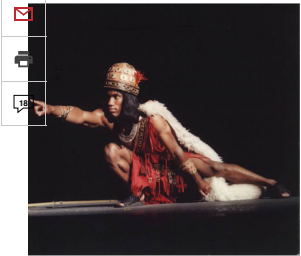


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Commentary: Mormon pageants and the performance of whiteness



(Courtesy Rulon Simmons) Charles Bruce was an Olympic athlete from Halifax, Nova Scotia, playing the role of Samuel Pageant in the 1990s.

By Jake Johnson | For The Tribune • Published: November 11, 2018
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Many were taken aback when The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced last month that it would no longer support or encourage large-scale pageants. One of the church’s longest-running traditions of musical theater, pageants are a big deal in Mormonism. The Hill Cumorah Pageant in particular provides a long-running theatrical link to the faith. “Book of Mormon” creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone drew inspiration from the pageant in constructing their musical satire of Mormonism, and one episode of the HBO series *Big Love* even followed the Henrickson family’s road trip to Palmyra, N.Y., to

...and the performance of whiteness, they do experience the show.

In writing my book on Mormons and American musical theater, I came to realize the degree to which Mormonism was culturally dependent upon musicals and what the genre has come to represent. Musicals are a lasting fixture in Mormonism, well-represented by the classic musical “Saturday’s Warrior” and the evening musicals performed at the church-owned Polynesian Cultural Center. Yet musicals also played a big hand in turning Mormonism into, as Harold Bloom called it, “the American religion.” To understand why the church would shut down its pageants you first have to understand the role musicals have played in turning Mormons into Americans.

Musicals and Mormons are cut from the same ideological cloth. Joseph Smith founded the Mormon Church in Fayette, N.Y., in 1830, the same year and region where white minstrel performer Thomas “Daddy” Rice inaugurated a new wave of blackface minstrelsy with his infamous character, Jump Jim Crow.

Mormonism and blackface minstrelsy were both responses to shifting sentiments in America. Jacksonian ideologies such as the expansion of democratic practice, an ongoing affirmation of white supremacy in the land, and, perhaps most centrally, the high stock placed in self-fashioning are all foundational tenets of Mormonism and minstrelsy — one of the major theatrical ingredients of American musical theater.

This relationship has not always been mutually beneficial. For much of the 19th century, Mormons were depicted harshly and cruelly on musical stages. As caricatured Mormon villains populated operetta and vaudeville theaters in New York and Boston, their portrayals more often than not implied an ethnic stain not all that different from that historically cast upon Jews. Practicing polygamy disqualified Mormons from white, middle-

class acceptance. In other words, Mormons didn't act white, so in the popular imagination they ceased to be white.

Eager to be accepted by American society, the Mormon Church saw an opportunity in, of all things, the 1943 musical "Oklahoma!". The church worked to commission "Promised Valley," an original musical modeled on "Oklahoma!," as a centerpiece to the Utah centennial celebration four years later. The plan was to deliberately connect Rodgers and Hammerstein's story of frontier life, innocence and moralizing of white community solidarity to the church's similarly simplistic story of Mormon pioneers in an effort to gain acceptance in white, middle-class America.

The plan worked, but maybe a little too well. Mormons today carry a reputation for being a little, well, *too* white. Ironically, Mormonism's racial stain today is whiteness itself, brought about in large part due to its close association with one of the whitest musical practices in America — musical theater.

As the church expands into other parts of the world, its one-time affinity for musical theater may be becoming a liability. This offers one explanation for the church's sudden disavowal of its pageant tradition. Systematically removing musical theater from its brand may distance the church from the racial implications of

the genre, yet ideological roots can't be entirely yanked out. The entwining branches of musicals and Mormonism will surely continue growing someplace further up the tree.

Jake Johnson

Jake Johnson teaches music at Oklahoma City University. His book *"Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America"* will be published summer 2019.

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