

Writing a Prophet: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at Red Books, a New Play about Ellen White | BY DANEEN AKERS

A small group of people huddle together on the black stage, looking expectantly toward the sky. They inhale together, rising on the balls of their feet, hoping, praying—is that what they’re looking for? No, no it isn’t. The deep crimson of the walls seems to mock their pain, bright against their falling hopes. They’ve been here a long time. Someone finally says the unsayable, dejection in his voice: “Let’s go.”

But no, they can’t. This is it. This is where it was supposed to all end and all begin. But nothing has happened. They’ve been waiting all day. And nothing has happened. Slowly they leave one by one until only one young girl is left humming “Shall We Gather at the River?” until she collapses, sobbing. Alone.

She is Ellen White.

It’s October 22, 1844, on stage, and this is the opening scene of the new play about Ellen White, *Red Books*, researched, written, produced, and directed by Pacific Union College students and faculty.

Several years ago, my husband, Stephen, asked me to name the person who had been most influential in my life (he’s fond of such “small talk” over dinner dishes). As I struggled to specify only one person, thinking of family members and mentors in turn, he surprised me by saying he could easily name the most influential person in his life. “It’s Ellen White.”

His answer surprised me. At the time we

weren’t actively attending church and were in the midst of the somewhat typical post-college religious identity crisis. It didn’t seem like Sister Ellen would be the first on his mind.

He went on,

My entire life has been influenced by Ellen White. My grandparents were missionaries for the Adventist Church, I always went to Adventist schools; all of our friends were Adventist. I was taught that the world was ending soon so I never really even thought about what my adult life should look like because I didn’t think I’d live to see it—my entire life perspective is completely filtered through Adventist lenses. Yet, I don’t think I know very much about her except that she was hit by a rock as a child, held a big Bible for a long time while having a vision from God, and had a negative opinion of going to the movies.

I started to realize he was right. Our families were something like fourth-generation Adventist on both sides. Very little in our family traditions didn’t have some ties to Adventism (even if they were in reaction to something within Adventism). Nobody in our family (or in our parents’ families) had gone to public schools. We were Adventist through and through, yet we knew only a few details about the prophet profoundly responsible for much of the trajectory of our lives and the lives of our families.

This revelation started a revealing conversation. If Ellen White was the most influential person in our lives, why didn’t we know more about her? That afternoon—fittingly enough, a Sabbath afternoon—we spent the whole day

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and well into the night browsing on our laptops, calling out excitedly to each other as we came across a good Web site to share. We read everything we could find, from the White Estate to *The White Lie*.

ond generation, after the leader dies, lifts that person up onto a pedestal," she continues, "and makes that person perfect, inerrant, unique. The third generation tears the pedestal down. And so the



"The Crash," a scene from *Red Books*, depicts the implosion that took place at some Seventh-day Adventist

colleges and universities in the 1970s, when academics began dissecting the prophet.

The situation Stephen and I found ourselves in turns out to have a name—it's the "fourth generation." It was precisely the place Mei Ann Teo found herself in when she decided that the time was right for the Dramatic Arts Society at PUC to do a play about Ellen White. The idea for an Ellen White play has been percolating in her mind for more than eight years, ever since she attended a choir room Sabbath School lesson at PUC where history professor Paul McGraw presented some generational concepts he had learned from studying the Shakers that seemed applicable to Adventism.

"He found this pattern," Teo explains. "The first generation, which is still alive with the founder or leader, considers the person an enlightened leader. The sec-

fourth generation is left with nothing. That's where we were. We're the fourth generation."

Teo remembers this realization shaking the choir room group. As a member of the fourth generation herself, Teo knew that the topic of Ellen White was an open wound, especially at PUC post-Desmond Ford. There were many present who remembered the aftermath of October 1979 and had seen firsthand that those who questioned the prophet didn't fare too well in the end.

"I knew there was a wound," Teo says. "But what kind of wound was it? Was it scabbed over? Or was it festering? I knew much remained unresolved and people seemed fearful to even discuss it. But where else can time and space converge to bring about a healing conversation better than in the theater?"

Fast forward eight years. Teo has now become the artist-in-residence at PUC, bringing new life and vitality to the drama program. She's spent her summers at intensive theater workshops and every moment she can getting experience directing plays around the San Francisco Bay Area. She has learned the power of ensemble acting in which the actors bring issues in their own lives to the stage, creating and making meaning as a group.

It was time to do the *Ellen White* play. "I realized that I had the skills professionally. I knew how to do this," she says. "And it felt like I had the right group of students to work with and that the school was finally ready for this conversation to begin."

She started to broach the idea with her core team of actors and past collaborators and discovered that they were all "fourth generation" Adventists as well, without any real knowledge of *Ellen White* and no real desire to get any. She found out that getting a group of college students excited about *Ellen* wasn't easy. Eryck Chairez, a co-writer and the play's director, puts it bluntly. "I'd heard from others to beware because Mei Ann had some cockamamie idea to do a play about *Ellen G. White*. I was suspicious—why would we want to do a play about *her*?"

The actual creation of the play has been, and continues to be, an intensely collaborative community effort. The actors and writers, nine in all, conducted more than two hundred interviews to collect a broad swath of perspectives about *Ellen White*. Not only did they interview fellow students, faculty, and staff, but they also talked to their parents, grandparents, cousins, and church members, as well as established theologians, *White Estate* staff members, and whoever else was willing to share their story.

"The actors really started seeing themselves and the community at large differently while writing this play," Teo says. "We aren't actors coming in from the city trying to figure out this strange religion. We are the story, too. This story is all of us."

The actors found the interviewing process difficult; they were accustomed to portraying characters on a stage, not asking difficult religious questions. "It was hard doing the interviews," said Cambria Wheeler, a senior history major. "However, it's also turning out to be the most rewarding part, although it's stressful playing people that we interviewed."

This aspect of the play, playing real people with whom the actors have real relationships, is turning out to be quite nerve-racking. The actors are keenly aware that many of the people represented in the play will one night be in the audience watching. As the play itself puts it in one of its many self-referential moments, "It's one thing to interview all of you and then go and perform you behind your backs in rehearsal. It's another thing to perform you in front of you."

After gathering a mountain of interview and research information, the three writers, Mei Ann Teo, Eryck Chairez, and Zachary Dunn, got to work. Gradually, and with much "wailing and gnashing of teeth," the structure of the play began to emerge. The play's emotional core is built around scenes that feature almost verbatim dialogue from people interviewed by the team, as well as moments when the actors play themselves, a rather unique moment in theater. Hiding inside a character isn't an option, their real fears, doubts, and hopes are also on display.

What they hope has emerged is a play about *Ellen White* as a human being, not just as a prophet who is off-limits to normal human emotions and relationships. And ultimately the play is less about *Ellen White* and more about a particular community and its members' views of their key founding figure. We all can see ourselves in the candid moments, intimate reflections, and personal stories shared onstage that all add up to the only unequivocal truth: faith isn't easy, and maybe if it was, it wouldn't be worth the bother.

This faith walk turned out to be more than

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just words on a page; it's been a personal experience for the actors and writers. They discovered, to their surprise, that these core Adventist identity questions mattered to them. Chairez lays it out with his typical honesty: "A lot of people raised their eyebrows when they heard I was writing a play about Ellen White," he says. "I'm not exactly known for being the best Adventist. A lot of us aren't known for that. And I've wondered often, 'Am I spiritually worthy to write this play?'"

The process of writing about Ellen White turned out to be a profoundly spiritual process for all of the actors, especially for the ones who weren't sure if they truly considered themselves Adventist at the core any more. "Before writing this play, I wasn't sure that I was an Adventist," Chairez admits. "But now I think that maybe I really am one. I've discovered that I do care about this church."

Teo tells the story of interviewing Julius Nam, a former professor of religion at PUC and a current professor at Loma Linda University. She had known him at PUC and knew that his story and faith walk would play an integral role in the play. But when she started talking to him, things suddenly turned confessional.

She felt obligated to explain to him that she didn't consider herself Adventist anymore. "I told him that I love these people—I'm not rejecting them, but I'm not going to say that I am Adventist," she recalls.

"He told me, 'You might say you're not an Adventist, but you're sitting here, aren't you?'"

It took her a moment to realize that he was right, a part of her cared enough to be writing a play about Ellen White. "I realized that he had just caught me being Adventist!"

All of the actors found that learning more about Ellen White and exploring the big questions—even the controversial, messy, where-was-that-copied-from and how-is-she-relevant-today questions—made them feel more affinity for the Church, not less. "My views have changed about her," said Tim Widmer, a history major. "I didn't really appreciate her before. Now I've softened toward her after doing this play. I see her as human now, not just a church figure."

Chairez now sounds downright protective of her, especially for someone who only a few months ago didn't readily claim church affiliation. "We wouldn't be here without her," he says. "This woman built a church, a health care system, and an education sys-

tem—and not just here, internationally. Who of us can say we've done that?"

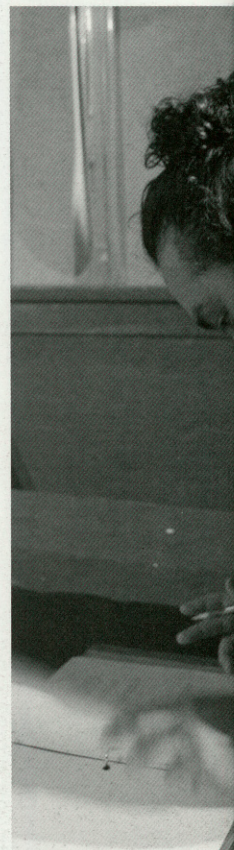
The one actor who is old enough to remember when the Church and especially PUC stopped talking about Ellen White is Greg Schneider, a professor of behavioral science and the patriarch of the group. He seems to feel that being involved in bringing this play to fruition can help salve some of the wounds he saw opened during the "train wreck in the early eighties" that he remembers all too well. "We just simply stopped talking about her. My generation failed her and failed these students."

He finds the play energizing and is thrilled that the students care enough to try to revive the long-dead conversation, but it's clear that he is still nervous. The fallout from 1979 happened when he was a young professor; the memory is still crystal clear. When the third generation destroyed Ellen White, it was a very messy crime scene with victims on all sides. "It's liberating to do this play, but still at the back of my mind is just a little paranoia that this could be a Prague Spring."

It's astonishing how much fear there actually is. As a fourth-generation member myself, I find it hard to imagine a time when asking questions about a founding figure had such serious implications. When I ask the group what their fears are about this play, Heather Denton, a history teacher at PUC Preparatory School, quickly replies, "You mean other than job security?"

The actors, especially the faculty, realize that they are attempting to jumpstart a conversation that many would prefer not to start again. Although they laugh, there is a palpable tension beneath the laugh. This play's honesty is a risk, and they know it. Teo remembers talking to a mentor about the play at the beginning of the process who warned her that serious fallout was quite possible. "Even though I assured him that my intention was not to mock or scorn, he told me that I needed to be ready to lose my job if I did this play," she says.

Teo sees the potential controversy as indicative of an age-old tension between the often-competing needs of scholars to search for "truth" versus the Church's



need to pastor. One side is always threatened by the other, and often for good reason. "One side says: 'You're destroying my scholarship!' While the other side says: 'You're destroying my faith.'"

some conclusions. I've found that it's just the beginning, though." She doesn't seem unhappy about this, though; rather, she seems excited to see where the conversation will take her, where it will take us all.



Left: Eryck Chairez, the director and one of the writers of *Red Books*.

What Teo hopes the play can help do is remind both sides that they need each other. In the end, it's a symbiotic balance. We can't exist without our search for historical truth or without our faith. "It's a problem when they can't co-exist. It's a problem when they try to edge each other out like in the seventies," she says. "What I hope our play can say is that both are valuable, both are needed. Without these two extremes, the center won't hold."

She and all of the actors are hoping that *Red Books* can be a conversation starter about the Church, our founding figures, prophets, labels, and most of all, faith itself. "I don't have an agenda for where the dialogue needs to end up," says Tim Wolcott. "I just want it to begin."

All the actors nod in agreement. Denton adds: "I thought doing this play would give me

The break is over and rehearsal gears up again; scene four needs more work. Chairez gives the actors some notes before they take their places. "We need to really build up the momentum here, all right? Remember in this scene the mythology is getting created, and we have to keep building, building, building—because next it gets destroyed."

"Okay then? Everyone ready? Lights." ■

Daneen Akers is an adjunct professor English at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California.

Above: The cast of *Red Books*.