

PASSION PLAY
Regine Petersen

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With a few rare exceptions, the inhabitants of the Bavarian village of Oberammergau have produced a performance of the Passion Play every ten years since 1634. This was in response to a vow made by the villagers after they were spared from the bubonic plague that had ravished the region. Over the years, it has grown to become an internationally-renowned production that attracts audiences from all over the world. All the cast and crew – numbering some 2,000 now – are residents or natives of the village. The costumes are home-made, and as no wigs are allowed, long hair and beards are grown naturally for the parts. As can be imagined, being appointed to the leading roles is highly competitive.

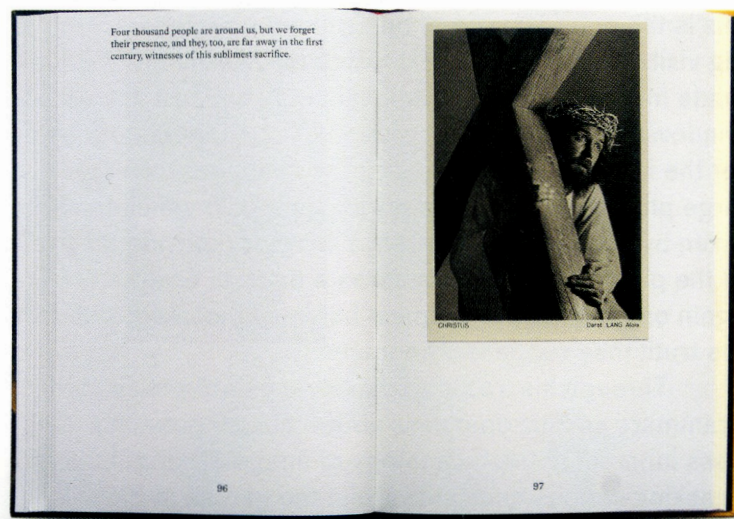
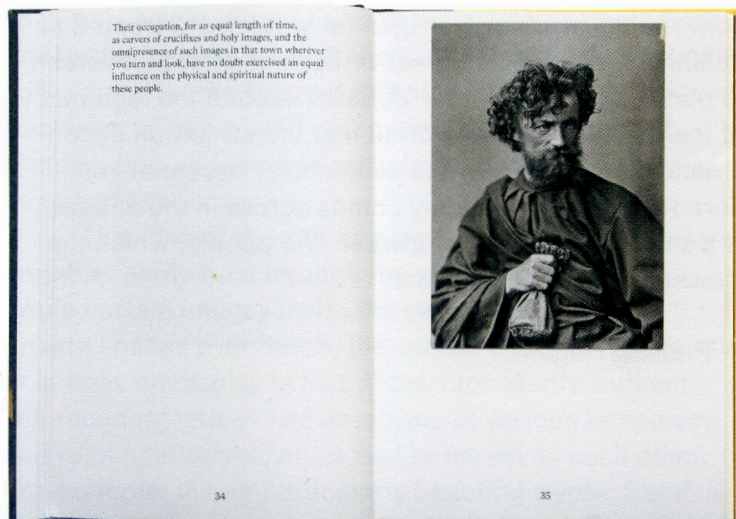
Artist and photographer Regine Petersen's newly-published book presents an intriguing compilation of images and facsimile documents relating to the history of the Oberammergau Passion Play, focussing primarily on the 1930s and 1940s when its hostile portrayal of the Jewish role in the death of Christ aligned closely with the views of the Nazi regime. The 1934 performance marked the 300th anniversary of the first production, and was attended by Hitler himself: the book begins with some words from an American bishop who was also there, and a newspaper cutting describing Hitler's presence at the play.

The images that follow contain a small selection from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but the bulk of them are portraits – in both colour and black and white – of leading actors: Hans Zwink (Judas), Benedict Stückl (Caiphas), Melchior Breitsamter (Pilate), Anton

and Alois Lang (who both played Christ in the 1920s and 1930s), Gabriele Gropper (Mary Magdalene) and Anton Preisinger (Christ, 1950). Many of these images were published as postcards and are printed here in such a way that both the front and the back of the cards – including the handwritten addresses and messages – can be viewed on either side of the page. These are often interleaved with folded facsimile documents, such as a police report from Oberammergau in 1937, excerpts from the text of the play, and post-war denazification files for performers. Photographers include Siegbert Bauer and Leo Schweyer, and the itinerant American film-maker Burton Holmes who coined the term 'travelogue'. Text and images are carefully arranged, presented without comment, creating some clever juxtapositions and allowing narratives to develop, only to be twisted by some revelation accompanying a subsequent photograph.

In some ways, leaving this material to stand on its own would have been a welcome (if bold) choice. Certainly, the assortment of press cuttings, religious texts and commercial images provides a vivid and immersive sense of contemporary political and social events. This reviewer felt almost disappointed to find an analytical essay concluding the book, but Natasha Christia's forty-page 'Postscriptum' is a superb piece of work. It examines the history of the medieval mystery plays from which the Oberammergau Passion Play took its inspiration, discusses its structure and content, interweaves narratives of some of the play's actors with the antisemitic controversies that have overshadowed its performance for decades and led to changes in the text, and provides commentary on the travelogues of Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf and Burton Holmes, as well as the artistic concepts of Regine Petersen.

Petersen, a German photographer whose work has been exhibited in the UK and across Europe over the last fifteen years or so, is both a creator and collector of images. Previous books include *Find a Fallen Star* (2015) – which also includes an essay by Natasha Christia – and *A Brief History of Meteorite Falls* (2014), both of which

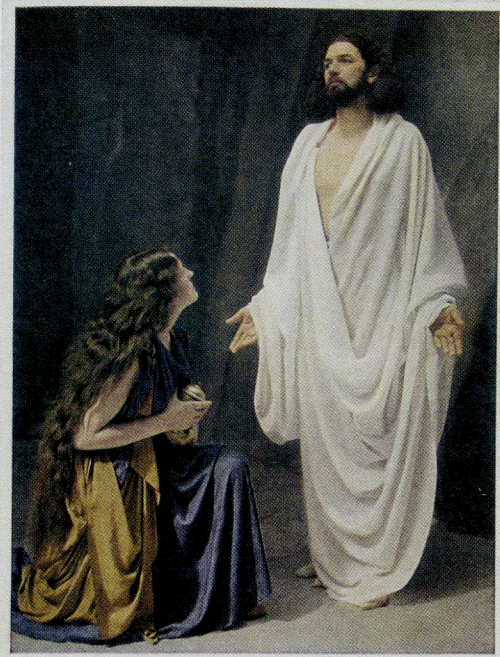


Passion Play Waits Upon Denazification

OBERAMMERGAU, Germany—Pressure for completion of the denazification process comes from a new source. Buergermeister Heinrich Zunterer of this village, famed for its decennial presentations of the Passion Play, states that he is trying to have the entire company of the play processed in the denazification program so that the production can be resumed in 1950.

"I am supplying the denazification board with fuel, transport and other assistance just to hurry up proceedings," he said. The nearest board, in Garmsch-Partenkirchen, expresses doubt, however, that the proceedings can be finished within six months.

Of the 1200 men, women and children of this Alpine village who put on the dramatization of the crucifixion of Christ, 300 must go on the carpet to explain why they were allegedly supporters of nazism. The most prominent among these is Alois Lang, the 59-year-old wood carver who played Christ in the last two productions, who is listed on the books as a "Class 2" or active Nazi. He joined the party in 1937. When asked today to comment on his political past, Lang said, however, "What has been said and written about me is largely untruth."



Jesus erscheint Magdalena

75

Spread from *Passion Play* showing a newspaper cutting and postcard image of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

combine Petersen's own photographs of meteorites with historical accounts of their landings on earth, sightings of fireballs from centuries past, facsimile documents, found photographs and interviews. In 2018 she self-published a German-language booklet, *Teufelsstein (Devil's Stone)*, which suggests a possible bridge between these books and *Passion Play*, being a compilation of rural legends about rocks in the landscape which local superstitions claim were thrown there by the devil. This booklet was produced in collaboration with Henning Rogge, a photographer who has explored the relationship between history and landscape through his series of photographs of woodland wartime bomb craters and other exhibitions, and who is credited with 'lithography' in the present publication. Various strands can be traced through Petersen's work as she juxtaposes text and images to draw out parallels, ambivalence and echoes, often with a subtly satirical intent.

There is a theatrical nature to this book in the sense that Petersen is 'staging' these materials as a performance, bringing them together for readers and creating space to reflect upon the relationship between the past and the present. The re-enactment at Oberammergau can be seen here as a play within a play: just as the lead-

ing players in Christ's persecution were enabled by the baying crowd of onlookers whose chorused cries shift under the influence of different parties, so too were the Nazi leaders enabled by the largely passive population of citizens who stood by and watched it happen. Once the performance ended, this anonymous mass of bystanders – for the most part – quietly slipped back into postwar life and pretended (to both themselves and others) that they had played no part in it all. By contrast, rather than distancing herself from the past, the author includes a portrait of herself as a child alongside one of her grandfather in Wehrmacht uniform, taken 35 years earlier, both on the banks of the Elbe in similar poses: presenting another silent, visual reminder of the impermeable distinctions between the personal and the political. From Petersen's photographs of the fortress of Masada and the Kofel mountain at Oberammergau, through the array of historic photographs, postcards, engravings and other documents, there is a wealth of material here for readers to study, interpret and make their own connections.

— James Downs