

# Oberammergau Passion Play (1922)

## Abstract

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The first production of Oberammergau's renowned Passion Play since the war—which dire economic circumstances had forced the organizing villagers to postpone from 1920 to 1922—generated a tremendous amount of attention in the United States. Hollywood studios offered handsome sums to film the spectacle; a group of American civic leaders organized an eight-city U.S. tour by some of the play's performers; and *TIME* magazine featured the Bavarian potter who had played Jesus Christ in the three most recent productions on a December 1923 cover.

The two articles reproduced here from the *New York Times* in 1922 reported from Oberammergau just prior to the opening of the Passion Play season and immediately following the season's conclusion. Both articles commented on the number of American visitors to the event as well as on lucrative offers from the U.S. to bring the live production to the United States or allow Hollywood to film it in Oberammergau. The performers' rejection of these offers highlighted their commitment to their faith and its persistence in many parts of Weimar Germany. The articles illustrate the increasingly sympathetic American press coverage of Germany as a whole, just five years after the Armistice and in the midst of the Weimar Republic's skyrocketing inflation and financial implosion.

The November article drew, in particular, on the perspective of Mathilde Lang, who had just housed many American guests in Oberammergau during the play's 1922 season and was married to Anton Lang, the man who played Jesus Christ. She endorsed the decision by the majority of the performers to reject the lucrative Hollywood deal, but she also acknowledged that the offer had divided villagers, with some wanting to accept the money. Mathilde Lang's comments revealed the tension between materialistic and spiritual pursuits, even in one of the most ostensibly pious places in Germany. Furthermore, the article described a local economy in transition, with its traditional artisanal sector coexisting with a developing tourist one.

The *TIME* magazine cover and article from December 17, 1923, which appeared just as the performers' U.S. tour had begun, showed the American fascination with the Passion Play and its host village. Moreover, the list of committee members who had sponsored the Germans on their American tour read like a who's who of leading philanthropists and policy influencers in the United States, all of them seemingly keen to engage the country in alleviating Germany's problems.

That tour extended from mid-December 1923 to mid-April 1924, with the goal of raising \$1,000,000 to end childhood hunger in Germany through the sale of wood carvings that the play's touring performers made for a living back home in Oberammergau. The *New York Times* quoted Anton Lang at the start of the tour as saying, "A great hunger is killing all that is left of our people and children. It is brutalizing our middle class, from which come our thinkers and in which lies the future happiness of our country and the world." (NYT, December 13, 1923). At a White House reception, Lang delivered a more politically charged message in the presence of President Coolidge, when he spoke forcefully against the Treaty of Versailles, which then prompted Coolidge to end the visit. Coolidge later sought to repair the damage caused by negative press over the incident and wrote a letter to Anton Lang in praise of the performers' "splendid work," but adding that "it is not permissible for the President to receive public addresses from people of another nation, unless they be presented through the usual diplomatic channels." (NYT, January 13, 1926).

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## Source

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### **TEXT 1: No Oberammergau Play For New York (7 May 1922)**

Anton Lang, the Star, Refuses a Big Offer to Bring the Production Here.  
CLINGS TO ANCIENT VOW

Bavarian Performances Start This Week With Capacity Bookings

BERLIN, May 6 (Associated Press) –

With the opening this coming week of the first season of the Passion Play since 1910, the vanguard of Americans booked to see it already have arrived in Berlin on their way to Oberammergau.

Reports from that little Bavarian village, which has been off the tourist route for twelve years, indicate that preparations have been nearly completed to accommodate a record gathering for the current revival. Approximately 800 newspaper correspondents have been invited for next Monday's press performance, after which dress rehearsals will be held for two days in preparation for the formal opening on May 14.

Visitors this year find a striking significance in the origin of the play because of the recent prevalence of contagious diseases resulting from the famine in Russia. It was due to the terrible pestilence ravaging this country in 1633 that the survivors of Oberammergau in the following year vowed to give a representation of the life of Christ regularly thereafter as an atonement for their sins.

Unusual international interest in this year's revival is manifested. Capacity audiences for all performances have been booked in advance. Advices from Bavaria show that the high character of the production, which has characterized the performances for more than 280 years, has been maintained, both as to the calibre of the cast and the scenic equipment. The management has been bombarded more than ever with financial schemes, all of which have been declined scrupulously in the spirit of the original vow. The lofty ideals inspiring the cast and producers are further enunciated by the recent rejection by Anton Lang, the leading actor, of the "benedictions and dollars" offered by an American syndicate for him to appear in the United States.

Refuses a Flattering Offer.

It was proposed that Lang should receive any amount he might name, together with expenses. The offer also emphasized a belief that he would bring a great benefit to the United States and that his visit might promote international friendship. It was proposed that the play should be staged, as at Oberammergau, in a huge open-air theatre in New York, with Lang heading the cast. Whatever profit might be made, the American syndicate proposed, could be devoted to the populace of Oberammergau.

"The good and friendly people of America," said the proposal, "would receive you with love and send you back with benedictions and dollars."

Lang, an upland villager, replied modestly, thanking the syndicate and expressing appreciation of the spirit of the offer, but declining because to do so would make him feel like "an uprooted tree." He agreed that a new international spirit of kindness should prevail, and that the Passion Play well could contribute thereto, but continued:

"I am not a professional actor; I am in Oberammergau and cannot give up the conditions and traditions of my village. The Passion Play for us is the fulfillment of a vow which our ancestors have given. We never shall forget this fact. Were I to do so, it would undermine the power of religious experience which as enabled me to give my performances, and I should not be able again to properly impersonate the Saviour."

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He also revealed the fact that an American offer was rejected in 1914, providing for high weekly salaries for himself and two other members of the cast.

Source: "No Oberammergau Play for New York," *New York Times*, May 7, 1922, p. 33. Available online at: <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1922/05/07/99021559.html?pageNumber=33>

## **TEXT 2: "Sacrifice of the Locks" (5 November 1922)**

By PATRICIA MINNIGERODE

It was a shock to me, amounting to an outrage to my sense of poetry and beauty and atmosphere, when some one [sic], a gross man at the same table with us in the house of Anton Lang, the Christ of the Passion Play, stated without any emotion that most of the Passion Spiel players were in the barber's shop getting their hair cut off. He had just come from there, and he described it as "some sight." It was only hair to him. To me it was beautiful, shiny, soft, waving locks, often, with the younger boys, held in place on the side by a barette [sic].

It was at dinner-time, immediately after the last performance of the Passion Play for eight long years, that we got this information. It was like a dash of cold water. I, for once, felt annoyed and cheated. It was as though these villagers, seemingly so blessed, had only waited for the emigration of foreigners, who had traveled far and wide to see their play, to become the usual village dwellers in the Bavarian Alps again. No, it went deeper than that. Wearing the long hair and shedding it at once seemed a trick of the legitimate stage, like the usual make-up of rouge, powder and lipstick.

With something akin to despair in voice and tears in her brown eyes, Frau Lang, the wife of Anton Lang, told me this story:

"They have all had their hair cut so that they cannot be filmed. We received an offer of a million dollars from an American film company a week ago for the privilege of filming the Passion Spiel without any change in the cast. It struck dismay to our hearts. It was no temptation to us, and it was no temptation to the majority of the players, but our people have suffered fearfully, owing to the depreciation of the mark. And when most of the villagers had expected a winter without worry and want, because they had worked harder than they had worked for many years in order to house and feed the people who came to see the play, their hopes have not been realized. We are all as poor as we were before the play began."

"And so some of the players whose families were young and large listened to the proposal that would make them rich. I know it was only a momentary temptation, and their argument in favor of filming the play was the influence it might have on the lives of people who were not able to come here and see it. I was behind the scenes yesterday for the last performance and I overheard one of the older actors say, 'If this play is allowed to be filmed, I will go up to Ludwig's monument and with chisel and hatchet efface the inscription from it.' That night I slept for the first time in many."

The monument Frau Lang referred to is a white marble crucifix, surrounded by a holy group. It stands on the hillside across the village meadows and was given to Oberammergau by King Ludwig II., in appreciation of the play, which he saw in 1880. It bears the inscription 'Faithful to the customs of their forefathers, Oberammergau given in grateful remembrance of the Passion Play by their King Ludwig II.'

Ludwig, the monarch whom historians call the mad King of Bavaria, on account of his excesses, asked that a special performance of the play be given for him alone, and he sat in that vast arena of empty seats while 750 performers went through their parts before the music-loving ruler with probably more fervor than they had ever shown before.

Frau Lang is still worried. Anton Lang is worried, but they are consoled and cheered by the short hair of

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most of the players, realizing that, with the atmosphere and beauty gone from them by the shedding of their hair, moving-picture magnates will not be so anxious to film them. The players would look farcical instead of biblical in wigs, and they know it. Saint John, the beloved apostle, whose name is Melchior Breitsamter, sat at the table in the Lang sitting room with us last night. His beauty has been the talk of the women who have seen the play. He was unrecognizable without his wavy, flowing hair.

At mass this morning I noticed that Judas, the celebrated Guido Mayr, whom people came to the play despising, and whose interpretation of his part sent them away with a deep sorrow for him in their hearts, had had his hair cut. The Christus, who sat in front of him, still had his beautiful chestnut colored wavy hair striking him above the shoulders. But Anton Lang has stated that they cannot film him in the Passion Play. His is not the type of character that has to shout and emphasize a fact in order to make it understood.

Some pressure was brought to bear upon him and he said: "You can get another Christus." Yesterday afternoon while I was having tea with an English woman in the dining room he came in, shivered in the large, cold place and said like a child, "I am lonely." He looked out at the snow-covered mountains wistfully and added, "There have been so many people here on Sunday for the last five months, and I am lonely." Then he explained that the change had been too sudden. "It should have been more gradual," he said. "I loved the work and I loved the people, and they have both been taken from me too suddenly."

The life of the Passion Play has always hung on a very slender thread. Electoral orders banned it time and again, and only the dogged perseverance of the Oberammergau folk in fulfilling the vow made by their forefathers has kept it alive. Only recently the whole world was agog with the report that the Pope had announced that, owing to the fact that it had become commercialized, the Passion Play would henceforth be banned as a public spectacle. This report amused rather than alarmed Oberammergau, because only the week before the Papal Nuncio of Bavaria had been sent by the Pope to witness the drama and bore with him the Pope's blessing for the good of Oberammergau and its players. The Pope as Cardinal Ratti saw the Passion Play in 1900, the first year that Anton Lang played the Christus.

The offer of the film company, which is not the first that Oberammergau has received, has created an undercurrent of sadness in the village. Behind the mask that we call faces, people are thinking thoughts that they have probably never thought before and that would not bear disclosure. The faction in favor of filming the picture feels that it has been thwarted in a laudable act. The faction against making their solemn spectacle a thing of mechanism feels the taint attached to the desire of some of their beloved people to have the play filmed.

I asked Frau Lang if she had considered the amount of good and the amount of joy that the filming of the drama would bring to people all over the world, although I think the play as it is staged now and without the tricks of the moving-picture director would be a failure.

"Yes, I have thought of that," she said, "but the time is not ripe for the presentation of this play on the screen. Maybe in a hundred years, but not now. The play could never be filmed as it is now acted. While they reeled out film after film my husband would be told to do this and to do that – what is it they say in the movies? – yes, register this and that emotion, where until now he has only acted according to the dictates of his heart and his spirit."

She is quite right. There is not a trick employed in the whole production to arouse an emotion. The audience has never once been considered by the people who directed this play. The motives are the fulfillment of a vow, their love of art and beauty and their religious fervor.

On Friday at Ettal, three miles from Oberammergau, where the monastery stands, a thanksgiving mass that the vow to their forefathers was allowed to be fulfilled was celebrated. The villagers marched to and

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from Ettal in solemn procession. The whole village is filled with thanksgiving. A procession yesterday, with Anton Lang leading, wearing a red cassock and white surplice and carrying the cross, with men and women following him chanting praise and thanks, was one of the most moving things that I have seen in the life of this lovely village.

Is it any wonder that people possessing their devotional spirit cannot be lured by the dream of wealth that is so tempting to the outside world? They have seen far beyond the mountains of Oberammergau. For all their faith and simplicity and charm, they are not people who have always remained at home. They know the comforts that riches would bring to them and to their children. The Rolls-Royces that have driven up to their doors and deposited the owners, richly dressed and wearing gorgeous jewels, have indicated to them the luxuries of life; but Anton Lang's philosophy is that riches do not bring contentment and happiness, two assets which he and his family now possess.

Every one who has come to Oberammergau knows Frau and Anton Lang and their family of six, and their problems are problems that will interest people all over the world. That they should have to stand sentinel over any worldliness creeping into the drama loved of so many will move thousands. Noticeable about Frau Lang are her patience and tranquilly sweet expression. In the matter of securing seats and lodging and food, she has been the chief organizer in the village during the season. Besides her own pension, Villa Daheim, she has managed several other houses. I have stood by and heard dozens of questions asked her by as many persons, and she answered all fully, as quietly and quickly as possible, without the slightest sign of nerve strain or irritation.

Before her betrothal to Lang she went to England to sing and [illegible] and learn English in a foundling asylum, and on her return organized classes to teach any one who wanted to learn English. One is not handicapped here by not speaking German, because the people of Oberammergau speak English faultlessly and without accent.

Source: "Sacrifice of the Locks," Patricia Minnigerode, *New York Times*, November 5, 1922, p. 68. Online available at:

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1922/11/05/107079513.html?pageNumber=68>

### **TEXT 3: "Christus, Petrus, Judas From Ober-Ammergau: They Come with Carving, Pottery, Paintings"**

The men who represent the Christ, Peter, Judas, together with 40 of their fellow-villagers, have arrived in the U.S. They will exhibit themselves and their woodcarving, pottery and painting. They will not give the Passion Play or any part of it. Cities to be visited by them will include Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati, St. Louis.

History.

In the early 1600's the Thirty Years' War\* ravaged Bavaria in which lies Ober-Ammergau. War was followed by the Black Plague, which was worse. To avert the plague, the Ober-Ammergau villagers, meeting in a churchyard, vowed to "enact the Passion-tragedy in honor of the bitter sufferings and death of our dear Lord" every tenth year forever. Fulfillment of the vow began with a play given in the churchyard, 1633.

The Play is now given in an open-air Renaissance amphitheatre on a stage similar to the Elizabethan. It begins early on Sunday morning after the players have attended High Mass. It lasts eight hours. The first part (Act I to Act VII) carries the story of Christ's last week from His entry into Jerusalem to His vigil in the Garden of Gethsemane where He prayed: "Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, not my will, but Thine, be done." After an interval for lunch, the second part (Act VIII to Act XIV) continues to the Condemnation under Pilate. The last part (Act XV to Act XVIII) is the Via Crucis (Way

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of the Cross). The performance also includes Old Testament tableaux. About 700 villagers take part in the play, including children as angels.

Ober-Ammergau is surrounded by walls of rock, snow-capped peaks, mountain streams. Its little stone houses are gaily decorated by the paintings of unknown artists. And every-where are wooden crosses bearing the image of Christ. At the town fountain, water flows from His bleeding hands.

Anton Lang was first chosen to play the Christus in 1900. The selection of artists is often determined by physical resemblance to the characters as idealized in religious paintings. No false beards or other make-up are permitted. The man who plays the Christus must have strength as well as dramatic ability, for the cross which he must carry for 15 minutes weighs 150 pounds, and, in addition, he remains for 20 minutes fastened to the cross. There is said to be danger of heart-failure each time an actor essays this scene. Lang played this part in 1900, 1910 and 1922.

Andreas Lang played Peter in 1922. Illustrative of the simplicity of the Passion Players in private life is the fact that Andreas Lang is known as one who "quite willingly drinks a glass of Bavarian beer with a visitor, in the old inn."

Guido Mayr is the present impersonator of Judas. He has become famous in his part and is also recognized as an exceptionally clever comedian.

The Exhibition.

It is, however, not as players but as craftsmen that Anton Lang and his fellows have crossed the Atlantic. Ober-Ammergau has been reduced to poverty. In 1922, despite the decline in the value of the mark, the villagers would not increase their prices. They gave three days' board with admittance to the play for 90c. Americans came to their rescue, provided them with orders for woodcarving, etc., and have now arranged for them to exhibit and sell their art work in America.

In the typical cottages erected in Grand Central Palace, Manhattan, against a painted background of icy mountains, the carvers, potters, metal workers, etchers are seen at their daily tasks as at Ober-Ammergau.

The venture is underwritten by a committee, headed by George Gordon Battle, including E. F. Albee, Clement M. Biddle, Joseph P. Day, Haley Fiske, W. A. Harriman, Arthur Curtiss James, Robert Underwood Johnson, Elmore Leffingwell, Franklin Simon, Addison Van Tine, Frank D. Waterman, Mrs. Gertrude Atherton, Mrs. A. C. Bedford, Mrs. John O. Cosgrave, Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske, Mrs. David F. Houston, Mrs. Arthur Curtiss James, Mrs. Medill McCormick, Mrs. Charles L. Tiffany, Jane Cowl and Evangeline Booth.

\*A war primarily religious between Catholic and Protestant princes over the principle *cujus regio ejus religio* ("the religion of the monarch shall become the religion of the country"). Wallenstein, Gustavus Adolphus, Turenne and Richelieu were conspicuous.

Source: "Christus, Petrus, Judas From Ober-Ammergau: They Come with Carving, Pottery, Paintings," *TIME Magazine*, December 17, 1923, v2, Issue 16, p. 19.

Source of TIME magazine cover:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton\\_Lang#/media/File:TIMEMagazine17Dec1923.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Lang#/media/File:TIMEMagazine17Dec1923.jpg)

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