

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 7

THE BIBLE AND MODERN DRAMA

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For the purpose of this paper DRAMA means a literary composition, now usually written in prose, arranged for enactment, and divided into acts which consist of various scenes. Drama is contrived by a playwright to portray life or character, or to tell a story by means of the actions of persons called actors. The play records the conflicts and tensions of human life and arranges affairs so as to reach a climax in an hour or two which may be tragic or comic. Drama is intended for presentation to an audience as entertainment.

While there is drama in real life, for the purpose of this paper drama is considered fictional in nature. This must be so because the dramatist employs dialogue, which, unless he is inspired or has an eyewitness validation of the fact, must be contrived by him. Besides this, while taken from real life the arrangements of the episodes is determined by the playwright who places them one after the other solely to achieve the effect which he has in mind. In the final act the play reaches its denouement, either pleasurable or tragic, towards which every character and every episode and almost every word has been manipulated by the writer. This by definition is fiction. Drama is therefore fictional.

It is perfectly true that even the most humdrum of days has its dramatic, that is, climactic and exciting moments. Since the Bible covers most aspects of human life, the inspired Scriptures contain dramatic moments. There is however no dramatic contriving toward effect in the Scriptures. Very little dialogue is found in the sacred story and what there is does not build towards tensions and resolutions in climaxes. The purpose of the Bible is to reveal truth, and not to entertain by the exciting effects of conflict and rebuttal.

Drama, as presented by the vast majority of playwrights, contains portrayals of the aberrations and foibles of mankind. It does not point up the right and the wrong of the activities, but displays characterization geared to entertain. Most dramatic productions depict conflicts between the sexes. On the other hand, a play that uses the ingredients of a happy, continuous monogamous relationship with no undue conflict and suspense would not complete its first night without catcalls! A happy, serene marriage, with children growing up towards the development of the Christian virtues, does not contain the ingredients demanded by the theater goer. On the other hand the stealthy robbing of the affections of one partner by a third party, the conflicts and discords, the rise of emotional tensions, the death and suffering of war between nation and nation, between white and red, between cops and robbers, between honesty and the law—these are the themes of most dramatic productions. The purpose of these plays is not to reveal truth, even though the “good guy” sometimes wins, but to entertain and make money. Drama is devised to lead the audience into a vicarious, empathetic relationship with the actor with whom the view identifies and who rouses his

emotions. Inspiration condemns this empathy of those who take “pleasure in them,” as well as the actors who “do these things.”

The Bible contains a clear condemnation of the audience which enjoys the portrayal or acting out of sin. Let us read Romans 1:29-32. These verses contain a list of the wicked deeds of men and women. After completing this catalog of crime the Apostle Paul continues: Most men “know the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, (but) not only do the same, *but have pleasure in them that do them.*” It is the final phrase which is so vital to our presentation. For the Christian to read or view a portrayal by actors of a drama which is made up of the ingredients listed by Paul, and then to “take pleasure” in this behavior, be it in novel or play or story, makes him a moral accessory incurring the wrath of God. Heaven condemns those who act thus in real life. Heaven condemns those who act out these sins in play or novel. Heaven also condemns the reader or viewer who takes pleasure in the dramatization of these acts against the norms of righteousness laid down by God. The results to those who enter into doing and viewing and vicariously sharing is that “God gives them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient” (Rom. 1:28). In other words, those who saturate their minds by mastering a play in order to act out its dramatic potential, or who view, via the media or in the theater, this portrayal of human sins and foibles, finally develop “degenerate minds.” By beholding “they become changed” (2 Cor. 3:18).

There is another important biblical passage in which the Holy Spirit has given to the Christian criteria to judge the rightness or wrongness of any literary production. Writing to the Philippians, Paul gives seven checks. We should apply each of them to our consideration of drama. Is it “true?” Even if we judge what the play contains as truth, is what is being said “honest?” Should it pass muster through these two gates, is it “pure?” How much of what is called drama today is “pure?” Even if it receives an “A” grade in these three areas, is it “lovely?” War and conflict and sin are sordid. Then, is it of “good report?” or “virtuous?” or, finally “praiseworthy?” If the play or novel or story checks “yes” in each of these seven areas, the Christian is bidden, “Think on these things.” If it does not, then, obviously, it is not approved by Heaven.

Let us now consider the *source* of drama as prevalent in the world today. Jesus bade us always to weigh origins. They make a difference. He asked, “Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?” And continues, “even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. The good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit” (Matt. 7:17). So sources do matter.

The Christian quality of the private lives of the actors and actresses in the business of drama, both on the movies or television and also in the straight theater, need little comment from me. Can you think of an actor or actress of note who has not gone through the divorce court? Something is morally wrong with what went on before this step was taken, as well as after! Years ago having a child out of wedlock would have ruined the career of an actress. Today it enhances it! Would you buy canned goods from a cannery which used decaying produce among conditions which were filthy and unhealthful, with diseased and careless persons handling it? I think not! You would rightly explain that such a place could not possibly produce good, wholesome food. And you would be right. Sources do count! No drama portrayed by sinful actors and actresses can possibly be good.

What are the motives of the actors and actresses in dramatic presentations? Do they seek to

present the true and the good, the virtuous and the helpful? Do they stress the pure and the right? Or do they depict human nature in all its crass and sordid wickedness? And why? To exhibit their own talents and skill and to make money, lots of money! “By their fruits ye shall know them,” Jesus declared.

Let us further consider the sources of the drama from the playwright’s point of view. What sort of men write for dramatic production? What are their motives? What overall purpose do they have in their presentations? Do they desire to entertain? To educate? To inspire to right living and holy dying? Look closely at the private lives of the “great” playwrights, and you will be compelled to admit that they do not appear virtuous in the light of the Scriptures. “By their fruits ye shall know them,” Jesus declared.

What is the immediate effect of presenting dramatic productions in our schools and colleges? As soon as a “drama” department begins to put on “plays,” objections to attending the straight theater crumble in many minds. It is argued that the audience should concentrate on what may be moral and high-toned and brush aside and overlook the risque and the vulgar and the immoral. A few visits to the theater to admire the skill of the actors and actresses, and to estimate their talents and techniques in portraying emotions and depicting character, and the last restraints to theater attendance are shattered.

In grade school, children may be taught to act out scenes taken from the Bible. What scenes are chosen? Observation demonstrates that the more exciting ones are selected. But the Bible does not give many dramatic touches and exciting portrayals, and so the teacher-playwright introduces fanciful inventions to add “drama.” This kind of “adding” to the Scriptures is forbidden by God (Rev. 22:18). It has a two-pronged effect. Firstly, it confuses the young person so that when he reads the Bible for himself he wonders where those details came from. Secondly, his norms of “truth” are broken down imperceptibly. He thinks, So what? If we need to fudge here and there for effect, why not? Soon he is reading fiction, both drama and novel, and enjoying every exciting, enervating, deceiving scene. The simple, quiet, almost humdrum stories of the Bible pall. After awhile he does not read the Scriptures any more. Then he cannot even understand it when he does. His brain is fevered. He must have the sensational, the exciting! Later on he is not even satisfied with this vicarious, empathetic thrill of the novel or the drama, but he must try for himself the activity portrayed in them. Long ago, J. Edgar Hoover wrote: “Our youth has been allowed to stray into crime; it has not gone there deliberately. Too often it has been led there by the cheap romanticism of the thoughtless who have painted the gangster as a figure to be emulated and who have emphasized the monetary rewards of crime as depicted in the headlines, rather than pointing to the price which must be paid for every tainted dollar.” God declares in warning, “Be not deceived. God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7).

Crimes of all kinds are acted out in drama today. By this means children are taught to sin. The final effect of drama on TV or movie or theater is to break down the morals and ultimately to lead to the second death. “By their fruits ye shall know them,” Jesus declared. F. D. Nichol quoted in one of his editorials, from an article in *The Saturday Review of Literature* entitled “The Kingdom of the Blind.” Its subtitle was “An Ex-Moving Picture Reviewer Considers His Ex-Job.” This is the studied view of this “expert”: “It is my indignant opinion that ninety per cent of the moving pictures exhibited in America are so vulgar, witless, and dull that it is preposterous to write about them in any publication not intended to be read while chewing gum” (*RH*, Vol. 123, No. 45). This, of course, is true also of the straight theater and TV.

Long ago Daniel Defoe affirmed: “Every devil has not a cloven foot.” From which we may note that things are not always what they seem to be. Drama may appear innocuous and innocent, but later the reality of this effect is seen. Let us turn the light of the Bible on the viewer of the modern drama; its reader would also be included. God condemns him by implication in these words: “He that walketh righteously;... that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil; he shall dwell on high” (Isa. 33:15, 16). But what of those who do not thus discipline themselves? They stand condemned. John K. Ryan, writing in *Forum* some years ago, said words which are uncannily true today: “Sadism, cannibalism, bestiality. Crude eroticism. Torturing, killing, kidnaping, monsters, madmen, creatures which are half-brute, half-human, raw melodrama; tales of crimes and criminals; extravagant exploits in strange lands on other plants; pirate stories.... Vulgarity, cheap humor, and cheaper wit. Sentimental stories designed for the general level of the moronic mind. Ugliness in thought and expression. All these, day after day, week after week, have become the mental food of American children young and old.” (Quoted in *Signs*, Feb. 21, 1939, p. 5. Please note the date!)

Have you ever thought of the implications of this command of God to ancient Israel? “Ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and *destroy all their pictures*” (Num. 33:52). The enervating, moral destroying still pictures of the ancient Canaanites must be destroyed at God’s command if ancient Israel was to attain to the Divine ideal. How much more are the pictorially dramatic presentations of movie, theater and TV of today calculated to corrode the morals and break down the norms of modern Israel.

In study of drama the Christian must consider the inordinate amount of time spent by the student in learning his part so as to enter into “the skin” of the character he is portraying. This identification with a character who might not even be a Christian is destructive to the character of the actor. Then consider the time necessary to coordinate all the actors and produce a play after dozens of rehearsals, and you have an expenditure of time which far outbalances any benefits which might be gained. Consider, too, the effect on the actors. The pride they take in their acting is their breath, and the vital need for their egos to feed upon the applause accorded them by the audience is their food. Is this good?

To depict the scenes, use the words, portray the characters in any play is to exhibit a lifestyle which is alien to that of the true Seventh-day Adventist. The student of drama must force himself into a mold which his better judgment tells him is contrary to the norms of the Bible. “By beholding,” by identifying with his character, “he is changed into” the likeness of the one whom he depicts.

If the student of drama says things he does not believe, in language he does not condone, and depicts attitudes and sentiments which are alien to his concepts of the standards of his Lord, his motives and feelings about right and wrong will become confused. He will eventually come to believe, because his literature or drama teacher tells him so, that drama is an art form which exhibits “culture” and reflects insights into life which are worthwhile. Then, when he studies the Bible his standards are further confused.

The natural inclination for the student of drama to excel and to be applauded leads him to participate and to enter in fully into what he is doing, and very soon his spirituality and desire for the

simple truths of the Bible wanes and the word of God appears dull. Very soon he will be heard to say, "I do not see anything wrong with drama." And what he is actually confessing is that he now doesn't see! He has gone blind and needs the "eyesalve" to open his perspectives to the norms of the word of God.

The major purpose of the imitative performing arts is pleasure, and entertainment, and their end is that the realities of life become blurred. Sin, brutality, domination, excess, love of applause, a refusal to accept the norms of Philippians four and Romans one and the results of teaching drama, and participating in fictional plays destroys the relish for the tranquil pleasure of daily life and the simple joys of true devotion, and confuses ideas of right and wrong while stimulating the desire for excitement, love of worldliness and pleasure for its own sake.

As far as this student of the drama in the light of the Scriptures is concerned, there is but one answer. Drama cannot survive the scrutiny of the Light of the world.