

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 31 - C Author's Letter to the September Gleaner Editorial on Drama

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Att: Mr. Edwin A. Schwisow

Gleaner

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Dear Mr. Schwisow,

Your article in the September 2000 issue of the *Gleaner* entitled "Surprising Facts About Drama and the Church" was a politically correct expose of the current Seventh-day Adventist church and institutional leadership's love affair with drama, but it is not true to the facts. I am sure that as a busy editor, you do not always have time to carefully check your sources. This is apparent in your article drafted from Kenneth Field's book, *Return Voyage*." Let me explain.

You first support your thesis in paragraphs three, four, and five that certain types of drama are acceptable in Adventist churches and institutions by giving your readers the impression that Ellen White "carefully qualifies her warnings." and "She counsels against *sensational* drama, *habitual* attendance (italics mine), dramas that contained 'low songs, lewd gestures, expressions and attitudes' that 'deprave the imaginations and debase the morals'." *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol 4, p 653

I have reviewed every "hit" (the number of "hits" on each word is in parentheses) in the 1999 Spirit of Prophecy research CD on the words drama (42), dramas (4), actor (47), actors (69), actresses (6), fiction (86), theater (139), theaters (43), and theatrical. **All** of these words, in context with the dramatic arts, do not fail to reveal an **across-the-board** condemnation of enacted programs.

Second, in paragraph seven you refer to Ellen White's article entitled "The Pros and Cons of Literary Societies" found in the January 4, 1881 *Review and Herald*. You wrote, "In a 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."

In this article there was recorded a real incident that took place with a young Methodist woman who wanted to be an actress. It is apparent the young woman wanted to be an actress more than her desire to give herself over to Christ. It is also interesting to note that her first desire to be an actress was awakened by the plays and skits she took part in as a member of the Methodist Church. Ellen White introduces the incident as follows (and by the way, she was

writing this counsel to Seventh-day Adventist youth literary societies):

Many literary societies are in reality young theaters on a cheap scale, and they create in the youth a taste for the stage. While writing upon this point, my eye falls upon the following striking incident from real life. (par. 5)

She then finishes the story with the following conclusion made by the writer of this real life incident:

And so the visitor turned sadly away, thinking for what miserable messes of pottage men and women are willing to sell their glorious birthright as children of God; **thinking also of the seeds which are being sowed in our Sunday-schools, the tares among the wheat, and the terrible harvest that may yet spring up from this well-meant but injudicious seed-sowing.** (Par 23) (Emphasis supplied)

Anyone willing to take the time to read the entire article would quickly discern the true facts. Ellen White not only agreed with the disapproval of the young woman's desire to be an actress, but also agreed that the dramatic arts conducted in her church ultimately lead her astray. Make no mistake here, for it is apparent that Ellen White viewed drama practiced within the church a serious danger to youth. In fact, the article was written because Adventist Literary Societies had failed and degraded into "young theaters on a cheap scale."

And she gave the same counsel to the students living with families while attending Battle Creek College.

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 hot-bed 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. —*Testimonies*, Vol. 4, pp. 652, 653. (Emphasis Supplied)

Some might deduce from this statement that she is writing against "habitual" attendance rather than occasional attendance, which **could** be appropriate. But, she is very clear that, "The only safe course is to shun the theater, the circus, and every other questionable place of amusement." *Ibid.* p.653

In the November 21, 1878 *Review*, in an article entitled "Holiday Presents," Ellen White penned the following counsel about fashionable "church corruptions, dissipations, and festivals, which have a demoralizing influence upon young and old." and "The pulpit may defend festivals, dancing, lotteries, fairs, and luxurious feasts, to obtain means for church purposes; but let us participate in none of these things; for if we do, God's displeasure will be upon us." Par. 15. Then she makes this most pointed statement:

Death, clad in the livery of Heaven, lurks in the pathway of the young. Sin is gilded over by church sanctity. These various forms of amusement in the churches of our day have ruined thousands who, but for them, might have remained upright and become the followers of Christ. Wrecks of character have been made by these fashionable church festivals **and theatrical performances**, and thousands more will be destroyed; yet people will not be aware of the danger, nor of the fearful influences exerted. Many young men and women have lost their souls through these corrupting influences. Par. 16. (Emphasis supplied)

For you to say, “she never condemns the dramatic arts themselves” (end of paragraph five) is not accurate. Today, our churches and schools pride themselves on producing “acceptable” drama that “illustrated the gospel” and supposedly “does not contain ‘low songs, lewd gestures, expressions and attitudes’ that ‘deprave the imaginations and debase the morals’.” (In my paper, read about “The Crucible” produced by Walla Walla College drama teachers and enacted by Walla Walla College students the fall of 2000.) But Ellen White counseled against attending even the highest type of theatrical performances.

There is an abundance of theatrical performances in our world, but in its highest order it is without God. We need now to point souls to the uplifted Saviour. Deceptions, impositions, and every evil work are in our world. Satan, the wily foe in angel’s garments, is working to deceive and destroy. The object of the death of Christ was to declare His righteousness, and no man, woman or child can do this in his own strength, or by his own words. *11MR*, p. 338 (Emphasis supplied)

Third, in paragraphs ten and eleven, you refer to a play Ellen White attended as recorded in *2MR*, pages 235-238 (Letter 5, 1888). You state “--- 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.” If you had read the whole letter, you would have discovered the “rest of the story.” Let’s look at the facts.

On Sabbath morning, December 22, 1888, Ellen White attended a theatrical performance put on by the Battle Creek Sabbath School in which her six-year-old granddaughter, Ella W. White, was dressed as and acted the part of an angel. There were props, actors, music, and poems. Four days later, on Wednesday morning, December 26, 1888 she wrote a letter to Brother Morse. In this letter it becomes obvious that Mrs. White **did** condemn the program. (The definitions of the word *condemn* is “to declare to be reprehensible, wrong, or evil, usually after weighing evidence and without reservation” —*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*.)

The letter begins with, “I have risen at three o’clock this morning to write you a few lines.” When you read the entire article, you will understand why she made the following statement:

I must say I was pained by these things, so out of order with the very work of reformation we were trying to carry forward in the church and with our institutions, that **I should have felt better if I had not been present.** —*2MR*, p. 236. (Emphasis supplied)

In fact, she made only three accepting remarks and twenty-two disapproving remarks. Does that sound like a kind critique giving suggestions on how to make the play better, or like a strong rebuke?

Fourth, in paragraphs twelve and thirteen, you refer to a paper entitled “Dramatic Productions in SDA Institutions,” published February, 1963, and authored by Arthur White. He makes the following statement on page one: “Request has been received at the White Estate for the materials from the pen of Ellen G. White which may have a bearing on the question of the production of dramatic programs in SDA institutions.”

And why wouldn't there have been questions? A television was in most North American Adventist homes by then, Hollywood feature films were the drawing power to church and institutional functions and many in leadership were sympathetic with the dramatic arts. For example, Faith for Today was making drama fashionable in the Adventist church by using it to “illustrate the gospel.”

This was a time for the White Estates to reestablish the old landmarks against an ever increasing church constituency and leadership who wanted drama. Or was it time to find a way of compromise? Remember, the Missionary Volunteer Society would soon be gone, the free speech, flower power, rock music movements were on the ascendency, and the “generation gap” had been proclaimed.

Yet there were many leaders, parents, and youth throughout the North American who were deeply concerned because the senior colleges were cranking up their drama departments and the English and literature departments were adding more fiction to their required reading lists.

Especially note the thesis of Arthur White's paper as contained in the second paragraph of the first page:

A survey of these counsels 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 may be dramatized. In this respect the counsels touching dramatic productions are much like the counsels relating to sports, and interestingly, the two are treated together in two of the statements of caution. Mrs. White did not condemn the “simple exercise of playing ball,” (AH 499) but as she enumerated the principles involved, she pointed out the grave perils which usually accompanied sports activities. Mrs. White did not condemn the simple enacted program put on by the Battle Creek Sabbath School in 1888, but in many statements she clearly points out the many and almost sure perils which accompany “plays” and “theatrical programs.” —A. L. White, *Dramatic Productions in SDA Institutions*, February 1963. Par. 2

If this paragraph and the one which follows it and Arthur White's interpretation of Ellen White's attitude toward the play she attended as described above in *2MR*, pages 235-238 (Letter 5, 1888) were left out of his paper, anyone reading it would conclude that Ellen White had nothing but condemnation for the use of drama. These two paragraphs and the interpretation actually contradict the balance of his paper. For example, the two concluding statements he quotes on page 8 clearly define Mrs. White's attitude toward drama.

Jesus Christ is the example for the Christian in all things. Of Him she wrote:

I have not been able to find one instance where He educated His disciples to engage in amusement of football or pugilistic games, to obtain physical exercise, or in theatrical performances, and yet

Christ was our pattern in all things. —*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 229.

A sound guiding principle to keep ever in mind in dealing with questions of the kind we have been studying is stated in *Testimonies*, Vol. 5, p. 360:

Our example and influence must be a power on the side of reform. We must abstain from any practice which will blunt the conscience or encourage temptation. We must open no door that will give Satan access to the mind of one human being formed in the image of God.

Fifth, you state in paragraph fourteen, “In 1975, a General Conference special Committee on drama and its relationship to the Adventist Christian agreed with both Ellen and Arthur White.” If there had been a minority report written on this subject, I don’t think you would be so positive in your statement. In reality, the committee was held in 1974 and the committee put out its report in 1975.

On January 28-31, 1974, the General Conference convened a committee of 37 select individuals. Some read papers on the subject of competitive sports: others on the subject of drama. When I communicated with the General Conference to gather information concerning this conference for my research on the inroads of drama into the Seventh-day Adventist church, the GC archive workers were able to find only three papers that were scheduled to be presented: those of Josephine Benton, J. H. Hancock, and Frank Knittel. Two other papers sent were apparently written for the committee but were not on the agenda: those of Phyllis Paytee and Leslie Hardinge. Apparently the rest have been lost or they did not present or turn in papers. Leslie Harginge and J. H. Hancock certainly would have authored a minority report if one were allowed. The report would have been strongly opposed to the idea that Ellen White approved **any** kind of dramatic arts.

Sixth. To say in paragraph twenty-one, “---every liturgical act by the priests was a symbolic representation – ‘a dramatization’ – of Christ’s saving grace.” is akin to blasphemy! No evidence can be found that God’s priests or messengers ever used drama in the sense that drama advocates use today.

In a pamphlet written by David J. Lee entitled *Drama? Truth-full? Or Pretentious?*, he explodes this myth.

But did not God employ drama to Bible times? Yes, if by “drama” is meant activities which are unusual and grab people’s attention. But we have found no evidence that God’s messengers ever employed “drama” in the sense that drama-advocates today employ the term.

On a number of occasions priests (as in the whole sanctuary service) and prophets (Isa. 20:2,3; Jer. 24:1-10; 27:2-12; 32:1-19; Ezek. 4:1-5:4; 12:2-7) made graphic representations **designed by God** to convey a message to His backslidden people. (See Ed 41; CG 19: “figures and symbols... animated imagery.”) It should be noted that in giving these visual lessons, the messengers never surrendered their own individuality. Their visual “sermons” involved pain, suffering, and time, and were **designed by God** to awaken the curiosity, inquiry, and empathy of an insensible, “stiff-necked” people. They were not a mere “mime” or pretense or impersonation. They were a painful, prayerful reality! Of

some of the sacrificial rituals, God declared His abhorrence (see Psalm 51:16, 17; Isa. 1:10-28). Indeed, He “gave them statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live. And I polluted them in their own gifts” (Ezek. 20:25, 26). He desired a loving, obedient relationship with them, not the bloody, sacrificial system (see Jer. 7:19-30). “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30, NIV). (Emphasis supplied)

We believe that it is unfair to cite the Old Testament sanctuary rituals and Ezekiel to defend pretentious drama. Those who cite their extreme efforts to touch hearts, might gain greater truth and power by fasting and prayer for modern Israel for 180 days+, as did Ezekiel! P.8.

Seventh, for you to say in paragraph sixteen, “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.” is totally misleading. Let me say again, anyone who is willing to take the time with the new CD of Ellen White’s complete published writings and research the subject, will find an “across the board” condemnation of the dramatic arts.

Finally, in your answer to Dennis Kendal’s letter “To the Editor” entitled “Respectfully Disagree” in the October 2000 Gleaner, you again accept the “facts” from the “exhaustive study our researcher [did that] we believe to be a ‘standard’ on which we can decidedly stand.” In fact, you did not even address his concern with the statement by Ellen White after she attended the Sabbath School play at Battle Creek when she said, “I would have felt better if I had not been present.”

You go on to say, “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.”

Your biblical evidence is, “The Old Testament sanctuary service was, in its ritual, a ‘dramatization’ thru metaphors of the coming Messiah.” Again, “God commanded his people, several times a year, to re-enact episodes of salvation — the most dramatic of which is the Passover.” And finally, “These admonitions, in spirit, were imported into Adventist services long ago in the form of ‘13th Sabbath Programs,’ which often included short dramatic presentations by children and youth and culminated with ‘observance’ (actually a dramatization) of the washing of feet and the Last Supper of Jesus Christ.” These ideas are patently false. Please refer above to the material quoted from the pamphlet authored by David J. Lee entitled *Drama? Truth-full?* concerning the sanctuary services and the Passover. As for the Lord’s Supper, no one plays my part in the service. It is a true drama of life, not pretentious dramatic acting.

And the facts beg to differ with your statement, “---that all drama is inherently corrupt and incapable of transmitting gospel truth is neither biblical nor accordance with Adventist church leaders, **past** or present.” (Emphasis supplied) Ellen White was very clear on her attitude concerning drama, and so were the majority of church leaders until the forties and fifties. You will find this evidence clearly portrayed in the appendices of my paper enclosed.

I realize this letter is long. Perhaps it could be printed in several editions, or better yet, after reading the enclosed paper, you would have sufficient courage to write a sequel to your September *Gleaner* article and set the record straight.

Yours in Christ

Lawrence R. Hawkins

Enclosure

Copy Elder Jere D. Patzer and the pastoral staff of my church.

PS: This letter in answer to your article and "To The Editor" has been delayed because the drama paper was not finished until the end of December.