

Oberammergau Passion Play

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History repeats itself - or does it? There were moments in the past year and a half when anyone familiar with the chronicle of the Oberammergau Passion Play briefly caught their breath.

First of all, there was the coincidence that exactly one hundred years earlier the Play had already been cancelled and postponed for two years. The culprits were the Spanish flu in 1920 and the losses of the First World War. Many performers and musicians had been seriously wounded or killed in action.

And then, of course: the pre-history of almost 400 years of Passion Play. The epidemic that ravaged the country in 1633, in the midst of the Thirty Years' War. The burning plague fires and the fear. The small village that was able to seal itself off from the "Black Death" just long enough until - so the legend goes - an infected day labourer in quarantine was seized by longing for his family. 84 people died. The pious vow to perform a *Play of the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ* every ten years from then on was to save the community from further plague deaths. To this day, the same vow is solemnly renewed at the same rhythm.

Also in 1870 the Passion Play could not take place: On July 17, the prologue speaker on stage announced the war against France, and the 26th Play was cancelled after only one performance. It is one of the most curious stories surrounding the Oberammergau Passion Play that as a result, the Jesus actor Josef Mayr was given permission to complete his wartime mission with long hair. An exception with most pleasant consequences: For when the performances could already be continued the following year, a kind of star cult developed around the actor with the flowing curls. In September, King Ludwig II attended a separate performance. Two days later - so the story goes - he received Mayr and „his apostles“ enthusiastically at Linderhof Palace. He presented "Jesus" and eleven "disciples" each with a silver spoon and "Judas" with a tin one.

It is not only on the basis of such anecdotes that it becomes clear how inseparably the "hair and beard decree" on Ash Wednesday in the year before the Passion Play belongs to it. Just this old custom stands for the anticipation in Oberammergau. With hair and beards also grows the excitement, the tension, the cohesion in the village.



Photo: Birgit Gudjonsdottir



Photo: Gabriela Neeb

Experiencing instead of remembering

"How does 'memory work' work? In the context of the 'Third Reich,' that's a very difficult word. Very early on, at the age of 15, 16, 17, I understood: Christian anti-Semitism is a topic that our fathers and grandfathers completely ignore. There was a coming to terms with it in Germany, but we were the first generation that was so distant that it could deal with it more freely. But: I don't remember, I can't remember, because there is no memory in me. Even the plague is not a personal memory. The plague as an experience does not exist for us. It's something historical that every child learns - you know it, but you don't associate anything with it.

The interesting thing is that we have carried anti-Semitism with us for ages. The confrontation remains and is important, even after 35 years as a Play director, I'm not done with it and society is not done with it. It is all the more important to speak out clearly again and again and to say: I am on the side of the people who want to deal with it.

For us in the directing team of the Passion Play, it quickly became clear that confrontation must not arise out of compulsion. We went to Israel with the main performers, singers and musicians and tried for three, now four Passions Plays to get to know and experience Judaism in this direct way.

My view of the Passion Play has changed completely in the last seven years: I have deleted almost all of the religious rule violations that Jesus is accused of and that have been used again and again over the centuries to tell why the Jews would have killed him - unless it becomes quite clear what Jesus wants to achieve with them.

Already for 2020 it was important for us to make it even more visible that Jesus goes to the margins of society and cares for those who are marginalized. Jesus is with the sick, with the strangers - he does not care about hierarchy. Showing this becomes all the more urgent now.

Since Covid-19 has entered our lives, everyone is crying out for democracy. One has the feeling that the restriction of personal rights has become more important than solidarity with one another. We see that suddenly the police are being attacked, that there are demonstrations, that people are shouting at each other, that racism and anti-Semitism are coming up again. We talk about pandemics and disease, but I don't see anyone turning back to religion. So I ask myself: How do you sharpen the Passion Play once again so that it deals more strongly with the questions of our time?

Actually, something is happening all the time that could be taken into the Play. And vice versa: all the problems we have today also already occur in the Passion story."

Christian Stückl

Before the Play

As the hair of the performers grows,
so does the anticipation for the 42nd Passion Play in 2022

Not losing faith. What sounds quite natural in view of a pious tradition preserved for centuries and the story told through it, the turmoil of the Covid-19 pandemic initially called into question for many months. It was not God, but an insurance policy taken out for the first time

for the Passion Play, which - as strange as it sounds in a historical context - includes epidemics, that saved the theatre from the worst in March 2020.

And now? History repeats itself. In a positive sense. Now hair is growing again

in the Ammer Valley. Now costumes are being fitted again, sets are being built, texts and notes are being rehearsed. Now visitor requests arrive again from all over the world, from India or the USA. Now the task is to take our own history as a model, to draw creativity

from the crisis and to recreate the fascination of the Oberammergau spectacle once again. In order to celebrate together with the audience at the 42nd *Play of the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ* also the own life - with or without beard.

Committed

With new energy:
the Passion Play's
directing team
in an interview

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Enthusiastic

They all came
to the village:
theatre guests
of distinction

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Directly

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Connected

Jesus and the whole
world: The first
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“The role is about inner conflict”

An interview with the two Jesus actors of the 2022 Passion Play

Anticipatory excitement in Oberammergau. If things go according to us, we will play. Frederik Mayet (41), one of the two Jesus actors along with Rochus Rückel (25), is also full of conviction that the 2022 Passion Play will take place. “That open-air theatre can work has already been seen this summer at the Salzburg and Bregenz festivals.”

Do you see the stage rehearsals that are now beginning as a revival or a new start?

RR: As a new start. You also change, you’re at a different point in life than you were two years ago. That’s why this is now another Passion Play - the second one I’m involved in as a Jesus actor, and the third for Frederik. (Laughs.)

FM: I haven’t had the textbook in my hand since March 2020. Maybe it’s still kind of stored in my head, but basically you’re starting over now with different experiences. I think we all feel that way.

RR: “There is a time of fear in Israel, war cries fill the land, poverty and disease ravage you, and you hunger and thirst for justice” - I just rattled that through last time. Probably this time I will perceive some sentences quite differently, emphasize them more, think about them differently.

With the experience of the 2019/20 rehearsal period behind you: Which scenes are the most challenging?

RR: In the expulsion of the merchants from the temple, ranting and plain speaking is less difficult. But in the scenes that are more inward, Jesus is much more difficult to play.

FM: Yes, in the first part Jesus is quick-witted and not at a loss for an answer. When he then simply remains silent in front of Herod in the second part, for example, it’s totally difficult to bear. Nevertheless, he has to radiate dignity and strength.

RR: At the end, there is simply a lot of sadness, and doubts arise in him as well. The role is about inner conflict. But in costume and scenery, it’s much easier to play it.

The role of Jesus carries a special responsibility. Do you feel such a responsibility also personally for the Passion Play in these difficult times?

RR: Yes. We are all in this situation together, but the special responsibility still remains.

FM: The difficulty is not only the postponed Passion Play, but also the hole of the two missing Oberammergau theatre



The two Jesus actors Frederik Mayet (l.) and Rochus Rückel: For 2022, they hope that their desire to play will spill over to the audience and that a magical moment will arise.

Photo: Sebastian Schulte

summers in 2020 and 2021. It is the responsibility of our generation to carry on the Passion Play. All of us in Oberammergau must try not to let this tradition break off, we must pass on the Passion Play fire to the next, from generation to generation.

What kind of atmosphere would you like to see in 2022 - on stage and in the audience?

RR: Relaxation. When the Passion Play takes place, it’s like

a big starting signal that it’s going to be normal again. It’s starting again!

FM: The Passion Play has an immediate effect, goes straight to the heart. When we perform with desire and power, seri-

ousness and joy, ideally that is exactly what jumps over to the audience. Then a magical moment arises that releases energies on both sides. That’s what I hope for: that it becomes something beautiful and immediate.

With great consistency

In his production, Christian Stückl searches for humanity and topicality

The first rehearsal is just around the corner. The big reading. For Play director Christian Stückl, it means getting in the mood for the story. “Everyone, even if they only have a very small sentence, comes together. It’s the only time the performers hear the Play together with each other.” The past stage rehearsals from January to March 2020 seem far away to him - so far that he is planning a new beginning. What remains a pipe dream elsewhere - in Oberammergau it is possible: although a total of 150 participants in the cancelled Passion Play 2020 can’t participate in 2022 for reasons of time or pandemic, at the same time 150 new ones have also signed up. Cast changes, even in the speaking roles, are no problem for Christian Stückl: “There are always people who catch my eye during rehearsals because they are so dedicated.”

At the beginning of January, the amateur ensemble will start rehearsing the individual scenes. The text, which has already been adapted for 2020, will be constantly revised by its director until the premiere in 2022. This work actually began 44 years ago. Back then, in 1977, 15-year-old Christian Stückl experienced the “reform rehearsal” by sculptor Hans Schwaighofer. The performance was based on the *Passio*

Nova by the Ettal Benedictine priest Ferdinand Rosner, the baroque Passion Play text from 1750. Schwaighofer, however, now tells the millennia-old story in a completely new way. “That’s when I realized what directing is. That’s when I knew I wanted to be a director.” The

search for a Jesus who touches the audience through his emotions, but also through his consistency, continues to occupy Stückl during his fourth Passion Play production. “Rochus Rückel is my sixth Jesus. And all of them are totally different. You catch up with a young ac-

tor and always have the chance to approach the character in a completely new way. You’re on your feet differently, you also have more life experience, and you bring that to the table.” In 1986, when he is the Passion Play director for the first time at the age of 25 and, after

almost 40 years of immobility of the Oberammergau Play, enforces that a third of the main performers in the 1990 Passion Play are under 30 years old, he still thinks: “Jesus has to be a rebel!” In 2010 he realizes: “It’s not about volume, it’s about a character who goes

through life with great consistency. Who follows his idea of his God.” Only: what does that mean?

“I’ve always said the most exciting part of the whole Play is the Mount of Olives. The moment when Jesus is faced with the decision, ‘Do I continue on this path ... Or do I go to the Sea of Galilee for a beach vacation?’ The laughter that accompanies this last sentence quickly dies away. “After all, like every human being, he knows fear - and yet he remains steadfast.” In order to make this inner conflict between man and Messiah understandable, Stückl wants to expand the Jesus figure even more - and find the difficult access with each of the two actors together.

As contradictory as it may sound, working on a text that reveals the great topicality of the biblical stories sometimes involves dispensing with the spoken word. In the past, there was a prologue speaker who led into the musically accompanied “Living Images” of the Old Testament. For the Play director, that no longer fits in with today’s times: “The prologue speaker leaves no room for our own interpretation and - even worse - he gives us a kind of moral sermon along the way.” In 2022, therefore, the music will speak for itself - and Stückl will entrust the interpretation of the story to the audience.



“Like every human being, he knows fear - and yet he remains steadfast,” says Play director Christian Stückl, describing Jesus’ inner conflict. “It’s about a character who goes through life with great consistency.”

Photo: Birgit Gudjonsdottir

Creating closeness out of strangeness

In music, Markus Zwink tells the Passion story through emotion

“The music should drive the Play” - that is the top priority in his workshop. Markus Zwink has been musical director and conductor for four Passion Play decades. During this time, he has increasingly acted as composer; when there is a need for text, he is also replacing the librettist for the first time for 2022. That wasn’t always the case: “I can still remember how I rewrote a transition in a musical number in 1990. Eight bars only, but I had real qualms about it, it was all so sacred and so given and so determined.” But a change had to come - that was already clear to him ten years earlier. In the 1980 Play, Markus Zwink is a bass soloist, Christian Stückl sings in the choir - “and we both thought that it couldn’t really go on like that, because it just felt like a repetition of 1970, 1960, 1950”. Six years later, there was an “almost landslide turnaround” - and finally the opportunity to take action himself. Zwink’s cautious liberation, however, did not come until the Passion Play in 2000: “Then I had the feeling, okay, now I’ll try it myself and maybe I can do it ... at least as well as Dedler.” Dedler was a teacher in Oberammergau more than

200 years ago and composed recitatives, arias and choruses to accompany the “Living Images” as early as 1811. With

the text changes of 1815, Rochus Dedler once again created a completely new Passion Play music.

Zwink now leans on their sound. He expands the harmonic spectrum even further and also incorporates the archi-

tectural features of the large Passion Play stage into his compositional concept. For the Passion Play 2010, he creates a

new, powerful moment of tension through choral passages in Hebrew, and oriental sounds through certain chordal combinations. The musical director has continued to think in this direction for 2020/22. “It’s a task of constantly working on it.”

The tendency to integrate Hebrew texts into the singing is to be strengthened, because the supposedly foreign touches, connects, opens. “The Old Testament pieces in particular, after all, often convey themselves not through the brain, but through feeling: the audience realizes that the themes in the story specifically tailored to one people are actually themes that could happen in some other form all over the world.”

Only a few members of the Passion Play Choir have cancelled for 2022 because they have changed careers or started college. There was an audition at the end of July “to also give a chance to the young people who are now, after two years, developmentally ready.” The music helps tell the Passion story - this fascinating feeling will be experienced by both the new and established singers and instrumentalists in the coming weeks.



Rehearsals with choir and instrumentalists are already in full swing again. The original music was composed by Rochus Dedler in 1811/1815 and has been adapted and expanded by Markus Zwink since 1990.

Photo: Sebastian Schulte

A treasure beyond words

With his stage design and costumes, Stefan Hageneier creates touching moments

And then something happened in 2020 after all: In October, when in the village the heaviest disappointment about the postponed Play and the theatre summer that passed without sound and above all without a Play has been overcome, the Oberammergau Passion Play Theatre as a whole complex is put under monument protection. The main reason for this is the auditorium with its impressive steel arch construction from 1898 as one of the “most important testimonies of Bavarian engineering of its time”. For the Passion Play in 1930, it was expanded from around 4,200 to 5,200 seats.

The immediately adjacent stage house, on the other hand - since 1830 at the same location on an almost identical floor plan - has undergone several character changes over the decades, reflecting the self-image of the respective Passion Play era. In 1890 it was redesigned in the generous, playful style of the Neo-Renaissance, and in 1928 it was transformed into an almost unadorned, neoclassically sober monumental building made of reinforced concrete.

Under the new directing team with stage and costume designer Stefan Hageneier, the demands on the stage situa-



Since November, the workshops have been busy with the further construction of the stage set. The tailor shop is also working again: All actors need new fittings for the approximately 1,500 costumes.

Photos: Sebastian Schulte



tion changed; the carved frieze and, most recently, the lateral steps and arches were removed. After all, a stage set

must be able to be changed. Add to that the increasingly crippling tightness as the number of participants grew:

“Never was this problem more evident than during the pandemic,” explains Hageneier, whose own career began right

here. During the 1990 Passion Play, Stückl, the 27-year-old Play director, discovers the 17-year-old angel actor while drawing and invites him to design the stage for his *What You Will* production in the village. Then, for the Passion Play 2000, Hageneier is the first person after several decades to touch the Passion Play stage again. While he spends nights painting and building, he discovers “what an inconceivable cultural and also art-historical treasure” lies in the stories. With the brightly colored “Living Images” of the 2010 Plays, filled with iconography and symbolism, he creates modern devotional images in a completely new aesthetic, which also builds a bridge towards today in terms of art history.

For 2022, Hageneier has found historical depictions that seem to overflow with figures. For him, the mass of fleeing Israelites is an important and effective model for the new Oberammergau paintings. Even under aggravated pandemic conditions, he sticks to his new approach, which has been touchingly topical, especially since the refugee catastrophe in the Mediterranean in 2015: “The new thinking behind the ‘Living Images’ is to show a large crowd of people in different variations of oppression, of being displaced and persecuted, but also of hope.” Since November, the workshops have been busy continuing the construction of the stage set. Work is also continuing in the tailor shop. All the actors need new fittings of the approximately 1,500 costumes once again. “But we don’t have to redesign anything.” A great deal of effort was put into dyeing fabrics in 2019 and finishing them with an old wood-printing process. More than 400 square meters of kelim were processed. Hageneier gathered inspiration on his trips to India and Turkey. That was different in the past, too: people performed in borrowed costumes, around 1700 from the Rottenbuch monastery, for example. In 1840, the community had a permanent collection, built from the stocks of the disbanded plays of Mittenwald and Bad Kohlgrub. In 1880/90, the ornate robes were made at the Münchner Hoftheater. Curiously, a receipt for eight wigs has been preserved from the Passion Play year of 1820 - 200 years ago, people do not seem to have been so strict about the hair and beard decree.



Photo: Florian Wagner / Ammergauer Alpen GmbH

Excitement before the world event

How do you bring history into the present?
A conversation with the directing team

The director Christian Stückl, the set and costume designer Stefan Hageneier, the musical director and conductor Markus Zwink: They are entering the second round of their third joint Passion Play production with renewed energy. The fact that it was a pandemic that wrote Passion Play history almost 400 years ago is not forgotten these days.

The tradition of the Oberammergau Passion Play is based on the prevention of the plague. A religious "vaccination" in a ten-year rhythm?

Stefan Hageneier (SH): Of course, it's crazy how all of this affects us. The plague lockdown, the fires and the fact that no one was allowed into the village ... Suddenly you realize that these were the same measures. At that time, a day laborer named Kaspar Schisler is said to have been the "lockdown breaker. And now?

Christian Stückl (CS): That's right. Especially because a year later, with the television images of the burning fires in India before my eyes, people were saying to me: That's probably how it was during the plague back then.

Right in your opening image, you'll bring that time of the plague back on stage through the choir.

SH: The question about the function of the Passion Play choir is always ignited by the costume. What are the singers wearing? Are they angels or guardian spirits? From old photos, the idea arose for 2020 that they could also be citizens of Oberammergau from the time when the Play was created.

Markus Zwink (MZ): Musically, the beginning is like a huge fermata. The first chorus is called "Lord, you are far away, see our need" - and out of this need the Passion Play was created in Oberammergau.

CS: Of course in 1633 - and still until 1760 - under completely different religious conditions than we can imagine today. At that time, people flagellated themselves, believed in the miraculous power of relics. But this moment brings the choir and the Play together.

SH: So it is also possible to take out "The Adoration of the Cross" - formerly the first "Living Image" - and put it in front of the Play. In this way, the choir gains a meaningful attribution, which runs through the entire Passion Play as an Oberammergau reference.

Talking about the new production of the Passion Play always means discussing the "Living Images" as well. Why?

CS: The "Living Images" and the music are part of our development. In the very beginning, hell was still fighting against heaven. Lucifer made a mockery of the audience in the first scene. With the "Living Images" from 1750, 1780, hell disappeared more and more, also from the texts. Through this division into twelve blocks, we preserve an old form that exists almost nowhere else. The music is an integral part of it.

SH: Without the "Living Images" we would lose a whole level of illusion in terms of content. That was also the purpose of Lucifer and other figures before: not only to tell the Jesus story.

CS: There are scenes from the Old Testament being depicted. They are symbolic images that were originally meant to represent God intervening in our world. But what do they stand for today?

SH: In 2022, these should be images asking about the repetition of history, bringing history into the present. But that doesn't require any concrete current references - the fact that the biblical story continues to take place in its time makes it readable in many respects. If I were to depict the Flood, then this large image would perhaps stand for the flood catastrophe of 2021 in Germany, but at the same time also for many other things that can happen. That is why the "Living Images" of 2022 do not focus on selected symbolic figures, but simply: people on the run.

A people on the run

So the question today is no longer: How does God intervene in our world? But rather: Why? What are we doing with God's creation?

SH: There is no longer a one-to-one comparison of the past versus the present. Instead, I've tried to achieve both: to create indi-

vidual images that seem brand new, and at the same time, a timeless thought about those images in the continuous frame narrative of an over-motive: a people in various flight. In this way, the representation can reach a contemporary audience, both aesthetically and in terms of content.

CS: I find it exciting to show what our roots are through Moses' story in the "Living Images." It's important to realize that these roots are very much anchored in Jewishness. Until the late 19th century, it was always the local clergy who staged the Passion Play. The "Living Image" gave an indication that something that had existed was being replaced: Judaism by Christianity. We took that to another level, which says: the action of God is always already in the world.

Often the Old Testament is a history book.

Music transports and channels moods - does that also apply to Passion Play music?

MZ: On the one hand, there is the music that explains and deepens the "Living Images". This is similar to the Bach Passion, for example, where chorales are sung and the listener thus has a moment in which he can pause and reflect, even involve himself if he wants to. So it is about another level besides the Passion event, about additional illuminations on the subject, other focuses, an intellectual but also emotional confrontation, which in the best case has a broadening effect. That is the main function of the music.

This time you are doing it without the moralizing prologue speaker, which has been around for 200 years.

MZ: Yes, and with it also the melodrama with which he took the emotionality before the crucifixion scene to the extreme. In 2010 we already had the scene in which the people sing the "Sh'ma Israel". In 2022, I would like

to emphasize the Hebrew psalm of "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" once again and accompany both the Way of the Cross and the crucifixion with it musically.

The Old Testament, Jesus' Bible, is full of God's trials to human beings: the plagues, the commandments, the near-sacrifice of Isaac, the Book of Job.... What are these crises good for?

CS: At the moment in the theatre we have a very strong discussion about the extent to which we should show the terrible and thereby reproduce it. Or whether we should instead just show beautiful images, that it can be much more beautiful in the world. The Old Testament is basically a book of observations of people: how they interact with each other, deal with illness and other adversities.

MZ: I think there's a lot to think about with an image like "Isaac's Sacrifice." Is it about obedience or about how far one goes? In a positive context, do we really want to show one agreeing to sacrifice his son?

CS: It is an image of the old obedience. Abraham, after all, founds a new religion - but before that, God tries him out. The much more exciting figure is actually Sarah, who never speaks a word to her husband again, because he still hasn't completely put aside the old faith. God does not want sacrifices! He says: I want your heart, your mind. But: Your sacrifices make me sick. Job stands for someone who despairs in his misery, but in the end does not let himself be diverted from his path to God. Jesus also goes to the cross with exactly this consequence.

But God does provoke.



They bring the biblical stories to a level where they can be understood today: stage and costume designer Stefan Hageneier, director Christian Stückl and musical director and conductor Markus Zwink (from left to right).
Photo: Gabriela Neeb

CS: That is often told in the Old Testament, yes. But it's actually about human situations that we get into and the question of how we deal with them. By showing the terrible, the Old Testament is sometimes much closer to human beings than the New. Mankind itself is to blame for Sodom and Gomorrah - just as it is to blame for climate change now.

SH: In this way, the Old Testament already describes a civilization process. But the context seems enormously archaic, of course.

CS: Often the Old Testament is simply a history book. The Israelites were slaves and therefore walked through the desert for forty years, because they were not taken in anywhere, did not find a foothold. First of all, they needed legislation. That God gave it to them is of course described bombastically - but in the end it was Moses who wrote down ten main laws and said, if you follow them, then almost nothing can happen. And then, because after forty years they were strong enough to "topple the walls of Jericho with their trumpets," they took the land - not because the good Lord said, "Here you go!" (Laughs.)

So the function of God in the Old Testament is a kind of "deus ex machina," an impetus to keep telling the stories?

CS: Yes, you could say that. (Laughs.)

Do you think audiences in 2022 will be more receptive to the Passion story because of the Corona crisis?

CS: The "best" Passion Play years were after major catastrophes like World War I and World War II, or even after the plague period.

In 1922, the number of spectators more than doubled from 120,000 to 300,000, you had to make a lot of extra Plays in addition to the catch-up Plays. Now I do not have the impression that there is a greater turn to religion. Everything is too scientific for that.

MZ: Yes, the "plague effect" is not there. But that probably also has to do with the fact that today everyone is individually challenged. "Get vaccinated!" and not, "The Lord God will fix it!" It's a personal contribution that you have to decide for or against.

The pandemic changes the view on the Play and its staging.

Does the staging need to be rethought and critiqued in that regard?

SH: The pandemic changes everything, the view on the Play and the staging. Still - that's what's great about it - it's a great narrative with great themes that has survived centuries. It will also survive Covid-19. The plague as the core of its origin story naturally gives the Passion Play this very special character, which has a lot to do with the pandemic anyway.

CS: "Get the Jesus down to a level where you can understand him!" (Laughs.) - I think you should push the arguments about religion and priesthood further back in the Play. Perhaps the evangelists only wanted to show the differences between Judaism and Christianity from the beginning. All the more important for me are the "marginal notes": When it says, for example, that Jesus is a friend of tax

collectors and prostitutes, that he goes to the poor, to the prostitutes, when he washes people at the pond of Siloah. Is it really about the religious laws that Jesus is said to have broken? Or is it not much more about the annoyance that he dealt with people who apparently do not fit into our society and therefore have no place there? And to what extent has that changed to this day? - Not particularly.

It sounds as if the Passion Play hasn't let go of you even during the last year and a half.

MZ: That's true. But you can't maintain this alertness, this activity over so many years. Inwardly, we have actually been busy with the upcoming Passion Play since 2016/17.

What does a break like this mean for the new generation in the "village of the Play-crazy"?

CS: We only have the Passion Play every ten years. If you leave out a generation at that rate, you've lost. If you bring children and young people to the theatre early, they lose their shyness before the stage. You have to build them up, show them the way from the bottom to the top.

The music rehearsals are already underway again, the fittings for more than 1,500 costumes are underway in the tailor shop, and in January you'll be going on stage.

MZ: It is partly like a déjà vu. The fact that we can finally rehearse actively again with the choir and orchestra is a lot of fun for everyone. For my concert on August 1, I had al-

ready searched through all 196 Bach cantatas and then decided on number 30: "Rejoice, Redeemed Host". I was just a little too early. (Laughs.) But what that did to people when they sang it, and more each time - that was crazy!

Like a piece had been cut out of a movie

SH: It's been almost two years now since you've been slowed down in full sprint. And yet: you get right back into it. As if a piece had been cut out of a movie.

CS: The number of actors has stayed about the same from 2020 to 2022. Some have dropped out because they've started further education training, others have joined because they're only now eligible to perform. Some youngsters have grown up and need to be recast. So it's really a new beginning. You can't very well ask, "Remember?" So let's just start over.

What does it mean to bring the Passion Play back to the Oberammergau stage as a world event in 2022?

SH: There won't be Day X, when the pandemic is over. But I believe that if the Passion Play takes place again in 2022, it will be a great moment, then it will be enough in itself as a statement.

CS: Most of all I hope that in the inner cohesion it will be a beautiful Passion Play for all who participate. If you have a good experience on stage, it comes through down in the auditorium.



“Living Image” at the 2010 Passion Play. Photo: Kleinberger

“The Play is part of our life”

Ten performers - from 12 to 82 years old - share the same fascination



I look forward to the Passion Play because I love to perform in theatre and be on stage with my friends. Ten years ago my aunt took me along in the people of Jerusalem. Now I understand what it's all about and find it exciting to really be a part of it.

Sophie Maderspacher, 12 years, schoolgirl
1st Passion Play: People of Jerusalem/Living Image



The Passion Play was and is a very formative event for me. It is an incredible feeling to stand on stage in front of almost 5,000 spectators. As a small child, it felt like an endless sea of people all staring at you.

Sebastian Schulte, 18 years, photographer/student
2nd Passion Play: Servant of Caiaphas



Participating in the Passion Play means for me, first of all, the joy of theatre, to which we are introduced at an early age, here in Oberammergau. In addition, we have a very nice feeling of community among the participants, which I will certainly enjoy again!

Christoph Stöger, 24 years, legal trainee
2nd Passion Play: John



In a fast-paced, rapidly changing world, the story and the messages Jesus proclaims through it remain all the more important and of timeless validity - for example, the issue of social injustice.

Barbara Schuster, 34 years, human resources manager
4th Passion Play: Mary Magdalene



My first memory of the Passion Play is the image of a large community. I am walking to the rehearsal on my grandfather's hand. People are streaming in the same direction from all the alleys. The atmosphere is relaxed. Suddenly everything is calm and concentrated. The music starts and everyone sings a song that everyone seems to know. All eyes light up.

Andreas Richter, 45 years, certified psychologist
6th Passion Play: Caiaphas



The Passion Play gives me a connection to the essentials in life. It shows me what a forgiving and giving attitude is all about. For me, it is about the task of practicing tolerance, the ability to compromise and, above all, respect for others.

Jeannine Wimmer, 46 years, general practitioner/pain therapist
6th Passion Play: Oboist



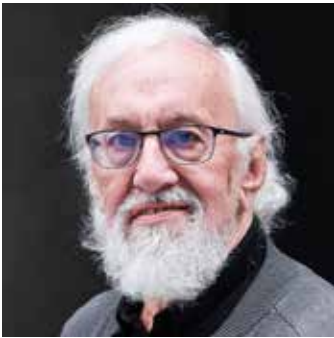
Drama accompanied by music, performed live by people, is one of the most beautiful forms of artistic expression for me. I want to be there! For an entire village history, this major event is like a red thread that weaves through the generations. I consider that an invaluable asset.

Maria Buchwieser, 55 years, music teacher
4th Passion Play: Soprano Soloist



For our guests, a large part of the fascination lies in the long tradition. The fact that a small village in the mountains manages, despite all adversities, to get something great going together again and again gives hope - regardless of whether or what one believes in.

Ulrike Bubenzer, 56 years, employee of Oberammergau Museum
1st Passion Play: People of Jerusalem



The Passion Play is part of our lives - ten years is always a big period of life. In 1950, I was with the people of Jerusalem as a child. In 1960, in the choir as the youngest bass, I met my wife. In 1970, I played Nathanael, which my grandfather played in 1930. In 1980, I was the High Priest Caiaphas, played by my father in 1950 and 1960. In 1990 I was the Judas actor, directed for the first time by my son Christian. Then in 2000, Caiaphas again, my father was Annas. In 2010 I played Annas - the circle is closed!

Peter Stückl, 79 years, innkeeper
10th Passion Play: Annas



As early as 1950, I had caught the 'Passion bug': As a 'non-local' from Upper Bavaria, I was quickly integrated, and even as a child I felt it was something special to be allowed to be part of this incredibly emotional Play. This attitude continues to this day - and when I'm involved, I give it my all! The months of pulling together, the intergenerational bond, the togetherness on and off stage are a source of joy and enrichment, even beyond the Passion Play year.

Walter F. X. Lang, 82 years, pensioner
9th Passion Play: People of Jerusalem

Photos: Gabriela Neeb, Sebastian Schulte, Karolina Frank

You are Jesus

During the Youth Days the Oberammergauers perform in front of a young audience

On May 7 and 8, 2022, the Youth Days of the Oberammergau Passion Play will take place for the first time. Over 8,000 young visitors from all over the world are expected to meet each other and experience the famous spectacle together in two performances in advance. The offer is aimed at young people between 16 and 28 years.

"We are Jesus," say the two main actors of the Passion Play, Frederik Mayet and Rochus Rückel. And they are talking not only about themselves and their role as Christ, but also about each and every one of the young guests.

To rethink things, to think differently, to question things - what was a guiding principle of Jesus thousands of years ago

is more relevant today than ever. Young people are joining forces, taking to the streets to discuss with vigor and urgency how to live together in the future, to make a difference. A political gesture like the one that shaped religion in Jesus' time. "Jesus probably never thought about climate change," Frederik Mayet explains. "But he recognized the problems of his time, questioned them, addressed them clearly, and tried to act accordingly. Sometimes something is in the air, and then someone comes along, finds the right words and hits a nerve. And suddenly a movement arises from it, and the powerful are irritated. You have to believe in yourself, in your ideas and ideals, then something can come out of it."

The focus of the Youth Days will, of course, be the Passion Play. All around there will be interdenominational services and prayers for peace, as well as discussions with the participants, and of course there will also be celebrations. From Bavaria to South Africa, from England to the USA - the response is very good.

With courage and steadfastness, everyone can be a little bit like Jesus, believes Rochus Rückel. For him, Jesus was "a troublemaker - in a positive sense. No one has to be religious to take him as an example. Experience has shown the Oberammergauers: All guests feel something different while following the Passion Play, but somewhere everyone finds themselves in it.



Accompanying the Passion Play, there will be interdenominational church services and prayers for peace for the young people from all over the world. And, of course, there will also be celebrations.

Photo: Gabriela Neeb

Famous visitors

From Giacomo Puccini to Angela Merkel - the guest list of the Passion Play is spectacular

Like many other world-famous theatres, the Oberammergau stage is a place that tells contemporary history. Not least thanks to its illustrious visitors.

For the Passion Play of 1840, Oberammergau celebrated an increase from 13,000 to 35,000 spectators. The village owes this primarily to the enthusiastic press. Indirectly, 81-year-old **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** also promoted the Play by publishing an admiring letter by **Sulpiz Boisserée** in his private journal *Chaos* in 1830. In it, the art historian is presented as being "on many levels instructed and excited" by the intellect and artistic sense of the presentation.

The celebrities do not stay away for long. Among the royal guests at the Passion Play of 1840, besides **Friedrich August II. King of Saxony** and his wife **Karoline Ferdinande of Austria**, also **Crown Prince Maximilian of Bavaria**. The journey by carriage from Munich takes two days at that time.

In 1850, **Queen Marie of Bavaria** also makes the journey - as does a twelve-year-old noblewoman named Elisabeth, Duchess in Bavaria, who later became the Austrian **Empress "Sisi"**.

1870 sees the first visit from the isle: in addition to banker **Leopold de Rothschild**, **Crown Prince Albert Edward**, later King of England.

A milestone on **September 25, 1871: King Ludwig II** visits the Passion Play in a separate performance. In the then still unroofed auditorium, where otherwise up to 10,000 visitors crowd in, there are only four companions apart from him. The "Kini" is so enthusiastic that he donates the "Crucifixion Group" to the community. At that time, the marble sculpture on the Osterbichl, weighing 116 tons, is the largest stone monument in the world.

In 1880 **Queen Victoria of Sweden** and the Prussian **Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm** are in the audience. A railroad line now runs to Murnau, shortening the journey. In the same year, **Thomas Cook** also makes his way to the edge of the Alps; he will boost the flow of international tourists.



King Gustav V of Sweden stayed at the Joseph Ruederer house from May 28 to 30, 1910.

Photo: GAO



Cardinal Pacelli, later Pope Pius XII, with Jesus actor Anton Lang, 1922.

Photo: GAO



Among the audience in 2010: German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Photo: Niels Starnick/BILD am Sonntag

Eiffel arrives from Paris, perhaps also because of the new auditorium with its imposing iron arches.

In the USA, **Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf** publishes the essay *A Rabbi's Impressions of the Oberammergau Passion Play*. In it, he describes the harmony of the Play and the life of the people of Oberammergau - the village appears like a piece of Judea in the middle of the Bavarian Alps. But he also criticizes the anti-Semitism in the Play.

The wave of travellers that spilled over from overseas at that time is still unbranded today: from oil magnate **John Davidson Rockefeller (1900)** to automobile

manufacturer **Henry Ford (1930)**, from Presidents **William Howard Taft (1910)**, **Herbert Hoover (1922)** and **Dwight D. Eisenhower (1950)** to Rabbi **Marc H. Tanenbaum (1970)** and New York Archbishop **Timothy Michael Cardinal Dolan (2010)**.

Among the many ecclesiastical representatives who will sit in the auditorium in the following years are **Achille Cardinal Ratti**, later **Pope Pius XI (1910)**, and Nuncio Cardinal **Pacelli**, later **Pope Pius XII. (1922)**. Among the archbishops of Munich and Freising who have been present since 1950, most recently **Reinhard Cardinal Marx** in

the following years are **Achille Cardinal Ratti**, later **Pope Pius XI (1910)**, and Nuncio Cardinal **Pacelli**, later **Pope Pius XII. (1922)**. Among the archbishops of Munich and Freising who have been present since 1950, most recently **Reinhard Cardinal Marx** in

2010, is **Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger**, later **Pope Benedict XVI (1980)**.

Of course, there is no lack of painters, writers, composers in the idyllic Ammertal. In 1870, **Franz Liszt** paid a visit. During the performance on **August 22, 1880**, the Viennese composer **Anton Bruckner** falls in love with a 17-year-old actress. **Franz von Lenbach (1890)**, **Richard Strauss (1910)**, **Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1910)** are followed in 1922 by **Giacomo Puccini**, who - in search of new musical-theatrical impulses - often stays in Germany in the last years of his life.

Inglorious guests also visit Oberammergau. As on a first visit in 1930, **Adolf Hitler** sits in the auditorium on **August 13, 1934** with several Nazi celebrities. Oberammergau advertises in Nazi manner with the words: "Germany is calling you!"

Internationally, these Plays again mean an event for an almost unprecedentedly broad audience: not only **King Prajadhipok, Rama VII of Siam/Thailand** is present, not only media tycoon **William R. Hearst - Simone de Beauvoir** and **Jean-Paul Sartre** are also among the spectators. Later, the philosopher will rave about the pull of the performance, the truth in the Play and the great persuasive power of its performers.

Oberammergau has seen many political celebrities since the post-war period: for example, the Federal Presidents **Theodor Heuss**, **Richard von Weizsäcker**, **Roman Herzog** and **Christian Wulff**, Chancellor **Konrad Adenauer** and Chancellor **Angela Merkel**, as well as Bundestag President **Wolfgang Thierse** and the Bavarian Minister Presidents **Franz Josef Strauß**, **Max Streibl** and **Edmund Stoiber**.

With anticipation the Oberammergauers expected for 2020 illustrious guests from church, politics and nobility, art and culture to the state reception.

Who will be on the guest list in 2022 is not yet certain.



Photo: Oberammergau Museum/Anton Brandl

Facts & figures

Interesting facts about the Passion Play

The first **Passion Play** took place in 1634.

The **venue for the Play** was the Oberammergau cemetery until 1820. In 1830, at the behest of King Ludwig I, the Play was moved to the northern edge of the village.

The current **Passion Play stage** was built in 1928 according to the plans of the brothers Georg Johann and Raimund Lang. In 1815, the priest Nicolaus Unhoch had already designed a wooden stage for the Oberammergau cemetery; with the relocation of the theatre, Unhoch was also responsible for the 1830 stage. Again in 1890, a new stage was built by the renowned Munich theatre technician Carl Lautenschläger in the neo-Renaissance style.

Partial roofing of the seats had already been in place since 1890. The **auditorium** with its remarkable iron construction under the wooden hall was built in 1898 for about 4,200 visitors and expanded to 5,200 seats in 1930. The theatre has been a listed building since 2020.

The movable **stage roof** designed by architects Jabornegg and Palffy has been in place since 2009.

For **Christian Stückl**, this is his fourth Passion Play as **director**. He is **assisted by second play director Abdullah Kenan Karaca**, who was born in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in 1989.

The **text** was written in 1860/70 by **Joseph Alois Daisenberger** (1799-1883) and has been reworked by Christian Stückl for each production since 1990.

In addition to the Passion of Christ, the production also features so-called **"Living Images"**, i.e. tableaux vivants, musically accompanied "reflections" depicting scenes from the Old Testament. This tradition has existed since 1750.

As in 2000 and 2010, **Stefan Hageneier** is designing the **set and costumes**.

The **musical direction** will be taken over for the fourth time by **Markus Zwink**. With him at the conductor's desk will be for the first time **Eva Kammerer** and **Dr. Christian Wolf**.

The **original music** was composed by **Rochus Deder** (1779-1822) in 1811/1815; it has been adapted and expanded with new compositions by Markus Zwink since 1990.

The village currently has about 5,500 inhabitants. Each of the approximately **2,100 performers** was born in Oberammergau or has lived there for at least 20 years. The **children** are an exception to this: they are all allowed to take part in the Passion Play.

The **21 main roles** are double cast. There are also **120 additional speaking roles**. Numerous Oberammergauers are also on stage as apostles, priests and scribes, as Roman soldiers, as temple guards or as the people of Jerusalem.

The **youngest participant** is still a baby, the **oldest** almost 100 years old.

Sheep, goats, a horse and a donkey will be on stage. Some white **doves** will fly in the Oberammergau sky.

There will be **103 performances** from **May 14 to Oct. 2, 2022**. Plays will take place five times a week.

The **organizer** is the **municipality of Oberammergau**.

450,000 **spectators from all over the world** are expected.

On March 19, 2020, the Passion Play had to be postponed for two years due to the **Corona pandemic**. 425,000 already sold tickets were rebooked or cancelled. Since October 5, 2020, the **advance sale** for the Passion Play 2022 is running.

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