

Oberammergau 2000: The passion revised

by [Franklin Sherman](#) in the [August 16, 2000](#) issue

The Passion Play at Oberammergau is a vast spectacle that can be viewed at many levels. As a dramatic and musical performance, its quality is astonishingly high, considering that everyone connected with the production—from actors, musicians, director and set designer down to the smallest child who cries out “Hosanna,” some 2,200 persons in all—is from this one small German town (population 5,350). The pacing is rapid, the characters are sharply drawn, the dramatic tension remains high throughout, and the 48-voice choir and 75-member orchestra provide a stirring musical accompaniment.

This is no amateur production. The director, Christian Stückl, though still in his 30s, already has an international reputation as a director in Munich, Brussels and elsewhere. The script director and reviser, Otto Huber, is an expert on the history of Passion plays. In the interviews I had with him he showed himself to be conversant with the biblical and theological questions surrounding the production. The principals had traveled to Israel the year before to soak up the local atmosphere and had studied numerous films on the life of Jesus. (Huber said his favorites were Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* and Denys Arcand’s *Jesus of Montreal* .)

The costuming is vivid, and together with the colorful “living images” (scenes of related Old Testament events presented in “stop motion” style) provides a visual feast. All these things together make the play a great theatrical experience—six hours’ worth.

But most of the nearly 5,000 attendees at each performance probably have journeyed to Oberammergau more in the mood of a pilgrimage than of a theatrical grand tour, and the play clearly also functions on that level. It is a liturgical experience as well as a theatrical one. The prologue to each act, spoken by a narrator, together with the texts of the choral pieces, place the play in a faith

context.

“Prostrate yourselves in holy wonder, humans, bent low under Adam’s burden! Peace be with you. From Zion, renewed grace!” These are the opening words of the play, sung as a bass solo. And the chorus responds: “Merciful God, you sent your only Son to raise sinners from despair. Jesus, Savior! To restore us to life, you were our friend unto death.”

Not every member of the cast or crew is a person of faith. Oberammergau has its share of church-leavers, like the rest of Germany. What sustains believers and nonbelievers alike in the immense effort needed to produce the play is, Stückl believes, “the story itself.” It is the story, in his words, of “a faithful Jew who set out to recover what he felt the people had lost: justice, compassion and faith; who held contempt for all who wore their piety like festive costumes; who was ready to be stripped naked, maltreated and mocked before howling crowds for his God; and who stayed steady on his path to its final consequence—to his execution on the cross.”

Jesus the Jew, indeed the “faithful Jew,” in Stückl’s words: this is a major theme of the new production, and it reflects the diligent efforts of the new leadership in Oberammergau to overcome the anti-Jewish reputation of past versions. The changes are striking. Even the name of the protagonist, as identified in the printed text, has changed. Formerly it was “Christ,” obviously a term of faith. Now it is the more historical “Jesus.” Instead of being called “Master” by his disciples, he is addressed as “Rabbi.” He wears a prayer shawl, chants a pilgrimage psalm, and says a blessing in Hebrew. A menorah stands on the table at the Last Supper, and it is clearly a Passover meal. As the youngest disciple, John asks, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” (This is of course nonbiblical, as are many elements in this and other Passion plays. Like TV “docudramas,” they fill in what happened with what might have happened or what the characters might have said.)

Furthermore, the new production makes it clear that not all Jews opposed or deserted Jesus. In the debates in the High Council (the term “Sanhedrin” is avoided), Jesus is vigorously defended by several evidently quite senior members: Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus and—conveniently brought forward from the Book of Acts—Gamaliel. The plot line about the vengeful Temple merchants seeking Jesus’s death has been removed. Judas, rather than being vilified as typical of the “greedy Jews,” appears as a complex figure, motivated not by the 30 pieces of silver but by his probably Zealot ideology. In the crowd scene before Pilate, Jesus is opposed by

the majority (“Crucify him!”) but supported by a minority (“Set him free!”). The so-called blood curse, “His blood be on us and on our children”—part of the play since 1750—has been completely omitted.

I was, however, disconcerted by two instances in which the on-stage performance significantly worsens the effect of the written text. In the text the high priest, Caiaphas, is depicted as a self-serving sycophant, while Pontius Pilate, true to what we know of him from history, is a ruthless tyrant. But in the performance Caiaphas was played by a tall, burly actor of such verbal and psychological force that he completely overshadowed Pilate, who seemed like a mild-mannered bureaucrat. (At least this was true in the version I saw; two actors are assigned to each major role and play on alternate days.) The result is that the blame for the death of Jesus—as in the New Testament itself—attaches disproportionately to the Jews.

The other problem is that the part of the crowd that shouts in Jesus’s defense manages only a weak and disorganized outcry, compared to the thunderous roar of those who shout condemnation. It was hard to remember that, historically, only a small number of Jews would have been involved in these outcries. As the text has Pilate himself declare, “This is not the people of Jerusalem. This is a frenzied mob.”

On another issue, that of “typology,” it is true that the play’s depiction of persons and incidents from the Hebrew scriptures as prefigurations of the Passion can be read as implying that those events had little meaning in themselves until they found their fulfillment in the New Testament. However, it can also be read in the opposite way, as implying that they had a great deal of intrinsic meaning, so much so that the Jesus story gains some of its own depth and power from the fact that it resembles or reduplicates them.

Rosemary Ruether asked long ago, “Is it possible to say ‘Jesus is Messiah’ without, implicitly or explicitly, saying at the same time, ‘and the Jews be damned’?” The Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II and also the Protestant churches, as well as many individual scholars, have been trying to make it clear that the answer is yes. As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America stated in its 1994 “Declaration to the Jewish Community,” it is both possible and necessary “to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people.” To the ongoing task of realizing that intention, Oberammergau 2000 has, however imperfectly, made a positive contribution.