

Jerusalem is coming to a street near you this Easter

More and more people all over Europe are preparing to take part in Passion plays, writes **Bess Twiston Davies**

“It’s modern,” says Lex Houba, “but we don’t shoot Jesus — he’s going on the Cross.”

The Passion play he produces in Tegelen, near the Dutch border with Germany, is the only one in the Netherlands. It is staged once every five years, and Houba, now 67, has been involved since his mother first brought him, aged 3, to rehearsals.

Forty-six thousand people, including Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, came to the 23 performances of the 2010 production, which had a €1.2 million budget and a spectacular set — Jerusalem on stage.

“The audience didn’t know where to look — they didn’t see half of it so they came back another time,” says Houba. For the 2015 play, script, set and music for this narrative of the death and resurrection of Christ will be entirely original.

“The Dutch always want something new,” explains Houba. “In Germany and Austria people want tradition.”

He speaks with authority — for as well as watching Passion plays for a hobby (80 to date, in locations from Switzerland to Japan), Houba is the treasurer of Europassion, thought to be the world’s largest Passion play organisation.

Founded in 1982 at the Abbey of Montserrat in Catalonia, Europassion represents 1,700 plays ranging from Oberammergau, the once-a-decade Passion play in Germany (budget: €92 million) to tiny church hall productions costing scarcely €1,000.

Each year, representatives from 15 countries in Europe gather for a congress — to swap ideas — and the chance to see a local passion play. Statutes decree each play in Europassion must be unique — so far they include mime (Sibiu, Romania), dance (Crakow) and a play staged in Amiens



Crowds greet Jesus as He rides into Jerusalem on an ass — in the Passion play at Wintershall near Guildford, Surrey

helps anyone putting on a play, brought the first UK-based Passion Play group to the first Europassion congress in Schönberg, Belgium.

“It was incredible,” he says, recalling the vision and faith of those he met: “There were nuns from Poland with no money for instance but who felt as if the Lord was calling them to put on a play.”

Equally inspired was Sally Mears, who came with thoughts of putting on a play for her local town: Abingdon in Oxfordshire. “We met the mayor of Oberammergau,” she says. “It was very humbling.”

Now, the Abingdon play is one of about 15 Passion plays being staged in the UK in 2013. More are expected next year. “People are catching a vision of how these plays bring the Bible’s

and microphone costs, and finding a director when the first one was forced to drop out — is co-directing the Abingdon play’s music. No small task — there are three school choirs, a brass band, a string quartet, and styles ranging from unaccompanied plain song to Mozart’s *Ave Verum* and modern hymns.

“We’re a mix of people from all sorts of angles,” says Mears. By no means all involved are believers — but the Methodists are loaning church premises for choir rehearsals, the chair of the play’s committee is Roman Catholic, and youth workers from Christ Church, the evangelical Anglican church which Mears attends, have offered unfolding staging. An initial £1,000 was donated by Churches Together in Abingdon.

Such ecumenism is the hallmark of

England passion plays tend to be put on by all the churches working together.”

And the consequence can be stronger ties between local churches. That, at least, seems the case in Lewes, East Sussex, where in 2010 for the first time local Christian churches collaborated on a production. Previously in 2000 various Lewes churches had each produced one section of the Passion of Christ.

“People say that the 2010 play was a catalyst,” says Serena Smith, director of the 2010 and 2015 Lewes Passion. “Clearly there are still differences [between churches] but the after-effect is a lovely undercurrent in the town of

people from the different churches knowing each other.” Mutual projects are now springing up: prayer breakfasts, Christmas inter-church choral groups singing in the pubs, council estates and streets of Lewes, and ecumenical workshops for Lent.

It did require courage to get going, Smith admits. “We had an open discussion so a lot of difficult questions were looked at — what to include in the play, who was going to pay for what, etc?” Three scriptwriters — a Catholic, an Anglican and an evangelical — were chosen, and then the play committee set up a database of all the local churches. “We began to put out a monthly newsletter — a basic A4 sheet,” says Smith. This gave updates on the play, inviting churchgoers to auditions. “Different people started to come along to the workshops,” says Smith. “When we needed material for costumes, it just appeared.”

That is not to say it was problem-free: a sound engineer dropped out and “we didn’t find an actor for Jesus until quite late on,” says Smith. So Smith, her cast and a team of volunteers, turned to prayer. “We set up prayer groups in churches across the town,” says Smith. “Prayer was absolutely central — we know we got answers to issues that came up. We really felt God’s blessing all the way through. People cried. There was a sense it was meant to happen.

“God does provide,” agrees Mears. When she began plans for Abingdon, Stewart-Clark gave three tips: “He said ‘open it up to the local community, get people to co-operate, and rely on the Holy Spirit.’”

The sense of Providence — leading and under-girding the plays — is often reported by those who contact the Passion Trust, confirms Stewart-Clark, citing the example of the first Brighton Passion in 2011. The city’s Chinese church had “an enthusiastic cast” for the Passion play they wanted to put on but lacked a venue.

“Unbeknown to them another Brighton team was organising with the council a 2011 city public Passion play but had no cast,” he says. When the two came together, the Brighton Passion, now in its third year, was born.

As the plays increase in number year

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