

Not Your Average Action Hero

Willie Aames, once famous for his role on Eight Is Enough, now dons a cape and mask to play the Christian superhero known as Bibleman. Here's how he found faith while in Hollywood.

There once was a time not long ago in churches across America when children clad in rubber masks and flowing capes wielded colorful swords, swinging them back and forth through stage fog while chanting, "Bibleman, Bibleman."

Offstage, outfitted in purple spandex and foam-rubber muscles, the star kids were yearning to see—Willie "Bibleman" Aames—would gather with fellow cast members before the show started and pray for lives to be transformed and for people to make decisions for Christ.

For at least a night in those churches, pyrotechnics, stunts, sword battles, superheroes and villains replaced sermons, fellowship and worship.

"Whatever is good, whatever is righteous, we will stand strong against the evil of our adversary the devil!" Bibleman's voice would boom, jumpstarting the show.

The children, worked into a frenzy, would whoop and holler until Bibleman's evil nemesis, Spawndroth, ripped through one of the set's gigantic TV screens and unleashed a verbal assault against the pro-Bibleman audience. With the hero and the villain established, a classic battle between good and evil ensued.

"This show is all about obeying God," Aames has said. "But all of the elements that make the show so exciting are only a

springboard for pointing the audience toward Christ.”

Indeed. But no longer.

In 2000, more than 16,000 children and adults had made commitments to Christ at Bibleman’s Conquering the Wrath of Rage show. But last year the Breaking the Bonds of Disobedience live tour was postponed in the summer after Aames was injured. He had expected a half million people to see it.

Soon after, Bibleman’s entire fall promotional tour and his remaining concerts were canceled—according to Aames because of death threats. And now Bibleman’s official Web site states that the live shows have been dealt a financial—and potentially lethal—blow.

“It is with deep sadness that I must announce that the funding that has supported ‘Bibleman Live’ each year has come to an end,” writes Aames in a letter that begins, “A special now.”

He goes on to note that financial backing for the live shows came from one source, and the production had been allowed to incur losses each year because the show was very good at spreading Christ’s message of hope and love. But, his letter continues: “In short, there cannot be a ‘Bibleman Live’ tour this year.”

Though Aames promises in the letter to keep making Bibleman videos—10 have been made, and the latest, Lead Us Not Into Temptation, was released last December—it is questionable if the Christian action hero will ever return.

But, then again, Aames has seen and overcome greater obstacles in his life and career, a sign that Bibleman may again emerge from the swirling fog to herald good and terrorize evil.

Good vs. Evil

Aames, 41, has been entertaining people for more than 30 years. When he was 8 he landed his first role on a Phillips 66 TV commercial. Before that he was, in his own words, a short, unexceptional kid growing up in Southern California.

But when he discovered acting he also found the warmth of Hollywood's spotlight, which provided some of the attention and affirmation he desired. Soon after the commercial, guest appearances followed on several TV shows including *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* and *Gunsmoke*.

Although his childhood seems like it would have been the envy of every kid in America, Aames' formative years left him with memories he would rather forget.

"I was raised in a home that was very big into the occult," says Aames, who today attends a nondenominational church in Portland, Oregon, with his wife and daughter. "We were big on séances, Ouija boards, palmists and tarot cards. My family saw it as harmless."

Aames was fast becoming a steadily employed actor, yet he could not find happiness. "The only reason I became an actor is because I wanted to be accepted," Aames says. "I wanted to prove to the world that they had to deal with me."

That resolve fueled his career and addictions. Aames started abusing alcohol and drugs when he was 13.

From 1977-1981, he was a household name when he played Tommy Bradford, the troubled curly-haired teen on the nighttime TV drama *Eight Is Enough*. As the years wore on, he continued to be a familiar face on television, in the movies, and at parties in Hollywood and at the Playboy mansion.

His drugs of choice were Quaaludes, cocaine, psychedelic mushrooms and marijuana. His career kept chugging along, even though he had lost weight and became estranged from his parents. He joined a 12-step alcohol- and drug-rehabilitation program in the early 1980s, during the time when he was playing Buddy Lembeck on *Charles in Charge*.

In 1983, during his rehab, he met actress Maylo McCaslin on the set of a cable-TV show in which he was guest starring. McCaslin also was an addict.

As a child she had been sexually abused, and when she was 13 she had run away from home and lived among the prostitutes and drug abusers of Hollywood. Desperate to escape the streets, she had auditioned at a dance school and had been awarded a scholarship.

The pairing of Aames and McCaslin was destructive at first. "One week we were sober," Aames says. "The next, we were getting high."

But the alliance ultimately proved providential, as—sometimes for entertainment—Aames and McCaslin would cruise the streets of Los Angeles at night while listening to a pastor preach on

the radio. They eventually decided to attend the pastor's church.

Aames wore black leather and sunglasses to the church and, at the request of one of the church's ushers, reluctantly extinguished a cigarette dangling from his mouth before he entered the sanctuary. As they walked to their seats Aames says the couple "could feel that the people were just happy we were there."

During the service several people shared their testimonies. "These people had done all the things I had done, but they had hope," Aames says. "I had had everything this world could offer, but I had never had hope."

That day, Aames and McCaslin allowed Jesus to become their Savior. They began attending the church frequently and met with the pastor.

"He assured us we were new creatures in Christ. We both wept because we realized God was giving us a clean slate," Aames says. "But we realized there was a lot of physical, spiritual and emotional healing that was needed."

For Aames, part of that healing meant reconciling with his parents.

"After I got saved I realized my parents were not my problem," he says. "My problem was a spiritual problem. There was a spiritual battle being waged for my soul."

Many of those battles stemmed from his childhood memories.

“There is real power in the occult,” he says. “The memories it left me with could be dangerous because Satan tries to use those as a distraction with my walk with God. But Jesus Christ corrects all things and has nullified the sins of my past.”

Aames says overcoming the power of memories and drug addictions also is the work of the Holy Spirit: “I am Spirit-filled, and I believe in speaking in tongues. It’s scriptural. Sometimes our words are too clumsy to communicate with God.”

A Battle for Souls

It has been more than 15 years since Aames and McCaslin committed their lives to Christ. They married in 1986, and in 1990 they moved to Kansas City, Kansas, where Aames worked as a writer, producer and director.

There the Aameses attended a tiny church where they were “grounded in the Word,” he says. It also was there that Pamplin Entertainment, now based in Portland, Oregon, broached the idea of Bibleman.

“I thought Bibleman was the worst idea I had ever heard,” Aames says. “But after praying about it and seeking counsel from my pastor and Christian friends, I began to like the idea.”

Since its inception, Bibleman Live and Bibleman videos have evolved into high-energy productions with state-of-the-art special effects, but other hallmarks are the use of campy humor and sometimes corny dialogue. Yet couched in it all are serious matters.

"Bibleman has always been geared to presenting real-life dilemmas and real-life scenarios that kids can relate to," Aames said. "We then offer real answers by presenting God's Word, supported with chapter and verse."

Evangelist Franklin Graham has used Bibleman as part of several evangelistic outreaches. Steve Peterson, who works with Graham, says Bibleman is the alternative of choice for children and parents weary of secular superheroes.

"The show is pretty much all Scripture wrapped around special effects and a story line," he says. "Bibleman has been one of the most successful children's outreaches we have had."

Kids and parents seem to agree.

"Bibleman is cool, and he's also a Christian," says Natasha Turnure, 11, who has seen the Bibleman show at her church in Rocklin, California. "I learned that the bad guy never wins and that God will always help kids when they are going through hard times."

"We went to the Bibleman show to be entertained, but we knew it was going to be God-centered," says Chuck Hepola of Willard, Missouri. "The show opened doors for us to talk to our kids about spiritual things."

Although Aames' live show was effective at spreading the gospel, it was never financially practical. Each year it cost more than \$1 million to produce, and in 5-1/2 years of touring it never broke even.

One reason for this, Aames says, is that churches were charged a little more than \$5,000 for each show, and the price of Bibleman merchandise was never ratcheted up at the shows.

“We were born of the church, and we will remain of the church,” Aames says. “I want to remain accessible to the church because this is about ministry. As long as we can pay our bills and get the message out, then I think we are doing what God wants us to do.”

Whatever the reason for the funding being pulled from the live shows (Aames did not comment on the specifics and repeated calls by Charisma to Pamplin Entertainment were not returned), Bibleman fans will be left to wonder why their superhero has vanished and when and if he is ever coming back.

“I am not worthy of this kind of responsibility, but that’s the effect Bibleman has on kids,” Aames said last year about the number of children committing their lives to Christ at the shows. “I realize that it has nothing to do with me. It just makes me realize how good Jesus really is.”

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