

Oberammergau visitors see longest-running play

By WILLIAM WHITE

Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap," which has been on the stage 47 years, is the record holder for the world's longest-running play.

That's nothing if you compare it with the Oberammergau Passion Play, which has been running for almost 350 years.

Of course "The Mousetrap" plays every night, or at least five nights a week with a matinee on Saturday. And the Passion Play is shown only in the summer every 10 years.

But then any play that attracts 4,000 people for each showing and has been produced since 1634 must have something going for it. And it's a six-hour performance.

If you'd like to see the Passion Play at Oberammergau this summer, before it closes its 1980 run Sept. 28, unfortunately you can't. It's all sold out and has been since late last fall.

HOWEVER, YOU won't have to wait until 1990. An extra series is being presented in 1984 to celebrate the Passion Play's 350th anniversary. So unless you've read George Orwell's novel and think 1984 is going to be a year of horrors, save up your money, and when tickets go on sale in the fall of 1983, see your friendly travel agent and sign up.

Save lots of money; Germany is an expensive country to visit.

You'll have to buy a package tour. That means a plane flight, hotel accommodations, a week's tour of Bavaria and meals. It's the only way you can see the play, although if you wish you can make a separate flight arrangement. But the rest of the package is mandatory.

With inflation and all, nobody knows what it'll cost in 1984. This year it cost us \$532 per person to fly from Detroit to Frankfurt and \$652 each for the week in Bavaria: the play, hotel, meals (except drinks) and the bus tour.

Was it worth it?

There was absolutely no question about it. The production in Oberammergau was impressive. For the whole six hours — 9 a.m. to noon, and 3-6 p.m. — there wasn't a dull moment.

The play is produced, acted, directed and indeed conceived by amateurs. That is to say, the cast and company is not professionals but just ordinary townspeople of Oberammergau. The play deals mainly with Jesus Christ's last week on earth and it was simply marvelous. There's no better word for it.

It's done in German. (But you can buy an English script. It's done in the daylight so you can easily follow what the actors are saying.)

THE PRODUCTION consists of three main parts: the action, that is, the play itself, of 14 acts and each of them with several scenes; the *tableau vivant*, in which live actors pose but say nothing, largely in scenes from the Old Testament, beginning with Adam and Eve, on the inner stage; and the chorus, made up of 48 men and women singers, which parades the length of the stage and introduces each act by "announcing" in song what's going to happen, somewhat of an adaptation of the Greek Chorus.

The action ranges from Christ's entry into Jerusalem — extraordinarily well arranged and executed with more than 100 players on the huge stage — to the final Resurrection in front of the tomb.

Memorable are the cleansing of the temple by Christ, scenes involving Pontius Pilate, the Last Supper, Judas' betrayal and self-discovery of what he has done, and the descent from the cross.

No matter how well you know the story, there is something moving about seeing it depicted on the stage by dedicated actors.

What the official program says about the play is literally true: "The name of the most famous of all mountain villages is linked, the world over, with the tragic representation of the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ."

"THOUSANDS FROM every country come to see it, each time it is performed. These people follow and experience the Christian stage-play and return to their native land in every continent of the world deeply moved, even strongly affected, and with a feeling of fulfillment."

The present text is a revision of a version made in 1860 by a parish priest, J. Alois Daisenberg, which in turn goes back to a script by Father Othmar Weis in 1810. And in the last few years, the Parish of Oberammergau has further revised the play to allay Jewish objections. It has now been adapted to the theological propositions of the Second Vatican Council.

Meadow Brook has long hours

Visitors touring Meadow Brook Hall during the summer will be able to see a special architectural exhibit which shows the elaborate preparatory work that went into the creation of this country estate built in the late 1920s.

Less than a month remains for those who wish to take advantage of the expanded summer schedule, Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday, 1-5 p.m. After Sept. 1, the hall will be open for public tours on Sunday only.

Although each item in the display was used as a working tool by Meadow Brook Hall architects and designers, each piece is a work of art in itself.

As the preface to the English script says, "The Passion Play is not concerned to seek the guilty ones in the trial of Christ. Holy Scripture includes all of mankind in the guilt for Jesus' death. However, the question of guilt is not the only issue. . . . (There is also) the compassionate love of God, and teaching the whole world God's mercy."

Nevertheless, this year's production has caused a good deal of controversy in both the village of Oberammergau and in Germany. But the hope is that it will not destroy the tradition in the town, for Oberammergau is one of the last of more than 200 which began pro-

ducing the play about 400 years ago.

The story has it that, after King Gustav of Sweden retreated from Bavaria in 1632, the "Black Death," "the scourge of God," the plague of sickness wiped out village after village.

IF OBERAMMERGAU were spared, the village elders vowed to perform the "Passion-Tragedy" every 10 years. And "The Chronicle relates that, from the time of the Vow, no one else, although infected, died of the plague."

From 1634 on, the Passion Play has thus been put on every 10 years, getting it rounded out to 10th years along the way.

The music, played by a full orchestra of 65 members, adds considerably to the presentation, both with and without the chorus. It was composed in 1810 by Rochus Dedler, an Oberammergau teacher, and was rearranged in 1950 by Eugen Papst.

The cast, made up entirely of residents of the village, who must have lived there for 10 years (I was told), has 86 speaking parts — Christ, Mary, the Apostles, his friends, Pilate, Herod, priests, Pharisees, traders, witnesses, Romans, servants, guards, four executioners, two thieves, Barabbas, townspeople and children.

Because the Passion Play is so de-

manding of its cast in its six-hour performances, each of the 27 major speaking roles has two actors who alternate — Christ, Mary, Peter, John, Judas, Pilate, Herod and others.

BEGINNING MAY 24 and ending Sept. 28, the play is presented five days a week, with no productions on Tuesdays and Thursdays. There are 92 performances in the 1980 schedule.

Most of the Oberammergau tours bring their people into the village on the evening before they are to see the play, and the day after seeing the play they leave. Where the tourists spend their time before and after their visit

to Oberammergau varies. The village is small and pleasant, and the accommodations well arranged and wholly satisfactory.

Our particular tour spent its first three nights in Wiesbaden, Rothenburg and Munich. Rothenburg is a charming walled city, rather more of a village, with a cathedral and its wood carvings by Riemenschneider that are the finest pieces of such in the world. The rest of the tour, including the stop after Oberammergau in a Bavarian village called Feldkirchen, you could just as well forget.

But the Passion Play was worth it all.



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