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1924 saw the first open-air performances at the "World Theatre" in Einsiedeln, featuring a world figure surrounded by earth spirits.
Photo: Welttheater Einsiedeln



In 1981, the stage took the form of a massive "P" for "pax". Photo: Welttheater Einsiedeln



Amateur actors form the troupe and continue to play the roles today. Top: production design from 1960. Bottom: auditions for the 1981 performances
Photos: Welttheater Einsiedeln, Keystone



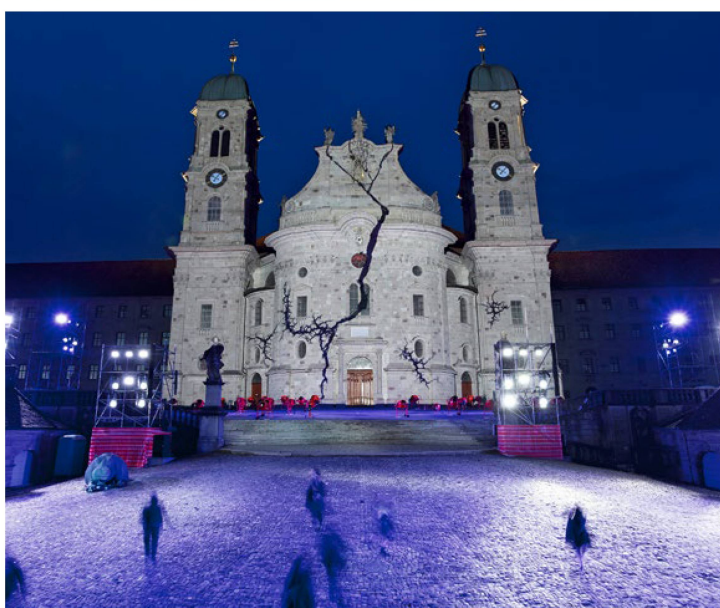
To mark the new millennium, contemporary Swiss authors were commissioned to write a fresh interpretation. The version by Thomas Hürlimann, first performed in 2000, returned to the monastery stage in 2007. Top: the "world" dressed in red

Left: the figure cabinet with the main characters
Photos: Welttheater Einsiedeln, Keystone

100 years of Einsiedeln World Theatre: stage fever in a monastery village

Since 1924, the “World Theatre” by Spanish baroque poet Pedro Calderón de la Barca has been performed every few years in front of Einsiedeln monastery. In recent decades, contemporary authors have reinterpreted the four-hundred-year-old mystery play. This year, a version by Swiss author Lukas Bärfuss takes to the stage. Some 500 theatre lovers from Einsiedeln will participate in the open-air spectacle.

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In 2013, author Tim Krohn illustrated man's greed and interference with creation using the example of genetic engineering. Photos: Welttheater Einsiedeln, Keystone



In 2024, women took the main roles in “The Great Theatre of the World”. Author Lukas Bärfuss elaborates on the existential questions of Calderón's mystery play: what is my role in life? What is a good life? Photos: Welttheater Einsiedeln

From religious mystery to modern didactic theatre

THEODORA PETER

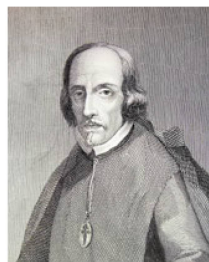
The Einsiedeln backdrop is unique. The monastery square bordered by arcades – Europe's second-largest church forecourt after St Peter's Square in Rome – provides the setting for the "World Theatre". The imposing facade of the baroque church looms in the background. Einsiedeln monastery is Switzerland's top pilgrimage site: hundreds of thousands of visitors come every year to marvel at the black Madonna in the Chapel of Grace.

In 1917, a local scientist discovered that the square in front of the monastery was acoustically very well suited to theatre performances. The abbot of the Benedictine abbey then gave his blessing for "spiritual plays", which led to the selection of a Spanish mystery play. Baroque poet Pedro Calderón de la Barca wrote "The Great Theatre of the World" (*El gran teatro del mundo*) in the 1630s. The work portrays human existence in the form of a play. A 'creator' allocates the roles and the 'world' is the stage where the story unfolds. The allegorical characters include the rich man, the beggar, the king and farmer, as well as beauty, wisdom and grace. For 50 years, the "World Theatre" in Einsiedeln stayed true to the original, through the German translation by Joseph von Eichendorff. However, in 1970, people started to express their disapproval of the outdated image of a societal order determined by a divine being, where power structures are confirmed instead of being called into question.

Existential life questions

It took another 30 years for the organisers to come up with a contemporary version. Swiss author Thomas Hürlimann, a former pupil at the Klosterschule in Einsiedeln, was commissioned to come up with a new interpretation for the 2000 and 2007 seasons. From then, "Einsiedeln World Theatre" has integrated current issues. For example, in 2013, author Tim Krohn used the example of gene technology to focus on interventions in creation and the human pursuit of perfection.

The most recent version – postponed from 2020 to 2024 due to the corona pandemic – was penned by Lukas Bärfuss. The award-winning author is one of the most incisive exponents of contemporary Swiss literature and a keen-eyed observer of societal developments. Bärfuss also addresses the existential questions posed by Calderón's mystery play: "What is my role in life? What am I prepared to die for? What is a good life?" These questions are eternally relevant, although the social resonance of these themes has changed. Four hundred years ago, a per-



Spanish baroque poet Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681) wrote "The Great Theatre of the World" as a spiritual play for Corpus Christi.



Swiss author Lukas Bärfuss (*1971) will present a contemporary interpretation of Calderón's "World Theatre" in Einsiedeln in 2024.

son's fate was more or less set at birth. Someone born as a beggar remained poor – and hoped for a better life in heaven. "Today, the enlightened person faces the challenge of plotting their own course in life." In Bärfuss's version, a woman – Emanuela – embodies all the roles in Calderón's play. As a farmer, she succeeds in becoming queen, loses power and falls into poverty, before she turns her fortunes around and finally leaves the world as an old woman.

A major village undertaking

The locals make up the cast for the Einsiedeln production, with roughly 250 amateur thespians playing major and minor roles. A further 250 people also work behind the scenes. "The whole of Einsiedeln is involved in one way or other," says James Kälin, president of the organising committee. Kälin himself fell in love with the theatre at his mother's knee, as he once explained in a radio interview. As a youngster, he was one of the singing angels on the monastery square while his father played the main role of the beggar. His mother worked behind the scenes in the cloakroom – as his grandfather had done before. Other families from the village have also been involved with the open-air performance for generations. Producer Livio Andreina, who set up "World Theatre" 2024 with Lukas Bärfuss, raves about the "incredible enthusiasm of the participants". Andreina told the local paper that the Einsiedeln theatre performance is unique in Switzerland. "It's a lot more than just a play; it's a social project involving the entire village."

The Benedictine monastery is also represented on the theatre company's managing committee. The production has relied on its goodwill for 100 years. In the early days, the monks composed the music for Calderón's "World Theatre", before secular musicians took over from the turn of the century. In the 2000 and 2007 performances, a monk took to the stage. Father Kassian Etter, who died in 2009, remains the only monk from the monastery to have acted in the play to date.

The "Einsiedeln World Theatre" runs until 7 September.
www.welttheatereinsiedeln.ch

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