

THE KLOSTER-NEUZELLE THEATRE OF THE PASSION OF CHRIST – A PRE-CINEMA PRESENTATION OF 1750

Bill Barnes

Some 60 kilometres south of Frankfurt-on-Oder, in a little-known corner of eastern Germany, close to the Polish border, lies the small town of Neuzelle. You will not find it in any of the popular guidebooks to Germany, nor is it listed in the celebrated Michelin Green Tourist Guides. But in this remote place, far off the beaten tourist route lies one of the most remarkable treasures of pre-cinema.

A chance postcard from my partner Karin, on a tour of the area with her sister Astrid Breker, set my pulse racing. I seemed to be looking at a giant 'Guckkasten' (peepshow): a painted proscenium with side flats with various cut-out freestanding figures and scenery crowded within, like a very large cardboard toy theatre (fig. 1).

I immediately contacted Karin, back in Berlin by this time, urging her to contact, on my behalf, anyone who may be able to provide more information concerning this spectacular image. It was not long before she received a letter and several pages describing and illustrating this extraordinary survival – an artificial theatrical presentation of the 'The Passion of Christ', a wood and canvas reconstruction, in the tradition of the medieval Passion Play. The writer was Walter Ederer, the director of marketing and culture of the Kloster-Neuzelle. This is largely his story.

The Kloster-Neuzelle, the home of this masterpiece, was a former Cistercian monastery (1268–1817). It has recently been lovingly restored to its former baroque splendour and is now a national monument (fig. 2).

*1. The postcard from Neuzelle that set my quest in motion.
Received 8 August 2012 (Stiftung Stift Neuzelle)*





2. The Kloster Neuzelle as it appears today after extensive restoration (Stiftung Stift Neuzelle)

The 'Theatre of the Passion of Christ' is now housed in three separate store rooms in Neuzelle and is in the process of being restored. A special museum is under construction to exhibit it, which, it is hoped, will be open to the public in spring 2015.

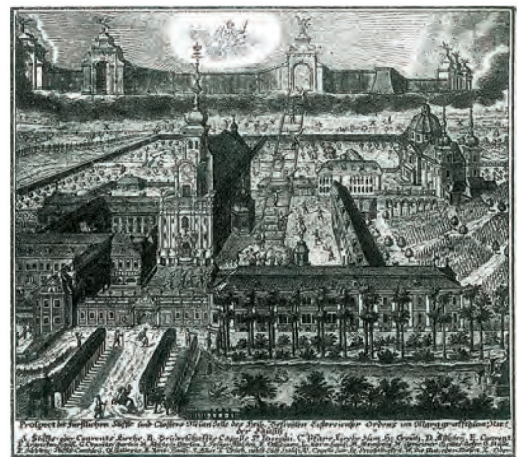
The complete collection, forming (what Herr Ederer calls) 'the Holy Sepulchre' originally consisted of 240 separate pieces, of which 200 are still extant. They are made up of five acts to be presented in fifteen scenes representing the Passion of Christ, including his resurrection. These are:

| Act | Scene | |
|----------------------|-------|--------------------------------------|
| I Garden | 1 | Jesus prays on the Mount of Olives |
| | 2 | The kiss of Judas |
| II Palace | 3 | Inquisition of Jesus before Hannas |
| | 4 | Mocking of Jesus in front of Kaiphas |
| | 5 | Jesus and King Herod |
| III Palace Yard | 6 | Scouring of Jesus |
| | 7 | Crowning with thorns |
| | 8 | Ecce Homo (Behold the Man) |
| IV City of Jerusalem | 9 | Bearing the Cross |
| | 10 | Simon of Cyrene |
| V Calvary | 11 | The stripping of Jesus of his robes |
| | 12 | Erecting the Cross |
| | 13 | The Crucifixion |
| VI The Resurrection | 14 | Burial of Jesus |
| | 15 | The Resurrection |

When the church of St Marian within the Kloster Neuzelle was being restored in 1997 all these numerous pieces were recovered from it, but sadly many were found to be much damaged by damp and neglect. The paint of the surfaces of the wood and canvas of the figures and flats was peeling off and parts of frames were rotten. The paint on some of the stretched canvas was in a particularly poor state. During the period from 2001 to 2003 the pieces comprising the scene for the 'Kiss of Judas' (Der Judaskuss) were the first to be restored. Forty-five large-scale canvasses and boards were saved as a first step. These were put on exhibition in Wnsdorf, Munich, and in Neuzelle (fig. 3) and amazed modern audiences with their uniqueness and beauty. It is hoped that the next to be restored will be the 'Crown of Thorns', and the remainder of the material by later in 2014 when they will be presented in their own special museum in Neuzelle.

The painting of the scenes and figures for this Theatre of the Passion has been attributed to one Johann Felix Seyfrid, who we know was residing in Neuzelle between 1748 and 1752 (fig. 4). His signature can be found on some of the paper models that were used as guides in the making of it.

3. The Heilige Grab Neuzelle after restoration, as exhibited in the refectory of the Kloster Neuzelle, August 2004 (Stiftung Stift Neuzelle)



4. An engraving of the Kloster Neuzelle c. 1752 by J.F. Seyfrid, who is believed to have been the creator of 'Das Heilige Grab Neuzelle' of 1750 (Stiftung Stift Neuzelle)

It is thought Seyfrid may have come from Bavaria or Prague. Also that there may have been other painters, assistants and workmen employed to help on this project. The first time it was exhibited is believed to have been in the Joseph Chapel of the monastery in 1753.

The almost life-sized figures and groups of figures were painted using distemper on wooden boards and stretched canvas, and presented in a proscenium 7 metres high and 6 metres deep (fig. 5). Each piece was freestanding so could be placed within eight upright 'flats' suitable to its part in the play. The backdrop which formed the back to the stage had a fixture attached to hold the 'Host' (the Holy of Holies). Many of these freestanding figures have quotations from the Bible painted on them.

To further the effect of perspective and to allow the figures towards the rear to be seen more clearly, the stage or platform upon which these scenes are assembled was slightly raked upwards towards the end backdrop. A whole setting or scene could be illuminated by oil-lamps situated behind the 'flats', which must have added to its magic. Some of the original glass lamps and the holes in which they were fixed in the structures can be seen to this day.

This 'Theatre of the Passion of Christ' was played out over the course of the Easter festival. Each day the inhabitants of the town would witness a different stage of the Passion in a similar way that a cinema audience would follow an old movie serial or a modern audience a television one. It ended finally with Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday.

It is thought that the final installation of this 'Theatre of the Passion' may have been in 1863 in the gothic sacristy of the Kloster, and thereafter only single groups were displayed.

As its construction and elements became more and more unstable a priest, Florian Birnbach, suggested building a new one, but his plan was never

5. A graphic reconstruction of the eight 'flats' of the 'Theatre of the Passion' in which the freestanding figures were placed on a slightly elevated raked floor to give the spectators a better view of the more distant characters, similar to the seating in a modern theatre or cinema (Stiftung Stift Neuzelle).



realised. It is remarkable that because of the poor state a lot of it was in, it was not thrown out and burnt. As it was, 20 pieces were discarded, as this is the number missing from an original total of 240.

No systematic list of surviving 'Holy Sepulchres' of middle Europe consisting of dramatic set-ups has so far been compiled. The prototype for such constructions is believed to have been brought to the attention of church authorities in 1740 with the publication of an engraving by Guiseppe Galli Bibino, which has eight flats for a single scene.

Andrea Pozzo, a Jesuit, described the 'Holy Sepulchre' in the Jesuit church of Il Jesu, in Rome. Further scenic examples are in St Andreä in Lienz, similar to that in Neuzelle with changing scenes of the story of the passion and resurrection. Others, in Patsch in the Tyrol, Wolfratshausen and Gaisach, have been restored in the past few years.

Since 2006 a Holy Sepulchre has been regularly installed in the Presbyterian Jesuit Church of St Ignatius in Landshut each Holy Week.

The artificial constructions of the Passion Play, such as that of Neuzelle, are directly descended from the medieval Mystery Plays enacted by the townsfolk outside the cathedrals and large churches of Europe. They have their origins in ancient Egypt where plays in honour of Osiris were held at Abydos, in ancient Greece where the mysteries of Dionysus were performed, and in the Cristian plays depicting the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ in certain of the medieval miracle plays, such as those performed in York. In modern times there is the spectacle of the Passion Play at Oberammergau in Bavaria, which attracts Christians from all over the world, and was perhaps the inspiration for the early Tableaux – films made during the closing years of the 19th century which introduced to cinema the first 'feature length' film.

The first filmed version of a Passion Play, directed in France by Albert Lear in 1897, comprised twelve Tableaux. Its total length was 550 feet (20 minutes), whereas the average length of a film at this date was about 40–50 feet.

This was followed by films of similar length by Gaumont in France and Hollaman, Lubin and Klaus and Erlanger (see Barnes).

It should also be borne in mind that the life and Passion of Christ had been depicted in stereographs and magic lantern slides with scenes enacted by Life Models in static poses. Probably these were the real sources in which the Passion films had their origin, although it has been an on-going story since classical and medieval times.

Returning to the subject of artificial representations of the Passion Play such as that which survives in Neuzelle, there were similar displays being presented in other parts of Europe (fig. 6).

Jean Nicholas Servandoni (1695–1766), an Italian by birth, became famous as a decorator (scene painter) at the Paris Opera and organiser of public festivals. He obtained the job of producing spectacles in the King's Theatre, known as the 'Salle des Machines'. In 1738 he produced his first project, a painted reconstruction of the St Peter's Basilica in Rome with the aim of transposing viewers into the actual interior of the church through means of linear perspective (see Pinson). He eventually introduced movement through mechanical means.

Besides Paris, London too witnessed such

theatrical effects, mainly through the work of Philippe de Louthembourg, who had exhibited four paintings at the Paris Salon in 1763, representing Dawn, Morn, Evening and Night, indicating his fascination with natural effects and light, which he later exploited at the Drury Lane Theatre, London. By February 1771 he had opened his own enterprise 'the Eidophusikon', which I have dealt with in some depth elsewhere.

Shows similar to the Eidophusikon appeared in France at the beginning of the 19th century. One of the most notable was the 'Spectacle Pittoresque et mécanique' of M. Pierre. Like de Louthembourg's, it was a scaled-down model of a theatre with mechanical parts and artificial lighting effects to represent scenes 'drawn from nature'.

Another practitioner was Ignacio Degotti, born c. 1759 in Turin. He was reported to be the first to use such freestanding pieces, which he called 'fermes', though we now know this to be untrue, as the Neuzelle Holy Sepulchre bears witness. He also suggested the use of framing devices such as 'Archades' and 'Caves', which created a greater sense of depth and thus heightened the natural illusion. This we know was a device used in the set-up of the Kloster Neuzelle Passion Play half a century earlier.

The 18th century in Europe, known as the Age of Enlightenment, was a period of more liberal thinking and a century of invention and discovery in the Arts and Sciences. Advances in optics and physics led to a number of optical and mechanical devices that we now term pre-cinema.

It was the heyday of the magic lantern, peepshows, vues d'optiques, perspective views, silhouettes and shadow shows. It was as if the cinematograph were kicking and struggling to be born, having to wait, however, until the closing years of the next century before celebrating its first birthday.

Whereas many of these wonders of the 18th and 19th centuries have come and gone leaving little trace, the unique and wonderful theatrical presentation of the Kloster-Neuzelle Theatre of the Passion of Christ remains virtually intact, and after careful restoration will again be something to wonder at as it was over 250 years ago.

I wish to thank Karin Siemonert for translations and help in making this project possible.

REFERENCES

- For a fuller story of the history and restoration of the Kloster Sepulchre of Neuzelle one can do no better than to consult the two beautiful books that Walter Ederer has so kindly sent me, namely: *Sein grab wird Herrlich seijn. Das Heilige Grab von Neuzelle und seine Passionsdarstellungen von 1751. Ausstellungskatalog*. Herausgegeben von Walter Ederer, Stiftung Stift Neuzelle, Klaus Reinecke, Ordensmuseum Abtei Kamp. Schnell & Steiner, Regensburg 1998, and *Das Heilige Grab Neuzelle. Untersuchung und Konservierung der scene 'Judaskuss' in Buchnenbild 'Garten'*. Michael Imhof Verlag. Petersburg 2005
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6. Two views of the 'Theatre Sacrum' in Marienmünster at Diessen-on-Ammersee in Bavaria, showing a stucco proscenium framing a mural representing three arched 'flats' and a flight of steps. The back area is open in order to receive a set of interchangeable pictures depicting scenes from the life of Christ (photo Kunstverlag Peda).