

The Hills Are Alive With Thousands Of Adventists

The Sound of Music as “the heart of Adventist cultural literacy.”

by Scott Moncrieff

I MUST HAVE BEEN ABOUT NINE YEARS OLD THE first time I went to see *The Sound of Music*. Up to that point I had developed as a culturally normal Seventh-day Adventist. I recognized all the actors' voices on “Your Story Hour.” I had read *Brush Valley Adventure; Dookie, Sookie, and Big Mo; Singer on the Sand*; all the Sam Campbell books; and I had *Swift Arrow* practically memorized: “I love you as a brother, Swift Arrow; I cannot marry you, for I love White Rabbit. Somehow I must become White Rabbit's squaw.”

But my normal development was about to be interrupted. On that fateful Saturday night, our family packed into the Volkswagen for the drive from Loma Linda to La Sierra. I dimly remember anticipating something about singing children, which would not of itself have excited me, but this was clearly going to be a big event, and I might as well be in on it. It was

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not to be. We arrived at the parking lot to an ongoing murmur of consternation. I don't remember if the projector had broken, or the reels hadn't arrived, or what, but there was some such fiasco sufficient to cancel the showing. We drove home in dudgeon, without even entering the auditorium.

I'm not sure how I continued to miss seeing the film over the next decade. I did see *The Love Bug* three or four times—I could measure my burgeoning adolescence in the transference of interest from Dean Jones and Buddy Hackett to Michelle Lee. I saw *The Yellowstone Cubs* a couple of times, all the Stan Midgely and Don Cooper movies. I fell asleep during *A Man for All Seasons*. Even though I hadn't seen *The Sound of Music*, I was absorbing it out of the very air I breathed. “Do Re Me” was part of the basic music curriculum.

It wasn't until college that I actually saw Maria and company hiking across the silver screen. It was Sadie Hawkins reverse weekend at Pacific Union College, and I got asked to *The Sound of Music* by a hardened veteran

of a couple dozen encounters. She was thrilled to be initiating a virgin, as it were—probably the last one on Howell Mountain. She brought popcorn and sang all the songs. I thought it was nice, but like many another initiate, I was left wondering, “Is that it?”

The years have slipped by. I’ve seen the film several more times, and I’ve seen my children watch the film. A couple of years ago, our four year old went through a three-month stage where he insisted on being called Friedrich, and calling his mother and me Fraulein Maria and the Captain. He insisted he was 14, and told his teachers at preschool to call him Friedrich. I was beginning to fear this phase might be permanent, but it was replaced by a new and consuming interest in pirates.

You don’t have to take my word for it—you can probably trust your own experience—when I tell you the *The Sound of Music* is at the heart of Adventist cultural literacy. Of all the films ever made, ahead of even *Ben Hur* and the complete Walt Disney set from *Old Yeller* to *Treasure Island* and *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes*, *The Sound of Music* holds a special place in our cinematic heritage. It is *the* film we all hold in common.

“Climb Every Mountain” was the class song for the graduates of 1968 at Laurelwood Academy. It was also the class song for the graduates of 1968 at Grand Ledge Academy. “Climb Every Mountain” was probably the class song for a lot of other academies in the late 1960s. When the first Adventist showing of the film in Colorado occurred at Campion Academy in 1969, people drove from across the state to attend. The gym was “packed to the rafters,” according to one observer, for the most successful senior benefit in memory.

At the Andrews University premier, Adventists who wouldn’t see the film in a theater drove down from Toronto on Sabbath afternoon to swell the hallowed halls of Johnson

Gymnasium. People from all over Maine drove to Atlantic Union College for the showing, and when the sound system went out, the audience supplied the music from memory. One of our friends at Andrews University remembers a vacation in New York where she talked her father, an Andrews professor, into taking her and her brother to a showing of *The Sound of Music* at a theater. Her mother wouldn’t go because if there had been a fire in the theater, she “wouldn’t have been ready.”

The previous generation knew where it was when Kennedy was shot. We know where we were when we first saw *The Sound of Music*. I asked my Argentinean wife, a latecomer to the American cultural scene: “March 1974, Glendale Academy,” she replied, without hesitation. And it’s not just a film that many of us have seen. It’s a film we’ve seen again . . . and again . . . and again. One of my students told me that even before her family owned a VCR, every December her mother would rent a VCR and a copy of *The Sound of Music* for a family showing.

Some Adventists would no doubt rather have a more subtle and intricate film as our church’s central cinematic legacy—perhaps something like *The Seventh Seal* or even *Jesus of Montreal*. The fact is, we have *The Sound of Music*. Why? Some reasons apply to any audience for the film.

The film has a lot to offer children—it gratifies several of their central fantasies. First of all, children are tremendously important in the film. They are seen and heard—and appreciated. As the stars of Captain von Trapp’s party, they sing “So Long, Farewell” to a group of admiring guests. They win over the Baroness by crooning “The Sound of Music”: “Georg, you never told me how enchanting your children are.” They put on a wonderful puppet show, and they top off their accomplishments by winning first place at the Salzburg Folk Festival. The typical child who watches the

film can thrill to imagining himself or herself just as talented and appreciated as these screen children.

Furthermore, the children are cute, friendly to each other, and abundant—growing on trees, to adapt an image from the film. All of us who worried about crooked teeth or acne, who fretted about having no one to play with except one “dumb little brother” or sister, can bask in 172 minutes of raised self-esteem, sibling perfection, and plenitude.

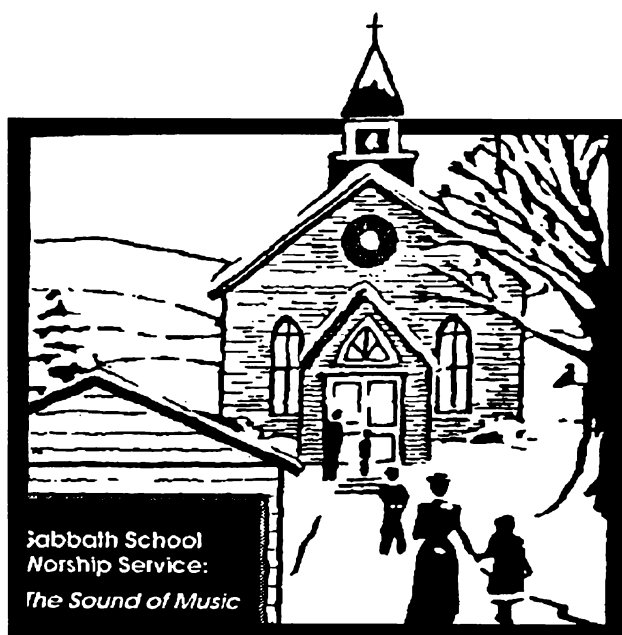
But even from a child’s point of view, the film does not exist in a pure state of naive wish fulfillment—a sufficient cloud on the horizon allows the wish fulfillment to pass the suspension of disbelief. The children have lost their mother several years earlier, and their father is encased in a shell of stern repression. Enter Fraulein Maria.

One of Freud’s more fruitful discussions, in my opinion, describes a supposedly universal phenomenon he calls the Family Romance. In the family romance, children reach an age where they begin to see deficiencies in their parents and begin to compare their parents with other parents, real or imagined. Not surprisingly, children are able to imagine better parents than their own: in material

possessions, character, talent, community prestige. And they align themselves with these imagined parents by supposing themselves temporarily misplaced children, out of their real home, who will someday be rescued when their “real” parents return to claim them. There are many examples of this fantasy being played out in literature: in Dickens’ novels, for instance, or in the children’s classic *Nobody’s Boy*. One might say Adventism itself is based on a celestial family romance where God, the perfect Parent, rescues us out of this vale of tears and takes us to our heavenly home.

A strictly terrestrial version of the family romance takes place in *The Sound of Music*. Having had only the shadowiest of mothers and a distant father, the children are virtually orphaned before Maria marches through the gates singing “I Have Confidence.” This replacement fairy-godmother mother can magically make play-clothes out of old curtains, sing enchanting songs, and, most important, make the children feel and be enchanting themselves—“Is there anything you can’t do, Fraulein?” asks Baroness Schraeder. Not only is Maria perfection herself—she brings the captain around. In one of the more sentimental scenes—I found myself torn between tearing up and gagging when I reviewed it the other day—the captain’s heart melts when he first hears the children singing. He joins in the chorus, and then awkwardly embraces them all afterward. Thus, the children are elevated from an essentially dysfunctional home to a perfect one. This is an imaginative pattern that many children devour.

From a parent’s point of view, the film supplies two obvious lines of attraction. First, we have good “wholesome” entertainment for our children. The story is pretty well innocent, sanitized, uplifting, etc.—only the puppets drink beer—and secondly, kids like it. Parents know how unusual this combination is, and they treasure it. Finally, parents of



my generation can look at the film nostalgically, as a reminder of their own childhood.

But perhaps there are some more particularly Adventist reasons why we watch the film. It is certainly full of motifs we find familiar. I don't want to insist too much on the apocalyptic flight to the hills in the face of unwarranted persecution. After all, this time it is the Catholics fleeing the Nazis, instead of the Adventists fleeing the Catholics, an irony we should appreciate; but what Adventist child hasn't at one time or another daydreamed about that always imminent flight?

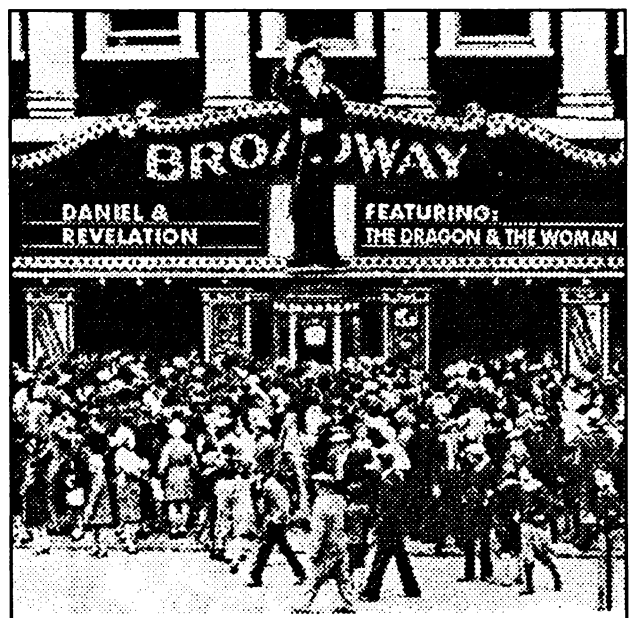
I remember being captivated by a book about the Waldenses as a child, all their adventures hiding out in the hills, and, if my memory serves me correctly, occasionally fighting back and vanquishing their opponents. I also read *Flee the Captor* a few times, and knew, in my imagination, every cranny of the rock face John Weidner descended, while the frustrated Germans cursed from above. I thought about what kinds of canned goods I'd like to take on our flight, if and when the time should arrive. Fleeing to the hills was part of the topography of my Adventist imagination.

But more obviously and perhaps more convincingly, the film taps into our repressed desire for song and dance. As Adventists, we have forbidden all uniform movement, except for Pathfinder drill marching—and note how we excel there. I am not trying to make an argument for academy sock hops, but I think our ban on dancing may have produced some ill effects. Inside many Adventists lurks a Fred Astaire or Ginger Rogers, all dressed up with nowhere to go. We want to sing and dance, to perform in musicals, even if they seem dumb and sentimental.

When I was at Loma Linda Academy, we had a class party with “folk-marching,” a euphemism for square-dancing. Many of us had never really moved in a patterned way to music before, and we found it so enchanting that five or six of us signed up for square

dancing lessons at a local mobile home park. We spent the next eight Tuesdays do-si-do-ing in a smoke-filled community room, while a caller with “Joe” emblazoned on his silver belt-buckle called out the numbers.

The Adventist tension with song and dance is part of a larger tension we feel between the church and the individual, which the film also explores. I think there is a spiritual crossroads at which we feel we must strike out on our own, apart from the church, or deny ourselves and commit wholly to the church. Part of Maria wants to be a nun and part of her wants to live in the world, apart from the abbey. “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?” ask the nuns; and many Adventists, who also feel a tension about their degree of commitment vs. autonomy *vis à vis* the church, might ask “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria's?” Like many Adventists, Maria appreciates the church and wants to be a part of it—at times she longs for a self-annihilating commitment—yet she and the mother superior doubt her fitness for such a commitment, and in many ways, Maria seems unfitted for the strict abbey life. For all it offers in terms of community and spiritual aura, the church can also be



overpowering, oppressive. Many in my generation, I suspect, are not “Seeking a Sanctuary,” to use Bull and Lockhart’s rubric for Adventism, so much as seeking some kind of mediation between the sanctuary and the world.

Cinematographer Ted McCord created a special dark-to-light transition when Maria leaves the abbey walls to go to the captain’s house, and that feeling of being out from under watchful eyes censuring our movements is shared by many Adventists and ex-Adventists.

Maria relishes freedom of movement and voice on the road, enjoys her new confidence, her sense of self as she faces life on her own,

out of the shelter of conventional wisdom. However, when she comes face to face, up close with the captain during an Austrian folk dance, she flees back to the abbey; she isn’t ready to deal with the troubling emotional situations freedom brings.

Maria’s resolution is one much desired by many Adventists. She lives out from under the abbey walls, yet has the approval, blessing, and friendship of her sisters. She is at peace with the church and herself, enjoying both community and individuality. This Sabbath, think about how—like Mission Spotlight and Nuteena—*The Sound of Music* is an integral thread in the fabric of our Adventist lives.