

INTERVIEW

STATES OF CHANGE

A Conversation with Richard Dutcher



RICHARD DUTCHER is Mormonism's preeminent filmmaker. Although Latter-day Saint filmmakers have been telling quintessential Mormon stories since the 1930s, the release of Dutcher's films, *God's Army* (2000) and *Brigham City* (2001) mark what some consider to be the birth of "Mormon cinema"—feature-length films with LDS subject matter produced independently of the Church and released theatrically. Now, some six years after *God's Army*, and in support of the DVD release of Dutcher's most recent film, *States of Grace*, the director sat down with *SUNSTONE* editor Dan Wotherspoon during a rare day off from shooting his current project, a supernatural thriller titled *Evil Angel*, to discuss *States of Grace*, the state of Mormon cinema, and where his work is taking him in the future. He's also finishing another, very personal, film, *Falling*, which should begin making the rounds at film festivals next year.

Before we talk about the DVD release of *States of Grace*, tell me: what in the heck are you doing shooting a supernatural thriller?

I know people are surprised by that. I like to tell them that I've made my Easter film (*God's Army*). I've made my Christmas film (*States of Grace*). And now I'm doing my Halloween film. I've been a fan of horror movies my whole life, and so those who know me aren't surprised by what I'm doing. But yes, it's a supernatural, sort of edgy, horror film, titled *Evil Angel*, which stars Ving Rhames. It's my biggest film so far. Like my other films, it's one I wrote and am directing myself. We're shooting it primarily in downtown Salt Lake City and are about five or six weeks into production with a couple of weeks left.

Why did you choose to shoot the film in Salt Lake City? Is Mormonism part of the story?

One of the main reasons to shoot in Salt Lake is simply that it's more convenient for me. With this film's long schedule, I wanted to be at least somewhat close to my family. But Salt Lake also really fits the story well. I'm using a lot of old, kind of cool buildings in downtown Salt Lake City. The film doesn't take place in Salt Lake; its story isn't dependent on a specific location. And I don't think the film will naturally lead people to recognize where I shot it, but it will have an old, gothic urban feel to it, so Salt Lake has been great.

There is no Mormon content in it at all. But given my LDS background, that fact that I'm working in the area of the supernatural, and that I wrote the script, I'll be interested to see if people pick up on any Mormon influences in the film.

Let's talk about *States of Grace*. Many familiar with *SUNSTONE* will already have a sense of what the film is about, but can I get you to give a quick framing of it for those who may be learning about it for the first time?

Sure. The film is about a half-dozen people in Santa Monica, California, two of whom are Mormon missionaries, and about how their lives intersect and their impact on one another. That's what fascinates me: putting a very diverse group of people into an interesting circumstance and seeing how it might all turn out. But as far as the storyline goes, it all begins with the two missionaries getting pulled into a gang-related drive-by shooting. And the film follows in the aftermath of that and what happens to these missionaries and some of the gang members involved.

Some reactions to *States of Grace* have focused on its edgier, darker elements—that you show LDS characters "warts and all." What's your reaction when you hear that?

That term is way overused and doesn't reflect my approach at all. I want to tell an honest

story—that's all. I don't set out to show warts; in fact, my natural inclination would be to put a little make-up on the wart if someone had one.

What I want to do is tell stories about something real and important, something that fascinates me and that I feel the need to explore. Sure, someone may end up seeing more warts than they'd want to, but in other ways, I think my LDS films have been very sincere and open-hearted. I hear people say my films have violent elements or that they talk about thematically mature themes. But at the same time, I believe they have such a positive outlook on life and on religion and on human relationships that I just can't buy those easy descriptions. They aren't dark; they're about something. And unfortunately there has been so little in Mormon art that's had any degree of real honesty toward the reality of the human condition, that when many Latter-day Saints encounter it, they call it dark when all that means is that it resembles reality more than anything else overtly Mormon they've seen.

During the session on the film at this summer's Salt Lake Sunstone symposium, you were visibly moved by what the panelists shared about their experiences with the film. Would you be willing to talk about your reaction to their remarks?

As I said then, I'd been fighting for the film for so long—not just to make it but also because I was distributing it myself and wanting it to be seen and understood—that I was pretty beaten down by having to constantly defend it to people who didn't understand what I was trying to say. I had been on the defensive so long, that sitting there and being reminded of why I had made the film—and seeing that people had actually understood what I was doing, and that the film meant something to them really hit me hard. I'd been so focused on how it hadn't succeeded financially in the way I needed and wanted it to do, and they reminded me that it had succeeded in doing what was most important—communicating the thoughts and feelings and experiences about the atonement and repentance that I wanted to share. It made that panel a wonderful experience for me.

There are a few specific elements in the film that I haven't heard you talk much about. First, your two uses of two Book of Mormon—one comic; one very serious.

Yeah. The ideas for using those came together in the writing as the characters devel-

oped and simply as settings suggested it. In the scene with Louis, the homeless preacher, it was just fun and endearing to have him preach from King Benjamin's speech about not suffering the beggar to put up his petition in vain. In the scene with Carl and Elder Banks, it just came naturally. A gang banger and a Mormon missionary having a very serious conversation about repentance—what image could work better than the story of the people of Ammon and their vow to end their violent ways, to bury their weapons forever?

You also introduce the symbol of the cross in a powerful way. That's pretty unusual in an LDS setting.

That was really important to me. In art, visual iconography is so important, as you can communicate so much with iconic images. Having entered Mormonism from a background in Pentecostal and Baptist churches, in which crosses are everywhere, I've always viewed the reaction many Mormons have to the cross as very strange. I don't know all the cultural and doctrinal reasons Mormons have felt it important not to incorporate that symbol—but I think it's gotten way out of whack. How did such a prominent, important symbol of our savior become almost demonized in our community? We seem almost angry toward the cross.

So what I wanted to do in the film was to try in some small way to communicate the beautiful concepts that people in other religions associate with the cross. They aren't conflicted the way Mormons seem to be. When Mormons see a cross, they almost instantly start to explain why we don't wear them and how we're different from other religions. I wanted to try in some way to make it a beautiful image again—or at least to communicate to the Mormon community what it communicates to others so meaningfully.

It was also important to bring that in because the movie is about the atonement of Christ and the cross is *the* central visual image about that. And it was crucial for me to have it appear in the film the way it did—in the storyline of a missionary who has been teaching about the atonement and understanding it from a doctrinal or intellectual standpoint but not really understanding it on a personal, real level. So having the missionary taught about the atonement was very, very important to me.

This interview will run in a SUNSTONE issue in which an essay brings up the statement one hears in LDS settings about parents who say they'd prefer their children be dead than

alive and having lost their virtue through sexual sin. You have one of the characters in the film say that whoever thinks that is a jerk.

I did. And I stand by that. I've always found that notion repugnant and have seen how it has caused so much damage and heartache. So I loved having an opportunity to kick at that a bit and to say, hey, *this* is what this communicates, and to ask out loud if we believe this, can we really call ourselves "Christian"? How can someone believe in the atonement of Christ and have something like that come out of his or her mouth?

Earlier you mentioned the financial picture for *States of Grace*. Are you willing to share any specifics about that?

Well, we have had zero real income on the film. Everything we've taken in has just gone back to paying for what we've had to spend just to promote it. We need to sell a heck of a lot of DVDs just to come near breaking even, which is what, at a minimum, we are hoping to do.

What really has me discouraged is that although the film did better there than most other places, in Provo, Utah, which has about the highest percentage of Mormons anywhere, *States of Grace* did nothing compared to *Saw II* and other films that came out near the same time. So for me, it's frustrating that the Mormon community doesn't want to see my kind of movies—*States of Grace* and *Brigham City*. They want to see *Saw II*. The death of Mormon cinema is going to come about simply because the Mormons are going to kill it. This isn't at all to blame the audience. I know why people don't come to these films. It's because there have been so many crappy Mormon movies that the filmmakers have completely violated the trust of the audience. People are not going to spend \$8, or \$30 or \$40 on a date, to go out and see another bad Mormon film. So when something good comes along, convincing them that it's good is very difficult. So I get pretty worked up about it.

When I first saw what Mormon cinema could be—when I saw that there was enough of a community in Mormonism that if that community would support serious, important, spiritual films—my hope was that Mormonism would instantly become the breeding ground for those films. Since the beginning of cinema, hardly anyone has been interested in exploring spiritual themes or expressing spiritual feeling through film. So I knew that if this community would step up to the challenge and produce those kinds of

thoughtful, excellent, meaningful, real, honest films, that immediately whenever someone thought of spirituality in film, they'd think of the Mormon community. And that's what I tried to preach up through *Brigham City*.

But we blew that so quickly. That's why, as soon as *The Singles Ward* came out and I realized that Mormon cinema was going to be just like Mormon literature, just like Mormon theatre and Mormon music, I became discouraged. It was then I began to realize that as much as I'd been talking, either nobody understood what I was saying, or they understood and just didn't want it.

You don't mean that there's no place in Mormon cinema for something like *The Singles Ward*, do you? Isn't it that *The Singles Ward* and many of the other films that followed immediately upon the success of *God's Army* represent something more for you?

Yeah. They represent a lack of reverence and respect. There's far too little reverence for cinema as an art form to begin with. But in these films, there's also a lack of reverence and respect for Mormonism. Had *Singles Ward* been followed up by three serious, well-made films, then sure, why not do something like *Singles Ward*? But when that's all you start to get, when all of a sudden you get people who aren't taking Mormonism or cinema seriously—there's no reason to wonder why Mormon cinema is dying away. Don't get me wrong, I love comedies and will see silly movies and have a great time doing that, but that Mormon cinema so quickly became just that—that's what I object to.

You said that for you, Mormon cinema has become just like Mormon literature and Mormon music. What do you mean by that?

It seems to me that in every field of Mormon artistic expression, it's always followed the same pattern: some bright, talented artist—such as Avard Fairbanks or Mahonri Young in sculpting, or Minerva Teichert in painting—will come along, and we will suddenly see the potential of the art form and what Mormon expression through that art form might be. But as soon as these things become clear and achieve the recognition they deserve, they are immediately buried under a mountain of garbage. Right away, a bunch of knock-off works get produced just to satisfy someone's ego that they are an "artist," even though their work isn't worthy of the marketplace, or by others who hope simply to cash in and make some money. It's killed us every time. That's



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why there's zero respect for Mormonism in the arts community.

And what I really don't understand is that over a couple hundred years, Mormonism has accumulated a handful of great writers, great painters, great sculptors, but when you walk into a Deseret Book or other LDS bookstores, only rarely will you be able to find their work. You'll find cheap, bad sculptures, bad paintings. You have to really hunt for the good stuff. Our community doesn't celebrate these people, yet it would have such a powerful, inspiring, cumulative effect on the arts and Mormonism if we would realize who and what we have in our history and would start celebrating the great artists who've been with us. If we would shift our focus toward that, toward excellence instead of what everyone thinks of when they think of Mormon literature and Mormon painting, maybe we could have pride in the arts instead of shame.

You're not claiming that Mormonism is a special case of a religious community that doesn't celebrate artists, are you? Aren't the roots of most art found primarily in tension with a community's dominant notions?

I know a lot of people say that, and to some extent it's true. But what I object to is how that idea leads some people to only see artists as rebellious folks who are deliberately trying to poke around in things and stir up controversy. It's the bad artists who do that. It's the bad writer or bad filmmaker who is primarily interested in provoking a reaction.

In sincere, honest, real art, an artist is trying to explore something. Sometimes he's trying to express something, something he doesn't know. He's reaching for something in the work to get an answer that the work itself will provide. So just by the very nature of what he's trying to express or explore, some-

times he'll go into areas he doesn't understand or that confuse him—and often those are going to be shadowy areas.

Artists are out there—they are exploring and reaching. And, as a result, they are going to go to places that the rest of the community, the rest of humanity doesn't want to go. Most people don't want to explore—they want to stay safe in the settlement—while their artists are reaching out to find new territory, new terrain, and sometimes they are going to go into uncomfortable places.

That's what the Mormon community has trouble seeing—and no, it's not just a Mormon problem but a fact of American culture in general—that art is something besides entertainment. For most people, the artist is supposed to provide a nice evening for them. They see film as simply a nice way to spend the evening, so if a movie goes into dark territory, or if it highlights an uncomfortable truth, that falls outside the realm of entertainment.

But art can be so much more than entertainment. When I go to a museum or see a film, I'm searching for what these artists are trying to tell me. I want to know what they have learned in their lives that can help me in some way. Maybe it's simply how to understand and live with the rest of humanity, or how to love better or come closer to other people. Or, on the rare occasion, what is it they know about God that I don't know yet? When someone makes a film like that, its so thrilling for me. Those kinds of movies have changed me; they've helped me love others more, drawn me closer to God. And that's why I have such a passion for filmmaking, because I can't think of another art form with more power or potential to do that, or one that is used more rarely to do that. The Mormon film community had the opportunity to step into that role, and it still has if it can get past this stage it's in, this period of disrepute. And there is such beautiful potential.

For example, what if David B. Haight had been a filmmaker? I got to know him some before he died, and I loved him. I recognized what an amazing human being he was, that he understood things that I really wanted to know. So what if he had been a filmmaker and could have crafted something that encapsulated his relationship with God or his understanding of life? How absolutely amazing and valuable would that be!

And that's why I have such little respect for films like *The Singles Ward*, because they are an insult to the potential of what Mormon cinema could be. And I do get angry about it. I went through a period where I would get angry and passionate, and then I felt like I didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, so I'd play nice again. But I don't do that anymore, for I feel the message has to get out. I don't care if I'm stepping on people's toes, because I want to see change. I want people to understand what Mormon cinema could be. I want Mormon cinema to continue even though I won't be part of it any more. I want to see it continue to achieve its potential. I want to be an old man and know that I had a part in it, and I hope I will see that it grew into something beautiful and powerful.

Hold on! You've shared with me before that you're making your Halloween movie partly in an effort to make enough money to fund future film projects like *The Prophet*—your film about Joseph Smith. And now you are saying you're not going to be part of Mormon cinema anymore. What do you mean?

What I'm expressing is just a shift in the way I started looking at things a couple of years ago when I realized I really don't want to talk about Mormon cinema any more because I saw that I had zero control over what it was going to become. I came to realize that all I have control over are my own films, so now I am just thinking about Richard Dutcher films. I'm not averse to doing films with Mormon content. I've had thirty years in Mormonism, so I'm sure a lot of that will always be part of me and will find expression in whatever I will do. Especially as I continue to reach toward God in my work, my Mormonism will, by necessity, be part of that. But I don't want to be associated with Mormon cinema if it is going to continue to be what it is now.

So what I'm saying is that I will never make another film for the Mormon audience. I just won't do it. I'll make films for myself, and hopefully some of the Mormon audience will go along with what I do, but that will never be my target audience again. ☺