

Interview with Jerry Argetsinger
Monday, March 14, 2022
The Hill Cumorah Legacy Project

Recorded over Zoom

Interviewee: Gerald (Jerry) Argetsinger

Interviewer: Daniel Gorman Jr.

Duration: 45:01

Transcription App: Panopto

As of spring 2022, Jerry Argetsinger, PhD, is Associate Professor Emeritus at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). Jerry is married to Gail Argetsinger, who was also interviewed for this project.

Historical Context: List of Hill Cumorah Pageant Directors

The following list of Pageant directors is based on information provided by Jerry Argetsinger and Neil Pitts.

- 1937–1938: Oliver R. Smith. Pageant overseen by Mission President Donald Colton and written by H. Wayne Driggs.
- 1939–1941: J. Karl Wood.
- 1942–1945: No Pageant because of World War II.
- 1946: J. Karl Wood (original choice); Harold Hansen (replacement).
- 1947–1977: Harold Hansen.
- 1978–1985: Jack Sederholm.
- 1986–1987: Lund Johnson.
- 1988–1989 (beginning of the “New Pageant”): Charles (Chuck) Metten.
- 1990–1997: Jerry Argetsinger.
- 1998–2003: Rodger Sorenson.
- 2003–2018: Brent Hanson.
- 2019 (Final Performance): Shawnda Moss.

Transcript

[00:00]

Dan Gorman: All right, we are recording.

Jerry Argetsinger: [speaking to Gail Argetsinger off-camera] Now, do—Gail, do I need something with this? Do I just say—there’s a “gotta” place, where I—? OK, there we go.

Dan Gorman: All right. So today is Monday, March 14th, 2022. My name is Daniel Gorman. I am speaking via Zoom to Ger—Actually, I’m sorry. Is your name Gerard or Gerald?

Jerry Argetsinger: Gerald.

Dan Gorman: Gerald. I’m sorry—*Gerald* Argetsinger, better known as Jerry, former director of the Hill Cumorah Pageant. Jerry, to introduce yourself to our future listeners, could you tell me what was the position you held at RIT, and what was the position you held in the Pageant?

Jerry Argetsinger: Oh, OK. Jumping right to there, all right. I was hired into the Theatre Department at NTID, which is the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, which is a college of RIT. At the time, I—in 1988, when I joined the [Pageant] directing staff, I was working in a different department, a general education department, also for the deaf, and I was working with the student theater groups at that time. Later on, I came back into the theatre department and worked both in the NTID Theatre Department and the College of Liberal Arts (or, for the rest of the students). I ended up being there 43 years when I retired.

Dan Gorman: And then for a time you were director of the Hill Cumorah Pageant.

Jerry Argetsinger: [laughing] I *was* the director of the Hill Cumorah Pageant. Do you want to take a little running jump into that, or just start there?

Dan Gorman: We can back up a little bit. Now that we’ve established who you are—

Jerry Argetsinger: Right.

Dan Gorman: For context, what is your connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

Jerry Argetsinger: OK. Real quick, getting from the beginning, like we talked about just a couple of minutes ago: My mother joined the Mormon Church when I was two years old, so I was raised with one foot in and one foot out of being a Mormonism [sic]. But I had an older brother who's the bad boy, and I was the younger brother who was the good boy, so I was always tried to be a good Mormon one way or another.

I went on a mission to Denmark, and after—immediately after coming back from Denmark for my mission, things started happening that led me to Rochester and the Hill Cumorah Pageant. I had heard of the Pageant in graduate school. Gail and I actually drove over from Ohio and watched the Pageant once, so I'd at least seen it. And I had read a little about the Pageant in Church magazines, but there wasn't much in public published. I got off my mission. I had been—I had had one year of college and started my second year, and I went home for—home was Oregon—I went home for a for Christmas, and while I was there, I was at a barber shop after hours, and the phone rang, and it was a person from the State Department asking for me. And they said—I said, “Yeah, what'd I do?” They said, “Well, we understand you're a magician.” And yes, I was a professional. I was a professional-quality magician at that time. And I said yes. And he said, “And I also understand you speak fluent Danish,” and I said, “Yes.” He says, “We have a tour going out to Greenland, Iceland, Newfoundland, and Labrador, and we need an act that can speak Danish.” And so, they hired me! It was a two-month trip. I put off my education, but that kind of thing happened to me regularly, putting me into professional situations. I ended up doing three different tours for the State Department and for the Vietnamese soldiers—the American soldiers fighting in the Vietnamese war. So that got me into the profession.

I started my education [in] theater, went into graduate student—graduate school, started focusing on directing and [graduating]—and finished with my Ph.D. in Danish theater, again using that term. So, we looked around. Had a couple of friends in Rochester who let me know that they were looking for a new chair of [05:00] theater at NTID. I applied for it, and I was hired. And so, now I was in place to be working on the Pageant. Because I had gone to **BYU** for my undergrad, for my first degree, I knew some of the people that were working on the Pageant, so the first time I went out, I introduced myself, found the ones I knew, said hi, and ended up being asked to write a column, a short article on it, for the Church magazines. So that got me into knowing the people with Pageant.

But time goes on. I did various things: I worked lighting a little bit; I worked sound a little bit. I'm directing other places in the Rochester area. Summertime, we go other places and direct shows and such. So, when they decided to redo the Hill Cumorah Pageant, I was asked to join the directing crew for 1988. So, that's how I got into the Pageant, and I was an assistant to the director of the show, so that's how I got into it, first of all with Jack Sederholm.

Dan Gorman: Sure. Now, for context, you had seen the Pageant before you were actively involved—

Jerry Argetsinger: That's right.

Dan Gorman: In directing it. And I spoke just moments ago to your wife, Gail, who was a costume designer before you came on board as the director.

Jerry Argetsinger: That's correct.

Dan Gorman: So, what was your experience of, sort of, looking over Gail's shoulder, as it were, at the Pageant? What was your opinion of it before you became actively involved?

Jerry Argetsinger: I'm—yeah, OK. It was a pretty good outdoor drama. The size of that made it unique. It was one of the two oldest outdoor dramas in the United States. It had worked. The people working on the Pageant had put it together with that in mind, and reflecting the principles of outdoor drama, and having a show that was good enough for it. But they really didn't have a directing staff that was professional in any way at the beginning. And by the time we were here, we were watching Harold Hansen in his final years. He started working on the show in—*man*, 1937, and this was now—we were here in Rochester in the late '70s, going into the early '80s, and he's still working here for that last bit of time. He left the Pageant in 1977—[correcting himself] '76. He—he—that's fine; that's enough.

[laughter]

Jerry Argetsinger: So anyhow—so that's how I—we got with that.

Gayle started working on the Pageant, and that was—Gail was a costume designer. She did costumes, and she left a job at RIT herself to work on the Pageant costumes, and she just changed the house into her shop for the Hill Cumorah Pageant. And for us in theater, it's work the way you do it. So, it was not unusual, but it was specifically honed at that. We started having children. We adopted two boys through time there, and I took care of the kids when they were really young and such so that she could do this project.

Dan Gorman: Now, in 1988—well, actually, let me back up.

Jerry Argetsinger: Yeah.

Dan Gorman: What year was it announced that the Pageant was going to be revamped *again*?

Jerry Argetsinger: Ah! It was announced in—it was announced in about 1926 [sic; 1986], about 1926 [sic; 1986], and we heard about it very early on because, through our work at getting my

bachelor's degree, I had become real close friends with a guy that was just a little younger than me named Orson Scott Card.

[laughter]

Jerry Argetsinger: And he was not yet a well-known writer of fantasy and science fiction and such. But he was like me. He was going to school at BYU. [10:00] He was doing shows there. He was learning how to write there. He was in that process. And then he started doing a lot of scripts for Mormon movies. And so, he really developed the ability to write scripts like that very well.

Well, he gave me a call, and he said, "I'm coming out to Palmyra. I want to talk to you, and you can't tell anyone there. Gail can come, but that's it." And so, we got out on the Hill Cumorah and sat down, and Scott said, "They're going to redo the Pageant, which it needs, and I'm going to write it, and we chose you to—for me to talk to because you've been over to Broadway and seen how magic is done at that level. We want a show that has a lot of special effects and such in it, and we feel that your background can help me come up with the facts and ideas and such for the show." And so, we had that conversation, then—so Scott went back to work and worked on the script. And the next thing we knew, it was eight—it was a year and a half later, and we were reading the final draft of the script in a production meeting with Charles Metten, who was going to be directing it in 1988.

Dan Gorman: Now that you knew that you were going to be in the—I suppose the Pageant presidency is the term?

Jerry Argetsinger: Yes. That's my first position with the new show—was I was in the Pageant presidency. Pageant presidency for the Church just means the producer.

Dan Gorman: So as a member of this presidency, what were your responsibilities separate from—yes, you have to mount the show. But this larger reimagining, can you speak a little bit more about how you fit into the administrative process?

Jerry Argetsinger: We were moving into using families, and the way that the families had been used before it was mostly the Mormon missionaries took that over, because the Church decided that they were the only mission in the Church that had summer vacation and brought young ladies from BYU to entertain them while they put this show on, which is kind of an in-joke for the Church. But that's where it was. And so, the new Pageant presidency took the show and made it a Rochester, New York, project. Until then, it had been produced by one of the organizations in Salt Lake City that took care of the visitor's centers and that kind of situation. And so, the Pageant moved to Rochester, and we had to figure out as a presidency, how do we look for a cast? How do we cast the right number? And that became my responsibility because I was the theater person who could read the script and come up with how many people we needed for the different scenes and such. We also realized that, if we hired people by kids' age, we would have way too many kids that [sic] we could handle. Just couldn't work at all. In fact, we tried to do, and we did do, the first couple of years with only children of the staff being in the show, and then added children a little later than that. So, we did that.

And then we started working on the idea of how do we cast the show, and then how do we assign the parts? Chuck Metten had not—had *seen* the Pageant; I think he worked on it one year in that vast 30 years that the Pageant had been going—but he tried to use the method that man that Chuck [sic; Harold] Hansen had done, which was, he'd just look at the people, and he said—we had them walk past in a circle because it was only male roles. There was one role for a female, and it was Mary in the “Jesus is born” [Nativity] scene. So anyhow, we learned very

quickly that that did not work. And so, it was my responsibility to come up with a new way to cast the show and give the parts out to the people that should have them. And so, that was the first big change that I brought to the Hill Cumorah Pageant, was a new way to cast the show.

Dan Gorman: Now, once the show was casted—cast?

Jerry Argetsinger: Cast. Yeah, cast.

Dan Gorman: Cast. I always wondered about the verb tense there.

Jerry Argetsinger: [laughing] Yeah, there's no "ed" on the end!

Dan Gorman: So, sort of walking through, for our listeners' [15:00] sake, sort of a hypothetical Pageant production. So—you've—you cast the show. You have selected people. Now, what do you do?

Jerry Argetsinger: OK! Gail gave you some spiritual experiences. It goes to that, if it's OK, if I can use some spiritual experiences.

[Dan nods toward Jerry]

Jerry Argetsinger: So, I was getting ready to become the director, so I had been on the directing staff for '88 and '89. I was taking over in 1990, and I had to come up with this new way to cast the show. Well, I had been asked to give a talk down in Bath, New York, and I asked this teenager to come with me because he was sharp. He was very—had been his—he and his family lived near the Pageant, where it was put on, and so he had grown up with the Pageant, so I asked him to come with me. And we went down to Bath and were sitting there, and he stood up to give his talk. And while he was giving his talk, I got this strong feeling in my heart that he should play the descending Christ. And it was kind of like, "*He's your descending Christ,*" and it was kind of [looking around dramatically], "Who said that?" There was no voice or anything, but it was that feeling, and then it was, "Oh. That's how it works. OK." I did not tell him that I was

going to use him as the descending Christ, which is the one that came down out of the sky during the show.

As we came to Pageant, as we approached Pageant, I had five assistant directors, one of them a choreographer, another one with special effects. So anyhow, we had worked together to determine how to look at the cast, not as one person at a time going past a group of people, but putting people in age groups for the roles that we had and going out two by two, literally, with assigned scenes, so that there were five of us; there were 10 scenes; we each got two scenes that we had to caste. And we were able to do it in three hours, and it worked.

However, there was a glitch. We thought we were completely done, and we looked over, and we had not cast Mormon and Moroni. Two of the most important roles in the show had not been cast. And it was Mormon when he was getting older, [and] Moroni when he was probably about 19 or so. Well, anyhow, that's a disaster, because, when you go out and have to take someone from another scene and start putting them together into the show, there's a domino effect, and it could end up casting—recasting 50 or 100 people, which is terrible. Well, there were a couple of people that were standing over next to one of the—next to where we were working, and there was a father and a son, and they were about that age. But I said, "What roles did you get when we were just going through and assigning roles?" And he said, "Well, we just got here from Ohio. We were late." And it was a father and a son. They were the right size. They were the right age. They got the role of Mormon and Moroni. Now, that solved that problem.

We continued on. We got into working with the show and such, and after about a week, his father came to me and said, "You don't know the rest of the story." And I said, "Well, what's that?" [Jerry chokes up] He said, "Two years ago, my son and I came to see the show from Ohio, and he's been praying every night for two years that he could play Moroni." They were late.

They thought they were going to be stuck in the cast, in just the people that were in the background scenes, but his prayer was answered. And that was one of those places where you learn that—there isn't for every person; it doesn't hit everybody—but some people have parts that they're supposed to have.

The young man that had spoken to me in Bath came through the line. We assigned him that role. He came up the next week and said, “You don't know the rest of the story. I wasn't going to be in Pageant this year. I didn't tell anybody. My folks would have been upset and everything, but I [20:00] just simply I was tired of it. I wasn't going to do it. And for some reason, two days before the whole family got ready to go be in Pageant except me. I decided, OK, I'll do one last time; I'll be in the Pageant.” And so, he came; he went through; he got cast as the descending Christ. That was my prayer that got answered, both how to handle the casting of the show, and sometimes there were specific people who were to have specific roles. Not every time, but it happened enough that we knew that it was happening behind our own work and our own way of approaching things.

Dan Gorman: A related—

Jerry Argetsinger: So, yes—

[Jerry pumps his fist, prompting Dan to laugh]

Jerry Argetsinger: We do believe in a spiritual interface with the Lord.

Dan Gorman: A related question I would ask about casting now: Historically, the LDS Church demographically was largely white, Anglo-American until the twentieth century.

Jerry Argetsinger: That's right.

Dan Gorman: There had been missionaries earlier, but it's only in the last 50 years or so that the Church has become more international.

Jerry Argetsinger: That's true.

Dan Gorman: Now, with that in mind, and with obviously the Civil Rights Movement, the LDS Church's extension of the of the priesthood to men of color—how did all of these changes affect casting in the show?

Jerry Argetsinger: Great question.

Dan Gorman: I would say beyond that, also casting women in the show—if you could speak about these changes a bit.

Jerry Argetsinger: OK, I said the old Pageant had one woman's role. The new Pageant had 180 women's roles, so that took care of that part of the choice, of the plan. But the other thing was, here I am. I'm a university professor of theater, and one of the things that we do in university theater and such, at least in universities in the east that I've worked on, is that we are inclusive. We are generous in casting people for their talent, not for what they look like. And then—and I and my team came in and brought that with us.

And so, one of the first things we did is we recruited people of color. We recruited, more specifically, people with an American Indian background. And so, my choreographer was named Mike Campbell, but he is—he's from the reservation just over by Buffalo, and he's a brilliant choreographer. And he was able to take the show, which starts in Jerusalem, ends up in the New World, and has both Indian-type characters and Caucasian-type characters, and he was able to choreograph the show so that, as it covered that 1,000 years that the show covers, he actually started the choreography in Jerusalem, and as they came to the New World, it changed slowly and became the leading type of dance for the rest of our shows. So, Michael was able to handle that, too.

So, number one: We vowed to be race-included [sic]. We went and looked for actors who were qualified and could be in the show and do that. We had an American—a Native American who was a brilliant choreographer for us, and we and that brought some more of the Canadian and American Native Americans to our show. So, I am proud to say that my group was the first group of the Hill Cumorah Pageant that considered race, and that we were proactive in casting the right people in the right roles and making sure that we had them. We—I was one of the ones sitting there, making sure that the people that were—that we needed in who those people—who were applying said they fit the roles, they fit the people, and they fit their unique qualities of race for the show. [25:00] That was something we did on purpose, and I'm really proud of, because that got lost after a while, after we left the show.

Dan Gorman: So, bracketing the issue of casting and these larger artistic choices, can you walk us through what the rehearsal process was like? It's summertime. You've got 700 people coming off of busses in Upstate New York. Can you talk a little bit about how rehearsals were structured?

Jerry Argetsinger: Yes, it sounds really great when you say, "And it only took one week of rehearsal. Because you bring them in. You cast the show. You have five days of rehearsals, and then you have two dress rehearsals, and the show is open." That sounds fantastic. Well, there's a dirty little secret there, too. And it's a great theater answer.

Gail mentioned that the set was the size of a football field. (Well, actually about two-thirds the size of a football field, but who's counting?) Anyhow, because of that, we had the space to work on the show in groups of scenes, so I had that group of five that worked with me, and the **whole idea—well, four** worked with me, and myself was number five—we could have three to five set scenes rehearsing at the same time, so if you broke it down, we actually had—for

a normal situation, we had enough rehearsal time that gave us six weeks of standard theater rehearsal. So, it was actually easier than it sounds because we had a directing staff who was qualified and able to take their two scenes each, and to rehearse at one part of the set for one person; another part of the set for another person; off the set, but in the grassy field, for the choreographer, for the fight master. That's another thing. In the new show, the first two years, they danced the fight scenes. It looked so awful. It was embarrassing. And so, I went out and got myself a fighting master, somebody who could come in and teach actual stage fighting and to choreograph the fighting shows. [gesturing] So, he can be over here with them. Michael can be over here with the dancers. And so, we really had six weeks of rehearsal time.

Dan Gorman: Now, once you had rehearsed the show in segments as you described—

Jerry Argetsinger: Yes, right.

Dan Gorman: Can you talk a little bit about the theater term the *sitzprobe*—the technical run-through where you're bringing in the special effects and the music?¹ Can you talk about scaling up the production from these little rehearsed modules?

Jerry Argetsinger: OK, yes. We had a new—new background music was composed—new—and new music was composed by Crawford Gates, who had done the only other music for the Hill Cumorah Pageant, starting in about 1957, when he was a student here in Rochester and got in doing that. So anyhow—so he was experienced, and he was able to—he knew how to write music for this kind of show. It was also determined that it would be scored like a movie. In other words, you've got pre-show music; you've got the music that starts the show; you've got under-

¹ Note by Dan Gorman: I used the term “sitzprobe” incorrectly here. While the term refers to one of the final rehearsals of a play, it refers to a specific kind of rehearsal—the first time that the cast of a musical or opera performs alongside the orchestra. [See “Sitzprobe,” *Lexico* (Dictionary.com and Oxford University Press), accessed May 6, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220506201831/https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/sitzprobe>.] Since the Pageant used a prerecorded soundtrack, there would have been no orchestra present during the dress rehearsals.

music for every single scene. There was some singing in it that was recorded so that nobody at the show had to try to sing it to that many people with what the ramifications were. So, he took care of that. We had a fight orchestrator, a fight man, who could take care of that part of the bringing the cast together and integrating the scenes with the characters that they're working with in the various scenes.

You notice that I'm saying the words *professional*. We got rid of doing of working with nonprofessionals. So, I had a movie— [30:00] all of my lighting was done by a motion picture lighting director. We had a professional [fight] master working with the actors who were fighting. We had a sharp stream of actors who had the same kind of background as I had, which was a lot of outdoor drama and a lot of university drama. And so, we were working with professionals in their own type of work. And that's how we did it. We rehearsed everyone, but then we had professionals who had experience in this, and so they were able to do it like they would if one of them was working on a movie, putting that kind of scene together. If other people had been working on plays, that's how that kind of thing came together. So frankly, we solved it by going professional.

Dan Gorman: And then, on opening night—

Jerry Argetsinger: Yes.

Dan Gorman: While you were director, did you have any opening night rituals? Did you get the cast together? Can you speak a little bit about the opening of the show?

Jerry Argetsinger: Yeah. Let's talk... The first night of the production of the new show. OK, you bring the cast together. We have a large building, open building, to the side of the set that the audience can't see. And so, we brought the cast together. We had prayer. We had a talk to rev— get them going, get their blood flying, talk to them about what a great experience they've had

putting the show together, what a great experience it is for this. The President of the Church—well, the senior vice president of the Church; that's not the right calling name, but—we had one of the top, major general authorities was there to give the show his blessing. And so, you end with a yell and a prayer and head out to do the show, just like putting on a football game. [Jerry pumps his fist]

[laughter]

Dan Gorman: And then—

Jerry Argetsinger: The next day, it rained.

Dan Gorman: Oh.

Jerry Argetsinger: And it rained. And it rained. And it rained. And the show got canceled. That was a disappointment.

[laughter]

Dan Gorman: And what was the response like from the public, from other people in the Church, to this new version of the show?

Jerry Argetsinger: The target audience was the audience that lives around us. Educated. People who like theater. It was not written to the Mormon audience; it was written to a non-Mormon audience. It was written to people of any religion. And that really brought in a crowd from the general audience. That worked for the first two performances, and it worked through my eight week [sic]—eight years of directing the show [1990–1997].

After we were done with that, a group from Brigham Young University came in and took over the show and changed it into—from—it changed it from a broad Eastern show for Eastern people and such. We had started with a cast [sic; audience] of about 30,000 people, and we had it up to almost 80,000 people seeing the show each year. And this new group came in, changed it

to a Mormon destination pageant, and they lost their local audience within three years. But to quote them, “We are righteous.” And it changed the entire direction of the Pageant because it became a show that was geared to people who were Mormon already.

Gail mentioned that one year that my congregation—our congregation alone—had 100 baptisms from the Pageant. We knew—we had good demographics; we didn’t lie on our demographics, which is what outdoor dramas usually do. We had 90 [35:00]—we had—six, seven—seven? 70,000... we had 73,000 people attend that last year of the Pageant that I was the director, and we knew that half of them were Mormon and half of them were not Mormon. We knew that the show was general and that everyone liked it. People liked coming. During the time I was the director, it increased by 10 percent every year into the audience until the last time, because I brought in Donny Osmond and his family to be in our last year of doing the show. Donny came in and really helped break—I mean, *increase* the audience. I had Orson Scott Card come back, and he was able to talk to the audience about writing the show and such. And it was exciting, and then it took three years to see it drop. It lost its non-Mormon audience in three years. And so they got—

Dan Gorman: So just a brief interjection—so you were director from 1988 to what was the final year, OK?

Jerry Argetsinger: I was on the directing team from ’88, but I became the director in 1990 through ’97.

Dan Gorman: OK. So, I didn’t mean—

Jerry Argetsinger: I was in the directing staff for two weeks [sic; years], and then for eight weeks [sic; years], I was the director.

Dan Gorman: I see. I didn’t mean to cut you off.

Jerry Argetsinger: No, that—no—that’s great.

So anyhow, at first—oh! One other thing that had an incredible impact on the audience, and that was I joined the Institute of Outdoor Drama and went to their conferences. And I’m sitting in Kentucky, where they have *My Old Kentucky Home*, and they’re talking about, “Well, we’ve got this show and it’s like, we’re here doing the show, and the people that live here hate us, and we fixed that—by accident, but we fixed that. We got the local service organizations to serve food.”

And so, I came back to the—to my Pageant meeting here and said, “You know what they’re doing down in Kentucky? They got the local Lions and other service organizations to take care of the—of selling the food and such. And what it did was it involved the local audience, and they started calling it *their* Pageant. It was no longer the *Mormon Pageant* over there. It was, “This is *our* Pageant.” And they stayed there until the last performance two years ago [July 2019]. So, we involved the community that was out trying to raise money anyway, and it allowed them in two weeks to raise more money for their organizations than they were able to do in [an] entire year of activities before that. So, that was another thing that made a big difference, was involving the community, and that effect stayed there through the entire run of the rest of the show.

Dan Gorman: Jerry, the Pageant has, as you know, concluded.

Jerry Argetsinger: Yep.

Dan Gorman: The Church announced a change in direction. The final performance was going to be in 2020, but then the coronavirus pandemic...

[Jerry nods in acknowledgment]

Dan Gorman: It was pushed to 2021, and then it was finally canceled.

Jerry Argetsinger: That's right.

Dan Gorman: Now, as we've discussed, your opinion of the Pageant—you were not as big of a fan of it in its final years. But how did you feel about the Pageant ending, and in the way it did?

Jerry Argetsinger: When the Church bought the hill, they'd been negotiating with a farmer and trying to get the hill as Church property, and they finally were able to buy it about 1930. And the first thing that happened was they put—they built—they had an enormous statue created and put on top of the hill. Where am I going with this? What was the question again, seriously?

Dan Gorman: So, I'm asking how you felt about the Pageant ending—

Jerry Argetsinger: Oh, how I felt about it. OK...

Dan Gorman: And also, in the way it did—

Jerry Argetsinger: OK.

Dan Gorman: That there never got to be a final performance.

Jerry Argetsinger: So, the first time they had a program at the Hill Cumorah, owning the Hill Cumorah, was 19—well, it was 1937, and it was performed—they brought in singers from the Metropolitan Opera in New York. They broadcast it all over the United States. There had never been a year without a program put on for the public since the time the Church bought the hill [until 2020]. And so, it's not just the Pageant that ended; it ended the legacy of every year, every summer, there was an important program that was put on, until that became the Hill Cumorah Pageant, and then for all those years, until—from 1987 [sic]—1937—all the way up to 1940 [sic; unclear]—I can't talk and add at the same time, I'm sorry. But anyhow, so it's missing the entire structure of what was there.

And the people who are now taking over and taking care of the Pageant are turning it into how it looked when Joseph [Smith] was here. We have pictures of that, and it's a completely

bare hill, but they're covering it with trees, and I'm glad they're going to cover it with trees. But it's going to now be a different kind of attraction because there's not a show of *any* kind there for the first time in its history as a Mormon property, that's going to be there. So, losing it is like losing part of the Church in Rochester. It's like losing a good friend, and that's really sad because it—if they wanted to put the money into it and go back to that philosophy that they opened the New Pageant with, that it's a show for a non-specified group of people who like theater, it could work again. But again, it's—you can spend your \$3 million dollars or \$4 million dollars doing that, or you can go out in the desert in Utah and film a Bible thing that's 20 minutes long and put it on YouTube, and it gets a million and a half hits in the first six months. So, for a very low price, they've got a million and a half hits on a show that they're presenting. And here, we had 2,500 [sic; 25,000] at the end of this run? We went from 73,000 people when Gail and I left to a show that ended up serving an audience of only 25,000 people. What do you do with your \$3 million dollars? It's a money question. You go into the desert, and you make another movie.

Dan Gorman: Jerry, as we wind down our interview, is there any final comment or story you would like to share?

Jerry Argetsinger: It's been the highlight of my family's life. Our boys grew up there. My son at age 14 knew all the props. That's 300 different props and where the presets and everything were. We would show up when my youngest was four years old, and he'd head one way out of the car, and I'd go to my meetings, and Gail would go to the costume shop, and it would be rehearsal time, and at their scenes, they would magically appear and participate in the scene they were supposed to be in and disappear again. And then after the rehearsal at the end of the day, they would appear at the car and go home with us. We have no idea who took care of—what the

kids did for the time, the couple of weeks that we were there as a family and doing that. So, this was my kids' entrance into a worthy project, into a worthy project that is service, a worthy project that uses our talents for the good of all without even a thought of remuneration or money for oneself. It has established a family relationship that carries us through still, and we're very grateful for that. And we're... Our whole family is still blessed by the *joy* that we had of working on the Hill Cumorah Pageant for those twenty years, ten of it when I was in the directing cast.

[laughs]

Dan Gorman: Well, Jerry, thank you so much for sharing your stories and your memories with us.

Jerry Argetsinger: Thank you for having me. [45:00]

Dublin Core Metadata for the Interview

Title: Interview with Jerry Argetsinger, Monday, March 14, 2022

Subject: Hill Cumorah Project, Argetsinger Family, Theater, Twentieth Century, Twenty-First Century, Direct Revelation

Description: Jerry Argetsinger was a longtime theater professor at RIT who joined the Hill Cumorah Pageant directing team in 1988, when the "New Pageant" was introduced, and he later directed the Pageant from 1990 to 1997. Argetsinger is a longtime friend of Orson Scott Card, who wrote the new script in 1988. During this interview, Argetsinger discusses the process of casting individuals through divine inspiration, bringing Hollywood-quality special effects to the Pageant, developing relationships with the Pageant's non-LDS neighbors, and creating religious entertainment that would appeal to LDS and non-LDS audiences alike. Argetsinger argues that the 1990s Pageant triumphed because it was accessible, professional-grade theater. In his opinion, the Pageant declined in quality during the 2000s, when he felt it shifted to being an event primarily for LDS audiences. Argetsinger regrets the ending of the Pageant, but he expresses a strong appreciation for the experience.

Creator: Jerry Argetsinger and Daniel Gorman Jr.

Source: Hill Cumorah Legacy Project

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