



Xerxes and Vashti performing the memorable "Walls," far left. King Xerxes (Geoffrey Heald) and Vashti (Susan Orillosa) left. Xerxes, right. Deliah (Kimberly Osborne) and Vashti, far right.

Springtime for Esther

A Response to the Musical, Esther
By Nancy Lecourt

Music and Lyrics by Ginger Ketting • Story and Script by Mark Phillips
Orchestration by Jennifer Janssen • Premiered at Pacific Union College
April 12, 13, 14, and 16, 2001

Springtime for Hitler, it ain't. Nevertheless, it may have taken as much *chutzpah* for Ginger Ketting, professor of education at Pacific Union College, to take this story of palace intrigue, harems, eunuchs, execution, and mayhem, and adapt it into a musical for an Adventist family audience as it took Mel Brooks to make his musical comedy about the Führer. While at three-and-a-half hours *Esther* is much too long, this classic Cinderella tale enhanced by Ketting's witty, touching songs reminds us that old stories are the best stories.

Before I proceed further, I feel it is only fair to warn you that this isn't really a review. I know less about musicals than most people (though I did host a sing-along *Sound of Music* at home last summer—classic Adventist entertainment at its best!), and I certainly am not qualified to critique this huge undertaking, which included scripts, songs, sets, sheet music, choreography, costumes, and so forth. I will say that there was way too much fussing about with walls and carpets and potted plants, though the impressive incidental music and the comic relief provided by the two palace guards certainly went a long way toward covering it up: it really didn't seem like three and a half hours. Nevertheless, this will be along the line of what English teachers call a *response*. Which means that I can say what I want.

And so to begin.

I don't know about you, but I grew up thinking that Esther was chosen by Xerxes as much for her good



Vashti, far left. Haman (Flint Johnston), left. Xerxes, right. Esther (Emily Moran), far right.

character as for her looks, and certainly not because she'd spent a terrific night in bed with the king. Indeed, the *Bible Story* books are very clear, at least on this last point: "At last she came into the 'house royal' and the king was overcome by her breath-taking beauty. It was a case of love at first *sight*."¹ (Italics mine.) The illustration shows quite a crowd of people in the sunny room where the king looks at Esther. On the other hand, the Bible says, "In the evening she went, and in the morning she came back to the second harem" (2:14).

And so does *Esther*. Although nothing actually happens on stage during the bedroom scene, the script makes it pretty clear that the king didn't just *look*. Indeed, the student reviewer for Pacific Union College's *Campus Chronicle*, Jason Araujo, reports that he turned to his neighbor and whispered, "Did they really just say that Esther is going to receive SEXUAL TRAINING!?"

Still, I never did quite shake the feeling that Esther was a nice Adventist girl who found herself in a bit of a jam. Despite the convincing set—huge "sandstone" walls covered with evocative hieroglyphs—I was unable to suspend disbelief enough to feel that I was watching the struggles of a Jewish girl of about 500 B.C. At one point, Mordecai even informed someone that his people don't drink wine. I can't find this in my RSV. What's next, vegeburgers on the palace barbecue?

Granted, anachronisms are inevitable when one tries to turn an ancient hero tale into a modern genre like the musical. Indeed, purposeful anachronism is used for comic relief: the deliciously evil villain, Haman, is all set to ingratiate himself with his cover letter and resume—a scroll, of course. But what about the most glaring anachronism, and the most daring plot change, the romantic love between Xerxes and Vashti? (Yes, that's right, Vashti.) On the morning after the banquet when the king's head has cleared he asks himself, "What have I done?" and spends much of the rest of the play regretting his rashness. Meanwhile Vashti, confined to quarters at the other end of

the palace, pines over her foolish ex-husband, and indeed one of the two more striking duets, "Walls," is sung by the two of them from opposite sides of one of the huge "standstone" barriers:

(Xerxes:)

Here I am again, behind a wall again.
What is it that leads a man to hide?
What is it I fear, what keeps me lurking near
When all that was between us must have died?

Am I not ruler over all,
Is it not true that everyone is at my beck and call?
And here my words can save, and there my words
bring pain,
The walls I've built are driving me insane!

I look at her beyond the wall,
The wall my words have forged.
How could I put myself beyond the reach
Of one that I have treasured and adored?

What's done is done!

(Vashti:)

Lone moon in the sky, listen to my cry,
How can love live on when torn apart?
Is she with him now, lying with him now,
Listening to the beating of his heart?

Am I not the one who knows his soul?
Is it not true that our love took two halves and
made them whole?
And here his words can save, and there his words
bring pain,
The walls he's built are driving me insane.

So now I live beyond the wall
The wall his words have forged.
How could he shut me out beyond the reach



Esther and Mordecai (David Waddell), left. Congo Line nobles (Welby Lo, Triatan Hensel, Robin Matsukawa, Eryck Chairez, Tarun Kapoor), middle. Haman and Hagai (Lem Bach), right.

Of him whom I have treasured and adored?
What's done is done!

(Both:)
What's done is done!

As one of those picky, finicky people who probably shouldn't be allowed to write a response like this, I can't help but remind my dear readers that romantic love didn't really exist until Eleanor of Aquitaine more or less invented it in the twelfth century. Yet, let's face it: What would a musical be without romance? And isn't it rather a satisfying surprise when it turns about to be Vashti, the scorned first wife, who is the love interest, instead of the beauty queen, Esther? It is.

(Nevertheless, it was a bit much when they actually *get back together* in the end, and Esther, who has bonded to Vashti, steps sweetly aside and allows monogamy to triumph. And apparently Ketting thinks so too, because she told me that this is just one of several scenes that will be cut in future performances.)

But let's get back to things I liked about *Esther*. I found the silly sycophants, who tell Xerxes that if he doesn't dump Vashti all the women in the kingdom will start to think they can disobey their husbands with impunity (an early instance of the slippery slope argument) quite charming. They get into a conga line and sing heartily:

Oh, you've gotta keep a woman in her place
If you're going to protect the human race.
It is men who are the source
Of leadership, of course,
And women acquiesce with reverent grace.

We've got the power, yeah! All the world is ours, yeah!

Several students—males—have told me they found this scene very elementary-school, somewhat embarrassing. But even they admit that it is funny.

The other scene I loved is the wonderfully ironic

encounter between the King and Haman, with its song, "What Shall Be Done for the Man Whom the King Delights to Honor?" I had forgotten just how delicious this scene is, but it really is straight from the Bible. The villainous Haman is so caught up in thinking that he is piling up rewards for himself (Fantastic! Fabulous! / What a clever plan! / Amazing! Incredible! / You're an ingenious man!) that his comeuppance is wholly satisfying.²

In fact, it was this scene that reminded me what a great story this is. As Ketting herself points out in her comments in the *Campus Chronicle*, "*Esther* . . . has all the basic elements of a good dramatic plot: power, beauty, sex, greed, the underdogs winning out at the end." And it is this happy ending that qualifies it as comedy, and made it indeed a good choice for a musical, anachronisms and all. When it comes to your town—and it is already being planned for Loma Linda and will probably happen at Walla Walla as well, since Ketting, on her honeymoon as I write, will be moving there soon—you won't want to miss it.

Notes and References

1. Okay, I think I must have made up the other point without the help of Uncle Arthur. As a plain girl with good character, I really didn't need another story telling me that pretty girls get all the breaks.

2. Haman is played wonderfully by a former student of mine, Fint Johnston, for whom I take a good deal of credit, though some can go to his parents and other teachers and a teeny-weeny bit to him.

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