

Gemsong

Book and lyrics by Jean McConnell

Music by Terry Shaw

Gemsong is a musical play based on a true incident in the history of the German village of Idar-Oberstein.

Fact

Since the Middle Ages all types of precious and semi-precious minerals were mined around Idar-Oberstein, which was the centre of the gem cutting industry. A Grinder's Guild statute of 1609 declared that "no stranger must acquire the trade of a grinder but the craft should be handed down from father to son." By the nineteenth century Idar was world famous for the artistry of its craftsmen, but in the early 1800s the mines became worked out and previously prosperous families fell on hard times.

One such family emigrated to Brazil, where they earned a living by their talent for music and singing, entertaining at social gatherings. On one such evening the family were busy in the ballroom of a wealthy landowner while the children passed their time swimming in the river which ran through the garden. In the river one of the children found a familiar looking rock, which he showed to his father. The family spent the night by the river and in daylight waded in to search, finding it full of minerals similar to those mined in Idar.

The family were able to arrange for these gemstones to be exported to Germany, the first shipment arriving in 1834. Thus they were able to take up their craft again and bring back prosperity to Idar-Oberstein, which is world famous for this work to the present day.

Fiction

Gemsong follows the fortunes of Thomas and Anna, their two sons Hannes and Conrad, and their young daughters Maria and Berthe. Thomas and Hannes are gem cutters in Idar-Oberstein. Genial Uncle Martin is a foreman in the near-exhausted mines.

Hannes is a master craftsman and the more important of the two young men whilst they are in Idar. Gisela is his fiancée, having rejected Conrad's love. Conrad has less talent at the gem cutting craft, but he had a fine voice and becomes more valued when the family must earn their living as musicians in Brazil. When Conrad's musical talents are given true appreciation, the flighty Gisela finds herself attracted once again to Conrad.

Thomas does his best to adjust to their new life in a foreign land, but his wife Anna, who like Conrad possesses a splendid singing voice, finds herself greatly admired by the wealthy Senor Almarez, much to her consternation and confusion. Conrad too glimpses real passion with the gypsy dancer Inez.

When the children find the gemstones in the river and the family can make plans to return to their old life in Idar, both Anna and Conrad are presented with a dilemma. Do they give up the new and exciting life they have found in Brazil? In fact, they both decide to return to Germany, Anna as the dutiful wife of Thomas, whose qualities of strength and honesty she realises she appreciates, Conrad because he is persuaded that he will be needed in Idar.

When the family return to Idar, Anna finds that her feelings of duty and love for Thomas are not misplaced. Gisela takes up where she left off with Hannes. Conrad, however, regrets leaving behind his status and his true passion – Inez.

The first shipment of rock arrives and much of it is faulty, causing anger in the village against Thomas and a lack of confidence in his promises of restored prosperity. Martin, serious for once, convinces the villagers that the true gemstones do exist in great quantities and Conrad willingly volunteers to return to Brazil and take charge of the shipments there. He believes that Inez will be waiting for him.

Cast

Thomas

Anna

Conrad (son of Thomas and Anna)

Hannes (son of Thomas and Anna)

Maria (daughter of Thomas and Anna)

Berthe (daughter of Thomas and Anna)

Gisela (betrothed to Hannes)

Martin (an uncle)

Senor Almarez (a rich Brazilian merchant)

Inez (a gypsy dancer)

A storekeeper

Donna Eldora (a wealthy hostess)

Villagers: Ida Oberstein and Brazil

Sailors, first class passengers, steerage passengers, wealthy lady travellers

Guests at Senora Eldora's ball, servants

Act I Sc 1. Outside the house at Ida Oberstein

2. The coach station

3. The ship

4. The Brazilian trading post

Act II Sc 5, 6, 7, 8. Patio and ballroom

9. The carnival in Rio

10. The rail of the ship

11. Outside the house at Ida Oberstein