

## Drama and the SDA Church:

### Appendix 25

#### IS DRAMATIZATION WRONG?

by John H. Hancock

(Committee on Guidelines for Sports and Drama, January 28-31, 1974)

Is dramatization wrong? This is a simple question, but it cannot be answered with a simple affirmation, or negative declaration for this matter, as with the question of sports or literature must be considered on the basis of fundamental principles and the far-reaching effects upon all concerned.

The question of drama is one which has plagued our church almost from its beginning. It is interesting to go back in our history to discover the attitude of our leadership relative to this subject, and to trace a gradual modification in practice and counsel given concerning the use of drama. Whether the change in attitude has been brought about by a re-evaluation of principles or a gradual adaptation to the customs and influences of the universities and general culture surrounding the church is something I believe is worthy of careful research.

Some of our pioneer leaders, with whom I have been personally acquainted and for whom I have much respect, took a strong stand against introducing drama into our churches or schools.

Elder J. E. Fulton, pioneer missionary to Fiji, made this statement while he was president of the Pacific Union Conference: "Have not our children and some of our older folk been prepared for attendance at theatrical plays by the introduction into our churches and Sabbath schools of plays that are dramatic in character? Let us keep all semblance of this out of our assemblies. All exhibitions of display of a worldly nature, such as drama or theatrical performances, should be kept out of all our religious exercises." (J. E. Fulton, December 6, 1928.)

In 1934, W. A. Spicer commented, "The introduction into our schools and churches of pageants and plays and the dramatization of various incidents, even though they may be historical and educational, has a tendency to break down in the minds of many the objection to theater going." (W. A. Spicer, January 25, 1934.)

A former editor of the *Review and Herald*, F. M. Wilcox, wrote, "Worldly methods such as dramatic exhibitions, religious plays and pageants are being employed in our churches and institutions. All this is wrong." (October 18, 1945.)

Forty-two years ago the Moody Bible Institute seemingly took a stand against dramatics in the church in an article in *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, January 1921:

As a general thing Christians have felt an aversion toward the dramatic play, and have given warnings against its dangers, but it is my impression that these dangers have been felt more than they have been understood and defined. It is easy to see the danger in a dramatic production which presents a vulgar or otherwise improper subject, or which presents a proper subject in a vulgar, blasphemous manner.

But apart from this, the dramatic play has another element equally dangerous and harmful, because its influence is more subtle. I refer to the element of feigning, the influence of which is to destroy sincerity, to destroy the ability to distinguish between sin and virtue, and to deaden the conscience.

If we consider to what extent feigning enters into a simple pageant we find it less in evidence than in the more elaborate plays, in which to the imitations of surroundings, costume, posture, and expression is added imitations of speech...

But if we want a natural and convincing expression of spiritual truth, we can have it, not by introducing the play in our churches, but from an abundant spiritual life. And this life does not come by means of the dramatic play, but by a simple and unfeigned presentation of the gospel. What part has the dramatic play had in promoting the great spiritual revivals of the past?

If we look for abundant spiritual life now, will we find it where dramatic productions are the most popular?...

It is difficult to offer convincing objections to church plays which are reverent and apparently in harmony with the Bible. Some Christians have been accustomed to such plays, and may not offer objection to introducing them in their own church. But they do not realize that in so doing, a precedent is established for a development of dramatics within the church, with far-reaching and often fatal results.  
—*Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, January 1932.

I was a freshman in college when the Autumn Council of 1934 took an action that recommended that in Sabbath school programs “no attempt be made to present plays or pageants.... that representations that require elaborate costuming, or the dramatizing of the lives of Bible characters or religious incidents, be avoided.” The action further recommended that “the utmost simplicity distinguish the representation of an exercise or a dialogue, or the taking of character parts in mission incidents or scenes.”

Again in 1935 and 1938, Autumn Council actions were taken appealing “to our ministers, our workers, our people everywhere, to keep their feet in the ‘old paths’ and not to remove the ‘ancient landmarks’ of this message.” Included in this appeal was a call to labor faithfully for members who were holding bridge parties and similar card parties in their homes and who were frequenting theaters or movie houses, recommending that if such persons did not turn from the error of their ways, they be dismissed from church membership. Another warning against bringing dramatization into the church was sounded:

There is an apparent endeavor in some instances to bring the spirit of entertainment into church services, Sabbath school exercises, Missionary Volunteer meetings, and evangelistic meetings. This should be guarded against, and the Bible given its rightful place as the center of all our services and programs. Dramatization and acting should have no place among us, pageants and playlets should be avoided, and save in the case of some dignified representation to make real what our missionaries are facing in mission lands, make-up and costuming should not be countenanced. Let us hold to the plain and simple, and discard the elaborate, the exaggerated, the gaudy and showy.

At the Spring Meeting, March 9-11, 1937, another recommendation was voted that recognized a basic line of demarcation between motion pictures that depicted scenes from real life, nature adventures or travelogues and pictures of dramatized theatrical plots. Motion pictures of dramatized theatrical plots were severely condemned, pointing out that the themes were largely built on human passion and evil, with its attempt at depicting virtue feeble and frequently false. Then these pointed words which sought to give some guidance to the ever increasing problem of “flicks”

and the church were written:

Theatrical films are evil in their influence, and consequently unacceptable, because they confuse the thinking of our people regarding the Seventh-day Adventist attitude toward the theater, the opera, and novel reading; because they create an appetite for emotional reaction which can be satisfied only by further indulgence; and because they make an unwarranted play upon the emotions. This is wrong because emotional stimulation without appropriate action is destruction to character development. Pictures which play upon the emotions create an appetite for the sensational, causing the individual to live in the realm of the unreal, destroying responsiveness to duty, and resulting in emotional instability.

The motion-picture house has so popularized the theater, that millions are daily in attendance at exhibitions which can only exert an influence to lower standards of Christian purity. We believe that in no small degree it is responsible for the present breakdown of morality. There can therefore be no compromise here without tragic loss and fundamental mistake. While it may be necessary at times to go to theatrical buildings for evangelistic meetings, or to hear wholesome lectures or musical concerts, we should avoid, just as far as possible, attendance at places devoted to shows and theatrical performances.

In education we are directed to build only upon the real, the actual, and the true, and to turn away from the false, the speculative, and the fanciful. In literature we are cautioned against the fictional and the unreal.... So, likewise, in our relation to the motion picture, silent or sound, we must definitely choose only 'whatsoever things are true,' honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report; and deliberately refuse that which is untrue and unreal, which involves sham and pretense, or which is impure and corrupting. All such pictures should, because of their inherent wrong, be barred from use by the church, its organizations, institutions, and members.

With such basic principles established, we therefore take a definite and positive stand against all dramatic motion pictures which use character representation for the purpose of acting out a theatrical plot. Such dramatization of imaginative plots, as a method of creating impressions, influencing life, or conveying information, should not be employed in God's service, and it is not to be countenanced by His people. We therefore call upon our entire church membership, young and old, to take their stand upon this platform.

After this strong denunciation of dramatized motion pictures using character representation for the purpose of acting out a theatrical plot, the recommendation then refers back to the paragraph which established a basic line of demarcation between real-life pictures or nature pictures and dramatized theatrical plots, and states "with such basic principles clearly established and accepted in our selection of films, we are convinced that certain motion pictures can be used effectively and helpfully in God's cause, for purposes of education, enlightenment, and wholesome entertainment."

Then there followed a list of suggestions to aid those charged with the responsibility of selecting films for showing to church or school groups.

I can well remember the difficulties we faced as leaders interpreting some of these things. In 1946 I became a youth director in Southeastern California Conference. There was a continual hassle over Saturday night films churches and schools were getting from motion picture rental agencies. The Pacific Union Conference set up a film-review commission, trying to make up a list of

“approved” films for the Adventist’s own legion of decency, but there was disagreement even among the appointed previewers as to what was right and what was wrong.

Then came television and the church’s own entry into the field of drama. It was about this time that our own version of Daniel 2 was produced as a full-length feature film. The pressures were on and I watched as at the 1951 Autumn Council words were deleted to bring what was being practiced into line with official church policy. The words “inspired men” were deleted from the forbidden portrayal list, for new series of religious motion pictures being produced by private film producers on the life of Paul and other Bible characters were eagerly used by both church and school groups in religious meetings and for classroom instruction.

As television and the abundance of available motion pictures from rental agencies began to cloud the scene, it became evident that existing church actions had to be restudied. It was thus in 1951 that the **last important action** relative to our subject today was taken at an Autumn Council. It was a revision of the 1937 statement, and again disapproved of all feature motion pictures or telecasts that portray fictional, dramatized theatrical plays and stated that the history of theatrical drama and its present character show it to be generally opposed to the highest ideals of morality, and alien to spiritual life. It called upon church membership, young and old, to take their stand against such motion pictures and telecasts that dramatize scenes opposed to the high ideals of morality that have been enunciated in our church standards.

Then, however, a modification was made in our previous position to include dramatization of both historical and Biblical characters: “We recognize that there are acceptable motion pictures and telecasts depicting real life, and historical or even Biblical scenes that have been dramatized. The legitimate use of motion pictures or television for the presentation of the message or for education and also recreational purposes is not to be condemned. No doubt there are wonderful opportunities for proclaiming the gospel and reaching millions through these means; but like so many things in life, motion pictures and television are dangerous blends of good and evil. They have been largely appropriated by the evil one with the result that the popular movie and television tend to break down standards of Christian character. Clear discernment of right and wrong is needed, therefore, that we may guard well the avenues of the soul.”

Then there followed a list of guidelines for those selecting films, bringing the 1937 list into harmony with the modified position. The Youth Department was asked to prepare an MV Leaflet giving these guidelines for young and old. On pages 6-8 of MV Leaflet #47 these were listed:

### I. Acceptable Presentations

- a. Industrial Pictures—Pictures showing processes of manufacture, lumbering, mining, oil production, public utilities, transportation, commerce, and transmission of news and information.
- b. Scientific Processes and Food Research.
- c. Travelogs—Pictures of other countries, their national habits, customs, and life (excluding scenes that may have an unwholesome influence).
- d. Nature and Wildlife—Pictures of national or other parks, natural scenery, mountain climbing, exploration, the Forest Service, animal life in various States and nations, the life development of insects, plants, fish, birds, and animals (excluding those which emphasize cruelty).
- e. Archaeology and Wholesome Art—Pictures that conform to our recognized standards of Christian modesty.

- f. Newsreels and Current History—(Excluding pictures that are contrary to our recognized standards).
- g. Educational Pictures—Pictures that impart information and teach truth in any branch of learning.
- h. Historical—Pictures of authentic events accurately portrayed, and otherwise meeting the standards set forth in this statement.
- i. Our Denominational Work and Activities.
- j. Biographical—Pictures of honorable characters, worthy of emulation and accurately portrayed, and otherwise meeting the standards set forth in this statement.

## II. Unacceptable Presentation

- a. Motion pictures impersonating Christ.
- b. All feature motion-picture films or telecasts that portray fictional dramatized theatrical plays.
- c. Pictures portraying scenes of intimate lovemaking.
- d. Pictures which lower esteem for the sanctity of marriage by portraying family disruptions or ridiculing home life and home relationships.
- e. Pictures portraying scenes which are contrary to Seventh-day Adventist standards and ideals, such as dancing, card playing, gambling, drinking, night life, carousing, gaiety, revelry, or rowdiness.
- f. Pictures portraying crime or glorifying criminals.
- g. Pictures portraying scenes of violence, cruelty, or brutality, such as prize fighting or professional wrestling.
- h. Pictures portraying scenes of smoking or drinking as a desirable social activity.
- i. Pictures which by ridicule or insinuation or crude comedy could lower, in the estimation of the observer, regard for the law of God, religion, or the ministry, or the dignity of human personality or law enforcing agencies.
- j. Pictures of a scientific or historical character which distort the facts or pervert the truth.
- k. Pictures in which coarse, profane, or vulgar language is used.
- l. Animated cartoons which violate the standards of propriety in this section.

The Youth Department circulated MV Leaflet #47 like the leaves of autumn, but parts of the recommendations soon became obsolete through apparent acceptable practice. A new religious film on the life of Christ was produced entitled, "I Beheld His Glory," and our evangelists suddenly found this to be a great opening night feature to get a crowd overseas and later in North America. Cecil B. DeMille's "Ten Commandments" muddled the thinking of a lot of Adventists even though *Time* magazine in its November 12, 1956, issue called the film ludicrous and stated that "there are moments, in fact, when it seems that the Seventh Commandment is the only one DeMille is really interested in; to the point where the Exodus itself seems almost a sort of Sexodus—the result of Moses' unhappy (and purely fictional) love life." *Time* further stated, "It is impossible to avoid the impression that the movie maker...has taken the name of the Lord in vain."

When I was a lad growing up, the first major film on the life of Christ entitled, "King of

Kings,” made the rounds in the theaters and our church took a stand against this portrayal of Christ. I have witnessed the gradual change in our position as a church on this matter take place, to where we now bring full-length feature films on the life of Christ into our churches and the response is so great among our people we have to have repeat showings the second week to get the crowds inside of the sanctuary. The Youth Department fought a losing battle in trying to uphold the 1951 Autumn Council recommendation which listed as unacceptable, “motion pictures impersonating Christ.” MV Leaflet #47 was withdrawn from circulation in the Adventist Book Center, and to my knowledge there are now **no** leaflets available published by any department or office of the church which lists acceptable and unacceptable films. If a person would stand up today and try to defend some of the unacceptable presentations listed on page 7 of that old leaflet, he would find himself facing a storm of criticism and controversy, perhaps even ridicule.

Has our “clear discernment” been so affected by familiarity with television and film viewing that we are no longer in a position to make a clear judgment on this matter?

Drama within the church and on campus has become more and more accepted as a legitimate form of expression. Some of our colleges have both a winter and spring play, produced by a select group of voice students, or sometimes anyone who is interested in drama and is willing to work hard may audition.

I read in one of our college papers the following: “Drama is an important instructional aid in today’s visually oriented society, says Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_. It catches attention quickly and really gets the message across. Controversy over drama on a Christian campus has diminished over the years, according to Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_.... Drama helps you to be natural in your speech and actions in front of an audience. It is better than a speech class. Drama gives a person a better understanding of history and human behavior.”

In the world, drama has been an integral part of education and church life. Many church youth papers are filled with reviews of theatrical arts, both on stage and screen, and dramatics is advocated as a part of religious education and expression. Role playing is encouraged as a lively way to present problems for discussion or to help the participant reach an empathetic understanding of a character in a given situation. Simple plays are included as a teaching aid in the elementary classroom. There was a day when the use of drama in presenting our message was frowned upon, yet somewhere along the way, so gradually that its entry would scarcely be pinpointed, picture by picture, play by play, film by film, skit by skit, we are at a point today where there are few who even dare challenge it as a legitimate tool to be used by the church.

Without question there has been a decided change since the 1930's in our church as far as drama is concerned. Were those in leadership positions who took such a decided position then too narrow in their viewpoints? Were they mistaken? Has the church matured in its outlook today and come of age where it can handle the problems warned about by these men of God, or have we in our attempt to compete with the world headed back into Egypt instead of away from it? Are less percentages of Adventists attending the theater today than when the warning was given that if worldly or theatrical entertainments were introduced into our institutions, “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 theatre breaks down the last barrier” (*4T* 578)? It would be appalling if we really knew the number of Seventh-day Adventist church members who not only frequent theaters today, but also watch the late shows on their home TV sets. If the recommendation of the 1935 and 1938 Autumn Councils to disfellowship those who persisted in attending theaters, operas and stage shows were followed today, I fear there would be quite a membership loss, not only in North America, but in numerous places overseas where Western influences are strongly felt. But more serious to me is the permissive attitude toward the theater that has developed among many church members, and the

types of entertainment that is now being accepted in our Adventist centers and institutions as legitimate forms of amusement. It is difficult to really know how much brainwashing has actually been accomplished among us by the mass media, but it is evident from some things that are happening among us that we have not escaped unscathed.

In this day of revival among our youth, they are asking some penetrating questions. They cannot understand how certain films which make the run of commercial theaters, in a few years are shown to Adventist audiences without even an attempt at censoring. There is also developing a conflict between serious-minded youth and some who have taken a liberal attitude toward drama and the effects of TV on the mind. We pick this up in student letters published in school papers. We are in a critical time for the church when this issue, along with the tremendous influence of sports, calls for some real heart searching and examination of the counsels of God. That's why we are here at this committee, and I believe only a careful study of Spirit of Prophecy statements in their entirety can bring us out of this dilemma and give us guidance as to what can be safely adopted as far as any drama is concerned. I don't believe what is being taught in modern educational circles of the world can give us our answer, no matter how logical some of it may appear to our finite minds.

In a study of Spirit of Prophecy counsels, I have not found a blanket condemnation of dramatized programs. Yet there are clearly pointed out many dangers and evil results which often accompany "plays" and "theatrical programs." Interestingly enough, some of the same perils which accompany sports are identified with dramatics, and on two different occasions both sports and dramatic productions are linked together in words of caution.

Simple dramatization has been used for centuries to teach lessons or portray a certain plot. The sanctuary service was a dramatic portrayal of the plan of salvation, using stage props, costuming and enactments to beautify, typify, and accentuate the ministry of reconciliation. Prophets were often instructed to dramatize God's special message to His people by some public demonstration which would make a lasting impression on the congregation. Visual presentations of world history were given in vision to the prophets who wrote what they had seen transpire in great panoramic views. In commenting on this method of teaching employed by God, Sister White writes:

God Himself employed pictures and symbols to represent to His prophets lessons which He would have them give to the people, and which could thus be better understood than if given in any other way. He appealed to the understanding through the sense of sight." —*2SM 319*

One of the most vivid presentations of all time was the vision given to Ezekiel when the dry bones suddenly became animated and moved together to reconstruct human skeletons. Flesh and muscle then covered them, and God breathed life into these human forms which suddenly, according to Ezekiel, stood upon their feet and became an exceeding great army. This dramatic portrayal drove home a mighty lesson on the power of God and has inspired one of the most spirited of the Negro spirituals.

As in the case with most things that God has made or institutions which He has established, Satan has perverted them to an evil use. The evil one has used drama to portray and vivify sin and vice and also to so engross the mind that the individual loses his hold on God. Among the earliest testimonies relating to drama the servant of God points that Satan is using this to preoccupy men's minds so that they do not grasp the messages of truth when they come to them: "Novelties in the form of sensational dramas are continually arising to engross the mind, and absurd theories abound which are destructive to moral and spiritual advancement." —*4T 415*

Some of the same problems with novels and fiction, which keep a person's mind in a world of make-believe or in a restless desire for excitement, seem to apply to the question of drama. The individual is unfitted to face the sober realities of life or enjoy the tranquil pleasures available for the Christian.

It is no doubt correct to assume that the impact of dramatic arts is more powerful and potent today than at any time in history, for, with modern electronics, audio-visual stimulus is constantly bombarding society. The theater, drama, and acting have been a part of civilized culture from its beginning, but only in recent times with the introduction of radio and television has the family circle been penetrated with such devastating effect. Every home now may well become a stage with youthful members mimicking their favorite TV character whether it be Captain Kangaroo or Hawaii Five-O. Familiarity with dramatization, as portrayed on home TV sets, may make it difficult for some to be objective in any discussion of this topic, for, imperceptibly, attitudes change as the individual is conditioned through repeated exposure. Because of the impact of drama on our lives, however, coming to grips with this issue is really a life and death matter, for in the outcome of the battle for the mind rests our eternal destiny.

Examining this problem of drama is not something new for Seventh-day Adventists. Speaking about the welfare of the students attending Battle Creek College before the days when the dormitories were built and the youth were living in the homes of families, Sister White warned of the dangers of theatrical amusements:

Among the most dangerous resorts for pleasure is the theater. Instead of being a school of morality and virtue, as is so often claimed, it is the very hotbed of immorality. Vicious habits and sinful propensities are strengthened and confirmed by these entertainments. Low songs, lewd gestures, expressions, and attitudes, deprave the imagination and debase the morals. Every youth who habitually attends such exhibitions will be corrupted in principle. There is no influence in our land more powerful to poison the imagination, to destroy religious impressions, and to blunt the relish for the tranquil pleasures and sober realities of life than theatrical amusements. The love for these scenes increases with every indulgence, as the desire for intoxicating drink strengthens with its use. The only safe course is to shun the theater, the circus, and every other questionable place of amusement. —*4T* 652, 653.

This statement referred to the legitimate theater in 1881. It was evil enough then, but what would the servant of God say of today's motion pictures and New York stage productions? Obscenity, vulgarity, sodomy, illicit sex, and violence are portrayed with abandonment far beyond the plays on stage in Sister White's day. As in the days of Sodom and Gomorrah, the citizens seem to clamor after that which is more revealing, sadistic or immoral. The other day here in Washington, D.C., the police changed the rating of one of the most licentious films to make its debut in many a year, "The Exorcist," from "R" to "X," which meant that no youth under 18 could attend. People lined up for blocks to get into the theater to see this film. On a news report a picture was shown of a woman fighting with a policeman because he wouldn't let her take her twelve-year-old girl into the theater with her to see this film which portrayed the seduction of a little girl of the same age.

Satan has taken drama and turned it to his account in the destruction of souls. In 1890 the servant of God again pointed out that Christians were being ensnared by this amusement:

Many of the amusements popular in the world today, even with those who claim to be Christians, tend to the same end as did those of the heathen. There are

indeed few among them that Satan does not turn to account in destroying souls. Through the drama he has worked for ages to excite passion and glorify vice. The opera, with its fascinating display and bewildering music, the masquerade, the dance, the card table, Satan employs to break down the barriers of principle and open the door to sensual indulgence. In every gathering for pleasure where pride is fostered or appetite indulged, where one is led to forget God and lose sight of eternal interests, there Satan is binding his chains about the soul.” —*PP* 459

In these foregoing statements we note that Satan has used drama to accomplish a number of evils:

1. To excite passion
2. To glorify vice
3. To foster pride of eyes
4. To keep God from the mind
5. To confuse the senses
6. To open the door to indulgence
7. To poison the imagination
8. To destroy religious impressions
9. To blunt the relish for tranquil pleasures
10. To strengthen sinful propensities
11. To debase the morals
12. To corrupt high principles
13. To create a continual desire for excitement

Certainly the discriminating Christian will recognize the perils of the various so-called art forms today, whether they be music, acting, the spoken word in prose or verse, pantomime, or expressions of painting or sculpture that lead a person away from that which is pure and uplifting. Some reason that it is necessary for cultural growth to be familiar with historical works of literature such as those of Shakespeare, and encourage students to attend Shakespearean plays.

With this in mind it is with interest that we read what counsel was given to the editors of the *Signs* when, in July 9, 1902, a photo of Stratford on Avon was used as a cover picture and an account of Shakespeare’s historical place in literature was extolled. M. C. Wilcox was rebuked as having dishonored God, even though he did not mean to do this.

I was greatly pained to see on the first page of a recent issue of the *Signs* a picture of the birthplace of Shakespeare, accompanied by an article on Shakespeare. May the Lord pity our discernment if we have no better food than this to give the flock of God. It greatly distresses me to see those in positions of trust, who should daily be gaining a rich experience, placing such matter before the people.

Let those who are representing the truth for this time pray earnestly for clear spiritual discernment.... Let them see the sinfulness of exalting such men as Shakespeare, calling the attention of people to those who did not in their lives honor God or represent Christ. —*CW* 172, 173.

While we would not overlook the fact that Shakespeare has written some pithy sayings, and has revealed a remarkable knowledge of humanity, any moral precepts which his writings contain are

counteracted by the coarseness and vulgarity also found in his plays. Can we justify asking our youth to study Shakespeare and attend Shakespearean plays all in the name of culture, sanctified under a halo of so-called great literature? One of Satan's most subtle traps is the mingling of good with evil.

Early in Adventist history the question of dramatic productions in the church arose. As is the case today, whenever a large group of Adventists congregate to form a large Adventist center, the problem of what to do for entertainment confronted the church. In an attempt to meet this need and also to provide cultural programs for church members, Seventh-day Adventist literary societies were formed. Dramatic productions soon became a part of the society program.

It was also about this time that a New York medical institution, Dansville, under the management of Dr. Jackson, encouraged "plays" as being beneficial therapy for patients. Sister White was quick to give firm counsel that this type of thing must not come into the Battle Creek Sanitarium, and also observed that the dramatic productions in the literary societies had proven to be a snare rather than a blessing. The warnings both to the sanitarium and to the literary societies give guiding principles for us today.

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. Worldly or theatrical entertainments are not essential for the prosperity of the sanitarium or for the health of the patients. The more they have of this kind of amusements, the less will they be pleased unless something of the kind shall be continually carried on. The mind is in a fever of unrest for something new and exciting, the very thing it ought not to have. And if these amusements are once allowed, they are expected again, and the patients lose their relish for any simple arrangement to occupy the time. —*4T 577, 578.*

In every case where a literary society has been established among our people, its influence has proved to be unfavorable to religious life, and has led to backsliding from God.... The purposes and objects which lead to the formation of literary societies may be good, but unless wisdom from God shall control these organizations, they will become a positive evil. Various entertainments are introduced to make the meetings interesting and attractive for worldlings and thus the exercises of the so-called literary society too often degenerates into demoralizing theatrical performances and cheap nonsense. All these gratify the carnal mind, that is at enmity with God, but they do not strengthen the intellect nor confirm the morals.... Many literary societies are in reality young theaters on a cheap scale, and they create in the youth a taste for the stage. —*Review and Herald*, January 4, 1881.

At a later date, similar counsel was given regarding Seventh-day Adventist literary societies and Seventh-day Adventist lyceums which were very popular in our larger centers. She noted that oftentimes new members lead out in the dramatic productions and these persons of "short religious experience" propose a variety of amusing, nonsensical and worldly things which gradually crowd out the religious element entirely.

Those who compose these societies, who profess to love and reverence sacred things, and yet allow the mind to come down to the superficial, to the unreal, to the simple, cheap, fictitious acting, are doing the devil's work just as surely as they look upon and unite with these scenes. —*MS 41, 1900.*

In these foregoing quotations it would appear that the unreal, fictitious world of drama, the superficiality and cheapness of the plot and roles portrayed, lowered the minds of the actors, turning them from spiritual life to worldliness. The adoption of these theatrical plays by the church for church productions also brought confusion to the minds of the youth with two very disastrous results:

1. The barrier against theater-going was broken down. “As soon as these entertainments are introduced, the objects 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.” (4T 578)
2. A taste for acting on the stage was created. “Many literary societies are in reality young theaters on a cheap scale, and they create in the youth a taste for the stage.” (*Review and Herald*, January 4, 1881.)

While the servant of God did point out the dangers of bringing theatrical plays into the church and school, she did not disapprove of simple dramatic exercises which were used to teach a spiritual lesson. Ella White, Sister White’s own six year old granddaughter, took part in a Christmas program at Battle Creek, put on by the Sabbath school. There were costumes, speeches, poems, songs, and some simple acting. Little Ella was dressed to typify an angel. After Sister White attended this program enacted in 1888, she wrote to the brother who had organized the program and told him, “I was pleased with the lighthouse.... The part acted by the children was good. The reading was appropriate.” (E. G. White, Letter 5, 1888, page 19.) She gave some suggestions on how the program could have been improved, but this counsel related to content, a choice of music, and an evaluation of certain objectives, and no condemnation of the fact that portions were dramatically presented. If this simple portrayal had been sinful, surely she would have mentioned this, but instead she approved of what the children had done, saying that it was “good.”

In commenting on this, A. L. White has said, “This experience would seem to indicate the proper use of an enacted program dedicated to enlighten men and women concerning the love of God and the way of salvation, by consecrated men and women engaging in the enterprise, motivated by the service of God and not the aggrandizement of self.” (*Dramatic Productions*, page 8.)

From this reference it seems there must be a legitimate place for some simple portrayals of mission life, of historical events of interest to the church, of role-playing to get discussions going and situations clearly defined, skits to present spiritual or Biblical truths; but in using these methods for that which is theatrical is to be avoided.

In speaking to ministers the servant of God has clearly indicated that they should shun anything that is sensational or theatrical:

Some ministers make the mistake of supposing that success depends on...delivering the message of truth in a theatrical style. But this is using common fire instead of the sacred fire of God’s kindling. The Lord is not glorified by this manner of working. —*Ev.* 126.

In my very first labors the message was given that all theatrical performances in connection with the preaching of present truth were to be discouraged and forbidden.... Do not encourage the men who are to engage in this work to think that they must proclaim the solemn, sacred message in a theatrical style. Not one jot or tittle of anything theatrical is to be brought into our work. God’s cause is to have a sacred, heavenly mold. Let everything connected with the giving of the message for this time bear the divine impress. Let nothing

of a theatrical nature be permitted, for this would spoil the sacredness of the work. —*Ev 137.*

It may be observed that Sister White is talking about preachers and the sacredness of the Word and that the holy and mundane are not to be confused. While this may be true, in a sense every believer is presenting the message by the way he lives, the way he works, and in every act of life. Even our educational institutions should consider themselves not merely as church-related schools, but as an extension of the church in the preparation of our youth for service and life. While drama may be a successful method of getting across a point or emphasizing a lesson, we must ask ourselves the question whether it is worth the risk of using a method which has such unholy associations. What are we doing to the personality and thinking of the young? Are we developing a love for the unreal, for that which is sensational, and breaking down the barriers against that which we know is evil?

When a church or school attempts to put on a dramatic production it is extremely difficult to find anything which is really in keeping with true Adventist philosophy and which does not either feed the carnal nature or become because of our amateurism ludicrous or sacrilegious. Just a few days ago I received a letter from a young Adventist layman who was visiting in a city far from home during Christmas week. He attended the church school Christmas program, which turned out to be a dramatic production. He wrote these words in the letter:

As I went to the \_\_\_\_\_ church school Christmas program I saw and heard the play presented by the 8th, 9th, and 10th graders. I experienced something I never have before. In the light of what I have been studying in the book of Romans recently, and as a result of God's leading into a greater comprehension of righteousness by faith, I watched the play and found myself with tears in my eyes. I beheld in that church school an attitude of blatant disregard for the instruction of God in the Scriptures and writings of Mrs. White. The play was so completely out of place in a Christ-centered school and so frivolous I was deeply troubled. Sex was blatantly a part as was also selfish gain. As the little children of lower grades sat there and watched their idols—teachers, parents and even the pastor laugh and clap at comments and actions that would make their Saviour weep. I felt that somehow through love and understanding I wanted to help these dear people see what they were doing to lead their own youth out of the church.

This layman himself is working in the field of communications, and has a deep concern over what is happening in our church in some areas of this field.

All of us are constantly being exposed to acting and drama, through commercials, through TV programs, and in many other ways. We see people picking up the ways of prominent television personalities or Hollywood actors early in life. The jargon and music of the day rise and fall according to these influences. Very early in life the youth begin imitating. One little fellow hardly able to talk toddled up to me one day at a camp meeting and blurted out, "You look just like Jack Benny." I looked down at him in amazement and said, "Who are you?" "I'm Mannix," was his baby reply, and he lifted up his arm as if to swing into action with a make-believe revolver.

How much shall we feed this urge to act—to imitate? Those of us working with youth constantly are concerned that we do not develop a generation of "up front" performers with stage-struck smiles on their faces presenting a glamor picture of Christianity as the happy side of life, but who find it difficult to get back to the sober realities of everyday living when the world of pretense collapses. Price, self-esteem and boldness mark the young generation, qualities which often are fostered by the way we push our children forward into performance.

It is only natural we should be proud of our children, for their success is our success, but we may

need to restudy some of our activities and training which may lead to “pride and love of display.” In *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, Sister White reminds us that when she saw “parents and teachers seeking to display the ability and proficiency of their children and scholars,” she was pained in the heart for she knew that, “it is exactly the opposite course from the one that should be pursued.” (CSS 46)

Our young people today want action and are clamoring for training to know how to give a solid Bible-centered witness. It is interesting that even in the world, disillusioned youth are taking off their beads and are asking for Bible answers. This is a most significant trend which offers unparalleled opportunity for us as a church. At a time when we are spending precious hours wondering about the place of drama in our church, how much better it would be if the same energies could be devoted to witness training in meeting the reality of the hour in which we live.

Can you glorify God by being educated to represent characters in plays, and to amuse the audience with fables? Has not the Lord given you intellect to be used to His name’s glory in proclaiming the gospel of Christ? If you desire a public career, there is a work you may do. Help the class you represent in plays. Come to the reality.... The Lord has given evidence of His love for the world. There was no falsity, no acting, in what He did. —*MS 42, 1898.*

I think of what could happen to this church if all the energies spent in training our boys and girls to give plays could be spent in teaching them how to, for example, take part in a Voice of Junior Youth evangelistic effort or how to conduct Voice of Youth meetings. I was thrilled as I visited the Hansen Place Church in New York City recently to hear junior boys and girls conducting a Voice of Junior Youth effort. Adults had spent much time training them and rehearsing them for their parts, but when the campaign was over and Bible studies had been completed, eighty (80) persons were baptized. The most beautiful part of the story is, however, that those children who led those souls to Christ will never be the same again. Something wonderful happened to their thinking that no amount of acting could ever have accomplished in a make-believe drama.

Is it not time for us to direct the energies of our youth away from the theatrical world of sham to the stark reality of a life and death message for a society fast headed for curtain-fall? Have we been drifting, perhaps almost imperceptibly away from the old paths and need to heed the warnings of our pioneer leaders who recognized that, “Satan’s ruling passion is to pervert the intellect and cause men to long for shows and theatrical performances.” (*Evangelism, p. 266.*) Is it time for the voice of another Autumn Council to affirm the church’s historic position in this problem area as it appeals for revival and reformation?