

The Value of

Drama

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Recently I received some promotional literature for a new book entitled *Life in the Ocean*. The brochure headline invited me to "Discover the Drama of the Seas."

Later that night the six o'clock news reporter described a hostage situation as "the drama unfolding before us..."

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art the tour guide referred to a particularly impressive mural as "dramatic."

I began to conclude that the word *drama*, which once had a specific meaning, is enjoying much more permissive and broader usage than in the past.

Not only is the word evolving in meaning and usage, but the medium itself is also enjoying ever-broadening application, as more functions for drama are discovered and utilized.

Seventh-day Adventists among others who draw their traditions and values from 19th-century roots, have had to reconcile historical characterizations of theatrical drama as "bawdy," "unwholesome," and "satanic" with 20th-century applications of drama that are clearly wholesome, educational, and worthwhile. Increasingly, drama is finding acceptance in Adventist classrooms, Sabbath school programs, vespers services, and

Saturday night entertainment for young and old alike.

Drama, or the enactment of a story through dialogue and action, actually has wide-reaching applications, making it a valuable tool for enriching human existence. The medium finds purpose on at least five different levels, each of which elevates drama from the realm of mere diversion.

Entertainment

The first and most commonly understood use of drama is for entertainment. People-watching has long

been a consuming human pastime. I was recently advised by a friend, "Never underestimate the entertainment value of people's eccentricities." We are thoroughly fascinated by the twists and turns of human existence and the endless diversity of human behavior. We are spectators to life as much as participants when we pause to watch others in the act of being themselves.

The dramatic medium allows us to satisfy this voyeuristic urge in socially permissible ways. By tacit agreement,

reality is momentarily suspended. Performers pretend that the stage is a living room where they may converse in privacy. Audiences pretend to be eavesdroppers, deliciously intruding into the secret intimacy of two lovers kissing, in a family's arguing, in a comical exchange, or in a deceptive act. We laugh, we cry, reveling in the human experience unfolding before us.

Whether in the natural setting of a public park, restaurant, or grocery store, or in the contrived setting of backdrops and spotlights, we share vicariously the joys and sorrows of others. We are endlessly intrigued, amused, mystified. Yes, we are entertained. Why human experience should entertain us is obvious—we share in the motivations that provoke human action and eagerly await their consequences. We need not be ashamed of our ability to be amused. God created us with this capacity.

A Means of Artistic Expression

However, entertainment is not the only value of the dramatic medium. Another very significant function of drama is in providing the performer with a valid means of artistic expression. A number of people discover within themselves an inclination toward various art forms. Many even develop their skills in these areas. Some turn to music, others to painting, whittling, knitting, pottery making, sculpting, flower arranging, paper folding, macramé, or some other means of creative expression. Each participant

enjoys a sense of personal fulfillment through the sweep and movement, the visual and tactile aspects of the art form, and in the opportunity to be creative.

Drama is classified as the art of human expression, an art that uses the human body as its medium, even as oil and canvas serve as the medium of expression for the painter. The art of pantomime, for example, specifies that moods, stories, emotions, and even abstract ideas like freedom and determination be created strictly through body and facial motion.

Many people find great pleasure in creating art through the use of the body. As early as childhood, some people delight to "ham it up" in front of a crowd, while others seem shy and retiring. The dramatic medium offers those extroverts an unparalleled opportunity to utilize their talent in a challenging and popular art form—the art of human performance.

As they mature to adulthood, some people achieve poise and finesse on stage in front of an audience, while others seem anxious, inhibited, and awkward. Dramatic ability appears to be a talent possessed by some but not by others, an aptitude that finds its greatest fulfillment in the art of performance. Drama, therefore, serves as a valuable outlet for those skilled in human performance.

Therapeutic Uses

A third important use for drama is therapy. Psychiatrists and other mental health professionals frequently utilize psycho-drama with patients to help alleviate the traumatic effects of major life crises. Psycho-drama involves the recreation of some significant past event or the impersonation of some pivotal person in the patient's life. Often improvised and unscripted, these intense minidramas help to unlock the dark secrets of the past, revealing buried thoughts and emotions obliterated from recollection by the mind in defense against memories too painful to retain.

Above, the author in his one-man play, *An Evening With James White*. Below, scene from Loma Linda University's production of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

During counseling sessions a young woman, whom we will call Annie Brown, confessed that she had trouble getting close to men and felt incapable of deep personal relationships. Despite the counselor's probing, she could not account for this crushing emotional condition. In a psycho-drama she was cast as her now-deceased father, while the counselor played the part of "Baby Annie."

"Baby Annie" initiated episodes with a question or comment such as "Daddy, will you play dollies with me?" to which the "father" was expected to react. Back and forth the dialogue progressed, with the counselor carefully controlling the direction of the conversation.

Through this free-flowing format, Annie eventually resurrected the repressed traumatic experiences of her childhood as she relived them in the role of her father. Through psycho-drama she was able to understand her feelings and to begin the road to recovery.

Psycho-drama is a valuable yet delicate medium that helps people understand themselves and others. In the hands of a capable professional, it can be a powerful and beneficial therapeutic tool.

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Drama as Instruction

A fourth use of drama is instruction. Important concepts, relationships, and ideas can be impressively and memorably presented through a kind of drama called role playing. Often elementary and secondary schools use this method of instruction to relieve the tedium of lectures and to stimulate student

participation.

In academy we had an annual event called "student government day." For an entire day students played the part of faculty and administration. The student who served as principal sat at his big mahogany desk, made official decisions, settled disputes, and handled student disciplinary problems. Other students

replaced the treasurer, work supervisors, and teachers. The experience of role-playing these school officials and of seeing students through their eyes was insightful and transforming.

In a similar manner teachers often engineer role-playing activities in the classroom. The history teacher may have students reenact the Lincoln-Douglas debates; the political science teacher may divide the class into the "Senate" and the "House of Representatives" to hammer out some key national legislation. The behavioral science teacher may pair off students to portray a drug addict and police officer, rebellious teenager and stubborn parent, or a marriage counselor and a despondent wife. Such experiences allow the performers to step into the role of the person they are portraying, enabling them to understand other points of view. Even a simple Sabbath school charade for 10-year-olds becomes highly educational as the performers pretend to mock Noah, sacrifice Isaac, or march around Jericho.

Students remember information presented through the dramatic medium far longer than through the lecture method. Communications researchers have clearly demonstrated that more than 75 percent of most lectures will be forgotten in three days' time. Can you recall last week's Sabbath sermon? If you are typical, you may remember one or two major points, but most of the presentation will be a blur. However, an impressive movie from last week will be so memorable that scenes and dialogue will remain etched in the mind for years to come. Drama as instruction is a powerful, captivating, and memorable vehicle for conveying important concepts, events, perspectives, and values.

Drama as Persuasion

A final purpose for drama is persuasion. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare immortalized this principle with the line "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the

king." In Act 3 Scene 2 the young prince Hamlet designs a play to reenact the murder of his father by his mother's new husband, in order to expose the crime to the perpetrator and convict him of his guilt.

The Old Testament offers several examples of drama for persuasion's sake. In Ezekiel 12:1-7, we read of a scripted play directed by God Himself casting the prophet Ezekiel in the lead role. The script called for Ezekiel to pack his belongings outside of his home in full view of bystanders (the "audience"), carry the pack back inside his house, dig a hole through the wall, and stumble blindfolded through the opening at twilight. Having failed to convict Israel of

its inevitable fate through the preaching of Jeremiah and Isaiah, God resorted to drama to allegorically portray the exile and dispersion of the Jews who persisted in their rebellion against God.

Likewise, Hosea acted out a public drama. By marrying a prostitute whom he repeatedly had to retrieve when she willfully returned to her profession, he acted out God's frustrating relationship with the nation of Israel in a graphic and passionate manner (Hosea 1-3).

Drama as persuasion structures the message in a stimulating format to pierce the hearts and minds of its audience, who may be too dull or insensitive to be

moved by sermons or lectures. God, through Ezekiel, turned to drama to quicken the sensibilities of a people. He declared "have eyes but do not see, and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people" (Ezekiel 12:2).

However, not only does drama have persuasive impact for an audience, it also produces a strong persuasive reaction in the performer. Scripture tells us that we are changed by what we see (2 Corinthians 3:18), and behavioral research in cognitive dissonance suggests that participants become changed as well. While intellectually we may detach ourselves from the characters we portray, certain emotional consequences may result, challenging us to reconcile any differences in our own personal value system with that of the scripted persona.

Drama has many artistic, medical, and social uses. It has the power to captivate, stimulate, and activate. As entertainment it captures our imagination; as artistic expression it enriches our souls. As therapy it assists in the exploration of the mind; as instruction it educates and assists in information retention; and as persuasion it challenges us to consider another point of view. As a tool for shaping thought and behavior, drama may well be unequalled. But as with any tool, its value and work are shaped by the user. If utilized with skill and precision, the dramatic medium can uplift and enrich the lives of human beings. □

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