

REVIEWS

Red Books

Our Search for Ellen White | REVIEWED BY ADRIAN ZYTKOSKEE

I first heard about this play shortly before its premier performance, which was scheduled to continue for five days at the newly remodeled Alice L. Holst Theater, an intimate venue on the campus of Pacific Union College, with a capacity of fifty-five people.

But why did such a remarkably titled play on this subject appear at Pacific Union College?

My mind filled immediately with questions. Whose "search" were the producers of the play talking about? For that matter, who were the producers? Was it to be a dramatization of the iconic Ellen White? Perhaps little Ellen of stone-throwing fame? Or Ellen Harmon with early visions? Maybe Sister White, whom we know for her stern testimonies? Given the title, perhaps it was the Ellen G. White who was taxed beyond one person's capacities to provide publishable materials to a seemingly insatiable market? Could it be that the play was not really about Ellen White at all, but was some kind of a description of the way Adventists related to Ellen White in the generations that have come and gone since her death in 1915?

But why did such a remarkably titled play on this subject appear at Pacific Union College? I knew something of the tumultuous years at PUC, having been a professor there from 1975 to 1984. Was this play going to get that specific and, yes, controversial?

I got on the phone to friends at PUC and got the answers to some of my questions. The play was conceived and written by PUC students or newly minted graduates. The nine-member cast was of the same vintage except

for one professor. All participants were Seventh-day Adventists, some fourth and fifth generation. But that raised even more interesting questions. What motivated these students to choose this subject and place such a commitment of time and energy in this project? And, finally, how on earth could this play actually be interesting?

On Saturday night, March 11, my questions were answered. Seated on the front row of a packed house, I saw a stage furnished with a simple set consisting of two giant red books that could be moved, opened, slammed shut, and used as needed throughout the performance.

The producers/directors/writers, Mei Ann Teo, Eryck Chairez, and Zachary Dunn assisted by others in the cast, had interviewed more than one hundred people to get direct reports on how these interviewees related to Ellen White, controversies surrounding her, historical knowledge they may have had, and events they may have witnessed.

These interviews became a major part of the play, with spoken excerpts from the actual interviews inserted in appropriate contexts. For the most part, the interviewees were left unnamed. But Ellen White introduced herself early in the play and was played by the same actor throughout the performance. The play had two acts and nineteen scenes, which gave it continuing action and sparkle.

Most of the material about Ellen White herself was familiar, at least to a lifelong Adventist of my era. The child Ellen, the

adult Mrs. White as the stern arbiter of do's and don'ts many of which contradicted each other, the authoritative church leader, the benevolent employer. All are scenes taken from familiar material.

But there were two other dimensions to this play. One was the relation of the Church as well as ordinary Adventists to the role and authority of Ellen White. Second was the personal and sometimes agonizingly painful relation of the interviewees and of the young people in the play to Ellen White and what she stands for in the Church coupled with their relation to the Church itself. Such scenes as "The Crash," "Fear," "Firing Line," "Teaching Ellen White," and "Labels" summoned up quite recent memories.

But there were two totally unexpected aspects of the play that answered my questions and made this an unusually delightful and interesting evening. First were the production values. The play was never boring. There was an amazing amount of movement, sound, dramatic intensity, and pacing. Moreover, the writing was clear and on target. I looked forward to each scene and was seldom disappointed.

The second aspect is even more important. These young people whom I had assumed gave little, if any, thought to Ellen White made the "search" their search. They convinced me of that by their energy and enthusiasm in the performance, and they closed the deal in a third act, which followed the play as a question-and-answer session that involved the audience.

Finally, I must not fail to comment on the play as a part of an educational institution. I can think of nothing more positive from an educational perspective than the months of hard work, the sense of being a team, the gathering of heretofore unexplored knowledge, the confidence gained in expressing oneself dramatically before an audience, and the general experience of success that comes from an endeavor such as *Red Books*. ■

Adrian Zytoske, a retired educator and administrator, writes from Placerville, California.

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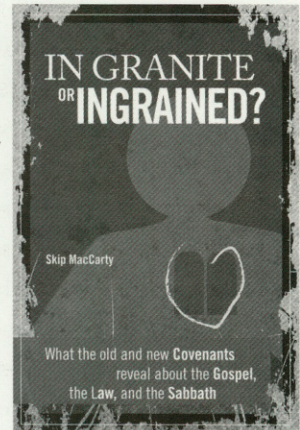
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