



Pregó de Festa Major

Emma Vilarasau

Tuesday 23 of September 2025

Saló de Cent, Ajuntament de Barcelona

www.barcelona.cat

OPENING SPEECH OF LA MERCÈ 2025

Emma Vilarasau

Good evening everyone, people of Barcelona, friends.

Good evening to the Mayor, the authorities, city councillors and you, the citizens who breathe life into this festival.

It goes without saying that it is an extraordinary honour to be here today, giving the opening speech of La Mercè. And it is also a responsibility. I hope to be up to such a special circumstance as this one.

I particularly want to express my appreciation to the fact that this year's poster, designed by Lluís Danès, features the performing arts. No artistic discipline interacts so directly with its audience. Dance, music, opera, circus and theatre are performed live, in public. They are like organisms that evolve and transform alongside the society from which they come. No artistic discipline gets such an immediate response from its audience, be it diagnosis, criticism, praise or rejection, so these arts are also the quickest to take the pulse of our society.

Theatre in this city has grown and evolved with its people. It has had brilliant peaks and dimmer valleys; times when it has been accepted and others when it has not managed to sync with its audience; phases when it innovated and broke new ground and others beset by inertia and repetition. Just like the city itself, theatre often needs to reinvent itself; new forms get old because we're living in a constantly evolving world. That is why I think that beginning this festival with the performing arts is like paying tribute both to citizens, to audiences, and to their artists.

This evening I will mostly talk about my personal relationship with Barcelona. And of course, we'll survey the theatres in this city, which have been my workplace over all these years.

As the admirable, notable Barcelona native Maria Aurèlia Capmany said: "Perhaps our only way to contribute to the truth is by clearly determining our viewpoint, always explaining where we're coming from, our way in, and where we are heading. Therefore, it's clear that I will never provide an overall picture of my city. When I talk about Barcelona, I'm talking about my Barcelona."

So let's start at the beginning. My relationship with this city began in the school year 1975-76. I'm originally from Sant Cugat del Vallès, and except when I lived here in my twenties and thirties, I've always been loyal to my town. My first memories of Barcelona are from my childhood: when my parents would take me to the cinema, the zoo and the paediatrician.

I remember La Rambla with all those animal stalls, Plaça Catalunya with its pigeons and Carrer Petritxol, where we'd have our afternoon snack before catching the train back home. I both admired and feared Barcelona, which was foreign territory to us as children.

When adolescence came, it became a place to escape to; nobody knew us and we could dare to break all the rules: we could dress and act the way we wanted, which was wild in the eyes of the town but invisible in the big city. People in towns look askance at anything different. At home, everyone knew us and what Albert and Ida's daughter was up to never went unnoticed. So Barcelona became my first place of freedom.

Later, when I was in secondary school, I enrolled in what is today the Institut Joan Boscà, back when it was called Boscán. It was school year 1975-76, and I was beginning to feel political stirrings. It was an intense time just at the end of the Franco regime and after an entire life of nuns, so that school was where my social and political consciousness was awakened. I signed up for all the secret meetings and assemblies; I handed out



leaflets on the metro; I ran in front of the *grisos* [the police of the dictatorship] with my heart racing, always searching for a place where I could escape, a doorway to hide in. All of this excitement at flouting the norms, so common in adolescence, may have outweighed conviction, which I was beginning to view as individual responsibility, commitment, the need to get involved if you wanted things to change.

That was one of the first gifts this city gave me. Franco died in November of that year, and everything became heightened. The search for my teenage boundaries merged with Barcelona's quest for its identity, as it cobbled together its personality while leaving behind so many years of darkness. I entered the Institut del Teatre [Theatre Institute] in school year 1976-77. I no longer stayed on the edge of the city at Avinguda de Esplugues, 40, but took the train every day that left me in the heart of Barcelona, where I would walk to the Theatre Institute, which at that time was located on Carrer d'Elisabets and directed by Herman Bonnin.

As you can see, there are many proper names in this speech, and I actually think that cities are the people who live in them, and they have names.

There I met teachers the stature of Jaume Melendres, Joan Enric Lahosa, José Sanchis Sinisterra, Pere Planella, Lluís Pasqual, Coralina Colom and Josep Maria Montanyés (who died years later before even seeing the second season of the new Teatre Lliure which he was directing at the time, a project he had fought so hard for).

A little bit later I met a woman at the Institute who helped me believe in myself, who gave me the confidence I needed to keep going. She was Carme Portaceli, today the director of the TNC. In the beginning, it's important to find people who believe in you when you don't.

I began to grow at the Institute. A new theatre opened in Barcelona in December of that same year, and the Institute was abuzz. It was a theatre in Gràcia whose directors taught at the Institute.

I didn't go to the première on Thursday 2 December 1976, but the next day I was told that the audience clapped even before it began. They were applauding for the theatre, the idea, the boldness, the innovation. People were so eager for change, surprises, to feel like part of a project.

I did go there that same weekend. I remember the scent of the wooden stage where the action took place, the rustle of the actors' costumes when they moved, their faces so close to me, hearing their breathing, that way of acting that was different because of its extreme proximity... We left excited, impressed and convinced that we had just seen something exceptional. If that could be done, anything was possible. I still get that feeling sometimes after seeing a show. It's the feeling of theatre. Dreams and nightmares become possible within the darkness of the theatre. It's a safe space where actors can fearlessly go to those shadowy places that the majority of human beings leave in the dark. It's like Beckett said: it's a place to make the invisible visible, not on a screen but with the actor right there in front of you. Like I said, this city has given me the best moments not only as an actress, but also as a spectator.

After all, theatre feeds off the real world, yet it also improves reality. Still talking as a spectator, how many times have we seen everything around us differently after a great show? Seen it more deeply and consciously?

In May 1976, Barcelona hosted the Catalan Conference on Women at the university's auditorium. Those four days marked an era: hundreds of women from different fields and ideologies gathered, reached an understanding and made demands like the law on divorce, abortion and the repeal of the law on the danger of homosexuals. Years went by before they were achieved, but that conference marked a turning point. I was fortunate enough to have experienced the first public wave of feminism at the tender age of 17, with its massive, diverse participation.

And the first feminist demonstration after the Franco regime was held that December. That's another gift Barcelona gave me. We women took to the streets to demand our rights, and we did so with overwhelming force, knowing there were so many of us, we were so strong and we wanted to be free. For the first time, we



had this sense of pride at being a woman among many women. It was my first feminist demonstration, and firsts always leave special memories.

No hablaré en clase Dagoll Dagom opened in April 1977. It was a show that resonated with everyone, at the Saló Diana, which was also the headquarters of the entertainment workers' assembly, where many assemblies were held during the brief period when Mario Gas and Carlos Lucena were at the helm of the project. They managed to keep it afloat one year after it closed due to a lack of institutional support, like so many other venues in Barcelona. *Antaviana* premièred at the Villarroel in 1978. It was based on the stories of Pere Calders and was the first musical by Dagoll Dagom, with music by Jaume Sisa. The Villarroel theatre is another important place in this map of emotions that Barcelona is to me.

In September of that same year, Albert Boadella and several members of the company Els Joglars were arrested over their show *La Torna*. Some fled to France, threatened by court-martial, and we headed back to the streets. We took to the streets to demand freedom of expression, and once again we did so in huge numbers. It was easy to stir people because there were so many things to demand, claim, condemn. Barcelona was reclaiming itself; a creative spirit was coursing through the streets.

Different theatre styles coexisted, from text-based theatre at the Lliure to Dagoll Dagom's first musicals. Els Comediants were transforming street theatre and turning it into a celebration, while Els Joglars were offering a much more satirical, gestural theatre. Joan Baxies's *La Claca* were revolutionising and politicising Joan Miró's hand puppets with *Mori el Merma*. Cabaret was at its peak, and I discovered the great Pavlovsky and *La Cúpula Venus*, along with Tricycle and *La Cubana*.

Political discourse, audiences and theatres went hand in hand. And what was so difficult to achieve was achieved: we all needed the same thing; we all came from the same past; we had a shared history; we all needed to tell who we were, who we had been, where we were and what we wanted to be. And the performing arts served one of their most important purposes: they were the projection of the spirit of a society that needed to understand itself and reach into the future.

Being a theatre student at such a special political and social time was extraordinarily fortunate. Everything was new and ready to be discovered, and the world was brimming with infinite possibilities. However, TV3 did not exist, very few Catalan films were being made and the city still had only a handful of cinemas, so the future of being an actress was really questionable. Doubts as to whether you could be part of this extraordinary world were always there, but at age 20 faith is indestructible.

They were years of studying, but also discovering this creative, irreverent, brazen, fun, free, explosive and extremely hard-working city.

And along the way I was discovering myself. I still had everything to learn and even more before I could let down the masks I had built up to survive, but I began to glimpse what would become my lifelong calling. I would never stop learning because my instrument would age with me and my experiences would give me a broader understanding of the characters and shadowy places that I couldn't even guess at back then. The Institute helped me to grow. I eagerly signed up for as many classes as possible. I was extremely driven to confirm my validity as an actress, which I constantly doubted.

On 21 March 1979, the Lliure premièred *La Bella Helena*, an unforgettable show which led me to fall in love with Anna Lizaran, I and many fellow Barcelona residents, with her immense capacity for playfulness and constant seduction. If someone had told me then that one day I'd work alongside her and that we'd even become friends, I would have dismissed it as wishful thinking.



But life, fate or luck was on my side. I went to the Lliure to audition in 1983 because they needed a young woman, and I ended up staying ten years.

That changed my life. What would I have been had I not been so lucky? I have no idea. Sometimes life decides for you. Being directed by Fabià Puigserver, Lluís Pasqual and Pere Planella; working alongside Anna, Lluís Homar, Imma Colomer, Domènech Reixach, Toni Sevilla (AKA 'Mene' at that time) and the great Carlota Soldevila; joining that family that spent more time at the theatre than at home, gave me the chance to learn and understand what theatre is, not that individual dream to express yourself on-stage but a powerful tool to stir consciences, to spur, encourage, question, challenge the audience, to bring culture to everyone, 'an art theatre for everyone' as the Lliure's byelaws say even today.

L'Heroe premièred in May 1983, and for the first time I was working in that venue where I had seen so many shows, and where I had fallen in love with this profession and its actors, the Lliure. Everything had to be authentic, small and truthful; the audience was right there. I had felt their breathing in that 'Camí de nit', but now I heard the audience's breathing just as vividly. They were part of the show and were in the space: the audience was truly part of the play.

L'Heroe was a co-production with the government of Catalonia's Centre Dramàtic, which had been launched the previous year and was based at the Romea, the first institutional theatre. The first Catalan Culture Conference revealed the need for a theatre policy; the country's language and culture had to be promoted and protected.

Thanks to this, I walked on-stage at the Teatre Grec for the first time in August 1983. Debuting on the stage, which the city had gotten back in 1976, was a unique and very special experience. Anyone who has performed at the Grec would tell you that. Those stands holding 1,000 people, those sounds of nature, that silence so different than an enclosed theatre, that ceiling of stars and that sense of smallness make the Grec almost a mystical experience. Today the Grec is the nerve centre of a festival that keeps growing and growing and enriching the city with a plethora of shows every summer. That is also where I met the man who years later would become my life companion, Jordi, and this is one of the biggest gifts that the Lliure and Barcelona have given me.

Another first: I stepped onto the stage of the Romea in June 1986, directed by Mario Gas, another of our great directors, in his show *La Ronda*.

Working at the Romea meant inhabiting the space where all the Catalan theatre greats had worked; it meant becoming aware that you were part of a history that began many, many years ago.

The Mercat de les Flors, the city's first public theatre, opened in 1985 thanks to Maria Aurèlia Capmany, the city councillor for culture in the government of Pasqual Maragall. And *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* opened there in January 1987, directed by Konrad Ziedrich (who had come from the Berliner Ensemble), another stroke of luck to be directed by an incredible expert and wonderful person. And, by a coincidence of fate, the next year I performed at the Mercat de les Flors in another Brecht play, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, this time with the Lliure.

What good is goodness if the good are struck down first, and so are those who have been shown goodness?

What good is freedom if free people have to live among the subjugated? What good is common sense if we only get the food we all need through fierceness?

This is the leitmotiv of Saint Joan, and the timeliness of the text is astonishing.



One of Fabià's great shows, *The Marriage of Figaro*, premièred at the Lliure in February 1989. The Lliure was wavering between continuing on shaky footing or closing because the money promised it never came. It was a constant struggle that we've never fully resolved: the necessary investment in culture.

I returned to the Mercat de les Flors for the third time in December 1990, when we premièred *Terra Baixa* under the direction of Fabià Puigserver, a show that left an indelible mark on all of us. It was one of Fabià's iconic shows and absolute proof that the Lliure needed more space.

The Lliure was the home to the theatre company, Cesc Gelabert's dance company, the Teatre Lliure chamber orchestra conducted by Josep Pons and a group of world-class musicians. Fabià's ambition was to embrace all the performing arts. In October of that year, he was finally given the keys to the Palau de l'Agricultura at a simple yet symbolic event held in the lobby of the old theatre in Gràcia. Fabià (and an entire team behind him) had fought to get this space and found the legal formula to remain dissociated from any institution by creating the Teatre Lliure Foundation which all the institutions belonged to, although the theatre belonged to none of them, essentially so that the name 'teatre lliure' [free theatre] would continue to mean that. This entailed many problems and many meetings, plenty of delays and too much time to reach an agreement. And unfortunately, the day the scale model of this impressive Palau de l'Agricultura was unveiled, Fabià was no longer with us. In the late 1980 and early 1990s, Barcelona was suffering from an HIV epidemic which stole many, many colleagues. We watched as our professional friends and colleagues fell, and a silent, deep fear lodged itself in the world of theatre. They were very difficult years with a great deal of pain, where the question was: Who would be next? Who is carrying it but doesn't know it? That was on everyone's mind. The stigma, the discrimination, the fear. Today AIDS is a chronic disease, but for a long time it was a death sentence.

But life stubbornly went on, and Barcelona underwent a huge transformation for the upcoming Olympics that would change the city forever. The city was transforming, and so was my body: I was expecting my first child.

He was born on 17 July 1991, and Fabià died on the 31st of that same month.

We were orphaned, and the Lliure continued along its more or less difficult way, as I continued along mine. After giving birth, I decided to take some time off; I wanted to enjoy my child. Obviously I had no maternity leave. These things were complicated in our profession, but my husband and the father of our child stayed at the Lliure, and we trusted it could keep going. Curiously, it did. Today it is totally impossible to pay rent in Gràcia on an actor's salary. The city has a dire housing shortage, and salaries have nothing to do with rental prices. Today many young and not-so-young people are forced to live in one room, or they leave their city. I think that's really sad and the start of the city's decline: when it ejects its own citizens.

In 1993, the Lliure decided to take possession of the Palau de l'Agricultura with an extraordinary show by Lluís Pasqual, *Roberto Zucco*, another first. This was the only time working at the Palau when it wasn't anything yet, only the remains of what it had been. But construction hadn't begun and actually didn't begin until 1996, and the Lliure people couldn't wait any longer. That's where the scale model had been unveiled, and I remember that Fabià's absence occupied that entire huge space, his space, that day.

The Teatre Lliure Palau de l'Agricultura opened in 2001, and along with the Institut del Teatre and the Mercat de les Flors it was part of an ambitious project called the City of Theatre that unfortunately never came to fruition.

My first time in the new Lliure was in 2005, precisely with Anna in *Matrimoni de Boston* directed by Josep Maria Mestre, with whom I worked in many other shows as well.



I won't barrage you with more dates and plays, but this is the stuff of my life, and surveying the city through all the theatres I've worked in and the people I've shared them with is a history of what I have done. But I wanted to focus on the early years because they were truly exceptional for both me and the city.

Another of those magical nights as a spectator was in 1985 when I watched Josep Maria Flotats's great *Cyrano*. I had never heard the verse spoken in that way, with that speed and precision in every word, that mastery of the profession. We were fascinated, and my colleagues who were fortunate enough to join his company regaled me with wonders. The Poliorama became the embryo of the TNC, not without controversies and often causing divisions in the profession, but cities keep moving and people are only temporary in the life of a city. Today we have a TNC, although it may be a bit presumptuous, architecturally speaking.

I worked there with Anna for the last time on a spectacular play directed by Sergi Belbel, *Agost*. My dear Anna topped off her career with a great character we'll never forget. The years spent sharing the stage with this great actress were a privilege, and it was immense good fortune to learn by her side. Another gaping hole.

Shortly thereafter, I was back on-stage in the Sala Gran with a spectacular work, *Barcelona*, directed and written by Pere Riera. Contemporary Catalan authors had taken a huge step forward and proven that when their texts are performed the city becomes rich in contemporary dramaturgy.

After that came the TV show *Nissaga de Poder*, written like so many other series by Benet i Jornet, 'Papitu', a Barcelona native who changed Catalonia's TV history. That clearly marked a turning point in the lives of all of us who appeared in it. There was something about those early years when we suffered, even though TV3 had been operating for some time, and I want to talk about it because I get the sense the people aren't aware of how hard it was to keep the language. TV3 worked hard, but the language of theatre is more refined; we performed classical texts translated by great professionals, but everyday language, the language of the streets that was used in the series, required careful attention. Now it seems funny, but things happened like an actor who didn't want to say 'bústia' because nobody would have understood it; instead they said 'buzón'. And the poor proofreader had to put down her foot and make the actor say it, otherwise it wouldn't be filmed. It seems incredible, but that's how damaged the language was. Now it hurts when you see situations in which people don't tolerate Catalan, or they think it's not very international, or they ask you to switch languages because they can't understand you. Maybe people would be more understanding if knew how much this language had suffered.

And so began a new period: private theatre carved a niche for itself in the city with Focus, at first with a bit of competitiveness with public theatre, but over the years everyone has found their place and now it's a fundamental part of Barcelona's theatre scene. I've worked with them many times and they breathed life into this city's theatre. Barcelona currently has a great theatre scene with shows for all audiences, but we still have a lot of work ahead of us to reflect the multiculturalism of the streets on the stage; to fill the chairs with a new, diverse audience; to internationalise our theatre; and to urgently solve the problem of small theatres, which are so important in maintaining the health of a city's theatre because they're where you can experiment, take risks or begin a career, and they help maintain the balance with the more consolidated theatres. They're the first stage in the careers of many young actors and directors, who are the future of our theatre. Unfortunately, it's virtually impossible to live decently if you work in the theatre circuit. Maybe one day we'll reach that two percent of the budget earmarked for culture, but we still come short today, although I hope something can be done about it.

Montserrat Roig said 'cities are loved when someone makes a landscape where people still applaud'. I wanted to applaud some of the people who have supported and guided me in my life. Theatre is fleeting; nothing remains of everything I've told you, and this is one of its loveliest features, as Olga says at the end of *The Three Sisters*: 'Time will pass, and we shall go away for ever, and we shall be forgotten, our faces will be forgotten, our voices, and how many there were of us'. This is why I wanted to pay tribute to everyone who has somehow helped us reach where we are today. We are what we were able to do and not do.



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We can make a wish for the Annual Festival, just as we make a wish for Saint John's and burn it in the bonfire. If I may, my wish is: to see Netanyahu and his entire military gang judged for war crimes and crimes against humanity in an international criminal court. My wish is for sanctions and embargoes against Israel to be issued once and for all, and that we stop negotiating with a genocidal government once and for all. Europe will never be the Europe that some of us believed in, but we should at least regain a modicum of credibility. I'm tired, like I imagine many of you are, of feeling shame, anger, impotence and so much sadness. So I think that not letting you enter Tel Aviv is perhaps more an honour than a wrongdoing.

I know that many of you must think that nothing we do is worth anything, but every gesture counts, and we've achieved so much by taking to the streets. That's why at the demonstration organised by the Palestinian community of Barcelona, Coalició Prou Complicitat amb Israel, on the 4th at 12 noon - that weekend many demonstrations are being organised around Spain, and Barcelona has always been sensitive to injustices - I'd like the streets to fill once again so at least we can share our impotence.

And now, let's open the festival, this Annual Festival of La Mercè 2025. Even though it is forever joined with the memory of this ignominious war, the festival should be experienced and celebrated and the streets, the concerts and all the events should be filled. Experience and enjoy this most Barcelona of festivals. Don't let tourists anger you or take your place: occupy the city and enjoy it.

Long live Barcelona's Annual Festival! Long live La Mercè!!!!