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Autor: Meakin, Derek
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4,000 PLAYERS HONOUR WINE IN MAMMOTH SWISS FESTIVAL.

By Derek Meakin.

It starts next week — a fortnight of jollification that will turn Vevey, often ribbed as the Rip Van Winkletown of the Suisse Romande, into the busiest, gayest, happiest little place in all Europe.

Yes, that is what is meant by the Winegrowers' Festival, which the Veveysans and their friends from all over the world are about to celebrate once again after a lapse of nearly 30 years.

I have just been through the plans for this festival. And fantastic some of them are.

Have you ever heard of a first night being held at eight o'clock in the morning?

Well, that is what will be happening on Monday. And you can take it from me there will be no shortage of first-nighters there to give it a good send-off.

For the show that is to open at such an early hour is the centrepiece of the festival. It is to run for only eleven performances, each lasting three and a quarter hours. And I am not going to argue with the billing that it is one of the most grandiose open-air spectacles ever devised.

Scene of it all is Vevey's market place, where Napoleon once stalked up and down reviewing his troops and where — in normal times — twice-weekly open-air markets are held.

But these are not normal times. Not in festival year. For the whole of this vast square whose southern boundary is washed by the gently-undulating waters of the sparkling lake of Geneva has been turned into a huge amphitheatre.

This egg-shaped structure holds 16,000 spectators in row upon row of tiered seats.

And with the artistic direction in the hands of Maurice Lehmann, who runs both the Paris Opera and the Opéra Comique, you can expect only the best in artistic talent.

Animals, too

Over from Paris will come the entire troupe of one of the French capital's leading ballet companies,

and with them the band of the Republican Guard. Altogether there will be close on 4,000 performers — and that is not counting the 300 horses, oxen, cows and sheep that are being brought on to add realism to the scene.

The subject of all this? Well, it's rather involved. It has been described as "a brilliant hymn of gratitude to the glory of the Creator", but pagan beliefs about the workings of nature also play a big part in its make-up.

The last festival, in 1927, glorified "the rhythm of the four seasons and the treasures of the cherished soil".

The theme remains the same. The spectacle opens with heralds and horsemen and soldiers marching to the sound of fifes and drums. There is the goddess Pales and her dancing girls. A long line of herdsmen with their flocks. At one point the unrestrained gaiety of the vineyards takes over, with jovial Bacchus, swept along by a crowd of fawns, setting his seal on the merrymaking.

To end it all there is a mad farandole, in which everyone who can get into the act takes part. Bells ring out their joyful peals. Guns thunder. And more than three hours of fantasy concludes on a proud note of triumph.

And if a show like this isn't enough to tempt visitors to Vevey during the next fortnight there is still more to offer. There will be a Venetian Fête on the lake. And three carnivals through the streets, each of which will have 4,000 performers and 15 bands and will be one and a half hours long.

All of this has been in the blueprint stage since the end of the war. So you see what I mean when I say that while this four-times-a-century Winegrowers' Festival has such a long and colourful history behind it, the current version is going to be the biggest, brightest and best of them all.

* * *

[DEREK MEAKIN is off to Vevey this weekend to see the Winegrowers' Festival. Next month, in his "Roundabout Switzerland" series, he will tell the full story of this unique event. — EDITOR.]

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