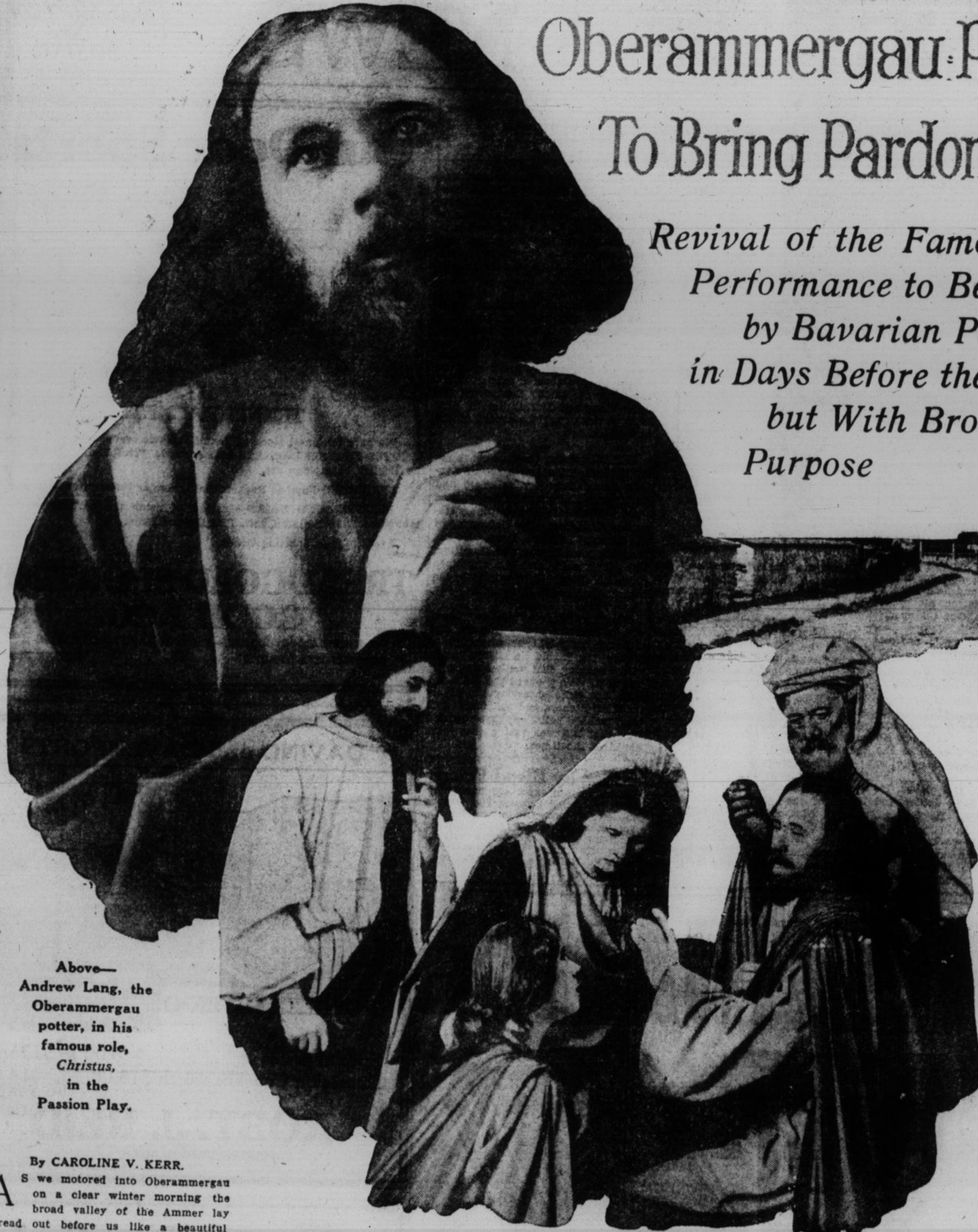


Oberammergau Players Hope To Bring Pardon to Germany

Revival of the Famous Passion
Performance to Be Staged
by Bavarian Peasants as
in Days Before the War,
but With Broader
Purpose



Above—
Andrew Lang, the
Oberammergau
potter, in his
famous role,
Christus,
in the
Passion Play.

Main street of Oberammergau, in southern Bavaria, where the Passion play will be revived this year. Houses are typical of lodgings furnished for visitors. At end of street is the open air theater. At left is a scene in costume from the Passion Play, all the actors being peasants.

By CAROLINE V. KERR.

As we motored into Oberammergau on a clear winter morning the broad valley of the Ammer lay spread out before us like a beautiful Christmas card. Hoar frost glistened on the alders along the stream, festoons of snow as soft as a feather boa were draped along the fences, and trees and houses were sharply silhouetted against the white background. From a distance the Kofelberg seemed like a hand raised in benediction over the little village nestling at its feet, and the metal covered cross on its summit threw back the rays of the sun as if a huge beacon light were flashing a welcome. Here stood, as we felt, the visible symbol of the Oberammergau Passion Play!

The first person we met in the village Main street was a gentle faced, long haired man, whom our Bavarian chauffeur told us was the "second Christ"—in other words, the understudy of Anton Lang, whose interpretation of the Christus has dominated the Passion Play for two decades. It is curious how the personality of this peasant-actor has impressed itself upon the international retina, as it was Lang's face, Lang's skill as a potter, Lang's hospitable home, which were ever in the foreground of the picture to the visitors from all parts of the world who thronged to this corner of Bavaria before the war.

I found Lang not at his potter's table, which would have served to strengthen the illusion of the humble carpenter whose life and passion he has been chosen to portray, but occupied with the more homely duties of shop and house. For while Lang is a well to do man, he has become so by manual labor and the added income derived from the Pension *Dahlein* so capably run by his wife.

I had just barely missed seeing him as he was about to start across the mountains to set up a new tile stove for the Benedictine monks in the Ettal. It was the brotherhood of this self-same monastery who initiated the Passion Play in 1634, with the village cemetery as a stage and the heavens as a setting. Then as now, it was conceived as a festival of thanksgiving after trials and tribulations. Famine and pestilence had crept stealthily over

the face of Europe in the wake of the Thirty Years' War, penetrating even to these remote mountain regions. Oberammergau was the only village in Bavaria to escape, and out of sheer gratitude the monks resolved to create here a modern Gethsemane; the crucified Christ was made the symbol of their faith, and it was no difficult matter to imbue the naive peasant folk with the belief that they were indeed a chosen people.

Lost Eighty in World War Out of 500 Who Went

Oberammergau did not fare so well in the late war, as 500 of her sons were called to the colors and eighty of these—by no means a negligible percentage when one remembers that the entire population numbers only 2,000—fell on the field of battle. Not only Death, but the sinister figure of Revolution stalked through the village and the new law of "what is yours is mine" necessitated the formation of a home militia.

These were dark days for the villagers and in desperation the Festival Theater was stripped of every accessory that could be utilized for the wounded soldiers and the suffering home population. Even the long strip of beautifully homespun linen, by the aid of which the "Descent from the Cross" had been given in 1910 with all the dramatic intensity of the Rubens canvas serving as the prototype for the stage picture, was sacrificed and used to make bandages for the hospitals. The stage tricolors and the hand dyed garments worn by the men and women of Palestine were cut into clothing for the destitute villagers.

As one of them told me, "this seemed of no consequence at the moment, as we were only concerned in throwing our mite into the sacrificial box of the Fatherland, and, moreover, no one of us thought that the time would so soon come when it would be possible to resume the festival."

Indeed, as I learned from Anton Lang, it was not without a great degree of trepidation that the village council resolved to embark upon what may be a problematical enterprise considered in terms of the fluctuating German mark. Not only has the theater itself—heretofore only partly cov-

ered—been at the mercy of winter snows and storms, but the scenery has depreciated, the stage properties decimated and a tremendous expenditure of money and labor will be required in putting the houses and high roads in condition after seven years filled with a devastating war and a still more devastating peace.

But determination to maintain the century old tradition and firm faith in a merciful future fill all minds with courage to resume the performances after a twelve years' pause. Moreover, the forthcoming festival solves the sinister problem of unemployment, as it means work and plenty of it for every one throughout the long winter months when the customary occupations of this agrarian community are suspended.

Carpenters, masons, road makers, scene painters, costumers are hard at work, and from the Town Hall, where the festival committee has its headquarters, innumerable threads go out to all parts of the little village, and further still into all parts of the world, answering inquiries and booking reservations for the thousands who have already announced their intention of participating in the festival, to extend from May 14 until September 24.

In 1910 the festival visitors numbered 270,000, of whom 120,000 were Americans, and it is natural that the eyes of all Oberammergau are again turned to the "dollar land" as the only country in a position to assure the financial success of the undertaking. It is expected that 50,000 Americans will attend the coming festival, and already 25,000 have applied for reservations.

Lang's thoughts seemed to be centered on the moral significance of the festival and one of the first things he said to me was:

"To us older men and women this year's Passion Play will assume a peculiar significance. We hope that it will be a Feast of Reconciliation! Not only our friends, but some of our late enemies as well, will come to Oberammergau to witness the most stirring tragedy the world has ever known—the fundamental thought of which is brotherly love and Christian forgiveness.

It seems to me that no one can fail to be moved by the thought of Christ's symbolic return to a world abandoned for years to the forces of evil, for there must be many persons in all countries who will agree with me in thinking that the war represented the triumph of evil over good, of darkness over light!"

This was said with an introspective look betokening deep feeling, and it was with a visible effort that he came back to the discussion of other phases of the festival.

"No outsider can fathom the significance we attach to participation in the Passion Play. It is a sort of bar sinister on the escutcheon of any family not to have been represented in some capacity, however humble, in an event which has made the name of our village known throughout the world. Knowing this, the village council exercises the greatest care and fairness in making the ensemble a representative one; indeed, we are inclined to regard such a distinction as *pour le merite* and to be prized far more highly than the nominal fee we receive for our services."

Fees Are Merely Nominal, But Village Benefits

These fees are in truth nominal, as no munificent sum remains for the participants after the total receipts are divided into three even parts—one-third going to the actors, another to the upkeep of the theater, *garderobe* and advertising, and the remaining third to public utilities, such as canalization, high roads, schools and the village church.

This year's surplus, should there be one, will be set aside for the utilitarian purpose of building a sadly needed modern slaughter house. Two of the most dreaded enemies of the little village are the two apparently harmless looking streams, the Laine and the Ammer, which flow along like liquid silver. Picturesque brooks we would call them, as they can scarcely be dignified with the names of rivers!—but at times they are capable of deluging the fields and wreaking untold havoc.

Returning to the question of salaries, Lang told me that before the war, the principals received the princely sum of 2,500

marks for a three months' season (during which time, it must be understood, every other means of gaining a livelihood is precluded!) the scale gradually diminishing until the minimum of 50 marks was reached, this sum being paid to the children taking part in the big processional scenes such as the entry of Christ into Jerusalem.

This analysis of the finances would seem to dispose effectually of the reproach frequently heard in former years, that the Oberammergau Passion Play was essentially a money making scheme. Lang naturally resented such an interpretation, asking, reasonably it seemed to me, how a little village like Oberammergau, solely dependent upon agricultural pursuits and the manual labor of the peasant population, could be expected to devote three of the most valuable months of the year to a festival unless reimbursed.

"Even Richard Wagner, despite his magnetic personality and large circle of influential friends, was forced to abandon the high-hearted plans he cherished for the realization of the Bayreuth idea, and the world is most assuredly less ripe for altruism and idealism than it was fifty years ago."

Village Barber Is Idle, As All Grow Beards

I could not find the least suggestion of pose or self-consciousness in the bearing of this simple man. His large, pale blue eyes look out upon the world with the gaze of a dreamer, and his sensitive mouth is framed in by the traditional beard of the Galileans—indeed, the entire male contingent of Oberammergau had long ago dispensed with the services of the village barber in readiness for the coming event. But his clothing and surroundings were disturbingly commonplace, and could it have been accomplished without homicidal intent, I should have liked to have carried his altogether satisfactory head off to some quiet corner and talked to it, without fear of harassing interruptions connected with "baking kilns," prices of pottery, and questions pertaining to the nursery, as his good wife happened to be having a day off.

I took up with Lang questions of a practical nature, one of them being the control of prices during the festival. Just how this is to be accomplished is as yet problematical, in view of the mercurial fluctuations of the mark. Assuming authority to speak for the great American public, I suggested that the prices for foreigners be based on international values, but if possible so estimated as to necessitate no material modifications, as the Americans would accept this arrangement if it were understood in advance, whereas they would be reasonably sure to resent any effort to juggle with prices after their arrival in Oberammergau.

The official bulletin has provided a loophole in this respect by stating that the committee reserves the right of altering the prices as a consequence of higher prices of all commodities that may arise before or during the festival. This committee is already passing sleepless nights trying to solve the problem, and their task is being made none the easier by the Germans, who are manifesting a natural uneasiness as to the reaction the influx of foreigners will have upon their own chances for participation in the festival. In fact, the Bavarian Chamber of Deputies has already been called upon to answer an interpellation as to what provision has been made

to feed and lodge the visitors, without imposing hardships upon the native population.

Before going over to the theater I asked Lang for the true story of his trip to the Holy Land and learned that in 1910 a wealthy American had offered to send him and that the offer had been joyfully accepted until Lang found out that he was to be made an advertisement for some American enterprise. But the thought of treading the soil of the Holy Land and visiting the scenes he had so long visualized in his imagination became a *idée fixe*, and three years later Lang and his wife made the trip at their own expense. What this meant to him is best expressed in his own words:

"My entire conception of the Passion of Christ was deepened and spiritualized and the words of the Christ which I have to speak have become a matter of inner soul experience."

Stage Largest in World, Scenery a Native Product

Even the unattended theater creates a deep impression. Spread out upon the seats lie the gigantic sketches for the new background and wings, a task which has been entrusted to a young Oberammergauer by the name of George Lang, as it has always been the policy of the committee to employ only the villagers for every phase of the work.

The stage, which is in the historic trip-tych form with the eternal hills as a background, is probably the largest in the world. From this vantage point one gains the best impression of the size of the auditorium, the acoustic of which is so perfect that a whispered word carries to the very back row.

To the right of the stage lay the cross, weighing 150 pounds, which must be carried for fifteen minutes on the way to Gethsemane, and that in a bowed position. Only a man whose muscles had been hardened by incessant work under winter snows, summer suns and mountain winds, would be capable of so strenuous a task.

This brought us to the question of the Crucifixion Scene, about which there has been so much discussion in years gone by. The Christ must remain fastened to the Cross for twenty minutes, during which time the blood cannot circulate freely. There is imminent danger of heart failure each time an actor essays this scene and one single false movement during the impressive Descent from the Cross, whereby the blood would rush to the head too suddenly, would cost him his life.

Zwinnick, who in his well-known role of Judas Iscariot had the reputation of being an incarnate traitor, whereas in reality he was the soul of amiability, will not be in the cast this year. He is now seventy years old, fifty of which have been identified with the Passion Play—twice as John, the beloved disciple, and three times as Judas. Zwinnick's daughter, who was the Mary of the 1910 festival, has since married, and as according to Oberammergau traditions all of the women's roles must be taken by virgins, is no longer eligible for the role.

One of the village tragedies occurred when Mary Magdalene realized her role in private life by giving birth to a child and was barred from participation in the festival.

Any one who has taken the trouble to search the minds of these peasants cannot fail to be impressed by their sincerity and genuine piety, and can only echo the wish that the "Christus Drama"—the name the Oberammergauers give to the Passion Play—may this year be a veritable Feast of Reconciliation!