





Mahonri Stewart

INTERVIEWED BY DAVID HABBEN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tell us about writing *The Fading Flower*.

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

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

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

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

What was it like writing *Swallow the Sun*?

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

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



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



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

What advice would you offer to aspiring playwrights?

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

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

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

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

How do you see the gospel influencing your work?

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

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

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

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

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

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

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