



Why *The Book of Mormon* (the Musical) Is Awesomely Lame

Never mind the Tony awards and all the acclaim, Broadway's best is not all that

By **Jared Farmer**

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The Book of Mormon cleaned up at this year's Tony Awards, winning nine of the 14 awards it was nominated for, including Best Musical. But tonight's success is hardly unexpected, capping off, as it does, an extraordinary season of critical adulation. What's going on? Why has a good-not-great religious satire from the creators of *South Park* received rapturous praise from the whole canon of media tastemakers?

It may be true that *The Book of Mormon* is the second best musical debut (behind *American Idiot*) on the Great White Way in recent memory, but that's really not saying much. In a season devoted mainly to re-runs, revivals, and adaptations, *The Book of Mormon* stands out for being a first-run play with an original score and book. Also, while the musical adheres to 1950s Broadway conventions—tunefulness, campiness, and uplift—it's modishly vulgar.

The Book of Arnold?

The plot concerns two unprepared and ill-paired missionaries, a pious hunk and a delusional geek, sent from Utah to Uganda. There the rural villagers suffer from AIDS, dysentery, and political violence. The Ugandans say they have no use for

this American religion; it doesn't help their situation. But when the chubby, bespectacled geek—a Mormon who has never read the Book of Mormon—invents “scriptural” stories in the form of practical allegories, with embellishments borrowed from *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, the Africans respond enthusiastically.

When confronted by LDS Church authorities about this blasphemy, the missionaries defect, and, with the help of the natives, start their own new religion based on their own new scripture—the Book of Arnold.

The musical gives Africans far more offense than Mormons. By virtue of being from the American West, the *South Park* creators, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, have an intuitive feel for heartland Mormons. The main character, Elder Price—though a caricature—felt real to me. (I was born and raised in Utah.) All of the Ugandans felt fake.

To be fair, *The Book of Mormon* intends to lampoon neo-colonial cultural products like *The Lion King*, and celebrity do-gooders like Bono who proclaim, “We’re all Africans.” And to the extent that the musical forces its audience to think about Africa in the present rather than a nostalgic past, it might be considered well intentioned. (Likewise, mercifully, the musical passes over the tired topic of polygamy.) However, the pathologizing of modern Africa is too much. *The Book of Mormon*'s black people are rural, backwards, poor, violent, uneducated, illiterate, superstitious, gullible, hopeless, diseased. They have maggots. Warlords mutilate female

genitalia and rape babies to cure their AIDS (a now outdated reference to a folk-belief about “virgin-cleansing” that began in South Africa).

One of the musical's running gags—a young female convert believes she can use a typewriter to send text-messages—is simply groundless. East Africans are among the most adept users of cell phones in the world.



The plot twists at the end raise questions about the racial politics of the show. Only a threat of American violence saves the villagers from the tyranny of the local warlord. Only the ingenuity of the white men provides Africans a useful religion. The dewy-eyed boys from Utah share the genius of Joseph Smith: the Yankee spirit of invention. The musical's happy ending, complete with black missionaries in neo-Mormon garb, contains a strong note of American chauvinism. This may or may

not seem odd coming from Parker and Stone, authors of the satiric anthem, “America, Fuck Yeah!” the theme to *Team America: World Police*, their 2004 puppetry film about U.S. special forces.

It seems relevant that Parker, Stone, and their collaborator, Robert Lopez (*Avenue Q*), each have backgrounds in puppetry. Their Broadway characters talk, sing, and dance like puppets, and they might be funnier as actual puppets—or cartoons. The musical made me think of the Ethiopian character “Starvin’ Marvin” from the first season of *South Park*. Starvin’ Marvin worked as a paper cutout. A child actor performing the same role on stage would be appalling.

I cringed in my seat at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre as I watched talented African American actors hamming up “African-ness” for cheap laughs. It brought to mind the long, shameful history of Americans—black and white—performing blackness (often in blackface) on stage for white audiences. *The Book of Mormon* wants to have it both ways. It attempts to ridicule *The Lion King* and Wild Africa stereotypes by substituting Third World stereotypes. It tries to be transgressive *and* conventional, blasphemous *and* saccharine. This combination is not impossible, but incredibly difficult to achieve. Parker, Stone, and Lopez don’t pull it off.

Mormon Magic Kingdom

Don’t get me wrong: *The Book of Mormon* is fun, and occasionally uproarious. If the giddy laughter I heard at the sold-

out show on Easter Sunday is any indication, theatergoers love it.

And they delight in laughing at Mormons.

From personal knowledge, I can tell you that many of the play’s zingers about 19-year-old Mormon “elders” fall on target. A surprising number of these Christian soldiers haven’t in fact read the Book of Mormon (“Another Testament of Jesus Christ”). Pairs of missionaries (“companions”) do often resent each other; sexual tension, homophobia, homesickness, and boredom strain the relationships of these co-workers/roommates. Many missionaries dislike their geographic assignments. Even as they compete against each other for baptisms in the field, missionaries often struggle to convert a single person in two years of service.

The musical’s main character, Elder Price, is a recognizable alpha-Mormon type: a hyper-masculine priesthood holder who wraps his spiritual arrogance in self-professed humility. (In Mormonism, unlike most patriarchal systems, men must rule through meekness.) Price is certain that his life will be “awesome” because he deserves it. He can’t understand why Heavenly Father sent him to Uganda instead of his favorite place on Earth—Orlando!

The recurring musical outbursts about Orlando, Florida, were for me the funniest parts of the show. There are indeed striking similarities between Temple Square and Disney World: the fantasy-castle architecture; the immaculate, artificial neatness; the perky helpfulness of “cast members”/missionaries;

the imagineering and the edutainment in service of a well-groomed corporate brand.

Imagine There's No Hell

Many of the *The Book of Mormon's* ethnographic details are wrong, however. Pairs of missionaries are rarely equals; there is typically a “senior companion” and a “junior companion.” The various missionaries (men and women) in an area are supervised by one (male) “mission president” and his wife, not by a three-person bishopric. (And, for whatever reason, such authority figures always were dark suits, not beige suits.) Mormons never intone, “Christ be praised,” like evangelicals. More importantly, missionaries don't emphasize the Book of Mormon nearly as much as Joseph's Smith's “First Vision,” the restoration of the true church of Christ, and especially the “plan of salvation” and its promise that “families are forever.” The missionary program certainly no longer encourages Latter-day Saints to gather in Salt Lake City. I could go on. Can't Broadway afford fact-checkers?

Most egregiously, the play mischaracterizes Mormon theology.

The elaborate showstopper in Act II, “Spooky Mormon Hell Dream,” shows Elder Price imagining the consequences of being a bad missionary. The problem is that contemporary Mormons don't believe in hell—at least not the way other Christians understand that word. The screenwriters could have learned this in about one minute of online research, or a single conversation with a church member.



Yes, Mormons speak of “outer darkness”—the hell-place reserved for Satan and the “sons of perdition” who defected from God during the War in Heaven. But for all the mortals who have ever sinned on Earth, there is no fire, no brimstone—only a temporary “spiritual prison” for the unrepentant. And even those sinners ascend to heaven upon the final resurrection. Heaven has multiple levels, each better than the last, but no one will be unsatisfied with their place. Each individual progresses at his or her own rate, and ends up where he

or she belongs (though the uppermost “kingdom” is reserved for straight couples).

Unlike evangelical missionaries who want to save you from going to hell, LDS missionaries want to help you reach your potential in heaven. Mormon eschatology is radically egalitarian, and very American: everyone gets a second chance, everyone wins. It would make a great, cheesy musical number.

Mormons are ideal subjects for musical parody because they have their own homegrown traditions of musical theater. Not counting its uniformed missionaries, the most recognizable Mormon “product” in the religious marketplace is the Mormon Tabernacle Choir (“MoTab”), which specializes in milque-toast Americana, including Broadway favorites. From the 1950s through the 1990s, Utah wards (congregations) staged summer “roadshows”—touring musical skits in church-wide competition. Today, Mormons are among the last Americans to preserve the once-popular tradition of community pageants.

The cheesiness parodied in *The Book of Mormon* is nothing compared to the annual Mormon Miracle Pageant in Manti, Utah, or the Hill Cumorah Pageant in Palmyra, New York. On a more professional level, the LDS Church’s film division (originally operated out of BYU) has produced hundreds of schmaltzy movies over the years. There is a distinctive heavy-handed theatricality about contemporary Mormon productions, a sensibility not too far from Rogers & Hammerstein. In

many ways, including cuisine, Utah is a time capsule of mid-twentieth-century American tastes.

If Latter-day Saints lend themselves to musical treatment, and if the Mormon mission, a classic rite of passage, lends itself to theater, the same cannot be said about the Book of Mormon. It’s simply too hard to read—even for most Mormons. It’s misleading to imply, as the musical does, that this scripture was somehow pragmatically useful to converts of the nineteenth century.

In fact, for Joseph Smith and his followers, the existence of the translated text—proof of Smith’s prophetic powers—was more important than its contents. Today, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints emphasizes scripture reading more than ever; but even now, Mormonism is not primarily about the Book of Mormon. This sacred text would indeed be a strange foundation for a religion. It’s a convoluted, quasi-historical chronology of prehistoric America, a narrative summary of men with arcane names—fathers, warriors, generals, prophets—giving speeches and fighting battles, all highlighted by the undead Jesus teleporting to America during his time away from the Tomb. It’s the kind of book a fantasy-minded teenage male geek might actually treasure.

A Mormon Moment?

Highbrow appreciation of Mormon esoterica began in 1993 with Harold Bloom’s *The American Religion* and Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*. And in popular culture, high and

low, right and left, the past ten years in America has been something of a Mormon moment.

Consider the following: Mitt Romney's past and present bids for the GOP nomination, Jon Huntsman's presumptive presidential run, the power of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, the power of Fox News demagogue Glenn Beck, the "7 Habits" empire of business management guru Stephen R. Covey, the widespread commentary about the Mormon influences in Stephanie Meyer's phenomenally popular *Twilight* series, the controversy over Prop. 8 in California, the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, the Elizabeth Smart kidnapping and its judicial aftermath, the Warren Jeffs trial, *American Idol* runner-up David Archuleta, all-time *Jeopardy* winner Ken Jennings, ex-Mormon bad-boy playwright-screenwriter-director Neil LaBute, Jared and Jerusha Hess's sleeper indie hit *Napoleon Dynamite*, the PBS documentary *The Mormons*, HBO's adaptation of *Angels in America*, HBO's original series *Big Love*, TLC's reality show *Sister Wives*, Richard and Joan Ostling's investigative nonfiction *Mormon America*, John Krakauer's polemical nonfiction *Under the Banner of Heaven*, Martha Beck's scandalous memoir *Leaving the Saints*, David Ebershoff's experimental fiction *The 19th Wife*, Brady Udall's tragicomic novel *The Lonely Polygamist*, and the *South Park* episode about Joseph Smith (who also shows up as one of the "Super Best Friends" in other episodes satirizing religion).

If attention is flattery, the LDS Church should be pleased. Although the church can claim only 14 million members (an exaggerated statistic that counts all baptisms and births, but not

the actual number of church-goers), representatives of the religion—and representations of it—have managed to become fixtures in popular culture.

I don't have a complete explanation for this, but I would point first to the post-9/11 zeitgeist. In the last decade, there was a national and global debate about the place of religion in politics. Many looked to the American past to better understand the present. Long before the religious controversies surrounding JFK, Joe Lieberman, Mitt Romney, Barack Obama, and Sarah Palin, Americans wrestled with the issue of high-office candidates being connected to beliefs or believers outside the mainstream.

Back in 1902, Reed Smoot, an apostle of the LDS Church, was elected to the U.S. Senate. The Senate refused to seat him for four years while it conducted hearings and investigations on the basic question: Can a faithful Mormon also be a loyal American?

In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the U.S. Protestant establishment vilified Utah Mormons as foreign, deviant, dangerous, violent, secretive, conspiratorial, theocratic, repressive, despotic, anti-democratic, un-American, un-Christian fanatics who followed a false prophet, read phony scriptures, worshiped in strange buildings, lived in desert communes, grew long beards, and kept women in political and sexual oppression. Mormonism was equated to white slavery. Best-selling authors such Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Zane Grey cast Mormons as depraved villains. Latter-day

Saints were variously likened to “Oriental,” “Asiatic,” “Turkish,” and “Mohammedan” peoples.

Even today, more than 120 years after the prophet Wilford Woodruff officially disavowed the practice of polygamy, the media routinely conflates the LDS Church with Mormon fundamentalists (more properly called fundamentalist believers in late-period Joseph Smith).

In this historical context, *The Book of Mormon* is light, sweet stuff. It demonstrates the attenuation of anti-Mormonism. Only among Southern Baptists and other hardline evangelicals do you hear claims anymore that the LDS Church is a dangerous non-Christian cult. For most people—gay marriage activists notwithstanding—Mormons seem pretty harmless. In popular culture, Latter-day Saints have progressed from menacing to risible. This is a huge step, one that Church authorities should actually welcome. Their understated reaction to the musical suggests that they do.

Popular Blasphemy

Ultimately it’s disappointing that Trey Parker and Matt Stone—two of the best satirists around—should have chosen such soft religious targets: missionaries from Utah. The finale to season 14 of *South Park*—the censored episode about the propriety of depicting Mohammed in a bear costume—was guttier by far. By comparison, poking fun at clueless Mormon teenagers is a cop-out. It’s a waste of theatrical talent. (Andrew Rannells, who plays Elder Price, is particularly good.)



The play’s take-home message—that all religions and scriptures are preposterous yet potentially useful and uplifting—is hardly a revelation. To call *The Book of Mormon* a daring piece of religious satire is like calling *Jesus Christ Superstar* a great opera. With low-budget animation, *South Park* manages to do more with less. The 2003 episode about Joseph Smith (“All About Mormons”) is funnier, smarter, and spikier than *The Book of Mormon*—and you can watch it online for free.

Satire, like blasphemy, is not supposed to be crowd-pleasing entertainment. It is supposed to be discomfiting. Instead of inspiring religious debate, *The Book of Mormon* has mainly inspired a lot of self-admiration from pop culture mavens, people who evidently believe that singing Mormons and starving Africans are now retro-cool.

As Eric Cartman might say: “Lame!”