

DRAMA

‘Through beauty to freedom . . .’

On Labor Day weekend, in New Glarus, Wisconsin, three performances of Friedrich Schiller’s drama “Wilhelm Tell”—two in English and one in German—were staged in full costume, with animals and nearly a hundred children in the cast, set in a green meadow surrounded by forest in gently rolling hills. New Glarus, known as “Little Switzerland,” has been staging the Schiller drama since 1938, as part of its proudly held Swiss heritage.

But “Wilhelm Tell” is truly a universal play, written in the finest German, about those ideas which are the founda-

tion of Judeo-Christian civilization. The bravery of Tell and his young son—from whose head the father shoots an apple with his crossbow in the face of the tyrant—are part of the cultural heritage of every freedom-loving nation.

Thus, the performance of Schiller’s play in its original German, in America, which Peter Etter, the director for the past fifteen years of the Wilhelm Tell Guild in New Glarus, discusses with Fidelio in the accompanying interview, is very important, as is the teaching of Schiller’s writings in the large German program offered in New Glarus’s schools. In an America

which has become worn down by the brutality of its popular culture, it is a true joy to encounter this jewel of a festival, in which goodness is still unabashedly celebrated. Friedrich Schiller said, “It is through beauty that one proceeds to freedom.” This kind of beautiful event serves as a happy reminder of the principles of freedom on which our nation was founded, not merely for its choice of dramatic content, but for the community’s commitment to a tradition so evidently at odds with the environment shaped by today’s cynical Hollywood entertainment media.

—Marianna Wertz

Wisconsin Festival Features *Wilhelm Tell*

A quiet flowering of German culture has been taking place, perhaps a little too quietly, in the rolling hills and beautiful countryside of southern Wisconsin, far removed from the origins in the Swiss Alps of the drama *Wilhelm Tell*, written by Germany’s national poet, Friedrich Schiller, during the Weimar literary renaissance of the late Eighteenth century.

For 62 years, the New Glarus Wil-

helm Tell Guild has been performing German and English versions of *Wilhelm Tell* to celebrate the story of Swiss independence, written by Schiller to demonstrate the “universal history” of mankind’s aspirations for a better destiny. I attended the 62nd German performance this Labor Day week-

end, to see the only such ongoing production of amateur Classical drama in these United States.

Swiss emigrés settled New Glarus, Wisconsin in 1845, after departing the depression conditions of their cantons in that tumultuous European decade for the New World. Today, a giant image of Wilhelm Tell and his son, Walter, greets you

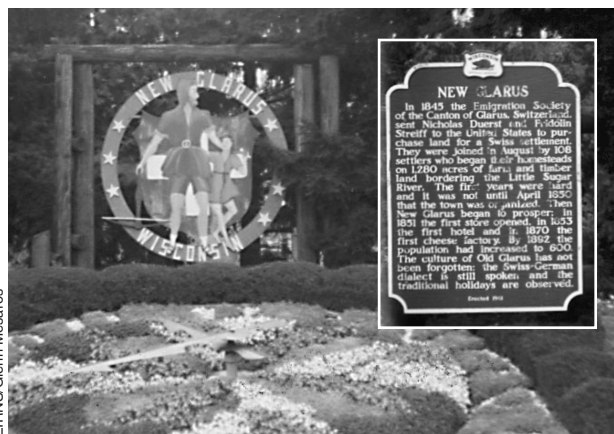
as you enter New Glarus (population 1899), which tells you of the success of their venture. In 1938, a local resident named Edwin Barlow established the Wilhelm Tell drama as an annual event. Today, the citizens of New Glarus continue to celebrate their independence, and their cultural efforts represent the antidote to the increasing “Littleton” fragmentation of American society.

Wilhelm Tell

The play is situated on the beautiful “Tell Grounds,” located several miles out of town in the countryside. You drive into a typical-looking farm field on the side of the road, which has been cut out of a heavily wooded area. Then you walk, sloping downhill, into the thick woods through a delightful, almost enchanted pathway, over which the trees and bushes are interwoven in a lovely quarter-mile archway. This allows you to leave the mundane world behind, and excites your imagination for the “next world,” as you suddenly step onto a luscious green meadow, not



EIFNS/Glenn Mesaros



EIFNS/Glenn Mesaros

Town plaque and emblem tell of New Glarus’s Swiss heritage.



Left: “All must bow to Gessler’s hat!”
Below: Men of three cantons recite the
 “Rütli Oath.”

unlike the rolling meadows of Switzerland!

You sit on the right side of the meadow, which extends for at least an acre, and look across to another heavily wooded area marked with several trails, from which the actors will emerge in their brilliantly colored costumes. But wait! First, you must relax, as a children’s group performs several songs with carefully crafted, and harmonious, Swiss bells. Now, surely, you are in a different world, where you have to use your imagination.

Now, the stage empties, as an unseen announcer introduces the overture to Rossini’s opera version of *Wilhelm Tell*. There is an excellent sound system, and soon the familiar, riotous overture is exciting everyone for the play.

As the overture wafts away, tinkling cow bells are heard from yonder, and soon a whole panoply of colorful peasants, leading brown dairy cows with huge decorated bells, and shepherds, guiding bleating goats, traipse onto the meadow. The play has begun! However, one huge cow is recalcitrant about “exeunt left,” and her handler wisely stays put; they just blend into the next scene, until the cow decides to follow the herd into the wooded trail.

“*Hoch Deutsch*” begins to resound in rolling R’s throughout the meadows and woods, as Wilhelm Tell resolves to help the poor Alzeller refugee from the governor’s troops cross the stormy lake. Violent peals of thunder echo through-



out. While Tell helps his fellow countryman here, he still holds back from the growing rebellion which will soon recite the famous “Rütli Oath.”

Nonetheless, various Swiss Cantons soon assemble on the famous meadow, and begin a long debate on the history of Swiss independence, which invokes their forefathers’ rejection of the capricious

whims of governors and even the emperor or himself. “God is everywhere, where justice is dispensed,” they proclaim, as Schiller reviews the lawful history of Swiss rebellion. The deliberation of this *ad hoc* “constitutional convention” stands as a living polemic against the anarchy of the just-past French Revolution, when Schiller had lamented that “a great historical moment had found a little people.”

Schiller’s Swiss will not be “little people,” and soon they raise their swords at the impassioned call of Werner Stauffacher, “No, there’s a limit to a tyrant’s power!” They pledge their sacred honor and blood to a secret rebellion on Christmas Day, when they will take over the castles fortified by the occupying army. “Let everyone restrain his righteous rage, and save his vengeance only for the whole, for he despoils the universal good, who only helps himself in his own cause.”



The Swiss are free! Flags of twenty-one cantons parade in the finale.

are resounding throughout the meadows. There is a touching scene where Tell explains to his son (a young boy speaking excellent German) why the Swiss prefer to live among the dangerous mountain glaciers, amid avalanches, rather than kowtow to the likes of Gessler.

The stage is now set for the famous confrontation between Tell and Gessler, replete with soldiers carrying Gessler's silly hat on a highly decorated pole. Townspeople scurry every which way to get away from saluting the blasted thing. However, Tell, carrying his vaunted crossbow, and his son, nonchalantly walk right on by it.

"Halt!"

Tell's brave son takes center stage, inspired by his father's talk, and insolently tells the governor that his father can shoot the apple off his head. The mounted Gessler grows increasingly enraged, as his horse snorts furiously along with his master, and Gessler, refusing Tell's apologies, demands his entertainment. Walter confidently walks off in the distance, and soon comes back with half an apple for the now apoplectic Governor, who takes Tell prisoner anyway.

Interspersed among these exciting scenes is the deathbed appearance of Werner, Baron von Attinghausen, who is brought onto the meadow on a wooden plank, barely alive, and destined not to live to see the conversion of his heir-apparent nephew to the Swiss cause. There is great sacred music as a group of young boys, dressed as monks, lead the funeral procession.

Finally, the escaped Tell lies in wait for Gessler, who makes one last violent outburst against a petitioning peasant woman, when suddenly an arrow rips his heart, and ends his tyranny once and for all. The crowd cheers, as Gessler falls from his horse, and a local wedding party streams out of the woods into the meadow, featuring many colorful young girls twirling flower garlands and singing.

The play ends as all the players, and all the animals, return to the meadows from the thick forest, and Switzerland celebrates with a parade of all the flags of all its newly independent cantons! Bravo!

—Glenn Mesaros

Peter Etter President, Wilhelm Tell Guild

'The entire community is involved'

Peter Etter, president of the Wilhelm Tell Guild in New Glarus, Wisconsin, is also Superintendent of Schools and Principal of New Glarus Elementary School. He has played the role of Hermann Gessler in the German performance of Schiller's "Wilhelm Tell" in New Glarus for the past fifteen years. He spoke September 8 with Schiller Institute vice president Marianna Wertz.

Etter: Let me tell you who I am. I am the Superintendent of Schools of the New Glarus School District, and in K-12 I have 700 students. In this capacity as Superintendent, I'm also the Elementary Principal and Business Manager all rolled into one. When I came to New Glarus 21 years ago, I had a German program, and my German teacher had two classes and was also the librarian. When I saw that—how would you like to be a German teacher in New Glarus and have me drop in your classroom, since I speak the language!—I told her, Linda, you need to go to Germany and get this program going. She is now a full-time German teacher, our high school has 200 students, and she has an enrollment of 130 students in her classes.

The reason she is doing that is, number one, because she's a good teacher. Number two, because she has German contacts now. I took her to Germany. We have a partnership school, we're bringing



Courtesy of Peter Etter

I don't need to defend my heritage, but twelve years of German history, when we had this person from Austria ruin it, we have to fight that. Everybody thinks that Germans are Nazis!

German kids over every year and every year our kids go over to Germany.

Fidelio: What's your partnership school?

Etter: It's in Hessen, Bad Arolsen. The principal there is Dan Radeck. He even brings adult groups over here, which has really gotten us into the adult exchange program. On Oct. 3-12, I've got ten principals coming from the National Association of School Administrators in Wisconsin, and we're hosting them here in New Glarus. They're staying in peo-