

Sisterz in Zion. Directed by Melissa Puente.

Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University;
American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2006

Reviewed by John M. Murphy and Leslee Thorne-Murphy

The film *Sisterz in Zion* is a one-hour documentary following the experiences of twenty-six young Latter-day Saint women from New York City who travel to Utah to attend a session of Especially for Youth at Brigham Young University. As one of their Young Women leaders, Renee Larson, remarks, these teenage girls are “really trying hard to be good Latter-day Saints—read their scriptures, pray, and do what Heavenly Father would want them to do—but they’ve never seen anybody else do it, and it’s like they’re making it up as they go along.” Their Church leaders hope that at EFY the young women will have the opportunity to be surrounded by youth who are striving to live the gospel. As another leader, Jaime Rasmussen, explains, “We wanted to create a connection [between these young women and] . . . other youth in the Church.”

The film highlights the experiences of several young women. They live in various parts of New York City, come from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and participate in typical LDS youth activities, such as early-morning seminary and the Young Women program. In virtually every case, they are the only LDS teenagers in their schools, and they are all fairly recent converts to the LDS Church. Daisy Andino is from Honduras and immigrated with her family when she was ten years old. Wendy Lee was born in Malaysia and moved to New York City when she was sixteen. Syretta McQuiller lives in the Bronx with her mother and sister. Massiel and Vanessa Gutierrez are from the Dominican Republic and now live in Manhattan. They all value and enjoy living in New York City specifically because of its cultural diversity. As Jaime Rasmussen explains, “One of the things that we were concerned about was the fact that [at EFY] they’d be probably the only nonwhite kids with . . . suburban teenagers, and [we

ANNOUNCEMENT**BYU Studies Creates New Board
for Reviews of Books and Creative Works**

A new board has been organized at BYU Studies to review the broader universe of Latter-day Saint culture and art. In addition to reviewing books of LDS interest on history, society, and theology, BYU Studies will now review theatre, art, music, film, literature, and other media such as websites. We also plan to review museum and art exhibits that focus on LDS themes or feature works of LDS artists. We anticipate that this new scholarly initiative will appeal to a broad audience of readers. We also hope to bring attention to the work of LDS artists, playwrights, designers, musicians, composers, directors, actors, writers, and curators.

LDS prophets have said that the creative work of the Saints will one day fulfill the cultural and artistic aspirations of our highest gospel and societal ideals. We share this worthy ideal, and at BYU Studies our goal is to contribute to the realization of this prophetic vision.

The list of talented review editors includes: Kent R. Bean (Snow College) in film and television; Richard H. Cracroft (BYU emeritus) in literature; Gary Gillum (BYU) in new media; Greg Hansen (professional musician) in music; and Richard G. Oman (Museum of Church History and Art) in art and exhibits; Don Marshall (BYU emeritus) in film; and Eric R. Samuelsen (BYU) in theatre. These editors will identify works and performances, write reviews as well as identify potential reviewers, and prepare prospective reviews for publication. Reviews will be posted on byustudies.byu.edu, and selected reviews will be published in the print journal. We hope our readers will enjoy and benefit from this new initiative.

—John M. Murphy
Co-chair, Review Editor

—Eric Eliason
Co-chair, Review Editor

were] not really sure how they'd react, whether they'd feel welcomed, whether they'd like it."

When the young women arrive in Utah, they are struck by the sidewalks in Salt Lake City that are so clean "you could even walk [on them] barefoot"; the trusting nature of a candy store owner who leaves open barrels of candy unattended; and a young man who holds a door open for every person in the group. At EFY, they are similarly surprised by the cultural differences they encounter as they meet and get to know LDS youth from the western United States. Syretta's roommate, Chelsea, is from Vernal, Utah. They shyly begin to get acquainted. Daisy and her friend Wendy Cacho are in the same EFY group and struggle to connect with their group members who like to discuss wakeboarding and whose taste in music contrasts with their own.

Music is one of several motifs in the film that both highlight difference and provide common ground for the various young women at EFY. At almost every stage in the film, the young women must negotiate differences in musical taste. When Wendy and Daisy roll their eyes at the corny lyrics and melody their group members compose as a cheer, contrasting musical tastes are more than evident. As Daisy comments, she and Wendy were "thinking in a hip-hop way." Yet, just as music can reveal divisions, it also has the power to unify. When twelve of the young women from New York City perform a merengue dance at the EFY talent show, they are delighted by the enthusiastic audience response. They and their music have been accepted; cultural differences are appreciated and celebrated. As Daisy says, "They loved our culture, our moves, our dance. . . . [It made me] proud to be a Latina." The young women from New York City view this acceptance as a transitional event. While the merengue performance allows the young women to celebrate cultural distinctions, Church music offers an opportunity for them to share their common religious convictions. In a pivotal segment of the documentary, several young women from New York City comment on how they feel united with all the young women as they sing "As Sisters in Zion." As Leyddy Rosario remembers, "When we sang, 'As Sisters in Zion,' I felt the Spirit very strongly. . . . We're all daughters of God, and our race doesn't matter."

The need to negotiate cultural difference is a dominant theme throughout the entire documentary. All the EFY participants, whether they are from New York City or elsewhere, are in a position where they must find common experiences and beliefs as well as find ways of expressing their own individuality. In its depiction of youth striving to make sense of their world, *Sisterz in Zion* is reminiscent of a coming-of-age film, or *bildungsfilm*. The youth discover different patterns of living, identify ways to

overcome differences by finding common ground in their religious convictions, and, at the same time, retain a sense of their own unique identity as they confront expectations and assumptions unlike their own. This film is, in many respects, a specifically LDS coming-of-age narrative: youth responding to the challenges of keeping faith in a modern world.

One of the great strengths of the film is in the youth telling their own stories. The director and editors do not use a narrator; instead, they present footage of the young women shot before, during, and after the week at EFY. They were able to conduct post-EFY interviews with many of the New York City participants as well as some of their EFY roommates from the western United States. This allows us to view EFY activities and to hear commentary from the young women after they have had a chance to reflect on their experiences, resulting in a balanced narrative that brings the young women to the foreground.

The film was directed and edited by Melissa Puente, who as a Young Women President in Manhattan wanted “to document . . . [the] courage and bravery” of the young women in her LDS ward.¹ Their courage and bravery does indeed come through. It would be a compelling film to show to a youth group, yet this is not its only potential audience. Its depiction of cultural and ethnic interactions is timely for all members of the LDS community. The film reflects many of the changes that confront an ever-expanding Church. As it documents cultural difference and the forging of new identities within a gospel context, the film portrays Church members developing Christian communities based upon shared assumptions of faith and belief.

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1. Melissa Puente, “Background to the Movie,” <http://www.sisterzinzion.com> (accessed January 23, 2007).