work in the movie business and it was made on a much, much smaller budget than *Life Is Beautiful*—although it was a lot of money to me! There were many movies that inspired me and I got few ideas here and there that I tried to adapt to my story. One example is the scene of a child that never speaks in the movie *The Patriot* with Mel Gibson. It is such an emotional scene and I was very touched by it, so I wanted to do something similar in my movie.

What has been the reaction to your film so far, both in Italy and in the United States?

The film has been shown in private movie theatres and at special events in the last few months, though it has not had an “official” release yet. It was very well received by those who have watched it so far and there has been an informal DVD sale/distribution that, although limited, has demonstrated great interest in the product. We are still testing it in the U.S. It was screened for the first time at the 2011 LDS Film Festival as the first international movie ever presented there. The first screening was so well received that the organizers asked for a second screening during the event. More than 300 people attended both screenings and we collected feedback from a large number of viewers. There was not a single negative comment. It was given four to five stars (out of five) from nearly everyone. We also received many requests to make the movie available in theatres or on DVD in the U.S., but so far we have not received any formal offers for distribution. The film is currently being edited to fix a couple minor issues with length and subtitles and we hope to have additional opportunities to show it to people and to allow them to purchase it. So far, everything we’ve done with it has produced overwhelmingly positive results that are encouraging us to move forward with it.

Is the film going to be distributed in English? How can someone who is interested in your film see it?

We added English subtitles for the screening at the LDS Film Festival last January and right now we are evaluating what the best options are to make it available to the public. Eventually, we want to have it available as a DVD or for download, but it would be nice to run it in a few theaters for a few weeks first. There is something more special and magic when you are able to watch a film on the big screen. We currently have a YouTube channel and a Facebook page set up for people to follow the developments so that we can inform them when and where it becomes available. We are also

interested in talking with anyone who could help in distributing it.

Mormon independent film has had its ups and downs. Some people have said that Mormon cinema is dead. Do you agree with this? What is your vision for Mormon cinema?

I’m not familiar with the concept of Mormon cinema. It is new to me. I have seen a few movies made by Mormons with a Mormon theme (*The R.M.*, *The Singles Ward*, etc.), and it was evident to me that they were funny movies for Mormons only because they used themes that are familiar to LDS people specifically. They were funny to watch if you knew about Mormons in detail, but for those not of our faith, they were for the most part incomprehensible.

I don’t know how to answer to this question, because it was not what inspired me to make my movie. I didn’t want to make a Mormon movie for Mormons. I made this movie thinking about all people. There are movies made by the Church that are very powerful and worth watching, but for a different reason (*The Mountain of the Lord*, etc.). These are not commercial movies, but the emotions they can create are real and lasting. These Mormon movies will never “die.”

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

Conversion is a personal matter, something that people explore on

their own, perhaps with the assistance of a friend or another person. My job is to entertain people. I like to do it using clean language and positive messages. I know that some people who learned of the sacrifices I made to make this movie found courage in their hearts to make their own difficult decisions. I think that people who see my work will be positively influenced and if they learn that it is the work of a Mormon, perhaps it will give them a chance to overcome misconceptions or wrong judgments.

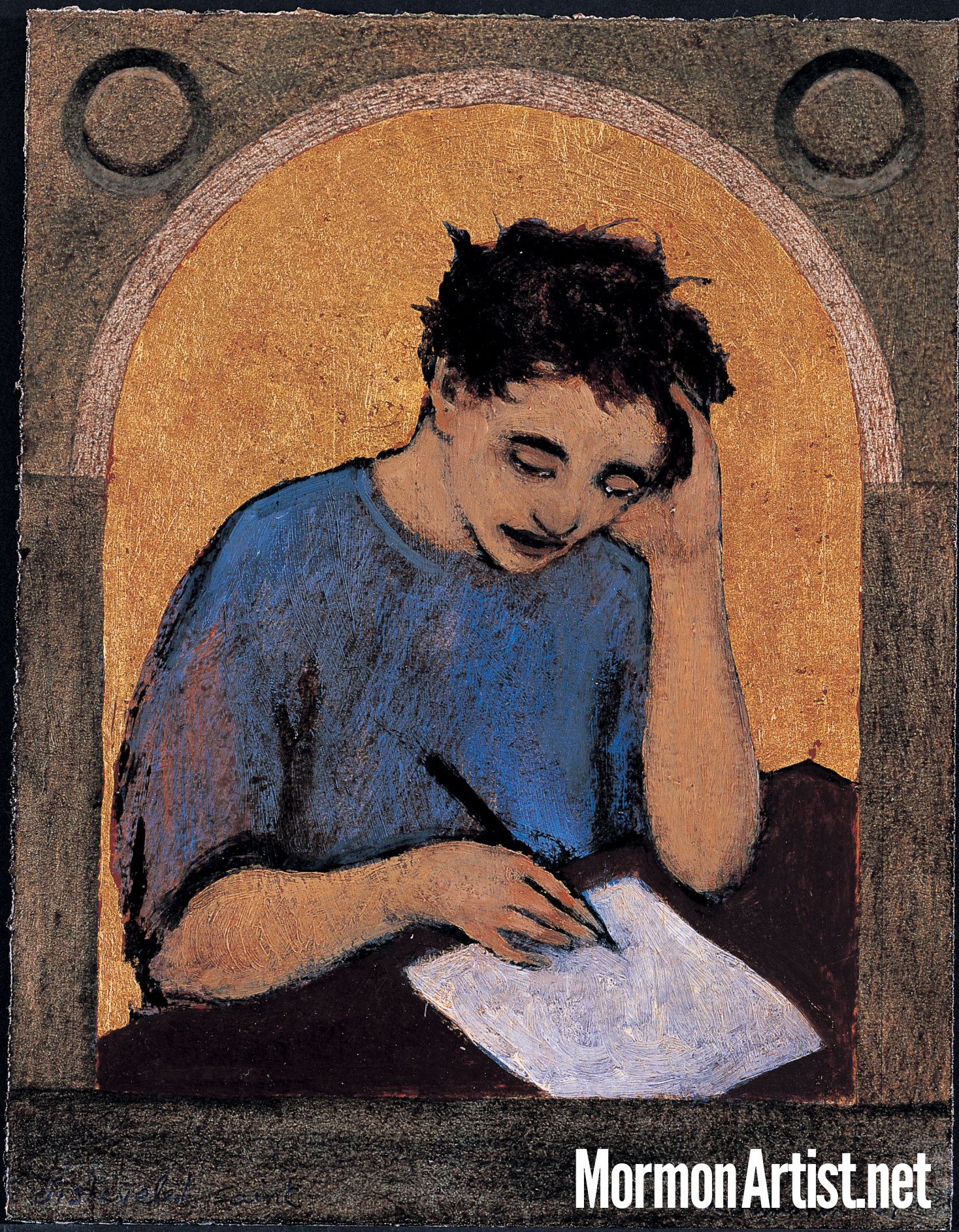
Care to share what you are working on currently? Any plans for any more movies or other theatre roles?

A couple of weeks ago I won a national competition for a new project I would like to work on as either a TV series or a movie. The contest was for original scripts and mine received first prize. It is a project that will have nothing to do with LDS doctrines or other Mormon themes but is actually a comedy that has a bit of a dark side—something similar to the works of Tim Burton. It is a project that I hope will touch people, using themes that are familiar to adolescents. The story is of a teenage witch who needs to find her own self.

I also recently received a proposal from Bollywood to produce something for them and I am currently running a TV show and doing live comedy, so life is good with current and future projects. 🍿



Photo courtesy Marco Lui



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