

## Passion Play Over the Years

1631 - 1633

The continent was by then some nine years into the "Thirty Years War" and in 1631, the Protestant army of the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus had heavily defeated the Catholics at Breitenfeld and afterwards taking Wurzburg and Munich. Bavaria as a whole was being run over by gangs of looting soldiers who, being unpaid and underfed, went on a pillage thus helping to spread the disease, which claimed more than a million lives throughout Saxony and Bavaria alone. Oberammergau, whose geographical location in the mountains of Bavaria and accessible only in the summer months, had managed to keep the plague away. It was not until a woodcarver from the village who had been living away, was overcome by homesickness, plus a desire to attend the anniversary celebrations in his hometown, came back to town, unknowingly bringing with him the plague to his own people.

Within months, some 84 inhabitants had died. At the cemetery, plague victims swore an oath to portray the suffering and death of the Lord every 10 years. They erected a symbol of Christ on poles and crossbars which were done by the Oberammergau artist Hans Schwaighofer. From the day of the meeting at the church cemetery, there were no more recorded deaths from the plague.

1634

At Pentecost, the Oberammergauers first performed the "Play of the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ" (the first title of the Passion Play) on a stage constructed in the cemetery above the fresh graves of the plague victims. Expressions of sorrow were encouraged by the Catholic reform movement. Between 1600 and 1650, some 40 passion play sites were created in the Bavarian-Austrian region, with over 250 during the period between 1650 and 1900.

1662

Copy of the oldest existing Oberammergau Passion Play script is from 1662. A large portion of the 4502 verses came from older plays, which had already been compiled before 1634.

Passion Play Theater :: Oberammergau, Germany

Open Stage with Natural Background Seats 4800+

A Medieval passion play (2nd half of the 15th Century), manuscript was found in the Augsburg monastery of St. Ulrich and Alra and a passion "Tragedie" written in the reformation spirit in 1586 by the Augsburg master singer Sebastian Wild and was distributed in printed form.

1680

6th Passion Play year &ndash; the community voted to transfer the performances to the beginning of each decade.

1700

Beneficiate Thomas Ainhaus was the director and worked on an improvement of the rhymes. (8th year of performance)

1720

A document is found with preserved sections of a text revised by Fr. Karl Bader (1652 &ndash; 1731), a baroque theatrical tradition.

1730

A new version of the play was created by the Augustine Anselm Manhart (1680-1752) from Rottenbuch, which introduced the allegorical figures of Envy, Avarice, Death and Sin as Jesus's adversaries. From 1730-1760, the director was beneficiate Max Erlböck (1690-1770)

1750

13th Passion Play year. The Age of Reason contended that the holiest secrets of Christianity had no place on a theatrical stage.

The Oberammergauers sought to confront this contention with a new form. In the person of the Ettal Benedictine Ferdinand Rosner (1709-1778) they found a theatre man who was as articulate, as he was religious. The 8457 verses of his "Passio nova" pulled out all the stops of liturgical baroque theatre. Rosner's text gave Oberammergau the status of role model for other Passion Play sites and was widely distributed in the Bavaria.

1770

An application for special permission was rejected from residents of Oberammergau after Passion plays were prohibited in Bavaria.

Their petition pointed out that: "Over routes covering 20, 30 and more miles, from Bavaria, the Troll, Swabia and the Empire, as well as such cities as Munich, Fresing, Landshut, Innsbruck, Augsburg and other places, hastened not to limit simple citizens but also trades-people, persons of aristocratic character and scholars to witness this sacred performance&hellip;. which they did praise with all satisfaction, attending the same at all times with all seemingly personal satisfaction as they did hope to acquire.&rdquo; Beyond this, there were "no reasonable, childish and tasteless exhibitions or personages&rdquo;, and, first and foremost, the principal roles were played by men, "the same having travelled throughout all Europe, thus enabling theme to differentiate between those elements deemed simple-minded and repulsive in other places and those which are appropriate to such a sacred performance.&rdquo;

1780

15th Passion Play year. Oberammergau received a special privilege. The performance was a version by the Ettal Benedictine M. Knipfelberger (1747-1825), the title of which "The Old and New Testament&rdquo; avoided any reference to the subject matter of the Passion Play.

1811

As a result of Montgelas&rsquo; prohibition of these type performances in 1801 the Play was not given until 1811. Dr. Othmar Weis (1769-1843), priest of Ettal, a monk, submitted a new text. This text concentrated on the central idea of atonement and the gospels, removed the allegorical, mythological and legendary elements, introduced contemporary theology, prose style, realism and wordy, moralizing interpretations of the tableaux and reference to social conflicts. The Oberammergau teacher Rochus Dedler (1779-1822) composed the music.

1815

20th Passion Play year &ndash; special performances as thanks for the end of the Napoleonic wars. This year brought further extensive new versions of the text by Weis and the music by Rochus Dedler (continuing until 1820). The merchants and people&rsquo;s scenes were expanded (inter alia by the "Entry into Jerusalem&rdquo;). Portions were borrowed from the literature of the time. A new stage was created in the Empire style by beneficiate J.N. Unhoch (1762-1832) with flanked Annas and Pilate "Houses&rdquo; and side wings and new settings.

1830

22nd Passion Play year &ndash; Ludwig I granted permission for the play under the condition that the stage no longer be erected, as previously, over the cemetery. This is why the 1815 stage had been set up on a meadow on the northwestern edge of town. Its ground plan determined the structure of the Passion Play Theatre to the present day. 5,000 spectators could be accommodated in front of it. From 1830 to 1850 a romantic view of the play was discovered and widely publicized by S. Boisserée, G. Görres, I.F. Lentner, L. Staub, E. Devrient, M. Deutinger, J. Sepp and others. There were approximately 18,000 attendees this year.

1840

23rd Passion Play year &ndash; 35,000 people attended the play. The increase was attributable, among other things, to the enthusiastic reports of well-known attendees, who discovered and widely publicized their romantic view of the play: these included Sulpice, Boisserée, Guido Görres, Joseph Friedrich Lentner and Ludwig Staub.

1850

Alois Daisenberger (1799-1883), a parish priest in Oberammergau (1845 &ndash; 1883) became director and made some changes in the text in the memory of his teacher, J.M. Sailer. These changes were popular based on historical and dramatic work. An elected "Passion Play Committee" organized the performances. For the first time, reports of the play were published in French and English (prior publications were only in German).

Tobias Flunger :: 1850

(Oldest Passion Play Photo)

1860

In 1856, at the request of the German government and bearing in mind the 1850 critiques of versions by J.N.Sepps, among others, the director, Daisenberger, created a new version. He gave partiality to the Gospel of St. John and sought to emphasize the drama of the Passion instead of realism, humility and glorification and instead of the political and psychological aspects, such as the changes to the character Judas. He also based his work on ancient, classic tragedy as he stroved for a more popular appeal through the insertion of legends (Veronica, Ahasver); subject matter from the Stations of the Cross, such as Mary's encounter with Jesus; historical references to older Passion Play texts, (through a more touching approach, a symbolic use of language and simple symbols, such as the cross as a tree of life.

1870

The play was canceled because of the war and was continued in 1871.

1880

The numbers of people seeing the play are increase still. The growing signs of self-assertion by the Church in the struggle between it and the State under Bismarck appear stronger for this performance. It was also the first year that the costumes were made by the Munich Court Theatre.

1890

A new stage was constructed using the designs of C. Laufenschläger. (The houses on the side were separated, neo-Renaissance façade, technical modernization) and the seating was partially roofed over. Also new for this performance, the production was done in court theatre style with naturalistic-historical settings and costumes.

Jesus Christ and John :: Passion Play 1900

1922

31st Passion Play year &ndash; because of the aftermath of the war, the Passion Play was postponed for 2 years. The young sculptor Georg Johann Lang (1889-1968) was selected as director. An unexpected number of spectators came for this performance (311,127, app. 100,000 from other countries).

1930

32nd Passion Play year &ndash; 420,000 total spectators - G.J. Lang's new production is the first to use modern theatrical techniques. The simplicity and artistic concentration instead of décor, all interpretive means were subjected to a unified artistic concept, a very popular theatrical technique for the period. Prominent spectators at the 1930 Passion Play included Rabindranath Tagore, Henry Ford and Papal Nunzio Eugenio Pacelli, the later Pope Pius XII.

Georg J. Lang and his brother, architect Raimund Lang, replaced in the historical 1890 stage with a clear, ascetic, monumental new stage and enlarged the auditorium to 5,200 seats

1934

33rd Passion Play year was the 300th anniversary of the performance. With the addition of special anniversary performances, drastic lowering of admission fees and reduced price railroad tickets, over 440,000 spectators were in attendance. The new régime demanded that "Germany calls you!" be printed on the posters and sought to form the play ideologically into a "peasant drama" derived from the "consecrating power of the soil".

Hitler took advantage of Oberammergau's popularity by attending performances shortly before elections were held. The Catholic Church conferred the Missio canonica, an official allowance to teach, on Oberammergau. An attempt to commission Leo Weismantel (1885-1964) to revise the text failed following protests from conservative circles.

1950

The 34th Passion Play year had over 480,000 spectators. This Passion Play was marked by the horrors of the national catastrophe just concluded. The play was seen as an opportunity to display the other Germany with its western Christian tradition to the vast international audience returning after the war. In conjunction with the performances, there was an art exhibition entitled "1,000 Years of Christian Art in the Sign of the Passion". Among the visitors were Federal President Heuss, Chancellor Adenauer and the Bavarian Governor, Erhard Höchster. Representatives of the Allied powers, including General Eisenhower attended the Passion Play. Instead of the originally planned 33 performances, there were actually 87. Despite this increase in performances, thousands of people were unable to get in.

1970

35th Passion Play year &ndash; app. 500,000 spectators. Directing the play for the last time, G. J. Lang sought an author for a text more in keeping with the times, such as A.J. Lippi or A.M. Miller, without success, so the 1930 script was retained almost unaltered. Criticism was voiced on the part of both Christian and Jewish observers suggesting the play was anti-Semitic. Due to this uproar, the Abbot of Ettal, Dr. J. M. Höck, made some small corrections to the text.

1977

In 1975 the Oberammergau community commissioned Schwaighofer to stage a rehearsal of the Rosner text, the artist designed settings, masks and costumes. Alois Fink created a performance version, and composer Wolfgang Fortner produced new music. In 1977, there were eight special performances, which were positively received by the press and the public. In a referendum by the community of Oberammergau, however, the majority voted against Rosner's text for the 1980. The town council reversed this decision, and initially voted in favor of the new text, but a newly elected town council decided to use the Weiss-Daisenberger text for the 1980 play. Jewish organizations boycotted the play. Conservative forces felt confirmed in their attitude when ultimately over 530,000 spectators attended the production by director A. Preisinger (1912-1989), which largely continued the Lang staging.

1980

1980 brought in the 350th anniversary for the 38th Passion Play year, With over 530,000 spectators in attendance. Under the guidance of director Maier, some meaningful changes were made to both the text and the settings were made. For the first time, women were given active and passive voting rights in the election of the Passion Play Committee, however, the only women permitted to take part had to be unmarried citizens of Oberammergau under the age of 35.

1984

Jubilee performances. 1980/84 stage sets were redesigned by the director Hans Maier.

1990

39th Passion Play year. In 1990, the youngest director ever was selected: the 27-year-old sculptor Christian Stückl. In preparation a text commission under the leadership of Prof. Rudolf Presch sought answers for several issues raised by the Anti-Defamation League in the interest of avoiding accusations of anti-Semitism. The question of whether married, older women might participate was decided by the district court. The discussions of Stückl's production had meanwhile taken on dramatic proportions as his dismissal was barely prevented. A total of 480,000 spectators attended this year.

2000

The 40th Passion Play year had over 500,000 people in attendance with just over 2,200 people in the production. This year also got an interesting twist as the English-speaking visitors represent 50% of the attendees. For 2000 the village of Oberammergau gave Christian Stuckl the task of preparing a new production and also authorized new costumes and the graphics on the back stages were updated.

Professor Modl, the official Catholic advisor for Oberammergau, appointed by Cardinal Wetter, praised the new text&hellip;&rdquo;Wherever people are selfish or malicious, they behave as human beings who just happen to be Jewish. The evil characters as well as the virtuous ones are primarily human beings and only the Passion Play, members of the High Council who demand a fair trial for Jesus. In this way, the dangerous all-inclusive reproach that the evil Jews had crucified Jesus has been eliminated.&rdquo; It is important to emphasise that precisely because the Passion Play is based on the gospel, it is not a historic docudrama, but a play of faith.

2010

The 2010 Passion Play will be a historic year for Wilcox World Travel and Tours / American Express. We will be participating in operating tours to this spectacular performance for the 7th time, stretching back to our first year in 1960. Remember

this event only occurs once every decade. We certainly hope you join us and travel to Oberammergau for Passion Play 2010 for this remarkable experience. If you have any questions, we are happy to assist you with any of your travel needs. Call today Toll Free: (800) 294-5269