

INTERVIEW

MORMON BOY ARRIVES
OFF-BROADWAY

A Conversation with Steven Fales

STEVEN FALES is the writer, creator, and performer of the one-man autobiographical play, *Confessions of a Mormon Boy*. The play details Steven's journey from a returned missionary and young husband and father coming to terms with his homosexuality through his Church excommunication, divorce, and descent into addiction and the darker side of New York's gay scene before eventually regaining control of his life and finding renewed spirituality and healthy balance in his relationships. *Confessions* began as a reading at the 2001 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium and debuted that November at the Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center in Salt Lake City. That early version, full of Mormon in-humor, was published in the December 2003 SUNSTONE.

The play underwent extensive reshaping in the four years following its debut and has played to fantastic reviews and sold-out runs throughout the U.S. On 5 February 2006, it arrived off-Broadway with an open-ended commercial run at the SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam Street, New York City. For show or ticket inquiries, call (212) 619-1555, or visit www.sohoplayhouse.com.

This following is largely excerpted from a SunstonePodcast interview with Steven conducted by SUNSTONE editor Dan Wotherspoon on 6 December 2005, the day after *Confessions* was featured at a Lincoln Center benefit for the Point Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing college scholarships for students who are "marginalized due to sexual orientation, gender expression or gender identity." Some material is excerpted as well as from an email exchange that followed the release of the podcast.

The podcast can be accessed through the Sunstone blog, www.SunstoneBlog.com, or directly at <http://www.sunstoneonline.com/podcast/SunstonePodcast-006-ConfessionsOfAMormonBoy.mp3>.

Congratulations on the Lincoln Center event! I hear the evening raised more than \$250,000 for the Point Foundation.

Thank you! It was a fabulous evening. I don't know if you've been to Lincoln Center before, but it's right across the street from the Mormon temple in Manhattan. The irony of my life! Here I am at the Lincoln Center, and the temple is right there to remind me of where I come from.

Tell us about the origins of the play.

I feel like my life and my art came to a point in this project. When my life fell apart, I turned to stand-up comedy, using humor to deal with the pain. And as I did so, I thought, "I have things I want to share, especially as a gay Mormon father." I wanted to write something for my children so they could know from me, their gay dad, who I am.

I married into a family that is very public about homosexuality. Many know Carol Lynn Pearson and the story of her husband Gerald's homosexuality. Well, I married the

Pearsons' oldest daughter, Emily. I felt like it wasn't enough to just have the Pearson women tell their story—the men needed to tell their story, too, and Gerald Pearson is no longer with us.

I felt it was my duty as a father and an artist to articulate this human experience. And I have found that my journey is parallel to so many other people's. It's not at all unusual to have someone come up to me after a performance and say, "Did you steal my journals to write this? I'm Lutheran."

The play has evolved significantly in its journey from its Salt Lake debut to this off-Broadway run. Tell us the story.

My Utah version had lots of delicious Mormon in-humor, and included the pre-existence and even had Heavenly Mother making an appearance. But soon after that, I started writing a "Gentile" version because many people didn't know who Jimmy Flinders is or what the Lion House means, and so forth. So I wrote a new version, which I workshoped in New York City in June

2002, where several producers got really excited about it.

The first version takes place somewhere in eternity and has me trying to get into the celestial kingdom by telling St. Peter my story. And eventually I do get in. In the Gentile version, I come out in a BYU T-shirt and just tell the story in classic storytelling style. I worked with the fabulous director Jack Hofssis, who won a Tony award for *The Elephant Man*, and Jack helped shape the piece and edit me out so the story could really land.

Early versions of this show were positively received, but one review from the *San Francisco Chronicle* in particular suggested that while the play was very affecting, I still really hadn't gone as far behind the "Mormon smile" as I had set out to do at the beginning. That's when I knew that I really did need to tell my whole story—so I added my escorting experiences and my dealings with drugs. And I got really, really honest.

Eventually the play shows my journey of going from one extreme, Mormonism, to another extreme, hedonism, and then finally coming to a middle ground. The show really is about what it means to be human—the humanization of a Mormon boy—and reclaiming a spirituality that works.

If I am following you correctly, this all happened in 2002–03. Why did it take so long to get to the point where you're at last ready for this off-Broadway debut?

You're right. We were supposed to open off-Broadway in the summer of 2003. But when my producers ran into problems raising the remainder of the money needed to fully capitalize the show, they suggested that if I got full-frontal naked during the performance, they'd have no problem raising the rest of the money and everyone would be able to recoup investments quickly. And while I was at it, they told me to add Mormon garments. When I told them that I couldn't do that—that I *wouldn't* do that—(and I said it very respectfully, and as diplomatically as I could), they canned the show. And I had to wait to get the rights back to my own show.

Eventually I did, and soon after, I took it to the 2004 New York International Fringe Festival, where it won the overall excellence award. And since then, I've been performing it all over the country in developmental runs, trying to raise money for this off-Broadway run. And something that's very satisfying to me is that this time around, almost all of my investors are straight Mormons or straight

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men and women. It's very validating to have straight money behind me.

Tell us about the play's main themes. What do you hope members of the audience will feel as they walk out of the theatre?

One message is that we really need to look at the spiritual abuse that is happening in our churches, especially toward gays and lesbians. I define spiritual abuse as any time someone is told that he or she is not worthy of God's full love and blessings. And not only *told* that they're not worthy but also *shown*. For example, we often hear the notion of "hate the sin, love the sinner," but then things get done in the name of this love such as excommunication and banishment from families, or straight spouses will keep children from having a relationship with their gay parent. This using religion to justify keeping people's basic human rights from them is spiritual abuse. And it's really been that message that has propelled this project forward even in moments of total poverty.

The play deals head-on with the issue of: What do you fill the void with when you are told God does not love you? And it illustrates what I think is a very clear link between spiritual abuse and addiction. I took my pain and anger to the bars and clubs. I got into escorting—high-end male prostitution. I thought, if the Church isn't going to take me, I am going to go where people will take me—someplace where I would be accepted. But, in the end, I found that just as I'd wanted to please the Brethren, I wanted to please these

people—and that wasn't healthy either.

I feel I'm currently going through a very happy time, but I had to go through a gay adolescence to find myself. At the end of the play, I take full responsibility for my life and choices. I take on my life and reclaim it along with my kids and my "Donny Osmond smile." The play winds up in a very life-affirming, positive ending. And in none of my story do I blame the Church. I'm just saying that this happens.

In fact, debuting the play at Sunstone was very important for me in finding my voice. Sunstone was the ideal audience for me to first tell my story to, for I wanted to be generous to Mormonism while at the same time being intellectually honest. Sunstone allowed me the perfect vehicle to tap into the voice that I'm using onstage today.

To me, one of the neatest moments in the play is when you describe the spiritual experience you had as the stake president read the decision to excommunicate you.

Unlike some, I decided to attend my church court. I went because I wanted to be complete and to have integrity with the whole process. As I sat there while he was pronouncing my excommunication, it was as if his voice faded away and a warm feeling of

peace and truth washed over me, and another voice said, "*Steven, I know who you are, and I am so much bigger than this church.*" It was a revelation. As my life was falling apart, there it came. It was one of the real gifts of that experience.

I had to go through other trials before I really took a look at that revelation and before I could say that God really *has* been there for me and always has been. And now I'm really working on that relationship with that higher power. I don't believe there's a middleman you have to go

through to have a relationship with God. That's what Joseph Smith taught, don't you think?

You asked earlier about the messages I hope people will take home from the play. Well, another one is that it's possible to stop being a victim. I was a victim—of the Church, of the gay scene, of therapists who had steered me wrong, of my parents, of Emily's parents, of Emily. But when we give victimhood up, we have so many choices. We can stop self-destructing and invent new possibilities. One of these for me was to create a show, a transforming piece of theatre, where people leave feeling optimistic about the possibility of transformation and renewed spirituality in their lives. And lo and behold, in doing this, I think I'm doing what I always was taught to do as a good Mormon boy. ☺

