

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 31 - A

(WITHOUT GRAPHICS)

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SURPRISING FACTS ABOUT DRAMA AND THE CHURCH--

During the past 50 years drama has invaded nearly every home in America through television and video.

So sordid is some of its programming, that sincere Christians often are tempted to dismiss drama entirely as a method of illustrating the gospel.

A survey of early Adventist writings seems to lend credibility to that view. Ellen White clearly condemns "sensational dramas" that "engross the mind," 1 and are "dangerous resorts of pleasure."2 But as I researched her comments, I noticed that she carefully qualifies her warnings. She counsels' against sensational drama, habitual attendance (italics mine), dramas that contain "low songs; lewd gestures, expressions and attitudes" that "deprave the imagination and debase the morals." 3

All drama is by no means sensational or demeaning, and her counsels acknowledge as much. Although rightly condemning certain aspects found in some dramatic productions, she never condemns the dramatic arts themselves. In an 1881 "Review and Herald" article, she uses the illustration of a young woman who placed her wish to be an actress before her desire for salvation. She condemns the behavior' because of the young woman's priorities, not for her wish to become an actress. 4. .

At another time, she recalls a humorous, but thought-provoking comment made by Thomas Betterton, a celebrated actor of the time, to the Archbishop of Canterbury. In it, Betterton suggested that one difference between an actor and a minister seems to be the lack of enthusiasm of the latter. 5..

Ellen White also speaks of the "drama of life," 6 and describes the Church as the theater of God's grace. 7 If such words as "drama" and "theater" always held a bad connotation in her mind, it . seems unlikely she would have used them to illustrate important concepts such as God's grace. '

During the Christmas season of 1888, the Battle Creek Sabbath school staged a dramatic production. Ellen White attended' to watch her granddaughter, Ella, take part. The production included spoken lines, sets, costumes, and props.

Early the next morning, Ellen White wrote a letter to the director, commenting that the children's lines were appropriate and commending the effort put forth. She then made several specific suggestions on how to improve the production. Such behavior seems a far cry from total condemnation of dramatic productions. 8

Arthur L. White, her grandson, agrees. As secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate in www.temcat.com

1963, he writes: "A survey of these counsels (pertaining to drama) fails' to reveal an across the board condemnation of all enacted programs. In other words, Ellen White does not condemn a program just because it is dramatized." 9

He suggests that the question of drama in Seventh-day Adventist institutions cannot be answered by either total acceptance or rejection of dramatic production¹¹. 10 He points out that a production dedicated to God's service could be an effective agent. 11 Still, he warns that the improper use of drama might force even the correct use of the medium to be halted, for safety's sake. 12

In 1975, a General Conference Special Committee on drama' and its relationship to' the Adventist Christian agreed with both Ellen and Arthur White: "The vehicle of drama is in itself of neutral quality. The communicated content, the life or' 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." 13

This Special Committee, although aware of the problems involved' with drama, still advocated its use for effective communication, education, and recreation in Adventist surroundings. 14

Many moral and ethical questions regarding drama and the Christian remain to be answered. Ellen White never dealt with them specifically, but they deserve thoughtful consideration. 15

"LOST" IN A CHARACTER-

In order to perform well, do actors have to 'lose' themselves in the Character they're playing?.

Acting is hard work, and it is the actor's job to present a Character in a believable way for the audience, which means the actor must understand the person he plays.

This is easier for some types of Characters than for others. Generally, however, actors try to find within themselves something they can use to relate to the characters they play. In a very real sense, actors are playing parts of themselves, even when they pretend to be other people.,'

"Losing" oneself in the part is not an accurate description of what happens, but it may seem that way to observers, and it is something that actors should consider whenever they take up a role.

IN CHURCH?

Should drama be, presented in the church.? That depends on the production. It's interesting that in the Old Testament tabernacle, every liturgical act by the priests was a symbolic representation—a dramatization—of Christ's saving grace. Since a church is a place specifically built for the worship of God, only drama that fulfills this requirement should be presented in church. Dramatic productions can be enormously beneficial in this regard.

TOO MUCH TIME?

How can anyone justify the time spent with drama, particularly secular presentations? Secular themes can be immensely powerful advocates for moral, ethical, and social goals. We are still living in the world, even as we struggle against becoming part of it. To ignore the secular needs of the people about us runs counter to our mission to spread the Gospel. In some ways, there are no strictly secular themes or presentations. When we fight evil in any form, we are doing God's work. Can we overdo it? Get too involved? Yes. But drama is no more guilty of causing imbalance than any of thousands of things that tempt us each day.

FOR SAFETY SAKE ELIMINATE?

But wouldn't it be safer to eliminate dramatic productions? Safer is not better. Following Christ is not safe or comfortable. The "safe" path leads to stagnation. Discarding dangerous things simply because they are dangerous invokes an even greater Laodician danger.

Ellen White, in her letter to the producer of the Christmas play, provides the standard which, everyone involved with the dramatic arts should prayerfully consider: "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 the fallen man from utter ruin? Was the mind awakened to grasp God because of His great love wherewith He has loved us?"

Rightly used, drama is a powerful agency to illustrate grace and counteract evil. As Christians, we should harness its power and employ it carefully, but assertively, to the glory of God.

Edwin A. Schwisow drafted this article, based on research by Kenneth Field, a freelance writer living in Sequim, Wash. His book, "Return Voyage," was recently published by Pacific Press Publishing Association.

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 31 - B

Letters to the *Gleaner* editor, October, 2000

Appendix 31-B

Letters published on above article-

Dramatic Balance

Thank-you for the balanced article, "Surprising Facts About Drama and the Church," in the September 2000 GLEANER. The conclusions were appropriate and balanced. Yes, drama has the potential for misuse, but so does love, so does law, so does organization, so does music, so does well -so does everything. Just because the extreme can be criticized does not mean that moderation should not be practiced. Thank-you for your courage in writing and publishing this article.

Ron Hessel Payette, Idaho

Respectfully Disagree

In "Surprising Facts About Drama And the Church" in the September 2000 GLEANER, I respectfully disagree with your conclusion that "Rightly used, drama is a powerful agency to illustrate grace and counteract evil." There are scores of quotes in Ellen White's writings that condemn drama unequivocally, but you have selectively and strategically highlighted snippets of her writings and used them out of context. For example, regarding the Christmas play you referred to, she wrote, "I should have felt better if I had not been present."

To get a full flavor of what inspiration says on this topic, I would encourage readers to take the time to look up references in this article and also in the Indexes to the writings of Ellen G White on drama, plays, and theatricals. It will be a real eye opener. Don't take any man's word for it. Insist upon a "Thus saith the Lord."

Dennis Kendall New Plymouth, Idaho

Editor's Note: "Theatrics" and "drama" are not synonymous. Much counsel is given against injecting "theatrics" into pulpit address.' The co-mingling of gospel proclamation with the histrionics of the stage actor is clearly a major concern of Ellen White, and she repeatedly speaks against it. However, the position arrived at through exhaustive study by our researcher we believe to be a "standard" on which we can decidedly stand. The position that all drama is inherently corrupt and incapable of transmitting gospel truth is neither biblical nor in accordance with Adventist church leaders, past or present. The Old Testament. sanctuary service was, in its ritual, a ."dramatization" through metaphor of the coming Messiah. Furthermore, God commanded his people, several times a year, to re-enact episodes of salvation -the most dramatic of which is the Passover. These admonitions,. in spirit, were imported into Adventist services long ago in the form of "13thSabbath Programs," which often include short dramatic presentations by children and youth and culminate with "observance" (actually a dramatization) of the washing of feet and Last Supper of Jesus Christ. These are excellent evidences that the Lord intends His people to employ the strengths of simple drama, while avoiding the excesses and hysteria of worldly varieties. E.S.

Quarterly Drama

In your response to "theatrics" and "drama", October 2000, you implied that God commanded his people several times a year to re-enact episodes of salvation-the most dramatic of which is the Passover—and for His people today to dramamtize the washing of feet and Last Supper of Christ.

I believe there was a time when serious, genuine belief in the reenactment of the PASsover went far beyond what is labeled as drama today.

In the dictionary, several definitions are listed under drama, and none fall under biblical truth felt in the heart.

The Jews, after a time, did make the Passover a ritual (dramatic performance), and I immagine Adventists have done the same with the ordinance of humility and the Lords

Supper. We have made foot-washing comfortable for everyone, and attendance on communion Sabbath declines dramatically....

To make this a dramatic performance would surely fall under this condemnation.

Robert Rouillard

Fircrest, Wash.