

## MISTERI D'ELX – HÈCTOR CÀMARA SEMPÈRE



*Professor Hèctor Càmara Sempere is a specialist in Catalan religious literature of the Middle Ages and a member of the Misteri d'Elx Board, the entity in charge of protecting, maintaining and celebrating the Festa in accordance with tradition. He explains why this religious drama is one of our greatest cultural treasures.*

### **What makes the Misteri d'Elx unique in Europe?**

Several features explain its uniqueness. I like to say that the Misteri is the only play which has been running uninterruptedly for over 500 years, something that neither Shakespeare nor Broadway musicals can boast about.

Furthermore, in Massip's words, it is "the best living and visible document of medieval theatre". We have countless old plays, but we do not know how they were performed. However, in the Mystery, we have both the text and the staging and, therefore, it is as if we were travelling through a time tunnel that takes us directly to the Middle Ages.

### **What role does popular participation play?**

The Misteri is known as the "Festa", this being its best definition: a festivity which involves the whole population. Although the staging takes place on every 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> August, it requires constant work by many volunteers throughout the year. Theatres did not exist in the Middle Ages; that is why, alongside its religious character, the performance takes place inside the Basilica of Santa Maria, where stagehands work with floor and air elements on a manual basis, following a centuries-old tradition. Furthermore, the work team includes hairdressers and tailors who endow the characters with the right appearance, as well as electricians or fitters, among others; altogether, almost 300 people give life to this religious drama performed by the singers of the chapel and the choir school (called Escolania) of the Misteri.

Of course, the Misteri would make no sense without an audience. For two consecutive days, locals and visitors not only accompany the acts that precede the performance but also crowd the benches and galleries of the basilica to attend the staging. Despite perfectly knowing the plot, the drama keeps moving them year after year.

### **To what extent are children an essential part of the Misteri?**

Children have always been essential in this entirely sung performance. We should bear in mind that women were not allowed to participate in medieval plays, and therefore, when there were female characters, such roles were assumed by children for their high-pitched voices. That tradition has lived on to this day.

The selection is very strict in terms of singers' vocal skills, and the children enthusiastically accept the work that their participation entails. Due to the characteristics of the play, one of the most striking challenges faced by kids is the "Prova de l'Àngel", which serves to determine if they experience any dizziness when descending from a 25-meter-high dome in the Araceli or the Magrana, the aerial elements of the stage machinery.

### **What feelings does it provoke in the audience?**

Feelings change from one person to another. We must not forget that the Misteri is a religious theatrical piece about Virgin Mary's death and assumption into Heaven in body and soul, a theme that inspires deep fervour among believers. However, faith is not a must to enjoy the Mystery. There are some spectators who, captivated by the first experience, come back a second time and feel as if they were attending a completely different show. And this comes as no surprise, because the scenic space varies according to the place that you occupy in the basilica: the composition of the scene, the view of the characters, the light and the music are all perceived differently, but always remaining spectacular and overwhelming. Each experience is unique. To this must be added the awareness of witnessing a performance that requires the altruistic work of a community that has inherited this tradition from their parents and grandparents, a community that one joins because they feel it as their own. That passion for achieving a common goal can be clearly seen, and it arouses the emotion of all attendees.

### **What does the Misteri mean for the city of Elche?**

The Misteri continues to be played on 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> August every year because it is Elche's festival *par excellence*. And nothing unites a town more than its festivities: every inhabitant identifies with them.

Unlike other medieval "mysteries", that of Elche was the one which best managed to bring together the population to celebrate it and transmit it; and precisely the consolidation of that symbolic and identity-related nature allowed the Misteri to last over time, while others disappeared.

As a matter of fact, the declaration of the Misteri d'Elx as an Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO acknowledged that its conservation depends on its link with the people of Elche, which is why its inhabitants continue to join forces so that it can remain alive for ever.