

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 17

Seventh-day Adventists and the Theater

Part I

(*F. M. Wilcox, Review and Herald, March 18, 1937*)

Should Seventh-day Adventists attend the theater? This may seem a strange question to ask, and yet I believe it is an appropriate one to consider. Do you say they should not, that it is entirely contrary to our belief and practice through the years that the members of our church should go to worldly amusements of this character? I fully agree with your reply, and I believe that the very large majority of the readers of the REVIEW will give their assent to this answer.

May I ask another question? If Seventh-day Adventist should not attend the theater or the movies, do you think they should bring theatrical plays into the gymnasiums of our sanitariums, the assembly rooms of our publishing houses, and the chapels of our colleges and academies? In other words, do you think that if it is wrong to attend a theatrical performance in a theater, it would be perfectly right to attend the same program if it were transferred to another atmosphere?

Oftentimes we go to theaters to attend religious services. Many times our ministers hire a theater building in which to preach the message. And this, I believe, is absolutely right. Why then, let me inquire, if it is right and proper to attend the theatrical play if it were enacted in one of our institutions, is it not right to attend it if it is enacted in the public playhouse?

For myself, I can see no difference. An amusement does not necessarily become sinful because of its environment. Its environment may accentuate the evil, may strengthen the evil influence attending it, but intrinsically the geographical location does not make a thing wrong. Do you agree with me in this? I know that the very large majority of the readers of the REVIEW do. On the other hand, I fear there is a respectable minority—respectable both as to numbers and to character—who will take issue with me on this proposition.

Do you say, “It makes all the difference in the world what the character of the play is?” Granted. Let us consider the character of some of the plays that have been enacted before Seventh-day Adventist audiences.

I have only to hark back a short while in my own experience to mention plays that have come under my own personal observation, plays that I attended innocently, not knowing their character until I witnessed them, attending them because I believed that their promoters had a fine discriminating sense that would not lead them to bring before their brethren and sisters plays of an objectionable character.

One was a play promoted by one of our sanitariums. Methods of the healing art in different periods in the world’s history were demonstrated. The miraculous healing attending the work of the apostles was pictured. Dorcas was represented in a state of death by a young woman stretched out on a couch before the audience. Several young women, personating Dorcas’ associates, stood around her bedside, weeping. A messenger was sent for the apostle Peter. A man personating Peter entered. He walked to the bedside of Dorcas, mumbled a prayer for her restoration, and then commanded her to rise and walk, which she did.

What a terrible travesty upon a sacred scene! It made of death a horrible mockery. It brought

the miraculous working power of God down to the cheap and commonplace. Think you such plays should be enacted before a Seventh-day Adventist audience? I felt in duty bound to make earnest protest to the management of the sanitarium against the character of such entertainments.

I attended, in one of our college halls, a talking movie in behalf of the cause of temperance. The pictures presented a series of fighting scenes, drinking, and debauchery. There was sex appeal and a love plot running through the story. I fail to see how any good could come to the cause of temperance from the portrayal of such ungodly scenes.

I was present at an entertainment in one of our college halls, and listened to a talking movie picture supposed to represent the growth of science and the heroic endeavor of a great scientist. It pictured the intrigue and jealousies and passions of men and women. It unfolded a love story of thrilling experience. It was advertised as historical and educational, but the historical was so distorted and disguised by fiction and romance that it gave an entirely wrong conception of the heroic struggles of the great scientist whose life it was supposed to picture.

In my judgment, only evil attended the presentation of these dramas, and this evil was in no sense mitigated by the fact that the entertainment was given for some worthy objective. I care not whether an entertainment of this character is presented in order to raise money for a church building, for missions, for the care of the poor, or for some other worthy objective, the character of the play is not changed thereby. It ill becomes the church of Christ to borrow the livery of Satan in which to serve Christ and His cause.

And what is the influence of such entertainments upon the minds of the young? The reaction which came to me from a number of Christian young men and women was most unfavorable. In their estimation it broke down the barrier against attendance at the theater and the movies; and I am convinced that many young men and women, none too secure in their religious experience, are led to attend similar worldly amusements in the playhouses of the world, after listening to and seeing these things in Seventh-day Adventist institutions.

I impute no unworthy motives to those who encourage entertainments of this character. I have every confidence in the Christian integrity of some who have done this. I feel, however, that they have a mistaken vision of true values.

The plea is sometimes made that we must provide for our young people entertainment of this character or they will go to the world to secure it. This argument, in my estimation, falls of its own weight. Instead of holding our youth back from the world by dramatic plays, we are creating in them an appetite for these things, which they will seek elsewhere.

Years ago, the messenger of the Lord recognized the evil influence attending entertainments of this character in our sanitariums, and sounded a definite warning against them:

As soon as these entertainments are introduced, the objections to theater going are removed from many minds, and the plea that moral and high-toned scenes are to be acted at the theater, breaks down the last barrier. Those who would permit this class of amusements at the sanitarium would better be seeking wisdom from God to lead these poor, hungry, thirsting souls to the Fountain of joy, and peace, and happiness. —*Testimonies*, Vol. IV, p. 578.

Upon whom does the responsibility rest for seeing that the entertainments provided for our young people in our institutions should be of a wholesome, upbuilding character? The responsibility logically, and in the very nature of the case, rests upon the management of the institution. And this is where it is placed by the messenger of the Lord.

Those who bear the responsibility at the sanitarium should be exceedingly guarded that the amusements shall not be of a character to lower the standard of Christianity, bringing this institution down upon a level with others, and weakening the power of true godliness in the minds of those who are connected with it. —*Id.*, pp. 577, 578.

Regarding this question we shall have more to say later.