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THE PASSION PLAY AND ITS ACTORS

Unique Dramatic Event That Is Enacted In the Little Bavarian Village of Oberammergau Every Ten Years Because of a Vow Made During a Plague.

Peasants Chosen For Their Religious Devotion and Purity of Life Present the Piece—Three Years Spent In Preparing For the Present Production.

BY WALTON WILLIAMS.

THE Passion play of Oberammergau has become perhaps the most famous single dramatic event on earth. It is certainly the most unique. Acted by peasants, the chief of whose required qualifications are religious devotion and purity of life, its dramatic force is equal to that seen upon any stage, albeit occupied by the world's greatest actors.

The Passion play is presented every ten years, the theory being that it shall not be cheapened by frequency. Oberammergau is a little Bavarian village surrounded by mountains. It has not been modernized except in the necessary features of sewerage and sanitation. In all other respects it is now as it has been for centuries. The peasants who present the play are woodcarvers and farmers. The financial return given to each actor is most modest, scarcely sufficient to pay for the actual time given the play. Yet the chief ambition of each of these simple villagers is to be an actor in the "Passionspiel."

It was in 1633 that the plague swept Oberammergau, the harvest of death claiming one-fourth of the population. The survivors met and resolved that every ten years thereafter they would present the sacred scenes of the Passion, after which the plague was miraculously stayed. That is the story, and back of it is one even more touching and beautiful. One peasant had lost his wife and children and in the dejection that followed dreamed that he saw the Saviour. Then the outline of the cross appeared and a gentle voice spoke to him: "My son, are you weary? Are you heavy hearted? Do you weep? Remember my agony. I have endured more than thou."

Rushing to the church, the peasant rang the bell until all the villagers had gathered, whereupon he recounted his dream and proposed that the people enact the sorrows of the Master on every tenth year. The vow was taken then and there, and the plague speedily ended. All this is little more than legend. The one fact that is not legend is that the Passion play has been enacted every tenth year through the centuries that followed, the only exception being once when nearly all the ablebodied men in the village were absent in the wars.

Play Lasts All Day.

The play follows the Biblical narrative with great fidelity and has been adapted from time to time by the village priests. Every act is preceded by a tableau, usually taken from the Old Testament. There is also a chorus, the songs of which explain the tableaux. The play lasts all day, with two hours intermission at noon. It is scheduled to be presented twenty-nine times during the season, which runs from May till September. In case the spectators on any given day are more than can be accommodated in the theater, which seats over 4,000, the play is repeated on the following day. As this is liable to happen frequently the number of performances may reach to at least fifty during the summer. Indications are that greater crowds will visit Oberammergau than ever before, about three-fourths of them being Americans. The dates selected are as follows: May 16, 22, 29, June 5, 12, 19, 24, 29, July 3, 10, 17, 20, 24, 27, 31, Aug. 3, 7, 10, 14, 17, 21, 24, 28, 31, Sept. 4, 8, 11, 18, 22.

To insure getting a ticket to the performance it is necessary to order not only a seat, but lodging in advance. Those who take rooms in the village are the ones given the right to buy seats. To make sure one should arrive a day or two before time.

Until 1830 the play was given in the open fields. Then the theater was erected, but without a covering. In recent years it has been roofed over, but the stage is still open so that the scenes have a background of mountains. The surroundings, the theme and the acting are all impressive in the highest degree. Applause is never permitted. Perhaps the best conception of the play itself can be given by a synopsis:

Program of the Passion Play.

PROLOGUE BY LEADER OF CHORUS

Opening Tableau—(a) The banishment of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden.

(b) The adoration of the cross.

These tableaux place before the mind the two main facts of the drama of the Passion—the fall of man through sin and his redemption by the cross. They thus form a fitting introduction to the play.

THREE OF THE CHIEF ACTORS IN THE PASSION PLAY.

PART I.

Act 1—Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Act 2—The meeting of the high court of the Jews and the debate against Christ.

Tableau—The sons of Jacob conspire against their brother Joseph.

Fulfillment—The high priests take counsel how to bring Jesus into their power.

Act 3—Christ bids farewell to his mother in Bethany.

Tableau—(a) The youthful Tobias takes leave of his aged father and mother.

(b) The loving bride laments the absent bridegroom.

Fulfillment—Christ at Bethany. He is anointed by Magdalen, whereat Judas murmurs. Christ parts from his mother and friends at Bethany.

Act 4—The last journey to Jerusalem.

Tableau—King Ahasuerus dismisses Vashti and chooses Esther.

Fulfillment—Christ goes with the disciples again toward Jerusalem, weeps at the sight of the sinful city, sends two disciples to prepare in advance the Passover lamb. Judas conceives the idea of betraying his Master. The two disciples come to Jerusalem.

Act 5—The last supper.

Tableau—(a) The fall of the manna.

(b) The grapes carried back from the promised land.

Fulfillment—Jesus partakes of the last supper with his disciples, washes their feet, institutes the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and reveals the traitor.

Act 6—Treachery of Judas.

Tableau—The sons of Jacob sell their brother for twenty pieces of silver.

Fulfillment—Judas comes into the sanhedrin and promises to deliver his Master into the hands of the Pharisees for thirty silver pieces. The latter accept the traitor's offer and decide upon the death of Jesus.

Act 7—The agony in the garden and the betrayal.

Tableau—(a) Adam compelled to earn his bread by the bitter sweat of hard toil.

(b) Joab, pretending to give Amasa the kiss of friendship, stabs him with a dagger.

Fulfillment—The agony of Christ in the garden. Judas betrays him with a kiss. Christ is bound and led captive to the city.

At this point where the events of holy Thursday end, there is an intermission for rest and refreshment.

PART II

Act 8—Jesus before Annas.

Tableau—Micheas, the prophet, is smitten for telling Achab the truth.

Fulfillment—Jesus brought to Annas, in whose presence he is buffeted in the face.

Act 9—Jesus before Caiphas.

Tableau—(a) The innocent Naboth stoned to death on the testimony of false witnesses.

(b) The sufferings and patience of Job.

Fulfillment—Christ is led to Caiphas, tried by him and declared worthy of death. Judas full of remorse and of anguish. Christ is denied by Peter, reviled and maltreated by the servants.

Act 10—Despair of Judas.

Tableau—Cain, the murderer of his brother, tortured by conscience wanders over the face of the earth.

Fulfillment—The despair of Judas, the ratification of the sentence of death in the sanhedrin. Judas, filled with remorse, enters the council chamber, dashes the thirty pieces of silver at the feet of the members of the council and in agony of conscience hangs himself.

Act 11—Christ before Pilate

Tableau—Daniel, accused of impiety by the princes before King Darius, condemned and cast into the lions' den.

Fulfillment—Christ is led to Pilate, accused by the priests, declared innocent and sent to Herod.

Act 12—Jesus at the court of Herod

Tableau—Samson, brought to make sport before the princes of the Philistines, pulls down the temple upon them.

Fulfillment—Christ, after being mocked by the soldiers of Herod, is sent back to Pilate.

Act 13—The scourging at the pillar and crowning with thorns.

Tableau—(a) The blood besprinkled coat of Joseph is brought to Jacob.

(b) Abraham on Mount Moriah sees a ram entangled in a thorn bush.

Fulfillment—Christ is led again to Pilate. The latter's attempt to save the innocent fails, and he orders the Saviour to be scourged.

Act 14—Jesus condemned to be nailed to the cross

Tableau—(a) Joseph is presented to the people as their ruler.

(b) The scapegoat set free to wander in the wilderness.

Fulfillment—Pilate presents the scourged and thorn crowned Christ to the people. At their demand he frees Barabbas and while washing his hands delivers Christ to the rabble to be put to death.

PART III

Act 15—The sad journey to Calvary.

Tableau—(a) Isaac carrying wood for the sacrifice.

(b) Moses lifts up the brazen serpent in the wilderness.

Fulfillment—Christ, carrying the cross, is led to Golgotha. Simon of Cyrene is compelled by the soldiers to assist Christ in bearing his heavy weight. Our Lord falls three times. The women of Jerusalem weep over Jesus. Christ meets his heartbroken mother.

Act 16—Calvary.

No tableau, but a prologue by the members of the chorus, who now wear black garments over their white tunics.

The Scene—Jesus is fastened to the cross, which is raised. The seven last words. The arrangements made by the Jews to watch the grave. The taking down from the cross. The burial of the body of Jesus.

Act 17—The resurrection.

Act 18—The ascension and benediction of Christ.

The closing tableau represents the victorious entrance of Christ into heaven. The chorus bursts into a triumphant anthem.

In Preparation Three Years.

For three years the peasants of Oberammergau have been preparing for this summer's work. They look upon the play as a religious rite, and none is allowed to take part whose life has not been without reproach. The three years preceding the performances are looked upon as a period of consecration.

The selection of the peasants to enact the various roles is made on Dec. 6, the celebration of the feast of St. Nicholas. No higher honor does life hold for these peasants than to be chosen to enact the role of the Christus or the Virgin Mary. The role of Judas, which offers the finest acting opportunities in the whole play, is always a source of the deepest grief to the person chosen for the part. It is accepted, however, with the spirit that the actor will endeavor to make the scene of remorse so poignant that it will be a never to be forgotten object lesson to all who see it. The profits of the play are divided into four parts, the first part going to the poor, the second to defraying the expenses of the play, the third for the hospital, the school of design and other institutions of the village; the fourth is as an honorarium for the actors. A small surplus is also put aside for equal distribution among the villagers, so that all may share in the financial benefits of the celebration.

That the actors have not been overpaid in the past is shown by the fact that Joseph Mayer, who was the Christus in 1870, received only $160 and in 1890 only $187.50, while Gregor Lechner, whose Judas was the masterpiece at both performances, had only $25. Undoubtedly the actors will receive vastly more than these sums this year. And then, too, there will be thousands of dollars left in the town by tourists who will wish to stay there for several days to study the life of the peasants and to make the journey up the mountain Kopfel, familiarly termed Christus Kopf, or Christ Head. The peasants go up this mountain the day after the performance as pilgrims to touch the picturesque cross perched on the topmost point. There is a belief among the natives that if this cross falls it will be a visible symbol that the Passion drama shall be discontinued.

A New Madonna.

Necessarily ten years bring about many changes in the dramatis personae. Those who witnessed the Passion play in 1900 will recognize this year only three "holdovers." Johann Swink, Judas, whose daughter, Otelia, is to be the new Madonna; Anton Lang, Christus, who with his wife, soprano soloist in the cast of 1900, and their children, gives us a typical Oberammergau family, and Burgomaster Sebastian Baur, who will again represent Pontius Pilate. Sebastian Lang, the Caiaphas of 1900, has been assigned the role of the ex-high priest Annas.

Oberammergau lies forty-three miles southwest of Munich, which is in the far southeastern part of Germany. In a straight line Munich is scarcely 300 miles across the Austrian Tyrol from Venice. By rail it is a fourteen hour journey or so from Bremen, Hamburg or Rotterdam, a distance of about 500 miles.

Oberammergau is within easy motoring distance of Munich, but the fact that the Passion play begins at 8 in the morning will serve to discourage any but the most energetic automobilists from attempting the forty-three miles between breakfast time and the opening of the performance. There is to be an airship line, too, it is said, with a round trip fare of $175 a passenger. It's the first airship line regularly to be opened in the world, and the captain of the ship will be an officer from the aeronautic corps of the German army.

Arthur Aldis' Great Work

When Margaret Donovan married Arthur Aldis, she said, "My life is magnified this day above all my days," and for a year she believed it. Then came the awakening. Slowly it dawned on her that it was not her handsome, dreamy, good-tempered husband who was doing all the work on their farm, but her freckled, raw-boned brother Tom. The farm in the far west had been given to her as her wedding dower by her father, whose broad cattle ranch in the shadows of the Rockies, stretched for miles beyond her own land.

It was one summer when she was just back from her convent school in Denver that she had met Arthur Aldis, artist, litterateur and dreamer, who had come out to Colorado and Wyoming because of some slight tendency to delicacy of the lungs, and, loving him with all her heart, had married him. Two months later her father died, and his broad lands had passed to her eldest brother, Robert. Then, it was that Tom, the youngest son, and Margaret's favorite brother, had come to live with them, and gradually Arthur had handed over to him first one thing on the farm and then another, until, at the end of a year, Tom was doing practically all the work.

"He likes it," the optimistic dreamer told his wife, "and as for me, I can now have more time for my literary work." So he fitted out the most attractive room in the house as his "den," and proceeded to write magazine articles that brought him a slender pittance, which, had it not been for the farm, would have utterly failed to provide for them.

In five years the faithful Tom married, left for a home of his own and confronted with the necessity of assuming the reins of government, Aldis settled it to his own satisfaction. "Joe will look after everything," he said, "and he can report to me from time to time."

Joe, a farm hand, with the best of good will, but no executive ability scratched his head and looked at Margaret doubtfully as Aldis' graceful figure disappeared in the house, seeing which, Margaret smiled bravely. "It's all right, Joe," she said. "Go to the north field and start the boys ploughing it; then come to me."

In the years that followed, it was Margaret who became the dominant spirit, while Aldis continued to write and to assure himself and everyone else how well Joe did the work under his direction. In the meantime, had he not wisely abandoned writing for the magazines, and was he not engaged in a monumental work that would bring him fame and [illegible] nothing less than [illegible] "Interdependence of Literature" a book that was to astonish the world. Margaret did her best but her babies came fast, and sixteen years after her marriage she died leaving her husband to face life with their nine children, the eldest of whom was only fifteen.

It had pleased Aldis to give his children poetic names, and it was the eldest, a girl named Mona Lisa, to whom the dying woman recommended her own children. "You will do your best Mona—always love your father, and teach the others to love him; and have patience with Don and Vittoria, and be a mother to little Angelo." And Mona Lisa, her soft brown eyes wet with tears had promised, and then Margaret whose brave spirit had never admitted to anyone but herself that her handsome husband was a broken reed to lean upon, had folded her hands and receiving the last sacraments, died with a great peace, her sorely-tried spirit had long been a stranger to.

Three years passed and it was Twelfth Night, or the Eve of the Epiphany. The snow lay deep on the far western land, as Mona Lisa stood in the warm farm kitchen, preparing the midday meal. It was a lovely face that bent over the stove, the counterpart of Aldis. Three years of heavy responsibility and care had brought shadows to the girl's eyes, and at eighteen she looked over twenty. Nobly she had fulfilled her mother's trust, and all that she could do had been done, but the [illegible] finished, the farm was not half tilled or cultivated, and money grew more scarce every year. With a wisdom beyond her years she had decided to let other things go, and keep her brothers and sisters warm and well fed. Hence the furnishings of the house were in a more or less dilapidated and broken down condition; the roof, mended [illegible] the still faithful Joe, had periodical fits of leaking, and the [illegible] were all going to pieces; but around Mona Lisa's table were eight handsome [illegible] Aldis [illegible] ing to meals until they had dispersed.

The kitchen door was flung open, and with a whirl there entered Don and Vittoria, sworn allies, and the most high-spirited and turbulent of the flock. Mona Lisa lifted her delicate flushed face from the frying pan and smiled at the newcomers.

"Don," she said, "please take some fresh logs [illegible] Vittoria, would you [illegible] Angelo has awakened from his nap?"

Vittoria Colonna, a [illegible] handsome girl of thirteen, [illegible] ed and Donovan [illegible] armful of logs [illegible] down the passage [illegible] father's [illegible] in five minutes.

[illegible]

A little [illegible] Mona's forehead [illegible]

[illegible] Twelfth Night. It was a [illegible] Aldis had [illegible] some parts of Germany [illegible] France, and [illegible]

[illegible] work he would take [illegible] himself.

Looking at the [illegible] around [illegible] Mona Lisa [illegible] "I have not much money," [illegible] said, "but I have a plan." [illegible] proceeded to unfold it. [illegible] midst of great clapping of [illegible] the door was opened, and [illegible] entered a stout comfortable [illegible] ing woman, followed by a [illegible] haired manly young man.

"Ach Je!" said the [illegible] "I want you, meine [illegible] Blume. It is to the town [illegible] go, mit meinem Fritz. Is [illegible] mein Engelein?"

Mona Lisa's face was [illegible] "How good you are, [illegible] Harter," she said. "I was wishing I could go [illegible] preparation for tomorrow. [illegible] is so much to do, and [illegible] time in which to do it."

"So," was the [illegible] up warm, mein [illegible] standing around [illegible] bright eager faces [illegible] for just one more [illegible] next to mein Fritz. [illegible] two-year-old Stephen [illegible] to restrain his [illegible] jumped up, and tripped [illegible] outstretched [illegible] landed right in [illegible] comfortable lap. [illegible] arrived in so previous [illegible] Stephen it should be [illegible] minutes later he was [illegible] under warm carriage robes, while Mona Lisa [illegible]