

Chapter Four  
Spiritual voyeurism and cultural nostalgia:  
Anglophone visitors to the Oberammergau Passion Play, 1870-1925 and 2010

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When I visited the Oberammergau Passion Play in the summer of 2010, I was struck by the hybridity of the experience. I was attending an international meeting of theatre scholars in Munich, and two busloads of us made the two-hour trip for the day's experience. What we saw was like no other event we had witnessed before. It was, in parts, a religious pilgrimage, a local cultural festival, a historical tribute, a crafts fair, a tourist trap, and the largest and most elaborate piece of amateur dramatics any of us had ever seen. These impulses behind these different aspects—religious devotion, cultural pride, artistic grandeur, and economic development—sat in a tension that fascinated us as observers of theatre as an artistic and social practice.

But there was one other aspect of the day that we could not ignore. The mechanics of welcoming and caring for thousands of audience members from across the world – a group larger than the village's population – were handled remarkably smoothly. Transport, refreshments, souvenirs, programmes, tickets, and seating all went off without a hitch. While the performance was only in German, every other need a visitor might have could be catered for in half a dozen languages. During the dinner break, the restaurants were plentiful and quick, and everyone had time to finish their ice cream and browse the shops before the bells rang for the second half. I have never been to a theatrical event in New York or London that was this well-organized. But then, this was clearly no ordinary piece of theatre.

These two traits—hybridity and organizational smoothness—appeared as two sides of the same coin. As visitors, our impression was not that of a hybrid performance which was built on its own and had only later opened up to an audience of tourists and pilgrims. Rather, the two seemed to have grown in tandem: the need to cater for such a diverse and international audience had led to the

hybridity of the event. As theatre scholars, we are also aware that this is how performance traditions develop: audiences, performers, organizers, and communities develop their practices in dialogue with one another, especially for performance traditions that have developed through many years and many iterations as has the Oberammergau Passion.<sup>1</sup>

So the twin questions of how this act of religious devotion became such a fascinating hybrid of culture, heritage, commerce and faith, and how the performance grew to become so central a tourist institution as to completely dominate the life of the village are, in fact, one and the same. If we could trace out the ways in which the audience for the Passion developed, we will be tracing out the development of the play itself. This is known as ‘reception history’ in theatre studies, and this chapter hopes to make a contribution to it.

Many histories and critical appraisals of the Passion exist in the literature. The most modern and helpful for the contemporary reader is James Shapiro’s *Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World’s Most Famous Passion Play* (2000). While Shapiro’s book has a broad scope, its focus is on the twentieth century, and in particular, on Oberammergau’s role in the rise of Nazism and in the controversies around Catholic anti-Semitism in the decades following WW II and the Second Vatican Council. These are, clearly, the areas in which the Passion has generated the most controversy, and Shapiro’s narrative teases them out well. But in order to understand the development of Oberammergau as an international cultural and tourist destination, I would like to go back a bit farther, to the late nineteenth century, when technological and economic developments led to the globalization of the passion for the first time in its history.

In particular, this chapter will look at the responses that American and especially British audiences had to these productions. From 1870 to about 1925, a considerable corpus of popular and semi-scholarly literature emerged from those who had made the journey to the Oberammergau Passion, and were eager to report back on their experiences to others. In some ways, they resemble

the narratives of the Hajj, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca that had long existed in the Islamic world but began circulating around Europe in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. In other ways, they resemble the exoticized orientalist travel narratives that also found great popularity in Europe at this time. They could also serve as commercial advertisements and guides for future visitors. But occasionally, they also take the form of the letters of a pilgrim, seeking to capture a profound religious experience for their own continued devotion and to share it with their friends and fellow believers. We can trace these tensions out in this literature, and through it, a sense of what the Oberammergau Passion meant for its new audiences.

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Passion plays, of course, were common in Bavaria, as in much of Catholic Europe, from the Middle Ages well into the eighteenth century. But there were three developments that helped to position the Oberammergau Passion as a particularly attractive one around which to build an international market.

First, there was a reduction in competition. In the late eighteenth century, the Catholic Church began banning passion plays as potential sources of heresy and as inappropriate for the laity. The 1770 Oberammergau Passion was not performed as a result. The Oberammergauers, however, were able to negotiate a dispensation from the Catholic authorities by pruning all “objectionable and unseemly matter” from the performance,<sup>2</sup> and by 1800, Oberammergau was effectively the only Passion left in Bavaria.

Next, the Passion developed a remarkable following within and around Bavaria. The excitement was so great that in 1870, King Ludwig II of Bavaria commissioned his royal photographer, Joseph Albert, to take a set of photographs of the performers in their costumes on set.<sup>3</sup> These are staged photographs, and to contemporary eyes, they look rather stiff, even if they do

provide a useful record of the costumes and set of these midcentury performances. What is more important, however, is that these photographs were published and distributed widely, spreading the Passion's fame far beyond those who had previously made the journey to Oberammergau.

And finally, the railroad network around Europe and southern Germany greatly developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Munich had become within easy reach of other European cities by rail by the latter part of the century, and a train line to Oberammergau itself was in place in time for the performance in 1900. The arduous voyage that earlier visitors described in getting to Oberammergau in 1850 or 1860, then, was much easier. This ease came from the general development of transport links across the continent, not simply the rail line to Oberammergau. This relative ease of travel meant that, at least for those who could afford it, Oberammergau offered a unique, famous, and exotic experience that was both enticingly rare yet still accessible enough to be a reasonable part of a Grand Tour or a summer's voyage to the Continent.

Aside from these technological developments, we should also recognize a cultural one: that the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the waning days of English Romanticism. The appeal of a small Alpine village maintaining a medieval performance tradition in pure sincerity with no care for the modern world was, for some, irresistibly alluring. Such an appeal was not universal or unequivocal—Alpine pastoral romanticism was not to everyone's taste by 1890—but it did attract a certain sort of cultural seeker to the Passion.

There was, however, one major disincentive. The devout Catholicism of the Oberammergauers was not appealing to the rationalist, Protestant English visitors. American visitors more influenced by Emersonian Transcendentalism may have been more willing to embrace the Passion as simply a spiritual experience, but the Passion was not such an amorphously spiritual creation. It was concrete, and that was the problem. The Catholic doctrine and imagery that so pervade the Passion—its Marian devotion, its typological reading of Old Testament narratives, and

its enthusiastic embrace of a visual and tactile New Testament narrative with a maximum of sensory detail and a minimum of metaphorical gloss—were not aspects that the cultured English visitors could valorize or affirm. Passion Plays themselves, of course, had a history in medieval England, but it was seen as a crude and somewhat barbarous old tradition that the educated modern Englishman would wish to distance himself from. If the attractive and admirable qualities of the Oberammergau Passion—that which was worth taking home with them—was to be understood as religious or spiritual, then it needed to be extracted out of the embarrassing and inappropriate Catholic package in which it came.

The solution to this puzzle was to treat Oberammergau anthropologically, not theologically. The particular doctrines and narratives of the Passion were less important than the simple, sincere, and almost primitive faith that it exemplified. Oberammergau became the place that the modern world, with its interests and troubles, had overlooked. In particular, English visitors were keen to emphasize that whatever else it was, the Oberammergau Passion was not a capitalist venture. Any income it happened to generate was nearly an accident and certainly not the purpose of the whole affair.

This nostalgic opposition to capitalist modernity is, of course, an ideological self-positioning that requires an understanding of modernity to assert. Oberammergau may have been a village, but the villagers understood the world around them: they were able to effectively navigate the world of princes and priests, railmen and restaurateurs, and businessmen of all sorts. They were far from naïve peasants whom the world just happened to discover. Ironically, the Oberammergau Passion was only possible as an international pilgrimage because of the very technological, capitalist system that its visitors so longed to escape.

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While a very few English visitors were present in earlier years,<sup>4</sup> the first wave of correspondents arrived in Oberammergau for the 1871 performance, and their narratives they sent back were formative in shaping views of the Passion in England. A number of periodicals ran reviews; most expressed surprise that such crude peasants could make so compelling a performance. The *Times* ran a review from Rev. Malcolm MacColl, the Anglican rector of St George's Church in Bloomsbury, London. His amazement was palpable:

I went to see it with very mixed feelings. From what I had heard and read, I was prepared for a striking exhibition, but also half prepared for some rude shocks to one's natural sense of religious propriety. So impossible did it seem to represent on a public stage and in a worthy manner the sublime story of Gethsemane and Calvary. Well, I have seen it, and I shall go home with the conviction that the thing is not impossible where a vivid faith and an intense devotion are combined in the representation. I have never seen so affecting a spectacle, or one more calculated to draw out the best and purest feelings of the heart.<sup>5</sup>

Note that he does not mention theological precision or artistic skill alongside faith and devotion. The affective power came not from the quality or accuracy of the performance, but from the sincerity of the performers. And the Play's power was not in what it depicted, but in how the audience responded to it (the 'drawing out'). The trope of the Oberammergau Passion as an surprisingly compelling diamond in the rough was echoed by another reviewer, who called himself simply 'An Oxonian,' who was struck by the quaintness and "simplicity" of the performance:

All through the Play, I kept repeating to myself, 'This is a primitive mediaeval, half-civilized peasantry, still sunk in the trammels of priestcraft; it

has never known what it is to have an open Bible, and a free press; it is deprived of the blessings of the Electric Telegraph, and is about 800 years behind the present age.’ But it would not do. I would not but confess that I was witnessing, not only a beautiful, but a most subtle and delicate and thoughtful rendering of the Gospel history.<sup>6</sup>

We should not, perhaps, take these expressions of surprise too literally. The trope of the world-weary urban sophisticate who travels to a place that time has forgotten and discovers the noble simplicity and grace of untrammelled natural man is an old one, and these writers were reenacting it in their prose. It is noteworthy that few of these reviews describe the performance in much detail, but rather, focus on their journey and their delight at what they found. It made for punchy journalism and piqued English interest in Oberammergau. But it was not enough to sustain a relationship with the play.

In order to make Oberammergau into not just a romantic surprise but a repeatable reality, this initial attraction needed to be given substance through more than the occasional pamphlet, review and literary journal. This mix of sentiment, nostalgia and devotion needed to be packaged and sold to the British public. It would be unwise to underestimate the role in this of Thomas Cook and Son, the pioneering travel agents and expedition planners who introduced several generations of well-to-do Britons to the luxuries and excitements of international travel. Thomas, the founder, was a Baptist with a strong pro-temperance position, and his son was equally staunch in his nonconformist Protestantism. They were in no way sympathetic to the Catholic demonstrativeness of the Passion. And yet, they were businessmen and knew an opportunity when they saw one. In preparation for the 1880 production, which was one of the earliest to attract a large international audience, the Cooks put aside their personal distaste for the Passion and “felt compelled to take such steps as we considered necessary to secure the best possible arrangement and the greatest comforts we could for the large

number of comparatively wealthy and well-educated English speaking travelers, whom we knew would wish to travel under our arrangements to Ammergau.”<sup>7</sup>The company opened a temporary office in Oberammergau in 1879, which would become permanent in 1930 and remain open into the 21st century. However, in promoting Oberammergau, the company took pains to separate their own cosmopolitan, commercial aims from those of the village in order to appear to be appropriately respectful of the simplicity and certainly not motivated by profit:

We gave instruction to our representatives specially to avoid entering into any arrangements which could possibly offend the susceptible villagers, or be looked upon by any one as combining pleasure or money-making with religious object, and in that spirit we declined proposals made to us by speculators who wanted the use of our name to support them in announcements .... [We did this all] without charging the traveler a single penny for our services.<sup>8</sup>

The Passion may not have been religiously supportable for the Baptist Cook, but it—and the villagers who put it on—did have a sort of fragile innocence that was ‘susceptible’ to contamination and thus ruination from the influence of the modern (and commercial) world. (Exactly how the Thomas Cook expected to bring 6000 well-off British tourists to a rural Bavarian village without introducing more than a bit of modern influence is another matter.<sup>9</sup>) The Cooks’ refer to the villagers’ religion as a sign of their faith and purity, but they are not themselves making a religious appeal. Twenty years later, in promoting tours to the 1900 production, the Cook advertisement was even more explicit about this distinction. In particular, it was important that the performance was so without artifice that it was not only non-commercial, it was not in fact a piece of theatre:

Oberammergau ... as an embodiment of simple old-world faith and piety is without parallel in our day ... The scenery surrounding this picturesque



Bavarian village speaks to the traveler of peace and simplicity, idylls and pastorals – of anything, in short, rather than a great theatrical exhibition. And indeed it is due to the villagers to state that they do not consider the taking a part in the Passion Play a dramatic performance, but an act of worship. It is this important fact that elevates the representation above all other spectacles and renders it so profoundly impressive to the beholder.<sup>10</sup>

What was being sold in Oberammergau, then, was not the quality of the performance or even value of the spiritual instruction it could offer, but rather the sincerity and authenticity of the performers. This could be ‘profoundly impressive’ even to the most skeptical of Englishmen. By treating the Oberammergauers as stalwart guardians of an ancient mindset and tradition, it was not necessary to admire the content or form of the performance to admire that they were doing it.

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This admiration seems to have been necessary, because for many visitors, the performance did not meet particularly high standards of artistic quality or theatrical taste. Fairly typical was Benno Rauchenegger’s description in *Bruckmann’s Illustrated Guides* from 1900:

Simplicity and naturalness, supported by a certain religious enthusiasm, lend to the homely gifts of the country actors a consecrated dignity that cannot fail to make an impression on the spectator and to put to silence every critical analysis. In consequence of the great success obtained by the people of Oberammergau, there has been no lack of attempts to alter the present form of the Passion Play, and to propose changes in accordance with views on modern art, but these endeavors have met with no acquiescence on the part of

the conservative population, and we shall not be going far wrong, if we approve of their persisting in this line of action. Not that the Play is incapable of improvement, nay rather that it is in need of it - but whether the improvements could be just as well mastered by the performers, is a question difficult to answer.<sup>11</sup>

For others, of course, this pastoral dignity was not enough to overcome the Passion's weaknesses. Henry Gideon wrote that only "a religious devotion which condones every shortcoming, will obliterate the memory of the wretchedness of the musical performance of the musical performance which accompanied the Passionspiel of 1910. No intelligent tourist who possesses an iota of the critical faculty can take exception to this statement."<sup>12</sup> Gideon's view may stand on the more polite end of the mockery of the Oberammergauer's peasant ways, and other voices defended them from this mockery. Hermine Diemer prefaced her 1900 account of the play with the claim that "the Ammergauers are a people which [*sic*] deserve to be taken earnestly and to be treated earnestly, and that neither they nor their Play deserve the assault and ridicule which is hurled upon them from certain quarters."<sup>13</sup> This tension between those who thought that the villagers' sincerity and simplicity excused all artistic shortcomings and those who did not can be seen in the differing responses of the explorer Richard Burton and his wife Isabel Burton to the performance. Richard found the performance dull, poorly done, and uninteresting. But for Isabel, the experience was one of transformation. Yes, she admitted, quoting approvingly from MacColl and the Oxonian, there may be a "shortcoming here and there," but:

It seemed not a play, but as if we were carried back eighteen hundred and forty-seven years ago, and that all was real, and we were talking part in it.<sup>14</sup>

This denial that there was any artifice in what, for any of its faults, was clearly a consciously staged production extended to a denial that it was done for the audience's benefit. "They are unconscious of

us,” she wrote. “They did not ask us to come, they cannot hinder us in coming.”<sup>15</sup> This frankly ridiculous fiction—that the villagers simply are acting naturally, that Oberammergau in fact *is* some sort of religious otherworld with an appropriate disdain connection to the economics of this massive audience—is one the Oberammergauers were not above promoting themselves. The published script of the 1922 Passion includes this in its preface:

We are often reproached that the spirit of the vow is extinct, and that the Play is a matter is a mere matter of speculation [i.e., business]. If that were so, we should surely not have taken the important step of resuming the matter, which brings us uncertainty and which might be our ruin. We have brought many sacrifices for our object, the Community is striving to produce the Play in a worthy manner, and to offer a pleasant home to their guests, but we do not expect great profit or riches. We cling to our tradition with faithfulness, in remembrance of our forefathers, and hope to be remembered in the same way.<sup>16</sup>

One does not have to accuse the villagers of insincerity to say that they had done the math and knew the enormous economic impact that the Passion had on the town. That they felt the need to include this in the Preface—in English, notably—does indicate that they knew how important it was that the outside world saw them that as disinterested in their own performance as anything but devoted, faithful service. Note, however, the slight equivocation here: the faithfulness shows is to the vow, to tradition, and to the forefathers, but not to the God or the Church, as would have been the case a century earlier. Tradition has replaced religion as the focal point of the Oberammergauer’s simple sincerity. This position was, of course, far less taxing for Protestant tourists, and did not require one to actually change the performance, only the way it was publicized.

This tendency to treat the Passion as a natural outpouring of the character of the village itself was perhaps encouraged by the normal mode of housing for visitors to the productions through at least 1900. As a rule, the performances would begin early in the morning, pause around noon for lunch, and finish in the late afternoon.<sup>17</sup> This made arriving on the day of the performance impractical. Therefore, most visitors arrived the evening before. Lacking adequate hotels, guests would stay overnight in the home of villagers, have breakfast with them in the morning, see the performance, and leave in the late afternoon. The experience of the arriving in a strange village and sharing room and board with a local—who may very well be seen a few hours later on stage—was part of the charm. An illustrated travelogue for children titled *Zigzagging amongst Dolomoites* (unsigned, but authored by Elizabeth Tuckett) which tells the story of a family’s travels around Europe, describes staying “in the house of ‘Nathaniel’”—which may be the name of her host or his role, or a deliberate elision of the two—in the same sentence as describing the lingering music and “bright-robed chorus.”<sup>18</sup> For some, these were simply substandard accommodations. “Much has been said of the poor accommodation and scarcity of food,” wrote A.W. Buckland in 1872,<sup>19</sup> but for many, this simply added to the excitement of living amongst people who “seem to belong more to the past than the present”<sup>20</sup> and were not so much performing the Passion as living it.

One of the consequences of this identification of the play with the people of Oberammergau was the frequent idea amongst supporters of the Passion that it would be wholly inappropriate for it to tour outside of the village, or for it to lead to a surge of staging of passion plays by others elsewhere. In Oberammergau, the character of the village and the isolation and infrequency of the event made the Passion possible and noble. Elsewhere, or by others, it would be corrupted by the profit motive or cynically manipulated by modernity, becoming blasphemous, crude or simply inappropriate. George Molloy, who was especially impressed with his visit to the Passion in 1871, was nevertheless clear that it ought not to be brought back to England:

The peculiar combination of circumstances which, in the course of many generations, has brought it to its present perfection in this mountain hamlet, could not, I think, be found elsewhere in the world; nor could they long subsist, even here, without the protection which is afforded by its rare recurrence. The curiosity of visitors would easily degenerate into irreverence, and the simple piety of the people would inevitably suffer from frequent contact with an ever-changing concourse of tourists.<sup>21</sup>

As early as 1860, one correspondent who was quite impressed with the Passion, thought it wholly inappropriate for “the natural reserve and delicacy of a more northern and more civilized people .... This, beyond all dispute, is an institution which cannot be transplanted without provoking sentiments the exact opposite of those which it excites in its own locality.”<sup>22</sup>

The view had not changed much twenty years later: in 1890, the Irish priest P.J. O’Reilly visited in 1890 and reported back that

One place alone exists where any effort to represent Christ's Passion in a drama would not be either artistically weak and ineffective, and consequently disedifying and repulsive or on the part of some of those engaged be mercenary, and therefore blasphemous and sacrilegious. That place is Ober-Ammergau.<sup>23</sup>

Part of what these writers were reacting to was what they saw as the impressive stoicism, seriousness and closeness to the Gospel narrative the Oberammergau Passion, at least as it was staged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Earlier productions, as Shapiro notes, may have been quite different.<sup>24</sup>) The English tradition of mystery plays that they were more familiar with, in contrast, was (rightly) seen as one that was heavy on ribald (or ‘indecent’) humor, larger-than-life characters, and broad comedy and melodrama, with only a thin link to biblical narratives. As a form of public religion, this raucous

crowd-pleasing carnival was seen as backwards at best and . A.W. Buckland wrote, “Now that we have attained to somewhat of light, let us know seek to go back into the darkness. If curiosity leads us to see a miracle play let us wait till 1880, and then visit Ober Ammergau, but let us not seek to re-introduce among us that which is so happily dead and buried.”<sup>25</sup>

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There is, after all, something dangerous about a Passion Play, and it has to do with the audience. All theatre audiences have the potential to become unruly mobs, and there have been a great many techniques that theatre and performance makers have used over the centuries to tame and control them.<sup>26</sup> For most contemporary thinkers, including Shapiro, the great danger of the tradition of the passion play tradition was its ability to provoke an audience into a hateful, violent mob, especially at the expense of the Jews. When the Gospel is presented in dramatic form, the dramaturgy of the event suggests that Jews—or at least the Temple Priesthood—make for the obvious and emotionally compelling villains. The nineteenth century Oberammergau Passions certainly used this pattern: an 1860 review refers to the “forcible representation of the predominant guilt of the Jewish hierarchy,” and quotes the (repeated) invocation of the trans-generational blood guilt of the Jewish people in calling for the crucifixion of Jesus (“His blood on us and on our children be / Yes! Upon you and on your children too.”<sup>27</sup> Shapiro quotes Alexander Sellar, who also attended the performance in 1860, on how this dramaturgical anti-Semitism could provoke an affect of rage and hatred in the audience that could lead to mob violence:

With strange emotions you gazed upon the executioners as upon wild beasts  
when they tore his mantle into shreds, and cast lots for his vesture; and the  
Jewish race appeared hateful in your eyes, as you watched them gathering

round the cross, looking upon the man they had crucified, and railing at him, and taunting him with his powerlessness and his pain. Then for the first time you seemed to understand the significance of those ungovernable explosions that in the history of the middle ages ones reads of, when sudden outbursts of hatred against the Hebrew race had taken place, and have been followed by cruelties and barbarities unexampled in history. Just such a feeling seemed excited in this Ammergau audience by this representation.<sup>28</sup>

The early Oberammergau visitor most sensitive to issues of anti-Semitism was likely Joseph Krauskopf, rabbi at a reform synagogue in Philadelphia. He visited the Passion in 1900 and delivered a series of lectures on his experience from his pulpit, which were published the next year. He describes the performance in terms similar to others, but also points out the more subtle Jewish stereotypes being used, such as the portrayal of Judas as haggard, snake-like, and repulsive, especially in the betrayal scene, and how this character formed a model for the anti-Semitic images of the Middle Ages: “Everything that is vile in human nature is pressed into that one character of Judas Iscariot.”<sup>29</sup> But his biggest concern was the effect of watching the portrayal of a band of Jews mocking and assaulting Jesus:

I had heard of the emotional and hysterical outbreaks on the part of some of the spectators at the sight of the outrages perpetrated against the Jesus of the Passion Play; I had heard that some had been so wrought up by the play as to become temporarily insane, and run about town haunted by wildest hallucinations, and I could readily understand why; and I could also imagine the kind of feelings against Jews that hundreds and thousands of these spectators would take home with them to all parts of Europe, and to distant lands across the seas, as a souvenir of Oberammergau.<sup>30</sup>

Krauskopf's response—that these outrages did not in fact happen, and that the narrative of Jewish guilt is untrue—is both correct and irrelevant. The potency and danger of these representations was not that they convinced their audience that they were correct; everyone knew that this was a staging with actors portraying roles distinct from themselves. Rather, the power came from the affective appeal. And fictionality does not have much of a role in changing that.

But did audiences in fact respond to incitement in this way? Neither Sellar nor Krauskopf in fact observe them doing so. In fact, both remark on how quiet the spectators were. Certainly, the argument can be made that the Passion helped to plant certain anti-Semitic seeds in German culture which, a half-century later, would be harvested by Hitler, but they were hardly the only ones to do so, and these seeds do appear to be quite slow-growing. Though they saw clearly how the material of the play could provoke it, they did not actually observe that provocation in the theatre itself.

In fact, it is striking how seldom other audience members are mentioned in the travelers' accounts. Many of these narratives seem quite individual – the intrepid explorer discovering a foreign land and its culture alone. But with 4000 spectators a day arriving as early as 1900, the visitors likely outnumbered the locals for a long time. Oberammergau has never been easy or inexpensive to get to, and knowing who makes the effort to attend it can tell us a good bit about the character of the Passion, setting aside questions of anti-Semitism. It is also instructive to see how those audiences behave when they are there. We have a different set of behavioral expectations for audiences in the theatre than we do for audiences for stand-up comedy, or for congregants at a worship service. Importantly, some twentieth century theatre makers looked to religious worship as a model for how audiences could participate more as co-creators than as passive spectators. Because of the hybridity of the Passion, it makes an interesting test case for the appropriateness of these models.

When the audience is mentioned, there is a noticeable difference between the earlier accounts (until 1880 or 1890) and the later ones. Early accounts call the audience remarkably calm, peaceful,



and silent, if emotionally touched, and sometimes refer to it as a ‘congregation.’<sup>31</sup> As a rule, these accounts are those that are more unashamedly in awe of the noble simplicity of the Oberammergauers. The audience are taken to be villagers as well, though this may not in fact be the case, and thus the unique nature of Oberammergau requires them to be as pristine as the performers. Isabella Burton, perhaps the strongest voice for Oberammergau as a romantic otherworld, wrote:

No one ate and drank at the solemn parts of the Play. the spectators are too rapt, and I never saw a better-conducted audience in my life; and I am told it is always so.<sup>32</sup>

But note the reference to food and drink here; no contemporary review of Hamlet would bother mentioning what the audience was not eating. Later accounts, as well as those which are a bit more skeptical, sometimes portray a somewhat rowdier audience, eating, drinking, shouting and talking. This is not a condemnation as such, but merely evidence that there was a difference between their understanding of this event and an Englishman’s understanding of what it meant to go to the theatre or to church. Henry Blackburn, in 1890, described the behavior of the audience of ‘peasants’:

The peasants had more the attitude of being in a picture gallery; they were more or less impressed, but evidently under no particular restraint of conduct. Some were in tears, and one or two indeed hysterical towards the end; and some—let us be exact—took beer frequently through the day. They came and went as they pleased, they brought their little children, and old men were carried in and had every incident read to them from the book of the play.<sup>33</sup>

Blackburn does not particularly mind this; it was, he says, “a picture speaking to them in a language they could understand.”<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein, he notes in passing that there were some scenes of “ludicrous incident” that it would be “unfair to write down.”<sup>35</sup> It is not a problem that a performance designed for peasants presents itself in a way that is appealing to them. There are two problems with

this. First, not all the audience were peasants, even in 1890. As the Passion grew, local audiences became a smaller and smaller part of those who attended. By the 1930s, the Oberammergau Passion would be turned into a symbol for all of Germany, which, even if it celebrated a pastoral ideal, spoke more to a national and international elite than to a local woodcarvers and shepherds. And second, this image of the play as ‘picture gallery’—reminiscent of the notion of church art as the bible of the unlettered—will need to fall away once the audience becomes more educated and cosmopolitan. This wildness, of course, is just what put off a number of Englishman as insufficiently restrained. If the Passion does not make this transition, it will simply remain a local event for an increasingly small community. And it is worth noting that there is nothing in Blackburn’s description that suggests that this increase in audience activity made them feel a higher level of responsibility for or participation in the Passion as an event.

When I saw the Passion in 2010, the audience was far from the peasantry. Tickets were expensive—about 150 euro, or two hundred dollars—and included an advertisement for BMW on their reverse side. Most guests seemed to be middle-class tourists of the sort who would attend other major cultural festivals such as Glyndebourne and Avignon, though it did appear to be an older group. The audience was quiet and well-behaved, with only the occasional whispering amongst themselves. A few brought snacks, but no more so than to a Broadway show. While the audience was attentive, I did not see any signs of religious passion: I heard no cries or tears, even at the crucifixion scene. I did not have the sense of participating in the performance, as opposed to watching it. Of course, unlike in 1900, the contemporary Passion begins at two pm and, after a dinner break, concludes in the evening. This means that, as the play builds to a dramatic climax, night has fallen and we can no longer see our fellow audience members. The stage is illuminated, but we are not, creating the more traditional individualized theatre audience that most of us are used to, where each individual spectator feels as if they are watching the performance for themselves alone. Whether they

were silent and respectful or drunken and hysterical, this was certainly not an experience that nineteenth century Oberammergau audiences could have shared.

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We have one further clue as to what brought visitors to Oberammergau at the turn of the twentieth century. Souvenirs of the visit were popular then, as now, and some remain. In particular, we have a set of picture postcards of the 1890 and 1900 performances, which, if they do not give us a perfect indication of what these performances looked like, they do give some indication of it as well as a sense of how audience members choose to remember them.

The Oberammergau Passion has been photographed since 1850,<sup>36</sup> and by 1870, the year Ludwig II commissioned photographs of his own, there was a “brisk traffic” in these images, spreading the Passion’s fame.<sup>37</sup> Like the photographs in the decades that follow, they come in one of two types. They either show a closeup of an individual actor in costume and character, particularly the more famous actors, or a wide-shot spanning the width of the stage, displaying one of the Passion’s crowded, picturesque, opulent scenes. Referring back to Blackburn’s idea image of the audiences as visitors to a visual art gallery, these images seem to suggest a performance that is built on relatively static, large scenes with little movement, which give the audience time to contemplate the picture in front of them as the dialogue proceeds. The play also makes use between scenes of a series of *Lebedene Bilder* —‘living images’ or *tableau vivants*—a series of stylized, static depiction of scenes framed by the white-robed chorus explaining in song how they prefigure the events of the Gospels. But this preference for pictorial grandeur over movement seems to apply to the rest of the Passion as well. Of course, when one has over a hundred people on stage, a still staging is far easier

than a moving one, but this is also an aesthetic choice which facilitates a contemplative, meditative relationship between the spectator and the performance.

Figures 1 and 2 below are two official photographs from the production in 1900 and 1890, respectively.<sup>38</sup> [place images Edelman 1 and Edelman 2 about here] The first is an official postcard from the 1900 production showing Christ before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. Note the grand opulence of the set which, while perhaps evoking the empires of Venice or Austria-Hungary, makes no real effort to evoke the aesthetics of first-century Jerusalem. The priests' outfits are ornate, luxurious and (likely) vividly colored, as opposed to the more simple flowing garments worn by Christ on the image's right. Caiaphas and the other high priest (in black on the left) wear headdresses with two round horns, a common depiction of Jews in Christian art since medieval times. The shape, garment, and formality of gestures refer more to the tradition of Biblical scenes depicted in oil on canvas, rather than a stage tradition of medieval carnival. This image could be contemplated, as a Book of Hours used to be, after it was sent as a postcard across the world. Figure 2 shows an equally painterly image of Anton Lang as Jesus, in the pose of *Ecce Homo*. This figure includes all the iconography expected for such a scene – the crown of thorns, the spear, the bound hands, the downturned face—but isolates them from the rest of the scene as it would have been depicted in the performance. As was the fashion of the time, his body remains clean and unmarred by wounds; the suffering that the viewer is asked to contemplate is expressed only in the face.

The stillness and pictorial majesty of these images do seem to suggest that at least part of the audience had the calm, devout attitude that Burton and other visitors observed. But this need not be the case. These guides and postcards were created more for tourists than for locals, who would have had no need to send a card home. And they bear the official stamp of the Oberammergau community, meaning that they were part of the maintenance of the attitude of pious simplicity which was so attractive to outsiders. This was certainly one way of perceiving Oberammergau, but we should not

conclude that it was the only way. I see no reason to assume, as Burton does, that the audience responded as a single unit. Audiences rarely do, and large and diverse audience are even less likely to do so. The hybridity of the Passion as a spectacle, as a practice, and as an event may have been every bit as present in 1900 as it was in 2010, if under a different guise.

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With this reception history in mind, then, I return to my initial struggle to make sense of what sort of event the Passion was in 2010. Was this a religious pilgrimage, a piece of theatre, a nostalgic reenactment, or a celebration of Bavarian culture, or a tourist trap? How was I, as an audience member, being asked to engage with it?

At the most concrete level, I felt a sense of awe at the monumental scope and weight of the performance. The enormous stage is at times filled with a cast of several hundred, and those who cannot fit crowd onto the roof. There are live animals on stage—horses, donkeys, and of course camels. The pacing the pacing often quite deliberate, heavy, even ponderous, so that the minutes add up to hours. There are many long speeches, little stage movement, and a great deal of narration. And the large choruses of supernumeraries—hundreds of people at once—can take considerable time to get on and off the stage. The *Lebedenes Bilder*, with the static images in shockingly bright colors at the back of the stage framed by the white-clad chorus, was the clearest presentation I have ever seen of the theological concept of typology. The two testaments were explicitly tied together but never confused; the static Old was framed as an illustration of the living New. The production felt didactic, stodgy, old-fashioned and proudly so; it wore its tradition as a badge of pride.

The music which is used in every *Lebedenes Bilder* and in much of the rest of the production—largely still that composed by Rochus Dedler for the 1820 production—had a heavy

formality and pre-Romantic stiffness. For the audience, this omnipresent music had the effect of placing the performance within a secular artistic tradition, that of classical German-language opera from Gluck to Mozart and Beethoven and Weber. While this music is obviously pre-Wagnerian, Oberammergau's place in this operatic tradition connects it to German festival opera, the modern apex of which is, of course, Bayreuth. (In fact, in a 1960 photo essay, *Life* magazine mentioned Oberammergau as a destination for opera-loving American tourists in Europe alongside Glyndebourne, Salzburg and Aix-en-Provence.<sup>39</sup>) Such festivals are very high in cultural capital, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense—but they also represent high cultural nationalism, both German and specifically Bavarian. These national and cultural capital are more visible in Oberammergau than its religious value. While I saw exactly one nun, and no obvious priests or monks, I saw several dozen people in lederhosen and dirndl, traditional Bavarian costume. In the shops around the show, I saw no rosaries or small devotional items, but there were many tourist souvenirs: T-shirts, caps, tote bags, as well as cultural artifacts like scripts, books and CDs. Visitors can also buy the hand-carved wood sculptures that are the traditional crafts of the area. While many of them are statues of saints or angels, these tend to be the larger and more expensive pieces: the majority (and certainly the most purchased) are of secular subjects and seem to be intended for decoration rather than devotion.

And yet, while I don't think we can understand Oberammergau without placing it in the frame of Bavarian high cultural tourism, it does not fit wholly into that category either. Even for an audience that may not be as religious as that of centuries past, it is clearly constructed for an emotional, and even spiritual, appeal. The play is performed in German without benefit of subtitles or translation, yes, but the language it is performed in is Hochdeutsch, high or standard German, very much not the local dialect. And quite a few American and British church groups were there, trying desperately to follow with their nose in the English translation. And, while long, this was well-crafted performance, a compelling piece of dramatic art that used standard and effective theatrical

techniques to evoke empathy and pathos. Though it was hardly naturalistic, the 2010 version was far less stuffy and stylized than Passions past. Whereas in past performances there was an attempt to treat Jesus and his followers like a king and their court, this year, the disciples' costumes were simple and iconic. The Roman Empire and the Temple Priesthood still wore extravagant frocks, but they seemed like a dazzlingly beautiful swirling storm with Jesus as its eye. In fact, it was notable, even surprising, how seldom Jesus spoke. Frequently, other characters would speak around him, about him, while he maintained a calm, simple, but compelling central presence. Our eyes were caught by the spectacle, but they kept being drawn back to him no matter how little he did. That he spoke so little added to the sense of mystery surrounding this central character.

One could see, however, the ghost of another audience at this production, who may not even have been in the theatre with us on that August day. This was the battalion of Catholic theologians and Jewish rabbis who, since the 1970s, have been following the lead of the Second Vatican Council in purging the Oberammergau Passion Play of its anti-Semitic content, as Shapiro describes so usefully. The production in 2010 seemed to go out of its way to show a highly Jewish Jesus, who prays in Hebrew with his disciples, holds up a Torah scroll to the assembled masses, and speaks with great respect towards the Law and the Prophets. These developments are to be welcomed, surely, but they seemed out of place, as if they were added separately to appeal to yet another audience: those who visited Oberammergau to check it for anti-Semitism. In fact, the only words spoken that are not in German are in Hebrew. It is one thing to add an operatically sung version of the Shema (the Jewish prayer of God's unity), which, while probably not a known or comprehensible text for the bulk of the audience, will serve for those who know it to emphasize the Disciples' membership in the Jewish tradition. It is another entirely when, at the Last Supper, Jesus quotes from 20th-century Hebrew poet (and Zionist heroine) Hannah Senesh without naming her. While non-Jews might appreciate the beauty of this one line ("Blessed is the match consumed in the kindling of flame,") it

is highly unlikely that it would be more memorable than the spectacle surrounding it. It functioned as a particularly targeted hail, in the terms of performance theory: a call-out from the performance to acknowledge and affirm the identity of a small but essential subset of the audience. In this, it functioned differently than the overt “Jewish content” (the Torah scroll, the Hebrew prayers): the Senesh was an appeal to the small audience that would go unrecognized by the rest, while the more overt content was legible to all. Whether it was helpful in recasting the traditional antagonistic relationship between Christ and the Jews that Passion Plays traditionally convey, or if it was simply an awkward fit with the traditional spectacle of the piece and thus hard to relate to, is hard for me to judge.

For most of us, though, who were neither monastically devout Christians or politically conscious Jews but simply compelled audience members, we were faced with the question of what, exactly, this spectacle was *for*? Why take the trouble to put on such an enormous show?

The two possible answers mark out the tension between an Oberammergau as a devotional event and as a piece of cultural tourism. First, the spectacle reflects the value of tradition. This is true in the (crude) causal and economic senses—the play has grown larger and more spectacular over the centuries in that its tradition has been monetized—but also in a (more relevant) justificatory one. This play is spectacular as a *statement* about its importance in the culture of Bavaria, Germany, Catholic Christendom, and the town of Oberammergau. This need not be a mode of cynical commerce; the staging of the play is itself a devotional act, as the opening song reminds us, done in fulfillment of a vow by the grandchildren of those whom God has spared. In this reading, our responsibility as audience members is to notarize and witness to that devotion. We are *not* its addressees, as much we may be moved by it. By this view, the audience genuinely are tourists, though not in any derogatory sense of that term: they are there to witness something strange and exotic from their own life. The profound *otherness* of that spectacle is what makes it powerful. This



is a Levinasian notion of otherness, not a Kristevan one: the other in its specificity does not *become* us but, in its alterity, compels our response.

The second option is that the spectacle is there for the purposes of the story—that is, to heighten the power of the drama. And in this, it is very effective. The Passion, of course, centers around that simple, quiet, enigmatic and charismatic figure of Jesus. It is a standard director's trick to increase a character's social status by having others talk them up, and to increase the audience's sympathy for them by contrasting them with others who are less sympathetic. That is what the spectacle of the Passion does. It focuses our attention on the figure of the incarnated Christ and how radically unlike the world around him he and his ministry were. But as Jesus speaks so seldom—because he is performed as a relative blank—the audience is asked to discover his character for themselves. And that contemplation is a devotional act that the audience *themselves* are given space to do, not as observers but as thoughtful contributors.

Inevitably, both modes of audiencing are present; the spectacle makes us both witnesses and devotees. But I want to point out that there is not as much space between them as it might seem. Both models begin with contemplative observation of that which is going on front of us. Both follow the phenomenological model of the audience's relationship to performance exemplified by the work of the great Bert States.<sup>40</sup> We are not participants in what is going on. We watch it and think and respond. And that watching may be devotional or purely aesthetic, but the fourth wall separating the audience from the stage is never breached. And that, to me, was a disappointment.

Let me explain by describing the play's final scene, the resurrection. By now, the sun has set and the theatre is quite dark. In half-light, we make out the women by the tomb. They discover that Jesus is risen, and they run, joyously, to spread the good news. A child enters from upstage, singing, carrying a small lit candle. The chorus has entered in two long rows, and the child turns to the two nearest him and lights the candles they hold. They turn to light the next, and so on, and so on, and

from this one small flame, a cascade of light grows and spills downstage towards us until we are looking at a sea of candlelight. But this is where it stops. The cast turn their backs to us and leave the stage, singing, bringing their light with them.

It would not have been unreasonably difficult or expensive to give us candles, too, and to let the light flow from the tomb of the risen Jesus, on to the cast, and on to us, so that we can bring the light out into the dark Bavarian night. But they chose not to. It was not our job to be involved. Artistically, culturally, or devotionally, we were asked to participate in this Passion through spectation, reflection and contemplation alone. All three of these are imaginative actions, and our audiencing was not certainly passive. But they are all private and individual pursuits, like books of hours or shopping. And my disappointment comes from the way in which the spectacle did not allow us to overcome that individuality and do something *together* as a single audience, a community of witnesses for this extraordinary performance.

Part of theatre's power is that it is always and thoroughly collaborative. As the audience play a key role in that collaboration, the questioning of their role is necessary. In Oberammergau in 2010, we were asked to watch, listen, feel, and think. This was extraordinarily powerful, but the logic of the Christian message, as well as the logic of the performative event, both imply a necessary concept of a community of reception, not just individual receivers. That this logic was not meaningfully applied to Oberammergau in 2010 gives the sense that it was first and foremost a touristic and cultural spectacle, reenacting and addressing a past that now had more value as history than as an address to a present public. Asking the motley bunch of tourists, critics, pilgrims, and fans that make up the contemporary Passion audience to all particulate in a single community may simply be impossible. The hybrid performance has fractured, and forcing it into a single mode of address for this diverse audience would be too violent, too disrespectful, and too rash a revision of what the Passion has become.

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