

Oberammergau Passion Play 'inter-religiously triumphant'

Leonard Swidler | Sep. 13, 2010



May 10 media rehearsal of the famous Passion Play in Oberammergau, Germany (CNS photo)

Review

I saw the Oberammergau Passion Play (first performed in 1634) for the sixth time last August ? and it was superb! It was profoundly moving, stunningly professionally performed, esthetically sweeping ? and inter-religiously triumphant!

I say the latter not at all lightly, for I have been working closely with the play directors, the town officials, the Archdiocese of Munich (the head of which for several years was my former colleague at the University of Tübingen Catholic Theology faculty, Pope Benedict XVI), the German Bishops' Conference, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith (ADL), and the American Jewish Committee (AJC) ? for over thirty years!

It was in 1979 Rabbi Leon Klenicki of the ADL approached me saying that in their conversations with Mayor Fink of Oberammergau they asked him whether he would welcome an analysis of the Passion Play for its depiction of Jews and Judaism by a Christian scholar of the field. He said, yes. Since I had been working in Jewish-Christian relations for 20 years already, I was asked by Klenicki if I would come to Oberammergau with a team from the ADL to meet with the decision-makers of the village, investigate the play in all its dimensions, and come up with such an analysis and recommendations to eliminate any anti-Judaic elements that might be found in it. I said yes, and persuaded my friend and colleague on the faculty of Temple University Department of Religion, Gerard Sloyan, a Catholic New Testament scholar?and Catholic priest?to join me in the analysis.

We went to the 1980 production, and talked with all concerned and then produced our report and recommendations for the next production, due on the 350th anniversary of the play, in 1984 [*Oberammergau Passionspiel 1984?Das Oberammergauer Passionspiel 1984*. New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1980; and later: *The Passion of the Jew Jesus (Das Leiden des Juden Jesus)* New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1984]. It was difficult to get any serious hearing of our concerns by the then play director for the 1980 production. However, the 1984 production was a significant improvement over its predecessors.

Thereafter a real revolution took place in the village political leadership, and also in the two new, young play directors, Christian Stückl and Otto Huber. They were sensitive to the portrayals of Jesus and the other Jews and the Romans and worked hard to eliminate remaining negative images of Jews and Judaism, and to highlight the

fact that, among other things, the final days of Jesus were about Roman politics and disputes among Jews about the best way to be Jewish (Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, Hellenists, followers of Rabbi Yeshua ha Notzri [Jesus of Nazareth]) ? not a struggle between Jews and Christians; there weren't any ?Christians? yet.

Huge progress was made in the 1990 production. Even so, there was still resistance from elements on the village council. However, by the time of the 2000 production Stückl had become such a famous theater director in Germany that he and Huber had almost free rein to cut out any remaining nuances of negativity in the portrayal of Jews and Judaism, and enhance even further the quality of the struggle leading to the death of Jesus being a struggle internal to Judaism rather than between Christians and Jews.

The 2010 Passion Play goes far beyond the elimination of all Jewish negative stereotypes, making it overwhelmingly clear that Jesus was caught up in a political power struggle between the Jewish leaders who held their power at the sufferance of Rome in the person of its Prefect Pontius Pilate (Philo, an older contemporary, described him as ?inflexible, stubborn, of cruel disposition. He executed troublemakers without a trial,? and referred to his ?venality, violence, thefts, assaults, abusive behavior, endless executions, endless savage ferocity.?). In the 2010 play Pilate, wears a soldier's armor, arrogantly tells the High Priest Caiphas that he had better take care of the upstart Jesus ? or else.

Perhaps the most amazing change in this production is the positively blatant Jewishness of Jesus and all his followers. He and his followers often pray ? in Hebrew! ? covering their heads with a talis and holding the Torah scroll up high. At one point the crowd of hundreds on stage with Jesus in the lead all sing the central prayer of Judaism in Hebrew, the Shema Israel, ?Hear oh Israel, Yahweh your God is one!?

All of the characters come across as humanly believable, not cardboard cutouts. This is true especially of Judas, who like Peter denied his leader, but unlike him fell into despair rather than hope (he was the only player to receive a spontaneous applause at the end of his major soliloquy). But most of all the human believableness of Jesus stands out. One person in the audience said to me afterward, ?This is a Jesus who is believable for modern persons!? Jesus clearly loved the people around him, touching and embracing them, including women. His scene of near despair in Gethsemane was heart wrenching.

The frequent use of a huge chorus (much like a Greek chorus), draining meaning out of the Hebrew biblical tableaux and pouring it into the following scene was managed exquisitely. And the music ? either Mozart-like from the early 19th century Rochus Dedler or newly composed by Markus Zwink ? was stunningly perfect in matching the action on stage.

All together, the 2010 Oberammergau Passion Play is as positive an esthetic/spiritual experience as possible for Christians of the suffering and death of their Founder as a Jewish Rabbi who had both supporters and opponents among his fellow Jews, and finally was murdered by the Romans in typical Roman execution manner ? crucifixion.

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