

A Story Worth Telling



Peter Hutley, the owner and writer.

Pat Coulter experiences a unique theatre production in the heart of scenic Surrey . . .

DEEP within the Surrey Hills, set in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, lies a remarkable earthly paradise called Wintershall. The picturesque country estate is the cherished home of Peter and Ann Hutley who have lived and thrived here for over 50 years. The 1,000-acre estate

is run as an organic farm, but it's not the cattle and sheep I've really come to see. Every summer thousands of people flock here to experience an epic, open-air theatrical production depicting the life of Christ, based on the Gospel according to St Luke. The play has been especially written and adapted by Peter himself and has been performed annually at Wintershall for 15 years.

I remember at school my deputy head teacher was an ardent visitor to Oberammergau to witness the Bavarian town's famous Passion Play.

The community there still comes together once every ten years to re-enact this epic story from the Bible and I've often wondered what it would be like to experience the Bible come to life on stage. Happily, now I have opportunity, and much closer to home.

Although not far from bustling Guildford, I soon find myself driving down winding country lanes to off-the-beaten-track Wintershall. Thousands make the journey into this secretive part of Surrey on an annual pilgrimage.

Upon arriving amongst its lush, green acres, I meet regulars Wayne and Lizzie, who have driven down from Sheffield in their camper van especially for the event. We're soon chatting like old friends.

"One year we were in the area and a friend invited us to come along and meet Jesus," Wayne explains.

Unsurprisingly, they were intrigued. That was their first introduction to Wintershall.

"It's an emotionally moving experience to see 'The Life Of Christ' staged here," Lizzie enthuses.

There's a real sense of excited anticipation as we all make our way down into an astonishingly beautiful natural amphitheatre, a wooded dell adorned with wild purple foxgloves, as pretty as any theatrical backdrop I've ever seen.

I discover many of the amateur cast members

taking part at Wintershall have done so for many years. They come from all walks of life and, rather surprisingly, religious faiths, too.

Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, Church of England, Catholics and Buddhists all harmoniously take part.

It's a dedicated commitment as the play takes up a significantly large part of their lives. During performance week in high summer, Wintershall becomes a retreat involving whole families.

Many cast members take time off work. Over the



years audience members have been inspired to take part themselves.

"I was so moved by the whole experience that, even though already a Christian, I felt I had to be involved," cast member Tony Bennewith says.

"It takes a lot of time and commitment, but taking part is a faith-building experience. I cannot hear a Bible reading about the life of Jesus without picturing the scene in vivid detail from the Wintershall performances. I have involved my children and even my grandchildren."

For a newcomer like me, this production promises to be unlike any other play I've ever attended. There's no formal stage or seating arrangement. You see, the beautiful, natural setting of Wintershall is the expansive stage.

It's also a roving theatre production as audience members follow the cast from scene to scene, literally in Jesus's footsteps.

Many well-organised stalwarts, I notice, have brought along rugs and fold-up chairs, together with picnic baskets. Divided into three acts, it runs all day from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. with a short intermission.

I discover Wintershall's owner Peter Hutley dressed for his role as a rabbi, and learn from him that he was



Jesus among the audience.

inspired to write and stage the production after Pope John Paul II declared 1999 the year of preparation for the millennium.

Peter recalls everyone was talking about parties and the Dome but, as a Christian, he was in tune with the true significance of the landmark date.

play has run every year since.

Wintershall is run by a charitable trust and profits from the plays contribute to the wider community. In recognition for his work, Peter was honoured by the Queen, receiving an MBE for services to the community in 2004.

"I realise I'm about to witness something very special indeed"

"There wouldn't have been a millennium without Jesus," he adds sagely.

Peter saw this as an opportunity to spread the word.

It took Peter 14 months to write "The Life Of Christ". The acclaim was immediate and overwhelming, and the

In addition, he was appointed a Knight of the Order of Saint Gregory, while his wife Ann was made a Dame. In 2013, he was awarded an OBE for his work in promoting Christian understanding.

To think this originally all came about from staging a

The Leading Man



James Burke-Dunsmore.

The leading role of Jesus is played by an outstanding professional actor, James Burke-Dunsmore, who, over the years, has made the role his own in open-air theatre.

He has performed to acclaim in productions of Peter's "The Life Of Christ" around the globe, even in Australia.

James is surely unique in the acting world. Who else can claim to have ridden into London's Trafalgar Square on the back of a donkey in front of a 20,000 strong audience?

James has a vivid recollection of one particular experience whilst playing Jesus when you could say he genuinely suffered for his art.

"Once, during the Crucifixion, one of the Roman soldiers accidentally hit my legs with the mallet. I screamed this blood-curdling scream but no-one except the soldier realised it was a real scream. On the cross, I was crying real tears. My ankles went numb.

"I could see the soldier looking up at me and saying he was sorry, but I couldn't say anything back to him. You couldn't have people seeing Jesus saying, 'Don't worry about it, mate,' to the soldiers.

"After they took me down, I managed to do the Resurrection even though both my ankles were fractured. Through that experience I learned about forgiveness!"

nativity play. That, too, was written by Peter, staged in the suitably rustic Holly Barn here on Wintershall estate, which transforms every year into a "lowly stable".

Although cast members aren't professional actors, their dedication and professional attitude is unquestionable. They are expertly guided by professional West End theatre director Ashley Herman.

And now it's time for the play to unfold. St Luke begins his story, acting as the Master of Ceremonies.

When the Angel Gabriel radiantly appears, wings outstretched high above us on the ridge, I realise I'm about to witness something very special indeed.

A donkey wends its way through purple-spined foxgloves, led by Joseph and carrying Mary with child. Shepherds and their flock gather round. Every hushed word, venerably spoken, is heard distinctly.

The actors don't have to project their voices – instead the very latest sound technology is used with cleverly concealed microphones taped to their heads and huge speakers strategically positioned out of sight.

Sunlight playing through the trees spotlights the scene. Fellow audience members bask in the glorious warmth, nestled on picnic rugs, happily munching refreshments and breathing in the country air.

Jesus's performance is so convincing, I'm enraptured and moved by the scene played out before me. My Bible studies have truly been brought to life.

It's not surprising many schoolchildren come to watch the play, as once seen, it is a sight never forgotten. ■

Want to know more?

"The Life Of Christ" takes place from Tuesday, June 21 to Sunday, June 26 at Wintershall Estate, Bramley, Surrey GU5 0LR. Visit www.wintershall-estate.com or call 01483 892167.

The good shepherd.

