

## Ellen White Re-Enactors | BY MIDORI YOSHIMURA



### Experiencing Ellen:

*Rita Hoshino Portrays Ellen G. White*

How come you're here when you're dead?" a young girl asks the woman wearing black and a gentle smile. Rita Hoshino, licensed Ellen G. White reenactor, pauses; she's not quite sure how to explain this. Even her resourceful contacts at the Ellen G. White Estate might be stumped. However, Hoshino knows at least one person who would have loved to try.

"[Ellen] just loved kids," says Hoshino, Ellen White's modern counterpart, who is petite, part-Hawaiian, part-Chinese. "You know, so many people have seen the strict Ellen. From the pictures she never smiled. Well [like everybody else back then], she never smiled because the film was so slow!" Photography has greatly improved since the prophetess's day, but Hoshino often finds that understanding of Ellen is still unclear. By portraying Ellen White, she helps others come to terms with, or introduces them to, Seventh-day Adventism's iconic prophetess.

"I was raised among the books [written by Ellen White]," remembers Hoshino. Her father worked at Pacific

Press Publishing Association, and she helped in the bindery department. Because of this connection, when Pacific Press asked her to portray a teenage Ellen White, she agreed. As a Pacific Union College student, she acted as Mrs. White for PUC Children's Church Ministries.

Hoshino has not grown out of her alter ego's costume, though she is currently adding pockets ("for a microphone pack") to Mrs. White's iconic black dress. The graphic artist and calligrapher has portrayed Ellen White at St. Helena Hospital's 125th anniversary celebration, Loma Linda University Hospital's Centennial Anniversary, and the Hiram Edson Farm Dedication, not to mention church services, and schools. She has been invited to represent Adventist Heritage Ministry and has received a nod from the E. G. White Estate, according to her website, [www.ellenwhitelegacy.com](http://www.ellenwhitelegacy.com). Increased publicity led to her most visible role yet: portraying Mrs. White at the 2010 General Conference Session in Atlanta, Georgia.

"At the GC, people tried to 'cup' my face," Hoshino remembers. This unique expression of affection involved strangers placing their hands on either side of her face, holding it within their palms' embrace. Others offered her money to be a prop for their product, or attract passersby to their booth. Hoshino says, "I had to hide just to be able to eat!" Her popularity as Mrs. White meant that Rita had to have a security guard or a handler. Exclamations of "You look just like [Ellen White]!" rang through the air. She jokes, "Well, it's not terribly complimentary when people think you look like someone who looks like they got hit by a car." That wasn't the only memorable conversation. "I had one lady say, 'Oh you're fatter than Ellen,' and all I could say was, 'I don't believe so,'" remembers Hoshino. Her background in stand-up comedy reminds her to maintain a sense of humor. "I'm not trying to beat people over the head with her; I am trying to portray her

as the woman I know her to be," she says.

Hoshino sees her role as an encourager. Drawing near the prophetess from the past, people tell her, "We don't know Ellen White, we haven't met her, we want to fall in love." Others encountered Ellen as a hammer: "They had been hit over the head with 'red books.'" With Ellen White quotes such as, "He will never leave you in uncertainty," she wants people "to feel the sense that they themselves are adored by Jesus too. Then I can just slip away into the background." She sees her role "not to point people to Ellen, but to point them to Jesus."

As a spiritual signpost, Hoshino has to remind herself, "I am *not* Ellen," that she is "managing two personalities." Nor, as many people believe, are the two women related. "When people ask me, 'Are you related to her family?' I say, 'family of God.'" I'm sure she wasn't part Hawaiian, with some Chinese," she says. But getting into costume—originally a repurposed pilgrim outfit—and adjusting her snood (signature hairnet) has affected her view of her alter ego. "I was never beaten over the head with the red books. I never felt negative about them; it was more towards a neutral feeling." Studying Ellen White's writings leads Rita to embrace her more than ever before. "She had to be faithful to her calling, faithful every day of her life... I would want to learn from her utter dependence on God for every single detail."

Both the preparation for and portrayal of Ellen White seems to have helped Hoshino find her own experience of Ellen. She says, "I feel like people try to play 'stump the Ellen,'" which often leads to "silly" questions. To some who ask, "How does it feel to get hit in the face with rocks?" she replies, "This is *how much* of Ellen you have read? They usually say, 'I read almost everything.' And I say, 'And *that* is what you come away with?'" Other pointed questions about Ellen White's "real" nationality, originality of her works, etc., lead her to say, "I admit that I don't know... what percentage is original with Ellen. I am not Ellen." But by portraying her, she herself learns how to "come away" from the prophetess. "Ellen was a woman who dearly loved Jesus. She was willing first—absolutely willing—to submit everything for the cause of Christ."

Cries of "One photo, one photo," encircle the iconic figure, as "Mrs. White" patiently smiles for another picture. The flash can't quite catch it, but Rita Hoshino has revealed Ellen G. White in a new light. ■

## Reading Between the Lines:

*Bringing Ellen G. White to the Stage*

**W**ho would think of Ellen in a red dress? Of my generation, who could imagine she owned anything red?" Elisabeth Reeves is from Angwin, Calif., a city that includes Pacific Union College, Elmshaven, site of Ellen White's home, and a large Adventist population. But before the 2007 play, *Red Books: Our Quest for Ellen White*, Angwin was almost all that Ellen White and Reeves had in common.

Written and performed by the Dramatic Arts Society of Pacific Union College, *Red Books* explored Ellen White's impact on others across the divide of time and culture, through the candid voices—wounded, reverent, ignorant—of Adventists and ex-Adventists alike. Mei Ann Teo, then resident artist and artistic director of DAS, teamed with



Elisabeth Reeves as White

**"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 fact that I can connect with the community about Ellen White brings me back in [to the community], and I appreciate it.*

PUC students Eryck Chairez and Zach Dunn to work on a script, and began production in the fall of 2006. By portraying Ellen White, Reeves truly met "Ellen" for the first time.

Yet "the play wasn't about Ellen White; it was about how a community relates to her," says the PUC alumna, who currently works in the college's chemistry department. Keeping with its goal to create dialogue, both within the production and outside the theatre, each cast member was originally supposed to portray the prophetess, lending their own interpretation of Ellen White to the script. This plan changed when the cast developed the play on a weekend retreat in the Sierras. Fore-shadowing her own impression of Ellen, Reeves realized she would be depicting Ellen—alone.

"The opening scene of the play, the Great Disappointment, impacted me the most," remembers Reeves. "That's where it hit me that I was doing something monumental." At the beginning of *Red Books*, the cast crowds together, looking to the ceiling for a heavenly future only they can imagine. "We're humming 'Shall We Gather at the River,' and one by

one, everyone leaves. [The stage is] left with me singing; I've never been comfortable singing alone," she says. She was struck by "the whole idea of being in the center of a group and having the whole group trickle away to leave you alone, very exposed." This theme threaded through the entire play. "There was this idea of solitude...I hadn't thought of her in [that] light before. When she started out [in her ministry], she was very, very alone," Reeves remembers.

Growing up in the predominantly Adventist community of Angwin, Reeves says that coming into the play, she "knew very little" about Ellen White. Though she frequently attended church at Elmshaven, and "once or twice toured her house on Glass Mountain Road," Reeves says, "I never really formed an opinion for or against her. I read very little of what she had written, just the first couple chapters of *The Great Controversy* as a student missionary, because it was in a storage cupboard with other Ellen writings." Among the DAS team, she wasn't alone in this understanding of Ellen White. "Everyone else in the *Red Books* cast pretty much knew nothing at all [about Ellen White]. The play was a process of discovering why that had happened."

Reeves explains part of the reason, gleaned from a presentation in the PUC Church Choir Room Sabbath School by PUC history professor, Dr. Paul McGraw. She shares McGraw's insights, first shared with her by Teo. "The generations alive with the prophet see her as enlightened; their children put the prophet on a pedestal and use her as a hammer to get their children to believe; and the fourth generation ignores her completely and knows nothing about the prophet." As part of the fourth generation, Reeves says, "Portraying Ellen White has changed my sympathy [toward her]. The idea of being alone, exposed, as a woman, as a prophet, and how much she had to struggle with how much people demanded of her as an individual...is one thing I can sympathize with her about. I understand where's she's coming

from, in terms of individual struggle.”

*Red Books* has also changed Reeves’s relationship with her community. “What struck me most is how much my portraying her has meant to the community I live in. People will stop me in random places and ask me questions about Ellen. It shows how much she is a part of the community here, and continually points out my lack of knowledge of her.” According to Reeves, this even happens in the PUC weight room, when “Ellen” is clad in workout clothes. “How can [they] see me the way I am right now and think of Ellen White?” Reeves wonders. Most often, people ask her how she managed to memorize “all those lines,” or they simply say thank you. Their appreciation is “often for unspecified reasons, whether for my portrayal of Ellen White or for the entire production.” Sometimes, she received more specific thanks: for “being involved in a production that helped [others], in some way, comprehend their own struggle, or heal their wounds” related to their past experiences with Adventism’s well-known prophetess.

Reeves’s role as Adventism’s prophetess is a connection point between her and the community. “The fact that I can connect with the community about Ellen White brings me back in [to the community], and I appreciate it,” she says. The grateful Reeves wants to leave her audience with two particular messages: “One, that Ellen was most definitely a human being, full of all of the faults and joys and complexities that any average human has. Second, just because we have different ideas about her and opinions toward her, toward everything she embodies, doesn’t mean we can’t get along, can’t have a healthy, open discussion about our opinions. And conversely, just because our generation has been raised differently doesn’t mean we should spoil it for someone else.”

Though Reeves isn’t sure how *Red Books* has personally changed her, portraying the prophetess has readjusted the spotlight on Ellen White—for herself and the audience. ■

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**The cast of *Red Books***