



The Passion of the Passion

BY BOBBY AMPEZZAN

For the past 45 years, the Great Passion Play has been performed at Eureka Springs, Arkansas, in a 4,000-seat concrete amphitheater poured along the eastern grade of Magnetic Mountain, which at 1,500 feet isn't technically a mountain. Facing the theater—beneath it, really—is a 500-foot-long Jerusalem city street with steps leading to a temple, facades for a boarding house and a brothel, and raised porches for the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate. Beyond the rooftops, the Garden of Gethsemane, two tombs, and Golgotha all stretch up toward an adjacent peak. Here, the final days of Jesus' life, from his return to Jerusalem to his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, play out according to a very faithful amalgam of details from the four New Testa-

ment gospels, in just under two hours.

I took off straight from work that Friday, hurrying to witness the penultimate performance of the holy drama. A month earlier, Sam Ray, the executive director of the operation, had announced that the money had run out. This would be the final season, and the Great Passion Play was now enacting its own final hours. Although it was rush hour when I left Little Rock, driving north along Highway 21 I didn't slow for another car headed my way for miles and miles, not in Metalton, not in Mossville. A sign next to a Baptist church in the middle of a field rightly asked, "Lost?" then advised: "Come in for direction." Just outside Eureka Springs a double-wide trailer set close to the road was evidently the Snake World exhibit, and I imagined a man inside, alone, chancellor of a writhing senate of scales—he must be so frustrated with the world around him that does not give a damn to see what he's done with reptiles.

The stone gazebo at the entrance to the grounds advertises the Great Passion Play, but the entire 600- or 700-acre compound holds several additional attractions funded by Gerald L.K. and Elna Smith. Gerald, a World War II isolationist and political agitator who

led the Christian Nationalist Crusade, died in 1976. Elna followed five years later. They now lie together beside the tallest and earliest monument here, a 67-foot stone Jesus called Christ of the Ozarks. Some call it the "milk-jug Jesus" for its resemblance to a half-gallon milk carton.

The outside temperature a little before curtain call was 35 degrees. I filed in along with a modest crowd, 500 I'm told, though I doubt it, and immediately rented a blanket for two dollars to throw around my shoulders. Some of the actors moseyed up and down the aisles, mingling with the spectators.

"Tonight I get both my ears cut off," a Roman guard said to a couple of kids.

"Does it hurt?"

"Yeah it hurts," the teenager said. "But then Jesus puts 'em back on."

"Awesome."

Among the many recorded exhortations laid atop the National Orchestra of London's overture is the following: "We here at The Great Passion Play believe we are all culpable for Jesus' death. No one people was or is responsible." There have been protests over the years that this particular depiction of the Passion has anti-Semitic undertones. In 1991, the Arkansas Interfaith Conference criticized the play for including the so-called "Blood Curse," a line found only in the Book of Matthew that proclaims Jesus' blood will forever be on his Jewish betrayers. The play's organizers defended the line's inclusion, though eventually it was removed. Gerald L.K. Smith's own past as a purveyor of anti-Semitism no doubt fueled the concern.

Within the first ten minutes, over a hundred actors walked the pebbly sand of the Jerusalem town square, shepherding a flock of sheep and leading camels and donkeys from one offstage feed trough to another. When Jesus overturned the money changers' tables on the temple steps he released several cages of doves that swirled above the players' heads as though they were in a living snow globe, then returned to their roost behind the temple. The lighting was particularly memorable. From the city street to the crucifix, so much of the set was uplit by flood lights and then reflected down to the ground by the trees that it created the effect of a kind of fluorescent dome between the audience and the night sky.

Very little of the performance was really *performed*. The actors were too far away from the audience to speak their lines so the script was prerecorded and the delivery lip-synced. Similarly, and for the same reasons, the acting was

gestural, not emotional, since the audience was too distant to perceive any “method” underpinning the action. In four-and-a-half decades an actor has never delivered a single line on that stage. Everything blares out of the enormous megawatt speakers, and worse, the voice-over actors were no better than the local ones. Mary sounded like she was tranked; Jesus sounded like Hank Hill.

Even so, the play mostly exceeded my expectations. It proceeded faithfully through Jesus’ feted arrival in the city of Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin plot to eliminate the prophet, the commission of Judas, the Last Supper, the confrontation in the garden, the negotiations with Pilate, the scourge and crucifixion; resurrection, reunion, and ascension. The final moments of Christ’s mortal life hit everyone’s favorite lines from Scripture, including the exoneration of the thief on his right, which is only mentioned in Luke, and the *cri de coeur* “It is finished,” which appears only in John. Omitted was Jesus’ damning indictment of the Sanhedrin in John, wherein he tells Pilate, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.”

Saturday I walked the Sacred Projects, the name given all five attractions at the Great Passion Play. The third, after the Christ of the Ozarks and the play, is a repository for rare old Bibles that includes a century-old specimen signed by all the founding Gideons, and 655 Wycliffe Bibles. The fourth project is a gallery of religious art and artifacts, and the fifth and newest is a paved walking tour of the Holy Land, with stations marked by an ersatz stone well or dry bathing cistern or dinghy with casting nets. At each station, biblical heroes such as Moses, Ruth, Mary, and Simon Peter offer lessons to passersby.

Kent Butler, a 23-year-old Jesus in the play, says the funding crisis is one of the Lord’s misunderstood blessings. “I have a clearer mind than ever of the direction we need to head,” he told me. His father chairs the board of the Elna M. Smith Foundation. When I asked if that direction meant pruning the other attractions free of the Great Passion Play, he said, “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes—I could say yes to infinity.”

But walking the unfinished Holy Land and visiting with some of the actors on the last day of the season, I gathered the im-

pression that this mountaintop ministry had developed into a part-time commune of role-playing seniors who needed it and one another more than visitors ever could. Some years ago, Moses—Jay Peters, age 72—made a pilgrimage to the real Holy Land, and there, on a tour of the place believed to be Sinai, where another Moses convened with God and hammered out the Ten Commandments, an Israeli soldier told him, “You can still feel the residue of God on this mountain.” That, he said, is what he’d say about this place, Magnetic Mountain. “I now know why Moses wore that veil over his face the rest of his life—that residue of God was always on him.” Then he called to some tourists over my shoulder, who might otherwise pass without a lesson. “Hi, there! Come on down and join Moses. I know you’ve heard some things about me, but I’m going to expand on it, and tell you some things you didn’t know. In my time, that’s about 1500 B.C. ...”

On the far side of the Holy Land, Ruth narrated the story of her relationship with Boaz, a propitious courtship that delivered an otherwise unworthy Moabite woman into the lineage of King David and Jesus Christ. “Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness,” she said. “Folks, I don’t know if you think this, but I certainly do—he is a great holy redeemer.” At 62, Judy Scoggins had been in the performance only four years. In retirement, she and her husband Bill moved from Colorado to be a part of the mission work and community here. “There’s no way to describe it,” she said of the play’s closing. Many nights she has played a member of the mob crying “Crucify him!” in the play, and that role has always given her a glimpse of what life would be like without Christ. “Seeing the Christ figure on the cross, then, standing on the hillside watching as he ascends to heaven, I will be there, saying as he goes, ‘Even so, come, Lord Jesus.’ Those are the last words of the New Testament. Because he’s coming back soon. I believe it.”

“I always thought I’d be pulled out on my deathbed,” said the Holy Land attraction’s Mary—Sharon Jacobsen, 71. “I love my job, love telling people about Jesus. So many Christian things are being taken away from us, but it’s in God’s hands.”

That night’s performance of the Great Passion Play went off without so much as a stammer, a slip, or a spilled grail. Nothing announced the sad finale.

The poster for the Oxford Film Festival 10th Anniversary is a vibrant blue and red design. At the top right, a red circle with white stars contains the text "Year 10". Below this, the website "OXFORD.FILMFEST.COM" is written vertically in white. The main title "OXFORD FILM FESTIVAL" is rendered in large, stylized white letters with a blue outline, set against a background of white dots. The word "FILM" is written in a red, cursive font across the middle. The dates "FEB 21-24" are written vertically on the left side. At the bottom, there is a red silhouette of a building with a sign that says "OXFORD FILM FESTIVAL". In the bottom right corner, the "10th ANNIVERSARY" logo is displayed, along with the text "OXFORD FILM FESTIVAL". At the bottom left, the "OXFORD MISSISSIPPI CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU" logo is visible, with a note that the project is partially funded by a grant from the bureau.

Not signage, not the actors who worked the crowd, not a pre-recorded farewell laid over the pre-recorded symphony. Not even word of mouth, for no one seemed to have any notion of the impending bankruptcy, despite several local and state newspaper reports and at least one television station spot in Springfield, Missouri. In fact, many in the crowd were unaware that this was even the last performance of the season. After the show, after the cast bid the audience adieu at the gates and the wide lot of cars braided a neat line out of the compound and back to town, all the actors met in the middle of Jerusalem. For the first time, the city was lit benthic blue by the stars overhead and the full moon. In a thick circle, some holding hands, they bowed their heads and prayed “that if it comes down to volunteering next year, that we would be willing. That you would supply the gas for those that drive 350 miles round trip ... that those in charge, Lord, we just ask that, um, maybe there’s something that needs to be changed up top. Maybe a new scheduling. Maybe a different type of play. But just ... may we not get down.”

Then, the refrain.

“We serve an awesome God, and you will supply the need according to your will.”

Amen, said the crowd, in unison.

“God bless you guys,” said one.

“See you next season!” said several.

Then they fanned out in a smiling if teary-eyed retreat to their homes in town or nearby Berryville, or a retirement community called Holiday Island on the Missouri border, leaving behind Kent Butler, unofficial spin doctor and spirit guide, and Vonda Smith, whose grandparents were Gunda and Charles F. Robertson, the dearest friends Gerald L.K. and Elna Smith had in Eureka Springs.

“What we know is, one, we serve a God that can perform all kinds of miracles. Exodus 4, God turns Moses’ staff into a snake. Second, no problem is too big for God, we see that in the story of David and Goliath,” said Butler.

What about all the lessons of the Passion? Judas, betrayer of Jesus, wasted the small fortune he made on the deal when he hung himself. Peter, chief proselyte for Christ before and after His death, eagerly disavowed Him at this critical hour. And, if you believe Matthew and Mark, even Christ cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” God built faltering and frailty into the story. The story of how we try and fail.

“You know, what strikes me about this,” said Smith. “We were talking about David and Goliath, and you know David declared victory over Goliath before he had it? So I think that’s kind of our attitude. We don’t know we’re going to open next year, but let’s trust that we will. Let’s declare victory.” 🐦

Group Fitness

BY ROXANE GAY

The adjustment had been uncomfortable. All her life Marcy had lived in the Midwest with people who ate red meat and starchy foods, who allowed their bodies to spread without shame. And then her husband was transferred to Naples. Marcy’s mother said, “Naples, like in Italy?” and Marcy said, “No, Florida,” and her mother said, “Oh dear.”

The women in Naples all looked the same—lean and darkly tan, their faces narrow with hungered discipline, whittled by the same surgeons. They stared at Marcy’s relatively ample physique with disgust or envy or something between the two. At night Marcy worried about her ass and thighs. Her husband always said, “Baby, you are perfect,” and she flushed angrily. His assurances were so reflexive as to be insulting.

In Omaha, they lived in a neighborhood. In Naples, they moved into a gated community where each estate was blandly unique and sprawl-

