

Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America
By Jake Johnson

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Reviewed by Megan Sanborn Jones

In his ambitious first book, musicologist Jake Johnson examines how and why the vocal and theatrical traditions of American musicals are evidenced in the theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At the heart of this examination are close readings of a number of popular American musicals and what Johnson sees as their Utah counterparts—*Oklahoma!* and *Promised Valley*; *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Life . . . More Sweet than Bitter*; *The Book of Mormon* and *Saturday's Warrior*. Part history, part literary criticism, part religious studies, and part music studies, *Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America* attempts to show not only that the history of Mormons and musical theatre are intertwined but also that the vocality that emerges at the intersection of Latter-day Saint theology and theatricality is uniquely American.

Scholars in a wide range of related fields as well as general readers will find much to appreciate here. Johnson's work is truly interdisciplinary. He moves quickly and easily across topics as varied as *The Sound of Music*, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, Brother Jake's satirical YouTube videos, President Trump, Orson Hyde's dedication of Jerusalem, the mechanics of early sound recording, rock musicals of the 1970s, the John Birch Society, the Latter-day Saint temple ceremony, Kate Kelly's excommunication, and the Osmond brothers. He calls his methodology a "spiraling historiographical model" and explains that it allows him to write across time, genre, and media to focus on the events and texts he finds most compelling (27–28). The result is that on almost every page, the reader is introduced to something surprising and provocative.

After introducing his theoretical framework, Johnson organizes his work in a roughly chronological fashion. He first develops what he calls the "theology of voice," in which he suggests that the voice is "the

principal means of understanding another person's righteousness and devotion to religious values" (15). He takes this position largely from the revelation to Joseph Smith recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 1:38, in which God explains, "Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same." Building on this idea of prophets speaking for God, Johnson teases out the idea of a vicarious voice, or the event of one person speaking for and on behalf of another unseen person. He then applies the theology of voice to selections from the history of American musical theatre and of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Johnson's examination of Latter-day Saint doctrine through the lens of the theology of voice is both thoughtful and thought-provoking. The two case studies he provides in the first chapter—Brigham Young speaking as if he were Joseph Smith and Nephi speaking with the voice of Laban—allow the reader to consider in new ways the power of voice to proxy authority. Much less successful, however, is his claim that culture is littered with vicarious voices, including machines that disseminate a person's voice or actors who play a role on the stage.

The problem with grouping these very different modes of vocality together is that it erases any nuance of performance, technology, reception, and context. For example, theatre, in addition to being live and ephemeral, is collaborative. Meaning is created by multiple "authors": from the playwright who creates a character, to the designer who shapes the physical realities of the actor's body, to the director who provides a framework of intention, to the actor who interprets the script, to the audience that brings its own insights. Theatre decidedly has more than one voice, and even when there is only one literal voice of an actor, the actor speaks for everyone who has contributed to the work as a whole. In acting there is generally no singular identifiable other like God, Joseph Smith, or Laban whom the actor must mimic with specificity and authority in order to convince an audience that she or he speaks for that person. Characters have no independent voice to proxy.

Johnson, however, uses verbs like to *proxy*, *mimic*, *pretend*, *imitate*, *play*, *shape-shift*, *ventriloquize*, *surrogate*, and *act* interchangeably. His untheorized assumptions about performance, imitation, and recreation prove his thesis that acting in musical theatre and acting like a Latter-day Saint are entwined, but do so at the cost of critical rigor in the area of performance studies. Compounding this is Johnson's focus on the script of plays rather than the performance of them. Johnson's training as a musicologist and this book's publication in the University of Illinois Press's Music in American Life Series in some ways mitigate his lack of

attention to theatre as a performing art, for it is clear that his primary interest is music and sound. However, since his central argument is a theatrical one, it is a notable oversight.

In the history that makes up the bulk of his work, Johnson begins with a development of American operetta in the nineteenth century. In the second chapter, he continues through to the development of the integrated musical and suggests that the Latter-day Saint Church's commission of the play *Promised Valley* built on the deep popularity of *Oklahoma!* the musical. He convincingly argues that *Promised Valley* shows how singing meant belonging and proved that Latter-day Saints belonged in the America of the 1940s and 1950s. His next chapter claims that Church members' fascination with the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* and the performances at the Polynesian Cultural Center illustrate the unique relationship Latter-day Saints claim to have with Judaism. (Johnson justifies putting these two performances side by side, explaining that Latter-day Saints think that Polynesians, as well as Native Americans, descend from the house of Israel.) He concludes that not only do these musical performances support the Church's beliefs about ancient and future Israel, but they also buoy up Latter-day Saint ideologies that "prefer whiteness as a demarcation of purity" (112).

Johnson then devotes chapter 4 to an examination of Church members' preoccupations with time and eternity in a close reading of *Saturday's Warrior*. He again finds parallels among a wide range of performances: temple work, fast Sunday testimonies, general conference talks, and pageants (as described in HBO's *Big Love* and in a post-apocalyptic short story by Orson Scott Card rather than as performed in actual Church pageants). He argues that all these performances evidence a standardized vocal behavior, which he calls the "correlated voice," a term inspired by the Church's correlation initiative that pulled disparate Latter-day Saint practices into a unified system. Johnson's final chapter moves forward to the present, with an analysis of the hit musical *The Book of Mormon* to show how aurality functions in contemporary Latter-day Saint political life. He concludes that the version of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints depicted in the musical disrupts the unity of correlation, which is "exactly what Mormonism needs to remain relevant" (167).

Johnson's work is at its finest when he takes the time to deeply examine a singular musical site. Readers will appreciate his detailed analysis of musical theatre songs, which he usually illustrates with figures of the score. Also of note are his sections on "Imitating God" (42-47)

and “Correlated Voices” (136–41). These, along with some other of his multiple short sections, provide compelling insights about the relationship between musical theatre and Latter-day Saint theology that truly expand an understanding of the larger relationship between performance and belief. However, these sections work less effectively to support Johnson’s overarching argument. His “spiral historiography” allows him to abandon one thread and pick up another one in each subsequent chapter in the book. In the end, readers may be surprised by where the book concludes in relationship to where they thought they were going.

For all this, *Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America* is a welcome addition to the growing field of American religious performance studies. Jake Johnson is a fascinating and agile new voice in Mormon studies from whom I hope we hear more in the future.

Megan Sanborn Jones is a professor of theatre at Brigham Young University. She has published work in *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Topics*, *Ecumenica*, *The Journal of Mormon History*, *Mormon Studies Review*, and more. Her most recent work, from the University of Michigan Press, is *Contemporary Mormon Pageantry: Seeking After Our Dead*.