

AN AMERICAN PASSION PLAY WITHOUT THE CHRIST



John J. Ivanovich as Judas.



Martin V. Merle, Who Directed the Production.



In the house of Caiaphas, thirty-three years later, the third scene occurs. The triumphal entry of the Nazarene into Jerusalem is indicated by a dazzling white light to suggest His presence, and by the waving palm tips seen in the streets below through the palace windows. Judas appears before the Council of High Priests, and, though sorely tempted, refuses to betray his Master.

In chapter four is seen Athias, now Matthew the Apostle, charging Judas with treachery, as he (Matthew) was present, unseen, in the council chamber of the high priests. Judas, however, succeeds in allaying the doubts of his fellow-apostles, and, with them, awaits the approach of the Master.

Scene five is upon the Mount of Olives. To the Apostles comes Peter, who tells them of the kiss of Judas and the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Then follows the sixth scene, which is laid in the palace of Herod II, formerly the boy Archelaus. To him come Matthew and his aged father, Jechonias, who plead eloquently for the Master's life. But Caiaphas and his priest enter and urge that Herod put the Nazarene to death.

Herod asks Caiaphas where the Messiah is to be found, and, turning toward the entrance, Caiaphas exclaims: "Behold Him, standing there!" At this point the great light streams through the arch, and Herod sinks back on his throne overcome. Then, pulling himself together and rising to his feet, he commands in a thunderous voice: "Jesus of Nazareth approach!"

Slowly the light moves on toward the stage as the soft tableau curtains quietly descend. This is one of the most thrilling situations in the sacred drama.

Scene seven is the courtyard of Pilate's palace, with the merchants of the Temple and the populace demanding the release of the robber Barabbas and the life of Jesus. "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" they cry out; "His blood be upon us and upon our children!" Again the light indicates His presence, and another great scene is acted, ending with the sentence of Pilate and the famous washing of the hands.

In the next scene the disciples are shown in a walled garden on the road to Golgotha. It is here that the march to Calvary is depicted so thrillingly that the audience sits spellbound. In the distance, the cries of the mob are heard, and the disciples fall upon their knees.

Shouts grow louder as the mob approaches, and soon the roar of the invisible multitude becomes positive hurt to the auditory nerve. Stones are flying, and the procession is passing on the other side of the wall. One sees above the wall, moving slowly, the spearheads of the Roman legion, and the air is thick with missiles and pierced with mocking cries against the "King of the Jews."

THRILLING SCENE OF THE CROSS

Presently above the wall, in a cloud of hard-flung stones, appear the top and part of the cross beam of a great, gaunt wooden cross. The sky is almost blindingly alight, and in this brilliant, startling atmosphere, the cross quivers, totters and sways in the unseen arms of its fast weakening supporter.

This great scene reveals the dramatic possibilities of suggestion. It thrills and permeates the innermost recesses of the soul. That great black cross, vibrating painfully in the tense, luminous atmosphere, rising and falling and swaying with the feebleness of its unseen supporter, enveloped in the roar of the invisible multitude, is a masterpiece of dramatic presentation.

Nor does this great act end with the passing of the cross. Directly the Apostles leave the scene, to follow at a distance to Calvary, Judas enters, torn, disheveled and maniac-like in appearance, with his crime of the betrayal stamped upon every feature.

He meets those who bribed him, but his appeal to them meets only repulsion, and, after an intense scene, in which he flings the thirty pieces of blood money into the faces of the high priests, the unfortunate wretch curses his betrayers and rushes forth to hang himself.

The ninth chapter carries the story to its end. One sees the interior of the Temple at the third hour of the crucifixion. The fearful multitude is gathered in the darkness that overspreads the earth. The high priest stands unsteady on the throne, but refuses to give ear to the appeals of the mob. Pilate enters in a frenzy and beseeches Caiaphas to undo, as far as possible, the wrong done the Nazarene, but the priest is hard, firm and relentless. Pilate threatens him, and the high priest orders his soldiers to hurl the governor from the Temple's roof.

Just at that moment the sins of men are expiated, for at Calvary Christ, the Saviour of the world, has expired. As the command of Caiaphas is uttered, the populace is thrown into mortal terror.

Lightnings flash and thunder roars. The earth rocks with fearful violence, the great columns of the Temple sway and totter; then, with a terrific crash, the supporting arch of the Temple gives way, and comes shattering down before the eyes of the people.

The Temple's veil is rent in twain, and out through the ruin of it all are seen, in the vivid lightning flashes, the three gaunt crosses on the hill of Calvary. The Apostles rush upon the scene as the high priests and the frenzied populace flee in flight, and Pilate, falling on his knees at Peter's feet, receives the disciple's blessing, and the glory of Christianity is foretold.

At this point the lights soften into darkness, out of which comes, clear and strong, the closing picture of the drama, the sepulchre, with the stone rolled back, and the angel of the Lord standing in the entrance with hand upraised and finger indicating that He, the Saviour of the world, has risen.

OBERAMMERGAU'S famous Passion Play was rivaled recently by a thrilling production, witnessed by thousands, in the little mission town of Santa Clara, which snuggles in the heart of California.

With dramatic intensity seldom seen on the stage, 300 boy students of Santa Clara College presented this story of the life of Christ. They acted with all the fervor such a great subject inspired, giving a finished, well-rounded production.

It is a reverent production, this American version of the Passion Play, presented by educated actors, and differs from the famous play of the Oberammergau peasants in that the presence of Christ is indicated—the chief actor in the tragedy of Calvary never appears upon the stage.

FROM far and wide visitors flocked to Santa Clara on special excursions to witness the performance. So great was the crush that fabulous prices were offered for seats, but refused.



Herod Sees the Christ Approach.



The Veil of the Temple was Rent.



"Give Us Barabbas!"

The first to secure tickets in the regular way were admitted at each presentation, and when the large auditorium was filled, the doors were locked, leaving many hundreds disconsolate outside.

Five years ago the play, which is called "Nazareth," was first given at Santa Clara College to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the institution and the 125th year since the founding of the old mission.

Written by Clay M. Greene, the dramatist, who dedicated it to the Rev. Robert E. Kenna, the play was carefully scrutinized by the college fathers before they accepted it. Its first production was under the direction of the veteran

actor, Joseph I. Grismer, while this year's revival was managed by Martin V. Merle, of the class of '06.

Dealing, as it does, with the life of the Saviour, the drama is thrillingly filled with the influence of His presence, although He is not impersonated in any way.

His presence in the vicinity is suggested by light effects, the awe that comes upon the people whenever He is supposed to approach, and the reverence and deep feeling with which His name is always mentioned. The able handling of the mobs and remarkable scenic effects add to the intensely dramatic quality of the production.

So fearful have the college fathers become that the great drama might be put to commercial usage and lose a great part of its religious message, that they have forbidden its production anywhere but within the college walls.

The great dramatic part of the play is that of Judas, created originally by John J. Ivanovich, who has played it in all succeeding productions. His acting is all verve and emotion. It is perhaps as real to him as to his auditors, and to them it is a tremendous actuality. He is little more than a boy in years, and still his work runs the gamut of emotion—sublime, hysterical, fearful emotion.

"Nazareth" opens on the plains of Bethlehem, a wonderfully beautiful stage picture. Stars twinkle, and in their midst is seen, brighter than the rest, the Star of Bethlehem that guides the wise men to the manger. Shepherds guard their flocks by the glow of the watchfire.

As they talk of the coming of the Messiah, a white-robed angel brings them the tidings of joy. Then, in the gray of the morning light, come the wise men of the East and the emissaries of Herod.

The second chapter shows the throne room in Herod's palace, where Herod, learning from his emissaries the report of the birth of the new King of the Jews, orders the killing of every male child of 2 years of age or younger. Here, too, occur the quarrel between Archelaus, son of Herod, and Athias, son of Jechonias, a wealthy publican; Athias' defiance of the king, and his confession of belief in Jesus of Nazareth.