

Contemporary Mormon Pageantry: Seeking after the Dead
By Megan Sanborn Jones

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018

Reviewed by Melissa Leilani Larson

I believe strongly in the communal nature of the theater. Live performance allows for an exchange between performer and audience member that is immediate and electric on both sides of the conduit. Audience members, swept away by a powerful scene, shift in their seats and hold their breaths; on stage, the actors feel that pleasant anxiety and feed off of it, using it as fuel to go further and deeper with their characters. Theater can be an intense conversation between actor and audience, with the playscript providing a plan for that conversation.

In her new book, *Contemporary Mormon Pageantry: Seeking after the Dead*, Brigham Young University theater professor Megan Sanborn Jones suggests that Latter-day Saint history pageants add another layer to that theatrical conversation. Latter-day Saint pageantry, Jones asserts, invokes an interaction between actor, spectator—and the dead.

Pageants are, of course, not unique to the Latter-day Saint tradition. The pageant has been a useful tool in Christian religious education since the Middle Ages. It relies on epic staging, music, and special effects to portray scenes of religious and historical significance, usually on outdoor stages and in an unabashedly presentational style. The renowned Oberammergau Passion Play, for example, was first performed in the 1600s and is still staged in Germany every ten years, though it has become more of a tourist attraction than a religious experience. Pageants still happen all over the world but have dwindled in popularity and spirituality—except, according to Jones, among the Latter-day Saints.

Jones's thorough study is an efficacious blend of historical research, interviews with recent and current pageant participants, and the author's own firsthand experience as a director and spectator. In clear, straightforward prose, Jones outlines the basic tenets of Latter-day Saint theology and how that theology is faithfully represented in four annual

Church-produced pageants: the Hill Cumorah Pageant in New York; the Mormon Miracle Pageant in Utah; the Nauvoo Pageant in Illinois; and the Mesa Easter Pageant in Arizona. Over a period of five years, Jones followed each pageant through the processes of rehearsal, production, and performance, taking a keen look at the “pageant culture” created by cast and crew along the way.

Jones maintains that a number of fascinating aspects set Latter-day Saint pageants apart from other theatrical events. First and foremost, pageants are intended to kindle a spiritual experience in everyone involved, from performer to technician to spectator. Though, as mentioned earlier, theater is a conversation between performers and the spectators, it is typically constructed to evoke an experience specifically for the audience. Jones notes that Latter-day Saint pageants provide a unique theatrical covenant: they are built to provide spiritual experiences for both actor and audience. One director told Jones, “We hope the cast has primarily a spiritual experience. . . . [I] hope we can provide them with an experience where they can feel something and then share that feeling with the audience” (79–80).

Actors who portray iconic figures like Jesus or Joseph Smith are naturally intimidated by the cultural expectations surrounding those characters. Jones observes that the actors choose to focus on emulating those men rather than imitating them; an actor doesn’t try to *be* Jesus Christ; rather, he tries to be *like* him. This actor might base his onstage and offstage behavior on that of the Savior, believing “[his] performance will naturally be Christ-like” (147). Jones continues, “The accuracy is not one of historical specificity but of emotional veracity” (148).

Lesser-known characters also provide ample opportunities for spiritual enlightenment. Applying her considerable background in theater theory, Jones examined the vocal and physical choices made by performers across all four pageants. Within Latter-day Saint pageants, performers are not acting; Jones perceives that they are instead sharing—sharing their personal testimonies about the Savior and his gospel on stage. Jones suggests that bearing testimony is a performance of sorts, and one of the most effective seen on the pageant stage: “participants worry less about realistically portraying characters from the past and focus more on acting in a style that will most realistically portray their present testimonies” (152).

Spirituality, as it centers on God and Jesus Christ, is easily the most important aspect of the modern Latter-day Saint pageant. But Jones reveals another layer of spirituality: literal and figurative interactions

with the dead. First, there is the onstage characterization of spirits: “In every Mormon pageant, characters who were once dead come back to the stage as figures from the afterlife. Even more powerfully, pageants imagine living characters as they will be in the future, after they have died and moved into their next life” (206). Second, Jones suggests that presenting the stories of deceased people invites the spirits of those Saints to join their theatrical counterparts on stage: “ghosts are characters in the narrative and perform alongside the participants who take on their personas” (207). Jones includes several participant experiences wherein the veil between the mortal and immortal worlds was remarkably thin, affecting performers and spectators alike.

Pageants, Jones contends, are an opportunity for Latter-day Saints to work toward exaltation, both for themselves and for those who have gone before. That spiritual impact is heightened by the physical location of each production; all four major pageants are staged in close proximity to a temple, wherein ordinances are performed on behalf of Latter-day Saints’ deceased ancestors. In the case of the Mormon Miracle Pageant, performed in Manti, Utah, the temple itself becomes an intrinsic piece of the set. At a climactic moment, the actor portraying Moroni appears precariously atop the Manti temple (Jones points out that the Manti temple is one of only a handful of temples lacking a permanent Moroni figure, and that absence enables the live spectacle to take place). At another moment in the same pageant, a husband and wife are reunited after death: “The couple climbs up white granite stairs toward the brightly lit temple, which is remade as the celestial kingdom” (103). Even when temples are not made part of the pageantry, their physical nearness “imbues pageant stages with a sanctity similar to temple worship” (102).

Pageants run the gamut of human emotion, employing complex theatrics, music, and choreography to the utmost in hopes of evoking a strong, spiritual response. Sometimes somber, sometimes joyful, sometimes violent, each pageant serves as a working intersection between the past and present—between the living and the dead. At this intersection, Jones affirms, Latter-day Saints can catch a glimpse of the eternal possibilities of the future and “imagine exaltation” (5).

Contemporary Mormon Pageantry is an invaluable addition to the study of Latter-day Saint arts. It is essential, engaging reading for Latter-day Saint theater artists; at the same time, it is easily accessible to scholars across other fields and faiths. In 2018, Church leaders announced the decision to reassess the production of pageants. If Church-produced

pageants do come to an end in the near future, Megan Sanborn Jones has effectively constructed a time capsule that preserves several key slices of the pageant experience.

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