

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Carla Long 00:33

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long. And today, I don't even know what I'm getting into. But I'm super excited about getting into it. I'm here with Jake Johnson. He is, actually, I know his brother, but I don't know him in person, and now after learning about who he is, and what he does, I cannot wait to meet him in person. So, Jake, thank you so much for being on the podcast. And I'm actually gonna let you introduce yourself and talk about what we are talking about today.

Jake Johnson 01:03

Totally, yeah. It's great to be here with you, Carla. So, I am a professor of musicology. It's a thing at Oklahoma City University, and I, the kind of work I do as a musician and as a music scholar, or music historian, has a lot to do with religion and American musical theater. And so, I've written a couple of books on that, one on Mormonism in particular. And I think, you know, happy to chat about both of those things, and some of the topics that came up, and, kind of, why that's a part of the story. So, yeah, that's a bit of who I am. I think, I have a background in the Community of Christ, which maybe we could talk about, I don't know if you want to talk about that, that, kind of, where I come from. Okay. Yeah, so, I grew up in the RLDS church and I was very involved in playing piano for church services and those kinds of things. And I guess if I was looking backwards on why I decided to write books on musicals and religion, it was because there's often, like, musical theater excerpts being sung in church services, whether people are aware of it or not, it's like "Climb Every Mountain". And it's something that's inspirational, that's something that means overcoming great obstacles, and people associate religious value with that. So anyway, I grew up playing those kinds of things in Community of Christ and other church services. And then, when I was later in my teens and going into college, I converted to Mormonism and got married to a Mormon woman and we started our lives together. And since then, many years later, we have, kind of, gravitated in and out of Mormonism as a whole. So, we, kind of, have occupied all the grounds, it seems like you might be able to occupy within Mormonism, in the belief in this, kind of, big tent version of things. And so, for me, it's really great to come back and reflect on the things I treasure most about the Community of Christ and to think about how people, on all strata and spectrum of Mormonism might relate to, I don't know, some of the ideas I have about musicals, of all things.

Carla Long 03:22

So, you really do have the full spectrum? Well, not the full spectrum. I mean, there's what, like a couple 100 churches supposedly founded by Joseph Smith, Jr.? So, you might have a few more to go, but you've hit the two big ones, the two biggest ones. So, you do have more of an understanding, I think, of the Restoration than a lot of people do, which is really cool. So, Jake, I'm not sure you mentioned your

two books' names. If you want to mention those, I think that people would be really interested in hearing what those are.

Jake Johnson 03:50

Yes, so my first book was from 2019, and it's called *Mormons, Musical Theater and Belonging in America*. And then in September of 2021, my second book will come out and it's called *Lying in the Middle: Musical Theater and Belief at the Heart of America*. And both of those are published through the University of Illinois Press.

Carla Long 04:12

Oh, that's very cool. And actually, very smart of you to publish books before, right before and during a pandemic. What else can people do but stay at home and read? Very, very clever of you?

Jake Johnson 04:22

Yeah, or writing books? That's what we do.

Carla Long 04:25

That's what we do. So, Jake, I'm just going to jump into it because I am very curious about your answers here. So, why do you think musicals are so important in religious communities? You mentioned, you know, like, singing musicals in church, like "Climb Every Mountain", but why else are they important?

Jake Johnson 04:44

Yeah, so that's a, I came to that question after just, kind of, being around Mormon people and Community of Christ people, but maybe I'll speak specifically to Mormons first. I just found that there was this great appreciation for the wholesome nature of what golden age musical theater was, where the guy gets the girl and the villain gets his comeuppance, and everything works out in the end. And that, kind of, tidy, energetic push towards reconciliation is very, smacks of, very much of, like, American religion as well where things are going to be okay in the end, we'll all be better if we work together, and if we celebrate the people who are exemplary moral figures around us. So, I came to that awareness just after watching people interact with musicals almost in a, as a religious, in a religious way. And this is from growing up in the middle of the country. In America anyway, there's so much traffic with musical theater. Even though we usually think of musicals as being something that happens in New York. I'm really committed to the idea that musical theater is an everywhere genre. It happens lots of places and unsuspecting places like rural parts of the country and in religious services. So, I started drawing a map of religion and musical theater, and they connected to each other so many times again, and again. So, that's, kind of, the broad interest in how musicals work. And I can talk a bit more, a bit later maybe, about how belief gets structured in and through musical theater and why that's important for religious communities. But I can say just really briefly, the Mormon connection is peculiar and specific and it has a lot to do with the origins of the Restoration in 1830, or the founding of the church, I should say, in 1830, and also, in upstate New York, in the same year, there was this creation of the jumping Jim Crow minstrel character that was developing alongside Mormonism. These were not related to each other in any obvious ways, but you do see within that same cities, the same region of the country, in the same year, this architecture being put together that says musical theater, this, kind of, American icon, this

genre, and then there's American homegrown religion are developing side by side, and I was captivated by the poetry of that and the more I looked into it, this, kind of, not completely unilateral, but oddly limping relationship between Mormonism and musical theater from the 19th century all the way until 2011, when *Book of Mormon*, the musical, comes on Broadway. You have this really strange story, and I started following it and was really happy to discover the ins and outs of American virtue and moral positions being reflected back when you start looking at these two American icons intersecting in strange ways. So, that was basically the, kind of, impulse behind the first book.

Carla Long 08:01

You know, it's really interesting that you brought up *The Book of Mormon* musical, because I wanted to see it, of course, and I really, I had a chance, like, to listen to the music before, and I didn't even want to do that. I wanted it to be all brand new the second I saw it on the theater. And I saw it here in Salt Lake City, and it was here for a couple weeks or so, and it was hard to get tickets. It was super-duper-duper packed every single time. And I was a little bit shocked by that. And then I realized that maybe *The Book of Mormon* musical really resonates with the post-Mormon community, and there's a lot of post-Mormons in Salt Lake City. Do you have anything to say about that? Do, can you talk about maybe why that is true or?

Jake Johnson 08:41

Sure, yeah. So, you know, *The Book of Mormon*, in some ways, does Mormon history better than the Mormon Church has been telling its own history. But what I mean by that is that the creators of the musical are not Mormon, but they grew up in the American west, and by their accounts grew up around a lot of Mormons, had a lot of Mormon friends, and so, Mormonism was vaguely familiar to them. And the way that the history of the Restoration is presented in its messy form, in the musical, is not the kind of history that most Restoration churches have been leading with as they tell their own version of the story. Things are obviously going to be more tidy and lean towards a cleaner version of things by an institution's standpoint. And in Mormonism, history is so vibrantly important to the theology. It, the theology really does emerge out of history itself. And so, when you start pulling at the strings and saying, "Oh, well, there's actually several versions of this first vision story we heard from Joseph Smith in the grove", or "Actually, this happened differently than the, kind of, canonical history," then it's not just an inconvenience, like "Oh, I didn't know that. That that's, it's interesting." It's not that. It's actually a lot more that comes with it when you start pulling those threads. So, just at face value, what the musical is doing is in reflecting back, more or less, how the Restoration started without the filters of the Mormon Church. It's already doing some, kind of, aggravational work. It's already kind of aggravating or upsetting the applecart. But I did see that, you know, maybe from that position, it was attractive to post-Mormons or Mormons who had known that the history was not as tidy as it has been presented, and found themselves ostracized, or not welcome, because they were trying to work through that in their own way. But yeah, I think there's also something important about when *Book of Mormon* comes about, 'cause this is only a few years after Prop Eight in California, which was a very controversial, as a political position, but with that institution of gay marriage, but also the church played a really big part in trying to prevent and trying to, kind of, insert itself into the policy of the state. And it seems to me that in some ways, this *Book of Mormon*, the musical, is presenting a queer version of Mormonism, queer, not necessarily because they're all gay on stage, but just like it's turning Mormonism on its head and making Mormons and non-Mormons alike see America differently through it and see themselves

differently through it. And it seems almost like a one-upping of this kind of cultural, like, you're, kind of, get back at the Prop Eight period within the country and with the church's history in it. So, I don't think there's anything in the musical that's trying to be mean, or I don't think it's being an overly critical version of Mormonism. But it's presenting it in a way that's so satirical and so light hearted, that you can't help but be en-, kind of, entrapped within the story. That's been part of its success, I think, leading up until the pandemic.

Carla Long 12:06

Well, I know that when I was watching it, I gasped several times because I was shocked. I was really shocked. The audience around me was cracking up and laughing. But I was like, oh, my goodness, how can they get away with saying that? I was, and I was just shocked by it.

Jake Johnson 12:25

Yeah, it's a wild musical. And it walked, it knew where the line was, and it tiptoed alongside it. And I think since then, you know, that there's been a lot of concern about revamping *Book of Mormon* to be, it, there's a lot of other reasons why *Book of Mormon* is a problematic musical and has a lot to do with the way Africans are depicted, and Africa is depicted not as much about how Mormons are depicted. Because here's, I mean here's the thing, Mormonism was more or less depicted accurately in the musical, as goofy as it may have been. It's, that's how it is. What's not presented accurately is this, kind of, version of Africa that seems to be drawn from, like, *Lion King*, or, kind of, grossly painting this continent in one single color, and that makes it look cartoonish. And I think it's that disjunction between Africa, either you take Mormonism seriously in a musical, therefore, you see the whole thing as being earnest, or you see it all as being cartoonish. And it's neither of those. It's actually presented in a weird combination. So, I think when *Book of Mormon* returns to Broadway, I think it will be a revamped and revised version that maybe rethinks some of the lang-, some of the way it talks about and depicts Africa.

Carla Long 13:37

Oh, that's good, because part of my gasping was about how the Ugandans were depicted. And I've been to Africa and, a long time ago, and I, I've seen a whole, lots of different types of Africans in Africa. There's not just one for sure. So, that makes me feel a little bit better about that. So, you talked about how *The Book of Mormon* musical, kind of, did something in Mormonism and post-Mormonism. Let's take a step back from that and maybe talk about what musicals actually do in the world. Like how do musicals change the world or change us? And then right after that, I'm going to ask you to narrow that down to Mormonism. But what do musicals do for us in the world?

Jake Johnson 14:23

So, the way I see musicals is that they are helping us practice fantasy. They are always telling lies about the world. And I want to talk about how I use that word "lie," a little bit. Musicals are always very obviously contrived. No one bursts into song and dance and has the same memorized choreography in the real world. So, it can't even pretend to be real. There can be real effects from the fantasy and that's something that's important, but on its face, it can never be confused with being real or being the truth. So, I have begun, especially in this, kind of, post-age moment or post-truth moment we've been living through. It's a long, extended moment. I've been thinking a lot about the effects of truth, and maybe as

many people have had experience with it through social media or elsewhere, you can only defend your position with facts that may not be convenient for the other people and so then they can contrive their own facts. And so, then you're just kind of talking past each other. So, truth, it seemed to me, was a losing proposition. What I suspect we need more of a, kind of like, a soapbox in America is this kind of practice in deception. And musicals offer that and that was one reason why I was, or one conclusion I came to while investigating this, what I would call the lived experience of musical theater. That is the way people practice and relate to musical theater in pockets of the country that have no obvious connection to musical theater. They're not on Broadway, or they're not in a major city. And so, part of that has to do with musicals giving space and a platform to tell lies about the world. What I mean by lies is not maybe the impulse behind, when we hear someone is lying, it's a, it's definitely not a thing you're supposed to be doing. But lies can be pro-social. We can tell lies in a way that helps the world. For instance, a doctor giving a placebo, or somebody flattering a friend with what they want to hear instead of maybe what the truth would be. There are times when telling a lie can be more righteous than telling the truth. And so, I wanted to complicate this word "lie" and being not so painted with that one negative color. And what it led me to was to think of lies as being some stories that are out of place, stories about the not yet. They are telling about a world that doesn't exist yet, right? We can, kind of, fall to that point. And it occurred to me that, that, especially in this kind of post-truth climate, if all we do is look around us and affirm the world that exists in its current form, then we're being journalists. We're not really challenging the norm, we're just reporting back what we see. And it doesn't take too long to report back that things are really messy, and we're in a lot of trouble. My way out of that I sus-, I suspect is that we should be more engaged in telling lies about the world. We should be, begin practicing the kinds of storytelling that actually creates a not yet world, that we can imagine a world where we take climate change seriously. We can imagine a world where politicians are held to this, kind of, higher standard, or whatever your politics are, whatever your fantasy world would be. So, I wanted to find out how musicals were doing this, because I suspected, and maybe if you're familiar with musicals at all you know this, kind of, this tidy reconciliation, this fantasy worlds they're always living in, that that was actually carving out a space for people to practice living in spaces that don't yet exist, or that can't exist in its current form. And so, that's the space that I think musicals occupy, and people love 'em or hate 'em because of that reason. But I think the kinds of deception that musicals invite us to, we need more of, and we need more of that now.

Carla Long 18:30

So, let me make sure I understand, and maybe I might need more of an explanation. So, what you're saying is that we can imagine a better world for ourself, like a musical does, and perhaps live into that, like, be kinder to each other, be more loving towards each other? Is that, kind of, what you're saying? Or am I not getting it?

Jake Johnson 18:52

No, it's totally at it. You can't create a better world if all you do is look around and affirm the badness of the current one. Lying is a creative act, let's put it that way, observing the world is not. And so, if you really want to build another world, it starts with telling lies about, practicing telling lies about the current one. So, that's how I, it's a, that's how I started structuring this investigation into musicals, was that lies don't have to always be bad, and that they're actually a creative adventure, and that there aren't a lot of spaces in the current conversation where creativity and imagination are welcome. And so, I wanted to

find a way of opening up past critique of the world into spaces where you can actually build and, through imagining, because I guess, you know, to put a fine point on it, you can't build a new world if you can't first imagine what the world might look like, and musicals do that for us.

Carla Long 19:52

That is so interesting, Jake. Like, I mean, I have to do a few mental gymnastics to get around it, but I think I'm getting there. That's really, what an interesting way, what an interesting book. And that's more of your second book, right? The second book is about that.

Jake Johnson 20:05

Yeah. The second, *Lying in the Middle*. Yeah. Which is, yeah, which is, kind of, takes that a little bit more earnestly. I started looking at that idea in the *Mormons* book. And it develops, of course, mostly in this second one.

Carla Long 20:17

Very cool. So, I said that we look at it from a global perspective. So now let's, kind of, narrow it down since you're, since you know a lot about Community of Christ and Mormonism. Can we narrow that idea that you just said, down into Mormonism and talk about, you know, like, Mormonism has a huge musical past, you know, with, they have tons of movies. They have tons of pageants. I've only seen a few of them, so I don't know all about all of them, but I know that it's a really big deal in the Mormon church to have musicals. So, can we, kind of, narrow it down here, that focus down and talk a little bit what we're just talking about with Mormonism?

Jake Johnson 20:55

Yes. So, I'll start with the voice. So, musicals are, the way I put it is, the musicals exchange value through the voice. So, a character sings in order to express themselves in a musical and if there's a character on stage who doesn't sing, they don't matter. And so, there's all sorts of ways by, belonging is measured by the voice in this genre, musical theater. And, in a lot of ways, Mormonism is as strictly devoted to the voice as musical theater is, and I'll explain that a little bit here. So, the origins of the document, the *Book of Mormon*, or not, you know, not the musical *Book of Mormon*, but the actual thing, the book we look at, the origins of that are sonic, so it exists as these plates, but those plates disappear from us, so we don't have any kind of evidence of that in its written form. And we know now that how it becomes translated by Joseph Smith from those plates to something we can read on paper, is he looks into a hat and he speaks these words out loud. So, this kind of, this vision is, it appears to him in word form, and then he speaks it and then somebody writes that down. And so, that already speaks to this, kind of, sonic version of this book, that's actually kind of a multimodal book, *The Book of Mormon*. And added to, by the fact that the *Book of Mormon* refers to itself a lot as a voice, "A voice whispering from the dust," is kind of bringing back some kind of sonic urgency from the past. That's how the *Book of Mormon* presents itself. So, there are a couple of examples of how that then develops in the very beginnings of the Restoration, one of them from the *Book of Mormon* itself, and that's this exchange between Nephi and Laman, or no, not Laman, I'm sorry, but Nephi and Laban, who's the bad guy in this story and he has to, before the family can even leave Jerusalem, they have to get these really important plates, these historical documents from him, but he doesn't want to give them up. And then Nephi comes back and is directed by God to go get them, no matter what, finds Laban drunk and

passed out. And then what happens is Nephi kills Laban, takes his clothes, puts them on, and then speaks with the voice of Laban to all of Laban's servants in order to get the plates back to them. And so, you have in that moment is, kind of, God ordaining this, what I call vicarious voice, where you speak on behalf of somebody else. You pretend to be somebody you're not, and that happens through the voice. And if you want to be really particular about it, it looks, he looks like he's donning a costume, and then presenting himself as an actor. So, Nephi does this, we know from other biblical stories, like, Jacob gets his birthright from doing, basically, doing the same thing, duping somebody by speaking like them, pretending at dressing up like them. This happens pretty frequently throughout. And so, you started getting instances where God actually favors this, kind of, pretend, this deception, this way into truth or getting as a means to an end deception is often used quite frequently. And then the second example I think about is actually the crux between Mormonism and, or between the LDS Church and the Community of Christ, which is this crisis of who's going to then pick up after Joseph Smith is murdered. And in Nauvoo, there is, especially it's a legend in Mormonism, and I'm curious if Community of Christ knows as much about this because I wasn't aware of as much until I became Mormon, but Brigham Young arises in front of this crowd as they're, kind of, debating who should be the next leader, and he essentially says no one person should be the leader, but all of the keys to the priesthood and all the rites that we need in this dispensation are already given to the 12 apostles and so, there was no need for any one particular person. But, so the story goes, as he was speaking, people started seeing him as Joseph and hearing Joseph's voice come out of his mouth. What we know later is that Brigham Young was a mimic and an actor. He actually, he founded a lot of, he was, it was, kind of like, a producer of shows and plays in the Salt Lake Valley once they arrived, and one of the first buildings they actually completed building was a theater. So, who knows if he really, if, who know, I don't think this actually happened. I mean, my own, I don't think it's ever happened, but it may have been an actorly gesture more than it would have been any kind of divine moment, similar to how Nephi was doing this kind of actorly gesture. So anyway, I, kind of, I'm going on a little bit, but I think that in those two examples, and then another, kind of, biblical examples where pretend plays a role, you start seeing that the center of Mormonism in the center of this kind of Godly exchange is the voice and that the human voice is somehow really important. And in these stories about God interchanging with humans. And so that, again, is kind of the relationship I was drawing to musicals, where musicals were also using this economy of voice in order to measure value in the world. And that if Mormons are trying to practice this godliness to become God-like themselves in these, kind of, future eternities, then part of that practice involves speaking on behalf of other people, pretending to be other people, to speak like them, to modulate your voice to be like them, because God has already shown many, many times, that's what gods do.

Carla Long 26:42

That is so interesting. Um, actually, I did know the story about Brigham Young, but I did not know the story about Brigham Young that you just told until I moved to Utah. So, I doubt that a lot of Community of Christ people would know that story. Or maybe they do. Maybe I just didn't pay attention at all. So, um, so I, musicals in the Mormon Church have been super, super important. Can you talk a little bit about what else those musicals bring, like, *Saturday's Warrior*? I can't name them all. I know that they have, like, the Hill Cumorah Pageant and, which has, I think, recently stopped? I don't know if they do that anymore. Maybe they do? I don't know. And some other pageants around, like, what do those musicals do for the Mormon church? Or for the people who watch them? Why do they continue going

on? And I know there's lots of movies, actually, that are musicals in the Mormon faith, because here in Utah, they actually show up on my TV sometimes and say, "Do you want to watch *Saturday's Warrior*? And I don't know if that happens other places, but in Utah, it does.

Jake Johnson 27:43

Probably not. Yeah, probably not in other places. You know, as you move closer to our present or, you know, closer to, let's say, *Book of Mormon*, the musical, you start seeing that the Mormon Church and the Mormon culture broadly, has realized better and better how to use musicals. So, *Saturday's Warrior* is a 1970s, 1980s rock musical. And it's one of dozens that exist that are written for and by Mormons to be performed, you know, as like a fun church type community, you know, a skit. And they are often very, they often take themselves very seriously. And it can be really kitschy and they're, you, they're musicals, right? They, kind of, fit into this genre really, really well. If you backtrack a few decades before that, well, actually even into the 19th century, Mormons were involved in musical theater, or what the early versions of musical theater like operetta and vaudeville and even minstrelsy, Mormons were involved in that but usually in not ways they wanted to be. They are often depicted as the villains in these, kind of, anti-Mormon operettas, always having to do with polygamy, often very exaggerated accounts of it, cartoonish in a lot of ways. But you know, at this point, 19th century Mormons had left the country, right? They left and went to what was Mexican territory, was now Utah. And so, they had, you know, most people in America had very little opportunity to engage with actual Mormons. And so, it just, kind of, led the stories to get more and more wild and the depictions of them in the newspapers to be more and more exaggerated. So, Mormons were often depicted in stage plays and in musicals in ways that were probably not that flattering. And after polygamy gets disavowed in the early part of the 20th century by mainstream Mormons, you start seeing a bit of an anxiety among the Mormon leadership to try to turn the narrative around because all of a sudden Mormons are this oddball group, off in the middle of nowhere, who are doing weird things and have, like, these, kind of, proto-socialist communities and they're living in polygamy. And so, as they start scrubbing out those more complex components of Mormonism, they look to a genre, or a cultural vehicle, that can help simplify complex issues into one note, and musicals are very good at that, very good at, kind of, let's say, whitewashing the past and making it more convenient. So, it was in the 1940s, in fact 1947, which was the centennial celebration of Utah, in 1947 the church commissioned a musical called *Promised Valley* and it was about this trek west across the plains to arrive in the valley. And it was a really big deal. It was an enormous amount of money put into it. It was, kind of, the center stone or the keystone of this whole centennial celebration. And they hired people from Broadway. They hired major actors from Broadway productions. They tried to get Broadway composers to write it. And the most important thing is it was modeled after *Oklahoma*, the musical *Oklahoma*, which had just come out four years earlier, which was also about this, kind of, idealized, fantastical frontier, where everybody just happens to get along. And so, and where there are no more, there's no more Indians. There's no more black people. It's like this completely whitewashed version of what America looks like, and what the ideal America would look like. I think that's probably what the point was. So, and in that case, Mormons were very strategically using a musical to turn the narrative around, to flip the script, and just say Mormons belong, and we are just like you, we're mainstream. The kind of metaphor that's used throughout *Promise Valley* is one of voice again, where we have huge choral numbers, where the choirs sing and hear choirs standing in for harmony, collective harmony, collective work, that we can collaborate and modulate our voices out of discord and into something that's unified and harmonious. And that's the idea of musical theater, right,

that everybody, somehow, we need a community in a musical, in, that's in chaos. And that chaos gets resolved usually by everybody's seeing that there's something that we can agree on, and we can move forward. And it was like a big wedding or something, and the story stops. And that's more or less how Mormons were using musicals in the mid part of the 20th century, kind of, as Paul Reeve puts it, a historian of Mormon race, that Mormonism and race, he said that Mormons were aspiring to whiteness at this point. They were trying to locate themselves in the middle of America, American values and to move away from the more problematic racialized past with polygamy where Mormons were associated with Muslims and other, kind of, de-, at that point, degraded races in America. So, you know, it shifts as you move along throughout history. That was a very pragmatic choice to use a musical to try to change the narrative. By the 1960s and '70s you have rock musicals. It's, kind of, a way of latching on to commercial successes within America. This is the rise of Donny and Marie Osmond and other kinds of Mormon exports into pop culture. Mormons, kind of, finally accepting pop culture as something they have to deal with instead of just completely resisting it at every turn. You mentioned pageants like the Hill Cumorah Pageant. Those were dotted throughout the 20th century, and are, kind of, a bygone era when in America, there was a lot of outdoor musical dramas like pageants happening to tell versions of the history, of a city's history. And that's mostly gone defunct, including Hill Cumorah Pageant, which I think is just wrapped up its last season. The church is no longer sponsoring it. So anyway, I think it's not as simple as, you know, Mormons don't use musicals for any, necessarily one particular thing. Throughout history, they've discovered that musicals are really helpful for them to make certain points, or to fit into the country in ways that are more convenient for them.

Carla Long 33:48

Well, I mean, sure, I don't know if you can. Well, I've only been to BYU a couple times, but I, every time I've gotten to BYU, I always hear someone singing Disney songs mostly. And, like, there's a way to connect through that music. And not just through Disney, of course, but through those musical, like, we connect through that singing and we connect through that shared kind of history together, not Community of Christ and Mormonism necessarily, but like, even together, you know, when different groups of people come together, and they know something and they know some songs together, you're automatically connected. So, I, that's probably a part of it as well. So,

Jake Johnson 34:26

Oh, for sure, for sure. You know, and Trey Parker and Matt Stone who created *Book of Mormon*, the musical, the South Park guys, when they were brainstorming, writing this musical, they were saying okay, it's Mormon's Disney, Rodgers and Hammerstein, all different words for the same thing. And it's, it's true because in their view, like, if you go to Temple Square in Salt Lake City, and you see this grand tem-, it's like Cinderella's castle in the middle of the city, and it's very fairy tale, right? It's very fantastical. You too can, not only are you gonna get your family when you go to heaven, but you're gonna become gods, right? I mean, it's like taking all of the most aspirational stories that people like in America and amplifying it to the nth degree. So, it's not, like, in some ways, Mormons, a musical about Mormons makes the most sense, because that's more or less the language and the, kind of, narrative posture that Mormonism has created for itself for most of the 20th century. And, you know, that kind of aspiration of whiteness I mentioned that Mormons were occupied with in the 20th, or the, kind of, mid-part of 20th century, they get really good at that. They actually launched themselves into the middle. I mean, they've, kind of, crafted a 1950s version of America that continues on within them, and to the

point where it's become a liability. You know, somewhat like, when Mormons are presented in popular culture, it's almost like they're too perfect, right? They're too, their hair is too well coiffed, their family too perfect. They're making too much money. They, kind of, are doing all the right things in this, kind of, capitalist American ideology, but it's suspiciously all too good. And that, kind of, aspiration to whiteness, like they overshot their mark a little bit. And *Book of Mormon*, the musical, takes advantage of that, and mocks that place within America. So, if you want to make fun of American values, you use Mormons to do that, because they so well represent all the things that America wants to be and all the things that are, kind of, problematic with that want.

Carla Long 36:37

You know, I was, I'm so glad you said that, because I was actually gonna say that, something like that, you know, seeing two Mormon missionary boys riding their bikes in their shirts and their ties and their helmets. And I mean, it is very wholesome. And it, and it's like, "Oh, look at those boys. Look what they're doing. They're, they're going out, and they're doing what they feel called to do. And isn't that just beautiful?" And then, you know, like, I see a lot of people who fall outside that box, and I meet a lot of people who fall outside the box, and then they no longer, they just don't feel like they belong in the box, because they're not wholesome people, or they don't feel like they're wholesome people. And so, I feel like, in some ways, because the Mormon Church has kind of overshot that mark, they've kind of painted themselves into a corner. Like, you have to be perfect in order to be Mormon. And that's a really high mark to, kind of, grab for a lot of people, and a little bit too difficult for a lot of people. So how interesting that it was in 1947, *Promised Valley*, that was the name of that musical, that it was, kind of, what catapulted them into that space, which I find really interesting.

Jake Johnson 37:46

Yeah, it's, so you know, bookended. You have a musical that launches them into the middle of America, then in 2011, with *The Book of Mormon*, you have a musical that's critiquing that place. And so, it really is musical theater that's in the middle of music, of Mormonism the whole time. I talk about Mormonism as a theology of voice, I mean there's a lot more to say about how voice factors in. But if you took voice out of Mormonism, there would be nothing left. It's at the center of everything. And it's a templ-, center of the Temple rituals, at the center of the first vision. Even though it's called the first vision, it's really about hearing something for the first time, not about seeing God and Jesus. So, I make the point, or at least make that argument in that first book, that Mormonism can maybe best be understood as this theology centered around voice, which then, you know, you can connect to musicals pretty quickly with that, this idea of what voice is doing and musicals as well.

Carla Long 38:39

Well, I'd be interested to hear a little bit more about that. If you want to go back into the voice and talk a little bit more about that, I'd be happy to hear a little bit more.

Jake Johnson 38:47

Yeah, yeah. So, something peculiar to when Mormonism arrives in America is that God was no longer quiet. God had, God was very loquacious, right? God has lots of people speaking on behalf of him at this point. And so, Joseph Smith was not the only one in that region to be, to claim to hear and see God and to have a message that was urgent and different. And so, the problem that Americans had to face

at that point was that they had to then listen differently, because you're then listening for distinctions about how somebody is telling the truth about God, or conveying the reality of God, that they saw and heard somebody that you can't see and hear for yourself. And so, that puts the onus on listening already that is, the very origins of Mormonism as this, kind of, American post-enlightenment religion. So, part of that has to do with Joseph saying that, you know, that the, only one person on earth at a time can speak on behalf of God, and that's me at this moment. And so, that creates this hierarchy where everybody can hear and have a relationship with God, but no one, except for the one ordained, can actually be the mouthpiece. Everything else is hearsay, or everything else is, you know, it's not legitimate. And so, there's a passage in *Doctrine and Covenants* where God is speaking, and God says, "Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same." And I take that passage and literalize it and think, "Okay, well, every time you're hearing the prophet speak, then you are hearing literally the voice of God, because that's what God is essentially saying. And so, that puts this, kind of, what that creates is that the Prophet is speaking on behalf, pretending to be voicing the sounds of God's voice. It's peculiar within Mormonism, because Mormons believe in a physical God, a God with a physical body, that God once was a man on a dist-, on another Earth, or a version of Earth like this, and so, has a resurrected body with lungs, and teeth, and lips, and a mouth, and with ears. And so, it's not some abstract entity that these prophets are speaking on behalf of. It's, like, one set of lips speaking into the ear of another human being. And what that creates is this, kind of, strata of, where God speaks on behalf of, or a, sorry, where the Prophet speaks on behalf of God, and then everyday Mormons then, repeat that, and they repeat it in a way that invoices God, invoices the Prophet, which is, like, another way of invoicing God. So, there's this, like, chain that emerges down from God's voice, down to everybody else. And you hear this all the time if you go to Mormon services, like, when you go to a fast and testimony meeting, for instance, which happens once a month, on a Sunday, where people will, kind of, be moved by the Spirit to get up and tell a story about something that happened, or to testify of the truths they know. And, or they're going to say a prayer, all of a sudden, their everyday language and pattern of the voice shifts to becoming something different. They sound different. And that, if you track what that sounds like, everybody essentially is trying to sound like a general authority or a prophet, which is another way of saying, like, now you're sounding like God. So, there's this, kind of, effort to speak like, or on behalf of, other people, that's very much at the center of Mormonism. It depends on somebody telling you that God said something else, right? It's, kind of, telephone game that's constantly happening, and that's what makes Mormonism tick. And again, if you think about that, Mormons see that this mortal life as preparatory for an eternal godlike life, where they become gods too, then the way to become godlike is to practice speaking on behalf of other people, to practice placing your voice in somebody else's ear, or somebody else's voice into your own mouth. So, that's the kind of theology that's built underneath Mormonism that I explore quite a bit. In this book about musicals, you know, it's, this book is trying to do a lot of things, but one of those is to draw a theoretical connection between a voice in Mormonism and, kind of, what voice does in, on the stage, right? Where actors are also always pretending to be somebody else.

Carla Long 43:20

Oh my gosh, Jake, I've never thought about any of this. This is so interesting to me that, I mean, I have only been to one Mormon service and I did recognize, and I've heard Mormons pray before, I did recognize that there's a lot of thees and thys and thous perhaps in prayers, and it sounds like scripture and the King James Version of Scripture. And at the end of every testimony, a Mormon would say, "In

the name of Jesus Christ, amen,” or, right, or something like that. So, like, there is, like, this thing, like, this is, kind of like, a musical. And it's wrapped up in a nice, neat little box and a nice, neat little bow, and I'm finished, and I can sit back down, and I can speak for myself again. Is that, am I understanding that right?

Jake Johnson 44:06

Yeah, that's exactly it. And it, it's that, you know, I don't think most Mormons would ever say, “Oh, that's, like, what musical, or that they don't necessarily see that as being odd, right? But, you know, from my perspective, that's very much the kind of principle behind musicals as well, right? Where everybody somehow magically speaks the same. They somehow all know the harmony and the more they do that as a community, they express a greater and greater cohesion. And you know, that's, it's true even outside of musical theater. Like, if you look at the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, America's choir, right, this kind of ordained mouthpiece of America, right, where it's, like, here's a very disciplined body of people who have agreed to harmonize and the choir or choral, the choral world comes to be, like, this, like, metaphor of all the things America likes to think about itself, right, where everybody's voice matters, everybody's voice, kind of, contributes to this great machine, that is democracy and that it moves us forward. And, you know, I, even if you don't believe in Mormonism or you think that Mormonism is kind of goofy in all its ways, I think there's something really endearing about this sincerity that fairytales can come true. And that's exactly how they present themselves. And in fact, when I was doing research for this book early on, for the *Mormons* book early on, I was in Provo, and I, it was a Sunday when I got there, and nothing was open on Sundays in Mormon land, but there was a Denny's that was open, so I went there to eat. And the waitstaff, at least at the time I was there, wore their non-Mormon-ness on their sleeve like they were clearly, like, they didn't really fit in to that world. And so, I was talking with one of the waitresses who was not Mormon but had moved there for a relationship at some point, and she said, “You know, it's, even though Mormons, Mormonism is not my fairy tale, it's so important to live around a fairy tale. And so, you know, she wasn't buying into what Mormonism was saying specifically, but it was the spirit of imagination, of willingness to believe in something that was fantastical and goofy, and maybe even oddball. And, because there's something in, there's something inspiring about that. I do, I've come to believe that. That's why I think people like musicals. And, you know, even in *The Book of Mormon*, the musical, there is the scene where the main character is singing a song, “I Believe”, and he talks about all these really, he's cementing his belief in Mormonism, and everything he says to a non-Mormon ear sounds ridiculous, like, these, and these are like actual tenets of belief within Mormonism, like, the ancient Jews sailed in boats across into America. Or, you know, the, this, kind of like, fantastical worldview that Mormons have created for themselves. But it's not meant to be funny. Like, it's actually sincere. You see these people engaging really directly with it. I guess that's what I mean by telling lies. I think Mormons are good at telling lies about the world because they're looking beyond it. They're invested in a world that's not yet, and this is true for a lot of religions, I'll say that. Like, religion factors really neatly within musicals because it's another shared space where they're not really concerned with the world as it is, they're investing in a world that's not yet, and a world that can be, which is maybe more just, and more humane, and more in line with the values they actually want. So, that's why I also think Mormons, I mean, sorry, religions more broadly, are gravitating towards musicals because it's a shared kind of value system.

Carla Long 47:50

Oh, gosh, Jake, I've never thought about that, either. And, you know, you, I mean, since I've been Community of Christ my whole life, I immediately thought about Community of Christ and how we try not to focus in on the hereafter so much. Like, we focus in on how we can be like Jesus now and how we can make our, the world like Zion, more like Zion right now. And, I mean, I think that's a pretty huge disconnect, between Community of Christ and Mormonism, a really huge disconnect. And I've thought about that disconnect before, but I've never put it in that kind of a way. So, thank you for saying that. That's really interesting. I'm gonna have to let that marinate a little bit more in my head because I do think that it's important to realize that Community of Christ and LDS church, we, sometimes, we're not even sharing the same language, like, not even the same language group. And we think that we are, and it's simply very, very different. So, I'm gonna have to chew on that for a little while longer.

Jake Johnson 48:54

No, that's a great, it's a great point. And I think it's one reason why the Community of Christ has never cultivated a really strong musical theater community, right, as opposed to Mormons. So, you know, you look around other Restoration branch, other kind of splintered groups from the Restoration, and you don't see this connection as strongly as you do in Mormonism. That, my book *Lying in the Middle*, I do have a chapter on the FLDS fundamentalist church, who have been very active in musical theater, and they're the most secluded, most insular community, where they're not going to Broadway. Broadway is not touring through them. And yet, they've cultivated this relationship with musical theater that's really striking and, in some ways, very bizarre. But yeah, you don't see that in the Community of Christ. So, that's an interesting point. But the, kind of like, where does the, kind of, progressivism lie, right? Is it moving towards a, is it putting all your energies into the world that's not here yet? Or is it, kind of, turning it back on, kind of, encouraging that where you are?

Carla Long 50:01

Oh, my friend, I have driven through Colorado City, Hildale, and it was, it was a crazy place. It was one crazy place. It is very insular there. That is for sure. Oh, my gosh. So, Jake, this is a really interesting way of moving on. I like talking about this Community of Christ - Mormonism thing. And since you have been both, you can kind of straddle that for us and help us out a little bit more. So, are there any other distinctions between Community of Christ and Mormonism, like in the musical language, the way the hymns are structured, the sounds of the two churches? Can you talk a little bit about that? Since we have, we actually have a lot of listeners who are Community of Christ and a lot of people who are post Mormon, so, they might be interested in hearing those differences and the sameness.

Jake Johnson 50:44

Yeah, oh, yeah. There's, oh, gosh, there's definitely a difference in the musical languages of these two churches at this point. And the Community of Christ, within recent years, redid their hymnal, right? And so, now it's got much more inclusive language, some tunes were thrown out, new, kind of, aesthetic sub-tastes, kind of, brought in. And many, many other cultures represented with, then the sounds and the language, right? I mean, of these, of this hymnal. It's very, I think, the Community of Christ is rightly very proud of what that hymnal represents. The Mormon Church is doing the same thing now. And so, I have no idea what that will look like. But, you know, even if you just took a snapshot today and went from a Community of Christ service, a typical Community of Christ service, to a typical Mormon service, the musical languages would be strikingly different. The Mormon Church is much more subdued in its

musical rhetoric. So, it's, most of the music happens through an organ, for instance, which is very traditional sound. People do not clap. There's no, like, percussion happening. Kids aren't running up and, like, doing a special number with their guitar and tambourine, is like, that's not happening at all. Whereas in a Community of Christ, you might see all of that. You might see kids with, like, little rhythm instruments running throughout the room. You might see space given to a budding pianist to play a little bit of their tune during offertory or something like that. There are more moments, I would say, in a Community of Christ service that are saturated with music and sounds than there are in a Mormon service. I think some of that's intentional. For instance, during communion, or what the Mormon, what Mormons call sacrament, typically, in a Community of Christ service, there's music happening during that time, because it's dead space. It takes time to move throughout, to, like, hand everything out and collect it. And silence seems to be awkward for a lot of people so, there's always music. In sacrament meeting there's never music happening during, while the Mormons are partaking in sacrament. It's considered time where you're supposed to be reflective on the atonement. You're supposed to be thinking fervently. You're not supposed to be distracted by sounds. And, you know, this is a, an ancient, kind of, paradox even, like, St. Augustin worried about how much music was making him forget about the words and forget about God, and so, there's always been this concern about music maybe taking away from the purpose behind your gathering and what you're actually doing. And then, other, of course, there's other ways of looking at, the music helps people stay there. It makes it more engaging and makes you reflect in a different way. So, I would say there's more silence in Mormon services, and more homogenous musical language than there is in Community of Christ. And there's a, there's some interesting studies about why that is the case, because you have very similar origins, right? You have the same kind of origin story. And then you have this dynamic shift at some point where you land, you know, in the 21st century, and this, they sound and look very, very different from what they, from each other. And Michael Hicks, who's a musicologist at BYU, a Mormon scholar, he has written about this, that the original hymnbook within Mormonism was, of course, given to Emma Smith to do. She was supposed to arrange and find hymns and put together this hymn book. And what he's discovered is that almost immediately when she was given that task, some of the brethren, or some of the male leaders of the church, sort of, inserting themselves into this process and saying, "Well, we don't want that hymn, or we don't want this particular lyric." And when you look at the hymn, hymns that Emma chose, the text is often about a very personal relationship with Jesus, a very intimate, immediate relationship, very, very descriptive language about personal, one on one relationship. That slowly starts getting substituted away by other interlocutors who decide to replace those kinds of hymns and language with them, with hymns that are more reflective of a, of vengeance, of a militant God, of this, kind of, follow the Prophet or else, those kinds of the sentiments. And you start getting a more distant relationship to God, through this, kind of, prism of militancy. And I think that's about as good a representation of the differences in the musical language as they shifted. Emma, of course, remains within the church, as the body moves west through, into Salt Lake. And, in some ways, the spirit of her hymnal stays as well. And it's funny because, like, there's the old saying that the doors of your life turn on small hinges, and I think that's what happened here in the Restoration. A very small choice about the kind of hymns that you were going to include, actually, in this hymnal, they make a big difference over time, because you start growing further and further apart from each other. And not, I don't mean to make, I'm painting with a broad brush here. There's a lot of hymns in Mormonism today that are about a really close relationship with Jesus, and I don't think any Mormon would say that they would favor militancy over, you know, this, kind of, deep fervency of religion. But overall, that does reflect this, kind of, march-like

sensibility of lots of marches, and lots of, kind of, patriotic fanfare in Mormon hymnals, that you just don't see in a Community of Christ anymore. And so, you know, we were talking earlier about one reason why Mormons are so attracted in musical theater versus Community of Christ, where it doesn't seem like there's not, there's almost completely absent this same kind of culture. And I think that's reflected in just the way these two different Mormon Restoration groups see the purpose of sound in their services, whether it's to include other people, whether it's to, kind of, draw our attention to a world that doesn't fit, isn't here yet, to like, prepare us for something that's coming around the corner.

Carla Long 57:21

Oh, wow. Like, I've never actually heard that phrase before that, the door swings on small hinges, but it certainly seems like that is the case here. And, you know, in Community of Christ, we love to say that we're Emma's church. So, that's really important to us.

Jake Johnson 57:34

Yes, absolutely. Yeah, I, well, I think the part, in fact, I think what Michael Hicks writes in this essay that I'm referring to is that Emma didn't leave the church, that in some ways, the church left Emma, by starting to move away from that initial, like, she was called to do that job for a particular reason, and then it was slowly taken away from her with the results being that maybe there's a very different church on the other end of that.

Carla Long 58:02

That's really interesting to hear you say that. Jake, I have learned so much from you, I have thought about things that I haven't really thought about before. And, you know, I've always loved musicals ever since I was a kid. I thought they were so, so fun, but I had no idea that they had such an impact on the world and an impact on religions. I, I've never thought about that. And I'm so, so glad that you agreed to this podcast, because I've learned a lot.

Jake Johnson 58:25

Well, it's been a pleasure, Carla. I really appreciate the invitation. And yeah, it's got my mind thinking differently in fun and in different ways as well. So,

Carla Long 58:34

So, before we, oh, yeah, it's been awesome. So, before we sign out, why don't you tell us the name of your books again, just in case people are interested in getting them? And how can they get them?

Jake Johnson 58:45

Sure. So, they're both published through the University of Illinois Press. So, you can always order through them. They're also on, like, Amazon and Barnes and Noble, those kinds of spaces. The first book is called *Mormons, Musical Theater and Belonging in America*. And the second, which comes out this fall is called, *Lying in the Middle: Musical Theater and Belief at the Heart of America*.

Carla Long 59:07

Awesome. Well, Jake, thanks so much for being here. And thanks so much for imparting some of your wisdom to us. I've really enjoyed it.

Jake Johnson 59:14

Yeah. Thanks again, Carla.

Josh Mangelson 59:23

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