



4-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Samuelson, Eric (2007) "Finding an Audience, Paying the Bills: Competing Business Models in Mormon Cinema," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 46 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol46/iss2/10>

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Finding an Audience, Paying the Bills

Competing Business Models in Mormon Cinema

Eric Samuelson

Ever since Richard Dutcher directed and released *God's Army* in 2000, articles in the news media as well as papers in various outlets within Mormon Studies have discussed the beginnings of a "Mormon film" movement. What has been lost in all this discussion, however, is a simple enough reality: that what Richard Dutcher and others have accomplished in beginning this new movement does not represent anything close to the totality of Mormon filmmaking, but rather, success following one specific business model. To refer to the commercial films that followed *God's Army* as "the Mormon film movement" presumes a direct link between the business model used by an artist and the aesthetic choices made by that artist, or perhaps even that the particular model used by Dutcher and those who have followed his lead ought to be preferred over other possibilities on aesthetic grounds. Such assumptions should be questioned, and other business arrangements should be considered.

Business Models

When talking of the business of Mormon filmmaking, we begin by acknowledging that a variety of models and approaches exist that appropriately should be included within it. Various combinations of funding, production, marketing, and distribution options yield an impressive array of possible business models open to LDS filmmakers and distributors. Of course, first of all, "Mormon filmmaking" surely must include films produced by the Church itself, under the aegis of the Church Audio-Visual Department, Bonneville International, the Church Educational System, and all the other filmmaking entities under the institutional umbrella of

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Yet even here, considering “Church filmmaking” monolithically is a mistake. For example, the Church clearly has different intentions, expectations, and outlets for the large-budget films intended for viewing in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building—specifically, *Legacy* (1993), *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd* (2000), and *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration* (2005)—than it does for CES videos; and it has different expectations for the Homefront television public service announcements than it does for the DVDs we find tucked into the *Ensign* magazine. In any event, all these films have production values¹ in keeping with the varied purposes for which they were made and generally accomplish those purposes with some artistry and imagination. The films made for the Legacy Theater can clearly compete, at least in terms of production values, with the best work by Hollywood epic directors. And, of course, in addition to being proselytizing or preaching tools, these films provide us with invaluable cultural markers. Since the Church, as a producing entity, has no concerns about marketing and distribution, and since the intent of the films is intentionally and obviously didactic, it is difficult to imagine a better window into the institutional Church, at least as it chooses to present itself.

Likewise, within the world of commercial filmmaking are several other models for Latter-day Saint filmmaking beyond the Dutcher model that has generally defined the recent Mormon film movement. First of all, a number of LDS artists have found success working within the professional film industry that we collectively call Hollywood. Hollywood itself is an entertainment industry with multiple economic models, and both in the past and currently a number of LDS film professionals have enjoyed successful careers as screenwriters, producers, and directors. For example, Kieth Merrill, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, directed such independent feature films as *Three Warriors* (1978), *Take Down* (1979), *Windwalker* (1980), and *Harry’s War* (1981)—four films in four years, following his Academy Award for the documentary *The Great American Cowboy* (1973). Although these films do not include specifically Mormon content, they do tend to express values compatible with a mainstream LDS aesthetic. In addition, no mention of contemporary LDS filmmakers would be complete without Neil LaBute, who wrote and directed *In the Company of Men* (1997), *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998), and *The Shape of Things* (2003), and who directed *The Wicker Man* (2006), *Possession* (2002), and *Nurse Betty* (2000). (Of LaBute’s work, only his *Bash* is set in an LDS cultural world—though not theatrically released, it was filmed for Showtime TV, and is available on DVD.) LaBute and Merrill have taken very different paths aesthetically, but national critics have

commented on the specific Mormon underpinnings of their films, and both are still working filmmakers.

We should also mention Don Bluth's animated films, including such family-oriented fare as *The Secret of NIMH* (1982), *An American Tale* (1986), *The Land before Time* (1988), and *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (1989). All the films listed above can be described as full-length feature films, and all found distribution within the Hollywood system. Also working in the Hollywood mode, documentary filmmaker Lee Groberg has made a series of films exploring various aspects of Mormonism, including *Trail of Hope* (1997), *American Prophet* (1999), and *America's Choir* (2004), generally for distribution through various Public Broadcasting outlets.

Following a non-Hollywood approach, Feature Films for Families (FFF) has currently no fewer than forty-seven films available for sale on its website, and FFF has been producing films for direct-to-video release since the mid-1970s. While these films do not generally feature specifically LDS characters or situations, the intent is clearly to make films that reflect LDS family values. Also, since 1974 Living Scriptures has produced animated children's films that derive specifically from LDS scripture. And starting in 2004, Lightstone Pictures began producing the Liken series of videos and music, essentially short musical films based on LDS and Bible scripture, all available on the Liken website and through Deseret Book Company. These efforts pursue a variety of business approaches and marketing strategies.

The Two-Part Process

At the risk of oversimplifying the complex interactions of competing business entities within the filmmaking industry, the observation of screenwriter William Goldman may be helpful in understanding how film deals are structured: filmmaking is a two-part process—making the film and selling the film.² For this reason, most commercial filmmaking involves partnerships between those who make films (production companies) and those who market and distribute films (studios). The standard Hollywood filmmaking model, therefore, has been one of limited partnerships. In such a model, a production company and a studio enter a contractual agreement for the creation and distribution of a single product, a film. What this means in practical terms is that a lot of interesting film projects never get off the ground because the production company trying to finance a particular film cannot interest any studios up front in distributing it. For obvious reasons, then, production companies are disinclined or even financially unable to make films without distribution deals in place. So

studios also serve as quality clearinghouses, refusing to greenlight projects they think they cannot sell. In addition, most studios also have in-house production entities, enabling them to combine production and distribution efforts.

This may seem strange, to call a studio a quality clearinghouse, since we all know of dreadful films that have been made within the Hollywood system, but studios are fairly canny at knowing what audiences would like—at least they think they know what audiences would like. And so the emphasis in Hollywood is on putting together what is called a “package”—a combination of story, script, star actors, and effective director—that might come together in an appealing way. In any event, Bluth, Merrill, and LaBute have all made films using this complete package approach.

Bluth and Merrill essentially created a series of small production companies for the creation of their films, which studios then marketed and distributed. LaBute created an entity called Fair and Square Films for his first film, *In the Company of Men*, which he made as an independent film without a distribution deal in place. But the film went to the Sundance Film Festival, and LaBute was able to sell the distribution rights to Sony Pictures Classics. Since that time, he has generally worked as a director-for-hire by production companies. The films that belong to what has been called the “Mormon film movement” are similar to the Merrill-Bluth-LaBute Hollywood model. The Lee Groberg documentaries, on the other hand, were made for initial broadcast on PBS and for subsequent sale as DVDs. Employing yet another business model, FFF and Living Scriptures make films intended for video or DVD release, which they distribute through direct-marketing efforts. Both the filmmaking and the distribution functions are combined in one business entity.

Rejecting the Hollywood Model

The varying business models in the LDS film industry have larger cultural and aesthetic implications. FFF aggressively rejects not only the traditional Hollywood business model, but also the values it has come to represent; on their website they could not be clearer about that. A “message from our founder” reads as follows:

Over the years, Hollywood has gone from creating movies like “The Sound of Music,” and “It’s a Wonderful Life” to edgy films and suggestive TV. Forrest S. Baker III, founder of Feature Films for Families®, believes that the only way to counteract this negative trend is by creating positive, uplifting movies that both teach and entertain, movies that instill important values that have stood the test of time.³



Soundtracks and music CDs from HaleStorm Entertainment. HaleStorm president David Hunter suggests that spin-off products from films, particularly CDs of movie soundtracks, are often more lucrative than the films themselves. © Hale-Stone Distribution.

The FFF business model rests on a number of very interesting cultural assumptions. First of all, the company assumes as a matter of course that its target market consists of people offended by mainstream Hollywood product and interested in a family-friendly alternative. Releasing a film in a theater presumes that a fairly large number of people are interested in gathering together at a specific location to watch it. But the FFF model implies that this may not be so, and that is all right. The point is to watch a film at home, alone with your family. Your family is embattled; its values are under siege. So gather together in small groups, watch something that affirms ideals Hollywood is attacking. This means, in turn, that FFF does not require a large LDS demographic to be successful. For instance, my parents, living in Bloomington, Indiana, will likely never have the experience of watching HaleStone's *The Best Two Years* in their local cineplex. But the entire FFF or Liken catalog is a phone call or web purchase away.

Of course, a corollary approach to distribution is well established now for mainstream Hollywood films, with Netflix and Blockbuster Online offering DVDs for home rental. The difference—and it's a slight one—is that FFF wants you to purchase their DVD, while Netflix merely wants you to rent theirs. Just as Netflix and Blockbuster Online have increasingly become the preferred marketing outlets for foreign and independent films unlikely to be seen in your local cineplex, the FFF direct-marketing approach may be well suited to meet the needs of a worldwide Church culture, unlike theatrically released LDS films, which may be limited to initial release in a few Western states.

In addition to FFF and Living Scriptures, Thomson Productions was a significant player in the LDS wholesale business. With a large catalogue of inspirational films available through LDS retail outlets, Thomson was the principal distributor for the films of, among others, John Lyde, including *The Field Is White* (2002), *The Collectors* (2003), *In the Service of God* (2003), *Dear John* (2004), and *Hoops* (2004). Thomson Productions closed its doors in 2006, however, and its catalog of films was acquired by HaleStone, the distribution and business entity associated with HaleStorm Entertainment.

Straight-to-video wholesaling and retailing activities are expanding as more Latter-day Saints take to selling online (LDSVideoStore.com, CreativeWorks.byu.edu, and even eBay) and as larger online film retailers sell Mormon fare (Amazon.com, Buy.com, and Reel.com). Not to be ignored are the big discount retailers (Wal-Mart, f.y.e., and Barnes and Noble), where, at least in LDS areas, one can purchase Mormon films. Wal-Mart has been particularly active in selling films distributed by HaleStone. Indeed, even as theatrically released LDS films have declined during 2006 and 2007, nontheatrical outlets for film have multiplied, proving that companies and filmmakers can succeed on modest sales to a broadly scattered LDS populace.

In 2006, Kieth Merrill began exploring yet another financial and marketing model for filmmaking by founding the Audience Alliance Motion Picture Studios (AAMPS). Rather than raise funds from private investors, AAMPS signs up members who pay an annual fee of \$149, which entitles them to have a voice in family-friendly films made by professional filmmakers. Essentially, the goal is to create a studio “owned” by moviegoers. Again, the presumption is that filmgoers are fed up with Hollywood's typical products and are willing to invest a modest amount of money in order to see films that speak to their values. Even such mainstream Hollywood studios as Twentieth Century Fox and Warner Brothers, noting the unexpected financial success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), have begun making and distributing religiously oriented films, creating

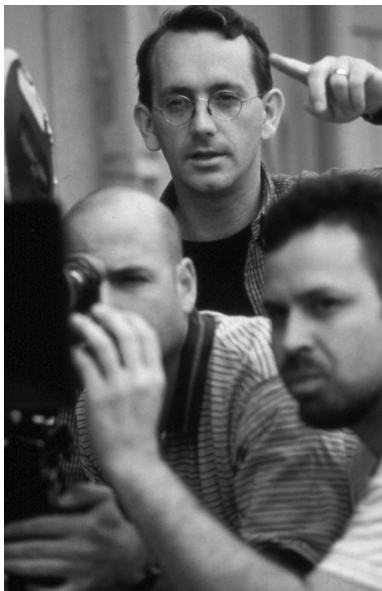
such companies as Fox Faith and Walden Media, which have in turn released such films as Fox Faith's *One Night with the King* (2006), about the Book of Esther, and *Amazing Grace* (2006), about William Wilberforce.

There is another assumption at work here, however, besides the perceived need to reinforce traditional Christian values. Because FFF and Living Scriptures make their films for video release, the production values are not necessarily of mainstream Hollywood quality. This implies, I think, a belief on their part that production values do not matter all that much. As long as the target audience is given a strong story with a good moral message, the assumption is that they will be satisfied. If FFF's product is not quite able to achieve the visual texture and richness of a Hollywood film, that shortcoming is not considered terribly significant. This assumption may become irrelevant, however, with the advent of digital video technology. AAMPS, at any rate, has declared its intention of making films with state-of-the-art production values, and Walden's *Amazing Grace*, directed by Hollywood veteran Michael Apted, is a major studio release combining technical excellence, outstanding acting performances from well-known veteran actors, and a strong Christian message.

Some filmmakers have suggested, and few have begun exploring, yet another approach, in which films are made inexpensively, shot on video, and marketed and distributed over the Internet. For instance, *Propensity* (2006), a narrative feature film about the problems of depression and suicide, was pitched to a national suicide prevention organization for advertising and distribution through its Internet site (Hopeline.com). Although online distribution remains in its infancy, a pioneer in the field may well turn out to be Mormonmovies.com, where people can post QuickTime versions of their short films. Although Mormonmovies currently operates as essentially a philanthropic enterprise, it could conceivably work toward a pay-per-download model in the future. Media giant Comcast has now begun offering films from the LDS Film Festival as part of its on-demand movie service, and at BYUbroadcasting.org one can now download either streaming video or MP3 files of BYU programming. MormonWebTV.com has recently become a clearinghouse for information and downloads of LDS film product, including trailers for such films as the documentary *Sisterz in Zion* (2006). Although the economic model for on-demand media is not quite mature yet, it seems as inevitable as online shopping and has its roots in the well-established pay-per-view model on cable or PayPal online.

Excel Entertainment and the Mormon Film Movement

Why, then, do people speak of a "Mormon film movement" beginning with Richard Dutcher? *God's Army* was theatrically distributed;



Director Richard Dutcher, *top*, on the set of *God's Army* (2000) with director of photography Ken Glassing, *left*, and assistant cameraman Matthew Caudillo, *right*. © Main Street Movie Company.

well, so were Merrill's and LaBute's films. *God's Army* deals specifically with Mormon subject matter; well, so do the Living Scriptures animated films, John Lyde's films, and, for that matter, independent films such as *Orgazmo* (1997) and *Latter Days* (2003). (Our discussion thus far has been limited to films made by Latter-day Saints, but of course there are a number of mainstream films with Mormon characters or at least a hint of Mormon subject matter, from *Orgazmo* and *Latter Days* to *Punch Drunk Love* [2002], *Georgia Rules* [2007], and *Ocean's Eleven* [2001].) In essence, *God's Army* was not unique in any one area. What made it unique was a combination of factors. It was the first feature film made by an LDS filmmaker, intended for theatrical release, dealing specifically with Mormon subject matter, and largely marketed to LDS audiences by a studio specifically created for the task of Mormon film distribution. What

may have been the most significant factor in the success of *God's Army* was not just the fact that it followed the standard Hollywood model, but also that both parties in the distribution agreement, producers and distributors, were specifically interested in LDS filmmaking.

Initially, Dutcher did the same thing Bluth, Merrill, and LaBute did: he formed a production company (Zion Films), he attracted investors to the project, and he made *God's Army*, planning either to distribute it himself or to sell distribution rights. But Bluth, Merrill, and LaBute had to then sell their films to larger business entities: Bluth to Universal Studios and United Artists, Merrill to Buena Vista and United Artists, LaBute to Sony Classics. And other LDS filmmakers had previously attempted to make independent films dealing with Mormon subject matter, only to see their films fail because of inadequate distribution. Tom McGowan's 1977 film *Brigham* comes immediately to mind, for example, as does Richard Lloyd Dewey's film *Rockwell* (1994), which starred Utah Jazz star Karl Malone as a

gunslinging Elijah Abel. *God's Army* was a Zion Films production, and Dutcher began distributing it himself, but Excel Entertainment Group wanted to get into the movie distribution business, and they reached an agreement with Dutcher a few weeks before *God's Army* hit the theaters. So, with the release of *God's Army*, Excel, which had previously been just a Mormon music distribution company, became something akin to a film studio.

Not all films in the Mormon film movement have gotten distribution deals. But it is not difficult to see the differences between those films that have and those that have not. *The Other Side of Heaven* (2001), for example, was made by two entities: Molen/Garbett Productions, a production company started by Gerald Molen and John Garbett, and 3Mark Productions, director Mitch Davis's production company. Excel marketed and distributed *The Other Side of Heaven*, and Disney Home Video later bought the rights for DVD distribution.⁴ *Handcart*, on the other hand, which came out about the same time, did not get a distribution deal from Excel. The producers ended up creating a new entity called Media Partners Entertainment to handle marketing and distribution, which essentially meant the filmmakers distributed it themselves. *The Other Side of Heaven* grossed a little shy of \$5 million domestic at the box office, according to figures from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). *Handcart* stalled at around \$98,000. While both films had their strengths and weaknesses, *The Other Side of Heaven* has made more money in large measure because it is a better-looking film. It is a better film in part because it cost more; the filmmakers were able to afford Hollywood-standard production values, while *Handcart* does not have comparable cinematography or production design. It could be argued that the scripts for the two films are more or less equal in quality. But when Excel said "yes" to marketing one film and "no"



Jeff Simpson, a former Disney executive who became CEO of Excel Entertainment, played just as significant a role in establishing the new Mormon cinematic movement as Richard Dutcher. Courtesy BYU Theatre and Media Arts Department.

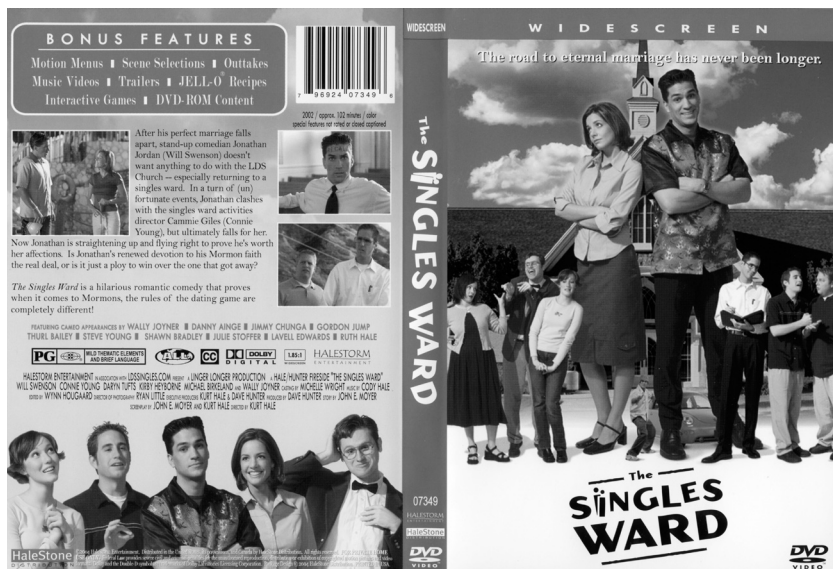
to the other, Excel acted like a studio, functioning as a quality clearing-house. When Excel said this film meets our standard, while this film does not, that very choice created a de facto aesthetic standard.

It is very possible that Excel is the main reason we can even talk with a straight face about a Mormon film movement. In this sense, Jeff Simpson, the former Disney executive who became CEO of Excel, played just as significant a role in establishing this new cinematic movement as Richard Dutcher did. The simple reality is that many, many independent films are made in this country that never get distribution. But film, in addition to being an art form, is also a commercial venture. Films cost a great deal of money to make, and investors should have a reasonable expectation for a return on their investment. When Excel made the leap into film distribution, it allowed the nascent Mormon film movement to bypass the “independent orphan” stage of development. This became very clear in conversations I had with actors in the 2003 LDS film *Pride and Prejudice*. These actors, most of them not LDS, were impressed by the support they had received from Excel. As relatively unknown young actors, they had all been in a number of independent films. But now, with this film, they said it was refreshing to work with a company that understood what properly goes in a media packet, a company that knew how to exploit a positive review, a company that, from their perspective, had its act together. This, to them, was rare.

After *God’s Army*, Excel began signing other distribution agreements: with Zion Films again for *Brigham City* (2001), with Cinergy Films for *Charly* (2002), and with Molen/Garbett for *The Other Side of Heaven*. When Excel declined to distribute other films in the early days of the Mormon film movement, the producers had little recourse but to do it themselves. Most of these films failed, at least in terms of normal measurements. Even with Excel’s enlistment, *Brigham City* was not financially successful in terms of domestic box office revenue; and *The Book of Mormon Movie* (2003) was released without a distribution deal, but it grossed almost \$1.7 million, more than double the box office receipts of *Brigham City*. Still, Excel distribution was generally a fairly good predictor of a film’s box office success.

Competition in Distribution

With the 2002 release of *The Singles Ward*, Excel faced competition for the limited LDS market. HaleStorm Entertainment, a production entity created by producer David Hunter and director Kurt Hale, produced *The Singles Ward*, which they then distributed through a second company,



With the release of *The Singles Ward* in 2002, the Mormon movie market reached a significant milestone—competition in distribution. While other production companies had attempted to market their own films, HaleStorm Entertainment and its sister company, HaleStone Distribution, were quite successful at it and were soon attracting films from other producers. © HaleStone Distribution.

HaleStone Distribution, created after they were unable to negotiate a distribution deal with Excel. Although other production companies unable to attract Excel distribution had also attempted to market their own films, HaleStorm proved quite successful at it, aided perhaps in part by the film’s catchy soundtrack, which HaleStone also distributed. Since that time, HaleStorm and HaleStone have essentially served as production company and studio for their own efforts, including *The R.M.* (2003), *The Home Teachers* (2004), *Sons of Provo* (2004), *Mobsters and Mormons* (2005), *Suits on the Loose* (2005), and *Church Ball* (2006). HaleStone also served as distributor for two films, *The Best Two Years* (2003) and *Baptists at Our Barbecue* (2004), produced by other production companies. *The Singles Ward* has so far grossed a little less than *The Book of Mormon Movie*, roughly \$1.3 million,⁵ but it cost a lot less to make.

While figures are unavailable to prove this, it appears that HaleStorm and HaleStone have also done very well in ancillary business: DVD, VHS, and soundtrack sales, even creating a music label, HaleYeah! Records, to market music CDs. Both Excel and HaleStorm followed the Hollywood model in more synergistic ways. In today’s Hollywood, films are becoming

just one part (and not always the profitable part) of a package of products. In his recent remarks at the 2006 LDS film festival, HaleStorm cofounder and president David Hunter suggested that HaleStone has found spin-off products from their films, principally music CDs of the movie soundtracks, more lucrative than the films themselves.⁶ Living Scriptures has been particularly active in ancillary business, selling coloring and activity books in addition to their films, and Excel even marketed a satirical dating guidebook in conjunction with *Pride and Prejudice*. Mormon films are increasingly becoming part of a larger set of cultural products sold to Mormons (board games, jewelry, and various tchotchkes). Could LDS-film-based video games be that far away when we have Book of Mormon action figures being sold at Deseret Book? In fact, two of the more prominent actors in LDS filmmaking, Kirby Heyborne and Heather Beers, have parlayed their appeal into advertising and other media (Heyborne appears on DearElder.com billboards. He also tours the Mountain West as a musician and has recorded two music CDs. Beers hosts a TV show, UtahBrides.com). Mormon film cannot be separated economically from the burgeoning growth of Mormon media and marketing.

A High-Water Mark

In 2004 Deseret Book acquired Excel, and as part of that merger, Jeff Simpson became executive vice president of the merged companies.⁷ This corporate marriage came about because the two companies had a common vision for selling products in the Mormon market, but it is also possible that Deseret Book hoped, through the acquisition of Excel, to distribute such films as *The Work and the Glory* series, based on the popular novels by Gerald Lund published by Bookcraft, which later became a subsidiary of Deseret Book. Excel had distributed *The Work and the Glory: The Pillar of Light* (2004), based on the first book in Lund's series. That film had been produced by Vineyard Production, a company founded by Scott Swofford in 1994. When it was announced, Deseret Book's acquisition of Excel seemed like a significant development in the Mormon film movement, with larger implications for Mormon culture. It is possible that Deseret Book felt the need to update itself by jumping on the film bandwagon. Deseret Book had, after all, been involved in film distribution (for Hollywood fare) back in the 1930s and 1940s. It is also likely that the Excel merger had larger cultural implications, representing the hope that literature and film could form something of a symbiotic relationship in the LDS market—successful fiction leading to successful films and vice versa. Excel had commissioned a novelization by Geoffrey Card of Dutcher's film

God's Army, which Deseret Book distributed. *The Work and the Glory* was, of course, based on a successful Deseret Book novel and *The Other Side of Heaven* on a successful memoir. The Deseret Book–Excel merger could be seen as a continued attempt at filmmaking–literature synergy.

At this point, however, Larry H. Miller, who had funded the first *Work and the Glory* film, apparently decided to become more involved in distribution. Miller, owner of a variety of businesses, including numerous car dealerships, Jordan Commons, KJZZ–TV, Energy Solutions Arena, and the Utah Jazz, partnered with Swofford to found a new distribution company, Vineyard Distribution, to release *The Work and the Glory II: American Zion* (2005). In a sense, Miller started to emerge as an LDS version of another iconic Hollywood figure, the movie mogul. Miller owned four movie megaplexes along the Wasatch Front, which meant that, like the studio moguls of Hollywood lore, he already controlled theaters into which he could distribute his own films.⁸

The founding of Vineyard Distribution temporarily complicated matters for Excel and Deseret Book. Miller's plans for Vineyard Distribution, however, did not come to fruition, and Excel became the distributor for *The Work and the Glory III: A House Divided* (2006). As of spring 2007, it appears that Miller's interest in filmmaking seems to have waned. Surely the disappointing box office returns for the 2005 and 2006 *Work and the Glory* films played a significant role. The two sequels cost around \$6.5 million to make, and the box office gross was a little over \$2 million and \$1.86 million, respectively. Since the *Work and the Glory* website advertises *A House Divided* as "The Inspiring Final Chapter," it is safe to conclude that the third installment is indeed the last.⁹

For a while, it appeared as though Excel had soured on Mormon film distribution. During the three years following the first *Work and the Glory* film, Excel's only releases, aside from *A House Divided*, were a comical documentary, *American Mormon* (2005), and a comedy about a pinewood derby, *Down and Derby* (2005), both of which were released not theatrically but direct to video. But perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Excel has become more selective regarding the films it will distribute. Excel has announced plans to release in September 2007 Michael Amundsen's *Return With Honor*, which premiered at the 2006 LDS Film Festival. This may also mark a new step in the Mormon filmmaking business. Such major film festivals as Sundance, Cannes, Tribeca, and others serve as showcases for films seeking distribution deals. Perhaps the LDS Film Festival will serve much the same function for the Mormon film market.

Excel also ended its collaboration with Richard Dutcher after *Brigham City*. Dutcher himself has recently announced his future dissociation with

Mormon cinema and has discontinued his active participation in the Church.¹⁰ Dutcher's final Mormon film, *States of Grace* (2005), was distributed by his own Main Street Movie Company. The film's disappointing reception in the LDS market may have contributed to his decision to stop making Mormon films. Meanwhile, HaleStorm and HaleStone continue to both produce and distribute their own films and films by other filmmakers, though they plan to direct their efforts toward family-friendly material, without significant LDS content. The film movement begun by Dutcher and Excel seems to have reached something of a hiatus, in other words. What Excel achieved was, at least initially, to give the Mormon film movement business legitimacy. Excel did so by nudging the movement in a particular aesthetic direction. But many films from 2005 onward have performed so poorly at the box office that the movement seems to have lost at least some of its momentum.

Jeff Simpson, who was Excel's CEO at the time of *God's Army*, had been an executive with Disney. When we look at the films that Excel agreed to distribute after *God's Army*, it becomes clear that Excel was primarily interested in films that followed very specific and conventional film genres and approaches. *Brigham City* was a murder mystery. *Pride and Prejudice* was a romantic comedy. *Charly* was a woman's melodrama, similar in most story respects to *Love Story* (1970) or *Autumn in New York* (2000). *Saints and Soldiers* (2004) is a war picture, while *The Other Side of Heaven* is a very standard Hollywood biopic. Some of these films are quite strong—there is no reason to suggest that they are all poor films—but they clearly reflect a mainstream Hollywood aesthetic. It appears that the films Excel backed were those with the most professional looking Hollywood-standard production values, as well as films with scripts that followed fairly conventional Hollywood narrative models. Excel films are attractively lit and shot and edited, and usually well acted as well. Screenplay limitations seem to have been less of a factor.

For whatever reason, as the movement progressed, Excel's films also tended to be films that backed away from the Mormon cultural world their earliest films explored. Dutcher's *Brigham City* had been criticized for showing various ordinances, including a baptism and a sacrament service. *The Other Side of Heaven*, on the other hand, shows a very strange healing blessing that bears very little resemblance to any actual ordinance in the Church. It is possible this odd scene was a direct reaction to the criticism that *Brigham City* received. In *Saints and Soldiers*, the main character, Corporal Greer, reads a small book of scripture for comfort, but the book he is reading is never identified, and the movie never explicitly refers to him as a Latter-day Saint.



Saints and Soldiers (2004), a Ryan Little film distributed by Excel Entertainment, received critical acclaim at film festivals but performed tepidly at the box office. In this scene, medic Steven Gould (Alexander Polinsky) removes a Book of Mormon from the pocket of Corporal “Deacon” Greer (Corbin Allred), a soldier who is never explicitly identified as a Latter-day Saint in the film. © Excel Entertainment.

Through 2003 and even beyond, it appeared as though the fledgling LDS film movement was in good shape. The year 2003 marked HaleStone’s release of the Scott Anderson missionary film *The Best Two Years*. This seemed significant at the time, because it was exactly the sort of attractively filmed, intelligently conceived movie over which Excel had previously held something of a monopoly, and also because it was the first film released by HaleStone that had not been made by HaleStorm. But the film’s production company, Harvest Films, was able to negotiate with both Excel and HaleStone, and as a result it was able to get a better distribution deal than Excel had previously offered filmmakers. In other words, *The Best Two Years* seemed to have benefited from the kind of healthy competition inherent in a flourishing market economy. The hope was that a competitive filmmaking environment, with two legitimate distribution networks, would work for the benefit of filmmakers, investors, and viewers.

At the same time, 2003 also proved something of a financial high-water mark for the industry. *The Best Two Years* grossed \$1,163,450, a

strong showing, but still a bit disappointing given the quality of the film. The general Mormon film business model, in which films could be made for a budget of around \$500,000, with an expected gross of over \$1 million (which was actually never all that accurate anyway), was about to collapse.

The chart on the following page tracks the success of the main films released by HaleStone and Excel, as well as two independent films. These raw data, publicly available on IMDb, suggest that we can simply subtract column A from column B and figure out which films made money and which ones did not. The fiscal reality is much more complex than that. The right-hand column represents gross box office revenue. But that total is split among various interests, including theaters, distributors, investors, filmmakers, and other entities. While it would be interesting to know just who got what percentage of the gross revenues, those contractual details tend to be closely guarded secrets within the industry, and unavailable to most researchers. Ancillary revenues are similarly unavailable, but we can assume that, for at least some films, DVD or soundtrack sales were considerable. As a result, we have no way of knowing which of the many stakeholders in any of these films made money and which didn't, or how much anyone made. The only conclusions we can draw with any confidence are quite general: for example, *God's Army* was more successful financially than *Baptists at our Barbecue*.

Misleading though these figures may be, it does seem clear that most Mormon films, including those distributed by Excel, have not been financially successful, and that sometime around 2004, LDS films suffered a substantial drop in box office receipts. Even a critically acclaimed film festival favorite like *Saints and Soldiers* performed indifferently, and flawed but perfectly watchable comedies like *Baptists at Our Barbecue*, *Mobsters and Mormons*, and *Pride and Prejudice* all did very poorly. Richard Dutcher's *God's Army Two: States of Grace*, which opened in November 2005 and which is arguably the finest film of the movement so far, has done disappointing business, with an opening week of just under \$60,000, after which Main Street Movie Company, Dutcher's distribution entity, stopped releasing figures to IMDb.

Glutting the Market

When a preliminary version of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the Association for Mormon Letters in 2003, it contained the following statement: "The most important recent development in the Mormon film movement is the continued evolution of HaleStorm. What HaleStorm has done is give Excel a legitimate business competitor. I think

Film Title	Budget (est.)	Box Office Gross
HaleStone Releases		
<i>The Singles Ward</i> (2002)	\$500,000	\$1,250,798
<i>The R.M.</i> (2003)	\$500,000	\$1,111,615
<i>The Best Two Years</i> (2004)	N/A	\$1,163,450
<i>The Home Teachers</i> (2004)	N/A	\$196,123
<i>Baptists at Our Barbecue</i> (2004)	\$500,000	\$173,106
<i>Mobsters and Mormons</i> (2005)	\$350,000	\$407,139
Excel Releases		
<i>God's Army</i> (2000)	\$300,000	\$2,628,829
<i>Brigham City</i> (2001)	\$1,000,000	\$798,341
<i>The Other Side of Heaven</i> (2001)	\$7,000,000	\$4,720,371
<i>Charly</i> (2002)	\$950,000	\$813,685
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i> (2003)	N/A	\$373,942
<i>Saints and Soldiers</i> (2004)	\$780,000	\$1,310,270
<i>The Work and the Glory</i> (2004)	\$7,500,000	\$3,347,439
Independent Releases		
<i>The Book of Mormon Movie:</i>		
<i>The Journey</i> (2003)	\$2,000,000	\$1,672,730
<i>Napoleon Dynamite</i> (2004)	\$400,000	\$44,540,956

this has all sorts of positive implications for the future of the movement.”¹¹
 In retrospect, that judgment was premature.

However, that earlier paper also stated:

On the negative side, competition may mean a further glutting of the market. With a limited LDS niche market, more is not necessarily a good thing. Two distribution companies may very well find themselves releasing high-quality films that end up battling each other for share in a shrinking market. *Saints and Soldiers*, the next Excel release, may well be the best film yet of the movement. Will it find itself fighting with *The Best Two Years* to attract the notice of an increasingly jaded audience?

It appears this is precisely what has taken place. Perhaps the initial novelty of LDS filmmaking has worn off and audiences have become disenchanted by a long string of mediocre films, as well as by too many strong films released at about the same time. The fall of 2005 provides a good case study of this latter point. HaleStorm released *Mobsters and Mormons* on September 11, 2005. *The Work and the Glory: American Zion* was released on October 23, 2005. Greg Whiteley’s marvelous documentary, *New York Doll*, came out October 30, 2005, but was released in Utah the following

week, on November 6, which was the same day Main Street released *States of Grace*. Three of the strongest films in the LDS film movement were all released within two weeks of each other, probably because they all wanted to beat the Christmas movie rush, and, as a result, all of them suffered.

What this suggests is that competition should not preclude the possibility of cooperation. In Hollywood, the major studios certainly compete with each other for box office revenue, but they also collaborate, through such trade organizations as the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America (MPPDA) and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. One might imagine that an entity like the LDS Booksellers Association could evolve to serve some of the same functions. Developing economies can sometimes benefit from protection and advocacy, especially in their earliest stages.

A Crossover Hit

At the same time, however, we have also seen the one genuine crossover hit of the entire Mormon film movement: Jared Hess's 2004 independent film, *Napoleon Dynamite*. Although *Napoleon Dynamite* is at best tangentially LDS in content, it was made by an LDS director, starred an LDS actor, and deals with life in a predominately LDS community. It can be argued that in some ways, its outlook and approach are more directly informed by a thoughtful examination of Mormon culture than even the HaleStorm comedies. The phenomenal success of *Napoleon Dynamite* has, I believe, some interesting implications for business options open to the Mormon film movement as it continues to evolve.

When considering the reasons why films succeed or fail, the first question we might profitably ask is this: Why should people go see this movie? For major Hollywood releases, the advertising will generally provide potential audiences with several reasons to see any particular film. Take, for example, the 2007 *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*. Television advertising emphasized performances by Johnny Depp and Keira Knightly, the anticipated appearance of Keith Richards and Chow Yun Fat, some remarkable CGI and makeup effects. Marketing efforts also built on audience expectations from the first two films of the *Pirates* series. A potential viewer might have decided to see the film because he or she liked the other films or has fond memories of the Disney ride they were based on, or because he or she liked Johnny Depp, or because of genre—it looked like an exciting action film.

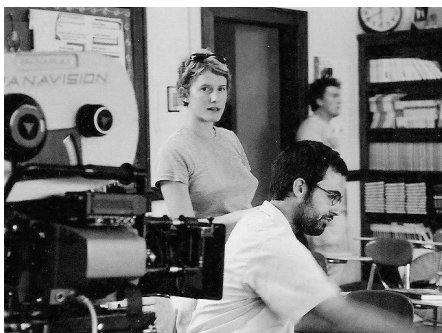
The Mormon film movement, on the other hand, is a subset of the American independent film movement, and, for independent films, most



Jared Hess's *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) is the only genuinely successful crossover hit of the Mormon film movement, grossing an astonishing \$44.5 million at the box office. Here, less astonishingly, Napoleon (Jon Heder) fails to negotiate a small, homemade bike ramp. Courtesy Jared Hess.

of the Hollywood promotional factors do not really apply. Most independent films cannot afford famous movie stars, exotic CGI effects, and expensive stunts or action movie sequences. For an independent film to succeed, the film itself has to be the star. Audience members have to be attracted to that film, usually because they have heard about it, heard that it is offbeat, unusual, that its story is not structured the way most traditional Hollywood narratives are structured, or because it is amusing or provocative in ways standard Hollywood films often are not.

This is precisely the case with *Napoleon Dynamite*. The film was the star. Jon Heder, who plays Napoleon, was a complete unknown when the film was released. When finally the distributor, Fox Searchlight, put some advertising into the film, the ads focused on the film's offbeat, quirky charms—Napoleon unsuccessfully trying to jump his bicycle off a small homemade ramp, for example. The film is clearly informed by an indie sensibility: in look and approach, it has clearly been influenced by such indie film directors as Joel and Ethan Coen, Kevin Smith, and most directly and particularly, Wes Anderson. (The same is true of Richard Dutcher, whose films also borrow liberally from an indie aesthetic, though his influences are more likely Carl Dreyer, John Cassavetes, and Paul Schrader.) As a result, the film resonates with a younger audience, which is itself jaded



Husband and wife team Jared and Jerusha Hess at work on the set of *Napoleon Dynamite*. Courtesy Jared Hess.

and put off by more traditional Hollywood filmmaking.

At the same time, *Napoleon Dynamite's* aesthetic is deeply baffling to more traditionally minded filmmakers and audience members. I suspect that the appeal of this film may be largely generational. For many older audience members, it feels slapdash and awkward, poorly structured, badly lit and photographed. To some, Heder's slackjawed deadpan portrayal looks more like bad acting than a richly textured comic performance.

And so, to many LDS filmmakers, the idea that *Napoleon Dynamite* could provide a model for other Mormon films seems confusing and troubling.

But what has perhaps happened with the Mormon film movement is that, in the minds of many audience members, Mormon films have become a genre, and one they do not particularly care for. Consciously or not, Mormon films have become known as "regular movies, only with Mormons, and not as good." This has been particularly true of romantic comedies such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Baptists at Our Barbecue*. These films look and feel like mainstream Hollywood romantic comedies. But without movie stars to drive them, without really distinguishing themselves meaningfully from the bigger-budget films they resemble, there is no particular reason for anyone to see them.

At a Crossroads

Certainly the Mormon film movement now finds itself at something of a crossroads. What has been accomplished is that certain filmmakers have distinguished themselves and launched careers that could lead in interesting directions. Richard Dutcher's *States of Grace* is a remarkable achievement, and it will be fascinating to track his future career, even though it apparently will not include more films in the Mormon movement he started. Jared Hess has proved, with *Napoleon Dynamite*, that an LDS and an indie sensibility can combine in wonderfully creative ways. Ryan Little (*Saints and Soldiers*) is a filmmaker with a provocative visual sense for style and shot composition, as is Andrew Black (*Pride and Prejudice*).

If the Mormon film movement has done nothing else, it has identified four exciting young filmmakers. That is a major accomplishment, if not quite what we may have hoped for. And the continued success of the LDS Film Festival provides a center and a home for further advances in the field.

At any rate, it seems premature to pronounce the movement dead. Chris Heimerdinger's *Passage to Zarahemla* is scheduled for an October 2007 release and could well build on the popular success of his *Tennis Shoes Among the Nephites* young adult novels. The previously mentioned September 2007 Excel release, *Return with Honor*, turns *The R.M.* on its head and may even inaugurate a new genre, the serious returned-missionary drama. *Journey of Faith: The New World*, a documentary from the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and director Peter Johnson, premiered at BYU's Campus Education Week in August 2007. *Familiar Spirits*, a back-from-the-dead picture in the spirit of M. Night Shyamalan, was released in January 2007. Michael Flynn has produced two McKay Daines films: *The Dance*, which was released in April 2007, and *Heber Holiday*, scheduled for release sometime in 2008. *Pirates of the Great Salt Lake*, a goofy comedy building on and ridiculing the affection that Utah audiences have for the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, has screened in no fewer than thirteen film festivals in the United States and Australia, though it has yet to find a distributor. The summer of 2007 saw the release of *Piccadilly Cowboy* (retitled *Anxiously Engaged* for video release) and *Beauty and the Beast*, and Loki Mulholland's send-up of multilevel marketing, *Believe*, was released in April 2007. That is a lot of product for a supposedly glutted market. To be sure, most recent releases have done poorly at the box office. But films continue to be made and distributed.

While there have been disappointments and failures, the expanding Mormon film movement has proved that good Mormon films can find their niche markets and that a variety of business models can indeed be profitable. It has also proven that independent filmmaking can be financially successful. Ultimately, Richard Dutcher's parting words still resonate: "Good filmmaking is the only thing that will save Mormon cinema."¹²

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1. By production values, I mean that combination of production design and cinematography that defines the "look" of a film, as well as the sound design and musical underscoring that determine mood.

2. William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade* (New York: Warner Books, 1983), 68.

3. <http://www.familytv.com/ourcause.aspx>.

4. It is worth noting that *The Other Side of Heaven* was not a “Disney film,” as it has sometimes been described. It was an independent film, initially distributed by Excel, and was only picked up by Disney for the DVD release after a reasonably successful theatrical run.

5. All these figures come from the Internet Movie Database.

6. David Hunter, comments given at the 2006 LDS Film Festival, Orem, Utah, January 21, 2006.

7. “Deseret Book and Excel Entertainment Join Forces,” *LDS Living*, November 15, 2004, http://deseretbook.com/mormon-life/news/story?story_id=5279.

8. The complicated relationship between Miller and the LDS film movement has been covered in, among other media venues, the *Deseret Morning News*. See, for example, Jeff Vice, “2 Sequels for Work and Glory,” *Deseret Morning News*, April, 1, 2005; http://www.desnews.com/cgi-bin/cqcgi_state/@state.env?CQ_SESSION_KEY=AVUWWNCFVESX&CQ_CUR_DOCUMENT=2&CQ_TEXT_MAIN=YES.

9. See <http://workandtheglory.com>.

10. See “Richard Dutcher: ‘Parting Words’ on Mormon Movies,” *Daily Herald*, April 12, 2007; <http://www.heraldextra.com/content/view/217694>.

11. Eric Samuelsen, “The LDS Film Movement: Where We Are, Where We’re Going,” paper presented at AML conference, February 8, 2003.

12. “Richard Dutcher: ‘Parting Words.’”