

THE PLAYER, THE FRIAR AND THE BURGHER. PAST AND PRESENT OF CATALAN THEATRE



CATALAN THEATRE, WHICH SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY HAS BEEN DEPRIVED OF THE STATE SUPPORT NECESSARY FOR THE CREATION OF A MODERN NATIONAL THEATRE, CONCENTRATED DRAMATIC ACTIVITY IN CATALAN IN THE RELIGIOUS AND POPULAR SPHERES.

FRANCESC MASSIP HISTORIAN



© A. CASTILLO

When a culture has to develop under the constant threat of lack of profitability –to use the economic terminology in vogue today–, its identity needs to be constantly and stubbornly defined if it is to survive and gain ground against the siege –or challenge– of today’s world. This is the case of minorities included in states which have different cultures and which use these cultures as a harness with which to dominate and a chisel with which to remove any individuality.

More than any other art form, the theatre, as a community event, has always maintained an inexcusable link with power, which, at least until the appearance of the mass media, made it a technique of government and a privileged ideological instrument, from both a religious and a civic point of view.

In this respect, Catalan theatre, from the beginning of the sixteenth century, has been deprived of the state support necessary for the creation of a modern

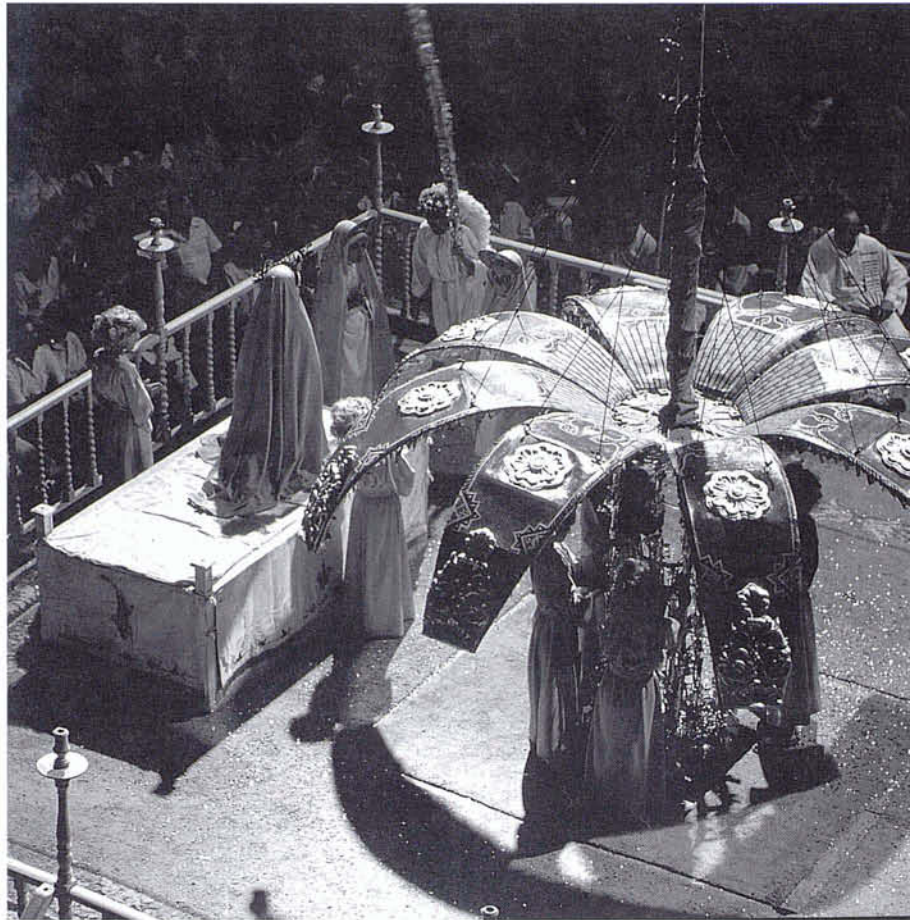
national theatre. However, because of this anomaly –which led to the importation on a massive scale of neighbouring state theatres, especially Castilian– dramatic activity in our language became concentrated in the religious and popular spheres, the most difficult to penetrate. In this way, today, faced with the urgent need to re-establish the winding labyrinth of our native theatre, we must look closely at our past and try to learn as much as possible about the Catalan dramatic tradition –which has fortunately been kept alive in so many places– and build from the foundations up, rather than from the roof down.

Because the Marca Hispanica (the future Catalonia) formed part of the Carolingian empire, our culture was drawn into European theatrical events at a very early stage, first of all with the cultivation and creation of liturgical plays, later on with more complex productions in the vernacular.

Amongst the religious plays, one of the

most outstanding is the *De Tribus Mariis* of Vic, of all the surviving Christian plays, the first to introduce the “profane” figure of the trader in ointments, and one we have recently had occasion to perform in the splendid settings of Girona Cathedral (1989) and the Basilica of Elx (1990). This liturgical drama has also survived in a few little-known celebrations in our country, especially in that treasure-chest of traditions: Majorca.

As for plays in the romance, it has been said that the great medieval mysteries are the result of the gradual development of the liturgical theatre, but it is very likely that they owe much to the dramatic experience and technique of the minstrels who “in the streets and in the squares and in the courts of princes” recited, sang and mimed passages from the Holy Scriptures and from the lives of the saints (as well as from national history), whose popularity led the clergy and the authorities to intervene. Origin-



© GENERALITAT VALENCIANA ARCHIVES

nally then, the mystery plays were probably religious city celebrations, acted mainly by laymen (craftsmen and burghers), arranged by priests and leading citizens and performed in the vulgar tongue.

The Easter Cycle is the liveliest and most prolific in medieval Catalan theatre and starts with one of the earliest European passion plays, whose traditional sequels have survived to this century. The other great cycle of plays from Catalan literature is that of the Assumption of the Virgin, three splendid plays of special importance in our theatre and which are about to be issued in the collection **Els Nostres Clàssics** under the title *Teatre Assumpcionista*. These are the *Representació de l'Assumpció de Madona Sancta Maria*, the earliest surviving play written entirely in Catalan, performed in Tarragona more than six hundred years ago on the sand of the Roman circus now being restored. The second piece, Valencia cathedral's *Misteri assumpcionista*, established a dra-

matic approach at the beginning of the fifteenth century based on verticality and on the use of aerial machines that was to have a broad following in subsequent dramatic forms in the Peninsula. It is also the Catalan text of greatest poetic quality in the medieval dramatic legacy. The third assumption play, the famous Mystery of Elx or *Festa d'Elx*, is still performed today as it has been since the beginning of the sixteenth century.

The plays still performed in the churches of Majorca at the end of the sixteenth century and preserved in the Llabrés manuscript provide a wide range both of pieces belonging to the Christmas Cycle (of which the *Pastorets* and the *Sibilla* are examples), and of the Old Testament and Hagiographic Cycle. The work is completed with the three Corpus Christi Mysteries of Valencia, which we had the opportunity to stage on the occasion of the 750th Anniversary of the Birth of the Valencian People.

It is important to understand that medieval theatre is a spectacle in which playwright and text take second place to melody and, especially, to the technical side of the production. This explains why the visual and musical elements are the chief object of current research into the subject, along with the audience, the real protagonist of those performances that can only be understood as community celebrations requiring the public's active participation. This is why I feel that research into the participation of artists and architects in the creation of the medieval spectacle should form the basis of investigation. This is why I feel that anthropology has so much to say about this type of theatre. This is why, when it comes to tracing our theatre's family tree, it is important to use an approach combining philology with art, sociology and anthropology. This is what I shall try to establish at the forthcoming International Congress on Medieval Theatre to be held in Girona in 1992. ■