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Subject: THE MAN WHO WOULD BE JESUS by Keith Merrill

How did it happen that a Danish actor a half a world away from the film maker came to play the part of Jesus in Testaments? Tomas Koford said it was because of ten miracles. Acting is tough. Good actors are hard to find. Some roles are impossible.

The day Tomas Koford arrived on set to play the role of Jesus Christ in The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd-the new 70-mm film playing at Legacy Theater-he told me ten miracles had been necessary to bring him to this remarkable moment in his life. "Someday I will share them with you," he promised. That was almost two years ago. The film is finished. The Legacy Theater is "sold out" until August. The Testaments is having an unexpected impact on the audience-both in and out of the church. Tomas Koford's depiction of the Savior has become a popular point of curiosity and conversation.

Last time we shared a moment here in cyberspace, I took you behind the scenes of the movie and inside the brain of the director. Your response to the article has been fascinating. Your reactions to the film have been overwhelming. Your insights and feelings are greatly appreciated. Before the excitement of the opening is replaced by the frustration of long summer lines, I thought you might enjoy one other personal glimpse into the making of the film. I thought you would like to meet the man who would be Jesus. What better way to immerse you in the passions behind the scenes?

Tomas was on his way to sing in an evening performance at Odense Theater >when I reached him at his home in Denmark. I asked him if he was ready to share the spiritual insights of his remarkable journey with me. We agreed to speak early the following morning. He said I could share these most personal feelings with you.

Looking for the Right Actor I'll begin his story with telling you the challenges of mine. How was I to find someone to play the role of Christ? The film was produced under the auspices of the LDS Audio Visual department. Over the years they have cast many men to portray Christ in a variety of films and videos. Our casting director began with that extensive database. Of the hundreds of candidates, 63 were selected for screen tests. They were

brought to LDS Motion Picture Studio in Provo.

Wigs and hair was cut and trimmed and put in place. Assorted costumes were draped and pinned and pulled to create the illusion of the classic icon. It was an exhaustive effort.

Of 63 anxious actors, the field was narrowed to 8. These were brought back for a second round of screen tests and personal priesthood interviews with Elder Anderson of the seventy who is chairman of the LDS Church Audio Visual Committee. All eight of the finalists were presented to the First Presidency. Of these, we favored three. We felt one of them would be selected to play this most special of roles. Our choices were considered carefully behind closed doors at the highest level. They were presented to the Quorum of the Twelve. The next day the word came down. None was accepted. We were astounded. I was dumbfounded. My faith stuttered; we had exhausted our resources-or so we thought.

Looking back, the words of the Savior to his frightening and despairing disciples on the troubled seas come to mind. "Oh ye of little faith." When the project began I was given a blessing by the First Presidency. The assurances given at the hand of the priesthood sustained me throughout the project. Among other things, I was promised, "If you are prayerful, you will be blessed to find the right player to portray the Savior-a role and

epicition so important."

At one level, our faith compels us to understand that one day, we will look back across the trials of our lives and from a celestial perspective understand precisely why things happened the way they happened. It has been likewise. Looking back across the two years of this project-a mini lifetime as each film tends to be-we see our mountains for what they really were, and why we had to climb them.

Background of Tomas Koford

Tomas Koford is Danish. His blood is mingled with the intrepid Vikings who once occupied the jutting north point of Europe and the isles of the North Sea. Tomas came to the United States as an exchange student in 1986-87. Of all the options "under spacious skies," he landed on the far side of the fruited planes in the shadow of purple mountains majesty. South Jordan was his first encounter with America. Mormonism was a curious part of his adventures in South Jordan, but it would be seven years before the testimony of Christ would change his life and bring him into the Church. "I felt the spirit at certain points in Utah," Tomas remembers, "and I knew when I came home to Denmark, that if I was ever to join a church, it would be the Mormon Church. But being a young man with everything else going on in

my life, it was very easy to put off."

Tomas met Anne Marie, his wife to be, two weeks after he was baptized into the Church. The first person he called was the only other Mormon actor in Denmark; a man named Eddie Carneal. At the risk of being accused of looking for a "three Nephite story," I can't resist mentioning the fact I taught Eddie Carneal the first discussion when I was a missionary in Denmark 30 years ago. [Tomas assures me there is no miraculous connection.]

Tomas' First Miracle: Obedience Back to my conversation with Tomas. I refreshed Tomas' memory and asked him if he remembered the ten miracles that brought him to play the role of Christ. "Remember them?" he laughed, I wrote them down. He retrieved his journal. Tomas was in a play called Birdie. They wanted him to be naked on stage. Actors who refuse to do what the director wants have a hard time staying employed. Denmark is not a modest place. His protest seemed ridiculous, but Tomas appealed to the director to find another way to do the scene. Remarkably the director agreed.

One week later Tomas was asked to audition for a play called Rent. He told me, "I knew the person who was directing so I was certain to get a part. He wanted me to sing the lead song for the audition. I did not know what kind of play it was, until I got the music and the lyrics. I discovered it was filled with all sorts of homosexual acting, very permissive with almost anything you can imagine. I did not have any work, nothing in the future, but I told Anne Marie, "I am turning this offer down. This is a part I will probably be given, but I am turning it down.

I am sure the Lord will bless us. I wrote the director and told him to count me out."

"When I finally came to the studio in Provo for the screen test, I was interviewed by Elder Neil L. Anderson. The first two questions he asked me were, "Have you ever been naked on stage"? The second question he asked was "Have you ever been involved in something with heavy homosexuality"? It was very interesting that within two months before that, I had been offered both of those choices and had turned them down. That was the first miracle."

Internet Posting : Early in the process, while our casting people scoured the rosters of LDS actors, auditioning coast to coast and places in between, I became impatient and posted a notice on the Internet. Asking the Internet at large who wants to be an actor is like asking who wants to be rich. I am still getting email responses from wanna-be actors wondering where they go to audition. For all its wonder, the Internet is like a radio signal sent into space. It never ends and bumping into solid matter somewhere in the universe of cyberspace, it echoes back like flickering lights from a burned-out star. I was flooded with responses. Among them was a note from Denmark. With it was a JPEG image. It was a black and white

photograph of an actor who seemed to be depicting the agony of Christ on the cross. I was intrigued. I responded and invited them to send us videotape. That brief exchange took place months before the First Presidency told us none of our choices were acceptable. In truth, it was almost forgotten. Days after we were told to keep looking, the videotape arrived from Denmark. Having been disappointed so many times, our expectations were low. Seeing the tape, our spirits soared. The actor introduced himself. There was something about him. His name was Tomas Koford. He lived on the island of Fyn, west of Copenhagen, Denmark.

We flew him to Utah for a screen test. He sent shivers down our spines. We knew the moment we watched the audition, we had found the man prepared to play the Savior. He was approved by the First Presidency.

Tomas Has More Miracles It was fascinating to relive those events from Tomas' perspective. He said, "On the very same day I turned down the audition for Rent-the film with heavily homosexual themes and actions-my wife, Anne Marie, discovered she could have an email address at her school." A computer and email was something they had wanted but had been unable to afford. But now, suddenly, they had access to email. His wife sent her first email to a friend in Orem, a girl whom she met during her two-and-a-half-years as an exchange student. Anne Marie had joined the Church in Utah, returned to Denmark, but stayed in touch. Tomas explained the curious email connection. "My wife's friend, RoMay Allen, worked with computers all day, so usually she didn't turn her own PC on when she got home, but for some reason that day, she did." The first email Tomas and his wife ever received was from RoMay. With the email was a reference to an LDS bulletin board and a call for actors by an LDS director named Keith Merrill.

I remember that plea I sent into cyberspace. I said I was in the eleventh hour looking for the right actor for a part. I did not say the part was to play Jesus Christ. I said I was looking for a tall person with penetrating eyes. It was a one day posting, but it was there the day it needed to be. It all happened in a tiny crack in time. Anne Marie called home from the school that day and said, "Tomas, guess what? I just got hooked to the Internet and RoMay has written me back with this wonderful news." She read the message to Tomas on the phone. "In the minute we hung up," said Tomas, "I was totally overwhelmed by the Spirit. I sat down on the couch, and I cried like a baby, and I did not know what hit me. Of course, I knew it had something to do with the talk I had just had with Anne Marie, but I did not know what it meant. That was kind of the first spiritual-shall I call it "warning"-that something big was on its way."

The Miracles Go On: The photograph Tomas sent was not intended to portray the Savior in agony. It just did. Looking back both of us agreed, it was incredibly significant that this was the only acting photo he could find

quickly. It was the only image he sent, and the only "first impression" we could get. Tomas was in the middle of rehearsals for a significant part in the Broadway musical Fame. In Denmark, actors never get excused and keep their jobs. Tomas needed four days to fly to the United States for the audition. The theater owner and director approved the absence. Remarkably, Fame star, Susanne Breuning requested one day away during the same period and was refused. In spite of that, Tomas reported she was very supportive of his taking his "once in a life time opportunity." How ever did she happen to understand? To us these events may seem small, coincidental, even insignificant. To Tomas, it was the parting of the Red Sea.

Synchronizing the schedule of the filming with the schedule of his commitments and contracts was another series of miracles. Finding a replacement from the Royal Danish theater acceptable to the director and one that could fit into the one of a kind costumes was throwing the parts of the watch into the air and watching them land all assembled. The world seemed to move on its axis just enough to allow it all to happen. Tomas said, "There were so many times it was so close that you can't believe it. Things that were way out of my or anyone's control-other than our Heavenly Father's-just worked against all odds."

Tickets and Birthday: Getting the tickets to come to the audition was another miracle for Tomas. The tickets had been seized in Danish customs and held until the day of the flight. They were finally and unexpectedly delivered by United Parcel at 1:00 am--3 hours before his plane left for New York. "When I woke up on the morning of my audition in Provo, Utah," Tomas told me, " it was on my 30th birthday. It was not the day before. It was not the day after. It was on my 30th birthday. " The tradition holds of course that Christ began his ministry when he was thirty years old. It held great significance for the man from Denmark-the man who would be Jesus.

Audition: In recalling his adventures at the audition, Tomas and I laughed a lot. He felt tall and skinny and out of place. His nose was too small. He spoke with a Danish accent and at the last minute they asked him to memorize a whole new set of pages-difficult under any circumstances. Very difficult in a second language. Very, very difficult with what he called "Church English".

And then he told me this: "My friends, my wife and I had been fasting and praying. I had felt my own spirituality subtly rising through the week, yet when we came to the actual screen test it was chaos."

His memory serves him well. It was chaotic. In our second great search for the actor we had obviously missed, there were many actors invited to the studio that day to audition for the part of Christ. We kept sending them back to change costumes, fix beards, add make up, or part their

hair a different way. Tomas remembered, "I was sitting in that chair, they are messing with my makeup, they are fussing with my hair, I've been given new pages to memorize. And looking out the hallway I just saw one Christ after the other walking by-all of them looking great. It was a little bit humorous but it was also very intimidating. I felt so misplaced. I knew I wasn't tall and athletic. I was just tall and skinny and Danish. I was shivering all over. I thought, when I get in front of that camera they will just laugh me out and say, "What a waste of money having him come over from Denmark."

"Elder Neil L. Anderson was watching," Tomas said. "He asked me if there was anything I would like different in my makeup so I might feel better. I said, 'I would like a little bit of shade on each side of my nose. I think the Savior had a little more nose than I have.'" "The makeup girl stepped in and added the shades of makeup. When she was done, she stepped aside, clearing the mirror and-for a startling moment- I thought I was looking right into the eyes of my Savior. I looked like my expectations of what he looked like. I was totally overwhelmed, and the tears streamed down my face. I remember worrying that I was destroying the makeup. That was the second time the Spirit strongly testified to me, "You will be doing this part," It whispered, "You can do this. Be calm."

This moment was such a gift for Tomas. It has been my experience in directing actors over many years, the challenge to project yourself into another human being can be exhausting. To think what they thought, and feel what they felt, and respond as they would respond in given circumstances is an extraordinary talent. Those who do it best become absorbed by a dimension of reality it is hard for us to understand. Can you imagine taking on the challenge of portraying the Savior? Tomas is a brilliant actor. In portraying the Savior he managed to project himself in ways it is difficult for most of us to understand. At the end of our filming days, we were totally exhausted. The spirit seemed always present, and at times was so near our hearts were tender to the edge of tears and deep feelings of reverence not easy to explain."

Filming the Crucifixion : The day we filmed the crucifixion, I saw Tomas weeping. He sat alone on the crude pallet constructed near the place of execution. I was concerned we had injured him. I sat beside him. I put my arm around his blood-stained shoulders and asked him if he was all right. We wept together as he shared with me then what he gave me permission to share with you now.

"I think the day at the crucifixion must have been the high peak of my experience," he said. "I didn't understand the pain the Savior suffered, because I didn't experience any pain that was comparable to His." Yet for a mortal, that day of shooting was miserable. His arms were held fast to the

cross beams as the executioners simulated the driving of the nails. To add realism, I had the man playing the part of the Roman strike the cross beam with his five pound hammer with all his force. Held fast to the beam, Tomas was severely jolted-though, of course, the nails were not pounded into his hands. These scenes were so intense, and the portrayal of the suffering so acute, that in their wisdom, the First Presidency asked me to drop three of the shots I had included in my original cut.

"There were many times it was unpleasant for me," said Tomas. I came home with bruises all over from carrying the cross beam and from having my arms hammered to the cross while I was lying on my back and they were pounding the nails. "My arms and back were blue. Hanging in the harness and having the ropes around my hands when I was scourged were painful but, of course, nothing compared to His. But I think what I did come to understand was something of the humiliation He suffered."

Tomas reminded me that I had had his lower stomach shaved, and in the rush of things, I hadn't asked, permission or explained, just ordered it done. Directors do that. "They came up to me, " Tomas grimaced. "No one said a word, they just shaved me and I felt so humiliated that you can not imagine it. It was just a little thing, but suddenly it struck me, "What must they have done to Him? They humiliated Him in so many ways. "I had always thought of the pain-but in our attempt to reenact those terrible events, I realized the humiliation He endured. He was ridiculed, mocked, scourged, and spit upon." Tomas paused a long time. In his home ten thousand miles away, I could hear his voice quiver as the memories flooded into his heart again.

"I think He was naked," Tomas finally said with a voice of a man who had been there. The voice of a man who really seemed to know things others of us do not understand. "I think they stripped Him completely and that at times in his torment, He was totally naked. I felt somehow that He was forced to suffer that total measure of complete humiliation and shame. "

Tomas is probably right. Crucifixion was the cruelest form of torture, and the Romans added humiliation to the pain. They stripped their victims naked and crucified them along the road so they would be a public spectacle, open for ridicule and shame.

Garden of Gethsemane: While the world focuses on the cross, we understand it was in the agony of Gethsemane the marvelous atonement was made. We can not begin to understand or comprehend how much the Savior suffered in those dark and lonely hours.

No actor can adequately portray events that transcend mortal understanding. Few of us will ever transport ourselves into that moment the way that Tomas

Ciphered was forced to do. Few of us will ever take our emotions where Tomas went. I found his memories of playing this moment of Christ's crowning achievement most fascinating. "The most spiritual experience for me was the filming of the Garden of Gethsemane." Tomas told me. "It was already very late. We were going over schedule. I thought to myself, This is the most important event in the whole history of the world, and we are doing it on overtime.

"It was the one scene I wanted to do right-to do perfectly- -to honor my Heavenly Father. I was most anxious. I was not sure how to do it-and then I remembered a time in my life when it was very, very difficult being a member of the Church. I was at the actor's school, and they threatened to kick me out because I was a Mormon.

"I went home broken hearted-and I told my Heavenly Father, "If you want me out of this school and want me to lose my education and job and everything, I will lose it because I will not lose you. And I told him that. That is where I went through 'my Garden of Gethsemane'. That is where I learned to say and mean, 'Thy will, not mine be done.'" Tomas has been generous to me in his compliments and gratitude. But it is I who have been blessed by my association with the man who would be Jesus. It was his honesty that brought him into the Church. It was his diligence in keeping the commandments that kept him worthy. It was his obedience of "Thy will, not mine be done" that brought him forth. It was his faith that the Lord is directing our lives that prepared him to play the greatest of all roles. He played it brilliantly.

The prophet promised us that if we were prayerful, we would be blessed to find the right player to portray the Savior-a role and depiction so important." Tomas was the answer to that prayer. He was the realization of that blessing. He was the man who would be Jesus-and when the moment came he was the vision that the prophets saw.

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The day Tomas Koford arrived on set to play the role of Jesus Christ in *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd*-the new 70-mm film playing at Legacy Theater-he told me ten miracles had been necessary to bring him to this remarkable moment in his life. "Someday I will share them with you," he promised. That was almost two years ago. The film is finished. The Legacy Theater is "sold out" until August. *The Testaments* is having an unexpected impact on the audience-both in and out of the church. Tomas Koford's depiction of the Savior has become a popular point of curiosity and conversation.

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Audition: In recalling his adventures at the audition, Tomas and I laughed a lot. He felt tall and skinny and out of place. His nose was too small. He spoke with a Danish accent and at the last minute they asked him to memorize a whole new set of pages-difficult under any circumstances. Very difficult in a second language. Very, very difficult with what he called "Church English".

And then he told me this: "My friends, my wife and I had been fasting and praying. I had felt my own spirituality subtly rising through the week, yet when we came to the actual screen test it was chaos."

His memory serves him well. It was chaotic. In our second great search for the actor we had obviously missed, there were many actors invited to the studio that day to audition for the part of Christ. We kept sending them back to change costumes, fix beards, add make up, or part their hair a different way. Tomas remembered, "I was sitting in that chair, they are messing with my makeup, they are fussing with my hair, I've been given new pages to memorize. And looking out the hallway I just saw one Christ after the other walking by-all of them looking great. It was a little bit humorous but it was also very intimidating. I felt so misplaced. I knew I wasn't tall and athletic. I was just tall and skinny and Danish. I was shivering all over. I thought, when I get in front of that camera they will just laugh me out and say, "What a waste of money having him come over from Denmark."

"Elder Neil L. Anderson was watching," Tomas said. "He asked me if there was anything I would like different in my makeup so I might feel better. I said,

'I would like a little bit of shade on each side of my nose. I think the Savior had a little more nose than I have.'" "The makeup girl stepped in and added the shades of makeup. When she was done, she stepped aside, clearing the mirror and-for a startling moment- I thought I was looking right into the eyes of my Savior. I looked like my expectations of what he looked like. I was totally overwhelmed, and the tears streamed down my face. I remember worrying that I was destroying the makeup. That was the second time the Spirit strongly testified to me, "You will be doing this part," It whispered, "You can do this. Be calm."

This moment was such a gift for Tomas. It has been my experience in directing actors over many years, the challenge to project yourself into another human being can be exhausting. To think what they thought, and feel what they felt, and respond as they would respond in given circumstances is an extraordinary talent. Those who do it best become absorbed by a dimension of reality it is hard for us to understand. Can you imagine taking on the challenge of portraying the Savior? Tomas is a brilliant actor. In portraying the Savior he managed to project himself in ways it is difficult for most of us to understand. At the end of our filming days, we were totally exhausted. The spirit seemed always present, and at times was so near our hearts were tender to the edge of tears and deep feelings of reverence not easy to explain."

Filming the Crucifixion : The day we filmed the crucifixion, I saw Tomas weeping. He sat alone on the crude pallet constructed near the place of execution. I was concerned we had injured him. I sat beside him. I put my arm around his blood-stained shoulders and asked him if he was all right. We wept together as he shared with me then what he gave me permission to share with you now.

"I think the day at the crucifixion must have been the high peak of my experience," he said. "I didn't understand the pain the Savior suffered, because I didn't experience any pain that was comparable to His." Yet for a mortal, that day of shooting was miserable. His arms were held fast to the cross beams as the executioners simulated the driving of the nails. To add realism, I had the man playing the part of the Roman strike the cross beam with his five pound hammer will all his force. Held fast to the beam, Tomas was severely jolted-though, of course, the nails were not pounded into his hands. These scenes were so intense, and the portrayal of the suffering so acute, that in their wisdom, the First Presidency asked me to drop three of the shots I had included in my original cut.

"There were many times it was unpleasant for me," said Tomas. I came home with bruises all over from carrying the cross beam and from having my arms hammered to the cross while I was lying on my back and they were pounding the nails. "My arms and back were blue. Hanging in the harness and having the

ropes around my hands when I was scourged were painful but, of course, nothing compared to His. But I think what I did come to understand was something of the humiliation He suffered."

Tomas reminded me that I had had his lower stomach shaved, and in the rush of things, I hadn't asked, permission or explained, just ordered it done. Directors do that. "They came up to me," Tomas grimaced. "No one said a word, they just shaved me and I felt so humiliated that you can not imagine it. It was just a little thing, but suddenly it struck me, "What must they have done to Him? They humiliated Him in so many ways. "I had always thought of the pain-but in our attempt to reenact those terrible events, I realized the humiliation He endured. He was ridiculed, mocked, scourged, and spit upon." Tomas paused a long time. In his home ten thousand miles away, I could hear his voice quiver as the memories flooded into his heart again.

"I think He was naked," Tomas finally said with a voice of a man who had been there. The voice of a man who really seemed to know things others of us do not understand. "I think they stripped Him completely and that at times in his torment, He was totally naked. I felt somehow that He was forced to suffer that total measure of complete humiliation and shame. "

Tomas is probably right. Crucifixion was the cruelest form of torture, and the Romans added humiliation to the pain. They stripped their victims naked and crucified them along the road so they would be a public spectacle, open for ridicule and shame.

Garden of Gethsemane: While the world focuses on the cross, we understand it was in the agony of Gethsemane the marvelous atonement was made. We can not begin to understand or comprehend how much the Savior suffered in those dark and lonely hours.

No actor can adequately portray events that transcend mortal understanding. Few of us will ever transport ourselves into that moment the way that Tomas CIPHERED was forced to do. Few of us will ever take our emotions where Tomas went. I found his memories of playing this moment of Christ's crowning achievement most fascinating. "The most spiritual experience for me was the filming of the Garden of Gethsemane." Tomas told me. "It was already very late. We were going over schedule. I thought to myself, This is the most important event in the whole history of the world, and we are doing it on overtime.

"It was the one scene I wanted to do right-to do perfectly- -to honor my Heavenly Father. I was most anxious. I was not sure how to do it-and then I remembered a time in my life when it was very, very difficult being a member of the Church. I was at the actor's school, and they threatened to kick me

out because I was a Mormon.

"I went home broken hearted-and I told my Heavenly Father, "If you want me out of this school and want me to lose my education and job and everything, I will lose it because I will not lose you. And I told him that. That is where I went through 'my Garden of Gethsemane'. That is where I learned to say and mean, 'Thy will, not mine be done.'" Tomas has been generous to me in his compliments and gratitude. But it is I who have been blessed by my association with the man who would be Jesus. It was his honesty that brought him into the Church. It was his diligence in keeping the commandments that kept him worthy. It was his obedience of "Thy will, not mine be done" that brought him forth. It was his faith that the Lord is directing our lives that prepared him to play the greatest of all roles. He played it brilliantly.

The prophet promised us that if we were prayerful, we would be blessed to find the right player to portray the Savior-a role and depiction so important." Tomas was the answer to that prayer. He was the realization of that blessing. He was the man who would be Jesus-and when the moment came he was the vision that the prophets saw.