

CHOREOGRAPHY

Gerald Griffin—Co-chairman, Rexburg Temple Celebration

In July of 2007, my stake president, Greg Moeller, asked my wife, Marilyn, and me to assist in the development of the Rexburg Temple celebration. President Moeller had been assigned as the chairman of the celebration committee because of his “administrative skills”—but he was concerned about his ability to fulfill this assignment alone, because at the time his vocation as an attorney had involved him in a difficult case, which looked like it would siphon much of his time. I was at first confused by this invitation, not knowing for sure what this assignment would entail. After watching just a few minutes of one of the DVD’s he gave me, it became clear that these celebrations generally involved youthful, energetic performances of dance and music—often displaying local culture and tradition. Throughout the ensuing days and weeks, I felt the weight of trying to create a framework that could utilize a variety of media to tell the story of our area. Our culture, our history, was that of the Mormon pioneers—and though this story was not unfamiliar in general terms, I felt that, in specific reference to the Teton Valley and Upper Snake River Plain, there was much that could and should be told.

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We tell stories about important events and sacred experiences in the hope that they may inspire those who hear them. One such story from my own family’s history took on additional significance for me as I participated in the development of the temple celebration.

My maternal grandfather, Gerald Miller Steed, was called to serve a mission to South Africa in 1917. After an arduous overland journey to New York City, he boarded a transatlantic steamer headed for Cape Town. The voyage was to be a month’s duration. On board, the young Elder Steed was delighted to meet his new mission president, also heading for South Africa. The mission president’s family was aboard and included one energetic and determined toddler intent on viewing the roily deep from as close to the edge of the ship as possible. This child seemed unusually determined to flee the restraints of parental supervision and propel himself pell mell toward the ship’s rail. His parents, terrified by his behavior, enlisted Elder Steed for the duration of voyage as the young child’s guardian and keeper. As the huge vessel pitched and rolled, it became Elder Steed’s duty to hold the leash tethered to this determined youngster and prevent him from doing himself harm.

My elder cousin, Paul Steed, was called in 1961 to serve a mission to New York City. When Elder Steed reached the mission headquarters, he was called in to meet with the mission president. During the course of the conversation, the story regarding Paul’s grandfather and his voyage

to South Africa was discussed. After a lengthy and amiable meeting his mission president paused, and then said, “I was that energetic child whose life your grandfather literally saved.”

I first heard this story as it was related by my cousin at his father, Seymour’s, funeral. Paul, a member of the Sacramento Temple presidency and a very spiritual man, had made the following statement in reference to that story: “Brothers and Sisters, I have come to believe that events like this are much more choreography than coincidence.” I noted at the time his very deliberate use of the word “choreography.” I reflected on it then and have since. To me, choreography had always been used to describe dance—people moving together—with a pre-conceived plan or pattern to their movements. His use of the term hinted at an expanded definition. An appeal to the dictionary provided a definition that was much more satisfying and revealing to me as it described the term “choreography” as, “the arrangement or manipulation of actions leading up to an event.”

It has been my privilege, for the better part of the past year, to see the choreography that played out in the lives of dedicated people as they prepared what would become a wonderfully inspiring event for all who were fortunate enough to view or participate in it. I am wary of issuing statements revealing events which chronicle individual creative inspiration. They can so easily become immodest and self-serving. However, it is my hope that an account of the genesis and development of the Rexburg Temple celebration may serve in some small way to promote the faith of those who read it.

It became a blessing to me in those days to seek the Lord to gain my own inspiration and to also learn to rely on the inspiration of my stake president. In the months that we served together, I came to rely on his great spiritual strength not only as an example but as a resource as well. He shared with me his vision for the program, relating the inspiration he had felt as he toured the temple—still under construction. He said that the wheat motif was to be featured prominently. It was to be symbolic of the harvesting of souls. He asserted his desire that the concept of gathering the saints to the temple should be related to the gathering of wheat into the garner. He shared scriptures that clearly stated his vision.

I remember as those early days unfolded, I struggled to find the right vehicle for my thoughts. I often prayed for help and inspiration. I was worried about my qualifications. I was not an experienced playwright. I was not a professional dancer or musician. I knew little about acting and stagecraft. Video production was a mystery to me. Yet I recall distinctly that I never experienced much frustration. On the contrary, I was somehow buoyed by the thought that if I just tried to do my best, and accomplished some small task each day, whatever deficit I incurred would somehow be made right.

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A statement from Elder Boyd K. Packer gave me reassurance. He said:

When [great works of art] are produced, who will produce them? Will it be the most talented and the most highly trained among us? I rather think it will not. They will be produced by those who are the most inspired among us. *Inspiration can come to those whose talents are barely adequate*, and their contribution will be felt for generations and the church and kingdom of God will move forward just a little more easily because they have been here.¹

As the production moved forward, President Moeller and I sought counsel. We met with the International Dance Festival producers. We inquired as to how to manage and produce an event of this magnitude. We asked about committees and heads of committees, and about stage managers and backstage managers; we sought advice on music, on dance, on acting, on sound, on video. We determined that we would form a committee and “call” those from our temple district whom we thought could contribute. We developed lists of names. In some cases the lists were long because the talent was so abundant. It was evident in the selection process, however, that our choices were being guided. It was at this time that the “choreography” began to become evident. As we enlisted help, it was not uncommon for people to express not only their willingness but also their fervent desire to be of help. Some had prayed for the opportunity to be of use. Some saw their inclusion in the production as a fulfillment of life-long dreams and desires.

After the committee had been formed, we held meetings and brainstormed as to the best way to present the show. The creative juices started to flow, and ideas came from each individual in rapid succession. Each made a unique contribution, most of the time in his or her particular area of expertise, but at times crossing the boundaries a little to synergize ideas. John Bidwell opined that the production should “flow” like a play. Kendell Nielsen suggested the music be both pre-recorded and played live, conducted by Diane Soelberg. Kendell’s son Justin was given the commission to compose an original score for the entire production—which he did in little more than three weeks—without a complete script and before many of the actual performances were solidified. Wendy Bone saw visions of dance routines displaying harvest, historical, and folk themes. Michael Bone quickly snatched up the assignment to choreograph the “sprinkler pipe dance.” LaNae Poulter envisioned children clad in white walking through wheat fields toward the temple, and Patty Randall suggested costumes of interest and modest expenditure. My own Marilyn recalled newspaper articles written in the local paper containing firsthand accounts of the settlement of the valley by local pioneers. She proved invaluable in helping construct a script that honored their sacrifices. Louis and Diane Clements were there to watch our facts. Maurice Wilkey,

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Brent Pritchett, and David Mann patiently reigned us in and told us what could and could not be done from the technical end.

All of these efforts began to fit neatly into the framework of the story of the Upper Valley. There was never any contention. As I recall it now, there was tolerance, interest, amusement, humor, some good-natured ribbing, and the occasional recognition of a bone-headed idea...again some good-natured ribbing, and ultimately plenty of individual projects and tasks to be completed. Everyone was on board and working together. There was a surprising absence of ego. There was not time for it. We all wanted something great to happen—that was our only goal—and all the while President Moeller conducted and controlled the flow of ideas—always pointing the ship toward the star—the idea that everything we did should inspire people and prepare them for the dedication.

Indeed it became evident as we moved along that the choreography of this vast undertaking was playing out with divine help. The first time I heard the 350 voice choir made up of young people from throughout the temple district sing the adapted arrangements of “Press Forward Saints,” or “Come Ye Thankful People, Come,” I felt chills. Practices for the participants became moving experiences. At times, it was difficult to sing or recite lines because of the strong emotions. Coincidences, resolution of problems, the clearing of scheduling conflicts, the unexpected rapidity with which outside agencies granted requests and even returned phone calls signaled what could only reasonably be seen as divine help. When I asked Noelle Hammond how she possessed the genius to choreograph a dance number that involved hundreds of children, lasted over six minutes, and included a rich visual texture of dozens of interesting movements and unexpected complexity, she simply stated, “I had help.” There was no doubt in my mind what she meant. I believe to greater or lesser degrees, we all felt it. There was much intervention. There was much choreography.

Yes, we encountered challenges. As the great artist Chardin exclaimed, “He who does not feel the difficulties of his art does nothing that matters.” Ironically, most of the criticism we experienced came from those who routinely work with these types of pageants. Our opinion was that their concerns sprang mainly from the fact that this particular celebration was different from anything that they had previously encountered. Ours was not simply a cultural dance festival but a seamless narrative using multi-media to tell the story of our area and how a temple came to be here. Because of this, our inclination was not to rebel against their suggestions even though we disagreed with most of them. Instead of giving up or giving in, there settled over the group a quiet resolve of confidence. We knew we had something special and realized that our task had now become

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I was inspired by the talents and dedication of those with whom I was privileged to work. It was an extraordinary privilege to be allowed to be involved. I saw people taken by the Lord beyond the limits of their natural talents. I grew close to those who I knew were working toward the goal as hard as I was. I felt a tremendous kinship and similarity of thought with my stake president—a very rational, literal, and organized person who began to see the world of the artist and who ultimately made many artistic contributions himself. And through it all, our fervent hope remained that our efforts would spiritually prepare the people of this area for the important event that would transpire the day after the celebration—namely, the dedication. Our success, if we had any, was accomplished by...choreography. ☺

NOTE

Boyd K Packer, “The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord,” *Ensign*, August 1976 (emphasis added).