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The Sixth Annual LDS Film Festival, January 17–20, 2007.
SCERA Center for the Arts, Orem, Utah

Reviewed by Candy Eash

If the Sixth Annual LDS Film Festival demonstrated nothing else, it proved that Mormon film is alive and well. The number of film submissions has grown, as has attendance (4,800 this year). Although the 2007 festival prominently showcased a dozen feature films, the short films were clearly more engaging and carried the most promise for the future of Mormon cinema.

Feature films shown at the festival generally aimed less at developing a unique Mormon cinematic approach and more at perfecting traditional Hollywood-style entertainment. With a number of the films reaching budgets close to a million dollars, the pressure on the filmmakers to cover production costs is obviously intense; hence the tendency to play it safe and stay within popular genres. Latter-day Saints producing feature films are certainly improving at imitating popular film, though this does little toward establishing a uniquely Mormon cinema.

Patterned after standard Hollywood fare is *Intellectual Property*, by Nicholas Peterson. With a budget of \$900,000, this film achieved production values that few of the other films at the festival could touch. Still, its storyline is conventional: a genius inventor is taken advantage of by everyone he has ever known and becomes bitter, untrusting, and paranoid. He is then framed for a murder that has been plotted and carried out by Russian spies in order to steal his most brilliant invention. The structure, plot, and style of the film are formulaic, suggested nothing relevant to Mormon culture or LDS belief, and in the end this film leaves the viewer dissatisfied. Its presence at the festival raised the question as to whether replicas of Hollywood films are appropriate for an LDS film festival simply because they are made by LDS filmmakers.

Other feature films emulating standard Hollywood genres included *The Dance*, a romantic comedy; *American Grace*, a very rough Mormon remake of George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973); *Tracker*, an action/thriller

comparable to *Speed* (1994) with its race against time to rescue the victim; and *Outlaw Trail*, a family western adventure about a group of kids who go in search of Butch Cassidy, *Indiana Jones* style. The most intriguing feature films of the festival were ghost stories, *The Haunting of Marsten Manor* and *Familiar Spirits*. Though their creators deserve praise for attempting to explore an untried genre in Mormon filmmaking, these avenues have still been well traveled with movies such as *Sixth Sense* (1999) and *The Others* (2001). With the exception of *Familiar Spirits* and *American Grace*, none of the features draw upon LDS beliefs or make any significant overtures to Mormon culture.

Two features that do engage LDS belief and Mormon culture are *The Return* (to be released in September 2007 under the title *Return with Honor: A Missionary Homecoming*), by Michael Amundsen and Tracy Garner; and the similarly titled *Returning with Honor*, by Samuel Adams. Both films are mission stories, and given that missions are a central feature of Mormon culture, we can expect the missionary film to be a standard Mormon film genre. Neither follows a path created by Hollywood in content or style. *Returning with Honor*, in particular, captures well the feelings of its filmmaker, who returned early from his mission to the Philippines due to illness. The film gives an honest portrait of Adams's struggle to regain his health and his dignity, during which he learns faith, disappointment, and



In the autobiographical *Returning with Honor*, director Samuel Adams uses the powerful symbol of a missionary floating to shore to express the state of limbo experienced by early-return missionaries. Adams says he made his film in order to encourage those who struggle with their faith after ending missionary service early. Courtesy Samuel Adams.

endurance. These missionary films move beyond familiar mission-field narratives and put a human face on the difficult return process many missionaries face.

Some of the short films also fell into the trap of following established genres. *Fathers and Sons* is reminiscent of a *Saturday Night Live* skit. *Above Average* feels like a prime-time reality show, and *Food Boy* could pass for a Disney Channel tweenybopper pilot. Other short films followed established Mormon filmmaking trends, mimicking such commodities as *The Home Teacher* or *The R.M.* Many films, however, stood out for their quality and originality.

Only the Pizza Man Knows, a twenty-minute documentary biopic by Scott Christopherson, starts out addressing the common challenge of creating a film but shifts focus midstream to the challenges Christopherson has faced in his personal life and his family. The director's father had struggled with family finances and had been overwhelmed by the stress of a professional career. He now delivers pizza. This film ventures into real and honest issues facing members of the Church and doesn't gloss over the damage and trauma that the decisions of one individual brought into the lives of his family members. The refreshing part of the piece is the healing it also portrays. This film deals with hard subjects honestly and with charity, much like the acclaimed *New York Doll* (2005). Christopherson turns the documentary inward, creating a format similar in style to a personal essay.

Speaking through Glass, a documentary by Lauren Moss, is another example of adapting a conventional genre to Mormon subject matter. Stained-glass maker Thomas Holdman is a man with a severe speech impediment who immerses himself in his art and achieves greatness. Holdman's stained-glass art has been used in many LDS temples, including Palmyra and Nauvoo. Moss's portrayal is candid as Holdman tells us, with some difficulty, about his passion for glass. Although the film itself is formulaic, a typical documentary, the subject is poetic. While Holdman struggles with verbal communication, he has the steadiest of hands and creates beautiful art that eloquently conveys his testimony. What makes this film particularly "Mormon" is not really the director's or the subject's religious affiliation, but the fact that it inspires in viewers a desire to achieve greatness in spite of their challenges.

A film that ventured completely off traditional paths and broached one of the most disturbing and uncomfortable topics at the festival was Brian Skiba's *Chained*, an experimental film only four minutes in length. This film is a visual representation of the emotional and psychological chains that bind individuals who become involved in Internet pornography.



Kirby Heyborne, *left*, familiar to Mormon audiences from such films as *The Best Two Years* (2004), stands next to LDS Film Festival director Christian Vuissa. In addition to founding and running the annual festival, Vuissa has pioneered the creation of non-English Mormon cinema. His *Roots and Wings* (2002), a half-hour drama in Spanish about a part-Catholic, part-Mormon family, gleaned many awards both within and outside Mormon circles. Courtesy Jed Ivie.

The film opens with a stunning view from behind a computer monitor looking at a man whose face is lit by the glare of the screen. After his wife retires for the evening, the sound of a few mouse clicks tells the viewer that the man has ventured into treacherous online territory. The scene then shifts to show the man wrapped in chains, lying on the ground in a dark desert, with rock music blaring. This scene shift intensifies the audience's feeling of urgency about the man's situation. By using this heavy symbolism, the director is able to avoid showing any of the images that comprise the addiction. In a moment of realization, the man is able to understand his predicament. The tone changes again as the man simply turns off his computer, dissolving the image of the chains and irritation of the hard-edged music. Similar to the indirect way in which the Crucifixion is treated by Russell Holt in the Church film *Lamb of God* (1993), *Chained* portrays evil more powerfully by implication than it could by direct depiction. *Chained* also demonstrates that it is possible to portray LDS beliefs and moral standards and thus create Mormon cinema without a single overt reference to Mormons or Mormonism.

The short film that eclipsed all others was from festival founder Christian Vuissa. *The Letter Writer* begins with an older gentleman sitting at a rolltop desk and writing a letter to someone who is, at first, believed to be his daughter. A voice-over of the words he is writing expresses the effect this woman's kindness has had in his life. He tells of her spiritual nature and her influence for good on the people with whom she has interacted. Upon completing the letter, the old man seals the envelope and places it in the mailbox. The sun sets and rises on the envelope. Slowly the scene pans back to show the old man once again entering his den, removing his robe, and rolling back the top of his desk. Sound plays an important role in the film as we hear him strike a match and light a candle on the edge of his desk. We hear the crisp sound of a sturdy sheet of paper being pulled from a stack of elegant stationary. We see him fill his fountain pen with ink. Finally, the man selects an envelope and retrieves a well-used phonebook from a desk drawer. As he flips through the phonebook, the audience sees dozens of names that have been crossed out, indicating hundreds of past recipients of such tender letters. *The Letter Writer* gives an honest and beautiful example of how to love others by showing the thoughtful actions of one individual. This film, of course, is nondenominational and could even be considered nonreligious, kindness not being the exclusive property of any creed or sect. But Vuissa's film is nevertheless a fine example of Mormon cinema at its best.

Animation may have emerged as the crown jewel of the festival. These short films were more polished, perhaps because of the exacting thought and time needed to complete an animated film. Each of the three animated shorts was innovative in the form its animator chose and each encompassed a subject that touched the core of Mormonism.

The first was a four-minute color animation, *Peach Baby*, by Brent Leavitt. The story is of a baby who wants to be like his father and eat a peach. After many humorous yet unsuccessful attempts, the baby is still unable to eat the fruit, a task his father accomplishes with ease. The kind



Peach Baby (2007) was one of several animated films that screened at the recent LDS film festival, further broadening the range of subjects and styles being pursued in Mormon animation. Courtesy BYU Department of Theatre and Media Arts.

father lets the baby try and try before offering assistance. Being imperfect and working to accomplish something within family relationships, the film suggests, can be joyful.

Toward the Theory of the Evolution of the Turkey by Brandon Arnold is a six-minute live-action film mixed with animated, crayon-colored cutouts. Inviting imaginations was the theme of this film, which won first place in the short film genre at this year's festival. In the film, a young girl is instructed to draw a turkey for her class. The turkey she draws is unique, with a beak shaped like a bass clarinet. The poor girl is ostracized by both her teacher and fellow classmates but bravely and stubbornly moves forward with her creative interpretations of animals. Unexpectedly, her creative drawings come to life, which causes a stir in the community. After overcoming the taunting, the girl learns to accept her uniqueness and, with some additional imaginative creatures, she soon has a garage band of very rare musical animals. Different from *Chained* or *Only the Pizza Man Knows*, which deal bluntly with their subjects, the lightheartedness of Arnold's film shows a more entertaining side to Mormon cinema.

Finally, Annie Poon's film, *Book of Visions*, combines the stories of Joan of Arc, Black Elk, and Joseph Smith Jr. in a stop-motion, paper-cut-out animated film. This film shows how Mormon cinema can address non-Mormon material and combine it with Mormon topics. A magical and mysterious book is uncovered by a dog in the backyard of an older gentleman. When the man opens the book, visions unfold before him (and his dog). The perspective offered by the film is respectful to each vision. Some could complain that placing Joseph Smith's vision alongside the other two is sacrilegious. However, Poon is able to connect with a non-LDS audience by paying respect to other visions. Then, after establishing that others believe in great visions, and that these visions are revered by us as well, Poon presents the fact that Mormons also believe in revealed truths. Accepting the idea that visions are not exclusive to the LDS faith and that those other visions deserve honor is a unique and refreshing innovation.

With the excellence of these short animated productions, it would not be surprising in the near future for an animated feature film to be a breakout film in Mormon cinema. Regardless, this year's LDS Film Festival shows that Mormon film is not a passing fad. Indeed, LDS filmmakers are beginning to establish a film tradition that Latter-day Saints would be well pleased to call their own.

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