

## Drama and the SDA Church:

### Appendix 27

#### The Witches' Den Opera at Southern College of SDA

by Vance Ferrell, *Pilgrim's Rest*

(Emphasis by the author)

*On Sunday, March 18, 1990, Southern College of SDA involved nearly all its performing arts groups in a special in witchery. They called it "an opera," but it was that and much more.*

*The whole thing combined about every aspect of worldly entertainment, plus witchcraft on top of it.*

Nine of the innocent Adventist young people sent to this Seventh-day Adventist senior college in Tennessee "to learn how to be missionaries," were led by the faculty into taking part in a spellbinding dramatization of Roman mythology involving witches and their hapless victims, one of whom dies on stage as a result.

Ten of the young people took part in a chorus which intoned the sentiments of the sorceress and her fellow witches.

Six children were assigned the task of dancing and ballet at various points in the musical dramatization. In some scenes they are called "*Cupids*" which bring about a romance between Aeneas and Dido. In another they are "*the Furies*"—little demon spirits—which are intent on bringing heartbreak and destruction.

An ensemble of six student musicians provided enchanting background music.

In addition to the students listed on the official program, others also take part. This includes two additional "sailors" not listed on the program. All three are dressed in short pants, and bare legs, feet, and chest.

The audience was packed with students, faculty members, and non-Adventists from the Greater Chattanooga area. (The non-Adventists learned about it from a city-wide advertising campaign; for many this was their first introduction to the beliefs and lifestyle of Seventh-day Adventists.)

*The entire project was hailed as a special missionary outreach, and because it reached out and drew so many children, teenagers, college students and adults into what turned out to be an auditorium of Endor, it was considered an outstanding success.*

Leading up to it were long months of hard work for those 25 students, six children, and the faculty of the drama and music departments at the college. It is not easy to memorize words and music for an opera and sing them well at the right time and place on stage. It is not easy to practice ballet and dance routines endlessly, or work on the chorus and musical ensemble routines.

*But under the watchful eye and careful guidance of teachers partly paid by your contributions, it was done. Never will the minds of those three dozen young people—on stage and in the wings—who took part, ever fully forget what they learned in that performance.*

This is what the young people you send to Southern College are learning. And it was all done deliberately by men and women on the faculty of a Seventh-day Adventist college, with the full support of the president, the administration, and other departments of the institution.

*Our only normative guide and only safe history is to be found in the Word of God, the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy. There we find outlined not only the most urgent warnings against*

*indulging in witchcraft, but we also learn of what happened to individuals and organizations which have dabbled with it in the past.*

In view of all this, I do believe that if an angel were to come down from heaven with a message, he would proclaim over the academic buildings and personnel in Collegedale:

*“Leave it alone; it is destroying itself. Send not thy sons nor thy daughters to this accursed institution. The men and women there will release them not until they have trained as many as possible in the dark arts. Leave them alone; go not near this institution; send not thy children there. It has committed the sin of Saul.”*

***Entitled Dido and Aeneas, the opera was performed at 8:00 p.m., Sunday, March 18, 1990 at the Ackerman Auditorium, Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, Collegedale, TN 37315. This opera was the climactic conclusion part of a three-day Southern Union Music Festival, all of which was held at the college.***

Requiring as it did so many months of careful preparation, this was the major performing arts presentation of the early spring 1990 season at Southern College. This full-scale opera dipped into departments and students from all over the school—and outside of it. Students at the college were taught dramatic arts, as they memorized their lines and pretended to be drunken men, witches and their victims, or disembodied spirits.

The dancers were six children from the *Children’s Company* of the *Chattanooga Ballet*, a non-Adventist organization. ***Perhaps the first introduction those six sweet children ever had to Adventism was this opportunity to dance in a “witches den” opera at a Seventh-day Adventist denominational college.***

This senior college, heavily supported financially by the church members of the denomination, has what is known as the *Schola Cantorum of Southern College*. The ostensible purpose of this group is the teaching of the fine arts through a choral group. But its activities specialize in introducing students of Southern College to the music of monasteries, nunneries, and cathedrals in the Dark Ages. Begun in January 1988, the *Schola Cantorum* openly admits that it is patterned, in both technique and musical content, after “the cathedral choir schools which began in Europe during the early Middle Ages” for “liturgical music from the Renaissance to Classical eras.”

The *ensemble* was selected from young people who came to the college with the intent of developing their instrumental music skills, so they could better serve God in the church after graduation.

The nine-member *cast* (plus at least two additional “sailors”) included three students trained by college personnel to be the “Sorceress,” the “First Witch,” and the “Second Witch.” ***Another girl enacted “Dido.” Her part was to accept the courting of the hero, and when he spurned her love,—to die! Another girl was the “spirit” of the heathen gods who called out instructions from pagan deities during the performance for Aeneas to obey.***

Much *pre-show and backstage work* was also carried on. This took even more student involvement. Special costumes had to be sewn and stage props made. One person spent his time as a “fence coach,” training two “sailors” to fence for a scene in the opera in which they had a sword duel with one another.

Other stage props had to be made.

Still another girl was the make-up artist, to put cosmetics on all the actors and actresses for the performance. Then there were the rehearsal accompanists—three students that spent their time going over the lines with the performers, so the sorcery scenes, calling spirits, and drunken rowdiness enacted on stage would be as realistic as possible.

In keeping with the ethereal and spiritist atmosphere, candles were the main lighting. Only rarely

were spotlights used, and then to enhance a certain actor or actress.

Both Diana, a Roman goddess (the equivalent of the Greek Artemis) mentioned in Acts 19:28, 34 and 35, and the mythological Acteon, are mentioned in Act Two:

“BELINDA AND CHORUS: Thanks to these lonesome vales, these desert hills and dales. So fair the game, so rich the sport, Diana’s self might to these woods resort.

“SECOND WOMAN: Oft she visits this loved mountain, oft she baths herself] in this fountain. Here Acteon met his fate, pursued by his own hounds, and after mortal wounds, discovered, discovered too late.”—*Act Two, lines twelve and thirteen.*

Here we have strong allusion to another pagan Roman myth: Acteon the hunter is said to have accidentally seen the goddess Diana (Artemis was her name in the Greek pantheon) bathing, so she in anger turned him into a stag, whereupon his own dogs then chased and killed him.

***Such stories have nothing to do with Christianity and should not be taught to the young people in our colleges.***

***A spirit from the nether world appears, speaking on behalf of the Roman god, Jove (who is called “God,” not “god” in the official transcript of the Southern College performance. Unnamed gods are sometimes written on that paper as “Gods” and at other times as “gods”).***

***At the beginning of Act Two, the sorceress makes a loud call for two fellow witches to materialize out of nowhere.***

“SORCERESS: Wayward Sisters [evil witches], you that fright the lonely traveler by night, who like dismal ravens crying, beat the windows of the dying. Appear at my call, and share in the fame of a mischief shall make all Carthage flame.”—*Act Two, paragraph one.*

Because proper witchcraft formulas have been used, they then appear. The above paragraph explains that it is the work of spiritualists to frighten people, keep them from dying in peace, and produce various disasters. Notice the close relationship of witchcraft to death. It figures prominently all through the performance. Spiritualism, and departing and departed spirits, always accompany one another. See *Great Controversy*, chapter 34, which will tell you of the terrible dangers in our people—of anyone else’s—dabbling in this infernal pathway to eternal death.

***Another prominent lesson taught throughout this opera is that we should FEAR and OBEY the devil spirits that tempt us to do wicked deeds, or they will afterward injure us.***

In one scene, the three sailors come out on the stage drunken, one swinging a bottle in his hand it will be clearly seen, and the three stagger around. The one with the bottle then sings to the others, “Take a boozy short leave of your nymphs on the shore, and silence their mourning with vows of returning, but never intending to visit them more.”—*Act Three, line one.*

***Unfaithfulness, lying, obeying evil spirits, drunkenness; this is what we find in this worldly opera.***

Elsewhere in the printed program, we are assured that the author of the opera “*fashioned the text after the manner of a morality play, appropriate for the young genteel girls intended for his original cast.*” ***This is a morality play? It teaches morality? It is intended for nice girls to view and take part in? And this play, filled as it is with besotted drunks, quick affairs while on shore leave with women, women talking about death or suicide, men harassed by demons, witches mixing brews in dark caves, heathen gods sending messages through “spirits” that humans must obey,—all this is presented by faculty and students of a denominationally-owned Seventh-day Adventist college to faculty, students, parents, children, and non-Adventists from the area? And the last question: Are you going to keep quiet about this matter? The Spirit of Prophecy says that neutrality in a crisis is treason.***

“If God abhors one sin above another, of which His people are guilty, it is doing nothing in case of an emergency. Indifference and neutrality in a religious crisis is regarded of God as a grievous crime and equal to the very worst type of hostility against God.”—*3 Testimonies, 281.*

*Who has your first loyalties: the God of the church and His truth, or men in the church that are carrying on these activities so successfully because everyone quietly lets them do so?*

As the Synopsis in the program mentions, the “sorceress and her witch cronies plot the demise [death] of Dido [Aeneas’ lover] and her kingdom [of Carthage]. Their jealousy drives them to deliver to Aeneas a spurious command from the god Jove demanding that he sail immediately for Italy.”

***In one important scene, the sorceress enters her cave and begins stirring a pot, as she mutters incantations. Various potions are in the pot, and hovering near are the other two witches. As she stirs and mixes, they move about in grotesque—grotesque!—positions to help call down the power of the spirits and the gods, to make their enchanting curse on Dido come true.***

You cannot grasp the full impact of this merely by reading the transcript, nor even by hearing the audio cassette. The video will show you the true horror of the experience. It really happened! in a Seventh-day Adventist college—only a few weeks before you read this!

The sorceress, her two witch associates, and children dancers imitating evil spirits, spend the rest of the play working toward getting Dido to die of suicide or grief. While Dido and Aeneas are intent on love, the six “Furies” (performed by six innocent children) do an “Echo Dance” to help them split up. Then the three mediums “conjure up a storm” to cause them more trouble.

***This concept of fate and human destiny is but the outcome of the hellish invocations of witches in dark caves interweaves itself throughout the entire play. From start to finish, the whole thing is all a study in fraternization with devil gods.***

At the very end of the opera, Dido cries out and falls down dead. Cupids gather to her fallen form as the opera ends. The witches have triumphed, their curse has finally fallen on Dido whom they hate.

Here are the final lines in the play:

“AENEAS: What shall lost Aeneas do? How, royal fair, shall I impart the Gods’ [sic.] decree and tell you we must part?

“DIDO: Thus on the fatal banks of Nile, weeps the deceitful crocodile. Thus hypocrites that murder act, make heaven and gods the authors of the fact!

“AENEAS: By all that’s good,—

“DIDO: By all that’s good no more, all that’s good you have foresworn, to your promised empire fly, and let forsaken Dido die!

“AENEAS: In spite of Jove’s command I’ll stay, offend the gods, and love obey.

“DIDO: No, faithless man, thy course pursue. I’m now resolved as well as you. No repentance shall reclaim the injured Dido’s slighted flame.

“AENEAS: Let Jove say what he will—I’ll stay.

“DIDO: Away, away! To death I’ll fly, if longer you delay. But death, alas? I cannot shun. Death must come when he [Aeneas] is gone.

“CHORUS: Great minds against themselves conspire, and shun the cure they most desire.

“DIDO: Thy hand, Belinda—darkness shades me. On thy bosom let me rest. More in would, but death invades me. Death is now a welcome guest. When I am laid in earth, may wrongs create no trouble in thy breast. Remember me, but ah; forget my fate!

“CHORUS: With dropping wings ye Cupids come, to scatter roses on her tomb. Soft and gentle as her heart, keep here your watch and never part.”—*Act Three, concluding twelve lines.*

### ***HISTORICAL BACKGROUND***

Here is the historical background behind this opera which you may never have heard of before. It  
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is opera, which our people should have nothing to do with; it is very worldly;—and this particular opera is a brief distillation of ancient Roman heathen mythology.

The Greeks had an extensive collection of mythology about their heathen gods. They also had Homer's epic works, the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, in which he showed a divine origin for the Greek race.

When the Romans arose to dominance in the Mediterranean, they had some deities also, but they were never the imaginative thinkers that the Greeks were. So they gave new Roman names to many of the Greek gods—and took them to themselves.

***It is of interest that it was in this environment that, several centuries later, the Christian church, under the leadership of the church at Rome, essentially did the same thing. They adopted pagan gods into Christianity by the simple expedient of making them "saints!"***

By the time of Augustus Caesar, Rome ruled the Western World,—but still lacking was that “divine origin” which the Greeks could claim. Very much aware of this missing element in their culture, two years before he became emperor, Octavian, a high-ranking government official (later renamed Augustus) (63 B.C.-A.D. 14; ruled 27 B.C.-A.D. 14), asked the poet Virgil (70-19 B.C.) to write an epic poem in the style of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, and in this way provide the Romans with a descent from the gods.

With such good financial backing, Virgil at first planned to write a poem on Augustus' divine origins, but then it was broadened into a full-scale epic on (1) the founding of Rome as a calling from the gods, (2) its mission to rule the world and bring peace to all men, and (3) the ancestry of Augustus as descended from the goddess Venus who finally married Aeneas, a mortal who was the founder of the Roman people and empire.

***So we have in this epic poem a full-blown heathen theology.***

With the assignment in hand, Virgil retired to various country homes in Italy and spent the next ten years working on it. He would dictate a few lines each morning, and then rewrite them in the afternoon. It was all done at a leisurely pace, while Emperor Augustus anxiously awaited its completion.

Virgil put him off as long as possible, claiming that it was neither finished nor perfected, but finally he read large sections to him. Augustus was thrilled, and Virgil went back to his task. In 19 B.C., Virgil decided to visit Greece in order to obtain additional background material. While there, he met Augustus in Athens. But in Megara, he became ill and started home. At Brundisium he died. Virgil was 51 years old. On his deathbed he begged his friends to destroy the manuscript of the poem, saying that another three years would be needed to bring it to perfection. Augustus, hearing of this, forbade them to do so.

***Virgil's epic poem is called the Aeneid, and became the bible of the official state religion of Rome.***

The story begins where Homer left off. The first six of its twelve books are modeled on Homer's *Odyssey* and the last six are based on the *Iliad*.

Aeneas the hero of the plot is in Homer's Troy, when the departed spirit of Hector appears to him and tells him to steal the heathen worship symbols which had protected Troy, and then cross the seas and found a new empire.

After encountering storms on the Mediterranean, they are driven by the winds onto the shore of North Africa. Nearby, they meet Dido, a Phoenician princess, who is trying to found the city of Carthage and make it into an empire. This is a nice poetic touch on Carthage's founding, since it was to become the leading city in the western Mediterranean standing in the way of Rome's advancement. Rome destroyed this Phoenician city (on the site of the modern city of Tunisia) in 146 B.C., and Augustus was rebuilding it at the time that Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*.

In a cave, Dido and Aeneas begin a common-law marriage. But soon after, the gods, who in pagan mythology never care much for marriage, send him messages that he must leave and found an

empire elsewhere. he sails off and she flings herself on a funeral pyre and burns to death.

Landing at Cumae on the Italian Peninsula, Aeneas has a variety of adventures, including another relationship with a princess, which, upon spurning her, turns into warfare with her father's nation.

To bring him a little refreshment in the midst of battle, his spirit guide leads him into a cave—and down into the mythical Underworld!

Ever following the lead of Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Virgil now copies Odysseus' tour of Hell, with a similar one for Aeneas. Down in the bowels of the earth, Aeneas again meets Dido, and sees the torments which earthlings must suffer forever for their sins. While in hell, Aeneas also travels through Purgatory.

***As the Roman church sainted the pagan gods, so it also copied their teaching regarding purgatory, and an ever-burning hellfire, as punishment by hateful gods.***

Coming back out of the cave, Aeneas is strengthened to conquer all his enemies and found the kingdom of Rome.

With the passing of centuries, Virgil's fame grew, until in the Dark Ages he was considered a magician, saint, and something of a theologian. His description in Book VI of the sufferings of the wicked in hellfire, and the cleansing fires of purgatory, were both valued by the Vatican.

Then Dante (1265-1321) wrote his summary of Roman Catholic theology, *The Inferno*, in which Virgil is said to have guided him through the torture chambers of Purgatory and Hell.

***In the Aeneid we find a full-blown presentation of the heart of ancient Greek, Roman, and Roman Catholic theology.***

Centuries later, in A.D. 1680, Henry Purcell (1659-1695), an English composer, took a text written by Nahum Tate and set it to music, summarizing several underlying teachings of the *Aeneid*—and put it into his play, *Dido and Aeneas*. Italian opera had dominated the scene for years, and *Dido and Aeneas* was the first important English opera, for, in it an Italian choral style was introduced into England. It was presented for the first time in 1689 and became Purcell's most famous work. In all, Purcell wrote six operas, incidental music for 54 plays, as well as several pieces for the organ, ***but his powerful portrayal of ancient Roman theology, Dido and Aeneas, has come down to our own time. And now it is being presented in our denomination.***

### CONCLUSION BACKGROUND

About a week before it was presented, *Dido and Aeneas* was advertised all over Greater Chattanooga. ***Here, thought our leaders at Southern College, was a performance truly representative of modern Adventist thought and lifestyle, and the college was proud to show it off.***

Learning of the forthcoming event through announcements in the worldly media of the city, one historic Adventist in the area was, to say the least, astonished. Calling the college, she was referred to the Chairman of the Music Department. Yes, he said, all the advance details she had heard were true. The play was about witches, disembodied pagan spirits, Roman gods, and yes, there would be dancing in it. (She had not heard about the drinking scene yet.)

***The chairman of the Music Department at Southern College was actually proud of the whole project, and surprised that there should be an Adventist in Collegedale or Greater Chattanooga who might complain about it.***

***He said: "Witchcraft is all right, for it is mentioned in the Bible, And dancing is okay since we have marching in our church." Then he paused for a moment, and added ominously, "And there won't be any problem unless you talk this up and make an issue of it."***

That must be the technique used in Collegedale. Keep the church members subdued into going

along with the growing apostasy there, by the threat of blackballing the reputation of any that dare speak up.

Shortly afterward that faithful Adventist church member called me on the phone. She could hardly speak. "I am so distraught and angry, I can hardly speak," she said. "I have to talk to someone, so I am calling you. I have not spoken up in the past, and I see now that in this I have probably done wrong. But when they bring witchcraft to Southern College,—this is the end!"

Actually, this musical event, *Dido and Aeneas*, is only the latest of a string of similar presentations. The first one we heard of occurred several years ago when we first arrived in southeastern Tennessee. We were told of a play at the college that had taken place shortly before. A faithful Adventist attended it and was shocked at what she saw. It was a dramatic play with worldly music, and students who, as part of their performance, acted the part of couples drinking liquor and dancing very close together. They enjoyed the task, and the faculty and others in the audience apparently enjoyed watching the sight, so there was no one to speak up and say, "This must stop!"

Checking with friends at the college, she was told that the students had to practice their dance routines for months in preparation for the play,—and even received instruction from dance specialists in Chattanooga. In conclusion, she was told that "several marriages are going to come out of this thing."

***But there is a God in heaven that is writing it all down. And some day in the Judgment He will call to account the Adventists in the Collegedale area who contentedly let this Southern College apostasy deepen as it has.***

In more recent years we have learned of other presentations, but always after they were concluded. *Dido and Aeneas* is the first one we learned of in advance. So we have been able to bring you this special report.

**NOTE:** This Southern College presentation of *Dido and Aeneas* is now available from Pilgrims Rest.

THE PROGRAM AND WRITTEN SCRIPT of *Dido and Aeneas* is available from us on a donation basis. It is brief and contains some information.

AN AUDIOTAPE will provide you with the soundtrack of the voices and music. It is available for a purchase price of \$2 per tape.

A VIDEOCASSETTE will provide you with the complete opera. We were very fortunate to be able to obtain a copy, and it is a good one, in spite of the poor lighting. It may be purchased for \$15.

We provide this documentary material so that YOU WILL KNOW and OTHERS WILL KNOW that our church has now descended into presentations of SPIRITUALISM! If we did not make this available, the rest of this report would be considered unbelievable by many readers. But we are not urging you to obtain copies of the script, audio cassette, or videocassette. Only do so if you believe that it will help convince lackadaisical church members to WAKE UP and demand that our leaders put a stop to this continuing lowering of standards and doctrinal purity.

King Saul killed the priests of God and sought to slay the Lord's anointed. ***But the night he went to the witch of Endor for guidance, marked his end. He died the next day.***

The Review and Herald Publishing Association fought Ellen White for years, beginning in 1889. But when they made the decision to print J. H. Kellogg's *Living Temple*, they neared their end. ***Shortly afterward, the manuscript for a full-blown book on spiritualism was lying on the desk of the editor who was planning to print it also, in addition to Kellogg's book. That did it.*** The same

evening the Review building burned to the ground, and the fire chief of Battle Creek said, “Fighting that fire was impossible. It was as if coal oil was being poured on it as we worked.” The destruction of the building was complete, and came less than a year after the Battle Creek Sanitarium burned to the ground.

***And now we are coming full circle back toward it again. The end cannot be far ahead.***

***How soon will the destructions come?***

First, the apostasy is deeper some places than others. Many of our people remain innocent of the greater depths of the apostasy.

Second, we note in history that God permits disasters to occur to arouse His people to repentance. But in those instances in which men were fully committed to apostasy—fully set in the world,—the disasters may not come.

***The point here is that disasters are permitted when it is seen that it may help bring men and women back to God. But when people are fully committed to a worldly course, they may be allowed to continue on their way unhindered.*** Committed worldlings are often permitted to have apparent prosperity and success in their downward course.—But that is not a position for the faithful to desire or choose! It is better to be a servant of the living God, than to have worldly success yet be headed for destruction.

The continual lesson is this: Run to God, confess your sins and plead for forgiveness for the past and enabling grace to change your ways. Read God’s Inspired Word daily and begin a new way of life. ***Admire not the prosperity of the wicked. Flee from their wicked ways and their flagrant rebellion. They think they have “liberty” and need not obey the mandates of God, but they are on the wrong side, and are doing the bidding of Satan without realizing it.***