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# Lights, Camera, and Whistling Solos: An LDS Roadshow

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Arrington Lecture Synopsis

Walter B. Rudoloph discussed the rich history of opera in Utah at the annual Arrington Lecture. His presentation highlighted a number of important figures in opera and their connections to Utah and the culture. He discussed the incorporation of LDS culture into operas, a variety of opera performers, and the current culture of opera.

Rudolph discussed a number of operas and how they employed LDS culture and stories. In "The Saints Affliction" or "Deseret" the opera focuses on the Mormon practice of polygamy. The opera had no judgement on polygamy and incorporated a traditional LDS Hymn "Come Come Ye Saints" into the score.

The Salt Lake Theatre and other local venues hosted a variety of national and international performers. One of which, Adelina Patti had difficulty getting approval for a performance in the LDS Tabernacle because she was not a member of the church. She jokingly said she was thinking of joining the church for the opportunity to perform in Utah. She eventually got permission and may have given the first performance in the Tabernacle, however a few sources dispute that. Another opera singer Marian Anderson was permitted to sing in Utah and had difficulty securing a room at the Hotel Utah because she was African American. Eventually, she was permitted to stay in a room, but only if she consented to use the freight elevator.

Opera continues to be part of the local community and the city of Logan hosts the Utah Festival Opera every summer. The five week festival features productions of grand opera, oppreta, light opera, and some Broadway style musical theatre. The festival has run every summer beginning in 1993 and recently celebrated its 25th anniversary. Leonard Arrington was

reportedly one of the first ticket holders and had an affinity for opera so much so that local opera star Michael Ballam was asked to sing at Arrington's funeral.

Lights, Camera, and Whistling Solos: An LDS Roadshow

In his humorous book about Mormons, Orson Scott Card describes a roadshow as "a ten-minute musical play in which as many teenagers as possible are crammed onto a tiny stage where they sing silly songs while swaying back and forth with their arms raised above their heads. This is done in order to acquaint Mormon youth with Shakespeare's art."[1] Some Mormon leaders argue the roadshow is a uniquely LDS art form which developed in the 1920s and grew to its highest levels of popularity in the 1950s and 1960s before drastically reducing its reach in the 1990s.[2] This paper argues roadshows are an important element of Utah's art and cultural history and offer an interesting way to research LDS childhood, culture and theater. Roadshows are an example of the LDS church's commitment to acquainting their members with, and cultivating, the arts.

There is a small historiography on theater in Utah and specifically LDS theater. Some of the research is incorporated into larger studies and much of it was published more than thirty years ago with little additional research coming forth since.[3] Literature, specifically on roadshows, is nestled into larger studies of Mormonism such as in Terryl Givens book *People of Paradox* which offers a more recent but limited analysis of roadshows. Jana M. Larsen's article describes the history of roadshows, and her experience as a participant, but lacks analysis.[4] The limited research on roadshows is interesting due to their importance to LDS culture during the 20th century and the large number of participants. Terryl Givens asserts that during a typical year

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[1] Orson Scott Card, *Saintspeak* (Salt Lake City: Orion Books, 1981).
[2] Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 267.
[3] Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985). 288-293. Kenneth Macgowan, *Footlights across America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929).
[4] Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Janna M. Larsen, "The Roadshow: A Mormon Theatrical Phenomenon" *Journal of the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters,* 77 (2000): 1-9.

in the 1920s, Utah wards completed 706 three-act and 918 one-act plays with 23,000 participants.[5] Roadshow participation rates grew through the 1960s suggesting increased numbers of plays and participants, indicating their importance to the community and offering an interesting way to research LDS childhood, culture and theater.

The LDS Church has a history of promoting the arts in the community. They are the sponsor of the renowned Tabernacle Choir, and music is an integral part of weekly LDS worship for all ages. In their weekly Sunday meetings, children 3-12 devote forty-five minutes to music, known as "singing time," and they participate in an annual primary program, a themed presentation that includes songs they have practiced and a scripted narration. All LDS meetings begin and end in song, and individual wards sponsor a choir that they encourage members to join. Formal Christmas concerts, performances by the Orchestra at Temple Square, and "Music and the Spoken Word" are important elements of LDS worship and culture. In the 1998 Arrington Lecture at Utah State University Howard R. Lamar asserts the theme of his lecture was to demonstrate "that there has been a remarkable continuity and intimacy in the relation of Mormon culture and life to the theater."[6]

Theater among Mormons dates back to the early days of the faith in Nauvoo, Illinois where Joseph Smith established a "fun house" for performances and dancing.[7] Joseph Smith and Brigham Young believed church members needed time for leisure and entertainment and the theater performed secular plays such as *Pizzro.*[8] The church's second prophet Brigham Young is credited with establishing trail shows as the group journeyed west. Brigham Young describes his commitment to the theater in a quote stating, "If I were placed on a cannibal island and given the

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[5] Givens, 267.
[6] Howard R. Lamar, "The Theater in Mormon Life and Culture" (1998). Arrington Annual Lecture. Paper 3. pg 18.
[7] John S. Lindsay, *The Mormons and the Theatre, or the History of Theatricals in Utah* (Salt Lake City: Century Printing, 1905), 9.
[8] Lamar, 4.

task of civilizing its people, I should straightway build a theater for the purpose."[9] When the saints arrived in Utah in 1847, building a theater was one of the first things they did. In 1862 the Salt Lake Theater, the only theater west of the Mississippi River, was completed.[10] The theater serves as a testament to the importance of the performing arts to the people of Utah.

Another example of the arts in the Mormon community was the little theater movement, which refers to a theater experience with an "intimate stage and auditorium."[11] An important element of the little theater movement was the absence of commercialism. Instead, they "aspired to genuine artistic endeavors on a small scale."[12] One drama historian considers Brigham Young to be the father of little theater, and Social Hall, in Salt Lake to be the first little theater in America.[13] The little theater movement began in late nineteenth century Europe and moved across the Atlantic to big cities such as Boston, New York, and Chicago.[14] Roadshows are similar to little theaters, in that they are small drama performances, with its main purpose being engaging with the arts and providing a community experience.

The Mutual Improvement Association (MIA) defines roadshows as a "capsule variety show. It travels on a planned circuit and performs several times in the course of a single evening in various halls."[15] The MIA continues to explain that a roadshows has "elements of artistic theatre." Music, dialogue, and dance work together to express a central idea. The play includes scenery, costumes and lighting.[16]

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[9] Harold L. Hansen, *A History and Influence of the Mormon Theatre from 1839-1869* (Brigham Young University, 1967), iii.
[10] Walter B. Rudolph, "Opera and its voices in Utah" (lecture, Logan LDS Tabernacle, Logan, UT, September 28, 2017).
[11] Constance D'Arcy Mackay, *The Little Theatre in the United States* (New York: Holt, 1917), 1-3.
[12] Givens, 266.
[13] Kenneth Mcgowan, *Footlights across America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), 43-44.
[14] Givens, 266.
[15] Ray L. Bergman. *Roadshows are fun! How to Write and Produce Them With Six, Successful Roadshow Scripts* (Salt Lake City: Wheelwright Lithographing Company), 3.
[16] Bergman, 3.

In 1924 the Granite, Utah Stake organized the first roadshow. The Stake performed 52 local acts with more than 250 participants in front of an audience of 2,500 people. Their performances included musical numbers, monologues, "whistling solos" and dance.[17] The idea caught on quickly and the nearby Utah Stake organized its own competition. In 1928, the Mutual Improvement Organization (MIA) the youth organization of the church adopted the roadshow as a church wide program. They hoped the program would serve as "a foundation for the expression of the artistic urges within."[18] As roadshows grew in popularity, and became an organized church activity, resources were created to help members create quality productions. The church published books, movies, and manuals on how to write scripts, music, costumes and build scenery.[19]

The content of roadshows varied drastically, some of them were of a spiritual nature, but a number of them were stories about youth encountering traditional concerns with themes of school life, love and sports. Others discuss the current events of the time such as one entitled, "Behind the Iron Curtain" which speculates about life in the Soviet Union.[20] The scripts for roadshows contain instructions for multiple dances, music for songs, and costumes. They even contain instructions on lighting and scenery. Roadshows were well developed theatrical performances that included extensive planning and preparation. The roadshow experience was sure to vary dramatically based on individual wards and stakes, but the number of published instruction manuals, and the system of competition demonstrate the church's commitment to creating a semi-professional theatrical experience for LDS youth.

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[17] Givens, 266.
[18] "Mutual Work," *Improvement ERA* 27.7 (May 1924).
[19] Mutual Improvement Association, *20 Roadshows* (General Boards of the Mutual Improvement Association, 1957 ). Hereafter Mutual Improvement Association will be abbreviated to MIA; Drama Committee of MIA, "Toward a Better Roadshow," Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1972.VHS.
[20] MIA, *20 Roadshows* (General Boards of the Mutual Improvement Association, 1957 ), 27.

LDS church buildings were well equipped to handle these productions. All larger LDS church buildings, called stake centers, include a stage with lighting and a sound system, creating a space where successful productions could take place. In 1981, the church began using new standardized building designs and built some smaller buildings in an effort to save money and increase efficiency. In the new standard church buildings they removed the stage and decreased the size of the cultural hall. The stake center, the church building where several wards meet, continued to have a stage for productions. An article describing the new church buildings explains that the new, smaller churches will still have a "portable stage...offering significant advantages for theater-in-the-round productions, concerts, and lectures.[21] Continuing to build stages in some buildings, and providing portable stages for buildings that do not have a fixed one, demonstrates the church's commitment to the arts and providing cultural experiences for their members.

While roadshows were a youth activity they required substantial participation by adult ward members who primarily wrote the script, original music, choreographed dances, and built scenery. Youth and adult participation in roadshows made them into a community event. An important element of the roadshow is song. Author, Ray Bergman writes that, "a roadshow without song is like bread without butter -- palatable but not too tasty."[22] Much of the music in roadshows consisted of original music and relied upon the musical talents of ward members.[23] The time and detail dedicated to these events is demonstrated in the detailed description of the scenery for one of the plays, it depicts,

> "One large mountain top, painted blue, with small mushroom-type houses painted in shades of blue on the sunny side is set in rear of stage to give stage

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[21] "A New Generation of Meetinghouses" *Ensign,* November 1981. https://www.lds.org/ensign/1981/11/news-of-the-church/a-new-generation-of-meetinghouses?lang=eng

[22] Bergman, 21.

[23] Bergman, 22.

> setting depth. One six-foot mountain top painted in shades of blue is set off center from large mountain. Five mushroom houses in various sizes and shapes are set in from wings, two on left, three on right. Roofs of individual houses were made from paper mache to give a dimensional effect. Houses had windows for lights to show through in the opening scene, flashlights were used for this purpose."[24]

This description of the detailed scenery demonstrates the time, and effort dedicated to the productions. Roadshows were a fun activity and an opportunity for the ward to come together as a community, but there was a competitive nature to them. Wards were judged on their performances and winners would advance through a churchwide competition that included cash prizes.[25]

Several Mormon leaders argue that roadshows are a unique form of art. The MIA's superintendent writes that the roadshow, "has created for itself a unique place in American art. It is perhaps the only one of its kind in the world, and deserves recognition in the development of drama in America."[26] Terryl Givens provides analysis of the quote and argues that what the MIA superintendent meant was that the church, "gave huge impetus to amateur drama on a large scale" and furthered what he called, 'the little theater movement of the church.'[27] In the 1984 *Ensign,* Pat Davis the cultural arts specialist for the General Activities Committee echoes Givens assertion and writes "Roadshows are a unique LDS art form, and an exciting showcase for talents. Every would-be composer, choreographer, director, singer, playwright, and dancer has the opportunity to hone skills and try them before the public."[28] These positive characterizations of the LDS art form are not shared by one Mormon scholar who asked, "must Mormon theater and drama eternally be apotheosized and cyrogenically dwarfed at the glorified roadshow level?

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[24] MIA, 161.
[25] Givens, 267.
[26] Givens, 266.
[27] Givens, 266.
[28] Kathleen Lubeck, "Get That Show on the Road" *Ensign*, August 1984. https://www.lds.org/ensign/1984/08/get-that-show-on-the-road-how-to-stage-a-roadshow?lang=eng.

Must a whole generation perish in theatrical unenlightenment."[29] A 1972 LDS youth magazine article responds to criticism about the quality of LDS theatrical productions. Keith Engar argues that one will find a varying quality in church theater from the, "highly professional to downright embarrassing." He goes on to explain that is true of all theater, not just LDS theater. He implores the youth to do better and, "take their share of responsibility."[30]

Roadshows fulfilled a variety of purposes for the church. They provided Mormon youth with wholesome entertainment, were seen as a missionary opportunity, gave youth an opportunity to develop artistic talents and provided a chance to reinforce gospel teachings. A 1983 El Cajon roadshow scrapbook resides at the Church History Library and contains scripts, practice schedules and photos of their roadshow. One of the documents in the scrapbook quotes a 1982 *Church News* article promoting roadshows as an, "alternative entertainment source in a world of rock concerts and R rated movies."[31] This sentiment is shared in a 1983 letter to a bishop from LDS ward member Joanna Reinhardt. In the letter Reinhardt acknowledges the challenges and the time demands of roadshows, but pleads with her bishop to continue and even increase church programs to combat what she defines as less wholesome activities. In her letter she quotes the following story from General Committee member Pat Davis. She writes,

> "recently a flier for a punk rock dance was placed on my doorstep. On the flier was a skeletal figure and across the bottom was written, DO YOURSELF A FAVOR AND KILL YOURSELF. I realized that this dance was reasonably priced - $1.50 - and that many young people who could be attending wholesome, fun activities would be attending that instead. Youth today are bombarded with high powered entertainment that spares no expense to corrupt their values. It is more important now than at any other time that we don't close the doors to our

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[29] Stanley B. Kimball, "Prometheus Hobbled: The Intellectual in Mormondom," *Dialogue,* 18 no. 1 (Spring 1985): 112-13.

[30] Keith Engar, "What Has Been and What is the Role of Theater in the Church?" *New ERA*, September 1972. https://www.lds.org/new-era/1972/09?lang=eng.

[31] El Cajon California Stake, "Roadshow '83 Guidelines," Roadshow Scrapbook 1983. Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as Church History Library).

> cultural halls, when destructive outside elements are so willingly opening theirs."[32]

The idea that the church needed to provide wholesome activities for youth as an alternative to worldly activities is a popular and powerful sentiment that continues to be used today.

Roadshows were also promoted as a missionary opportunity and a way to develop artistic talent. In a 1984 *Ensign* article Pat Davis states roadshows "are an ideal way to involve everyone—nonmembers and inactive members—in a fun activity, as well as develop a spirit of unity in a ward."[33] The LDS church places an emphasis on missionary work, so providing an activity that might appeal to all community members would certainly be important. In the El Cajon 2nd Ward and the Jamul Ward in July of 1983 roadshow scrapbook demonstrates their commitment to youth participation through their evaluation structure of performances. Each ward was awarded points based on the percentage of youth that participated in their wards. The youth did not have to participate on stage, but could help with scenery, lighting, and make-up. The "active involvement of the youth" and missionary opportunities were even listed as two of the three stake goals for the roadshow.[34] Roadshow productions required an immense amount of time and participation from both adults and youth. Participants could expect over four hours of rehearsals a week with practices every Tuesday from 6:30-8:45 and and every Saturday morning for two hours. If you had a lead role in the play you also had to rehearse every Thursday from 6:30-8:45.[35]

The focus on song and dance provided opportunities for youth to develop their talents and perform. Roadshows were promoted as a "training ground for future drama specialists" and a

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[32] Joanna Reinhardt, "Letter to a Bishop," June 29, 1983. Roadshow Scrapbook 1983. Church History Library.
[33] Kathleen Lubeck, "Get That Show on the Road" *Ensign*, August 1984. https://www.lds.org/ensign/1984/08/get-that-show-on-the-road-how-to-stage-a-roadshow?lang=eng.
[34] El Cajon California Stake, "Roadshow '83 Guidelines, quoted Church News 8/28/1982," Roadshow Scrapbook 1983. Church History Library.
[35] El Cajon 2nd Ward, "Roadshow '83 Practice Schedule," Roadshow Scrapbook 1983. Church History Library.

way to develop artistic talent.[36] The type of music performed in roadshows varied by stake and ward. The El Cajon 2nd Ward and the Jamul Ward used the tunes from popular songs such as "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" and "A Spoonful of Sugar" and altered the words to fit their theme of self-reliance.[37]

The 1950s and 1960s were the glory days of roadshows. The church had a well established competition system and they provided published resources for leaders. As the years went on, support for roadshows waned and they were discontinued churchwide in 1999.[38] Most college age Mormons have likely never participated in a roadshow, however there are still some stakes and wards who continue to organize them. There are a number of Mormon roadshow blogs, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels which indicate there is still some interest in the art form. Journalist Peggy Stack Fletcher memorializes roadshows in a piece entitled, "Mormon Roadshows Sent Packing" she writes,

> "Many Mormons who have grown up in the LDS church have performed in a roadshow at least once in their lives. People who later grew up to be bankers, lawyers and professors, willingly--even happily--participated in that uniquely Mormon summertime ritual: the roadshow. However, the past decade, roadshows have fallen prey to dwindling ward budgets, a lagging interest in the theatrical experience and the predominance of passive entertainment such as TV, movies, and the Internet."[39]

**Conclusion**

Roadshows are an example of the LDS church's commitment to the arts and are important to Utah, LDS, and Intermountain West history. They offer ways to research the history of childhood and theater history, and increase understanding of LDS culture. They are distinct in providing thousands of youth and adults opportunities to participate in drama in a variety of

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[36] El Cajon California Stake, "Roadshow '83 Guidelines, quoted Church News 8/28/1982," Roadshow Scrapbook 1983. Church History Library.
[37] El Cajon 2nd Ward, "Roadshow '83 Songs," Roadshow Scrapbook 1983. Church History Library.
[38] Givens, 267.
[39] Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Mormon Roadshows Sent Packing," *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 31, 1999.

capacities; as directors, writers, musicians, dancers, and performers. Even though the LDS church no longer participates in roadshows they offer an important opportunity for research into LDS artistic performances.

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