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“I Ain’t So Sure but What the Lord Done Put These Folks in Our Path for a Reason”: Latter-day Saints Building Communities Through Dancing in John Ford’s Wagon Master

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“I Ain’t So Sure but What the Lord Done Put These Folks in Our Path for a Reason”: Latter-day Saints Building Communities Through Dancing in John Ford’s Wagon Master

Abstract
One of Ford’s lesser known works, Wagon Master (1950), utilizes Mormonism’s affinity for dancing to build bonds between diverse groups, thus epitomizing the director’s optimistic vision of a united and progressive America. Through the development of the narrative and Wagon Master’s mise-en-scène, Ford displays a keen awareness of Mormon culture and the reasons dancing still holds such significance to members of the religion. Surprisingly, the film also captures a core tension of LDS culture: the desire to receive the inclusion of the rest of society whilst remaining a distinct and faithful people. For the Saints in the film, dancing navigates a path for them to temporarily resolve this conflict.

Keywords
Mormonism, John Ford, Western, Dancing

Author Notes
Ian Pettigrew is currently an instructor at Zhejiang University, teaching courses on film and literature. He is working on a book on the films of Ermanno Olmi. He would like to thank William Rothman, Oscar Jubis, and Maribeth Pettigrew for their comments and suggestions related to this article.
In his westerns, war films, and cinematic endeavors in other genres, the
great director John Ford undoubtedly shaped many American identities and visions.
Indeed, one of Ford’s themes repeatedly returned to and expressed visually is a
theoretical America that struggles to unite. In several of his films, westerns and
non-westerns, dancing suggests a willingness of the characters to form a
community, a representation of the participants’ future commitment to one another
in facing the hardships of life together (e.g. at the government camp in *The Grapes of Wrath* [1941]; the famous sequence in front of the church framework in *My Darling Clementine* [1946]; the officer’s dance near the opening of *Fort Apache* [1948]).

One of Ford’s lesser known works, *Wagon Master* (1950), utilizes
Mormonism’s affinity for dancing to build bonds between diverse groups, thus
epitomizing the director’s optimistic vision of a united and progressive America.
Through the development of the narrative and *Wagon Master’s mise-en-scène*, Ford
displays a keen awareness of Mormon culture and the reasons dancing held and still
holds such significance to members of the religion. Surprisingly, the film also
captures a core tension of LDS culture: the desire to receive the inclusion of the rest
of society whilst remaining a distinct and faithful people. Sociologist Armand L.
Mauss observed that in American society, regarding Mormonism, there remains “a
certain residue of the nineteenth-century aura of disreputability, with occasional
remarks, whether snide or in jest, about polygamy, theocracy, or other perceived traits.”¹ For the Saints in *Wagon Master*, dancing navigates a path for them to temporarily surmount this resistance felt by other Americans toward their belief system and practices.

Dance has served as a fundamental building block of human culture even prior to the dawn of civilization. Famed historian Will Durant explained “no art so characterized or expressed primitive man as the dance. He developed it from primordial simplicity to a complexity unrivaled in civilization, and varied it into a thousand forms.”² This art predates even language as a form of communication, expressing through bodily movement complex thoughts, desires, and feelings. As many civilizations developed, dance became a central piece of their cultures, often functioning as a ritual for community building or other celebratory events.

As the cinema developed, it was natural that early practitioners would attempt to merge the new medium with dance by taking advantage of the motion inherent in dancing to experiment with and promote cinema’s potentiality. Fusing these arts together not only provided spectacle but also mimicked the sentiment of vitality created when we move and shift our bodies. For example, the serpentine dance, made famous by Loïe Fuller, was filmed by many of the cinema’s first artists because of the amount of movement involved in this particular dance, including the rapid motions created by the performers’ dresses. In these dances “the translucent folds of a woman’s dress, dancing across the frame, tangibly animated the surface
of the film screen and gave it moving texture.” This animation immediately symbolized to many audiences a preservation or creation of something, even an abstract union between themselves and the personages on screen or within the world of the film itself. As film language and narrative evolved, dance in the cinema often came to represent a spiritual, romantic, or communal union in international films such as the musicals choreographed by Busby Berkeley (Gold Diggers of 1933 [1933]; 42nd Street [1933]), The Red Shoes (1948), An American in Paris (1951), The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (1964), The Red Detachment of Women (1970), and Pulp Fiction (1994).

For Latter-day Saints, dancing has held a special place in their religion’s culture at least since their brief sojourn in Nauvoo. The religion’s affinity for dancing clearly distinguishes it from most other Christian religions, especially since many American belief systems were hostile to the idea of dancing in the 19th century when Mormonism was founded. Leona Holbrook wrote, “the membership of the early Mormon church was drawn from puritanical New England, and from other areas where churches were opposed to play, and particularly hostile to dancing, though sometimes admitting play-party games.”

One reason for these converts’ commendation of dancing stems from the belief in Mormon theology that an essential purpose of the human experience is to receive a body. The body is not a cursed consequence of the fall from the Garden of Eden, but a gift to be celebrated and cultivated. In his interview with Helen
Whitney in the documentary *The Mormons* (2007), religion scholar Terryl Givens commented on the cultural significance of dancing in Mormonism:

The philosopher Nietzsche once wrote: ‘I should never believe in a God who should not know how to dance,” and I feel the same way. There is in the Mormon faith a kind of celebration of the physical, which I think is a little outside the Christian mainstream. Of course, in the early 19th century almost all of the Protestant denominations were condemning dancing, for example, as a device of the devil. Meanwhile, the Mormons are even dancing in the temple.5

In the Mormon book of scripture Doctrine and Covenants 29:34, God states “wherefore, verily I say unto you that all things unto me are spiritual.” In Latter-day Saint doctrine the sacred is also part of the mundane, part of the quotidian that adherents can discover even in exploring and enjoying the motion of swinging and rocking their bodies to non-devotional music.

The second president of the Church, Brigham Young, actively encouraged the initial generations of Saints and his own children to pursue dancing. As he led them further west to their eventual destination in Utah, the Saints would hold nightly dances, even during tumultuous periods when many lives were lost during the dangerous trek. It was a practice he and other Mormons had felt excluded from in the religion of their youth.6 For many years dancing remained a cultural touchstone for members of the Church around the world through ‘road shows’, pageants, dancing competitions, and monthly dances hosted at the local
Currently, churchwide competitions and ‘road shows’ no longer occur, but an appreciation for dance still exists in Latter-day Saint culture. A recent tradition has developed since 2004 attempting to revive dances that celebrated historic church events and promoted unity with the community. These events feature local members, who have spent months choreographing traditional dances, performing in ‘cultural celebrations’ to observe the dedication of new LDS temples. The disproportionate number of Latter-day Saints featured on the reality television show So You Think You Can Dance also reflects an element within the church that still considers dance an important cultural activity.

In the 1940s John Ford had employed Mormon extras in several films shot in Utah and Arizona’s Monument Valley, noting their excellent dancing skills, and he decided to put them to use in Wagon Master. Ford was originally interested in the idea of making a film about the Boers’ founding their own nation in South Africa. However, because of the racism associated with the settlers he switched the focus of his upcoming project to Mormon pioneers and a similar journey in the American Southwest. And this proved to be a perfect pairing.

Humanities academist Harold Bloom imagined a future poet writing the early story of the Saints. “Nothing else in all of American history strikes me as material poetica equal to the early Mormons, to Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Parley and Orson Pratt, and the men and women who were their followers and..."
Ford, the great cinematic poet of the American frontier, certainly saw this potential in featuring the Mormons. Andrew Sarris wrote that “Ford had found in the Mormons a truly moral pioneer stock, a people obsessed less with conquering the continent than sharing it with all and sundry. For once, the plot had been ingeniously contrived to reinforce the theme of accommodation.” This theme of accommodation actually allowed Ford to move beyond his past depictions of a savage land needing tamers or, as would be the case in much of his later work, the troubled ethics of the tamers.

For the esteemed director, *Wagon Master* was a relatively small personal project that has only been granted a place among Ford’s other masterpieces as a result of scholarly recognition years after its release. It contains perhaps the most perfect realization of the Fordian community and was a personal favorite. Looking back at his career after he had made his last movie in 1967, the esteemed director recalled “*Wagon Master* came closest to being what I had wanted to achieve.”

Seemingly ignoring *Wagon Master*, some auteurist film scholars summarized Ford’s work in readings similar to Peter Wollen’s expressed in his *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema*. “Ford finds transcendent values in the historic vocation of America as a nation, to bring civilization to a savage land, the garden to the wilderness. At the same time, Ford also sees these values themselves as problematic; he begins to question the movement of American history itself.”

*Wagon Master* is an exception within this dichotomy, happily episodic, almost like
an American *Flowers of St. Francis* (1950); it permits Ford to present a vision of an America that could exist if its inhabitants cheerfully integrated and accustomed themselves to one another.

Ford’s cinema, especially his Westerns, evolved substantially after he returned home from serving as a commander in the US Navy during the Second World War. The changes wrought in the world following World War II deeply affected the themes, aesthetics, and content of all American film genres and many of the filmmakers who served in the armed forces. Frank Capra, soon after he had begun directing *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), wrote in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* that the war “had caused American filmmakers to see the movies that studios had been turning out with new eyes.”¹⁴ The development and influence of *film noir* during the war tinged even non-gangster or detective related dramas with its somber post-war perspectives (e.g. *Leave her to Heaven* [1945]; *Pursued* [1947]). The western could no longer operate in its own cultural bubble in its depiction of Native Americans, Americans’ Manifest Destiny, and the unquestioned moral authority of figures regarded as heroes.

John G. Cawelti wrote that a new vision of the West had emerged in the immediate post-war period. “Instead of simply affirming the traditional morality and dramatically resolving conflicts within it, this new image of the West encouraged a richer exploration of the tensions between old moral assumptions and new uncertainties of experience.”¹⁵ Ford’s westerns of this period, from *My
Darling Clementine (1946) to The Searchers (1956) and Sergeant Rutledge (1960), reflect the changing attitudes in the United States towards groups and individuals who had been somewhat demonized in the past but were given new consideration in this era. Wagon Master also reveals this new inclusiveness presenting several ostracized groups, specifically Mormons, Native Americans, traveling horse traders, and prostitutes, and demonstrating their success in forming a new civilization and a Fordian American community.

Several scholars have commented on the simplicity of the film, including Tag Gallagher. Writing that the film is one of the director’s most rewarding, he noted that its magic “tends…to elude many viewers, particularly upon first viewing and particularly because purity and simplicity define that magic, for such qualities are far from those usually associated in the public mind with Great Motion Pictures.”16 Jim Kitses offered a similar appraisal in his assessment of the work. “Puzzling, almost mysterious in its simplicity and whimsy, Wagon Master insinuates its spiritual character gently and diplomatically, while simultaneously expressing delight in its own unique and vital world.”17 Indeed, the film resists the era’s tendency to be colored by film noir’s influence, instead relying on the comedic elements offered by the tension between the outcast groups and within the Mormon community itself.

The film characterizes the Mormons through two polarities that restrict them from immediately assimilating themselves spiritually with the other two
groups. Elder Wiggs (Ward Bond) has a foul temper and a propensity to swear (earning him chastisement even from the wagon masters). Adam Perkins (Russell Simpson), stands at the other end of the spectrum; an intolerant zealot unwilling to accept other cultures that conflict with his hardline view of Mormonism and how its members should live.

The film opens with a bank robbery in Crystal City by the Cleggs, a band of outlaws who murders the teller who takes a shot at their leader Uncle Shiloh (Charles Kemper). After this opening scene and the film’s title sequence, we are introduced to Travis (Ben Johnson) and Sandy (Harry Carey Jr.), two horse traders on their way to Crystal City. The two cowboys are ostracized from Crystal City alongside the Mormons and the traveling hoochie-coochie show after they upset the town’s marshal. Before being forced out, the Mormons propose that Travis and Sandy become their wagon masters on their journey to the San Juan Valley. Wiggs tells Travis that by the next summer a hundred Mormon families will be moving to the valley, and they are counting on an initial group to set up crops, but the two cowboys resist the original offer.

The Mormons gather at the edge of town, discouraged but attempting to lift their spirits by singing “Come, Come Ye Saints” before they start their perilous journey. Armed horse riders from Crystal City approach their circle to remind them it is time to leave. Addressing the other Mormons, Wiggs evokes Mormonism’s tumultuous history and the necessity for the LDS church at times to “go it alone.”
After Elder’s speech, he vocally wishes that Travis and Sandy would “give the Lord a hand” in helping them to the valley. He then asks Sister Ledyard (Jane Darwell) to blow her horn, a visual signifier that many may, with contextual reinforcement in the film, read as a reference to a distinctly Mormon symbol, the Angel Moroni (image 1).

The statue of the Angel Moroni atop many of the Church’s temples certainly stands as one of the most recognized symbols of the faith, representing the call to

(Image 1)

the world for the establishment of Zion. In a session of the Church’s general conference from 1993, Gordon B. Hinckley (then an apostle, but later the Church’s fifteenth president), spoke of the figure on top of the Salt Lake City temple, referencing the LDS belief that it “represents the angel spoken of by John the Revelator when he declared with prophetic vision: ‘and I saw another angel fly in
the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people.”

Although this scripture assists in establishing a scriptural rationale for Latter-day Saints to proselytize, it also evokes the need to build communities across national boundaries and cultures. Mauss opens his landmark study of the shifting role of Mormons in American society by comparing the Angel Moroni with another important Mormon symbol, the beehive. He suggests that the angel “represents the charismatic element in Mormonism.” In the film, Sister Ledyard’s horn blowing acts as a prayer to God for assistance and a plea to the two horse traders to reconsider their decision to not accompany them. The Mormons recognize their need for assistance and their very real and present need for ‘others’, not part of those within their religion, to create a community with them. The scene also foreshadows the musical union, before the dances, of Sister Ledyard’s horn with the drum and the flute played by members of the hoochie-coochoie wagon after they commence their journey together.

This scene typifies the film’s extraordinary ability to perceive one of the fundamental struggles of Latter-day Saint culture from its origins to the present day. In their discussion of Mormons’ recent representations in American popular culture, Lynita K. and Chad B. Newswander, and Lee Trepanier stated that Mormons have traditionally been characterized as “from another time and place, an “other” and an outsider”. Givens also summed up this conflict in his book People
of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture. In Mormonism, “isolation is often felt as a burden of exclusion and is frequently transformed into a quest for connections and universals. Mormons insist on the need for a gospel restoration, but then feel the sting of being excluded from the fold of Christendom they have just dismissed as irredeemably apostate.”22 Trepanier and Lynita K. Newswander further this claim, stating that this exclusion arises from Americans projecting “their own fears and prejudices upon the Mormons, a group about which they know little and which, despite its continued efforts to embrace and embody all that is American, remains outside the mainstream.”23

Some may attribute the Mormons’ isolation at the beginning of this film to Ford’s structuring his communal dilemma. But Ford was aware of Mormon culture as exhibited by his stated appreciation for the Church’s members, their dancing skills, and the awareness the film shows of the Church’s cultural peculiarities (e.g., Adam once refers to a Native American woman as ‘Sister Lamanite’24; jokes are made by the Saints about others remarking on their ‘Mormon horns’ and polygamy).

The film introduces Mormon culture with amicable jesting, certainly not in a derisory manner, which facilitates our belief that the union between the groups in the film can take place. This attitude also entrenches The Mormon cultural dilemma at the heart of the film. Wagon Master’s Mormons are well aware of their idiosyncrasies, but they also desire inclusion and acceptance despite their religion’s
distinct principles and beliefs. Only when the Mormons overcome this tension can the community be formed.

Not too long after Sandy and Travis join the Saints the group hears a guitar that leads them to a hoochie-coochie bandwagon, stranded in the desert and out of water. The Mormons have no problem giving them enough provisions to return to Crystal City. But the city has also just forced this group out and the wagon masters feel it would be wrong to leave these people to fend for themselves.

Adam and several other Mormons voice their opposition to being associated with the hoochie-coochie show, especially upon discovering that, out of wedlock, one of the women is romantically linked to Doctor A. Locksley Hall (Alan Mowbray) who is at the head of the group. At this point Elder acts as a mediator and states “I ain’t so sure but what the Lord done put these folks in our path for a reason.” The rest of the Mormons accept his explanation that God is giving them the chance to help people in need. Whether God is involved or not is of little concern to the wagon masters and the bandwagon; they are content with whatever viewpoint the Mormons adopt for their mutual survival.

Soon, they joyously discover a river and hold a dance to celebrate their combined success in surviving the odds fate had allotted them (image 2). At first only the Mormons are dancing; the wagon masters enjoy the rambunctious festivities as spectators and members of the hoochie-coochie bandwagon curiously watch as outsiders. After the first song, Elder asks Adam to play the ‘Chuckawallah
“Swing” so that he can get a Texas Star Square dance started. Elder promptly walks over to the hoochie-coochie bandwagon and invites the doctor’s love interest, Fleuretty Phyfe (Ruth Clifford), to join him. Travis, who has been flirting with Denver (Joanne Dru), also leads her to the dance floor. Sandy runs over to Prudence (Kathleen O’Malley), Adam’s daughter, and asks for the pleasure of dancing with her. The dance begins and the group on the floor grabs each other’s hands and form a hopping circle (image 3). Still sitting at the bandwagon, even the seemingly haughty Dr. Hall taps his feet in time with the rhythm of the song (image 4).
In overcoming their isolation through dancing, the Mormons also make a choice to engage in an activity that some may perceive as skirting a little too close to sexual activity. The dances the Mormons participate in during *Wagon Master* are from popular culture or, as will be discussed below, of a specific ritualistic nature with the Native Americans. In an excellent article examining this contradiction, Megan Sanborn Jones confirmed that 19th century LDS dancing was not unique among the rest of American dancing. She also suggested that in the past, the Church tried to find a middle road where the doctrines regarding viewing our bodies as gifts could be appreciated through dance while resisting some of the sensuality of popular dancing.

Jones wrote of this situation as an opportunity for play, or an opportunity for Church members to exercise their own judgement and freedom of choice.

The Church's institutional concern over the dangers of unregulated recreational dancing points to the power of play. Even in a religion grounded in the theology of the redeemable body, there is an awareness that play has the potential not just for positive growth, but also resistance of hegemony or corruption of the playful subject.25

In this sense, dancing serves as an objective correlative, representing the Church’s insistence that its members use their own judgement in governing themselves and in how they interact with the world and also granting members a measure of freedom in their interpretation of certain commandments. In the film, the Mormons choose to participate in the dances (even the fiery Adam Perkins) for
the sake of unity and harmony. In doing so, they fulfill Sister Ledyard’s earlier symbolic call for the formation of Zion.

The type of play enabled by dancing implies a constant spiritual adaptation to God’s will. Although not specifically discussing westerns, Stanley Cavell has written about a type of spiritual adaptation created through dance, as described in the sequence above, in another American genre, the romantic comedy. In Cavell’s insightful and rewarding book *Pursuits of Happiness*, he discussed a subgenre within the romantic comedy that has ties with American philosophy, which he entitles ‘comedies of remarriage.’

As an example of the effects this type of unifying dance has in the comedy of remarriage, he examines a scene from *The Awful Truth* (1937) when Lucy (Irene Dunne) sings and dances to “My Dreams are Gone with the Wind” for her ex-husband Jerry (Cary Grant). This performance is the moment when Jerry recognizes that he wants to be with Lucy again after they divorced near the beginning of the film. Cavell says of Dunne’s song and dance,

> It requires the perfect deployment of her self-containment, her amused but accepting attitude toward the necessity for complication, for the pleasures of civilization; one could say it requires her respect for the doubleness (at the least) of human consciousness, for the comedy of being human, neither angel nor beast, awkward as between heaven and earth.26

In this moment of reconciliation, Lucy’s song and dance is both a reflection and celebration of her complex humanity. Though others are present during the
performance, a private bond is formed between the couple, rekindling for them what makes a relationship exciting and worth having.

In Ford’s *Wagon Master*, dancing together likewise becomes a performative confirmation, a type of play as suggested by Jones, of the groups’ devotion to one another, facilitating, and expanding John Ford’s vision of an America ever striding towards perfection. Mormonism’s views on dance, in general and as expressed by the dances featuring members of the faith in *Wagon Master*, also require a respect for the comedy of being human in its recognition of the imperfection of inhumanity. In the film, the dance enables participants to set aside the friction created by the antipodes within the LDS community, namely Elder Wiggs’ coarseness and the self-righteous intolerance of Adam Perkins. The dance reaffirms to all of those participating that they accept one another for their strengths and weaknesses, for who they are, whether trailblazer, Mormon or prostitute. The Mormons’ roughness and zealotry and the very business of the hoochie-coochie bandwagon may have alienated them from Crystal City, but they are able to unite through dance in celebrating the discovery of water and the assurance it gives them of survival.

When the Clegg gang reappears in the film during the “Chuckwallah Swing”, this celebration is interrupted and the bank robbers threaten the new union. The Cleggs’ role in the film connotes what the community must purge from itself in order for it to attain the type of bond it desires. This family of outlaws infiltrates the wagon train so that it may hide from pursuing law enforcement.
Soon after the invasion of the Cleggs, the wagon train becomes lost until the group happens upon the Navajos. At first the Indians’ presence seems threatening; the Cleggs pull out their guns, aiming them towards the Navajos. Elder demands that the Cleggs put away their weapons. Unarmed, he then walks over to the Indians with Travis and Sandy. Sandy speaks Navajo and translates greetings from Elder. The Navajo leader voices his dislike for white men, accusing them of all being thieves. When Elder has this translated to him, he states “he’s smarter than he looks”. Sandy is about to relate Elder’s comments to the Indians when Elder interrupts him and says “don’t tell him that, you fool. Tell him we’re Mormons”.

(Image 5)

The Navajos and become excited, repeating it favorably as their leader says that Mormons are his brothers and are not like other white men because they are only little thieves (image 5).
However, the leader is suspicious of Travis because he looks like someone who made him an unfair deal in a horse trade. Travis quickly replies that he is also a Mormon. The leader then invites the wagon train to the Navajo camp that night. By being disguised as Mormons, the rest of the wagon train is permitted to join the Navajos. Even though Travis likely did cheat the Navajo leader in a horse trade, he is pardoned in his new commitment to leading this group through the desert along with Sandy. The Navajos hold a “squaw” dance and the women select their partners to form a ring around the fire (image 6).

(Image 6)

This moment of unification conflicts the facile assumptions and readings some have made of Ford’s films and their representations of Native Americans. One of the results of Native Americans no longer serving as antagonistic and uncivilized figures in many Post-WWII westerns was the development of a new
villain ‘the Yankee Indian.’ This new villain replaced the Native American in westerns, breaking up peace and enabling the community to act violently to ensure the local survival of civilization. Doug Williams stated “the Cleggs in Wagon Master are particularly good instances of the Yankee Indian, as the characters show something of the type’s range. Uncle Shiloh is crafty, but utterly lacking in empathy for anyone other than his sons. As a false pilgrim, he speaks the phrases of the true pilgrim, but interprets their meaning in accordance to his own desires.” It is not the barriers of race or religion that exclude the Cleggs from this new America; those who refuse to accommodate themselves to other groups are not invited into this vision.

It would not be appropriate for Ford to attempt to review the struggles in the American west from the perspective of Native Americans and he never attempted to do so. However here, and in other films such as Fort Apache (1948) and The Searchers, he purposefully de-vilifies Native Americans. In grouping them with the Mormons and the other outcasts he reclaims them, adding them to the American family in a Whitmanesque embrace.

In Wagon Master, the friendship between Mormons and Native Americans, and both groups’ penchant for dancing, enables Ford to create a beautiful scene visually that dreams of a more tolerant America. We sense the creation of this society as we watch the film. Gilles Deleuze wrote that while movies do not provide us with the material presence of their representations, they instead spread
an “experimental night” or a white space over us; it works with “dancing seeds” and a “luminous dust”; it affects the visible with a fundamental disturbance, and the world with a suspension, which contradicts all natural perception. What it produces in this way is the genesis of an unknown body, like the unthought in thought, the birth of the visible which is still hidden from view.29

The dialectic struggle of the Mormon settlers in Ford’s film gives birth to a synthetic union made possible by their choice to exercise their freedom of choice in deciding to partner with the other two groups and later, the Native Americans. Although not tangible, this dance’s realization on screen promises the possible and provides a sense of fulfillment for all of the parties concerned (the Cleggs excluded who obviously do not join the other parties in dance) and even the viewer.

After the Cleggs have been killed in a climatic gunfight towards the film’s conclusion, the Mormons are shown arriving at their promised land. They stare over it with wonder and hope for the future as the hymn “Come, Come Ye Saints” seems to emanate from the valley to welcome them. The film’s denouement cuts back to the square dancing scene, followed by scenes of the wagons making their way west accompanied by the music of The Sons of the Pioneers. This ending reminds us of the promised unity discovered in those scenes that will hopefully carry over into the ‘promised land’ and John Ford’s quintessential America.

Harry Carey Jr. related “Uncle Jack always said Wagon Master was his favorite picture. I think The Searchers was his best film, but Wagon Master was the most joyful.”30 Ford often suggested the desire for this type of alliance in his other
films. In *Wagon Master* it is actually achieved through the dance sequences involving the Latter-day Saints. In her seminal essay on the self-reflexive musical, Jane Feur asserted that a self-reflective musical dancing and singing in unison creates a myth of integration. This unification also functions as a type of ritual for the audience. “All ritual involves the celebration of shared values and beliefs; the ritual function of the musical is to reaffirm and articulate the place that entertainment occupies in its audience’s psychic lives.”

Although different from the films Feur specifically discussed, *Wagon Master* achieves this sense of unification within the film and outside of it through the Mormons’ successful temporary navigation of their struggle to simultaneously remain faithful to their religion and also join with others culturally. This balancing act uncannily mirrors Latter-day Saint endeavors within the United States in the past and presently. Trepanier and Newswander propose that “in the unique position of desiring to become American even though they are from America, Mormons have been able to contribute to defining American civilization.” In *Wagon Master*, we witness Ford utilizing the Mormons’ peripheral status to represent the assemblage of a prototypical Fordian America, a community built on celebrated trust and adapting to one another’s needs. Watching the film, a bond forms with others in a mutual acceptance of a common humanity and spirituality through all that dance communicates when performed in devotion to understanding and harmony.


4 Leona Holbrook, "Dancing as an Aspect of Early Mormon and Utah Culture,” 121. Some religious groups in 19th century America did engage in dancing as a manifestation of spirit, but this was often discouraged and repudiated by most Christian groups. Among African-American Christians dancing was more common. See Barry Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 11, 76, and 145.


7 See Terryl L. Givens, ““No Music in Hell”: Music and Dance,” in *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). In these chapters on LDS music and dance he explores the cultural roots of Mormon music and dance and the social functions dance served early in the Church and presently.


20 The name assigned to this group suggests that they are also a band of prostitutes.


24 A Lamanite is one of the two major peoples depicted in a *Book of Mormon* timeline that roughly takes place from 600 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. Many early Latter-day Saints assumed that the Lamanites’ ancestors were Native Americans. However, this belief was never confirmed as doctrine. Textual evidence from *The Book of Mormon* actually suggests there were other peoples living on the American continents than those given the majority of the scripture’s attention.


27 This is an unfortunate term adopted from James Fenimore Cooper’s novels.


References


