

Germansâ€™ mega Passion play is back, and Jews are watching

March 11, 2010

OBERAMMERGAU, Germany (RNS)—With its focus on the last days of Jesus' life, a Passion play should, by its nature, arouse passions. But in Oberammergau, the world's most famous Passion play keeps stirring the wrong kind.

As it has almost every 10 years since 1634, this Bavarian town is putting the final touches on the [Oberammergau Passion Play](#), keeping up its end of a divine compact after residents survived the bubonic plague amidst the Thirty Years War.

The Oberammergau Passion Play in southern Germany, seen here in its most recent production in 2000, attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims during its summer run.

And, as has become almost routine in recent decades, plans for the play—particularly the choice of words in the script—are causing heartburn among some of the world's Jewish leaders.

“It is possible to have a Passion play without the Jews as villains, but I have never seen one,” said James Rudin, the [American Jewish Committee's](#) senior interreligious adviser.

The disagreement resurfaced when the play's creative team officially presented the script to the archbishop of Munich. They noted to the media that two Jewish organizations had reviewed the script.

That much is true—some German Jewish groups have praised organizers

for their attempts to strip some of the more blatant anti-Jewish lines from the script. But Jewish groups in the United States complain they've only been able to look at the script, not suggest changes.

The AJC and the Anti-Defamation League, in a joint statement, said they've spearheaded the "decades-long process of removing anti-Jewish elements" from the Oberammergau production for one main reason: "Passion plays have perpetuated anti-Jewish sentiment through caricatures and stereotypes of Jews and selective texts."

But there's another reason. Oberammergau is one of the few remaining Passion plays and, by far, one of the largest. The play, which clocks in at well over four hours, will be staged five times a week, from May through October, in a theater that holds 4,700.

The spectacle attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors to the picturesque village during its five-month run every 10 years. Nearly half of the town's 5,200 residents participate in one way or another.

The production transforms the tiny village into a major tourist destination. Only locals may act in the show, and many male actors shun razors for a year or more to lend their beards a more authentic look.

With the enthusiasm, the history and the numbers, Oberammergau is no ordinary Passion play, Rudin said.

"You come pre-prepared (knowing) that this is something significant. Therefore, what you see on the stage is significant," said Rudin. "It has a great potential to transmit toxic images."

Director Christian Stueckl and dramatist Otto Huber have made changes since they took over the production in the 1980s, making sure, for example, that Jesus is referred to as a rabbi, and removing some anti-Jewish references about a blood curse against the Jews.

Some, including Rudin, think there's room for still more changes, but others aren't so sure.

James Shapiro, an English professor at Columbia University who has written about Oberammergau, says the directors and actors can't make too many more changes without straying too far from the original material. The blood curse—"His blood be on us and our children"—comes straight from the Gospel of Matthew.

"It's not a flattering portrayal of the role of the Jews in the death of Jesus," he said.

Stueckl, the director, argues that there are major changes in his productions compared to earlier versions.

"It is actually an inter-Jewish story," he said, taking a break from rehearsals. He compared Jesus' actions against the Jewish authorities to "a young Catholic opposing the pope."

With that in mind, he said his first production focused on portraying Jesus as more of a revolutionary. Subsequent productions have aimed for a more nuanced Jesus, and Stueckl added more scenes this year because, he said, "I wanted to write more about Jesus."

For their part, locals say the massive undertaking is their attempt at presenting faith as they understand it. For many of the amateur actors, the experience is equal parts religious and dramatic.

Frederik Mayet, one of the two men playing Jesus, said his motivation partly was based on tradition, but also because of the religious questions it forces him to confront.

"Interacting with Jesus, the character, you learn whole new factors. You have the opportunity ... to really interact with Jesus," he said.

Huber, the dramatist, agreed, noting that crews obsess over details in a bid to present Jewish life accurately, but also to create a meaningful spiritual experience for the audience—many of whom will not understand the German-language dialogue.

“In Oberammergau, there is a very clever combination between, on one hand meditation, and drama,” he said.