

Gonzaga University

## The Repository of Gonzaga University

---

Foley Library Scholarship

Foley Center Library

---

9-2013

### "Oberammergau of the West": Gonzaga's "Golgotha" Passion Play, 1924-1925

Stephanie Plowman

Gonzaga University, [plowman@gonzaga.edu](mailto:plowman@gonzaga.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.gonzaga.edu/foleyschol>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Plowman, Stephanie, ""Oberammergau of the West": Gonzaga's "Golgotha" Passion Play, 1924-1925" (2013). *Foley Library Scholarship*. 25.

<https://repository.gonzaga.edu/foleyschol/25>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Foley Center Library at The Repository of Gonzaga University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Foley Library Scholarship by an authorized administrator of The Repository of Gonzaga University. For more information, please contact [wawrzyniak@gonzaga.edu](mailto:wawrzyniak@gonzaga.edu).

# “Oberammergau of the West”: Gonzaga’s “Golgotha” Passion Play, 1924 - 1925

BY STEPHANIE PLOWMAN  
GONZAGA UNIVERSITY  
SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARIAN



Paul R. Lynch in the role of John The Baptist.  
Photo courtesy of Gonzaga University Archives.  
(rg\_1924\_Golgotha\_14)

Since its beginning, Gonzaga University has offered its students a chance to participate in drama productions. From the beginning, these plays were popular with the all-male student population. Most productions were religious based. In 1924 Fr. Timothy Driscoll, S.J. Director of Dramatics prepared the way for the greatest of all of Gonzaga’s stage productions, the biblical Passion Play called “Golgotha.”

At the time, no college in the Northwest had ever attempted anything so large. Composed by Fr. Dennis Kavanaugh, of St. Ignatius College, San Francisco, “Golgotha” consisted of a prologue and seven scenes, which showed several stages of the life of Jesus from the death of John the Baptist to the betrayal and subsequent crucifixion. The play required a cast of over 200 with 45 principals, not counting the orchestra and choir.

After receiving permission to proceed with the idea, Fr. Driscoll sought to borrow costumes and scenery. He rented 138 costumes from San Francisco. The remaining costumes were made by the Mothers’ Club after models of the “Oberammergau Passion Play”. The scenery was designed by Carl Westrum of the Twin Cities Scenic Company and constructed



# Golgotha

Gonzaga  
Passion + Play

AMERICAN THEATRE  
SPOKANE WASHINGTON  
MARCH 30 TO APRIL 6

Frank J. Needles in the role of Longinus, a Roman centurion, above, and "Golgotha" 1924 program (right). Ten thousand copies of this 68 page program

were printed for \$2,000. Photos courtesy of Gonzaga University Archives. (rg\_1924\_Golgotha\_15) (gp\_sd\_0505\_01)

at his Minneapolis studio for \$2900.

With the support of numerous staff and Jesuits, Fr. Driscoll leased the American Theater in Spokane for the eight day run which included weekday evenings and matinees on the weekends. Fr. William Garrigan

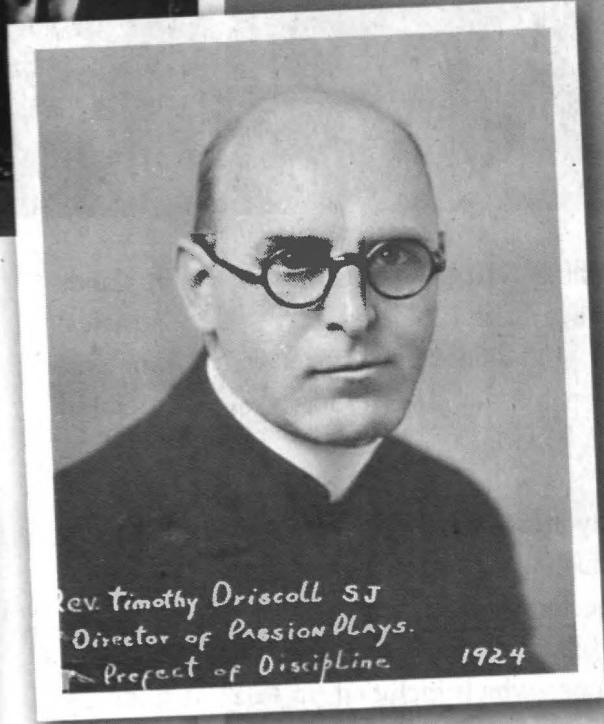
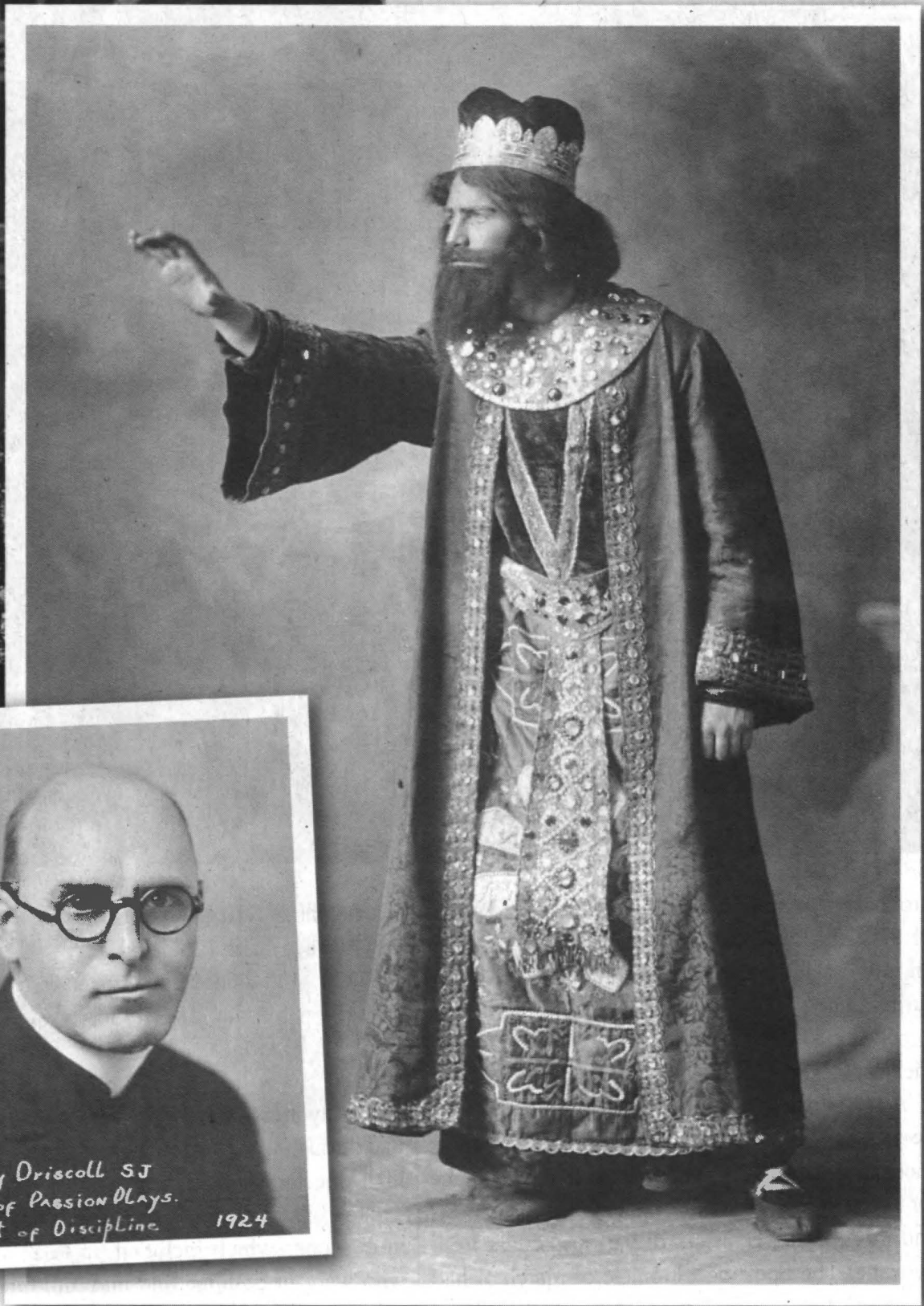
S.J. took charge of applying the actors' makeup. Music Director Walter Orion directed the 10 piece orchestra in a program of sacred music between the scenes. Professor Orion composed the musical themes and incidental music for the play.



Above: Roman guards standing in a row. Opposite page: King Herod and (inset) Fr. Timothy Driscoll, S.J., Director of Dramatics and Prefect of Discipline, 1924. Photos courtesy of Gonzaga University Archives. (rg\_1924\_Golgotha\_07) (gp\_sd\_0505\_02) (rg\_1924\_Golgotha\_10)

Prior to its opening, local businessmen supported the play to make sure it was an annual event. As the *Spokane Chronicle* wrote on March 25, 1924: "Business men and ministers of Spokane are enthused over the production of the Gonzaga passion play 'Golgotha' and many are working to make this production an annual event for the city of Spokane. The 'Oberammergau of the West' (named after the famous Passion play in Germany) is the

slogan adopted by enterprising students of Gonzaga University." The story quoted George A. Phillips of the *Palace* as saying: "I regard this as an important event in the annals of Spokane. It is an attraction that will bring a great many thousand people to Spokane, not only from a religious standpoint, but from an educational standpoint as well. Being in the hands of such an old-established institution as Gonzaga gives assurance that it will be a high-class



Rev. Timothy Driscoll SJ  
Director of Passion Plays.  
Prefect of Discipline 1924

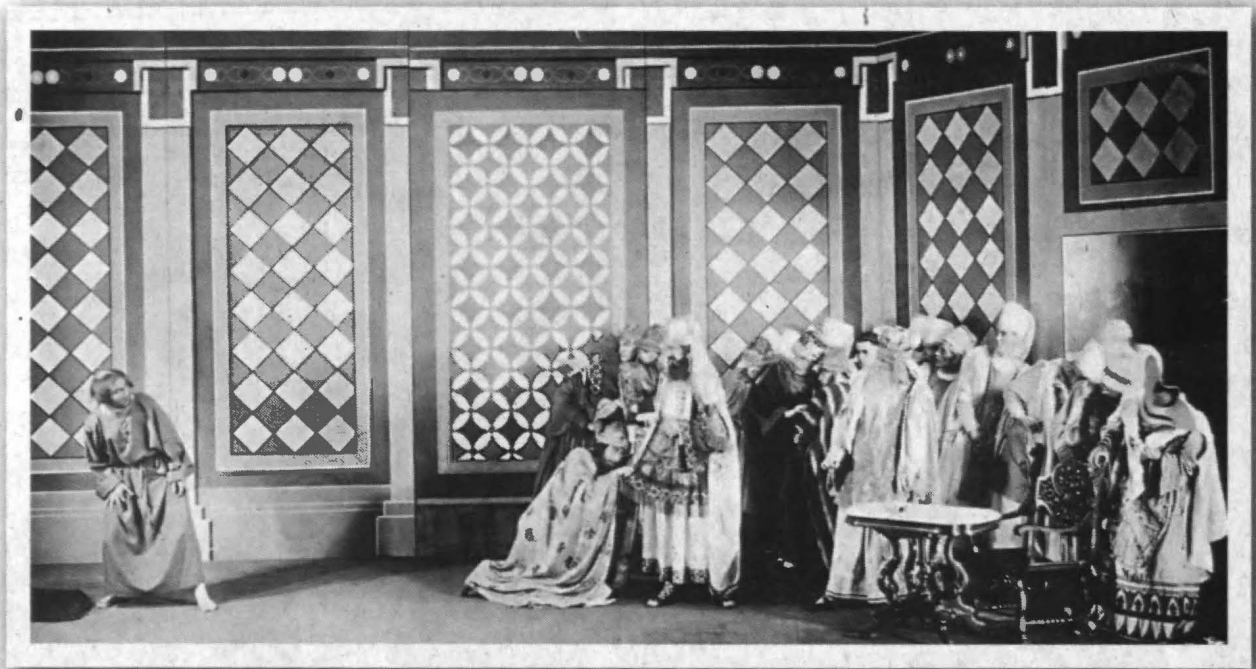


production” Another businessman, C. E. Alexander of the Whitehouse said: “The play should create an interest not only in the community, but in the surrounding territory. I consider such a production a real civic affair rather than a private project and as such should be backed by the people of Spokane.”

After two months of rehearsing, “Golgotha” opened on March 30, 1924. It was considered a huge success on campus and in Spokane. In the audience for the first show were more than 20 Catholic priests and more than 50 sisters of various orders from Spokane. The Spokane Chronicle of March 31 had

the headline: “‘Golgotha’ is Masterpiece in Hands of Gonzaga Lads.” It stated: “One of the greatest amateur productions ever staged in Spokane was presented Sunday afternoon by the Associated Students of Gonzaga University at the American Theater.” Later the story said: “200 students of the university presented it with such reverent perfection that through three hours there was scarcely a sound in the theater, off the stage.”

Newspaper reviews also mention the effective mob scenes which included up to 200 students, who were in costume and makeup. One wrote in



Opposite page: The temptation and fall of Judas. Above: Judas returns the money. Below: The Garden of Gethsemane, betrayal of the Master. Photos courtesy of Gonzaga University Archives. (rg\_1924\_Golgotha\_08), (rg\_1924\_Golgotha\_05), (rg\_1924\_Golgotha\_13)



The Condemnation. Text from scrapbook: "Pilate tries in vain to dissuade the people from demanding the death of the Master. At last, for fear of losing Caesar's favor and his position as representative of the Roman Power in Judea, he delivers Him over to them to be crucified. 'Take Him yourselves and crucify Him.'" Photo courtesy of Gonzaga University Archives. (rg\_1924\_Golgotha\_PilatesCourtyard\_1)

the Spokesman-Review on March 31: "They crowd the stage, of course, but there is no confusion and the first performance went through with machine like precision....There are many mob scenes in 'Golgotha' and they are the outstanding feature of this presentation."

Many people watched the play more than once. As the word spread, the theater became more crowded at each showing. The total receipts for the 1924

"Golgotha" were \$15,895. With about \$8,000 in expenses, the remaining balance was applied to the building fund for the first residence hall, DeSmet Hall.

With such monetary success, Gonzaga's administrators decided to put on the play annually. In 1925, Fr. Driscoll selected a cast of 240 students, many of whom assumed the same roles from the previous year. Michael Pecarovich, who had had been the 1924 sensation as Judas, returned for that role, even





though he was now a member of the Gonzaga faculty. Stage settings for the final scene were redesigned at an additional cost of \$1000. Since the rented costumes from San Francisco were unavailable, substitute costumes were found in Hollywood and publicized as an additional drawing card.

Performances were scheduled for the week of March 29 to April 5. One newspaper advertisement for March 25 stated: "Golgotha" is non-sectarian and is not intended for any particular class or sect. It bears the indorsement (sic) of all religious denominations in this city and is of the utmost interest to every person." Even though 10,000 people saw the 1925 version of

Golgotha, the net income was only \$6,202.23, while the expenses totaled over \$11,000.

While the local newspapers enthusiastically urged the play be repeated annually, the drop in revenue during the second year showed the university administration that it would not be financially advantageous to put it on annually. The president announced that it would be presented again in four years, 1929. This never came to fruition. In 1928 Fr. Driscoll directed "Golgotha" once more at Seattle College (now Seattle University). This "Oberammergau of the West" Passion play has never returned to Gonzaga, Spokane, or the Northwest. ♡