

The Passion Play

The purpose of this report is to analyse what a Passion Play is; from various perspectives and to then further analyse how it can be constructed/devised in terms of aims.

Metaphors for a Passion Play

1) A theatrical Production

As a theatrical production it raises questions as to what its purpose is; to entertain, challenge the thinking (or beliefs) of the audience and raise moral/social/ethical/political questions. Shakespeare is the example par excellence of theatre functioning in all these rolls.

Theatre also challenges the audience to 'suspend disbelief'. For the time that they are 'the audience' they can become not just passive observers but also engaged participants living in the time and space of the play in a manner that can be psychotherapeutic. In this way the audience can experience catharsis, to use the term from the Ancient Greek theatre and now expropriated by psychotherapists.

2) Propaganda

The aim of propaganda (in the modern twentieth century sense of the word) is to reinforce beliefs/opinions and/or to change these. Propaganda exists in the context of struggle (real or imagined), be it political, religious, cultural or ethnic; often with an 'other' or 'out group' that is the focus of antagonism or even hate. The 'in group' is always reinforced.

3) A Museum Piece

Museum pieces, actual artefacts or in this case a play, are fossils. They are dead relics from the past when life was invariably more primitive and harsh. They can however also be quaint and colourful as well and as such can attract the hobbyists and reinactors who enjoy dressing up and pretending to be Vikings, Romans, World War Two soldiers and so forth.

4) A Rite of Passage/Family Ritual

A school nativity play is a prime example of this. Proud parents video these not because they are taking a delight in their offspring taking part in an activity that is building and reinforcing their beliefs/faith, rather it is a pride in their offspring's 'talent' and self assurance that is being celebrated. Be it a nativity play, a musical show, a production of Snow White and the Seven

Dwarfs, Morris Dancing; it is all the same 'stuff'. It makes no difference if the song being sung is about the 'Good Ship Lollipop' or 'Baby Jesus'.

5) A Social Club

Just as with 'am-dram' clubs many become involved in the production of a Passion Play as a social activity. For every one actor on stage there are numerous 'back room' support staff doing everything from making the tea for the breaks, painting scenery, sewing costumes, working the lighting and sound systems and so on. Like everything else in the modern world a twenty-first century Passion Play, unlike its ancient origins, relies on electricity and technology.

As a direct consequence of this, the friends and relatives of all the participants are the automatic 'warm market' for the audience. A seemingly very successful production is in reality a micro success bulked up with the secondary support of the ancillary workers family and social contacts.

6) A Gig

Insofar as Passion Plays involve choirs, musicians, dancers, artists of all sorts; the Passion Play is a good gig. The attractiveness of any Passion Play as a gig is relative; it is not absolute. There are always other gigs.

The Passion Play Unchained?

Does a Passion Play have to be always set in first century Palestine with a cast looking like refugees from Sigmund Romberg's 'The Desert Song', as produced by an impoverished am-dram group?

1) Shakespeare and Richard Wagner

Shakespeare is eternal and universal, he speaks to the human spirit as no other writer. As a consequence productions of his plays have been staged in modern dress, set in African kingdoms, medieval Russia and in every other known culture and language.

Similarly Wagner's Ring Cycle has been produced in modern dress and set in an 'every town' for many years. He saw his mammoth works as 'gesamtkunstwerkes' (total art works) that had the power to change the world and the forces of destiny. Sublime art; but produced by a repulsive man who was, in every way, a prototype Hitler!

2) The Passion Play and Free Interpretation.

Possibilities.....

- a) Jesus played by a woman, that is a 'feminist' Passion Play.
- b) Jesus played by a series of different actors, that is Jesus as he appears to be to all those who follow him.....any race or ethnic, cultural, sex preference group.
- c) Jesus and Gaia (she of the James Lovelock hypothesis), Jesus discussing with Gaia global warming, saving the planet.
- d) Jesus meeting with vegans, a very interesting conversation here!
- e) The full blown Jewish Jesus, include sections of the Seder that was in fact the Last Supper.
- f) Jesus the 'Time Lord' travelling to our time. Religion has morphed into Sci-fi, the new gnostic gospels.
- g) The Passion Play as a mechanism for introducing new theology and concepts. Don Cupitt and the Sea of Faith Society etc.
- h) The Passion Play set in different historical periods and situations.
- i) The Passion Play set in Nazi Germany and the holocaust.
- k) The Passion Play written for atheists.

3) The Christian-Jewish Dimension.

In order to achieve a positive response and to develop cordial relations with the mainstream Jewish community the following may be useful.

- a) ALWAYS make sure that the word Jew(s) is replaced by 'Jewish' and 'Jewish people' even though this can be long winded. The word 'Jew' is very tainted and is fast becoming obsolete along with the 'n' word for black people. This is now very much the case in the USA. There are still some 'Jewish people' who don't object, but they are in a rapidly shrinking minority.
- b) Avoid making the actors playing 'the Jews' are not dressed like traditional orthodox men and thus become stereotypes of a kind so beloved by anti Semites down the years. German rabbis in the nineteenth century dressed as German lawyers, with long two tab collars. The Reform Jewish synagogues'

clergy wear this today as that particular branch of Judaism was founded in Germany.

c) Jesus and ALL his followers were Jewish and were therefore familiar with all the Hebrew prayers, most of which are still in use today. These can be included where appropriate BUT do make sure that the actual Hebrew name of God is changed to a very similar secular form to avoid offence. It amounts to saying 'Hashem' rather than 'Adonai'.

d) Messianic Jewish Groups I am sure would be very keen to help, but alas they are seen by most Jewish people in much the same way as Orange Lodges are viewed by Sinn Fein members and vice versa. You may already have them helping you? Personally I have no problem, but be careful!

e) A Christian Jewish Friendship Club would probably be very successful and attract many very interested Jewish people who would like to help with any Passion Play that was positive and constructive. The Council of Christians and 'Jews' (they won't change their title and I have tried hard to that end) might be helpful. It is ESSENTIAL that the contact is stressed and promoted as being for friendship and to eliminate anything offensive to Jewish people; NOT to try and evangelize.

Conclusions

The above leads to some basic questions that require addressing:-

- 1) What are we doing?
- 2) What do we want to do?
- 3) What would we like do do if we could anything?
- 4) How are planning meetings conducted and are they dominated by a few who are articulate at the expense of the quiet ones who never speak?

I hope that I have made a useful contribution!

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13/10/21