
Drama productions for Scripture Use¹

by Joyce Prettol

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In 1977, when we began work as a second team among the Ese Ejjas of Bolivia, our co-workers suggested we take over several responsibilities. One task that really appealed to us was recording Scripture on cassette tape. The Ese Ejjas are a nomadic river group and, therefore, learning to read in a school permanently based in a village was not feasible for many. As we began our search for readers who could read with expression, we found to our dismay that there was no one whose reading could hold the attention of a non-literate and often disinterested audience.

How can dramas be produced?

One of my colleagues in Bolivia, was facing a similar problem and suggested a solution she had tried successfully. Instead of reading the portion of Scripture verbatim, the story was dramatized. However, writing Biblical dramas for reading was not feasible either because of the same problem: reading is a personal skill and not for entertaining others. The idea of radio drama was good, but we had to use another process for producing them other than reading.

The way we did it was to take a Bible story (parable, miracle or New Testament incident) and write down the major characters and logical sequence of events (dividing them into “acts,” when necessary) and adding any needed “props” to fill out the drama and make it flow more easily. The next step was to choose the cast; knowing how to read was helpful but not necessary. We tried to fit them to the characters in the story as much as possible, but choosing the cast was sometimes difficult because some whom I thought would do well froze when they got in front of a microphone. We needed people who were willing to get into the action and ad lib. Before we went to the recording studio, we would talk about the story so they were very familiar with it. Next we would pass out props (having something tangible helped to keep them from getting stage fright) and begin to develop dialogue.

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Parable dramas

The first type of drama we tried was a parable. The parables, which are stories made up to teach a lesson, are a good place to start because they lend themselves to storytelling.

Anachronisms are acceptable because the purpose of a parable is to reach the listener and stimulate his interest. The first drama we did was the Prodigal Son. The action opened with the father eating breakfast, making lots of eating noises with an enamel dish and spoon. The first son walks in and sits down to eat. He makes small talk about what work there is to do—his attitude naturally is positive.

After establishing the first son's character in the conversation with his father, the second son walks in. His attitude is rebellious, complaining about the food, the work, and his lot in life. "What, only rice to eat—no meat?" "Why do I have to work in the field again?" and so forth. (Their suggestions on how they viewed the situation helped them feel involved and enjoy the storytelling.) One very helpful addition was to present a short application by one of the men, and to add the Bible reference at the end to make the connection between the story and reading. This made the drama more than pure entertainment and helped people to realize it came from the Word of God. Our aim was to impact them with the reality of the story and then encourage them to look it up and study it further.

Miracle dramas

In dealing with miracles, we wanted to be more precise than with parables. Many details are not specifically related in the Bible story, but are essential to making the story complete and understandable to the audience. For example, starting a story with a storm in the middle of the lake is not feasible; you need to get your characters out to the site. Another consideration is, Do the participants row, sail, or know anything about boats? We tried to make the story realistic without being incorrect. I found it best to read the Bible story, think it out logically, write it out in scenes, then check it with someone who could give good feedback about whether it is complete, but without taking undue liberties.

New Testament incident dramas

There are some stories, like the resurrection story, that we wanted to dramatize, but they had to be very exact. How could we tell the story and yet not introduce incidents that were not part of the text, thus raising questions about a very important real event? I decided to take the resurrection story as told by Matthew, with a few portions from John, as the basis for the drama.

We started with Chapter 28, using a narrator: "After Jesus finished speaking to the crowd He said to His disciples ..." (pause), then the character who is Jesus throughout the entire drama reads the words or even says them in his own words, if it flows more easily. (Jesus is the most important character, so choose the best performer.) The next scene is verse 3: the chief priests and elders are plotting, and Judas enters and makes his offer. (I omitted the unrelated story of the woman who anoints Jesus with perfume, thinking it would cause confusion.) The discussion with Judas can include such things as the question, "How do you know Him?", noise

of counting coins, and Judas concluding the scene by promising (verse 16) to look for a good opportunity to betray Jesus.

After a musical interlude (added later) the next scene follows (Matthew 26:17). The narrator reads, “Now on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying.... The disciples then ask, “Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover meal, Jesus?” Jesus responds directly, leaving out any narration. Verses like 19 that say, “Jesus directed them, and they prepared the Passover,” we turned into dialogue without any problem. I wish you could listen to the moving parts in the drama, like where Peter cuts off the ear of the soldier in the garden, or where the soldiers pound the nails into Jesus’ hands and Jesus groans in pain (we actually had hammer and nails and pounded them into a board to make it real), or the screams of fear of the women as they go to the grave and an earthquake strikes. At times it took encouragement and talking about a similar situation that they might have experienced to help them become convincing actors. Even if we had never finished the Easter story drama, the looks of understanding from the actors themselves, as they realized that this was a true-to-life happening, made it worthwhile!

Technical details

Because of the length of the story, there was no way we could rehearse all the scenes and record them all at once in the studio. Fortunately, we had a patient technician who allowed us trial runs and replays as necessary. It was slow going initially, but we finally finished recording the acting parts. Adding sound effects, such as footsteps, roosters crowing, earthquake tremors, and musical interludes, was important. Without them, the drama loses interest. I worked with the technician to make sure the sound effects were in the right places since he did not know the language—a small price to pay for putting the finishing touches on a powerful drama.

Conclusion

When I first started this project, several fellow workers questioned whether it was worth the time and effort. After seeing its impact on the people, I can report definite results. Those who were acting out the stories read, listened, and concentrated on what was in the Bible story. Having them ask, “Did they really put nails in Jesus’ hands?” is one of those times when you see them grasp the truth of Scripture.

Secondly, the attention of the audience was captured and listeners began to understand that the Bible stories are real and meaningful. Comments like, “Is that in the Bible?” were just the opening we desired for them to turn to the Bible and read it. The final decision of all of us on the team was that the cassette dramas were very effective and listened to repeatedly. This was Scripture Use from a unique angle.