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Hitler's favorite passion play makes

After 350 years, the Bavarian town of Oberammergau con

"Oberammergau: The Troubling Story Of the World's Most Famous Passion Play" by James Shapiro. Pantheon, 238 pages, $24.

By J. Hoberman

James Shapiro calls the Oberammergau passion play that is currently being performed in a Bavarian mountain village – as it has been at least once each decade for more than 350 years – "the last continuous survivor of the great age of Christian drama." But from a Jewish perspective, Oberammergau's seven-hour pageant is (or was) something else as well. The play is Germany's longest-running exercise in religious anti-Semitism.

According to tradition, the first Oberammergau passion play was staged in a church courtyard in 1634 to fulfill a vow taken by survivors of the plague. The rise of passion plays in the late medieval period coincided with a general demonization of Jews, and Oberammergau's pageant was no exception. Although the play was revised many times, it consistently held the Jews under Roman rule collectively responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. Oberammergau, Shapiro writes, is one of the few places in the world where theater actually matters. The year of the Oberammergau play entails a tough seven-month regimen of evening rehearsals as a prelude to five months of performances. The pageant has 100 speaking parts, as well as numerous tableaux vivants which involve non-speaking actors, and it draws in more than half of Oberammergau's 5,200 residents, many of whom begin letting their hair and beards grow for months before the rehearsals begin. Apparently, desire to participate in this play is so strong that the town's mortality rates actually decline in the years preceding the play (and rise thereafter). Shapiro's main interests in Oberammergau are the intra-religious conflicts (Catholic-Protestant as well as Jewish-Christian) that have characterized the production as well as the theological changes these conflicts have brought about. Ironically, as he points out, for the past half-century the warring parties have been secular, pitting the Oberammergau village council against American Jewish organizations.(The 20th century has seen control of the play shift from the hands of the local clergy to a committee of villagers.)

Even after the theological foundation of the Oberammergau play was undermined as anachronistic by the declaration of Vatican II, in 1965, the village stubbornly clung to the original script holding that Jews killed Christ. (Thus, Shapiro notes, Oberammergau was 'holier' than the Church, even as Church officials noted that, as a secular event, the play could not be considered under their jurisdiction.) In November 1966, the American Jewish Congress Commission mobilized American intellectuals and artists to protest Oberammergau, which subsequently led to a 1970 boycott of the play. This brought about changes in the production, changes which have culminated in the play's millennial edition.

Three hundred years ago, the Oberammergau play was already something of doctrinal compromise, synthesizing a late 15th-century Catholic play with a 16th-century Protestant tragedy. Despite this blend, it retained the standard medieval mix of Satan and his minions sharing the stage with Christ and the angels. Shapiro calls it rough-and-tumble theater, addi
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theater, adding that the actor who would play Jesus was often taking his life in his hands. This early version did not have the crucifixion as its climax but rather Jesus' harrowing of hell, thus making it as much a candidate to be labeled revenge drama as a passion story. The mid-18th-century revisions made by a local Benedictine monk doubled the play's length and made it more Catholic by including extended lamentation scenes for the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalen.

Oberammergau was scarcely unique; some 300 Bavarian villages staged passion plays until they were banned as unseemly in 1770. But Oberammergau successfully toned down its play and managed to get dispensation for its continued performance. Another significant revision occurred in 1811 when the play was purged of its on-stage devils, thus leaving the Jews to carry the burden of villainy.

In 1830, just in time for Oberammergau's 'discovery' as the isolated remnant of idealized piety, the village constructed a permanent stage that was tailored to the naturalistic crowd scenes that had by then become a key part of the pageant. That year's production attracted 13,000 visitors; by 1860, the number had swelled to 100,000 (many from abroad, chiefly England). The passion play was considered unique, a miraculous remnant of a more pious era. Oberammergau was, as Shapiro points out, the ideal tourist destination: safe enough for young women and ready-made for group tours. In the prevailing fantasy, the village was imagined as isolated from the world and its inhabitants as simple peasants. Thus, Oberammergau was, Shapiro writes, an alternative to the great monuments of European civilization, something more spiritually rewarding. During this period, an English cardinal declared there were two ways back to Jesus: through Jerusalem and through Oberammergau. Never mind that, from the late-18th- century on, Oberammergau's merchants had plied the village's carved goods throughout Europe. Extending their collective role-playing beyond the theater, the townspeople were utterly convincing in the part that visitors projected upon them. Moreover, they happily participated in the creation of their own mystique. By 1870, there was already a trade in performer photos, with the actors charging 25 cents for an autograph. Later, no cameras were permitted inside the theater.

The most interesting chapters of Shapiro's book deal with Oberammergau under the Nazis. Adolf Hitler first attended the passion play in August 1930, although his presence was upstaged by visitors such as the British prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald; a future American vice president, Alben Barkley; Henry Ford; Max Planck, and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. As early as November 8, 1931, there was a swastika banner planted atop the mountain overlooking the village. According to Shapiro, unemployed Oberammergau natives joined the Nazis in record numbers. By March 1933, swastikas were all over the place. Hitler returned to Oberammergau as Germany's dictator in August 1934. Jesus was played by an active young Nazi, who would later maintain that the role proved that he could not have been anti-Semitic. Of those who participated in the 1934 play, the villager who played Judas was the only known anti-Nazi. Through the strategic elimination of one paragraph, the play appeared to call for the annihilation of the Jews. Oberammergau did not stage its play again under Nazi auspices, but Hitler continued to stress its importance. At the height of the war he told his staff he considered it vital that the passion play be continued at Oberammergau, for never had the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what took place in Roman times. Shapiro estimates that 60 percent of the villagers were active Nazis; nevertheless, the Oberammergau play was never de-Nazified. Indeed, the American military government there bankrolled the first post-war production, which included a smiling American boy as a symbol of American-German cooperation. Indeed, according to Shapiro, local priests have been more honest in acknowledging the play's inconsistencies than admiring visitors, who, he points out, are often the most emotionally invested in defending Oberammergau's traditions.

Part history, part field-report, Shapiro's book is occasionally repetitive and somewhat confusingly structured. Nevertheless, he makes a compelling case for Oberammergau's cultural significance, using the pageant as evidence that religious dogma is capable of undergoing change, but also as proof of the enduring theatrical power a medieval mystery play can hold for a modern audience. The townspeople, he notes, have been playing Jews for so long that visitors who share their stereotypes of what constitutes Jewishness have often commented on the biblical aura of many of the villagers, while playing the role of Judas may exact a heavy psychological price. This year, he points out, members of the village's losing, conservative faction have been cast in the less attractive roles Jews who were not among Jesus' close circle of disciples.

It has taken 35 years for Oberammergau to accept the doctrinal positions of Vatican II, and although the villagers have always insisted that their play was historically accurate, the current strategy has been to make it more so. Oberammergau 2000 depicts the passion as an internecine Jewish struggle that turns deadly only when the Roman occupiers become involved. Jesus is referred to as 'Rabbi', and Pontius Pilate, formerly the play's hero, is now equated with the Old Testament Pharaoh of Egypt. More controversially, Otto Huber the play's deputy director and the individual most responsible for its 2000 form – recently compared the Jewish priest Caiaphas to corrupt judges of the Third Reich. Still, Jewish scholars see the 2000 text, in which Jesus is a Jew executed by Romans rather than a Christian put to death by Jews, as a considerable improvement. Nor is that the only concession to contemporary tastes. Oberammergau 2000 has been staged with modern stations of the cross created by avant-garde theater director Robert Wilson. Now more than ever, the passion play is big business. The 2000 performance was made under contract for the Catholic Church. Tickets sold out a year in advance; the village anticipates between 500,000 and a million visitors (most of them American) and revenues totaling many million of deutsch marks.

Hitler continued to stress the importance of the Oberammergau pageant. At the height of the war he told his staff he considered it vital that the passion play be continued in this village, for never had the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what took place in Roman times. An estimated 60 percent of the villagers were active Nazis; nevertheless, the Oberammergau play was never de-Nazified.

The story has a happy ending. If there is any residual anti-Semitism in Oberammergau, claims Shapiro, he does not see it. Indeed, the author made his own positive intervention into the play's millennial version. Having noticed that the newly-inserted Hebrew blessing spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper scene had been garbled in transliteration, he took it upon himself to coach the actors.

J. Hoberman is the senior film critic at The Village Voice and the new film programmer at the Center for Jewish History. (By arrangement with the Forward)