

Oberammergau Passion Play

Back in 2000, Sharon and I were privileged to see the 40th performance of the Passion play in Oberammergau, Germany. Being that we are nearing the end of Lent, I thought this might an appropriate time to take a look at a few facts regarding this famous play.

Let's start out with a bit of history:

This passion play has been performed every 10 years, beginning in 1634. The participants have always been residents of Oberammergau. According to legend, an outbreak of bubonic plague began to devastate the state of Bavaria in the first part of the 1600's. The village of Oberammergau had been spared the plague because the villagers had kept a watch to prevent any outsiders from entering. However, in 1633, a man who had been away for the summer doing outside work, slipped undetected back into his home in the village. He soon died from the plague, and within a short time, there were many deaths within the town. On October 28, 1633, the remaining desperate villagers vowed that if God spared them from the plague, they would perform a play every 10 years depicting the life and death of Jesus. Nobody died of plague in Oberammergau after that vow, and the villagers kept their word to God by performing a passion play for the first time in 1634. Except for the 2020 production, which was ironically delayed because of our current pandemic, the play has only missed two performances; one in 1770 due to a church decree banning all passion plays, and again in 1940 due to the Second World War.

The Theater

The play was originally performed in local churches, but because of its popularity and large crowds, they became too small. The production was moved to a church graveyard, where it was performed near the graves of those who had died in the plague. That too became too small, and in the late 1800's, a dedicated structure was built. In 1990, the building was rebuilt with more modern stage mechanics, more comfortable seats, underground heating, and other improvements. The theater can now seat 4,700 people, which is about how many residents live in Oberammergau. The audience is seated within an enclosed dome, but the stage is open to the elements. The orchestra is hidden below the stage area, and therefore out of sight of the audience.

Production Facts

Today, about half a million visitors from around the world come to see the play, which is a five hour performance, plus a three hour intermission to allow for grabbing a meal. The year that we went, there were 109 performances between May and October, and all were sold out. Over the years, the performance has lasted for as many as 7 hours, but that was eventually trimmed back. When we went, the play began at 9 in the morning, and ended around 5. These hours changed with the 2010 performance, which began later in the day, and ended after dark. This made the lighting effects more dramatic, especially at the end of the play. There are over 2,500 performers, musicians and technicians, with 130 speaking roles. At times, there are as many as 1,500 performers on stage at once. There are 120 members in the choir. In addition, there are live animals such as horses, sheep, goats, donkeys, and doves present on the stage at appropriate times. The actors and musicians are chosen 18 months before

the opening. Two equally talented players are chosen for each of the 21 major parts. They alternate between performances, or substitute for one another if one gets sick. To participate in the play, you have to either have been born in Oberammergau, or have at least lived there for at least 20 years. The only exceptions are children, of which 450 participate. For one year before the opening, the men actors are bound by decree to allow their hair and beards to grow according to the hair and beard regulation. The villagers who are part of the play mostly have daytime jobs. When we went, we stayed in a guesthouse run by "Simon Peter." He would periodically get in his car dressed in his costume, and go to the theater in time to play his part. Then, he would return back to work until his next scheduled appearance. It was not uncommon to see people walking and driving around in biblical costumes throughout the day doing the same thing. About 18 months before the performance is scheduled to begin, the actors are finally chosen. This is a big occasion, and many from the village turn out to see who was chosen.

The Play

There are 13 acts. Each opens with a tableau, which is a still-life representation of an Old Testament story that foretells the action that is about to happen in the New Testament story. In each, there are elaborate stage-settings combined with live actors that remain completely motionless as the narrator explains the setting and its relationship to the following scene. These tableaux are always accompanied by choir and orchestra. In the opening tableaux for example, the scene depicts the Expulsion from Paradise. It is presented right before Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. The symbolism here is a warning that happiness will be only short-lived, both for Adam and Eve, and for Jesus himself. Some other tableaux examples are Jesus and the money changers, the Last Supper, Jesus before Pilate, the Way of the Cross, and of course, the resurrection.

Most of the people on stage are dressed in blue. The main characters are dressed in other colors, which focuses the viewer on them and also the story of the play itself.

The play is constantly being revised, and is never identical to previous versions. One of the biggest changes occurred after 1990, when the anti-Semitic nature of the script was changed. Before that, the Jews were implicated for the "murder" of Christ. This was done through subtle and not-so-subtle texts and actions, and these were firmly supported by Adolf Hitler. As an example, take the scene in which Jesus stands before Pilate. Originally, all of the Jews in the crowd were supportive of Jesus' execution. Now, we have a story in which there is turmoil among the Jews; some supported Jesus, and some did not. The changed scene depicts Jews who are screaming both in support of Jesus, and also against him. Another change made that year was that married women and women over 35 were now allowed to participate in the production.

The play is performed completely in German. However, a book is distributed to guests as they enter the theater which contains all of the words in English (or other languages as needed.) We were able to follow along using the book, but it really wasn't necessary because we knew the story already.

To conclude, I would just like to show a few screen shots of various parts of the play to give you a flavor of the production. If you want to see a 20 minute video on the play, there are several on YouTube. One is spoken in German with subtitles, and one is narrated in English.

1. Shows the crowd at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem
2. Another depiction of Jesus' entry
3. Jesus with the children
4. Chasing out the money changers
- 4a. Cleansing of the temple
5. The Last Supper
6. Jesus before Pilate
7. The crowd during Pilate's decree
8. Jesus' flogging
9. The way to the cross
10. Veronica wipes Jesus' brow
11. Jesus carrying his cross
12. The crucifixion scene
13. Another view of the crucifixion
14. And last, we have the resurrection and finale