

TERESA SOLANA

Premiere Nights

Translated from Catalan by Peter Bush

I DETEST MOZART. His music seriously gets on my nerves. Naturally I don't like Verdi, Rossini, Handel, Monteverdi, Puccini or Bellini or Wagner. . . . In a nutshell, I can't stand opera. Even though I undoubtedly belong to the select band of old-timers who have watched the most performances at the Liceu.

I was born in 1924 and have been going to that opera house since I was eighteen. I am now ninety-two. I don't think I have missed a single premiere in all those years or that there is a single divo or diva I haven't heard sing. You will probably regard this as a privilege, but I can tell you, as far as I am concerned, going to the Liceu has always been a torture. And then you will ask: if she doesn't like opera, why did this good lady spend half her life going to the Liceu? Well, you know, things didn't used to be that easy, once.

I am referring to people of our social standing.

THE FIRST TIME I went to the opera, it was with my parents. I had just had my eighteenth birthday, and celebrated my coming out at a big party in the house where we then lived on the Passeig de la Bonanova, and Mama thought I was now of an age to go to the Liceu to see an adult performance. I had never been, and naturally enough, I was thrilled at the idea of going out at night and dressing up for the theater. In those days when almost everything was banned, there was very little in the way of entertainment, and the only distractions on hand were going to Mass or the dressmakers, or doing charity work.

Mama, who was very clever, didn't choose any ordinary day to take me, she decided on a night at the end of January when a gala performance was planned in honor of the Generalísimo that would bring together the city's great and the good. In those days, our family belonged to an exclusive circle of politicians, military, bankers, and businessmen, and as the daughter of one of the country's most important Catalan industrialists, I had to experience the rite of initiation of a night at the Liceu, and being

paraded in all my finery before my peers. You can't imagine how excited I was! I had never attended a big society event or seen Franco in the flesh—Papa was full of praise for the man—and I was so nervous I lost my appetite. We're talking about the year 1942. The war that had forced us to leave Barcelona and set up home in Camprodon to escape the anarchist patrols had only finished three years ago.

The program to pay homage to the Caudillo comprised the first and second acts of *Madame Butterfly* and the second act of *Lohengrin*. Mama was passionate about Wagner, whom she believed to be much superior to Verdi, and was of the opinion that *Lohengrin* was an excellent choice. Wagner's music was epic and patriotic, she said, like the decimation of the reds that Franco had pursued to protect us from communism and the "Jewish-Masonic conspiracy." I think I had heard the occasional piece by Puccini and Wagner on the radio at home, but never a whole opera (I don't even recall whether they broadcast operas in those days), and whenever I had the choice, I preferred piano concertos by Beethoven or Schubert, that were more in tune with the state of mind of the young girl I was at the time: an eighteen-year-old innocent who went to Mass in the morning and enjoyed secret fantasies of Errol Flynn by night.

That evening the Liceu looked splendid, so brightly lit and bedecked with flowers. The façade had been covered in small lights, as if it were Christmas, and the entrance had been decorated with plants and bay trees. I too looked gorgeous, in a sky-blue satin, full-length dress Mama had had made specially, with sparkling jewels and gauze ruffs that covered my thin arms. I was a skinny young thing—Mama was always complaining food never seemed to fill me out—and in those postwar times with so many sick and starving, we spindly girls weren't fashionable as they are now and were forced to hide the scant flesh on our bones to avoid people jumping to the conclusion that we were suffering from tuberculosis.

The performance began at a quarter past nine. Even though it was the usual damp cold January on the Rambla and by the front of the Boqueria market, the crowds were packed tight behind the barriers the police had erected around the theater and were fervently shouting out the name of the Generalísimo and the traditional "*Viva España!*" The Liceu's lobby was also full of people and quite a spectacle with men in their tuxedos and glittering, bejewelled women who, like us, added a touch of color with their brand-new gala outfits. The audience also contained lots of military in dress uniforms resplendent with medals, and one of them, a colonel who was a friend of Papa, told me it was a soldier, the Marquis of Mina,

who had brought opera to Barcelona in the last century and turned it into the city's favorite musical form. I already knew that, because the teacher who egregiously failed to teach me to play the piano had told me; however, I was polite, said nothing and simply smiled sweetly as I listened to his little lecture.

Our seats gave us a magnificent view of the presidential box located in the center of the dress circle. They had adorned it with flowers and a big tapestry, and as the moment when the performance was to start drew near, all eyes focused on that part of the theater expecting Franco to appear, but he didn't. To my astonishment, the curtain went up and the orchestra began although neither the Generalísimo nor his wife were present. I was totally flummoxed. How could Franco arrive late to a function that had been organized in his honor? What could have happened?

When Franco finally entered the auditorium, accompanied by Doña Carmen, it was gone half past ten and we were over halfway through the first act of *Madame Butterfly*. As soon as they spotted him, the singers stopped singing and the orchestra switched from Puccini to a lively account of the first bars of the national anthem. Everybody rose to their feet, clapping and shouting: "Franco! Franco! Franco!" It was incredible. I remember how my heart beat so fast I thought for a moment I would faint and cut a foolish figure in front of all those people. The hero of the fatherland, the savior of Spain in person. I saw how Mama, like many other ladies, shed tears while she applauded with her extremely elegant gray gloves.

That night, I had so many new exciting experiences, I hardly noticed what was happening onstage. Later on, when we were driving home, Papa asked me whether I had enjoyed the performance and I replied that I had, immensely. What else could I have said? Of course, it was a big mistake, because my parents concluded that I loved opera, and from that day onward, my life took a different path and I started to go regularly to the Liceu.

I SOON DISCOVERED that opera was truly tedious. All that shrieking and screaming, and plots that were so tragic and entangled I found them hard to unravel. . . . Worst of all were the baroque composers, and, of course, Wagner, with his endless operas that went on for over five hours and were sung in German to boot. There were evenings when the performances were so drawn out I couldn't keep still on my chair and Mama was forced to scold me. I couldn't help it: my bones stuck to the seat, and my bum and legs went to sleep; I felt like a pincushion. And it went on for hours and hours! When I looked at the audience in the gods I could hardly

believe that people existed who were willing to stand through a whole opera, and nobody was obliging them to do so. Papa, who was also bored out of his mind at the Liceu, said that the people in the gods were the true connoisseurs, and that the critics who wrote reviews for the daily newspapers took more notice of their applause or whistles than ours.

The only good thing about the Liceu was that afterward we would go the Fonda Espanya for dinner. That was the bit I liked. Not so much for the food—I recognize that at the time I was very persnickety, and Mama would say, I pecked at it like a sparrow—but because we always went with some of Papa’s friends, who had sons my age. On one such soirée I met Pere, the older son of the Gelaberts, and I became totally infatuated. He was a handsome, engaging boy and much more fun than the sourpusses I usually had to converse with. Mama, who immediately noticed I was fixated on that young man, said right away that the Gelaberts didn’t have sufficient status to be part of our family and killed dead any hopes I might have nurtured in that direction. I didn’t dare disagree. I trusted her judgment, and besides, Mama was very bad-tempered and under no circumstance did I want to annoy her.

Now and then, particularly in those early days, I was on the verge of confessing that I detested opera and that going to the Liceu was a real pain. But Mama was so proud—“Mercedes follows in my shoes. She *loves* the opera!” she liked to boast to her lady friends—that I didn’t have the heart to tell her the truth. Going to the Liceu was a compulsory society activity for people of our social class, and if Mama had taught me one thing, it was that women in our position also had to make sacrifices. Life—even a life as comfortable as ours—wasn’t all a bed of roses. We had to pay a price to have a good husband and live in a nice house, to own jewels, pretty dresses, and have domestic servants, and never be forced to worry about anything as vulgar as money. And so it was a case of suffering in silence. And being patient. I hoped that, when I married, I would be able to stop going to the Liceu, or at least would no longer have to go so often.

EARLY IN DECEMBER 1944, my paternal grandmother died of a heart attack. Mourning obliged us to wear black and we didn’t go to the Liceu for months. I discovered that was a good way to avoid having to go to the Rambla to listen to opera, and even though I was saddened by Grandmother’s death, I was thankful she had passed away at the beginning of the opera season and not at the end. We missed almost every performance. When Mama decided we could ease off on the mourning in the

spring and we rejoined the social round, I was ready to pray to God with all my heart to remove another relative so I wouldn't have to go to the Liceu.

The trouble now was that we didn't just go to the opera, but to the ballet as well. Frankly, I don't know which was worse. I occasionally made an excuse and managed to stay at home. "My head really aches," "It's that time in the month," I would sometimes tell Mama. But I knew I couldn't overplay that card. My only source of consolation was the hope there would be another death in the family and we would don our mourning weeds once again.

Nonetheless, the months went by and none of my relatives seemed in a hurry to die. I was desperate. Although I did all I could to hide the fact, those soirées at the Liceu were endless, and while I was in our box, I spent every second wishing a disaster would occur so I could stay at home. I wanted a revolutionary to appear and throw another Orsini into the stalls, or another war to break out, or the Liceu to burn down. . . .

I know I was taking things too far, but imagining such catastrophes was the only way I could keep awake during those interminable performances.

ONE TUESDAY at the end of November 1945, I stayed at home with Grandfather, alone except for the girl who helped our maid with the laundry. I was feeling rather delicate and had decided to stay and day-dream in my bedroom until lunchtime. I heard grandfather call out.

"Mercèeee . . . ! Please come and help me down the stairs. I want to go into the garden for a while."

"Won't you catch cold, Grandfather? You know how at this time of year. . . ."

"But can't you see how sunny it is, my dear? Go and find Maria and she can help you, because you won't be able to handle me by yourself."

Grandfather was no invalid, but he found walking difficult and spent most of the time sitting in his wheelchair. He was elderly, and after Grandmother died he had come to live with us and been given one of the first-floor bedrooms. As there wasn't a lift, he had an invalid chair upstairs that enabled him to move along the passage and around his bedroom, and a second one on the ground floor. He needed to be helped by Father or one of our maids when he wanted to go up- or downstairs.

"Mercè, why are you looking at me like that?"

I didn't think twice. Grandfather was sitting in his wheelchair next to the stone balustrade, and I pushed him downstairs with all my might.

“Mercèee. . .”

He bounced down to the bottom like a ball.

“Help! Grandfather has fallen downstairs and hurt himself!” I screamed.

The doctor said he had broken his neck and that death was instantaneous. Of course, I was consoled to know he hadn’t suffered. Everyone put Grandfather’s fall down to a tragic accident; no questions were asked, no investigation was opened, it was an eminently reasonable assumption. Who would have ever thought that a sensitive young woman who wouldn’t say boo to a goose might have pushed her grandfather downstairs so she could wear black and stop going to the Liceu?

THANKS TO GRANDFATHER I missed more than half the season that year.

“I’m so sorry for our little dear,” mother lamented. “She so adores her nights at the opera . . .”

At about that time—I had just celebrated my twenty-first birthday—I had started courting Josep Maria, heir to the Margalló fortune. My parents had selected a young man who was the son of one of Papa’s wealthiest partners and who, of course, was a member of the Liceu Circle. Josep Maria was fat, squat, and spotty, and his hands were always sweaty. I hated having him near me, but Mama said that uniting our families would mean that father’s businesses would prosper even more, and she assured me that the life of a grand dame Josep Maria would bring me would more than make up for having to keep him happy in bed.

All of a sudden I discovered that Josep Maria also detested the opera. Naturally, he didn’t like dancing, the movies, bullfights, or going out for aperitifs on a Sunday either—nothing at all, in fact. My God, he was so boring! Nevertheless, as we hardly knew each other and we wanted plain sailing when we were courting, I never dared tell him I too hated that kind of music, and that when we went to the Liceu, I found it tedious beyond belief. Even so, for a time I did think I had struck it lucky with the fiancé my parents had chosen, and was convinced that, as he didn’t like opera, after our marriage we would stop going to the Liceu, or at the very least, would only go now and then, to keep up appearances.

However, I couldn’t have been more wrong.

JOSEP MARIA’S MAMA, who was a widow, simply loved to go to the Liceu and show off her furs and jewels, and as soon as we were wed, her son slotted me into the ritual. Overnight I became her companion and we started going to the opera together. If the Liceu was already the

height of tedium, I soon discovered it was frankly torture to do so with one's mother-in-law. Apart from having to listen to all those singers screeching hour after hour, in the intervals I now had to endure that lady's advice and criticism: I didn't know how to manage the servants, I spent too much or too little, I didn't eat the right things, I should be pregnant by now . . . And I was forced to turn the other cheek and say amen to everything, because Josep Maria doted on his mother, and I knew that, if we argued, I would be the one to lose out.

Luckily at the time I could fall back on my cousin Mariona, the only real friend I have ever had. We were the same age and had grown up together, and she was the only person who knew how much I hated opera. One day, when she saw me looking suicidal, she advised me to pluck up courage and tell Josep Maria the truth.

I heeded her words but it wasn't a good idea.

"So, you have been deceiving people all this time, have you?" snapped a furious Josep Maria when he learned of my secret.

"I'm really sorry. I said nothing initially because I didn't want to upset Mama and Papa. And later . . ."

"Well, it's too late now!" he retorted. "You have become a kind of institution at the Liceu. You do realize that, don't you? 'Mrs Margalló is so knowledgeable, and never misses a first night . . .' What do you think they'll say if you suddenly stop going?"

"But . . ."

"No ifs or buts. I'm not going to allow you to make a fool of me! You will continue to go the Liceu and will never tell anyone what you have just told me. And I would like to remind you," he added in that tone he adopted when speaking to his subordinates, "I am the major shareholder in your father's company, and if it wasn't for me, his creditors would have taken him to the cleaners long ago!"

I had to swallow my tears and my pride.

And continue going to the Liceu.

NEVERTHELESS, I DIDN'T SURRENDER. The loathing I felt toward my mother-in-law gave me the idea, and the endless hours I sat in our box allowed me to think up a scheme that would kill her off reasonably peacefully, thanks to the foxgloves growing in our garden. Our gardener had warned me it was a dangerous plant, and one day, consulting some books in Papa's library, I discovered that one could make a poison from its leaves that left not a trace: I got to work. Subsequently, my mother-in-

law died from a heart attack provoked by an infusion of foxglove leaves, and she was buried without even an autopsy.

Eighteen months later, my brother-in-law (a horrible chap, and as ugly as my husband) fell over a precipice in the course of a family excursion to the Turó de l'Home mountains, in circumstances that, on this occasion, the police did think were rather strange. That was when I realized I needed to put the brake on. So many sudden deaths in the family, and in such quick succession, might arouse suspicion, and something everyone put down to a run of bad luck—"The Margallós, poor dears, can't seem to shake it off"—might lead to an investigation being opened that would cast a bad light on me. No more accidents or sudden illnesses, I decided. Whether I liked it or not, I would have to resign myself.

At the time—I must have been in my midthirties—I had already begun to fantasize about ridding myself of Josep Maria. While I was in our box, listening to those sopranos and tenors warbling away, I amused myself making plans and alibis, choosing poisons, pistols, axes and knives. It was really a harmless pastime I wasn't ever intending to put into practice, because although it's true that Josep Maria's premature death would supply me with the perfect alibi never to be forced to listen to an opera again—"Ay, Mercedes is so sad she has pledged to the Virgin of Montserrat that she will never again cross the threshold of the Liceu, and she so likes the opera . . . !" Josep Maria looked after everything, and I couldn't be sure that his death wouldn't have negative repercussions on our style of life. I still had three children to bring up, and I had no idea how Josep Maria's business worked, and that inhibited me.

Besides, it's not so easy to find a way to kill a young man that doesn't arouse suspicion.

TOWARD THE END of the eighties, my cousin Mariona died in a fire in the house the family owned in Puigcerdà. Her son and young daughter also lost their lives in the disaster—only Montserrat, her granddaughter, was saved—and that tragedy affected me deeply. From the moment Franco died, everything really changed and I felt disoriented, and now, without Mariona, I had nobody left to let confide in. For a time I succumbed to what is now called depression and turned into a recluse at home. Josep Maria, who by now was one of the country's wealthiest industrialists, decided I was playacting and was furious: he told me that I either snapped out of my depression and fulfilled my social duties, or he would stick me in an asylum. A couple of female acquaintances in my

social circle had ended up in the madhouse—one, for the right reasons, because she hallucinated and had tried to kill her children; the other case wasn't so straightforward, and I found the very idea quite terrifying.

In the event, I wasted no time when the occasion presented itself. Josep Maria had always had an iron constitution, but at the age of sixty-four, his appendix was perforated and he required an emergency operation. There was a sofa bed in the room in the clinic, and as I had had a brainwave, I offered to spend a night there to provide him with some company.

It was child's play to lay my hands on a syringe and inject a bubble of air through the drip supplying him serum.

And four years later, the Liceu burnt down.

By the way, that had nothing to do with me. Though I had toyed with the idea.

THE FIRST HALF must be about to begin. (Yes, regrettably, they *did* rebuild.) They are performing *The Twilight of the Gods*, one of Wagner's interminable operas that always gives me a splitting headache. It is rather surprising that the English consul isn't here, because he is so fond of opera and never misses a first night. Unlike his wife, who rarely comes, because everybody knows she doesn't like opera and skives off whenever she can. She is *so* fortunate! If only I could follow suit. . . . Because who'd have ever told me that, at my age, I would still have to go to listen to operas?

For over twenty years I've been coming to the Liceu in a wheelchair; ever since I had a stroke. A year after I buried Josep Maria, half of my body was paralyzed and I was reduced to a completely invalid state. I can't speak, and as arthritis prevents me from using my good hand, I can't write either. I have no way of telling my grandson, Carlos, to please stop taking me to the Liceu because I detest opera. The darling does everything in good faith, and unlike me he loves the opera (Josep Maria and I always suspected poor Carlos preferred his carnations green); whenever there is a premiere he drives round to pick me up, decks me out in my furs and jewels, and takes me to the Liceu.

Now I am ninety-two, I no longer pray for someone else's death, but for God to take me as soon as He can. Even though I am slightly worried by the possibility that hell exists and that my punishment will be to sit in a theater and listen to opera for the whole of eternity. As I can't speak and confess my sins to the priest, I don't know if the absolution he gives me

will act to open St. Peter's gates or if I will find them shut when I arrive.

If the truth be told, however much I try, I never manage to repent for the evil deeds I have committed throughout my life to avoid all those nights at the opera.

May God have mercy. . . .