

Noah Danby can really draw a crowd in Salt Lake City thanks to his lead role in Mormon cinema's first biblical epic. Will the 6-foot-3 Canadian now be able to make the leap to Hollywood?

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Canadian actor Noah Danby may be the hottest film star you've never heard of -- unless you happen to be Mormon.

Thanks to his lead role as Nephi in The Book of Mormon Movie, which topped box offices in Utah and Idaho when it opened last September (beating out Hollywood offerings Matchstick Men and Once Upon a Time in Mexico), Danby has become a household name in Mormon communities across North America. In Salt Lake City (or SLC), he's as recognizable as, say, Donny Osmond.

Danby was mobbed by fans in SLC's Temple Square one evening in December, when he was in town to promote The Book of Mormon Movie. He and some friends had gone downtown to check out the Christmas lights in the square, which was crowded with thousands of others doing exactly the same.

"I kept noticing people turning their heads to stare at me as I walked by," Danby says, recounting the experience of being recognized en masse. "I heard people saying, 'It's him! It's Nephi!' and all of a sudden I was surrounded. It was so surreal. . . I think I signed autographs for about two hours."

Another time, during the film's opening week in SLC, Danby was out for a morning jog. A school bus pulled up beside him at a stoplight, just a vague yellow blur in his peripheral vision until the repeated thump of sliding windows drew his attention.

"All these little kids about eight years old were shouting out the windows at me, 'Nephi! We love you, Nephi!' They were so cute and funny, I was just gutted," he says.

Meeting Danby, it's easy to understand what all the fuss is about. The 29-year-old actor, who recently relocated from Toronto to Vancouver, is blessed with the charisma and Hollywood leading-man looks that make film audiences sit up and pay attention.

These qualities, along with his skill as an actor, are what landed Danby the role of Nephi over the 1,000-odd other hopefuls (some Osmonds among them) who auditioned. And they could very well propel him into the ranks of action-hero superstardom.

The Rock crossed over from wrestling, so why not Noah Danby from "Mollywood"?

That shameless riff on Bollywood describes the burgeoning Mormon film industry, which seeks to entertain the 12 million members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (or LDS) worldwide. It's an audience niche that is only getting bigger: The LDS Church is reputed to be the world's fastest-growing Christian religion.

And while Mormons have worked in the movie business since there was a movie business, LDS cinema as a distinct genre only made its debut in 2000 with *God's Army*, a film by Richard Dutcher that has been described as the first-ever picture about Mormons written and directed by a Mormon. Since its release, a slew of films attempting to depict the LDS lifestyle (and hoping to dispel negative mainstream views of the religion) have been playing to packed theatres in Utah and beyond.

The Book of Mormon Movie is LDS cinema's first attempt at a biblical-style epic. Since its initial theatre run, the film's marketers have borrowed the Bollywood technique of "four-walling" theatres to attract audiences -- that is, preselling tickets to specific showings in select theatres, thereby guaranteeing a full house. The film, which is showing at the Ontario Place Cinesphere in Toronto later this month, has already played a number of engagements in venues across Canada.

Independently produced, written and directed by Gary Rogers (who has worked in TV and video production in SLC for more than 20 years), the film has wrung the most out of a \$2-million (U.S.) budget to bring a beloved story from the Book of Mormon -- the sacred text that is the cornerstone of the LDS Church -- to the big screen. It recounts the prophet Nephi's struggle to lead his people from Jerusalem to a Promised Land in the Americas.

"Nephi is a gentle giant," Rogers says. "The Book describes him as large in stature, muscular and strong, but also humble. Noah fits this description perfectly. I've gone all over the U.S. with this film, and after every showing I've had people come up to me with tears in their eyes, telling me how perfect Noah is in the role of Nephi and how touched they were by his performance."

The irony, of course, is that Noah Danby is not even Mormon. He is from Guelph, Ont., and the son of renowned Canadian realist painter Ken Danby (whose best-known work is probably *At the Crease*, which depicts a hockey goalie defending his net).

In fact, Danby was the only non-LDS actor cast in *The Book of Mormon Movie*, something that could have had negative repercussions if his portrayal of Nephi hadn't been up to snuff. To prepare for the role, Danby (who was cast a mere three weeks before shooting began on location in Utah) studied the Book of Mormon's Nephi chapters, and attended Scripture classes. And, as it stands, his performance is

one of the things critics have lauded, while otherwise giving the film a lukewarm reception.

"Mormon kids grow up wanting to be Nephi because he's the ultimate hero," Danby says. "LDS people picture themselves as Nephi -- humble, poetic and able to take on the world with their faith. He's a special character. I played him as a man who fights wars with his love of God, not a sword."

Now, with Nephi under his belt, Danby is focusing on playing what he calls his "hit" - his innate ability to fill the shoes of the onscreen "big guy" -- to the powers-that-be in Hollywood. Danby's agent in Los Angeles is Hilly Elkins, a veteran of the biz who has managed talents such as James Coburn, Steve McQueen, Ben Vereen and Faye Dunaway over the course of his lengthy Hollywood career. (Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1929, Elkins got a job in the mailroom at the William Morris Agency when he was 19. His meteoric rise to big-time agent and producer is documented in the recent book by David Rensin, *The Mailroom: Hollywood History from the bottom Up.*)

Elkins has a proven nose for talent, and it has sniffed out the star quality in Danby. "A mutual friend brought Noah to my attention, and when I saw his tape, I saw extraordinary potential," Elkins says.

Vancouver agent Dylan Collingwood, who signed the hunky 6-foot-3 actor on the recommendation of Elkins, describes Danby as having "the rugged coolness of a young Harrison Ford."

"Noah has a very short trip to becoming a Hollywood action star," Collingwood says.

Danby is no less committed to his own success -- a trait he has learned from his famous father, who he says "wears his business hat almost better than his artist's hat."

"My father has been an incredible role model in the business sense of things. He's taught me to go out and knock on doors," Danby says. "This work is about commitment, and I'm committed to being an actor for the rest of my life, no matter what it takes."