

[Movie Review: Emma Smith: A Really Great Catch](#)

By: David G. - November 18, 2007

Warning: Plot spoilers follow.

Tonight my girlfriend and I attended an advance screening of the forthcoming movie, *Emma Smith: My Story*. It was, to say the least, better than we had expected. I'm not a film critic, so I cannot critique the movie based on editing, music, camera angles, or even dialogue. However, none of these more aesthetic characteristics stuck out as being "bad" to me, despite being told before hand that the movie was still very rough. If I came into this movie with little historical background on Emma Smith's life, I would probably have enjoyed the show with no complaints.

As I noted in my [post](#) describing the [trailer](#), it's obvious that the Church has had a hand in the making of *Emma Smith: My Story*. The same actors, sets, costumes, and even some outtakes are identical in both this film and *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration*. Even if the Church did not provide direct funding for this feature, the donation of these items no doubt saved [Candlelight Media Group](#) a great deal of money. The film was [produced](#) by the Joseph and Emma Smith Historical Society, an organization that is dedicated to collecting and preserving historical and family materials that are not in the possession of either the LDS Church or the Community of Christ.

The film is retrospective, portraying Emma during the 1860s narrating to her adult adopted daughter Julia the story of Emma's life with Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet. It should be noted that Emma seems more real in this movie than her character in *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration*. In the previous movie, Emma was portrayed as always being well-groomed, with perfect hair regardless of her circumstances. In *Emma Smith: My Story*, Emma is shown as actually sweating and being dirty. This sense of of being an actual person well supports the central theme of the movie—Emma's search for strength through trials such as losing children and the Church's early persecutions. It is apparent that Julia has had a hard life, and is therefore learning from Emma what it means to be strong and faithful.

As should be expected in a commercial film, there were several mistakes in chronology and fact. However, of much more interest to me was how the filmmakers dealt with Emma's struggles with Joseph's polygamy, her falling out with Brigham Young, her marriage to Lewis C. Bidamon, and her involvement with her son Joseph Smith III and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

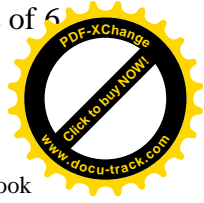
To my surprise, polygamy was not ignored, but received one comment near the end of the movie. Julia asks her mother how she dealt with the revelation on polygamy (D&C 132). Emma admits to having struggled with it, but concludes that it was of God and even testifies of it. The focus is on the revelation itself, and there is no specific reference to Joseph's actual plural wives. This, of course, is highly strange, considering the fact that Emma [denied](#) until the day of her death that her first husband practiced polygamy, so to have her testifying of the document that justified the practice of plural marriage is, to say the least, historical implausible. The studio [promises](#) that in the DVD extras, there will be a discussion of Emma's struggles with polygamy.

The movie contained a single reference to Emma's decision not to follow Brigham Young. "It is true that Brigham Young and I have not always seen eye to eye, but when it came to Joseph, we agreed." That's it. There's no discussion of her disputes with Young following Joseph's death in 1844 or her efforts during subsequent decades to argue that Young was the author of the practice of polygamy as well as an usurper of authority. Likewise I believe that the DVD extras will treat these struggles.

Emma's marriage to Lewis C. Bidamon is referenced briefly at the beginning of the movie. Although the script writers acknowledged that she was happy with him, the emphasis is that Bidamon could not replace Joseph. Bidamon is portrayed as a drunkard and an adulterer, while Emma is shown as being forgiving and loving and even taking in and caring for the illegitimate son that was the fruit of her husband's infidelity.

Joseph Smith III is portrayed only as a child. There is no mention of the younger Joseph's acceptance of leadership of the Reorganized Church in 1860 or Emma's role in the debates and battles between the Josephites and the Brighamites during the nineteenth century.

I realize that no movie can convey everything in a person's life. But I find it instructive to examine what was included and what was not. The burden of the narrative lies squarely on Emma's life with Joseph Smith, hence my titling this review *Emma Smith: A Really Great Catch*. If this movie had been made thirty years ago, it likely would have reflected the politics of memory that has played out historically between the Mountain Saints and the Prairie Saints. But there is no attempt to favor either the Brighamite claims to authority or the Josephite narrative, which I believe reflects recent changes in the relationship between the two churches.



Overall, I enjoyed the show. I found myself inspired by Emma Smith's life and the strength that the filmmakers convey. As an added treat, we sat behind venerated historian Larry C. Porter and his wife. I look forward to the film's release in spring 2008.

34 Comments »

1. David: Thanks for the well-analyzed review. I look forward to seeing it myself.

Comment by [Ben](#) — November 18, 2007 @ [1:55 am](#)

2. Thanks, David. I'll look forward to seeing it if it makes it to Chicago, or on DVD eventually in any event.

I tend to think these moviemakers are missing a bet by trying to see everything through rose colored glasses. Dealing a little bit more forthrightly with subjects like polygamy and the tensions with Brigham would only make the story stronger and make Emma more real. Sometimes I wish I were a film maker so I could take a shot at doing something like this with my own sensibilities.

Comment by [Kevin Barney](#) — November 18, 2007 @ [12:48 pm](#)

3. Kevin: I agree. It would be nice to see the filmmakers tackle more thoroughly these sensitive issues.

That said, I think it's also a difficult task, given the rose-colored glasses that their sponsors and the majority of their audience will be wearing coming into the theater/buying the DVD. Pleasing everyone (well-read people and ordinary folks alike) is a difficult line to tow, especially considering that they didn't have Richard Bushman writing the screenplay. I'm eager to see how they deal with these issues in the DVD "special features."

Comment by [David Grua](#) — November 18, 2007 @ [1:01 pm](#)

4. Did the filmmakers solicit feedback (comment cards, etc.) from the audience?

Comment by [Justin](#) — November 18, 2007 @ [6:08 pm](#)

5. They handed out electronic devices that let us tell them if the pace of the movie was too fast, slow, or just right. They also asked us for demographic information and if we'd be willing to see the movie in the regular theater, the dollar theater, or buy the movie. We had to leave at that point, but I think they went on to break up into smaller groups and get feedback on specifics.

They did provide food for those that came, which was nice.

Comment by [David Grua](#) — November 18, 2007 @ [7:32 pm](#)

6. Was the food as sanitized as the movie?...

Comment by [Ben](#) — November 18, 2007 @ [8:02 pm](#)

7. Haha, Ben. The food was about what you'd expect at something like this. Small sandwiches, minibrownies, mints, and water bottles.

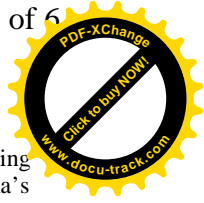
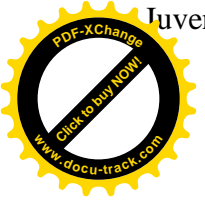
Comment by [David Grua](#) — November 18, 2007 @ [8:23 pm](#)

8. Thanks for this, David. A surprisingly positive review. I'd be interested in your girlfriend's thoughts on the movie.

Comment by [Christopher](#) — November 18, 2007 @ [9:41 pm](#)

9. I saw the movie with David on Saturday. For their purposes, I think the filmmakers made an excellent movie. It was inspiring and depicted more of her life than I expected. I liked that they showed an older Emma and made references to Lewis Bidamon.

In the end, I'm glad that they didn't include more of the "controversial" details. If they had added more about polygamy and problems with BY it would have ruined the feeling of the movie. In the past I've



been irritated when I would read or watch things that did not depict history accurately. After watching this movie I came to realize that there is a place and time to reveal every detail of Joseph and Emma's lives, but a movie released to the general public is not that place. Many people might be offended, and it would likely cause confusion for those who aren't prepared to learn about the details. She already has a bad reputation among some Mormons and depicting those things could possibly make it worse.

I think the movie did an excellent job of depicting Emma as a wonderful lady who had a very hard life, was human, and struggled. I enjoyed it and look forward to its release.

Comment by Jody — November 19, 2007 @ [1:00 pm](#)

10. *After watching this movie I came to realize that there is a place and time to reveal every detail of Joseph and Emma's lives, but a movie released to the general public is not that place.*

I think this is great insight, and I agree completely. Thanks for sharing your thoughts, Jody.

Comment by Christopher — November 19, 2007 @ [1:19 pm](#)

11. Jody,

Thanks for the insights. Like you, I struggle to know the exact balance between accurately portraying the past and providing for the needs of the audience. I think it's obvious that the filmmakers actually want to make money with this film, and including too many scandalous details would likely scare potential movie-goers away. Alas, those of us that would like to see those details portrayed will have to wait for the DVD.

Comment by [David Grua](#) — November 19, 2007 @ [2:47 pm](#)

12. David,

I appreciate the struggle for balance. See my note in the Joseph or the Sword thread.

Comment by [kevinf](#) — November 19, 2007 @ [5:17 pm](#)

13. *"It is true that Brigham Young and I have not always seen eye to eye, but when it came to Joseph, we agreed."*

Ugh. I'll assume from your generally positive review that the entire script is not as trite as this line.

I get the feeling that the quick lines re: polygamy and Brigham Young were thrown in so that the filmmakers could avoid the accusation of turning a totally blind eye to these important topics, but it sounds as if they are laced with the same reticence that plagues so much of Church media and discourse these days. I haven't seen the film, so I could be wrong, but I'm not exactly holding my breath.

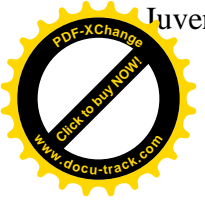
Thanks for the review.

Comment by [Steve M](#) — November 20, 2007 @ [12:04 am](#)

14. Hi David, I appreciated the inner scoop. I was in the Joseph: Prophet of the Restoration movie (the blacksmith's wife who first receives a Book of Mormon from Joseph Smith). I have written a one-woman play about Emma Smith and polygamy with my co-author Steven Fales entitled *The First Wive's Tale*. I performed it this past August at the SL Sunstone Symposium and in Chicago where I am based. I am fascinated with her, but precisely because of all the details that the movie side-steps. As an active LDS mother I wonder how we would respond if polygamy were reinstated - that was the genesis of my exploration. Member and non-member responses to the complicated version of her life have been startled but appreciative. We are currently in the rewriting process but hope to have a commercial run in Salt Lake late 2008. If you or anyone else would like more information, please feel free to email me at kymellen@hotmail.com and I will put you on our press list or at least send you the current flier.
-Kymberly Mellen

Comment by [Kymberly Mellen](#) — November 23, 2007 @ [7:31 pm](#)

15. Kymberly: Thanks for the (self-) promotion. I'll look for your play, as it does sound intriguing. Feel free to send any press releases to the administrator's email found on the "About Juvenile Instructor" page.



Comment by [David Grua](#) — November 23, 2007 @ [7:59 pm](#)

16. Very interesting, thanks for the write up. Will church members shell out money for a movie they're used to seeing for free in visitor's centers? I'm betting this goes direct to DVD.

Comment by [Eric Russell](#) — November 25, 2007 @ [11:31 pm](#)

17. Eric: Well, let's just remember that LDS viewers do pay money for the Work and the Glory movies. They may not be the biggest money makers, but they still make it to the theater for a brief time. I suspect *Emma Smith: My Story* will appear in theaters for a brief time and that viewers will pay money to see it.

Comment by [Jody](#) — November 26, 2007 @ [12:56 am](#)

18. Jody, good point. Though the TW&TG movies getting attention from theatres may have more to do with Larry Miller being the primary financial backer of those films, and also owning a few theatres around Utah.

Comment by [Christopher](#) — November 26, 2007 @ [10:53 am](#)

19. We got them in Albuquerque, and we get them up here in Washinton too. They get a limited run where there is a market.

Comment by [Eric Boysen](#) — December 1, 2007 @ [3:02 pm](#)

20. It is interesting to see so much currently about Emma Smith. My wife and two children have been cast to be in an upcoming play in SLC titled 'Through Emmas's Eyes' It is a musical and the music is wonderful. From the review of the movie it sounds like this play will definitely add more perspective on the post Joseph years. I play Lewis Bidamon although it is a non speaking, non singing role. Of special interest to us is that our two children play Elijah Abel's two children. So the aspect of blacks in the early days of the church will be somewhat addressed or at least acknowledged. For those of you not familiar, Elijah was ordained a Seventy and served a mission. There is a website for this play and either the editor or anyone individually may feel free to email me to get it an post it in an appropriate place.

Comment by [Spencer Gold](#) — January 2, 2008 @ [3:00 pm](#)

21. Spencer: Thanks for the note. Please see comment #15 above.

Comment by [David Grua](#) — January 2, 2008 @ [3:48 pm](#)

22. So how do I go about getting a user id and password so I can send an email to admin?

Comment by [Spencer Gold](#) — January 7, 2008 @ [3:23 pm](#)

23. Spencer: You'll have to cut and paste the admin email address into whatever email service you use.

Comment by [David Grua](#) — January 7, 2008 @ [3:27 pm](#)

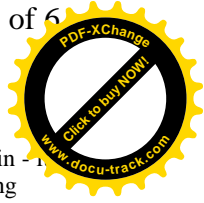
24. This is a great marketing idea I can already see what the sequels will be like

Emma's Story 2: Fannie Alger
Emma's Story 3: Lucinda Harris
Emma's Story 4: Zina Jacobs

There could be at least 33 sequels. I can hardly wait!

Comment by [CDN Mike](#) — March 30, 2008 @ [8:17 pm](#)

25. According to Bruce R. McConkie, "true faith must be based on true knowledge or it cannot produce the desired results". I won't go in to the many ways why this is sound logic, but to say the message of Joseph Smith, Jesus Christ, etc. was truth, in fact truth restored. It is ridiculous to suggest that the proper way to teach the gospel is through false retelling of history to make it more palatable to the masses, until "faith" (if you can call it that) is sufficiently present, then allow for a subject to now re-educate themselves to a correct understanding. The proper means of teaching was given by the savior, and entails building upon the proper foundation, and gradually increasing by degrees. Hence, milk before



meat. It should be remembered however that milk is not a synthetic, rather it is just a simpler protein - it is made of the same stuff. The only time and place to tell the truth correctly, especially when dealing with subject matter as serious as this, is all of the time.

Comment by Joe Wilson — April 9, 2008 @ 10:18 am

26. A very strong movie. It was mostly based on Emma's struggles during Joseph's life, and didn't offend me historically. Guess I'm just naive 😊 Anyway overall definitely will be a keeper on the bookshelves of many latter-day saints, and an inspiration to the dedication of an apparently great woman.

Comment by roger — April 12, 2008 @ 6:30 am

27. [...] Movie Review: Emma Smith:Christopher: "On Zion's Mt.": ReddJ. Stapley: "On Zion's Mt.": ReddJared T: "On Zion's Mt.": [...]

Pingback by Juvenile Instructor — April 12, 2008 @ 12:54 pm

28. #25, I must agree. It is one thing to not talk about something, but it's another thing entirely to alter details.

Comment by SAP — April 12, 2008 @ 7:41 pm

29. People just need to get in the official documents and letters of emmas. She did not like the practice of polygamy at all. She chased the two sisters that J.S. brought into her home and married them stole their money. When Emma found out about the girls she chased them off. Please don't portray Joseph Smith as a saint he is not. Emma had such strength to put up with him.

Comment by bonnie — May 18, 2008 @ 11:13 am

30. bonnie — citations, please. Where are these letters, and to which specific official documents do you refer? Hearsay is worthless — worse than worthless, really, since in this case you are bearing false witness.

Comment by Ardis E. Parshall — May 18, 2008 @ 11:27 am

31. #20—even though it was posted months ago. Elijah Abel's children are in this play? So part of the play takes place in Cincinnati? (That's where Elijah met and married his wife after he left Nauvoo around 1842.) Unless there is some significant manipulation of history, the play is taking some liberties beyond what I would approve. There were other Blacks in Nauvoo. I would urge the playwright to learn about them.

I'm with Ardis in wanting solid historical foundations to our stories—and it's not at all hard to guess where Bonnie's information comes from. I'm painfully aware of little details I got wrong in some of my own work, and am now revising to make sure it's all correct.

Comment by Margaret Young — May 18, 2008 @ 6:15 pm

32. Emma admits to having struggled with it, but concludes that it was of God and even testifies of it??

David G., I believe this scene has been cut out from the April release.

Can someone please confirm?

Thanks,

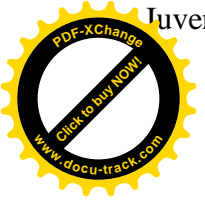
Hugo

Comment by Hugo — July 14, 2008 @ 9:57 pm

33. Hugo, that scene was indeed cut out of the more recently-released version of the film. There were a number of other small changes as well.

Comment by Christopher — July 14, 2008 @ 10:20 pm

34. Does anyone know; Was this movie based on Anita Stansfield's "Emma: Woman of Faith", vice versa,



or were they simply produced in conjunction with one another? I read the novel in September and just saw the movie and noticed that most, if not all of the movie is taken nearly word for word from the novel (or vice versa). Just wondered which came first or if they are meant to be the same thing but in different media formats.

Comment by Lisa — October 17, 2008 @ [10:28 am](#)

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