

Oberammergau 2022

'Excuse me please' 'Entschuldigung bitte', 'ting-a-ling' 'may we please come through? We have to prepare your dinners!' As we filed out of the huge theatre at the end of the afternoon performance of the Passion Play, so the members of the cast, the choir and the orchestra tried to make their way on their bicycles through the crowds of spectators to get back to their day-jobs of cooks, waiters and hospitality. And there was a strict time limit, everyone needed to be fed, watered, checked back through security and back in their seats (or in their costumes) again within three hours for the 8.00 evening performance, the 2nd half of the Passion Play.

Every ten years the tiny village of Oberammergau in Bavaria in Southern Germany devotes itself to a production of the Passion Play. Back in 1632, the bubonic plague was sweeping across Europe, and when the plague hit the tiny village of Oberammergau some 80 lives were lost. Panicked, the leaders of the village met in the church and standing in front of the crucifix which still stands today, they made a vow to perform the Passion Play every ten years, and thereafter no more lives were lost to the plague. With a few exceptions due to wars and Covid, they have managed to fulfil their promise and the 2022 production (rescheduled from 2020) is the 42nd season.

Oberammergau is a pretty picture-postcard Bavarian village with alpine-style buildings, glorious geraniums spilling over the window boxes, and beautiful frescos painted on the outsides of the houses. People come from all over the world to see the play, some as part of a deeply emotional pilgrimage and others purely as tourists. The theatre seats 4,500 people and every performance, five days a week from mid-May to the start of October is a sell-out. Most of the spectators spend one night in the village either in the small family-run hotels or housed with local residents in their homes. Check-out time is a strict 10am as rooms must be cleaned ready for the next influx around 12 noon, for the performance that afternoon. It is an enormous feat of organisation and provides much income and many extra jobs for the season in the provision of food for so many people, the laundry, and the transport, to name but a few.



But it represents so much more than this to the inhabitants. It is an honour and a point of pride to be involved with the play. To qualify for a role in the play you must have been born in the village, or have lived there at least eight years, and many take part in several plays over their lives. The youngest this year was a three-week old baby in the crowd scenes, and the oldest was 93, and this was his 7th play. Our hotel was owned by the man playing Pontius Pilate, his son was the head chef in our kitchen and was the disciple John, and the 15-year-old son of our local agent was thrilled to be a clarinettist in the orchestra. It is an enormous honour to be given one of the 20 main parts, for which two people are cast and alternate their performances. Roles are allocated two years ahead of production as the



men must grow their hair and their beards, and lengthy scripts must be memorised. Set design, costumes and sound and light are adjusted from one production to the next. The music is unique to the play and is never performed anywhere else. Indeed, after each production, the scores are locked away until rehearsals start for the next one. The singers are all from the village, even the soloists, and the members of the orchestra similarly all

have their roots in the village although they may now be members of prestigious orchestras around the world.

Profits from the staging of the play are significant and are channelled into charitable foundations to support local projects which can range from civic ones to personal ones. Any young people of the village who go on to university will have their fees paid, and the young 15-year-old clarinettist will receive a full scholarship at music college. In addition, this year 20% of the profits from the sale of merchandise (t-shirts, etc) will go to the Ukraine appeal.

The story of the play starts just before Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday and finishes with the resurrection from the tomb on Easter Sunday. The crowd scenes such as Jesus turning over the tables in the temple, and the Barabbas scene on Good Friday are violent and dramatic, with huge numbers on stage including little children, horses, cows, donkey, doves and camels. The quieter scenes such as Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane are powerful and moving. The moment when Jesus' body is gently taken down from the cross by his friends using the linen fabric is utterly poignant and very emotional.



Although the main action of the play is sequential and follows the events of Holy Week, a feature of the Passion Play is the use of 'Tableaux vivants' (or living images). Here the main action is paused, and a still 'tableau' appears in the centre of the stage, where the actors stand motionless and hold their positions for several minutes. These tableaux represent various episodes from the Old Testament and encourage the audience to see how similar Jesus' story is to those earlier in Israel's history. They are a visual treat with vibrant lighting and colourful costumes and the effect is a breath-taking contrast to the main story where the colours and the costumes are much more neutral.

Directors are free to take a slightly different approach with each production, and this year the focus was particularly on Caiaphas and Judas. The play highlights the pressure put on Caiaphas by the other high priests to do something to get rid of Jesus. Whilst lobbying for Jesus' death, Caiaphas seeks to remove himself from the actual decision by handing it over to Pilate. Caiaphas' weakness contrasts with the strength of character shown by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who support Jesus' case throughout, despite being very much in the minority.

In contrast to Caiaphas, Judas who features prominently in this production is portrayed more sympathetically. Initially a rather headstrong disciple of Jesus, he grows more disillusioned when the truth about Jesus' kingship becomes apparent. Judas had been seeking a radical leader who would take the fight to the Romans in a very traditional way, and he had misunderstood the nature of Jesus' kingdom. Judas' betrayal is portrayed as a manipulation of him by the high priests and afterwards he is filled with remorse and takes his own life.

Whilst the characters of Caiaphas and Judas loom large, especially in the second half of the play, the Resurrection Story merited only about five minutes in a play lasting five hours. This was our one big disappointment, not least because we felt it would leave many non-Christians attending the play very confused about the essential message of the Passion Play. Apparently in previous productions, the emphasis has been different, and the Resurrection has had much more prominence. Nonetheless, the play is an astonishing portrayal of the final days of Christ's life and the power of the narrative, the music and the visual imagery is unforgettable.



We were there as part of a pilgrimage with former parishioners Jeff and Gary, with a group of people including members of Fr. Jeff's last parish of St John's Waterloo, and his current parish in West Cornwall, plus a few extras. We spent the other six nights of our trip just across the border in the Austrian Tyrol where we toured the local area including

Stams Abbey and the city of Innsbruck. We enjoyed several Eucharist services in the pretty local village church as well as another in a stunningly beautiful pilgrimage church high up in the mountains. Fr. Jeff had deliberately planned our theatre trip in the middle of our week, so that we could have time to build up to it as a group and then reflect upon it together afterwards. We all felt that the huge audiences for the play, of people from all around the world, are a testament to the enduring appeal of the greatest story ever told.

Jill and Nigel Lewis