

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 29

GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF DRAMATIZATION AMONG SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS

General Conference Special Committee Report

March 3, 1978

I. PHILOSOPHY

The question of dramatizations of various kinds by Seventh-day Adventist churches and institutions, like all other questions, must be approached through this great principle: All that the Christian *does* who is growing into Christ must assist in attaining the character of Christ.

Increasingly the Christian realizes the significance of his being a child of God — a member of the royal family of the universe. His anticipation of living and conversing with the Savior, with the angels who attend him, and with the inhabitants of other worlds who observe him and even know him by name, is so keen that the other world with its values and its joys becomes his present reality. With Christ in his heart, he finds the things of earth growing strangely dim.

Through this progressive growth experience, behaviors which once seemed attractive may no longer appear profitable or desirable; activities formerly shunned gain high priority because they are part of the association with Jesus.

Ellen White used this positive approach in appraising a Sabbath School pageant in the Battle Creek Church:

Will it make those who acted their part in it more spiritually minded? Will it increase their sense of obligation to our heavenly Father who sent His Son into the world at such an infinite sacrifice to save fallen man from utter ruin? Was the mind awakened to grasp God because of His great love wherewith He has loved us? (Ellen White, Letter 5, 1888.)

Any dramatic performance — from a cradle-roll enactment through skits, pantomimes, pageants, history representations, musical productions, homiletic presentations, to a sophisticated Saturday night program in a church institution — should be appraised by the same positive criteria.

Although Ellen White did not condemn the simple Sabbath School drama at Battle Creek — “I was pleased with the lighthouse.... The part acted by the children was good. The reading was appropriate” — she found little light in the exercises. Particularly distressing to her was the singing — “after the order we would expect it to be in any theatrical performance,... not one word to be distinguished.”

Said she: “I was pained at these things, so out of order with the very work of reformation we are trying to carry forward in the church and with our institutions” (*Ibid*, p. 19).

While the messenger of the Lord certainly pointed out the great peril of drama and the dramatic performance, she called attention to the use God makes of some visual presentation as a means of communication to His prophets.

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.

Prophetic history was presented to Daniel and John in symbols, and these were to be represented plainly upon tables, that he who reads might understand (2SM: pp. 319, 320).

Experience within the Church has shown that dramatic media can be used to witness for God and win souls. But as is so often the case, that which may be effective for good when rightly used can also, if wrongly employed, be effective for evil. It would then appear that questions relating to dramatic productions in Seventh-day Adventist institutions must be settled on the basis of fundamental principles rather than a simple acceptance or prohibition.

There is no question but that many public dramatized productions today have reached a nadir of degeneration. Unfortunately, many plays provide no answers to questions. The prevailing climate normally reflects a Machiavellian attitude or, at best, a hedonistic approach to life; usually there is no attempt to laud religious ideals or to discredit a way of life out of harmony with the gospel ethic. When the supernatural is part of a dramatic production, emphasis is often on the demonic, the occult, extra-sensory perception, magic, and thinly veiled spiritistic sophistries.

A dangerous feature of commercial drama lies in its presentation of man contriving against man in a struggle for supremacy. Moreover, the personal life of many playwrights reveals basic unwholesome attitudes which often are reflected in the plays they write. Consequently, the reality of their plays is of a degenerating, 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.

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

Another consideration is the audience for which a typical commercial play is intended. Today's theater-going audience demands a type of play that conforms to prevailing attitudes which often are degenerate and dissolute. Playwrights are not blind to these attitudes, and few do not have their eyes fixed on the box office. If the playwright satisfies the audience, and if his play is commercially successful, the play is normally not meat for Seventh-day Adventist consumption.

While such drama may provide artistic and lasting insights into the 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. It is for such reasons that Ellen White penned her cautions relative to drama.

The world is teeming with errors and fables. 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: p. 415).

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 (4T: p. 653).

Satan is using every means to make crime and debasing vice popular. We cannot walk the streets of our cities without encountering flaring notices of crime presented in some novel, or to be acted at some theater. The mind is educated to familiarity with sin...

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 (PP: p. 459).

All natural gifts are to be sanctified as precious endowments. They are to be consecrated to God, that they may minister for the Master.... They are not to be devoted to self-pleasing amusement, or self-gratification....

Has God given you intellect? Is it for you to manage according to your inclinations? Can you glorify God by being educated to represent characters in plays, and to amuse an 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 that you may do. **Help the class you represent in plays.(??)** Come to the reality. Give your sympathy where it is needed by actually lifting up the bowed down. Satan's ruling passion is to pervert the intellect and cause men to long for shows and theatrical performances. The experience and character of all who engage in this work will be in accordance with the food given to the mind.

The Lord has given evidence of His love for the world. There was no falsity, no acting, in what He did (MS 42, 1898).

Though not condemning dramatic presentations per se, the preceding counsel does point out the necessity for a guiding philosophy for the utilization, production, or viewing of drama. The vehicle of drama is in itself of neutral quality. The communicated content, the life of the actor, and the theatrics of a production define its character. If the theme is morally positive and the treatment simple, the valuable lesson can be taught in an impressive manner.

Dramatizations for Seventh-day Adventist audiences should not have their purposes obscured by extremely complex or highly involved plots, which confuse thinking, or by sensational stories. The message and the plot will be complementary.

A guiding philosophy of drama subsequently recognizes the prevailing dangers of the medium while identifying its possible use for good as communication, education, and recreation in Seventh-day Adventist settings.

Dramatization should lead both participant and spectator into a deeper realization of his role as a child of God and as a profitable member of society. He should be encouraged to continue working for the salvation of others because he has a renewed concept of his spiritual mission on earth in preparation for eternity.

These goals will be realized only if total quality of the dramatic enactments enhance Christian concepts and ideals so that God and His church will be glorified because of the content, dignity, and excellence that mark each production. Principles should not be compromised to meet the taste of the audience, even though the nature of the audience, together with the occasion and setting, are factors for consideration when a dramatization is planned.

The moral, spiritual, and emotional facets of life must be treated with sincerity in a well-balanced manner. If primarily religious in nature, the presentation should be clear, with no ambiguity of purpose to confuse the viewer or participant. Emotional scenes will be portrayed with restraint, and intellectual themes marked by honesty.

Finally, as a result of participating in or viewing dramatizations, a person should be aided in his day-to-day life — his decisions, motives, and goals. He will be a more positive Seventh-day Adventist Christian because of what he has seen or presented.

II. FUNCTIONS

Based upon the foregoing philosophy, dramatization should:

- A. Provide an experience beneficial to participants and viewers.
- B. Strengthen ideals of Adventist living.
- C. Suggest meaningful answers to significant questions arising in life situations.
- D. Develop insights into facets of human experience.
- E. Emphasize the moral overtones of secular or religious issues in character development.
- F. Promote balance in the totality of human experience.

III. TYPES OF DRAMATIZATION

- A. Role Playing:
 - 1. Definition: Impromptu or extemporaneous enactment of real-life situations involving interaction with the environment. (Through life-like situations the participant becomes aware of acceptable behavior and develops understanding of self and others.)
 - 2. Purposes. Role-playing should:
 - a. Develop communication skills — listening, speaking, relating.
 - b. Bring latent creative powers to life.
 - c. Help clarify and reinforce Adventist values.
- B.
 - 1. Definition: Any dramatization enacted for an audience.
 - 2. Purposes. Dramatic productions should:
 - a. Foster the purposes of Adventist living.
 - b. Develop communication skills of participants.
 - c. Provide wholesome aesthetic experiences for viewers.
 - d. Foster a spirit of cooperative teamwork in the pursuit of excellence.
 - e. Encourage and develop various creative skills of participants.
 - f. Foster learning by doing.
 - g. Develop problem-solving ability.
 - h. Improve decision-making skills of participants and/or viewers.
 - I. Develop an understanding of the emotions of others.
 - j. Increase self-understanding and self-respect through success-experiences and encouragement.
 - k. Aid in learning that issues often have more than two sides.

IV. CRITERIA

The Lord is near.... Then the peace of God,... will keep guard over your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus. And now, my friends, all that is TRUE, all that is NOBLE, all that is JUST and PURE, all that is LOVABLE and GRACIOUS, whatever is EXCELLENT and ADMIRABLE — fill all your thoughts with these things (Phil. 4:6-8, NEB, emphasis supplied).

This appeal is vital to those awaiting the Advent. Within this framework all dramatizations employed by Seventh-day Adventists should be evaluated, and they should meet the following inspired criteria. They should be:

- A. TRUE — True to principle, free from distortion, oversimplification, or exaggeration, avoiding sensationalism (the exploitation of sex or violence or other elements calculated to shock), and maudlin sentimentality (the exploitation of romantic or other soft feelings), because men sometimes “allow the mind to come down to the superficial, to the unreal, to simple, cheap fictitious acting, [and] are doing the devil’s work” (MS 41, 1900).
- B. NOBLE — (“honest” KJV; “honorable” RSV) — Serious art, characterized by an honest attempt to present a true and significant view of life; because “love stories, frivolous and exciting tales.— are a curse” (MYP: p. 272).
- C. JUST — Balanced in emphases, avoiding elements that give the appearance of making evil desirable or goodness appear trivial, because “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,... than the theater” (4T: p. 653).
- D. PURE — Conducive to purifying thought and conduct, because “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: p. 415).
- E. LOVABLE — Permeated with a high idealism worthy of our affections, because “Satan does not wish the people to have a knowledge of God; and if he can set in operation...theatrical performances that will so confuse the senses of the young that human beings will perish in darkness while light shines all about them, he is well pleased” (RH, March 13, 1900).
- F. GRACIOUS — (“Fair speaking,” Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Vol. III, pp. 458, 459). — Free from profanity or other crude and offensive language, because “The roughness of spirit, the coarseness of speech, the cheapness of character, must be put away, or we can never wear the garment woven in the heavenly loom, — the righteousness of Christ” (SD: p. 315).
- G. EXCELLENT AND ADMIRABLE — Characterized by artistic as well as moral integrity and should provide examples of concern for excellence, because some “degenerate into demoralizing theatrical performances, and cheap nonsense” (RH, January 4, 1881).

V. CONSIDERATIONS

Will it make those who acted their part in it more spiritually minded? Will it increase their sense of obligation to our heavenly Father who sent His Son into the world at such an infinite sacrifice to save fallen man from utter ruin? Was the mind awakened to grasp God because of His great love wherewith He has loved us? (Letter 5, 1888).

Pride, self-esteem, and boldness are marked characteristics of the children of this day, and they are the curse of the age. When I see this un-Christlike, unlovely manifestation on every side, and then see parents and teachers seeking to display the ability and proficiency of their children and scholars, I am pained to the heart; for I know that it is exactly the opposite course from the one that should be pursued (CSSW: p. 46).

Directors or other sponsors of dramatizations should work in full cooperation with their school administrators or other persons in responsibility in selecting the work to be done, in planning the financial budget, and in all aspects of the production that might raise problems.

In the production of dramatizations, careful regard should be given to such aspects as the following:

- A. Selecting plays or other scripts that can be competently produced within the available
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facilities of the sponsoring institution.

- B. Cutting or modifying potentially objectionable parts or passages. Such modifying must be done with discrimination to maintain the integrity of the work.
- C. Using prayerful discretion in the selection of the cast, considering the impact upon the individuals and the institution, as well as upon the production itself.¹
- D. Avoiding excessive expenditures for elaborate costumes, stage properties, and other technical aspects of production.
- E. Maintaining moderation by avoiding the inordinate outlay of time by directors and other participants.
- F. Guarding the standards of good taste and modesty in costuming and in the creating of the dramatic roles.

VI. CONCLUSION

Having set forth these principles and criteria, the Church recognizes that the number of acceptable programs available is very limited. Further, experience and the counsels of the messenger of the Lord sound a solemn warning to all who may participate in dramatic productions: They must be constantly alert to the danger of opening a door which can lead to a love and infatuation for the dramatic productions of the world, *and will lead away from Christ and the duty of the Christian to serve mankind.*

¹Special concern was expressed by Ellen White for those participating in public performances lest an infatuation for praise and applause be engendered which could easily lead away from Christ and into the world. She wrote:

Many literary societies are in reality young theaters on a cheap scale and they create in the youth a taste for the stage (RH, January 4, 1881).

In a general manuscript on communication entitled "To Every Man His Work," quoted in part in the *Review and Herald Supplement* of June 22, 1898, we find these words:

By showing vanity, by longing for distinction, many hide the person of Christ, and expose themselves to view. There is such self-importance in their own ideas and ways, and they cherish such a pleasing sense of their own smartness, that the Lord cannot bestow His Holy Spirit upon them....

We are not to exalt the work of any man, magnifying him and praising his judgment. The first rising of self is the beginning of your fall, your separation from Christ (MS 42, 1898).

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