

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 26

SHALL WE USE COMMERCIAL DRAMA IN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST SCHOOLS by Frank Knittel

I am sure there has never been a task assigned me which has caused me greater perplexity than that of writing this paper. First of all, there was no stated premise and it became my responsibility to define my thesis and then to make some purely arbitrary decisions. The title alone implies some foregone conclusions. Since my task is to comment specifically on the place of commercial drama in Seventh-day Adventist schools, I have assumed that some general enactment of scenes by players is an acceptable Seventh-day Adventist activity. If not, my topic would be pointless, for there would be no use in evaluating a specific type, if the *genre* were unacceptable.

It also was necessary to make a rather arbitrary decision in reference to what is meant by a commercial play. For the purposes of this paper, my definition of commercial drama is that drama which has been prepared for commercial stage enactment as opposed to drama written for purely literary effects. For practical reasons we can assume that drama which anyone would be interested in presenting in our institutions would be that which has met with at least limited stage success.

First, let us briefly characterize a successful commercial play. Commercial drama falls mainly into three basic types: (1) conflict of forces, including wills, personality, and emotions; (2) comedy situations; (3) social tableaux; (4) the more or less plotless and formless musical plays.

Conflict plays would include those such as *The Andersonville Trial*, *The Ugly American*, *The Children's Hour*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Hairy Ape*, many Shakespearean plays, and all of the Oedipus plays. Comedy plays are such productions as *See Here*, *Charlie Brown*. Plays falling into the category of social tableau would include such creations as *Life With Father*, *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*, *Our Town*, *The Diary of Ann Frank*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *The Glass Menagerie*. With this paper I do not discuss operas, oratorios, cantatas or movies.

Let us not proceed further without a direct reference to the very excellent statement on literature which was accepted by our church in 1971 and which subsequently was widely disseminated throughout the world field. The principles therein enumerated specifically relating to the study of literature satisfy the criteria for movies and plays, since all fall into the general realm of verbal communication. We will first examine the character of drama on a Seventh-day Adventist campus and then, second, analyze how commercial drama fits into the picture. In this analysis I shall paraphrase, if not plagiarize the statement on the teaching of literature, because literature and commercial drama cannot be separated.

The function of drama should be to provide significant artistic and lasting insights into the entire scope of human experience. Its presentation must ever confront the viewer with reality. It should provide answers to significant questions and it should tend to draw the audience to Christ. Drama should be serious art, compatible with Seventh-day Adventist values. It should avoid exploitation of human beings, including the body and emotions. Any elements which suggest that evil is desirable or that goodness or spirituality are trivial should not be present. Excitingly suspenseful drama or drama characterized by plot for the sake of plot would not be acceptable. The

language of the drama should conform to the qualities of being pure and kind and true. As a result of viewing what is presented, the individual spectator should have his faith strengthened and he should be encouraged to continue his Christian development.

This does not mean that all drama need be religious—that it cannot be built around a secular theme. Ultimately all secular issues in life have moral overtones whether they are explicitly depicted in drama or not. Intellectual stimulation and growth, development of our judgment in meeting life's problems, growth in our understanding of others—all of this is a part of Christian growth, though much of it may be gained in a secular setting.

At this juncture I will make one rather sweeping generalization. Religious fundamentalists often are the poorest judges of moral values in the arts because they tend to judge art on the basis of the absence of explicit evil with too little consideration for the presence of that which is good. For years it was my unfortunate lot to be a member of various film committees, and the question almost invariable was this: "Well, people, is there too much objectionable in this film to keep us from showing it?" Rarely did we ever address ourselves to the question of whether or not a film had so much good about it (other than popularity!) which caused it to be morally and intellectually beneficial. Much of the same sort of judgment is often made relative to plays. If there is an absence of violence, no passionate love scene, no profanity, and no bawdy suggestion, then the play must be all right. Usually it ends up having nothing intellectual going for it, but we are not afraid of it because the dialogue and the scenes do not jar our finer sensibilities. Let us now consider the commercial stage play in light of criteria established thus far. First, commercially successful plays generally represent serious art. Exceptions are those based totally upon sexual exploitation and which are commercially successful because they are salacious. Second, they generally avoid the exploitation of violence—usually because of staging limitations. Third, they quite frequently explore significant questions. Last, the plot is usually not excitingly suspenseful and typically it is not plot for the sake of plot.

These characteristics are positive, but there are likewise some bold negative features. Unfortunately, most plays provide no answers to questions. The prevailing attitude normally presents a Machiavellian or at best a hedonistic approach to life, and normally there is no attempt to laud religious ideals or to discredit a way of life out of harmony with the Gospel ethic. A further weakness of modern drama is its absence of plot to the extent that the play in current times has become almost amorphous. It hardly any longer is really a study of the great human comedy.

Probably the most dangerous feature of commercial drama lies in its presentation of man contriving against man in an ultimate supremacy struggle. This is usually accomplished by pitting a character whose presence is germane to the action (the protagonist) against another character (the antagonist) whose presence in the story provides some sort of struggle for the protagonist. The spectator identifies himself with one of these characters. Usually the protagonist is also the hero, who frequently embodies more positive moral qualities than his opponent. However, the protagonist is not always admirable; and although the antagonist may also be unsavory, the sympathy of the audience lies with him because he is the underdog. Then, when he performs an unsavory act in response to evil on the part of the protagonist, the audience is glad, regardless of the moral questions relating to the act. Thus, as is very frequently the case, none of the characters are to be lauded for principled lives, but we agree with their acts because we are skillfully led to sympathize with them. If Bonnie and Clyde had evoked as much public sympathy in their lifetime for themselves as they did in that recent sordid film version of their horrible existence, they probably would still be living today.

A further significant concern of ours should be the personal mind and life of the author. I will not take the time or space to cite here all of the passages in the modern spirit of prophecy that warn

us about studying the works of infidel and otherwise Godless authors. Suffice it to say that the statements are there and are easily found. Furthermore, there is no question but that the society of authors and playwrights has yielded its share of dissolute citizens; and in all fairness I must point out that in the last 100 years there have been very few commercially successful playwrights whose personal lives have been wholesome. A serious student of the medium discovers very readily that the personal lives of playwrights have yielded basic unwholesome personal attitudes which quite regularly are reflected in the plays they write.

A classic example of this, by way of illustration, is the playwright, Lillian Hellman. *Watch on the Rhine*, *The Children's House*, and *The Little Foxes* are all very dissimilar and it never occurred to me while reading or watching these plays that the personality of the author ever really had anything to do with the construction of the productions. However, within the last three years after reading her autobiographical books, *An Unfinished Woman* and *Pintimento*, I came to the sudden realization that the hard-living, hard-drinking, hard-talking and religiously-coarse personality of Lillian Hellman shines through all of her plays like a beacon; the life and attitudes of this talented woman are seen in the lives of the hard-hitting, ruthless characters who trod her stage. The same observations with varying details are obvious with virtually all playwrights in the glittering galaxy of the world's drama. I am a very firm believer in the philosophy that it is almost impossible for a corrupt person to produce sustained, unblemished beauty. Moments here and there of fragrance and beauty, intermittent moral and religious truths—these are only occasionally bright spots on a general tapestry which represents a code of ethics not acceptable to a God-fearing people who are waiting for a soon-coming Savior.

Another consideration is the audience for which a play is intended. The viewing tastes of the theater-going audience demand a type of play which conforms to the prevailing attitudes of society. If we believe the Bible and the modern spirit of prophecy, if we read the national press, if we see even so much as the titles and covers of best sellers, and if we even so much as read the critical reviews of television fare, then, indeed, we are compelled to admit that the viewing appetite of the world today is dissolute and degenerate and assuredly not a craving for spiritual meat. Playwrights are not blind to this, and there is not a one in the modern repertoire of theater who does not have the eye of his mind fixed firmly on the box office. If he satisfies the audience and if his play is commercially successful, the spirit of the play which gratifies the desires of today's audience is normally not meat for Seventh-day Adventist consumption.

The simple fact is that in order to be publicly acceptable and commercially successful, the modern play satisfies a perverted public taste, which is directed downward. While such drama may provide artistic and lasting insights into the entire scope of human experience, these insights are typically seen through the medium of selfish or perverted characters who usually fall because of ignorance or rise because of wits, with no tribute given to the working of Providence.

A classic example of this is *The Little Foxes* by Lillian Hellman, which is a study of ruthless human beings forsaking all virtue and destroying each other. Yet, the play is artistically conceived and presents powerful and lasting insights into humanity, all presented realistically.

As with literature, we stated earlier that plays must confront the viewer with reality. Many plays do just this. *A Long Day's Journey into Night* and other similar productions are characterized by a fastidious attention to reality. The reality depicted, however, is harsh and coarse. It is of a depressant, not elevating quality. It raises no thought to God and conveys no concept that the brutality of the reality could be ameliorated if the characters turned to God. Furthermore, the reality tends to be, as Robert Frost suggested, a potato reality with the dirt left on.

We have said that the play should provide answers to significant questions, but in the case of commercial drama this is seldom so. Great questions of life are raised, but with no plausible

answers. Typically, the outcome—explicit or implied—reflects the attitude that life is a total mystery and certainly no one is directed to God for a solution.

Finally, in a collective sense, the language of commercial drama simply and plainly and deliberately does not conform to the ideals of purity, kindness, and veracity. It is hard, harsh, coarse, cruel, usually punctuated with profanity and spoken with invective, sarcasm and cynicism.

Having said all this, do I then propose a rather unilateral ban on the utilization of commercial plays in Seventh-day Adventist schools and do I propose a general church position that our schools and other institutions should not allow them as part of the educational or recreational fare of the church? Before answering this, let me say I firmly believe that there are some activities which we should not admit within our social and educational ranks because of their inherent generic qualities as activities. Into this category I would place varsity sports, social or ballroom dancing, the ROTC program, and other similar proceedings. My belief is that these are in antitheses to Seventh-day Adventist philosophy as historically and currently held by our church. I cannot, however, after a great deal of inner searching and outside reading come to the conclusion that drama per se is antagonistic to the Gospels or the three angels' messages or any portion of the philosophy of the Scriptures. I have heard it said that anyone acting in a play is not acting out his real life and, therefore, is acting a role and is consequently learning to live a double life. The implication apparently is that this leads to personal and perhaps public insincerity. I categorically reject the validity of this assertion. Others insist that drama as a form is dangerous because it seeks to make stars out of people and calls attention to them as persons and not as creatures of God. I maintain the play is no more prone to do this than is the field of music which often features brilliant solo performers.

I have strayed from my topic of commercial drama but have done so merely to illustrate the fact that I do not believe we should condemn commercial drama on the basis of its being inherently evil in the same way that we condemn, let us say, playing cards.

I see by analyzing my own considerations I have drawn a rather doleful picture of commercial drama. On the basis of everything I have said and on the basis of my own personal philosophy, my answer to the question of commercial drama on a Seventh-day Adventist campus yields a second rather sweeping generalization—the typical commercial drama has no place on a Seventh-day Adventist campus. To this statement I subscribe without equivocation. During my lifetime I have seen only about 150 stage productions—about 75 of these at one university—and I have yet to see one in a public arena that I would personally judge suitable as presented to be staged on a Seventh-day Adventist campus. This observation arises, however, because of what each of those plays was and not because of what any of them ever could have been.

You will note I referred to my generalization to the *typical* commercial play. I feel it is *possible* for a commercial play *not* to be typical to such an extent that it could be suitable for presentation to a Seventh-day Adventist audience. I have not seen a play in a long time and I have not read many of those which are currently being written. Each week I review the criticism of ten to twenty commercial plays and must confess I do not find any which lead me to think they have the tone we would consider desirable for our consumption. On the other hand, I do think there are commercial plays which have wholesome philosophies, which do offer the positive outcomes we desire, and which can be adapted to the Seventh-day Adventist stage. In the case of current plays, it sometimes is legally difficult, if not impossible, to alter the plays enough to make them conform to our high ideals. Many plays, however, are in public domain and we are free to do with them as we see fit. Admittedly my field is not drama and my scope is limited; I therefore am aware of only a few plays which I think merit consideration for our utilization. One of these easily could be Barrie's *The Little*

Minister. To come up to more recent times, we can consider *Our Town*, which, incidentally, I saw exquisitely edited and staged under the direction of Elaine Giddings at Andrews University in the middle sixties. Of natural interest to Seventh-day Adventists are some of the plays in connection with religious history such as *Saint Joan*, *Murder in the Cathedral* and similar dramas. The problem with these two is that while the theme is purportedly religious in nature, the questions emerge more intellectual than spiritual, and I seriously doubt we have many Seventh-day Adventist drama coaches capable of keeping the issues straight. Frankly, I think on a Seventh-day Adventist campus it would just plainly be virtually impossible to edit and stage these dramas dealing with religious themes of yesteryear without emasculating the intellectual questions which are raised.

A play which probably has far greater possibility on the Seventh-day Adventist stage is *Dear Brutus*, which explores the theme of whether or not we would choose to live our lives over again. Another consideration is Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln*, which raises to noble heights the mind of a magnificent man who was torn from life just at the time he was most needed to bind up a nation's wounds.

I cite these plays only as illustrations for my believe that it is possible to find plays which generically have positive qualities consonant with the Seventh-day Adventist ethic, and whose authors lived respectable lives characterized by admirable personal beliefs and attitudes.

In consideration of all this, it is crucial to understand that the preparation of plays like these for the Seventh-day Adventist stage is a formidable task. Editing any play for acceptance by a primitively fundamental Christian group requires close scrutiny of language, attitude, philosophy, and action. My conviction is that any public presentations before Seventh-day Adventist audiences must necessarily meet the minds of a conservative middle class church group who tend or pretend to be shocked rather easily. A problem with amateur performers is that so frequently they immediately become prima donnas and want to upstage the audience. In the case of drama, where there is admittedly a sensitive nerve, we should go an extra mile to maintain a positive reception by the spectator.

A problem which sometimes arises in connection with plays I the wish to be just as daring as possible without being banned. Sometimes our students react with a philosophy that to arrive intellectually, we must have enough nerve to toss a few shockers around in our plays. If, in the presentation of commercial drama we feel compelled to stay just as close to the original line of question as we possibly can, then it has no place on any of our campuses. Sometimes truth is shocking, but more often than not we do not rile up our audience because of truth but rather because of our affinity to coarseness; and the commercial drama contains a great deal of that which is coarse.

Some insecure or inexperienced drama coaches insist the excision of anything within a play somehow destroys its virtue. Against this I vigorously contend. Let us all be reminded that the great majority of plays begin with great masses of material and are then subsequently pared, pruned and rearranged until frequently only a skeleton play remains when compared with the original. It is well-known in theatrical history that many plays have undergone total revision after an initial appearance upon the stage, and the final revision—sometimes very much changed from the original—comes to be by far a superior product. Playwrights regularly adapt their plays to the shifting moods of audiences, which vary according to chronology and geography.

Seventh-day Adventists can edit a play to suit the individual needs of Seventh-day Adventist audiences as competently as many a producer on Broadway. It is not a task for amateurs nor is it an exercise for the religion department or the president. The president and the board, however, in any of our institutions must decide whether or not within the faculty there reside persons with the competence to stage a commercial play to the benefit of a Seventh-day Adventist audience.

These observations yield the conclusion that if a commercial drama is presented in our

institutions, it can be done safely only if it is staged by our own people. The fact that a group of players from some Christian organization produces a play does not mean that their philosophy in their production is compatible with that of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Most of the time it is not. I would not allow a non-campus group to present a commercial play to our student body. A possible exception would be a Seventh-day Adventist group which has previously demonstrated its ability to present a play suitable to a Seventh-day Adventist campus environment. Commercial drama for our own use must be sensitively interpreted by us in precisely the same way that we interpret anything else that we present to our students by way of oral communication. Some will take exception to this by insisting that this does not allow students to have the benefit of varied philosophies. Let us remember, however, that when we are talking about commercial drama, we are basically talking about entertainment and not education. Within the educative processes there should be room for divergent opinions. When we come to the entertainment of our young people, however, our presentations must meet high moral standards because they become the bill of fare offered by a school and not simply the opinions of a guest speaker or of some person who has expressed himself in a book and whose expressions are part of a class assignment.

There is one final consideration which bears our scrutiny. Will the production of the commercial play for Seventh-day Adventist youth condition them to patronize the theater of either the movie or the legitimate stage? I am not aware of any study of a statistical or an evaluative nature that gives us any answer to this question. Commercial dramas come into focus here because if students see productions by one author on our institutional grounds, are they then more prone to see other productions by the same author elsewhere? My own personal judgment is that most of our students understand there is discrimination shown for entertainment of any kind which is provided for Seventh-day Adventist young people on their own campuses, and they really do realize there is no justification for finding similar entertainment at the world's great amusement centers. If our students become theater goers because of pictures they see on our campus, we are not doing a very good job of educating them along these lines. I frankly have never met a young person who started attending the public theater because of movies he saw on a Seventh-day Adventist campus. The great mass of students whom I knew in college did not patronize the skating rink, even though at Union skating was the principle means of recreation for almost all of the students. I only wish more of our students would become habitués at the concert throughout their lives because of their exposure to college musical groups. Alas, such is not the case. My observation is that any of us can look for an excuse to do anything we want to do and, if we can blame some feature of the church, especially as it relates specifically to us, we are most eager to do so.

I rest my case, but not without concern and certainly not with a closed mind. My premises do not stem from pleasant or unpleasant experiences on the campus of Southern Missionary College relative to commercial drama, for the issue has not arisen. Perhaps it will in the future and, when it does, I am certain God will give all of us the judgment to discern between our right hand and our left hand and, in this assurance, I have continuing confidence.