

Curtains Going Up at Adventist Colleges

By Julie Lorenz

The dramatic flourish that at many Adventist colleges and universities once nourished a play or two has grown. Minor and major emphasis in the study of drama is now possible, and at one university the making of an original movie is under way.

Perhaps the most unusual drama-related program is the new four-year cinematography major at Southern Adventist University. According to Craig Hadley, adjunct professor of history, archaeology, and film, the fifteen cinematography majors in his department will assist in the making of a full-length movie this fall. Written by Hadley, the script is based on a true story of the siege of Chattanooga during the American Civil War. Hadley plans to submit the movie to several national and international film festivals and release it for distribution.

For the first part of the fall semester, cinematography students will attend film making classes. Beginning in late October, the students will participate in the five-week shooting of the movie, acting as paid interns to the hired professionals, which will include a director, actors, and crew members. After filming has finished for the day, the professionals will conduct workshops for the students.

The two-million-dollar budget for the movie was donated, and the bulk of its profits will go back into the cinematography program for a self-perpetuating film fund. Hadley says that the movie professionals are excited about working for a nonprofit educational program. He plans to tackle a major film project every two years with his students.

Hadley wants his program to be a place “where great Christian film makers can be trained. We have the opportunity to make a film that makes a statement, that will reach a wide secular audience.”

Three colleges now offer students the opportunity to pursue drama as a major or minor emphasis for their degree. Currently, three students at Union College are working toward bachelor of arts degrees in drama, and at least six are working on a drama minor. Students take some classes at the college and some at nearby Nebraska Wesleyan University and the University of Nebraska. “Students get the best of three departments, instead of just one,” says Mark Robison, associate professor of English and drama at Union College.

In addition to taking classes, students participate in the drama department’s Fourth Wall Theater Company. In a community with a lot of drama productions—university, community, and professional—people have discovered that Union’s dramatic productions are “strong, clean, and inexpensive,” something that families can attend together, he says.

Taking drama while attending an Adventist college enables students to think about their interests and beliefs in a safe place before they move into an area where performances and rehearsals are on Saturday. “I don’t dictate to them,” says Robison, “but I talk to them about Sabbath keeping.”

Another college that offers a minor in drama is probably the school with the longest history of drama



Steven Becker, Brandon Kennison, and Katie Lechler sing about "The Stuff in the Sink." *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, March 2001 performance at Union College.

activities. More than twenty students are currently working toward a minor in drama at Walla Walla College. Although they can take all the classes on campus necessary to complete the minor, those interested in the technical side of production can take classes in stage and lighting design at nearby Whitman College.

LuAnn Venden Herrell, assistant professor of English, and Marilynn Loveless, instructor in communications, are co-artistic directors of the drama program. Says Venden Herrell, "Drama is a useful learning tool. It gives students confidence and teaches them to think critically."

Loveless agrees. "Drama teaches students to work with other people, to think creatively, and to help them discover where they belong in the world."

This school year, Walla Walla College will celebrate "Forty Years of Drama," with numerous plays and a theater dedication. In October, a black box theater (a rehearsal hall and place to perform one-act plays) will be named for Donnie Rigby, communications professor emeritus, who introduced and fostered the growth of drama at the college. A play will be performed in her honor. "We hope many of her former students will attend the dedication," says Venden Herrell.

Beginning this school year, a third Adventist campus now offers a drama minor. The English/communication department at La Sierra University includes a drama minor "modeled on programs at well-known theater schools, including Yale and UCLA," according to Bruce Gilman, associate professor of English. Students must take seven courses to

complete the minor, and they must participate in workshops and at least one department production. The university intends to renovate Matheson Chapel into a university theater as soon as enough funds can be raised.

Although other Adventist colleges do not offer many drama classes, drama still is a major part of college life. Oakwood College has four dramatic groups, but the production that gets the most attention every year is the annual play performed during alumni weekend. Last school year, students performed *A Raisin in the Sun*. Although the play was coordinated by Ramona Hyman, assistant professor of English, she gives the credit to the students who directed, performed, made sets, raised money for preproduction, and created a playbook complete with advertisements for local businesses.

According to Hyman, who teaches a class called "Creative Drama," interest in drama is rapidly growing among college students. "Drama as ministry is beginning to take hold—almost by force," she says. "It's like a weed that will grow whether you water it or not. It needs to be shaped like a flower." Hyman's goal in shaping drama on campus is twofold: to "make people aware of plays written by our people," and to "create a uniquely Adventist voice in American theater."

Pacific Union College is another campus that provides opportunities to study drama. The school offers drama classes because elementary education majors must take an acting class in order to receive California teaching credentials. Clubs on the Pacific Union College campus include the Dramatic Arts Society, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, Parable Players, and the Napa Valley Musical Theater, which presents a major musical every year. (See Nancy Lecourt's review of *Esther*, pages 49-51.)

Students at Newbold College benefit from a Shakespeare expert on campus. Peter Balderstone, who teaches the school's first formal drama class, is



The courtroom scene from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, March 2000 performance at Union College.

currently working on a Ph.D. in Shakespeare studies, and has worked in several Shakespeare film projects.

Since 1987, students have performed an annual Shakespeare play in the school's Victorian garden, called Sylvia's Garden. The local community comes out in force to view the production. One recent production was a creative performance of *Twelfth Night*, where all the male and female roles were switched.

Last year, at Newbold's first annual "Make a Movie Day," students filmed a Victorian melodrama written by a student that speculated about the demise of Sylvia—for whom the garden was named.

Until recently, students at Canadian University College performed different Adventist heritage plays every year for a decade. Written by former Canadian University College librarian Keith Clouten, the plays featured stories about the Adventist pioneers. The

scripts were gathered together in a book titled *Playing Our Past*, published by the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

On many campuses, student-lead dramas are active and popular. The Destiny Drama Company at Southern University has a new student director every year and often

performs religious plays written by students. The fifteen-year-old group has traveled throughout the United States and overseas. Several young people have been baptized as the result of the group's performances, says campus chaplain Ken Rogers.

Another student-run drama group recently disbanded after three years in existence when its leader, Faith Deschamps, graduated from Atlantic Union College. Acting Under Christ (AUC) performed for student church services and vespers programs. Two years ago, the group traveled to Bermuda to present a week-long series of plays at an Adventist church, according to senior Bryan Castle.

Atlantic Union College has a long drama tradition. Otilie Stafford, now professor emeritus, estimates that she directed forty plays in her twenty-five years in the

English department before she scaled back her work a few years ago. During her decades of directing, Stafford learned it takes a while "to educate a community of people who are open to drama; to train an audience" to recognize good theater.

A new student-directed drama ministry begins this year at Columbia Union College. Sponsored by the campus ministries department, but managed by sophomore Ricardo Bacchus, the twenty-member group, Witness, plans to perform at various religious services on campus, as well as to travel to different area churches. According to Bacchus, a recent campus ministries survey indicated that drama is a top student interest.

Southwestern Adventist University has two active drama ministries. Brenda Schnell, director of admissions, sponsors the traveling group, Make Believe. The students in the group spend all or part of many weekends traveling to academies and churches in Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas performing for Sabbath School and church programs.

Southwestern Adventist University's other drama ministry is called Insight of the Master. The group was formed in response to a challenge made to students by chaplain Lane Campbell in which he encouraged them to develop their own ministries. Student Caleb Cross took up the challenge and now runs the group, which performs many short Scripture-based skits.

Another active student drama group resides at Avondale College. The group, called Acts II (Avondale College Theatrical Society), actively witnesses through street ministry and performances at hospitals and camp meetings.

Andrews University has four student drama groups, including Impressions of the Master, directed by senior Jerry Nichols. Students also participate in more formal drama through the English, music, and communication departments, says Stella Greig, professor of English. Past plays performed include *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *The Pirates of Penzance*. One year, students performed scenes from Shakespeare in the 1939 historic courthouse in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Almost every year the English and communication departments cosponsor a course in British Drama, which includes a trip to London to attend several plays.

Julie Lorenz is the advertising and circulation manager of *Spectrum*.

Subscriptions@spectrummagazine.org



Steven Becker, Eric Kiple, Brandon Kennison, Jessica Robison, and Katie Lechler in *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.