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Open air events in Switzerland, Summer 1989

In spite of the unstable high pressure zones from the Azores

It is a well known fact: The Swiss summer takes place either on 20 July or 5 August. For the rest of the time, with some lucky exceptions, one is advised to be armed with a jersey and an umbrella. Bearing in mind such weather conditions, one could well wonder why some untirable optimists stubbornly decide year after year to put on open air plays, despite all common sense and the unstable high pressure zones coming from the Azores. Pure madness! Even more surprising is the incredible variety of such events and the colourfulness of the cultural palette offered in the space of three to four months.

Honour where honour is due: The ancestor of Swiss open air theatre devotes itself to the undying myths of bygone Switzerland and is performed in the heart of a region which was given over to tourism long ago. 'William Tell' by Schiller was first performed in 1912. Since then the amateur dramatic enthusiasts of Interlaken have devoted body and soul to depicting the events which led to the alliance of the first three cantons. Twice only it didn't take place, due to the war. In comparison to Altdorf, where Schiller's play is also performed at frequent intervals, albeit under cover, the Oberland scenario lends itself to the expression of the author's dramatic pathos, with its lifelike reconstruction of the buildings, its mysterious surrounding foliage and its open space.

This is done to the great delight of the tourists, who feel in touch with the essence of the Swiss soul, even though this has been engendered by a German author.

'The Black Spider'

The open air is ideally suited to historical reconstructions. However, one is unsure what makes the audience shiver: The open space and its setting or the evening breeze. Examples are the historical plays 'Caeser and Diviko' performed last year at Avenches in the Arena, and 'The Black Spider' by Jeremias Gotthelf, which was performed in the Emmental at the foot of the impressive Castle of Trachselwald. The box-office success was incontestable in both cases, but the theatrical quality slight. However, the

general public wants such productions. Once more, this year, the lively producer of the 'Spider', Lukas Leuenberger, is making sure that they are not disappointed. By general demand, especially from his creditors, the young Bernese has once again gathered professional actors and local amateur extras into the hollow of the little valley surrounded by dark woods, for a remake, which is one hundred per cent guaranteed to be the same as before. 29 performances in 1988, 25 performances this year; the small outstanding debt of a million francs should, under normal conditions, melt like sins under Gotthelf's sun.

'The Black Spider' portrays most impressively one of the obsessions of the pastor from Lützelflüh: The necessary fear of God and the chastisement by the Lord of those who make a pact with the devil. 'St Jeremias' takes an epidemic of the plague towards the end of the Middle Ages as the setting on which to elaborate the above-mentioned theme in a novel, which was a great success in the 19th century amongst his flock. Leuenberger has transposed the tale into a theatrical play with the help of Hansjörg Schneider from Basle. The High German dialogue of this play is a scrupulous translation of the archaic prose of the moralist. The general public quite literally stormed the yellow bucket seated stands. However, the critics simply smirked. Quite rightly so: the actors lacked the spark, the daring and the presence which the chosen site would have permitted.

The Battle of Laupen

On these same lines, the little Bernese town of Laupen is preparing to commemorate a noteworthy battle. The opponents of the day were Fribourg and Berne, pushed by their respective allies: The Burgundians and Habsburgs on the side of Fribourg, and



Probably the best known open-air theatre in Switzerland: The Tell Plays in Interlaken. (Photo: pd)



There is always a relaxed and light-hearted atmosphere at open air festivals – if the weather is pleasant. (Photo: Eduard Rieben)

the forces from Bienne, the Emmental and the three original Cantons on the side of Berne. The tragic events were registered in the chronicles of the year 1339. Today, one might question this bloody conflict which one presumes to have cost thousands of lives and which established Bernese sovereignty. However that may be, between June and September 15 performances in the style of a 'son et lumière' will recall the bitter defeat of the Fribourgeois between Berne and Murten. The play, by Hans-Rudolf Hubler, former Radio DRS employee and enthusiastic Laupen fan, will use the castle of the small commune as his back-drop and will make no sacrifices to the language of Goethe. The title says all: 'Liechter uf Loupe'.

Finally: Rock and Dance

The Swiss open air cultural Summer fortunately also offers more peaceful activities. These include the Rock meetings, which are a fixture during the months of June, July and August. Either you like them or you don't, but you cannot ignore these colourful and cheerful meetings with their relaxed atmosphere, which unite teenagers and their parents in the same high spirits. St Gallen and Berne in German speaking Switzerland compete on the same date during the last weekend in June. In French speaking Switzerland the organisers of Nyon (Paléo) and Montreux (Jazz) have managed to come to an agreement to avoid any unwanted competition. Here, however, problems have arisen through the curious launching of a

Rock festival in Leysin which lies at over 1000 metres, first of all for the other concert organisers who are trying to attract almost the same audience and secondly also for the organisers of Leysin: The tourist station cannot guarantee good weather from one year to the next. The greenest meadow can be transformed into a mudbath within 24 hours, and the most enchanting melody can be swallowed up by the icy rain, as was the case last year. The event has been brought forward to June this year which avoids fatal date clashes, but you cannot make a contract with the west wind.

Finally, neither Rock nor mythological history, but dance, will take the stage in Basle in September, the third edition of a festival which seems to have found its style and audience. No details about this year's programme may be revealed yet. Meeting place: At the Barfässerplatz, but shod, not barefooted!

Jean-Luc Ingold

Details concerning the exact dates of the open air events may be obtained through the regional tourist offices or through the Swiss National Tourist Office, Bellariastrasse 38, CH-8027 Zurich.



Gotthelfs 'Schwarze Spinne' (The Black Spider) with a grandiose back-drop. (Photo: Leuenberger Production)