

IN REVIEW

Passion play books won't decorate his coffee table

The Passion Play 2000: Oberammergau, edited by the Community of Oberammergau, with contributions by Otto Huber and Christian Stuckl, Prestel, 160 pages, \$25.

The Story of Christ's Passion: A Tale for Children, by Anja-Sochia Henle, Prestel, 29 pages, \$14.95.

Reviewed by Charlie McKay
Guest contributor

They say that timing is everything. It is a sad commentary for these books that their publication is somewhat untimely, vis-à-vis ongoing Holocaust controversy. A great deal of recent antisemitic discussion has revolved around Pius XII's role in WWII, and what he did or didn't do to save the Jews. And the Oberammergau Passion Play itself continues to draw criticism for its portrayal of Jews, despite some changes. However, *The Passion Play 2000* boldly states in the first few pages, "Millions of Jews — the people who shared the faith of Jesus — died in the twentieth century. They had to die because the church, and yes, the Passion play for centuries sowed the seeds of anti-semitism, of Jew-hating. The Nazis harvested a well-fertilized field."

The Oberammergau Passion Play, dramatizing Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, dates from 1634, when the people of Oberammergau, Germany, staged it in gratitude for surviving the plague. It is generally performed every 10 years, including this year.

The book gives a disclaimer that the plays continue to be performed because of lack of moral values in today's society, and "... at a time when more and more Christians are renouncing both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches,



Reuters/CNS
Martin Norz plays Jesus Christ during a rehearsal of the famous passion play in Oberammergau, Germany.

at least in Europe." The reason for the performances is no longer the Black Plague, but apparently continuing gratitude for graces.

The first 20 pages or so are devoted to mechanics on the organizing and performing of the play. The rest of the text and Scripture, based on Luke's Gospel, are accompanied by photos taken during the 2000 year performance of the play.

Most of the photos, too many in fact, strive for chiaroscuro, or a Rembrandt-like posturing of Jesus in a central, lightened or lit arena, against a black, unlit background. All in all, both the children's book and the one for adults suffer from this contrived artistic technique; the

scenes are too lugubrious for words.

The covers of the books should have been reversed, since the adult version shows a smiling Jesus, while the children's book shows a Jesus with a puzzled look, with three boys, I presume, dancing around him as though they were sprites from Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

The children's version is subtitled, "A Tale for Children," and this is misleading, since "tale" implies more myth than story. The children's text, too, is more written in the language of adults than for children, abounding in Latinisms, like the words "exhausted," "deterred," "visionary," "condemned," etc. Most parents, I feel, would be repelled or repulsed by the gruesome, realistic and bloody photos that end the Passion

story.

Thus, the children's version is much too cluttered in photography and text, and should have been much more simplified and more appealing to children, showing Jesus less aggressive, as in the Temple scenes, and more approachable.

The language and the photos hardly change between the adult version and the children's version.

The ostensible reason for the appearance of both books at this time is the end of the millennium.

The play has become a multicultural event for Oberammergau, with Muslims, Protestants and Catholics all taking part. There are thousands of adults, and 550 children involved.

The play is accompanied by music, which originally was Baroque, and there is thought being given to returning to such music, in contrast to music that has proved too avant-garde or innovative. Big name composers have been incorporated, from Wagner to Carl Orff. But there has been a striving to return to tradition, with performances based on Daisenberger's script of 1860.

It would be interesting to hear the music as the play is performed, which of course is precluded in the print genre.

I believe these Passion play books were meant to decorate our coffee tables, and in that, they have failed. I would never place the children's version on my coffee table, nor deem it appropriate for most children.

I am enticed, however, to delve into the history and possibly attend a future Passion play at Oberammergau, based on the adult book. And I would like to share the insights with someone who has attended a performance — maybe over a cup of coffee.

Charlie McKay is a retired teacher and resides in Rochester.

Jewish leaders assert shift in Jewish-Christian relations

BALTIMORE (CNS) — "We welcome you if you want tonight to join a revolution," Jewish scholar Peter W. Ochs told about 800 Jews and interested Christians Sept. 11 at Chizuk Amuno Congregation.

The "revolution" he referred to was the call for Jews to adopt a new attitude toward Christians, which he and three other scholars published the day before in full-page ads in *The New York Times* and *The (Baltimore) Sun*. Nearly 170 other Jewish leaders also signed the statement.

In sessions with rabbis from the Washington-Baltimore-Philadelphia area and with the general public, the scholars discussed the statement, which outlines seven key points as areas where the scholars seek a new Jewish understanding of Christians and Christianity.

The statement asserts that in recent years there has been "a dramatic and unprecedented shift in Jewish and Christian relations." It says the changed attitude of Christians and Christian churches toward Jews and Judaism calls for Jews to undertake a similar re-evaluation of their understanding of Christianity and Christians.

It declares that Jews and Christians "worship the same God," "seek authority from the same book — the Bible," and "accept the moral principles of the Torah."

Eugene Fisher, the U.S. Catholic bishops' director of religious relations with the Jews, agreed. He told Catholic News Service, "This is historic. It does break new ground in a lot of ways."

"I hope it will receive a lot of intense reflection in the Jewish community."

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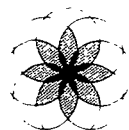


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