

News

New horizons beckon for the Passion players

Patrick Kidd

Wanted: eight or more Messiahs to be crucified and resurrected on April 10, 2020. Long hair and beard preferred, must be happy with donkeys, lepers and performing miracles in front of a crowd.

The annual Wintershall Passion Play, a Good Friday fixture in London's Trafalgar Square since 2010, was watched by an estimated 20,000 people in scorching sunshine yesterday. Next year, the organisers want to stage it in several towns and cities at the same time, expanding a tradition that has its roots in the Middle Ages.

They are going to need more Christs. Even miracle-workers can only be in one place at once. Yesterday, James Burke-Dunsmore, 47, playing Jesus in Trafalgar Square for the ninth year, was hailed, betrayed, whipped and stripped before some of the audience, including a trio of nuns, were invited to join the cast and demand his execution.

After a moving *Via Dolorosa* around the square to the music of *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* from Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, Christ was placed upon his cross before Nelson's Column, the lamb of God lying down with the bronze Landseer lions, and figuratively

crucified and buried before appearing suddenly from behind the crowd, robed in white, as if he had just strolled out of the National Gallery.

The play ends with Christ exhorting his disciples to spread his story. So the script for the 90-minute Wintershall Passion, which quotes from all four Gospels but especially John, and its production plan are being offered to communities who wish to put on their own version. Liverpool, Bath, Worcester, Bishop Auckland, Hamilton, Guildford, Horsesham and Staines have so far expressed an interest.

They will be taught to think creatively about using their outside space. In Trafalgar Square, for instance, Christ enters on a donkey from Pall Mall and uses water from one of Sir Edwin Lutyens's fountains to heal a leper. In the Cleansing of the Temple scene, a flight of doves are set free from a cage to join their pigeon cousins over the square.

The story of the Wintershall Passion began 30 years ago when Peter Hutley,



Crowds lined Trafalgar Square yesterday to see James Burke-Dunsmore in the role of Jesus Christ



then a 63-year-old property developer, tried to buy an 18th-century barn behind his house in Bramley, Surrey. He told his children that he wanted to use it to serve God. Having won the auction, he and his wife, Ann, put on a Nativity play for the

village. From humble beginnings a mission grew. While the Nativity was polished and expanded and now has 12 shows a year, Hutley was working on a script for a story of Christ's death and rebirth. His first Passion was performed on a tennis court in 1993.

A five-hour open-air *Life of Christ* followed, featuring 200 actors, 30 sheep, several camels and a lake as the

Sea of Galilee, before Hutley revised his Passion play, first for performance in Guildford, then from 2010 in London.

Production was passed to their daughter, Charlotte de Klee, in 2014, but Peter and Ann Hutley are still keen to play a role. When I met Ann before yesterday's show she was straight into casting. "What a beard!" she exclaimed. "I see you as Caiaphas next year."

STEPHEN CHUNG/LNP; MARK THOMAS/I-IMAGES