

Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman . . . Ether?

WHY CHURCH ARTISTS OWE RIC ESTRADA A THANK-YOU CARD

By Theric Jepson

RIC ESTRADA WAS BORN IN CUBA ON 26 February 1928. When he was nine years old, he was “trying to decide what I would be when I grew up. And I said, either I will be a truck driver, because that will help me drive all over the world and see places, or I’ll be a reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Those were my two choices. And I struggled with that for about a year when I was nine years old. Oh! Oh! There was a third choice. Or maybe I could be another incarnation of Tarzan of the Apes, and I could swing on trees.”

This desire to aim high revealed itself in 1941 when, at age 13, Ric gained his first publication credit, drawing the cover for Cuba’s premiere magazine *Bohemia* (which survived the revolution and is still publishing today).

When Ric turned 19, his uncle provided the money, and his uncle’s friend—a fellow named Ernest Hemingway, who liked his typewriter, his guns, and his Cuban friends—cut through red tape at the consulate to bring him to New York City. Ric would spend most of his life in America and come to call it home.

In New York, Ric began the work for which he’s best known today: comics. He drew for everyone from EC to DC, including stints rendering DC’s flagship characters: Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman.

But this is a Mormon story, and as anyone who’s ever read a Mormon story knows, this story needs a conversion:

RIC ESTRADA: Did I tell you the story of my conversion?

THERIC JEPSON: No, you didn’t.

RIC: Well, I was living in Germany at the time, working as a political cartoonist and journalist in West Berlin, when Berlin was still divided. And one day I got into serious trouble and I slapped my boss—

THERIC: Whoops.



RIC: —and I was so ashamed of it that I came into my room, I got on my knees, and I said, "Lord, I'm so lost. I'm not this kind of person. Please find me." And, next day, two Mormon missionaries knocked on my door and I knew that was the answer. Very dramatic.

It took me three years while I studied the books. I read the Book of Mormon through several times. I read the Doctrine and Covenants. I read some of the literature they gave me, and three years later, back in my home turf, I joined the Church.

THE NEWLY MINTED Brother Estrada, then 40 years old, applied the faith of his childhood to his new religion and soon the evidence began to manifest itself in his work. While he was working for *Our Fighting Forces*, the editor found himself short a story for the issue and asked Estrada to write and draw something to fill the space. Estrada chose the Mormon Battalion as his subject.

In a similar way, a story about the fall of the Jaredite civilization, "Peace with Honor," filled a suddenly open space in another DC war-comics magazine. It was this incidental work that led to what may be the most widely distributed Mormon comic of all time.

RIC: When I wrote "Peace with Honor," a missionary brought the comic book to Elder Hugh W. Pinnock of the Seventy and said, "Look at this! This fellow must be a Mormon." Because it said in the subtitle, "based on the Book of Mormon." So Hugh Pinnock phoned me from Salt Lake City and said, "I'm in charge of the New Testament stories for children. I've looked into your background and see that you're an active Mormon, and I'd like you to illustrate the book."

THERIC: Well, that's cool.

RIC: Not only was it cool—let me tell you the other part of the story. They offered me a certain amount of money for the book—it had about three hundred drawings—and I said, "Look, this work is going to take me at least six months to do. I don't think I can live on that amount of money." I broke it down for them, giving them a minimum price per picture and they saw that indeed the sum was twice as much as they had offered. We negotiated and they accepted my price. Then, a few months later, the editor of the Church magazines called and said, "Ric, you've done us a great favor because the Church—not



out of malice, but out of not really knowing what artwork is worth—has been underpaying its artists. As of now we'll start paying the proper amounts."

THERIC: Oh. Well, good for you!

RIC: Well, it was nice and good for the ones who followed me.

NOTE

1. This interview originally appeared in a different form on *A Motley Vision* (motleyvision.org). Quotations have been lightly edited for clarity and space. Ric Estrada passed away on 1 May 2009.