

Historic Passion Play Being Given Again at Oberammergau

Winnetkan Pens Account of Performance as Presented in 1922

(Editor's Note: The Passion Play, an impressive dramatic performance representing the passion and death of Christ is being presented again this year by the people of Oberammergau, Bavaria, Germany. The following is an article written by Mrs. John Vennema of 849 Willow road, Winnetka, dealing with the inception and history of the production and giving an account of the 1922 performance. It is believed that it will be of special interest at this time.)

By Mrs. John Vennema

Situated some sixty miles from Munich on the Ammer river and snugly tucked in the Bavarian Alps is the little village of Oberammergau. It is here that the Passion Play is being presented again this year.

Before we visit this revered spot it is well to know a bit about the history of the Passion Play, how it came to be played there and why. The question of the morality of this type of play comes up, its good influence or evil (if any) upon the people there and elsewhere. Many people have stated that they would not care to see such a spectacle as the passion of Christ and incidents from our Bible acted after the manner of the presentation at Oberammergau. I had feelings akin to theirs before I went to see the play. I went out to that little town because it was the thing for travelers to do and a part of my program while in Eastern Europe that year. I have been thankful for having witnessed it, thankful that the privilege came to me, and I count it one of the big things of my life.

I cannot feel otherwise than that such a celebration of the passion of Christ as presented at Oberammergau is most reverent and inspiring, and leaves one with the feeling that those simple people lead holy lives. One comes away with a better understanding of events biblical, and spiritually uplifted, besides being deeply affected by it. The effect upon the visiting world must have been profound.

Those sincere, good Oberammergauers—some 685 in number, men, women, and children acting out the incidents in Christ's life, with the events and scenes from the Old Testament as well as the new in that masterful manner, amidst such settings that no painter, musician, or dramatist ever dreamed of, was indeed most eventful.

Tendency to Commercialization

In the future the play may be commercialized—of course it is the target toward which the transportation companies steer their travelers in those years when it is presented, but it was given successfully generations before there were such companies. Too, in the future there is the chance that the younger generations may not in the same spirit carry on the great event because of contact with the outside world. Who knows but that the World war may have affected the youth—with its bloodshed and hypocrisies to such an extent that their relations to the holy may be changed.

Along with the spread of education over Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries developed religion. It was the stimulus from which blossomed architecture, art, music, drama, and literature. The desire to present the Christian religion before the people was growing on every hand. It had to take some form, and so plays representing the Passion of our Lord,

Jesus, were very popular from about 1200 A. D., to 1700. What that meant then is identical with the meaning today—namely, the passing incidents or episodes in the increasing martyrdom of one man—The Christ.

Titus condemned to be crucified 30,000 Jews in and about Jerusalem forty or so years after Christ's crucifixion. Those men, too, must have had distracted mothers to mourn them—some Marys who swooned at their crosses. They were Jews—He was a Jew. Their self-sacrifice, because they were followers of Him, did not save even their names from oblivion. Why then did the death of one Jew—Jesus of Nazareth—transform the world? It was the Great Divine and Natural law behind all, that brought about the crucifixion of that one man. Civilizations and empires have gone down into oblivion, but the kingdom that Christ established has gone on. The light of civilization has followed where His teachings have endured.

Teachings Represented in Plays

These teachings in their humble way have been represented over the centuries in the form of plays—in their efforts to impress upon the heart of man that Divine story. There came into being then all that was distinctly Catholic. In its efforts to leave the pagan ideals behind and set before the world the great truth, the church at that time made understanding of the truth possible. That the people might see and comprehend, he taught by symbols, spoke through the eye as well as the ear; every human element of pathos, of tragedy, of awe, that would touch the heart or impress the imagination was used. As the light of the new religion went farther into distant places, away from Rome the tendency grew to represent all this too often in larger and coarse ways, often defeating the cause in its efforts to reach all the people. As one play failed, another was tried and in these various manners the story was presented. Then, as it is today, it was hard to find anything powerful enough to soften the hearts of the people or inspire imagination. However, symbols were found to be the most successful method of inciting meditation and of particularly impressing people with an idea.

Representations of the Passion Play occurred in Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, and England very early. None but the one at Oberammergau, Bavaria, has survived. The others became irreverent, insincere, and non-inspiring.

Posters Used at Early Date

One such early play attracted the people by great posters announcing "La Passion de N. L. Jesus Christ" with sensational pictures of clowns, harlequins, columbines and conjurers all accomplishing wonderful miracles. In Spain we read of one along the same nature and in Germany in such plays there were parts that created much hilarity.

However, the presentation of the Passion Play at Oberammergau became justified. That sincere little group of people developed it into a splendid and worthwhile spectacle.

It was in the year 1590 that the Bavarians of the Tyrol region were suffering from intense want and privation. Thirty years of war had reduced them to abject poverty and starvation and sickness were apparent on every hand. A pestilence, similar to the Black Death, swept through the country and people died by the scores.

Plague Strikes Oberammergau

The Ammergauers established a rigid quarantine at the outset of the plague and escaped its ravages for a time. Then a certain Casper Schuehler, who had been working in the stricken area, desired to see his family and evaded the quarantine. Carried by this means into the hitherto untouched community, the disease spread with terrible swiftness. Death struck with devastating force and the people gathered in consternation and fear to discuss their plight. They turned to God, offered up prayers of repentance, and as a pledge of their sincerity made a vow that in all humility they would perform the Passion of the Christ every ten years. They have tried to be faithful to that solemn obligation. They live in the spirit of it, and the performance is an act of worship.

Legendary accounts state that from that hour the plague was stayed. The play became a fixed institution, and has been given regularly since, with some

interruptions. In 1870 the then acting Christ was summoned from the cross. The play was brought to a close, and all the men hurried off to war. Those who saw that performance said that so remarkable a rendering of the Passion Play could never again be possible.

To Father Dalsenberger, a parish priest at Oberammergau, we are indebted for much that is best in modern version of the Passion Play. The gospel story as recounted in the New Testament is used. The Passion of Christ, given incident by incident, is done with the figures and prophesies of the Old Testament as a background. The narrative of the Passion is continually interspersed, or I might say illustrated, by scenes selected from the Old Testament, which preface the event next to be presented. A prologue introduced the tableaux, and in order to explain the meanings of these and to prepare the audience for the scenes to follow, there was an arrangement whereby the interludes were featured by a chorus singing heavenly music, the force and pathos of which lingers with one. The music, by the way, has never been published for the public. The play is given in German, but one follows the libretto, translated into one's language, easily.

Theater Unpretentious

The theater, then, with a seating capacity of four thousand, was most unpretentious. The stage, Greek in structure, was closed at the back. The house of Pontius Pilate was on one side, while at the other was the home of Evans. A closed portion of the center of the stage was used for the tableaux. The unroofed stage seemed to have remarkable acoustic properties. For a background, stood the low mountain peak with its cross, the Kopalkrag. This stage held 685 people.

There are no "Ritz" accommodations at Oberammergau. One is courteously received by the long haired players, and conducted to the simple, clean homes, where comfortable beds and good food are waiting. One does not expect too much. Only to be with these people two days, trying to grasp their conception of the meaning of that tenth year is enough!

The angelus rang, heads were lowered. Eventide came. The musical tinkling of bells told us the goats and cows were returning from the pastures on the mountain sides. People strolled through the shops where the handiwork of the villagers was sold. Later, lights were lowered, the curfew tolled, and the watchman called out the hours of the night.

In the morning at 6:30 o'clock all were up and on their way to the great cathedral where simple mass was said for the actors and for those who would prepare spiritually for the event. One saw about him the Christus (then Anton Lang) Mary, the mother, Mary Magdalene, Judas, and others, kneeling and praying.

Players Well Trained

The players were well trained, being coached from childhood for their parts. Rehearsals begin two years before the play, although minor religious and mystery plays were constantly being performed during intervals and between the years of the great event. The actors are always natives of the village, never outsiders, and are chosen by a committee of nineteen elected by the villagers. Six of these are officers of the village. In the year preceding the play this committee meets and appoints detailed committees, such as press, housing, transport, baggage, costumes, stage-theater, advertising, etc. The year I attended, there were thirty performances of the Passion Play at Oberammergau: three in May, six in June, nine in July, and five in August. The performers find the strain to great to do their parts much oftener. Fifty-six performers out of the 685 actors took leading roles. They spoke their parts distinctly and their acting was flawless. Of course, Anton Lang, the Christus in 1900, 1910 and 1921, was outstanding and inspired. John Zwink as Judas was perhaps the greatest actor of his time. It was he who actually had to be rescued from hanging himself in 1910—so deeply did he sustain his part. The work of Otalie Zwink, aged 30, as Mary the mother, Maria Mays, aged 27, as Mary Magdalene and Victoria Bauer, aged 18, as Martha, was outstanding. There is a tendency for the same parts to be played insofar as it is possible, each ten years, but time bears heavily on some, and this year Anton Lang retires after three performances—extending over a period of thirty years. He ceded his part to his son, Alois Lang, who will be the Christus for 1934. The part of Mary, the mother, must be sustained by a young woman, so it is seldom acted by the same person twice. This is also true of Mary Magdalene. Both are outstanding characters, and upon these fine actresses depends much of the success of the play.

In regard to the remuneration of the actors: The players receive two-thirds

Sportsman Show Has Diversified Program at Fair

The big International Motorboat and Sportsman show, which opened Saturday at the Travel and Transport building of the World's fair, is arousing much interest in Chicago and suburban communities. The show presents a most diversified program, including archery, rifle shooting, fly casting, and other sports, and offers a complete North American zoo, and life on the frontier exhibit. The exposition also seeks to interest neighborhood groups and young athletes in staging competitive sports affairs and pageants.

For instance, a contest in amateur boat building will be held soon, and there will be horseshoe pitching contests, marksmanship tests and archery meets. The management of the show wants to hear from interested organizations in the communities, this especially including boy and girl scout troops, camp fire girls, boys' clubs, high schools and neighborhood playground groups. Such groups have been advised to consult Al Faeh, contest manager of the Motorboat and Sportsman show, by addressing him at 11 S. LaSalle street, Chicago.

According to H. H. Shuart, general manager of the show, "every kid in Chicago" will be interested in the zoo, which includes mountain lions, pronged horn antelopes, black and brown bears, peccaries, badgers, quail, wild turkey and other beasts and fowl.

Display Relics of Old West

Texas Jack and Bronco John have arranged an amazingly interesting display of relics of the old west. Think of seeing, all at one time, Jesse James' saddle and chaps, Wild Bill Hickok's shooting irons and the pistol carried by Billy the Kid, as well as the biggest buffalo hide ever tanned.

There is an aquarium, too, at this sports show. Thousands of beautiful fish, natives of the Minnesota lakes, are in the swim there, displayed in specially prepared glass tanks.

Such celebrities as Art Young, world famous archer, and Chief Collier, great authority on fly casting, are on hand each day to show tricks of these sports.

Mounted Heads of Animals

There is also a gallery of mounted heads of wild beasts, such as rhino and other African kings of the jungle, and exhibits of camping life, fishing, hunting and other sports. The motor boats hold forth a thrill for all lovers of the lakes and sea.

The exposition occupies over 50,000 square feet of space in the Travel and Transport building and is enclosed by a picturesque stockade of wooden palings. A special low price of admission for youngsters should prove attractive to family parties and the entire show is of a wholesome nature.

Stephen Brooks, 835 Fifteenth street, left Sunday, accompanying Mr. and Mrs. Frank Adams, John and Valerie of Wilmette. They are motor-ing to California by way of the Grand Canyon, and will return by way of Seattle. They expect to be gone two months.

of the receipts, while one-third goes to the village. This two-thirds varies with relative importance of the players of various classes. Each member of each class receives a like amount. This includes chorus, actors, and musicians, and workers in general who help to make the play possible. The community's money is expended on improvements, thus adding to the comfort of visitors.