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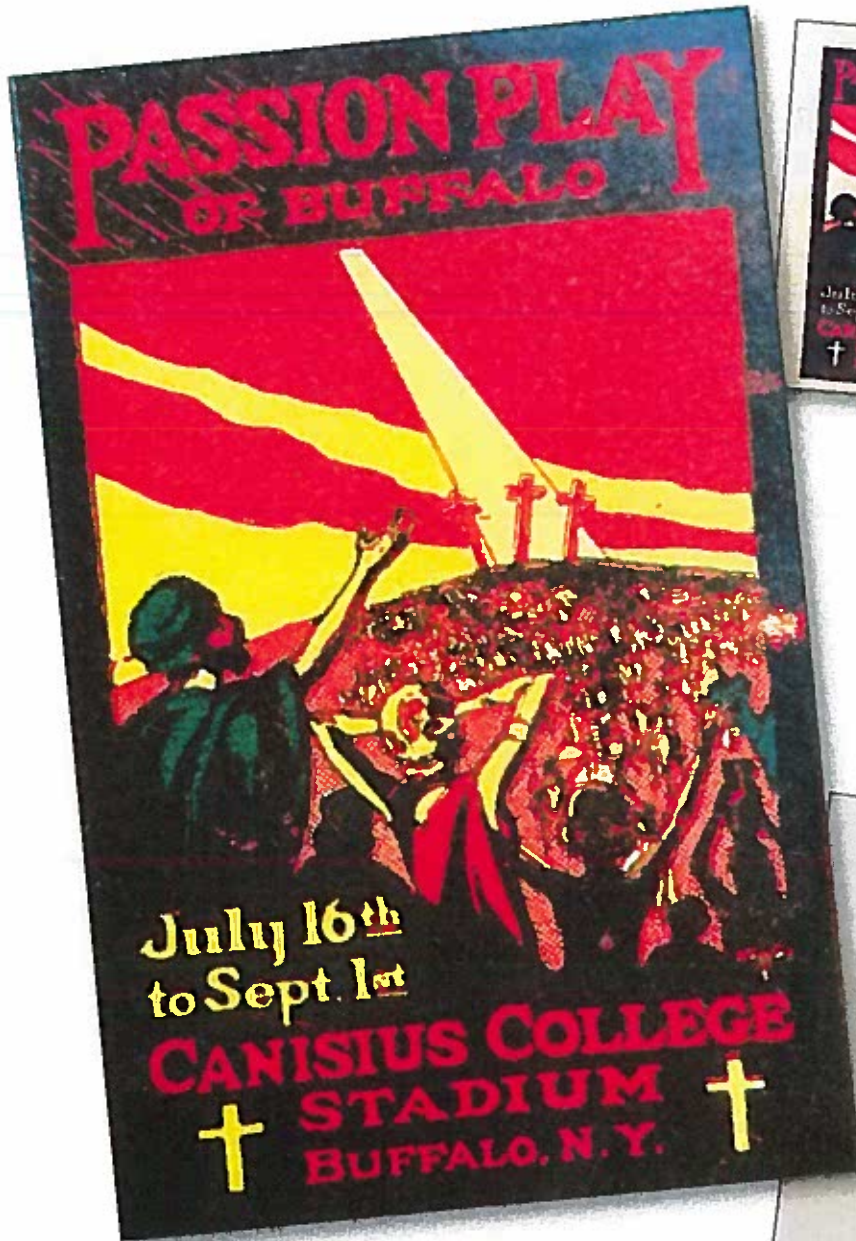
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THE CANISIUS COLLEGE PASSION PLAY: EPIC REVIVAL OF A THEATRICAL EPIC

By Jacek A. Wysocki



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Promotional items from the 1923 production of the Passion Play of Buffalo at Canisius College, along with an invitation sent to local dignitaries by college president Michael J. Ahern, S.J. COURTESY CANISIUS COLLEGE, REV. CLAYTON J. MURRAY, S.J. ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

A super production whose beauty the mind cannot conceive until the eye has seen it," promised advanced notices. "An event of national significance, which will attract thousands of people from all parts of the country." The year was 1923, and the Canisius College Dramatic Association was about to premiere a revival of its renowned Passion Play.

In medieval times, the Catholic Church sought to impart moral lessons from scripture and the lives of the saints by presenting popular dramas known as "Mystery Plays." They were performed in town squares or church precincts on the occasion of Church holidays and festivals. In 1633, as parts of Europe were being ravaged by a plague epidemic, desperate residents in the Bavarian village of Oberammergau pledged that, if their lives were spared, they would produce in perpetuity a play depicting the

comical acting. Though popular in Europe, such dramas were not readily imported for the entertainment of American audiences, which were constrained by the young nation's conservative – and largely Protestant – religious strictures. Depictions of the Passion tended to be of a secular nature, with the religious aspects of the story subdued. As a result, presentations of the Passion as envisioned at Oberammergau were late in coming to America.

That absence was addressed in 1901 when an adaptation was introduced at the Jesuit-affiliated University of Santa Clara. Now known as Santa Clara University, the oldest university in California elected to present the spectacle in celebration of the school's Golden Jubilee.

Clay M. Greene, a Santa Clara alumnus and Broadway playwright, wrote the script for an epic entitled *Nazareth: An Incident of the Passion*.

Greene's play was divided into four "epochs," covering the coming of Christ, His betrayal, condemnation and "consummation" (death and resurrection). Through ten "chapters," interspersed with musical interludes, a large cast drawn from the university traced Christ's odyssey from the plains of Bethlehem to Calvary. The play was a great success, drawing audiences from as far away as San Francisco.

An Educational Tradition

Since the end of the 16th Century, the course of studies at Jesuit colleges and universities has been ruled by the *Ratio Studiorum*, or "Plan of Studies," propounded by the Order's founder, Ignatius Loyola. Among its stated aims was to instill in its students the art of

eloquentia – "a good person speaking well." Addressing this aim, schools turned to the use of drama for "educational and propagandist" purposes. It was hoped that the process would develop in students "a self-conscious restraint in appearing before a large audience, a nobility of carriage, use of gestures, a clarity of diction, a true and just expression of sentiments." Activities ranged from "modest student exercises" to elaborate public presentations rivaling the professional stage. (It should be noted that Corneille, Racine and Moliere all honed their theatrical skills writing and performing in plays at their Jesuit universities!)

It was the Jesuits' reputation as educators that prompted Catholic Bishop John Timon to invite the Order to open a school in Buffalo in 1870. Diocesan resources were being severely taxed by the needs of Buffalo's immigrant population, particularly those of German heritage, who flocked to the city in the years following the Civil War. In response to Timon's invitation, the Order dispatched a group of German Jesuits. They established a school for young men on Washington Street which would evolve into the separate institutions of Canisius High School and Canisius College. The curriculum followed the educational model prescribed in the *Ratio Studiorum*, and early school catalogs specified that, in keeping with the *Ratio*, "*classis rhetoricae*," – "theoretical and practical instruction in the art of oratory" – would constitute the focus of studies during the student's sophomore year.

In the spirit of the Jesuit theater tradition, dramatic presentations were standard elements of the academic year. Some productions were learning exercises,



"Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ." The plague abated and, true to their promise, the villagers began to present their play in 1634. By 1700, the burden of annual productions was found to be too great and it was decided, instead, to present the play decennially. With only two exceptions, they have continued to do so over the intervening centuries. Most recently, in 2010, over 500,000 people attended 102 performances from May through October.

Eventually, the itinerant Mystery Plays came to be portrayed in the vernacular of the audiences rather than Latin. Such innovation opened the door for the insertion of "spicier" language and more



The stage at Oberammergau, ca. 1871.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

performed for student audiences, while others were more sophisticated and played before the general public. In 1913, for example, the Dramatic Association staged Plautus' comedy *IDue Captivi* in its original Latin, at the Twentieth Century Club. [For more information on the Twentieth Century Club, see "Let Her Own Works Praise Her in the Gates: The Twentieth Century Club of Buffalo" in the Fall 2014 issue of *Western New York Heritage*. Copies still available.]

In 1914, after several revivals of *Nazareth* at Santa Clara, Canisius College president Michael J. Ahern, S.J. secured the rights to produce the play in Buffalo. At the same time, he recruited author Clay Greene to oversee the production. The play was booked into the Teck Theater, at Main and Edward streets, which boasted the city's largest stage. Featuring a cast of 200, the play had its premiere on the evening of April 27, 1914, and ran for a week, with matinees on Wednesday and Saturday. Two more matinees were later added in response to audience demand. The combined audience for ten performances was estimated at 18,000. The reviewer for *The Buffalo Evening News* found the play "beautifully staged and its scenic effects ... pleasingly appropriate to the sacred story ... most creditable and delighting entertainment." The simple language used enabled "the aged and children [to] drink in the inspiration of artistic stage settings, ancient costumes

and the story ... and depart from the theater with greater reverence for God, with better understanding of His life and His mission on earth than before." Incidental music was provided by the Canisius College Orchestra, which was commended for "unusually capable ... playing."

Another reviewer found parts of the play more moving and impactful than the Oberammergau version. In fact, Greene's dramatization contained a significant departure from the German model – rather than being presented by an actor, the person of Jesus was "implied" by a bright beam of light. The reviewer was particularly struck by the use of this device during the Way of the Cross. In the scene, apostles are seen cowering behind a high wall, above which the top portion of the cross and the points of soldiers' spears are visible. A spotlight focuses on the cross and follows as it moves across the stage. Also, except for appearances in crowd scenes, there were no female roles.

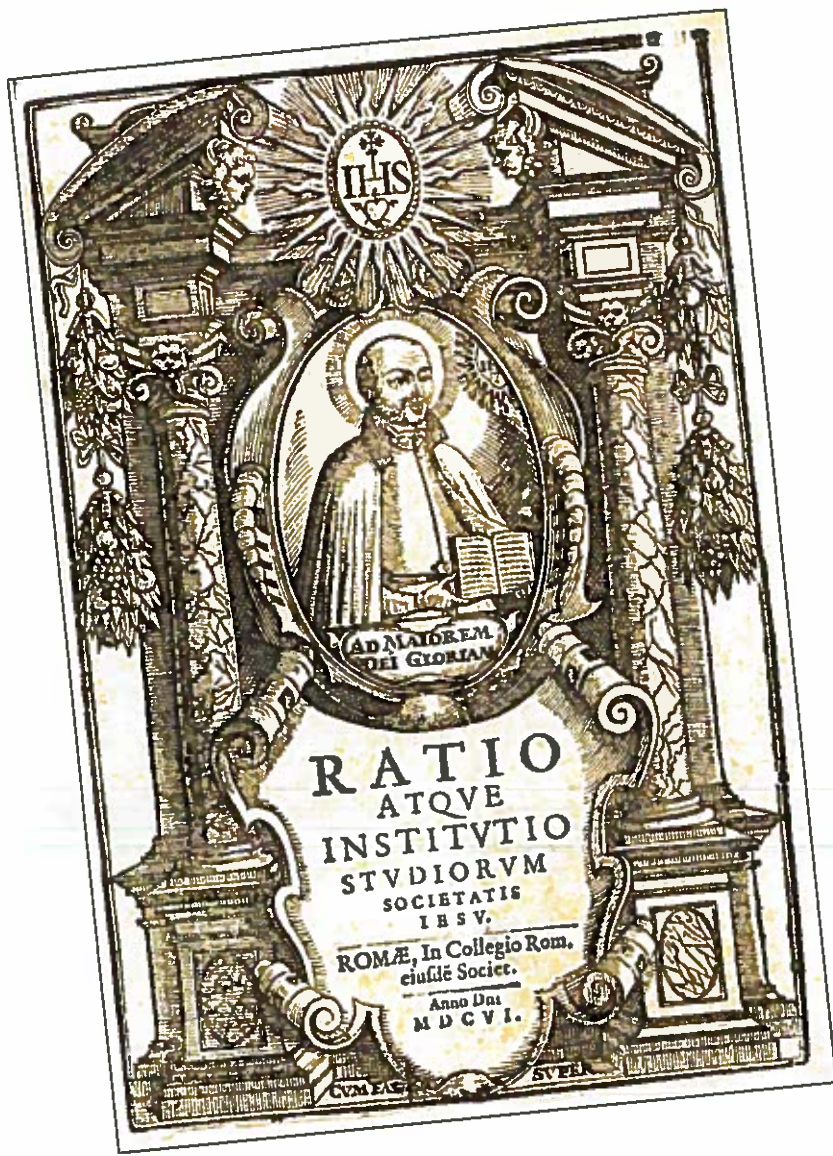
The Canisius production was revived three years later for another week-long run, this time at the Majestic Theater. *The Buffalo Evening News* reviewer found the production "in every essential ... an excellent entertainment, most appropriate to the Lenten season." The cast of 200 included several students and alumni who reprised roles they had first performed in 1914. Singled out for special praise was the play's musical accompaniment. In addition to incidental

music composed specially for the play, musical interludes were drawn from works by classical composers. The triumphal march from Gounod's *Queen of Sheba*, "proved so delightful that it was demanded a second time."

Golden Jubilee

The year 1920 marked Canisius College's Golden Jubilee. As at Santa Clara nearly two decades before, a staging of the Passion Play would be the signature event of this celebration. On the first page of the souvenir program for this third production, President Ahern attempted to explain the symbolic importance of the undertaking: "The fifty years of history which culminate this year in the Golden Jubilee of Canisius, have been years in which the great emotions of life have all played their part. Nothing light or trivial could epitomize these years of struggle, of sorrow, of privation, of ambition and success. Nothing lesser in character than the Passion Play itself could typify the aspiration of the Fathers of Canisius for the future of their institution."

Rather than return to a local stage, it was decided that the play would be performed on campus. The college had relocated from downtown Buffalo to its present location at Main Street and Jefferson Avenue, where the iconic "Old Main" building had been dedicated in 1913. In preparation, an immense outdoor arena was constructed behind Old Main at a cost described in the press as "many thousands of dollars." Taking its inspiration from Oberammergau, the stage was intended as a permanent structure. Elements of the concrete and plaster structure reached three stories in height, and the center was crowned by a red-tiled, gable roof that was visible "for miles." The stage was 175 feet wide and 86 feet deep, with a total area of 15,136 square feet. Action would be presented on three levels: a central proscenium was flanked on one side by an arched town street and on the other by Herod's palace. The main stage was 50 feet wide by 75 feet in depth; the curtain opening was 38 feet wide and 30 feet high. The stage was wider than the largest stage in



Title page from the 1606 edition of the *Ratio Studiorum*, which guided the course of studies at Jesuit colleges and universities since being compiled by Ignatius Loyola in the late 16th century. COURTESY SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

Buffalo, larger than Oberammergau; some claimed it to be the largest stage at that time in the United States, if not the world. Facing the stage, backing up to Old Main, was tiered seating for 3,000. Audiences were assured that the theater and stage were constructed in compliance with “every building regulation of the City of Buffalo,” and that insurance inspectors had determined that the seating arrangements were “seven times stronger than necessary to be considered absolutely safe.”

The scope of the production had grown since its more modest counterpart on the Teck stage, and now involved a 500-member cast, composed principally of students and alumni of the college, supplemented by performers from Canisius High School, St. Joseph Collegiate Institute and local parish organizations. Scenery, costumes and wigs were secured locally and from theater companies in New York City and Boston. The production was assisted by professionals affiliated with the New York stage.

As opening day approached, press accounts proclaimed that the production would be “the leading summer event of Buffalo,” and predicted that the city would be a “mecca” for visitors from across the country. No effort was spared in getting word out to potential audiences. In an effort to sell

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The Very Reverend Michael J. Ahern, S.J., president of Canisius College during the period of the Passion Play productions.
AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

tickets throughout Western New York, the producers secured the assistance of a pilot and plane from the Curtiss Aircraft Company. A series of 16 flights over a 10-day period would carry word of the event to communities from Silver Creek to Warsaw. Departing from the Niagara Aircraft Corporation's flying field, the plane would carry a courier, costumed in the tunic and sandals of an ancient Roman. At each destination, the courier would be met by local mayors and Catholic clergy whom he would address "in poetic phraseology" and deliver "messages and tidings" inviting the communities to come to Buffalo for the play. The plane would also "shower leaflets" advertising the play as it flew over the communities.

Group sales were not overlooked, and tours from other cities were promoted. For example, July 31 was designated as "Cleveland Day" and some 1,500 people, led by the mayor of Cleveland and the local leadership of the Knights of Columbus, were scheduled to travel to Buffalo by boat. Similar excursions were planned from Toledo and Detroit, and blocks of seats were set aside for parishes and related organizations from throughout the region.

Forty performances of the Jubilee production were staged from July 16 to

September 1, on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday evenings with a matinee on Saturday afternoon. By the end of the run, attendance was estimated to have exceeded 100,000. The close of the play was observed with a public concert in the outdoor theater and an open house for the general public. The 135-member Orpheus Choir, one of Buffalo's renowned German singing societies, and a band of Buffalo musicians performed.

In his remarks on opening night, President Ahern expressed the hope that the theater would stand for many years as a permanent structure to serve the college and the community for meetings, assemblies and other theatrical presentations. He also announced the launch of a Golden Jubilee \$1,000,000 capital campaign. Since moving to the Main Street campus, the student population had risen from 120 to 750, so the need to expand the campus was pressing.

A Final Reprise

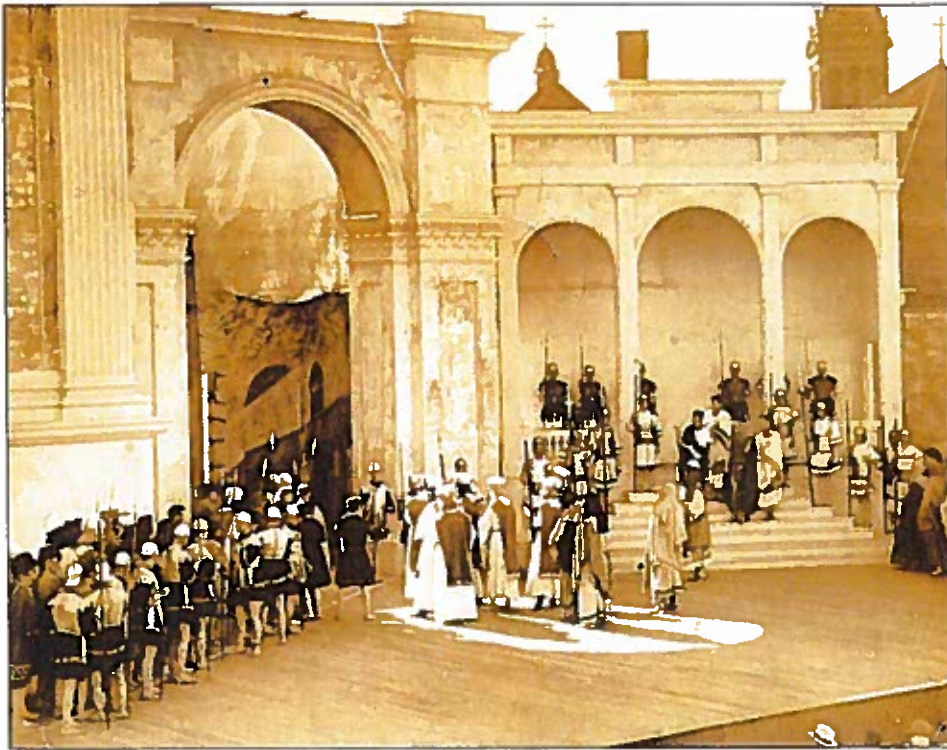
Canisius' Passion Play would be presented for the last time during the summer of 1923. Relying on the success of the 1920 performances, this final run was planned on an even more ambitious

scale. A promotional brochure for the play prepared for distribution at local hotels promised "the most complete and remarkable spectacle ever staged in this country." Though somewhat hyperbolic, the promise reflected the widespread reputation earlier versions had earned. Throughout the months leading up to opening night, the Passion Play's revival was the subject of frequent progress reports in the Buffalo press. Any new detail about preparations for the production, or of innovations planned, might warrant coverage.

Although the productions relied entirely on student actors and stage crew personnel, their growing complexity necessitated recruitment of professional talent for technical support. The play's author, Clay Greene, had provided material assistance in staging the inaugural production in 1914. Others had been secured to assist with the 1917 and 1920 productions. By the 1923 revival, the project had attracted the attention of New York City's theatrical community. New York's Theatre Guild reached out with advice and the loan of several of its most accomplished technical personnel. Arrangements for the loan of elaborate costumes and wigs were made through one of New York City's leading costumers.



Clay Greene's dramatization of the Passion differed from that presented in Oberammergau in that Jesus was not depicted as a stage persona, but rather "implied" by a bright beam of light. In this scene from the 1914 Buffalo production at the Teck Theater, the Way of the Cross is staged behind a wall, with only the cross and soldiers' spear points being visible. The beam of light followed the cross as it was carried across the scene.
AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



The huge stage built behind "Old Main" for the third production was 175 feet wide and 86 feet deep, making it larger than that at Oberammergau and perhaps the largest in the United States at the time, if not the world. Some of the structures towered three stories in height.
 COURTESY CANISIUS COLLEGE, REV. CLAYTON J. MURRAY, S.J. ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Eric Seton Snowden, described in *Buffalo Saturday Night* as "one of the foremost directors of the day," was recruited to direct the play. Originally from California, Snowden's résumé included serving as stage manager for the renowned British actor and theater manager, Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree. Once the Passion Play was over, he became director of the Buffalo Players (an early antecedent of the Studio Arena Theater). Sheldon Knickerbocker Viele, a prominent New York scenic designer of the 1920s, oversaw design of the production. As there was no scenery available for the massive venue, individually designed sets were painted by the same crew of artists that had painted the sets for John Barrymore's Broadway production of *Hamlet*. Incidental music to complement classical musical passages was composed by John Lund, long-time Buffalo conductor and choral director, whose credits included the Orpheus Choir and the Buffalo Symphony (precursor of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra).

The chief electrician from New York's Garrick Theater was in charge of lighting the production. He brought

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Francis Growney as St. Peter and William Hassett Sr. as Pontius Pilate, in a scene from the 1920 production.

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AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

with him cutting edge lighting equipment and techniques never before seen outside of New York City's Theatre Guild and Metropolitan Opera Company. The major element of the lighting scheme was the pioneering Linnebach Lantern. Invented by German lighting designer Adolf Linnebach, the device created background scenery effects such as clouds, hills and skylines. A concentrated-filament, high-intensity lamp projected an image imprinted on a mica or glass slide, either onto a translucent screen at the rear of the stage, or from the front, onto a backdrop. The resulting effect was to create a mood unlike any that could be achieved with a backdrop. Some two miles of electrical cable linked "lights of endless variety."

The cast and crew for the 1923 presentation numbered over 700. The visual impact of this crowd was amplified by inclusion of a menagerie. A flock of sheep was joined by a number of horses and donkeys. The quadruped cast was highlighted by the inclusion of two camels. Imported from Germany and accompanied by their own German-speaking trainer, the duo were instant celebrities. After acclimating to their new environment at the Buffalo Zoo,

they made appearances downtown to promote ticket sales. The sheep were housed in an enclosure adjacent to the stage and spent their days grazing in the quadrangle at the rear of Old Main. When not rehearsing their roles, the animals were tended by children from the surrounding neighborhood. Press accounts noted that the use of live animals – "gaily caparisoned camels," donkeys and "prancing horses" – provided spectacular visual effects. After completion of the run, the camels took up permanent residency at the Buffalo Zoo, becoming the first of their species in the zoo's collection.

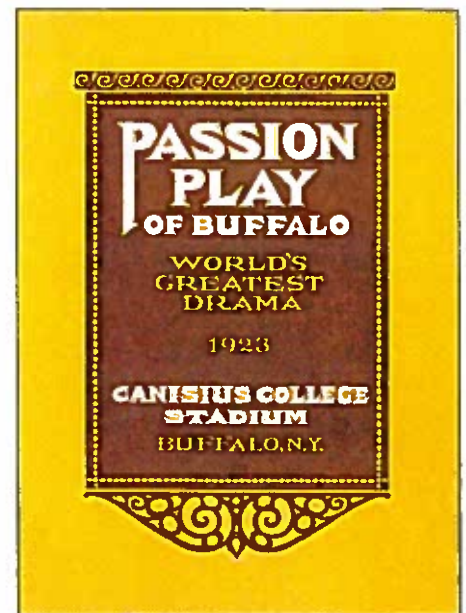
Much was made of the fact that preparation for the play, learning and rehearsing roles for upwards of six months, had not interfered in any way with classroom work. On the night before the opening, the cast finished final rehearsals around midnight. The stage crew and electricians worked on until 5:00 a.m. to complete adjustments to the lighting.

Successful completion of the Golden Jubilee campaign goal was announced during the performance. As the run ended, the consensus among critics was



Noted playwright Clay M. Greene created the script for his *Alma Mater*, the University of Santa Clara, for the school's Golden Jubilee in 1901. In 1914, President Ahern secured the rights to stage the production in Buffalo.

COURTESY SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

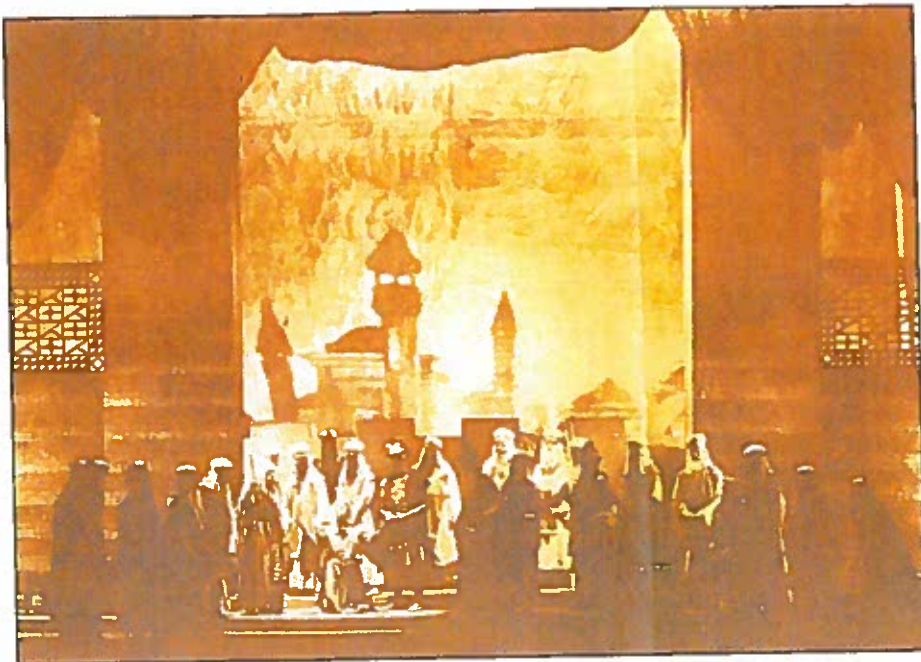


Cover of the souvenir program from the final production, staged during the summer of 1923. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

that the 1923 revival had been superior artistically to the 1920 production. Although it still drew well from out-of-town, attendance on the part of local residents had fallen, and the production ended with a financial loss.

On the morning of the premiere, Fr. Ahern received word that, in keeping with Jesuit term limit rules, his term as president was over and that he had been reassigned to the College of the Holy Cross as chair of the Chemistry Department. He was able to attend the opening performance, then said his farewells to the faculty before departing for Worcester on the following morning.

Ahern was replaced as president by Rev. Peter F. Cusack, S.J., who pledged to continue the projects initiated by his predecessor. However, perhaps because of the less-than-stellar financial results of the 1923 edition of the play, or because of a change in institutional vision made possible by the successful capital campaign, the stage and related structures were razed. Thereupon work commenced on construction of two wings extending the Old Main building. The college would grow significantly, thanks to the new campus buildings and the expanded curriculum that would now be available, including engineering, business, journalism and other courses of study. Although the days of the Passion



The 1923 production featured numerous improvements over previous efforts, including a menagerie, scenery and technical professionals from New York City and state-of-the-art special effects tools, such as the Linnebach Lantern – a projector used to generate backdrop visual effects such as clouds and the skyline shown in this image.

WESTERN NEW YORK HERITAGE PRESS COLLECTION

Play were over, the 1920 and 1923 productions both had shone a spotlight on the school and drew welcome attention to Canisius College's successful \$1,000,000 building campaign fund.

With respect to the earlier discussion of the Jesuit educational traditions, there is no question that didactic theories and methods had evolved greatly over the years since Ignatius Loyola invented his educational model. Nevertheless, the spirit of the *Ratio Studiorum* prevailed in the Jesuit institution. That tradition must at least partially explain the receptivity of the school to undertake such a massive project – the ultimate exemplar of the use of dramatics in furthering the achievement of academic goals. In the ensuing years, the spirit of the epic production lives on in today's "Little Theatre." However, for good or ill, the extravaganza that had been the Passion Play, so in keeping with the traditions of "Jesuit Theatre," would not be seen again. ❏

(Note: The author wishes to thank Kathleen DeLaney, Archivist of Canisius College, for her considerable assistance with research for this article.)

Jacek A. Wysocki is a Buffalo attorney, a founding director of Western New York Heritage Press and a student of local history and heritage.

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The cast of the 1923 production gathers for a panoramic group photo on the massive Canisius stage.
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