1-1-2016

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Jones, Megan Sanborn (2016) "Testimony in the Muscles, in the Body: Proxy Performance at the Mesa Easter Pageant," *Mormon Studies Review*. Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol3/iss1/4>

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Testimony in the Muscles, in the Body: Proxy Performance at the Mesa Easter Pageant

Megan Sanborn Jones

The greatest responsibility in this world that God has laid upon us is to seek after our dead. . . . Those saints, who neglect it in behalf of their deceased relatives, do it at the peril of their own salvation.

—Prophet Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*

ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL MOMENTS of the Mesa Easter Pageant comes each night during a reenactment of the crucifixion. The primary actor playing Jesus, after being condemned by Pontius Pilate, is given a crown of thorns and a red robe. The Romans mock him in exaggerated pantomime while a crowd jeers in the background. The actor is then tied between the columns stage right and whipped, with prerecorded strop noises coordinated with the action of the soldier who scourges Jesus. A neat costume trick has Christ's robe shredding during the scourging, revealing a back covered with makeup stripes. The lights shift ominously to red to emphasize the evil of the violence.

The sound of nails being hammered into wood segues the narrative to Calvary, where a different actor portraying the crucified Christ and two others portraying the two thieves are suspended on crosses and raised up in the center of the proscenium stage. The sound and lightning effects make clear the terror of the moment for the audience,

Mormon Studies Review, vol. 3, 2016, pp. 11–18

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Article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18809/msr.2016.0103> Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18809/mimsr.21568030>

starting with faint noise coming from behind the crosses and building out into the audience until the chairs rumble with the bass notes of the thunder. The scene ends in a terrible silence and blackout.

Each night that I saw this performance during the week I spent at the Mesa Pageant in March 2013, I was keenly aware of the reverence this moment was accorded by audience members. While the rest of the pageant was accompanied by the sounds of chatting, crying babies, and the muffled laughter of teenagers, even the most aggressively uninterested spectators paid attention to the crucifixion. The staging was certainly spectacular enough to merit the focus, but it was not so much more compelling than that of a number of other scenes. I believe that the audiences behaved reverently in this moment because they were responding to the scene as both compelling theatre and sacred moment. Indeed, the power of Mormon pageantry is this blurring of lines between the performance of the past and lived and practiced beliefs of the present.

Because I am a theatre scholar and practitioner, my work is focused on what it means to *perform* Mormonism in the twenty-first century. Basing my areas of inquiry on the field of performance studies allows me to examine not just theatre—like pageants, road shows, or *The Book of Mormon* musical on Broadway—but anything that is enacted or behaved. Performance studies considers a range of performances on a scale from efficacy/ritual to entertainment/performing arts.¹ On the one end are performances that are meant to make something happen, like a religious ritual or a public ceremony. On the other end are performances for the pleasure of the observing audience, like plays on stage or sporting events.

However, performance studies makes it clear that rarely is a performance one or the other, as all performances are intended to achieve an aim and to please audiences. The overlapping purposes of performance are especially notable in religious performances, where belief and behavior are sometimes almost inseparable. Religious performers do

1. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 80.

things because they believe they matter; religious things matter because believers do them. In the field of religion and theatre, performance studies has opened up a host of inquiries, including the examinations of evangelical missionary efforts,² the Creation Museum,³ Bible stories on the Broadway stage,⁴ religious drama in Egypt,⁵ and the public performance of religion.⁶

Mormonism has a long history of both ritual and performing arts. At the dedication of the Salt Lake Theatre in 1862, Brigham Young stated that “the stage can be made to aid the pulpit in impressing upon the minds of a community an enlightened sense of a virtuous life, also a proper horror of the enormity of sin and a just dread of its consequences.”⁷ Since then, the LDS Church has produced a wide range of theatrical performances, celebrations, and spectacles with an eye towards uplifting the audience. Additionally, performance is embedded in every aspect of Mormon practice: from the formal rituals practiced in temples to the elaborate handcart trek reenactments performed by Mormon youth to the identity construction evidenced by the “I’m a Mormon” campaign. Mormon performance is a vibrant cultural expression of the lived Mormon experience.

Lately, I have become fascinated by the six official Mormon pageants both as spectacular works of American religious theatre and as evidence of the deeply intertwined relationship between the living and

2. John Fletcher, *Preaching to Convert: Evangelical Outreach and Performance Activism in a Secular Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

3. Jill Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

4. Henry Bial, *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

5. Marvin Carlson, “The Religious Drama of Egypt’s Ali Ahmed Bakathir,” in *Religion, Theatre, and Performance: Acts of Faith*, ed. Lance Gharavi (New York: Routledge, 2012).

6. Joshua Edelman, Claire Chambers, and Simon du Toit, eds., *Performing Religion in Public* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

7. Brigham Young, “Propriety of Theatrical Amusements—Instructions Relative to Conducting Them,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:243.

dead in Mormon experience.⁸ In this essay I focus on the Mesa Arizona Easter Pageant to argue that those who participate in pageants each year are not just acting in roles in the theatrical sense.⁹ Instead, they are acting in behalf of those that they represent in a proxy performance that borrows as much from LDS theology as it does from realistic acting conventions. Understanding the experiences of Mormons who participate in pageants reveals the power of performance in worship and belief.

For Mormons, the past is an integral part of daily practice from scripture study that brings to life the ancient stories to blogging as a means of record keeping. The past can be visited at sacred sites preserved by the church and dedicated for spiritual experiences. It is commemorated in annual ceremonies that mark the LDS calendar. The past is also performed. The ritual performance of the past is most evident in the work done in the temple, where faithful members participate in a series of covenant-making ordinances like baptism, endowment ceremonies, and sealings for their ancestors.

In a general conference talk, Elder Dallin H. Oaks discussed the embodied practice of temple work: “Our temples are living, working testimonies to our faith in the reality of the resurrection. They provide the sacred settings where living proxies can perform all of the necessary ordinances of mortal life in behalf of those who live in the world of the spirits.”¹⁰ Oaks’s emphasis on “living, working testimonies” reminds his listeners how belief requires action and testimonies are dependent on practice. Indeed, the verb used in Mormon doctrinal language to describe the action of ordinances is *perform*. It is no wonder, then, that

8. Each year, the LDS Church produces four pageants across the United States—the Hill Cumorah Pageant in Palmyra, New York; the Manti Pageant in Manti, Utah; the Nauvoo Pageant (featuring the British Pageant) in Nauvoo, Illinois; and the Mesa Easter Pageant in Mesa, Arizona. Additionally, there are two biennial pageants—the Castle Valley Pageant in Castle Dale, Utah, and the Martin Harris Pageant in Clarkston, Utah.

9. This essay is a preview of work from my forthcoming book entitled *Walking with the Dead: Resurrecting the Past in Mormon Pageant Performance*.

10. Dallin H. Oaks, “Resurrection,” LDS.org, 2000, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2000/04/resurrection?lang=eng&query=proxy>.

participants in Mormon pageants feel a resonance between the work they do to embody a character of the past onstage and the work they do to redeem the dead in temples.

A man who played a Roman soldier in the Mesa Pageant remarked that the spirits of the people being enacted in the pageant “are up on stage with us. This year . . . one of the themes has been that every single person in the pageant represents someone that was alive at the time. I’m one-fourth Italian, so I don’t know what some of my ancestors were doing at the time, [but] some of them may have been involved in some of these events.”¹¹ This comment reveals the ease with which cast members are able to slip into a proxy role, even connecting their characters to possible ancestors in terms of genealogical lines. It also suggests how pageant organizers make this emphasis clear in the way they describe the pageant experience.

One feature of all of the Mormon pageants is how pageant performance is a spiritual experience rather than an opportunity to perform in a play. The spiritual function of pageant performance is coded in the way that cast members are anonymous; there are no programs or curtain calls that give credit to the performers for their skill in creating a role. Instead, cast members are set apart to religious callings for the duration of the pageant. Depending on the pageant, these callings might be as “special representatives,” as “pageant missionaries,” or simply as “missionaries.”¹² In addition to learning the staging of the pageant, casts are also trained by missionaries on effective teaching techniques and participate in daily scripture study, faith-building activities, and service projects. Each night before pageants are performed, cast members

11. Ron Middlebrook in discussion with the author, March 23, 2013.

12. The pageant program is housed in the missionary department of the LDS Church, but the relationship between local authorities and central oversight varies between each pageant. As a result, each pageant has a different process by which cast members are cast, called, and set apart. The processes also vary from year to year as pageant presidencies—the ecclesiastic leaders of the pageant experience—coordinate with the pageant artistic directors and local mission presidencies to find the best means to help pageant participants and audience members feel the Spirit and come closer to Christ.

attend a devotional together. It serves as a time for the director of the pageant to give practical notes on the production, but the emphasis is clearly on the spiritual preparation for the night ahead.

In one devotional I attended at the Mesa Easter Pageant, a speaker made clear the relationship between past and present when he suggested that the performers needed to focus on bringing the real people of Christ's time to life again on the stage. He asked the performers to consider that they were not left alone to simply invent these characters, but that "maybe [the real people] are looking down upon us and seeing how we are delivering what they did when they walked this earth with Christ. . . . Maybe, just maybe, they are watching us and praying for us."¹³ This belief in the literal dead who watch over the work of lived devotion is emphasized as well in temple discourse. As Elder Quentin L. Cook admonished, "Don't underestimate the influence of the deceased in assisting your efforts and the joy of ultimately meeting those you serve."¹⁴

The lived experience of proxy performance is made even more clear in Mesa as the pageant is performed on temple grounds. When I asked the director of the pageant if it could be performed anywhere else, she replied, "I don't think I would want it anywhere else. I think that [the temple] lends to the spirituality of the cast; I think it lends to the reverence, to the inspiration. I might see things on those grounds that I wouldn't see other places, or feel things. It's a sacred place for a sacred show, a pageant."¹⁵ It is clear that space brings meaning to production. In her essay on the production of space in Mormon cultural memory, Lindsay Adamson Livingston argues that certain Mormon space "functions as performative: it is supposed to *do* something. It ought to elicit feelings, create connections, and inspire revelations."¹⁶ Temple grounds

13. Author's field notes, devotional, March 22, 2013, Mesa, Arizona.

14. Quentin L. Cook, "Roots and Branches," LDS.org, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/04/roots-and-branches?lang=eng&query=perform>.

15. Jenee Wright in discussion with the author, March 21, 2013, Mesa, Arizona.

16. Lindsay Adamson Livingston, "'This Is the Place': Performance and the Production of Space in Mormon Cultural Memory," in *Enacting History*, ed. Scott Magelsson and Rhona Justice-Malloy (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 26.

perform the proxy work for the dead as the living pageant participants re-create the past on stage.

I don't want to suggest that those participating in pageant performances think they are actually doing proxy work in the same way that they would perform ordinance work in a temple. But it was surprising to me how often, across all pageants, the link between temple work and pageant participation was made. Pageant administrators and participants clearly see pageants as sacred experiences.¹⁷ When participants in pageants reenact the past, they are bringing back to life characters who they believe have already been literally brought back to life through resurrection or who may one day be so revived. They connect in very real ways to the presence of the past in the form of spirits from the other side who have agency and can intervene in human life. They feel responsible to those who came before, for their faithful lives and their sacrifices.

The mother of a family who has participated in the Mesa Pageant for years explained the impact that playing characters who knew Jesus has on the testimonies of the pageant performers:

They were testifying in their time; we're testifying in our time through their story. . . . We've had family discussions where we thought, "Okay, so Jesus actually kicked everyone out of the temple. What would that feel like? Can you imagine? Can you feel that physical force of somebody knocking over tables and throwing money and a whip passing by? Wow." Just to be able to reenact in a small way really helps you kind of get the testimony into your muscles, into your body.¹⁸

17. In fact, one of the biggest stumbling blocks I encountered as a researcher to pageants was the honest desire to keep private the sacred nature of pageants. As one woman explained, "I would be totally willing to talk with you about the pageant, of course, as long as your book is positive and uplifting about the pageants. I would in no way ever want to be a part of something that shed a bad light on something so sacred to me." Anonymous Facebook message to the author, September 25, 2013.

18. Noreen Allen in Allen family interview with the author, March 21, 2013, Mesa, Arizona.

Proxy performance in Mormon pageants is a unique and powerful way Mormons can connect the past, the present, and the future through their lived experiences that take testimony from the heart and into the body.

Megan Sanborn Jones is an associate professor in the Theatre and Media Arts Department at Brigham Young University. Her first book, *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama*, won the Mormon History Association's Smith-Pettit Best First Book Award. This essay is an excerpt from her forthcoming second book, *Walking with the Dead: Resurrecting the Past in Mormon Pageant Performance*. Megan is also a director/choreographer with credits including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Arabian Nights*, and a world premiere adaptation of Shannon Hale's *Princess Academy*.