The Future of Latter-day Saint Cinema

From niche comedies to crossover ambition, Latter-day Saint filmmaking is entering a more serious and sustainable age.

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I still remember pulling out the VHS of "God's Army" in my parents' living room. As a socially anxious high school sophomore, this was, in many ways, the first time I felt seen. These were my people, my quirks, my culture, packaged the same way as "The Prince of Egypt" or "The Legend of Bagger Vance."

By my senior year, with the release of "The Singles Ward," it was clear that not only could we portray ourselves, but we could laugh at ourselves, too.

For many in my generation, the idea of "Latter-day Saint cinema" still calls up that very specific world: missionaries with comic timing, ward basketball, Utah County social

codes, and the peculiar thrill of hearing one's own subculture reflected back from a movie screen. That world was real. It mattered. It was commercially surprising while it lasted. And then, almost as suddenly as it arrived, it seemed to disappear.

The feeling many people carry is not just that those movies ended, but that Latter-day Saint filmmaking itself somehow went quiet.

But the story is much more varied and interesting than that. In many ways those early aughts productions set the stage for a burgeoning Latter-day Saint cinema today, best embodied by the new release "The Angel," which may be bigger and more interesting than anything we've seen before.

The Beginnings

Latter-day Saint cinema developed in fragments for nearly a century. Film was first used to disparage the faith. Movies like "A Trip to Salt Lake City" satirized the faith, while "A Victim of the Mormons" was more straightforward propaganda.

In response, the Utah Moving Picture Company produced the film "One Hundred Years of Mormonism" in 1913. It was a monumental feature for its time and was shown for several years. In 1915, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints funded the film "The Life of Nephi," though its projected sequels never materialized.

By midcentury, institutions like the BYU Motion Picture Studio trained talent and produced hundreds of films for the Church's use, while later decades expanded that world through visitors' center films, pageant-style historical productions, television, and VHS.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Latter-day Saints were not only appearing in and making mainstream entertainment, but were also building the technical skills, professional networks, and imaginative confidence that would make independent feature filmmaking possible.

So while the modern story begins when "God's Army" appeared in 2000, it did not come out of nowhere. It was a breakthrough—but it was a breakthrough built on generations.

Richard Dutcher's "God's Army" opened in March 2000 and proved that a movie made by a Latter-day Saint about recognizable Latter-day Saint life, and marketed primarily to Latter-day Saint viewers, could actually make money. It proved there was a profitable niche market and marked the beginning of a period in which filmmakers began to portray the tradition from the inside.

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Once that door opened, others rushed through it. The most visible strain of the movement was not the meditative, auteurist branch that Dutcher briefly seemed to promise, but the comic and broadly accessible one. HaleStorm Entertainment became one of the emblematic names of that era, producing or distributing films that treated Latter-day Saint life as a comic social universe with its own rhythms and inside jokes. Those films had an obvious audience, especially in the Wasatch Front corridor. They also had something rarer in any niche market: novelty. People show up because no one has shown them this before. They come for recognition, for community, for the sense that an in-group language has become public culture.

Sadly, a storyline in Richard Dutcher's "God's Army 2" prompted a public feud between Dutcher and HaleStorm's Kurt Hale, prompting the father of this period of Latter-day Saint cinema to leave the Church within a few years.

Novelty also proved not to be a permanent business model. By the middle of the decade, even people inside the movement were saying so out loud. In 2006, as "Church Ball" was being released, Hale was already describing a diminishing box office, an oversaturated market, and an audience that seemed tired of the cycle. He even suggested that "Church Ball" might be the last comedy of its kind and said the company was looking beyond the narrow niche toward a broader family audience. With uncertain returns, investors dried up, and audience interest began to evaporate.

The old wave did not end because Latter-day Saints lost interest in seeing themselves onscreen. But eventually the movies had to offer something besides familiarity. In a 2014

reflection on the earlier boom, Jim Bennet said the "hunger" was still there but the novelty had worn off, and that now the movie had to actually be good.

There was also a broader industrial change working against niche cinema. The old independent-film economy had long relied on the possibility that a modest theatrical run could be followed by meaningful life on DVD, where niche audiences often compensated for limited box-office reach. As DVD revenue collapsed in the late 2000s, that safety net deteriorated across the industry. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in 2009 that DVD sales, once a critical profit cushion for many films, had fallen sharply.

The small, regionally concentrated Latter-day Saint film industry was especially vulnerable to that shift. Purchasing a DVD for the whole family to watch over and over again was a very different kind of investment than taking everyone out to the theater. And most of the Latter-day Saint film market was not in areas concentrated enough for theatrical runs. A market already strained by repetition suddenly lost one of the economic mechanisms that had made repetition survivable.

So yes, something ended. But what ended was a particular format: the local theatrical Latter-day Saint niche comedy and indie machine, dependent on insider recognition and modest expectations.

The Middle

What followed has been harder to name because it is not one thing. There is no single banner under which all contemporary Latter-day Saint filmmaking began to march.

Once the first wave of niche comedies and insider-culture films began to lose steam, Latter-day Saint filmmaking stopped looking like a single movement and started breaking into distinct lanes. When that broader economic model weakened, the old "modest theatrical run, then long tail on home video" pattern became much harder to sustain. At the same time, scholars were already observing that filmmakers were experimenting with very different business models: some built their own mini-studios, some went straight to DVD or online sales, and some chased genuine crossover distribution. In other words, the industry did not die. It fragmented.

One of those fragments was the historical-devotional lane, and no figure matters more here than T.C. Christensen. If the HaleStorm comedies captured Mormon culture as social recognition, Christensen kept alive a very different idea of what Latter-day Saint cinema could be: memory, sacrifice, pioneer endurance, conversion, rescue. In the 2010s especially, films like "17 Miracles" and "Ephraim's Rescue" showed that there was still a substantial audience for explicitly Latter-day Saint stories told with seriousness and reverence rather than irony. Christensen was not merely preserving an older form. He was proving that sincerity could still draw viewers, and that overtly Mormon material did not have to disappear simply because the joke-driven boom had cooled.

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Christensen has a talent for telling spiritually uplifting films and turning them in on time and on budget. He represents a through line from the early aughts filmmaking to today, producing a steady string of films that earn back frequently enough so that he can always get the next one greenlit. His 2024 film, "Escape from Germany," made $2.6 million on a budget of less than $1 million. But his vertical of explicitly Latter-day Saint films was narrow and intermittent.

His 2025 release "Raising the Bar: The Alma Richards Story" demonstrates that the line of continuity is still alive. Every artistic ecosystem needs not only innovators but custodians: people who keep faith with inherited stories long enough for a later generation to rediscover their value under new conditions. Christensen has done that work. He has kept a flame alive that flashier players sometimes overlook.

A second fragment moved in almost the opposite direction. These films had unmistakable Latter-day Saint DNA, but were no longer primarily selling themselves as "Mormon movies." This trend began with HaleStorm's attempt at "Pride and Prejudice." But while that thread didn't stick in comedy, Ryan Little's "Saints and Soldiers" created the look and style of film that did. Made on a reported $780,000 budget, it grossed about $1.31 million domestically, and the *Los Angeles Times* noted that while initiated viewers would catch its Latter-day Saint origins, those elements were never overt and the film could be easily appreciated by people with no particular background with the faith. The movie was not asking audiences to care because of its religion. It was asking them to

care because it was a solid war drama that happened to be shaped by Latter-day Saint moral sensibilities.

That lane became even clearer in the 2010s with Garrett Batty's work. "The Saratov Approach" grossed about $2.15 million domestically. Batty followed it with "Freetown," a Liberian civil-war thriller based on the experience of Latter-day Saint missionaries (an artistic improvement in my estimation), but it did not recover its investment.

Batty explicitly said he hoped "Freetown," like "Saratov," would appeal beyond Latter-day Saint audiences. These films still drew from Latter-day Saint experience, missionary life, faith under pressure, providence in danger, but they were being framed as thrillers, war stories, and survival dramas rather than as niche cultural products. That is one of the most important developments in the whole middle period: Latter-day Saint filmmakers were learning how to let their faith shape the story without requiring the audience to share all the background knowledge in advance.

But the market did not support that vision. While DVD sales had begun to sink, streaming had not yet started to acquire independent films. That meant the primary place for these films to find an audience was in theaters, and it was largely in Utah where there was enough audience to support them.

There was a third fragment too, less visible to audiences but hugely important for what came next: infrastructure. In 2005, just as the HaleStorm peak began to fall, the state of Utah passed its first tax incentive for filming. These incentives successfully enticed Disney to film 27 movies in Utah through the mid-2000s, most famously the *High School Musical* franchise.

By the end of the 2010s, the *New York Times* was describing northern Utah as a kind of "mini-Hollywood," built not only around independent faith-oriented films but around The Church of Jesus Christ's own motion picture operations, BYUtv productions, local crews, and a growing freelance workforce. That meant Latter-day Saint-adjacent filmmaking did not simply survive as a market; it survived as a craft community. Crews kept working. Actors kept training. Editors, cinematographers, composers, and producers kept building experience.

These post-HaleStorm years saw some talented filmmakers keep the space alive, as key new artistic ideas emerged and the talent pool grew and matured.

What has begun to happen over the last few years is an evolution of the threads that came out of that heyday. Today's filmmakers have inherited an audience trained by these experiments, and a filmmaking culture that had already spent years learning how to move beyond novelty toward craft, confidence, and authentic crossover.

Today

By the time we arrive at the present, those fragments have begun to recombine. What had been separate lanes in the aftermath of the early aughts Mormon-cinema wave—historical drama, crossover genre work, local craft infrastructure, and festival culture—are now starting to feed one another.

But as always, the story starts with the money. The old model depended on a Utah theatrical audience and then a healthy DVD afterlife. The current one is more layered: owned streaming platforms, licensing deals, audience memberships, eventized theatrical runs, festival exposure, and state incentives. For the first time since the early 2000s, Latter-day Saint filmmaking once again has an economic logic. It is not one logic, but several, and that may be exactly why this moment feels more durable.

No company better represents that new reality than Angel Studios. Angel is not simply the new HaleStorm. It is not primarily a Latter-day Saint movie studio making Latter-day Saint movies. It has a broader impact on the market: a Utah-rooted, values-branded distribution and audience-formation machine that has figured out how to turn moral affinity into a scalable business. Angel's own 2025 annual report shows where the center of gravity now lies. The company reported roughly 2.0 million paying Angel Guild members by the end of 2025, and said those memberships accounted for 65.2% of its total revenue. Its licensing revenue, notably, includes deals with platforms such as Amazon, Apple, and Netflix. Angel also runs its own streaming platform.

That is why Angel's outsized role matters so much. The company says the Guild helps choose what it will market and distribute, that its theatrical strategy can crowd-fund prints and advertising, and that its "Pay it Forward" system lets viewers subsidize tickets for others. Traditional Hollywood separates greenlighting, marketing, and

audience response into different silos. Angel has tried to collapse them into a single loop. It does not simply ask its audience to buy a ticket; it asks them to join, vote, fund, evangelize, and return. It's almost like community organizing with a balance sheet.

The scale of that model is real. Angel reported that it released eight films theatrically in 2025 and was ranked the No. 10 domestic distributor that year. Its reported grosses included $83.2 million for "The King of Kings," $83.9 million for "David," $15.2 million for "The Last Rodeo," and $6 million for "Truth & Treason." Even more revealing than any single title is the shape of the company itself: by the end of 2025 Angel said it had 137 titles under exclusive worldwide distribution, including 101 films and 36 television series. That is not a boutique religious sideline. It is a fully functioning media ecosystem with Utah roots and national reach.

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Angel's importance is not merely financial. It has helped solve a cultural problem too. The first wave of Latter-day Saint filmmaking often sold itself as Latter-day Saint first and cinema second. Angel usually reverses the order. It sells urgency, uplift, eventness, and moral stakes to a broad audience that feels underserved by Hollywood, while still drawing on instincts, networks, and habits of community-building that are recognizably Latter-day Saint. "Truth & Treason" is one of the clearest examples. Here is a story deeply embedded in Latter-day Saint history—the teenage Helmuth Hübener resisting Nazism—packaged not as internal uplift for Church members but as a morally legible, outward-facing historical thriller. Angel first announced it as a limited series adaptation, then shifted it into a theatrical release, and later expanded it back into a four-part streaming series. That fluidity between theatrical event, streaming life, and niche historical subject is exactly what is allowing this newfound success.

But Angel is only one part of this era's story. The broader Utah film scene has begun acting as though it no longer needs to choose between Latter-day Saint identity and indie legitimacy. Zions Indie Film Fest says that aloud.

I spoke with Michell Moore, the festival co-director, who told me that they want Latter-day Saints to have a home at their film festival, but they want to unite with others of

good faith and good artistic instincts.

Today, the festival presents itself instead as a celebration of independent film "from filmmakers worldwide," with a "sophisticated and diverse audience," and Moore describes the event as "inviting everyone," bridging the gap between filmmakers and audiences.

Zions Indie Film Fest has come to the same instincts as Angel. It might seem like Latter-day Saint filmmaking is getting short shrift in this model. But Zions premiered T.C. Christensen's latest film, and held a reading for a script about sister missionaries kidnapped by the cartel. They have managed to create a space that is broad and welcoming, rather than parochial, but where Latter-day Saint cinema can thrive and be represented.

The audience and participants have grown, and the courage to tell Latter-day Saint specific stories in that space is starting to burgeon.

When I spoke to filmmakers at the 2025 Zions Indie Film Fest, they were often concerned about the status of Utah's tax incentives, as they feared work in the state might dry up if they went away. But in March 2026, Utah Governor Spencer Cox announced a robust new round of initiatives allowing the industry to continue thriving in the state.

In the last year of the previous program, it enabled 36 productions across 14 counties, generating more than $136 million in production spending and over 2,600 jobs, with more than 40% of those productions created by homegrown talent and local companies.

When there is a steady source of work for Latter-day Saint filmmakers in commercial work, it allows them the freedom to also tell and finance more personal stories.

And while these filmmakers were sad that Sundance Film Festival was leaving the state, they didn't predict any big consequences, describing it as less connected to the broader Utah-film ecosystem than you might imagine.

Seen in that light, the current moment also feels like the first one in a long time that makes the artistic vision of 80s-era President of The Church of Jesus Christ, Spencer W.

Kimball, sound plausible.

In 1977, he wrote, "Our writers, our motion picture specialists, with the inspiration of heaven, should tomorrow be able to produce a masterpiece which would live forever."

For Latter-day Saint specialists, this nearly fifty-year-old call still lives near their hearts. And we're beginning to see some talented auteurs who could take advantage of this new moment.

If Angel Studios represents industrial crossover, Burgin may represent artistic crossover. He is not simply another promising Utah filmmaker. He is one of the first younger directors in this space to show signs of understanding both the cultural inheritance and the formal challenge.

Burgin began his career outside of Utah, and had to learn early on how to curate his religious impulses so they would be both authentic and appealing to newcomers to the tradition. From what he saw, he predicted in a 2017 essay the renaissance in interest in Latter-day Saints in film. This interest mostly happened with Latter-day Saints as the subjects, not the participants, of mocking portrayals in projects such as "Under the Banner of Heaven," "The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives" and "Heretic." The interest in Latter-day Saints has skyrocketed, and the infrastructure for Latter-day Saints to supply that interest themselves may have finally arrived. Perhaps through Burgin himself.

Burgin's premiere was his student film "Cryo." "Cryo" follows five scientists who awake from a cryogenic sleep without memory and slowly realize there may be a murderer among them. You can tell that "Cryo" is a student film. The budget shows on screen. But it's also a film full of ideas that come from his Latter-day Saint perspective. The film starts with a reference to Lazarus, and continually returns to themes of rebirth and resurrection. It quotes The Book of Mormon, references the veil of forgetfulness, and the protagonists slowly learn to place their salvific impulse outside of themselves.

In an essay marketing the film, he argued that Latter-day Saint filmmakers need to "put story before sermon," and expressed his belief that "we've barely scratched the surface of the narrative potential in our history, doctrine, culture and lore." Perhaps more importantly, he sold the film to a national distributor, had a multi-city theatrical run, and turned a profit—practically unheard of for a student film.

Burgin has then proved that in a series of short films. "The Next Door" a thriller about two missionaries who go on the search when someone they're teaching goes missing. "Java Jive" a comedy about a Latter-day Saint teen, who was hiding his faith, and then gets trapped trying to avoid drinking coffee. "A Scout is Kind" a talky coming-of-age film. These films premiered at important festivals, and won notable awards—including the top award for "A Scout is Kind" at Regal's film festival in Tennessee. The outsider interest is sincere and real.

His most critically successful film to date, "The Angel," is a horror film about a mysterious figure arriving in 19th-century Southern Utah. He co-directed it with his wife Jessica, marking her directorial debut.

Each of these shorts is deeply Latter-day Saint, enjoyable, accessible to a broad audience, and at least as entertaining as the average night on television. (Usually much more.)

This is a serious artistic program that is similar to the trajectories of many successful working directors.

"The Angel" does something earlier Latter-day Saint cinema rarely trusted itself to do. It does not flatten Latter-day Saint culture into a set of jokes, nor reduce it to generic uplift. It fulfills the idea of moving past novelty from the aughts, but in an environment that may finally be able to support it. It treats Latter-day Saint history as aesthetically strange, symbolically rich, and cinematically potent. I am not a fan of horror films, and there are certainly horror beats that may not be for everyone, but this is neither gross-out or jump-scare horror. The fear comes from the sensation that it might just be a little bit real.

The short has been included in Cannes' Short Film Corner, screened widely on the festival circuit, and received a U.K. premiere at Soho Horror Fest. Doug Jones—one of modern genre cinema's great creature actors—plays the title role. This is not an obscure or parochial project. It is a work of genre filmmaking that speaks in a cinematic language outsiders can understand while drawing directly on materials that feel unmistakably ours. After its successful festival run, the film was picked up by Alter, the largest and most prestigious dedicated horror short platform, and premiered last week to a wide audience. It is available to view online.

While the cinematic community has clearly latched on, it also really struck a chord for me within the Latter-day Saint culture. I'm far from the only cultural critic to think so. Stephen Smoot, a Latter-day Saint commentator, wrote for The Interpreter Foundation:

> The Angel … shows how horror, handled with restraint and reverence, can speak powerfully to Latter-day Saint audiences. Instead of relying on gore or cheap shocks, the Burgins build their story through atmosphere, psychological unease, and moral confrontation. The horror here is never gratuitous; it unsettles the viewer to reveal deeper truths about choice, faith, and unseen realities.

If the short generates enough interest, Burgin hopes to expand it into a feature called "The Third Wife," which they say has drawn industry interest and the attention of the Sundance Institute.

That is why "The Angel" deserves to be praised in stronger terms than one usually uses for a promising short. It feels like a reclaiming. A reclaiming of authority over the stories themselves.

When Barrett spoke to me, he was most excited about how interested individuals from outside the tradition are. "[Latter-day Saints] have made a concerted effort to fit in and even assimilate. That generational impulse is not without cause. But when telling our own stories, we have an opportunity to reclaim our peculiarity."

In that sense, perhaps the most hopeful thing one can say about the current state of Latter-day Saint filmmaking is that it no longer needs to choose between exile and self-parody. It no longer needs to survive on insider jokes, nor disappear into vague inspirational branding. It can remember where it came from, learn from what Angel Studios has built, honor the faithfulness of T.C. Christensen, and build toward that future imagined by Spencer W. Kimball.

About the author

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C.D. Cunningham is a founder and editor-at-large of Public Square magazine.