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## Darrah Delmar's vision "American Passion Play" concludes after 100 years

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WGLT Interview on Delmar Darrah's vision March 10, 2023

Charles Schlenker (announcer): "The American Passion Play" has been running longer in Bloomington than anywhere else in the country, 100 years to be exact. The Easter tradition ends this spring with the production's final shows in the theater built to support it. In this conversation with WGLT's Lauren Warnecke, cast members reflect on the history of the play and their own decades long involvement.

Lauren Warnecke: It was around 1915 the Delmar Darrah began envisioning an American Passion Play in the city of Bloomington.

Bob Trefzger (performer): He had the idea to communicate the story of Jesus it would be good to have a play.

Warnecke: That's Bob Trefzger who plays Judas in the American Passion Play running for the next four Saturdays at the Bloomington center for the performing arts. This was before mass media of course the first commercial radio broadcast would not take place for another five years. Unique to Darrah's vision was the inclusion of Jesus' ministry. Another remarkable point, Darrah, a professor of elocution and public speaking at Illinois Wesleyan University, was noted free mason who designed the Scottish rite temple specifically for dual purposes.

Trefzger: what's now the Bloomington center for the performing arts doubled as both the place where the place where the passion play was to be put on it was designed specifically, the theater portion of that building was specifically designed to house the play as well as the rest of the building to be able to support the Masonic community in Bloomington- Normal.

Warnecke: Two years after the Scottish rite temple was built Darrah's American Passion Play premiered. While it has been altered and updated over the years Bloomington's original passion play remains the longest running of its kind in the United States and now it's coming to an end. Nathan Bassett has spent the better portion of his life in the cast.

Nathan Bassett (performer): I actually started around 1975—

Warnecke: Oh my so you did not play Jesus in 1975

Bassett: I did not um but I was out for a few years and I came back and my last half has been I think about 20 years give or take. You lose track so (laughs)

Warnecke: yeah, that's a really long time to be continually involved in a single production so what has kept you coming back here year after year.

Bassett: Uh two things, the story, the ability just to tell the story I find there's a lot of passion in telling the story not just the theatrical production of it but just the story itself and this means being able to share that story. So that's one reason and the other reason I would say is the family—

Warnecke: This is the hundredth season from what I understand everything ran consecutively until 2020. What went into the decision to come back?

Bassett: So that wasn't actually a hard decision to come back um many of us missed the play those two years as I say the world shut down—

Warnecke: that's cause it's built into the routine of your life right?

Bassett: Oh very much so very much so, so you just get used to ok February opening dinner and practices and then the performance season. So it was very, very strange but there was a question whether there would be enough cast members returning so multiple phone calls saying are you returning, are you returning and we did have enough cast coming back after the pandemic and uh and so we put on the play.

Warnecke: So was the decision to come back around reaching that milestone, did you have in mind at that point that that would be the last season?

Trefzger: Uh in all honesty and all candor, over the last let's just say 20 years in particular we've seen a fairly steady drop off of um people coming to the play. Um we we've known that financially it's been difficult and really during the years of the pandemic uh if it weren't for some sort of behind the scenes fundraising that was happening we probably wouldn't have been able to reopen regardless of whether we had the cast.

Bassett: I think we've all had some time to process through what this might look like without it. You know were just 100 years of this 2,000 year story were just a little drop in the bucket. As is all of our lives. Were just a drop in the bucket of the whole span of humanity.

Warnecke: Trefzger joined the cast of Bloomington's American Passion Play in 1965, it was also where he met his wife of 49 years. Trefzger says the play has served a pivotal role in his life but it isn't his whole life.

Trefzger: Were passing the baton now, this ministry has had its beginning and its end, never the less when people see the play this year we also hope they will take this additional message that they are to go as well as us and make disciples of all nations.

Warnecke: The final 100<sup>th</sup> season of "The American Passion Play" runs Saturdays beginning this week through April 1<sup>st</sup> at the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts. I'm Lauren Warnecke.

Schlenker: tickets for "The American Passion Play" are \$25 available at [Americanpassionplay.org](http://Americanpassionplay.org)

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