

Hill Cumorah 2000: An American Mystery Cycle¹

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The following is a report on an intriguing example of contemporary “medieval” drama. By this is not meant the reconstructions or reinterpretations of actual medieval dramatic texts as practiced by universities such as Bristol, Leeds, Lancaster or Toronto, or present-day municipalities such as York and Chester, or major theater companies in such special projects as Tony Harrison’s *The Mysteries* (1979-84 at the National Theatre, London. This paper focuses, rather, on a contemporary tradition of religious drama which bears many striking similarities (as well, of course, as major differences) to the medieval dramatic enterprise, and one, moreover, that has a claim to being a completely indigenous North American growth. This is *The Hill Cumorah Pageant*, now in its sixty-fourth year, an outdoor evening spectacle staged for a short period each summer by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Days Saints (better known as the Mormons), near Palmyra, New York, some twenty miles to the east of the city of Rochester.

Superficially, *The Hill Cumorah Pageant* resembles the commercial ventures lumped under the collective title “Outdoor Drama,” exemplified by such works as Paul Green’s pioneering *The Lost Colony* (1937 staged at Roanoke, NC or his *Trumpet in the Land* (1972 commemorating the Moravian missionaries of eastern Ohio. Some more recent examples of the genre, still in production, include Alan Eckart’s *Tecumseh!* (1974 in Chillicothe, OH and W. L. Mundell’s *Blue Jacket* (1982 in Xenia, OH, both chronicling the Border Wars of the period 1790-1813 and the “tragedy” of Native American resistance.² These “symphonic dramas” (Green’s phrase) are populist American attempts at Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* and feature large outdoor amphitheatres with natural backdrops (often including bodies of water in the playing area), recorded movie score-style music, large-scale dance numbers, and a choreography of other special effects, particularly battle scenes involving live fire, the explosion of blackpowder weapons, galloping horses, and dozens of combatants. These spectacles invariably enshrine popular patriotic values as they portray local history *cum* folklore often in the area or even at the specific site of the events portrayed.

The Hill Cumorah Pageant shares all of these characteristics, but unlike other Outdoor Dramas, it is, at every stage of its development and presentation, an act of devotion and expression of Faith. It is, moreover, a decidedly non-commercial venture, financed by the famously well-off LDS Church with its efficient system of tithes and “fast-pennies.” The Pageant is absolutely free to the general public (including supervised parking), and there is no selling of “product” on site.³ The Pageant remains at core an *offering* in the fullest religious sense of the term. It is a serious

dramatic distillation of the *Book of Mormon* in much the same way that English cycle drama is a dramatic precis of the Old and New Testaments. The analogy is quite precise, for the *Book of Mormon* is taken as “Another Testament of Jesus Christ” by the LDS Church in a fairly fundamentalist fashion.

To outline briefly the Mormon *mythos*:⁴ this “other testament” is the purported translation made by Joseph Smith in 1827 of certain golden plates revealed and entrusted to him by an angelic personage, Maroni. Maroni was, in his mortal life, the son of Mormon, a prophet who had made an abridgement of the records of his people, a righteous remnant of Israelites who had voyaged to North America some 600 years before Christ. Internal dissensions within this immigrant group led eventually to the formation of two separate nations on the new continent, the *Nephites*, who followed in the ways of Old Testament righteousness, and the *Lamanites*, who reverted to a militant paganism and became their mortal enemies. But the Nephites, like their Hebrew forefathers before them, often lapsed as well and so required the astringent services of several notable prophets through the ages. These holy men also gave particularly precise and detailed accounts of the coming Messiah. The culmination of Nephite history was the post-Resurrection appearance of Christ Himself in the Americas wherein the fullness of His salvific message was revealed. Despite this Good News, the Nephites strayed yet again and finally succumbed to the belligerent Lamanites in an Armageddon somewhere in the vicinity of the Hill Cumorah, about four hundred years after Christ’s coming. Mormon’s golden tablets, secreted by Maroni in the hillside, were all that was left of this ancient Judeo-Christian civilization in what is now upstate New York.

The Hill Cumorah Pageant chronicles this often convoluted history in ten compact episodes, culminating in the scene of delivering the tablets to Joseph Smith on the very slope of the hill where the event purportedly transpired. *Representation* of sacred history thus is enacted on actual holy ground, much as a medieval saint’s play might be enacted before the church bearing his or her mortal remains. One close European analogy is the *Mistère du siège d’Orléans* (c. 1425), commissioned by and performed in Orléans itself, the site of Jeanne d’Arc’s miraculous victory.

As the Mormons’ own promotional literature asserts, the pageant is “presented in the tradition of the great religious pageants begun in the Middle Ages, but with all the advantages of today’s high technology.”⁵ The event is incredibly well-packaged into a fast-paced hour-and-a-half, along distinctly American entertainment lines. There are lots of “visuals” — vibrant color and a variety of textures in the costumes, plenty of action on a multi-level set, lots of quick cuts of a cinematic nature (facilitated by multiple actors impersonating the major characters), with

a lush orchestral and choral score running throughout. This is in contradistinction to the leisurely and protracted, dawn-to-dusk or multi-day events typical of medieval drama with their somewhat more “separated out” effects of music, spectacle, preaching, etc..

The Hill Cumorah Pageant is staged from dusk (about 9 p.m. to darkness and relies heavily on an ultra-sophisticated sound-and-light system. All the voice-over narration, dialogue, and music is pre-recorded and superbly amplified. Actors gesture broadly to recorded dialogue, a device that is actually quite effective, given the distance over which one views the event.

The production presents a veritable arsenal of “special effects” — live fire, including leaping jets of flame, smoke and fog machines, coursing baptismal waters, and so on. The prophet Lehi’s ship is constructed directly on stage and lightning destroys its mast in a storm. Several times, the flat-topped temple mounds of the set are filled with hundreds of battling Lamanites and Nephites. A huge belching volcano emerges from the stage floor, bringing destruction to the American cities at the very moment of Christ’s crucifixion over the seas in Jerusalem. One of the most intriguing effects, however, is reserved for Messianic vision experiences: a fine curtain of water-spray is activated behind the symbolic scene which, when struck by powerful spotlights, creates a truly shimmering, visionary effect. The culminating impression of the *Pageant* also depends upon pinpoint spotlighting against the black of night — together with the use of a purely mechanical cable-rig which might not have appeared too strange to medieval framers of Ascension plays. Christ, in a brilliant white robe and with his arms spread wide, slowly passes down through the air from the top of Hill Cumorah and calmly steps off onto a pyramid top for His post-Resurrection appearance to the Americas. After a tender scene with the children of the New World, He returns, equally smoothly, back up into the night. The absolutely last moment of the pageant catches Christ again in mid-air, His white robe now complemented by a bright red stole, for a dramatic prefiguration of the Second Coming.

The Hill Cumorah Pageant relies as heavily on this cutting-edge stage technology as any Broadway production of *Phantom of the Opera*, *Lion King*, or the musical *Titanic*. These special effects, however, are never indulged in for their own sake but remain subservient to the purpose of presenting sacred history and LDS theology. The riveting theatrical effect of the airborne Jesus, for example, is no doubt supported by the Mormon notion of a “rending of the veil,” the possibility of genuinely visionary experience even in these “latter days.” Very much in the manner of the medieval theatric aesthetic, special effects are there to capture or recapture

a lay audience's attention for the subsequent (and invariably quieter) scenes of teaching and instruction.

The genesis and the current organization of the *Pageant* also bear interesting similarities with the medieval religious stage. The present high-tech spectacle began quite modestly in 1917 when western Mormons returned to the Joseph Smith farm near Palmyra to commemorate their "Pioneer Day." The acting out of selected scenes from the *Book of Mormon* joined sermons, athletic events, and a pilgrimage to the Hill Cumorah as part of the festivities. This yearly event grew into the "Cumorah Conference of the Eastern States Mission," and the dramatic interludes grew as well, both in length and in number of venues, including Smith's "Sacred Grove" and the Hill Cumorah itself, though in the early 1930s the casts were only about 30 strong with audiences of only about 200. In 1936, however, the desire was expressed to create "America's Oberammergau," and from 1937 onward the steep slope of the Hill Cumorah became the site of a full-scale pageant. The present configuration, entitled *The Hill Cumorah Pageant: America's Witness to Christ*, dates from 1988 and includes a script by the well-known science fiction and fantasy writer, Orson Scott Card, and a recorded score by Crawford Gates featuring, as might be expected, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. For many years the overall artistic director was Gerry Argetsinger of nearby Rochester Institute of Technology, whose wife Gail was largely responsible for the design of the stunning Hebreo-Mayan costumes.⁶ Other committed Mormons with major Hollywood and Broadway credits (fight choreographers, etc. have contributed to the high technical sophistication of the production over the past dozen years. And yet despite its technical gloss, the event remains true to its roots in religious retreat. The steady, organic development of the *Pageant* out of the Cumorah Conference — its fusion of recreation, instruction, and community building — again closely parallels the development of vernacular religious drama out of medieval confraternities or trade guilds.⁷

Nowhere is the parallel with medieval drama more compelling to the jaded theatre-goer than in *The Hill Cumorah Pageant's* performers and audiences. As with almost all aspects of production, the performers of the *Pageant* are registered members of the LDS Church working on a voluntary basis. Potential participants go through an application process. Applications for the 2001 production, indeed, were already being picked up in the *Pageant* Office during the 2000 run. Some 650 performers and 100 stage crew are thereby selected. The majority are youth from Utah and other western States, but with a significant number of local Mormons as well. It is also common for entire families from distant parts of the country to enlist in the *Pageant*. One experiences very much a "summer camp" atmosphere, these nearly thousand-strong performing pilgrims

being accommodated in a variety of ways — put up by family and friends, camping in the campground or trailer park, and so on. Every participant contracts for a week of rehearsal and a week-and-a-half of performances. As might be expected, youthful performers are fiercely loyal to their particular ensemble within the cast as a whole, be it Lamanite warrior or female Harvest Dancer. The role of the tyrannical and sybaritic King Noah, who burns the prophet Abinadi in Episode 5, is usually given to a portly individual who plays it with the same relish one would imagine Herods and Pilates brought to their roles in the English Cycles. And obviously great care is taken with the casting of the Christ(s) and such important prophetic figures as Lehi, Nephi and Maroni.

The rehearsal process involves fairly rigorous drilling in massed-blocking, complicated choreography, and stage-combat. Only those few volunteers with “lines,” that is, characters who have to mime to the recorded dialogue, ever see anything like a script. The rest of the population learns by rote from the professional staggers. My impression from informal interviews conducted during two days at Cumorah is that there are a substantial number, perhaps even a majority, of newcomers to the *Pageant* every year. It is look upon as a distinct honor to be chosen and is obviously a major commitment of one’s time and resources, but it is also, equally obviously, a great deal of fun, especially for the youth. If dependence on teenage enthusiasm, stamina, and athleticism is essential to the process, this would in part explain the high degree of “turnover.” It was, in fact, hard to find “veterans,” let alone whole dynasties of players, as one readily finds in a place like Oberammergau, for example. This “mobility” of the performers is another of the uniquely American traits which distinguish *The Hill Cumorah Pageant* from those produced by sedentary urban communities of the Middle Ages. *Hill Cumorah* is medieval drama as summer vacation.

This is not to denigrate the dedication, indeed the devotion, which these players bring to the pageant. On a performance day, they can be found all over the Cumorah grounds, ready to greet fellow Mormons or gently proselytise outsiders like the author. These might be young married couples, the father of one of those families “vacationing” at the *Pageant*, youthful Elders, or other officers of the Church. Their sincerity and enthusiasm, as well as their absolute commitment to the literal truth of the *Book of Mormon*, is quite remarkable. The writer particularly remembers one young woman, who would be participating in the *Pageant* later that evening, sitting halfway up the Hill under a tree and pouring over the “Book of Alma” for guidance and inspiration.⁸ Even the early afternoon technical run-throughs would begin with a lengthy invocation by one of the Mormon Elders. The theatrical disciplines of costuming, reviewing, blocking, and making one’s “call” are everywhere informed by a religious

sense of purpose. Some two hours before “show time,” group prayer and hymn-singing commence. At about the hour-mark before curtain, most of the costumed performers, as well as many of the running crew, are out in the enormous seating-area, greeting the audience, friends, family, and strangers alike, distributing referral cards or scene summaries, and generally showing off their finery. This democratic mingling with the audience ends with a trumpet fanfare from the hillside stage, and with the first strains of the overture, the entire acting body, over six hundred strong, surges down the lanes of the audience and swarms over the multiple temple-platforms of the set, seeming to cover every available square foot. At the final measure of the overture, the entire cast turns abruptly to face the audience in a kind of reverse curtain call, a moment no doubt arranged to honor to these inspired players at the start of *their* Pageant.

Of the nature and composition of the audience, one is somewhat less certain. Free seating is provided for some 6,000 spectators (all of these seats taken by performance time, with the grassy areas beyond available for hundreds more picnickers and lawn-chair viewers. Clearly, it is hard to survey such an audience. Yet, despite the general atmosphere of a large outdoor summer fete, complete with fast food and romping children, one nevertheless experiences a crowd which is quite familiar with what is going on and very relaxed in its attitude. Obviously, there were hundreds of fellow Mormons — actors in previous *Pageants* and family members of current performers (unlike the Mennonites or Amish, Mormons cannot be discerned simply by their dress). But a fair number of non-Mormon locals who have grown up with the event, “fellow travellers” so to speak, were also present. One got the distinct impression, however, that curious outsiders like the author were definitely in the minority. This was an audience that, while not exactly a *congregation*, was nevertheless a very specially constituted *community*, a community at one with the presenters of the event, anxious to be thrilled and instructed, inspired and entertained — a community, in fact, which distinctly recalls, if not precisely replicates, those which gave rise to the great religious dramas of the millennium just past.

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NOTES

1. This report is based on a two-day visit to *The Hill Cumorah Pageant* in July of 2000. Further interviews and behind-the-scenes investigations are planned for the 2001 production, at which point a more structured survey of the audience will be attempted.
2. *The Hill Cumorah Pageant* is indeed listed in the “Outdoor Drama in America” checklist of the Institute of Outdoor Drama in Chapel Hill, NC.
3. Advertising to the outside world is rather low-key. The writer encountered only one billboard for the 2000 production, and that just outside Palmyra. Brochures for the

event can often be found at tourist locales in the Finger Lakes region, but generally speaking, the Pageant remains a fairly well-kept secret. It is, moreover, not exploited commercially at the performance site. Sweat shirts, t-shirts, and postcards are on sale in the Pageant Office at Cumorah, but only for participants. There is a bit of selling of Pageant souvenirs out on the sidewalks of the Palmyra's Main Street during the performance week, but all in all, the event is miraculously free of commercialism. The same cannot be said of an international box-office success like the Oberammergau Passion Play, to name one obvious parallel.

4. The Mormon sense of history, world view, and conception of the afterlife and the Deity are significantly different from other sects of American Christianity. The revelations given to the prophet Joseph Smith were all intended to restore the original Church of Jesus Christ which was seen as absent from the Earth at that time. The Mormon project, therefore, was a complete overhaul of Christian theology and historiography and involved not simply the recovery of the *Book of Mormon* but subsequent revelations of Smith as well, gathered in the volumes known as *Doctrine and Covenants* and *The Pearl of Great Price* (often grouped together for Mormon study as "The Triple Combination" . The latter two books include Smith's retranslations and emendations of the Bible itself. Thus the "restoration" of what was ancient and original was perceived by other Christians as total novelty and invention on the part of the church's founders and accounts for a good bit of the hostility encountered by the LDS church in its early decades. Much of this background is processed, for the non-Mormon, by Mormon convert Coke Newell in a recent book, *Latter Days: A Guided Tour through Six Billion Years of Mormonism*, an excellent general introduction to the Mormon mythos and ethos.
5. Promotional brochure for the 1999-2001 performances.
6. Background information from Prof. Gerald Argetsinger's in-house, five-page "History of the Hill Cumorah Pageant" obtained from the Pageant Office.
7. The "look" of these costumes is no doubt influenced by the historical work of Mormon scholars, particularly those affiliated with the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) . A good example of such work is John L. Sorenson's *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, UT: FARMS Research P, 1998) , which is a very nicely produced picture-book of ancient Central American art and architecture. Interestingly, contemporary Mormon scholars readjust Joseph Smith's sense of *Book of Mormon* geography from his own Finger Lakes region to Mesoamerica. Smith seems to have shared the early Republic's fascination with the "Mound Builders" (Jefferson et al.), and this "vanished civilization" no doubt influenced, at some level, the conception of his Nephites and Lamanites. But Mesoamerica is obviously a better place to search today for evidence of kingdoms, cities and suitably grand Armageddons.
8. One noticed a lot of silent reading of the *Book of Mormon* (mostly by men) at the Mormon historical sites in the area. Palmyra indeed affords an interesting American parallel to a medieval pilgrimage center such as Rome, Santiago, or Tours. Of course, one does not *process* from one holy site to another in the district, rather one takes one's car, but there are plenty of such "stations" to visit — particularly the Joseph Smith farm with its replica log-cabin, later frame-house, and the quietly inspiring "Sacred Grove," a stand of ancient trees where Smith received his initial vision; but also the farm of early disciple Martin Harris, the grave of Smith's older brother Alvin back in Palmyra, and the Grandin Printing House on Main Street where the *Book of Mormon* was first published. One culminates one's day of religious tourism, then, with the sacred representation at the spiritually-charged Hill Cumorah itself.

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