

What's Hot and What's Not: Latter-day Saint Cinema Year-in-Review

Presenter: Kels Goodman

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Film is such an important part of the arts, and SCERA is so happy to host the LDS Film Festival every year.

I think the LDS Film Festival plays a really important role in the landscape or the fabric of Mormon artists.

You get a young filmmaker and they don't always get a chance to be having their films out in front of a crowd, and this gives them that opportunity.

It's the one time every year where Mormon filmmakers get to come together, show off their work, trade ideas, and it really is a critical hub for Mormon filmmakers to get together once a year.

I think it's just invaluable. You don't have to be LDS or have an LDS film to be at the festival.

I believe it's just kind of family-oriented, those kinds of films, and you'll find a home there... For me personally, I went to the very first LDS Film Festival, and I was able to meet Kurt Hale and Michael Berkeley, and that really helped me, not knowing anyone in the film industry especially here in Utah, to meet people who are involved in film.

And from that, I was able to end up working for them on several projects... Our screening of the "Cokeville Miracle" worked out really well for us. We showed it to a packed house and got a lot of press and a lot of buzz... Then we were the closing night film, and that gave us the momentum and the early word of mouth that we needed to launch a successful theatrical campaign for that movie, which went on to gross almost \$1.5 million in the theaters... We don't

have much money to do marketing and so, to have the LDS Film Fest will give you that buzz beforehand, really boosts your effort... It's an opportunity for filmmakers to show their films to the general public and get that feedback, which is so important. The festival can be a litmus test for audiences, so we use the festival in a lot of different ways, to conduct business and to further the goals of our company.

A lot of filmmakers produce movies and never get to see it with the crowd, with a big audience. And this is a great opportunity for you to see it with hundreds of people and get their true feedback about your movie... Also, for the general public to see films before anybody else does, in addition to seeing the films, to meet the filmmakers and the producers, and the stars of the show... The Film Festival is a great place for the audience to come and mingle, to talk and get to know the filmmakers and the cast...

Hello, and welcome to my presentation today on the LDS Film Festival, the history of it and the latest and the greatest. My name is Kels Goodman, and welcome to my home as I virtually give you this presentation.

You just saw a video on the LDS Film Festival, which we show to kind of promote the festival. What I'd like to do is go little into my background.

I'm was born in Virginia, and I was raised in South Texas where there was no filmmaking. But as a kid I wanted to make movies, and I grew up in the "Star Wars" era, and I've noticed that there have been a lot that are my age that have become filmmakers because of "Star Wars" and so it kind of influenced me a lot—as you've probably noticed behind me.

But then I went to BYU film school, and then from there I started working on Hollywood films throughout the 90s, such as "Touched by an Angel" and had some other movies of the week, and then when we got into 2000 I started producing my own material, and one of the films I did early on in the LDS film world was "Handcart." And then not long after that, I went to work for Blendtec and produced the series "Will it Blend?" which was kind of something we did which was fun on the internet, and we actually had a big viral campaign. And that's kind of my claim to fame at the moment as well as some other stuff. But that's kind of a quick highlight of my history. About four years ago, I purchased the LDS Film Festival and took over its operations.

But I'd volunteered at it about 10 years before. So I worked it for quite a while with Christian Vuissa, who is the original owner, and we're going to go into that a little bit later.

The history of the Festival kind of begins beyond the first festival. This is our 20th year, but there is a long history of saints kind of spotting appearing in media throughout the last hundred years, and we're going to kind of go into that.

As a lot of people understand, art is usually created as a result from a form of some kind of oppression.

And so when an oppressive moment happens, while people are trying to work their way out of that oppression, there's also been people who have created some really good art, whether it be music, whether it be films, or whether it be painting.

And we know that the Latter-day Saints have kind of had their share of oppression, and so that's what we're going to kind of go into a little bit today.

You know, I'll give you an example, as some of the big years of film was 1939, so it was fresh out of the Great Depression.

And in 1939 we saw "Gone with the Wind" and "Wizard of Oz" and "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington"—just to name a few.

And so sometimes war and the Great Depression were things that brought about people wanting to escape, and also to talk about who they were and what they were going through.

And so, as you can see here, this is a copy of the extermination order on the Mormons, and I think we all know the story. But then we also forget that the Latter-day Saints were actually kicked out of the United States. Even though it's been over 150 years ago, the event still happened. And I think you'll see over the years, many books written about the pioneers, many stories, many songs, and then even in later days, several films. And that's one of the reasons why I did the film "Handcart," and then others down the road have done other films that I've talked about it.

I remember in 1993, I had just graduated from BYU the year before, but I came back to see Gerald Mullins speak about "Schindler's List." And it's kind of what inspired me to realize that, while he presented this amazing film about the oppression that the Jews went through during Nazi Germany, there was also a thought in my head that, "Well, as a Mormon" (and Gerald Mullen is LDS, and so I was kind of thinking) "why don't we show films that talk about the oppression that happened right here in the United States and, in some cases, to our own ancestors?" And so that's where I kind of had the idea of doing the film "Handcart." But I've seen

others kind of go through the same thing. So Latter-day Saints have had their kind of share of oppression. Here's an example. This is actually not an art form that talks about the oppression of the Saints; this is actually an oppressed piece. This was a silent British film called "Trapped by the Mormons" and the story surrounded "evil Mormons taking young virgin Englishwomen to their Utah temples to become their wives." And I remember my dad, when he went on his mission to Niue, which is part of the New Zealand mission, he rode on a boat, and people in the boat thought that he was going to Niue to gather some wives, and that he had a quota of wives to go and hide into his temple! So, misconceptions galore, and this film was made over 100 years ago. It's a silent film.

It's hard to find. You might be able to find it on YouTube or something like that, but it kind of shows you the early mentality when it came to the Saints in media.

You know, one thing that happens, and you've probably noticed this, and we're all probably guilty of it, is if we're ever watching a TV show or listening to the radio or something, and the word "Mormon" comes up, or "Utah" or something having to do with it, our ears kind of perk up because we we're kind of eager to see ourselves in some kind of positive light. And you kind of hope that somebody you know, who's not in the faith, might say something and think, "Oh yeah, they're good. They're resourceful, they're nice," or whatever, but occasionally we get the negative.

So what I wanted to do is show you here, real quick, some mentions in the media, just a few samples that are pretty obvious.

We have the movie "Fletch," which was actually shot here in Utah, and it mentions Mormons but it's not always very positive. It's not totally negative either, but it's not overtly positive. And actually, Fletch kind of makes fun of the Church a little bit. This is 1984 when they shot the film, and they talk about flying into Provo, which is obviously the nerdiest of the nerd. You could say Salt Lake City, but Provo becomes kind of the joking stick of the film, even though, at the time, there was no commercial airline to Provo. They talked about flying into Provo and how unexciting it is to go to Provo.

Mark Twain, numerous stories. Mark Twain, of course, he lived during the time the Saints were back in Missouri. And so, Mark Twain was one that often put Mormons in his literature. "Battlestar Galactica" was produced by an LDS gentleman, Glen Larson, and he bravely infused some Mormon theology. And he also said, when you see the documentary about "Battlestar Galactica" he talks about Mormon theology and he talks about other historical past pieces that he infused into the storyline of Battlestar Galactica. In the film, they all get sealed, for example.

When they're married, they're sealed. I'm friends with one of the actors who passed away a few years ago, and he was in the movie. He was sealed to Jane Seymour and I would joke with them, "How many LDS people would love to be sealed to Jane Seymour?" And then there's also the Twelve tribes. That was discussed in the Battlestar Galactica, that they were all divided into 12 groups.

Anyway, and they considered themselves lost. And then there was "Starship Troopers" which came out, I believe, in the early 90s, and it's basically a set of extreme Mormons that fled into deep space after losing their homes in Utah. This is kind of the storyline.

The Federation government, at the time, pressured the Mormons to have history and moral philosophy class sponsored by the Federation government, so they allowed a teacher to come and teach at Port Joe Smith. It is there that the killer bugs came and destroyed the temple. So, kind of fascinating, but hey, that's the media for you. So often Saints strive to seek some kind of acceptance without changing their values or their beliefs. And that's always been an ongoing challenge.

So thus was created LDS cinema. So you can see here the first film, "God's Army" which came out 20 years ago this year. Earlier this year, around March, we celebrated its 20th anniversary at the last LDS Film Festival. What "God's Army" had to do, and this is something to understand, is that "God's Army" kind of opened the door. And there are many things that have to be done in order to be able to create these films.

A lot of people will say, "Well, why don't they just make this?" and "Why don't they just do this?" And the question is, "Who is 'they' and how do they actually do it?" Film as an expensive medium and you have to be able to have some kind of market. It's just like any product in the world. You've got to be able to create a product and find the need, and sell the product, and be able to market it positively.

And so when it comes to Church films, that can be a very difficult situation. And so, to see missionaries in a positive light on the big screen was kind of a shock to a lot of people.

And so, when "God's Army" came out, that opened the door. And not only did it open the door to see missionaries on the big screen—people of my faith living the way I live my faith—on the big screen, but also to be financially viable. The film was made for about \$300,000 but it turned around and made \$2.5 million dollars at the box office! And that was a big deal. That was

probably the Number One reason why others said, “I can do this too,” or “I can go there, too.” And so LDS Cinema emerged.

And there became a lot of other films, and here are some samples right here. Here’s “Brigham City,” which Richard Dutcher made right after “God’s Army.” And “Singles Ward,” “Charlie,” “The R.M.” “Handcart,” which is my film that I produced, and many more. And what’s interesting is, over the years, there have been a lot of films that people have struggled with because their quality isn’t really good, and I’m here to let you know that they’re getting better! But it’s also a matter of being able to realize the filmmakers reinvent the wheel, which is really kind of an interesting concept, but they don’t have Hollywood to back them up. If you try to take your story, and you try to go to Hollywood and say, “Hey, I want to produce this,” you have a risk of it changing and becoming something that it wasn’t originally. So, in a lot of cases, these filmmakers have to go rogue; they have to kind of do it on their own.

And when you do that, it becomes tougher; it becomes a lifelong struggle. And so, as LDS filmmakers, we’re trying our best to make the best films we can with the budgets that we’re given.

And it’s much harder than just saying, “Just tell a good story.” There’s so much more to it than that, in order to tell a good story.

So anyway, we’re trying, and that’s part of why we created the LDS Film Festival. So 2001 came, and this allowed filmmakers to come and to share their films and to share their ideas. And in the early days, the festival kind of started in a small place down in Provo.

I don’t remember the first place that they had it—I wasn’t there. But I think I went there for the second year, which was at the Provo Library. So it was at the Provo Library for a while, and then by about 2005 the festival move to the SCERA Theater in Orem, which is a beautiful theater.

Right now it’s about an 85-year-old theater that’s been around for a long time, and they’ve upgraded it and it’s a beautiful place to hold a festival.

So the LDS Film Festival today, we now have many categories. And then in the past, the festival only showed short films, but now we’ve been able to expand the categories. There have been enough feature-length movies that have allowed it to have its own category. So now we have feature films, short films, and we even have feature documentaries and short documentaries. And so those categories exist, and we fill them, which is kind of amazing.

And then we've expanded categories. We've had a music video category. We've had a YouTube category, and now for this next year, we're kind of considering having a wedding video category, which was kind of odd, but with a lot of films. A lot of the filmmakers, as they attach to things like YouTube, they're seeing things that are shorter and quicker, and in series. And so we have to adapt the art to the current technology.

And wedding videos are one thing that have been around for a long time, but the quality of the wedding videos have gotten better and better. And how it goes over, we'll find out. We're always experimenting, but we may do that for this next year. Forty-eight-hour competition is something that we started back from the very beginning. And when Christian started it, Christian Vuissa started it as the 24-hour competition. And basically what this does is, two weeks before the actual festival dates, participants pay a fee.

They get into groups of five, and then we give them a prop that they can use, like a mirror or a comb or something like that. And then we give them a line of dialogue.

And then we give them a theme, and they have to be able to use the prop and a line of dialogue, and make a film that fits the theme—the best that they can. And they keep it within three to five minutes depending on what year, you know, how many entries we get and then we send them off. And then, 24 hours later, some people come back with their masterpieces, and hopefully they make it in time! And it's pretty amazing who's done films in the past. And the 24-hour competition, we've since increased it to 48 hours. Faith-based outreach: now this is something that we wanted to do because we know over the last number of years, the faith-based film world has exploded. With movies like "Facing the Giants" and "Fireproof" and "Courageous" and "God's Not Dead"—all of these films showing profit, and being able to increase in their quality as they make film after film. And we've always strived to look to them and say, "What are you doing that's working, and what can we do?" and there's many different questions and ideas that people have had and how to do it. Obviously, our numbers aren't as much: there are way more people of other faiths in the United States than there are in the LDS faith. So our audience can be limited.

But we also can learn from them on what to do. And so we've brought people over, like we've brought Dallas Jenkins, who's Evangelical from back East, and he's been directing "The Chosen" which is going on. And so we had him come and speak at the festival, and we actually showed the first episode of "The Chosen" last year, which was a neat experience. And so we were excited to be able to participate in that. We've had a few other people over time. We had Kimber Eastwood, who is the daughter of Clint Eastwood, and she produced a film.

She's actually married into an LDS family, and she's Christian herself. She made a film and we showed it at the festival, and it was a neat experience.

And we're trying really hard to encourage our time with other faiths, so that we can learn from them and hopefully show what we got as well. Difficult topics such as gender and race are always kind of hot and heated and when people make a film and they're able to bring it to the festival and we can talk about it.

I always, as a festival owner and one who makes the final decision with our system that we have of judging, I've always allowed films that discuss these serious topics, as long as they're films that are not offensive to the Church.

And most of the time, people have turned in films that have been respectful of the Church, whether it be about gender or race. And so we bring them in. We want them to come in and to be able to present their films and to be able to have a discussion to know that they can be part of the community. They don't have to feel separated.

And at the end, the family film competition. The Samuel H. Smith Foundation is an organization, and they do this cool thing with the Reorganized Church back in Nauvoo called "I dig Nauvoo" where they work together and have families come out for the summer, and they give them a plot of land and they can actually dig and find artifacts from Church history. And so they have this beautiful selection of all kinds of things, from silverware to clothes, to pieces of buildings that were there during the time the Saints were there and preserved them. And so, one of their pushes is to encourage people to record their family history. And so we decided to get with them and have a family film competition with families.

And they have to be part of a family and make their own film, and they're usually not the high-end films like some of the professionals do, but occasionally we get some really nice ones.

And they'll make a family film and enter it in, and the Samuel H. Smith Foundation will participate in sponsoring that one, so we love working with them. The role of the LDS Film Festival in the Latter days: It's to present films that any family member can watch, and we can bring safety to the movie-goers—clean films? I put a question mark there because what I wanted to do is help define clean films. And I always get a lot of people who are not filmmakers come up to me and say, You know, they ask me if I'm a clean filmmaker, or do I make films that are clean. One thing to remember is that sometimes some filmmakers, and I'll be careful when I say this, but some filmmakers are actually offended by that word because they already make clean films. Their focus is not to say, "Hey, let's make something clean" but their goal is, "Let's

make something good.” And that’s the real goal; it just happens to be clean. And Hollywood does, once in a while, pump out something that actually is clean.

But their focus wasn’t to be clean; their focus was to tell a good story. That’s our Number One focus.

We understand the concept of being able to be trusted when we produce a film—that the faith is not trashed, and that we’re not slipping in things that are not good for the Spirit.

But most of the time, our goal is to just produce a good story, and the clean part already kind of comes along with us.

And so we’re kind of hoping that we can eliminate that concept of a clean film, necessarily, but to really focus on just good films; because there’s plenty of clean films that actually are not very good films. And so our goal is to get past that and to focus strictly on. We don’t want people watching the films that we produce so they can kind of feel sorry for us, or just because we’re sweet or we’re of the same faith.

We want you to plunk that same \$10 down at the theater as you would if you went to see “Avengers” or something like that.

We may not have the budget of those things, but we can do our best to produce stories that are intriguing and make you want to stay. So that hopefully helps clarify a “clean” film and how most LDS artists take that phrase.

Our goal is to bring quality. We have a really good example that is from the faith-based community, or the Kendrick brothers.

Now the Kendrick brothers, I believe they’re Baptists, and they’re part of the church or like assistant pastors, and they just started making movies in the early 2000s. And thus they went on to make “Flywheel” and “Facing the Giants” and “Fireproof.” And each time their movies, while the quality in the earlier days, you know, some of the acting might have been not that great, and some of the technical stuff may not have been perfect. But the Spirit was really there with their films, and each time they profited.

And as they profited, they were able to make a better and a better movie, to where now they’re almost Hollywood-level films, and so they’ve done a wonderful job.

You know, Hollywood has had 100 years to get it right, and they still don't always get it right. They still make crap sometimes, just to put it bluntly.

But we're always trying to do what we can to bring quality to the filmmakers. We also have a goal of telling stories that Hollywood never will.

Hollywood would never really tell the stories, the true stories, of either the early Saints or whether it be the Book of Mormon or whether it be anything else that might be church-related.

And so it's kind of our mission to be able to do that and to bring it to the public, so that we're able to present things in, not necessarily a positive squeaky light, but in a light that's true and honest; and that way people can be moved by it and changed, if possible.

Figure out the financials and the platforms. Yeah, this is very interesting. You know that in the film world, things are changing.

Back in the day, you used to be able to produce a film and play it in the theater. And if you didn't make all your money back in theater, you always kind of leaned on DVD to make up the difference. And that would be what we'd always say, "Okay, well, what we don't make in the theater we'll make it back on DVD." Well, now that the DVDs are kind of dying, that model doesn't work much anymore.

And streaming is kind of a mystery in many cases. You can't really totally judge as an independent filmmaker and distributor. You can't totally judge when you produce a film: "I'm going to make it for this much, and in streaming I'm going to make this much." I know that we're getting better at it and we're figuring it out, but you can't always rely on that. And so we utilize the festival as a place to be able to talk about these changes.

One of our partners is Living Scriptures, and you remember "Living Scriptures," back in the day. In the '80s, they used to sell their animated Book of Mormon movies door to door, and that was the way to do it, and that's how you saw it then. Today that model, of course, no longer exists, and so "Living Scriptures" got smart and jumped right into the streaming platform, and now they stream just about everything that's LDS.

So they're an example. Excel Entertainment is one of our partners, and Covenant Communications and others. They come and they spend time with us, and we talk about what are they looking for and what are the numbers, and how are we going to do this. And so we hope, in many cases, that we walk away with some kind of answer.

Raising money, making money. We've got to be able to know if we're going to raise money, and how we're going to make it back. That's like the never-ending question because money is always the problem when it comes to getting films made.

Marketing. Marketing is another thing that, you know, how do we market a film? We've got to be able to work with experts who have had success on what they've done, to be able to market their films so that they can get in front of the right people, to be able to see the films.

Distribution, as we talked about earlier, it changes. You know, theatrical DVD, TV online—we've got to know where the films are going to go. And so this festival allows people to have those discussions in answering "what to do with my film when I'm done with it." And to build trust with the audience. We want the audience to be able to come to the festival and know that for the most part, they're going to see things that will not necessarily offend them.

Now, sometimes we have hits and misses—not often, but once in awhile, we've shown films that weren't necessarily rude or offensive, but some might have been a little scary, or there might have been a little bit of light language or something, and we allow some of that to happen to what I call a light PG-13 level. So we try to keep it to that level because we know some stories are intense, and filmmaking has changed in these days.

But we're trying to keep it the best we can so that the audience can trust us when they come and see it. And usually, if we show something that might have some adult themes, we'll put some kind of notice in the program so they'll know ahead of time.

Practicing humility in an ego-driven business. Oh my gosh, this is something that is kind of a personal thing for me.

The film business is a very ego-driven business. It is all about "me" and when you have actors and directors and musicians all coming together to produce something beautiful, quite often a film can become successful because a certain individual did an amazing job. And so sometimes it becomes normal for that individual to get a lot of credit and a lot of praise. And when that happens, I'm going to be blunt, it'll go right to your head.

And so, as we try to infuse the gospel in what we're doing, sometimes that doesn't work. Sometimes it's contrary to be praising somebody else when you see a lot of the films made by faith-based filmmakers.

That's why I kind of referenced the Kendrick brothers. The Kendrick brothers, when you watch there, behind the scenes while there are people in front of the camera acting, when you see they're behind the scenes, they sit there and they praise God. They say, "We were trying to do this scene and it was tough," or "We were trying to get this film made and we didn't know how. So we got on our knees, and we went to the Lord and we prayed, and it worked. And it worked out because of the Lord." They gave the praise to the Lord. And a lot of times I think, as LDS filmmakers I don't necessarily think that a lot of the filmmakers actually give the praise to the Lord.

They give the praise to themselves: "Oh, how was my performance?" "How was my directing—or my writing?" "Oh, he was so great!" you know, and you want to do that. You want to be able to give credit where credit is due.

But the ultimate credit really should be given to the Lord, and so in an ego-driven business we strive hard to hopefully, you know.

We can't tell people what to do or how to act—that is by no means our goal. But we hope to be able to at least be somewhat of an example to remember why we're here and what this festival is all about. So there's some really good things happening in LDS Cinema. We know that season two of "The Chosen" and if you haven't seen "The Chosen" it's not LDS-produced but it is LDS-backed. And so we know the Church has a lot to do with "The Chosen"—or, not necessarily the Church, but members of the Church have had a lot to do with it.

But it's a lot of non-LDS people who are people of other faiths, who are producing the show and so that's been an amazing series that has been out, and has really wowed the audiences to where now they're doing another season.

There's also other films that are being produced right now. We have one by the Bonner family called "Green Flake" that is going to be an amazing film, and we don't know whether we're going to show it in the festival, but we are hoping to. Either way, we cheer them on and we hope for their success. And it's the same with any of them: T.C. Christiansen, Garrett Batting, John Lyde. These are all our fellow filmmakers who are always out working hard, making their films, and I know there's another list a mile long of these filmmakers who are trying really hard and producing good material. And so anyway, so that's kind of the latest and the greatest with the LDS Film Festival. I can't necessarily share with you what we're going to show this year because we have just now begun our submissions.

And so, from September to December, we'll be watching all the films. And by the first of January, we're deciding what we're showing. Then the last week in February at the Scera theater, we're going to have another three and a half days of the festival.

And given the current conditions today, we don't know exactly how that will be. We hope that we'll all just be able to walk in and enjoy the festival, like we did last year, where we had our festival just right before COVID hit, but we are very blessed with the things that we've been able to do. So anyway, thank you for allowing me to have this time to speak to you about the LDS Film Festival. Have a wonderful day! Welcome to the 2020 LDS Film Festival for 20 years the LDS film festival has showcased the best LDS entertain.

We'd like to say thank you to our sponsors: the Utah Film Commission, XL Entertain, the Samuel H. Smith Foundation, Living Scriptures, Motion Picture Association of Utah, Covenant Communications, Deseret Book, the BYU Library Special Collections, Utah Film Studios, and the Scera Center for the Arts.