Earth: Theater of the Universe

DAN SHULTZ

Dan Shultz, emeritus professor of music, Walla Walla University, has researched and written extensively about Seventh-day Adventist music history and musicians. His publications include *A Great Tradition*–a history of music at Walla Walla University, and the *Adventist Musicians Biographical Resource*–an encyclopedia with biographies of over 1100 Adventist musicians. He founded the International Adventist Musicians Association, serving as its president for ten years and editing its publications and website for over thirty years. Shultz and his wife, Carolyn (nee Stevens), live in College Place, Washington.

Earth: Theater of the Universe was a multi-media presentation that used art, commentary, and music, to tell how Seventh-day Adventists view the biblical story of the plan of salvation, from the fall of Lucifer to the restoration of God's kingdom. The depiction of the Earth as the theater of the universe where the drama of the struggle between good and evil is unfolding can be found in 1 Corinthians 4:9, in early Protestant and Seventh-day Adventist evangelism (1858),[1] and in articles in SDA publications such as the *Signs of the Times* in 1930,[2] and *Ministry Magazine* in 1955.[3]

The presentation was created in the late 1960s and early 1970s by Richard Lange, an evangelist, who as early as the mid-1950s, while working as a minister in the Texico Conference, had envisioned a program that would vividly portray the story of salvation as it was unfolding on Earth.[4] When Lange became acquainted with Bill Wiley, a Christian businessperson who helped raise the funding for the project, the two combined their ideas and resources, and the concept began to become a reality.[5]

After the General Conference voted in 1972 to consolidate all its media in a Seventh-day Adventist Radio, TV and Film Center on the west coast,[6] ETU made a proposal to the GC the following year to become part of the new center and thereby expand the center's potential outreach and income. The idea was set aside because the ETU program was at that time a developing project and an unproven program. The GC Executive Committee action stated that the proposal "presents too many unresolved questions for us to become involved organizationally with it as a method of financing a portion of Center construction cost."[7]

ETU became a six-year, million-dollar project that included use of a 108-foot panorama of paintings by artist Lorenzo Ghiglieri of Portland, Oregon; a professional script based on research by Lange; and music composed and arranged by Loren Frost to maximize the impact of the presentation.[8] Appropriate materials were developed for promotion and distribution, including a book, *Earth: Theater of the Universe*, by W. Michael Duewel, done in cooperation with Lange and using illustrations from the panorama; and a quartet, The Faith Unlimited quartet, was formed.[9]

Frost later recalled, "As we worked on it, periodically we would go down to Whitney Studio in Glendale, California, to record the music. Looking back, it was a great experience. I was just a kid at that time and yet had

unlimited resources at my disposal. If I wanted a bass flute, I had it. Whether it was a special instrument like that or a full orchestra of forty, it was mine. I wrote eight songs, arranged two others written by another composer, and did all the background music. We used a music copyist and employed professional studio musicians at the recording sessions. It took two years to put the project together."[10]

The program was first presented in Portland, Oregon, in 1974 and then taken on a hugely successful tour of the United States. When, at the end of its first year, funding ended, the 19 computer-controlled-projectors, five large-screen programs, and six-channel stereo sound system continued to be used occasionally to present the original program. It was also simplified and reproduced in different ways, using three, five, and seven projectors.[11] These changes facilitated wide distribution and use in countless evangelistic meetings[12] and incorporation into Bible studies in the late 1970s through the end of the century.

In 1978 the original form of the program was presented in the Student Union Theater on the Baton Rouge campus of Louisiana State University. Publicity for this event included a display of the original art work in a mall and a cameo appearance of the Faith Unlimited Quartet on the Thursday before the weekend presentation. The program was given on Friday evening in the Angola Prison and performances were given on Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon to more than a thousand people, many of whom requested Bible studies and purchased large quantities of recordings and copies of the presentation book.

In 1980 a new printing of *Earth: Theater of the Universe* was released by *It Is Written* as Heritage II, the second in a series of books called the Heritage Library. It was offered along with a stereo narration on record or tape of the book by George Vandeman for a donation of $100.[13]

In 1984 a shortened 13-minute version produced by Martinsound studios of Alhambra, California, which used 20 projectors and a 30-foot screen, was shown at the New Orleans, Louisiana, World Fair. More than 120,000 people viewed it in a specially designed Adventist Living Water Theater. It was named one of the best religious exhibits at the fair.[14]

The Dempsey Center in Portland became the depository for the art work and offered showings of the program on a regularly scheduled basis during the late 1970s. *Theater of the Universe* and related products, including recordings, the book with that title, art work, and videos are now available on the internet.

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NOTES

1. "Selections," *ARH*, March 11, 1858, 130.
2. Varner J. Johns, "The World's History in Cartoons," *Signs of the Times*, August 26, 1930, 12-14.
3. J.A. Buckwalter, "Our Rendezvous With Destiny," *The Ministry*, September 1955, 5-8.
4. C. Elwyn Platner, "Theater of the Universe," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, July 4, 1977, 4, 5.
5. Ibid.
6. General Conference Committee Minutes, June 1972, 72-999, 72-1000.
7. General Conference Committee Minutes, 73-55.
8. Platner, 5, see endnote 4.
9. Ibid.; "Newsfront, Conference Combines Evangelistic Series and Camp Meeting," *ARH*, October 28, 1976, 23, 24; "New Group Cuts First Record," *The North Pacific Union Gleaner*, September 4, 1972, 18.
10. Loren Frost, interview by Dan Shultz, 2008.
11. Platner, 5, see endnote 4.
12. "Southwestern Union," *ARH*, March 11, 1976, 22; Dalores Broome Winget, "An adventure in faith," *ARH*, September 14, 1978, 4-6.
13. "New Heritage Library Offer," *Canadian Adventist Messenger*, January 24, 1980, 3.

14. Charles R. Beeler, “Adventists proclaim Christ at world’s fair in Louisiana,” *ARH*, August 30, 1984, 14, 15; “World’s Fair Evangelism,” *ARH*, April 11, 1985.

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