

GOETHE MEDAL 2024

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY CARMEN ROMERO QUERO

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- Check against delivery -

Thank you so much for choosing me to be here. I never dreamed that one day I would be here with all of you, receiving this award.

Theatre and art have brought me to this stage, to this country, to this culture, which I have discovered and come to admire thanks to the exchanges that we have created through the *Teatro a Mil* Festival. The festival was founded 31 years ago, in Santiago, in a country that had just regained its democracy, a country without cultural networks, full of mistrust, and in some ways still shrouded in darkness. The festival gradually became a kind of international platform for hundreds of Chilean companies that began to create based on what they saw on our stages, which we initially organized only in the month of January. Before the Internet, borders were much more powerful. The Andes Mountains were powerful in that way. Today's young theater companies play with far more references than ever before, but in the 1990s the festival was like a beacon of world theater in Santiago.

I was not born in Santiago. And if the capital of Chile was still in the dark, imagine what it was like in my small town, La Calera! The name refers to a quicklime mine. That white powder, hanging in the air, is part of my roots and permeates all my memories.

However, my roots are not in mining, but in the railways, and I now understand how this has shaped my life.

My father, Félix, was an employee of the State Railways Company, and La Calera, despite its tiny size, was an important station because it was the gateway to the north of Chile

and a stop on the way to Valparaíso. Ever since I was a child, I have been obsessed with travel – physically, intellectually or socially. I can't imagine a life without being on the move. I was raised in a diverse and motley community of butchers, bakers, broom makers, mail carriers, roma, traveling salesmen, and immigrants, in constant interaction with other people.

As I grew up, my insatiable curiosity drove me out of La Calera, first to Quillota, a town not much bigger than mine, then to Valdivia, my first city, and finally to Santiago, where the pieces began to fall into place.

Your curiosity, that of the German people, speaks to me and calls to me. My eagerness to understand and connect with others is still intact and that is why the question Carola Lentz, president of the Goethe-Institut, asked me when I was awarded this prize left me in awe: she wanted to know what gives me hope.

No one had ever asked me that question before.

That question is something so fundamental for understanding another person, but no one ever asks it. It is a beautiful, profound question that asks for both humanity and reflection.

That is why I am grateful to have been noticed by such a large country as Germany, even though I come from such a tiny place and am no more than one and a half meters tall. I feel like I am a part of a great community with all of you who have made an effort to understand me. Allow me to share a story with you:

In 2009, the German ballet master Pina Bausch traveled to Chile as part of the Teatro a Mil Festival. For some reason she decided to finish her creative work in my country and she gave us all her energy. As if boarding the train of my childhood, she travelled north with her company, made up of young people from many parts of the world. She got up at eight in the morning, slept in cabins full of cats, visited Valparaíso, and also travelled south. I was with her in Chiloé and saw her jump over sacks of potatoes and climb into

the colourful boats of the fishermen. She was so happy she didn't say a word. She was dancing. She was breathing.

It was all she needed.

She was in the last moments of her life and she didn't miss a thing. She was breathing everything in, living every moment, she fully immersed herself in it. It was beautiful to watch her. And I asked myself: What do I say to her? What do I say to someone so brilliant and so wise? I don't speak German and she didn't speak Spanish, but we both felt each other's breathe and accompanied each other in our humanity.

That was all the communication we needed.

In the 31 years of Teatro a Mil Festival, Germany has participated in 20 of them. Countless directors, playwrights, companies, and actors have impressed, moved and touched us. They impressed, touched and moved us.

If there is one nation that shares our view that the performing arts are fundamental to the life of a country and its citizens, it is Germany, whose cultural institutions, especially the Goethe-Institut Chile, we must thank for having supported and welcomed artists from Chile and Latin America during the dark times of the dictatorship and in all these years of democratic rebuilding. We would also like to thank all those who have supported us with co-productions, such as HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Tanztheater Wuppertal, Rimini Protokoll, Kampnagel, DorkyPark, and ¡Adelante! the Ibero-American Theatre Festival in Heidelberg, among many other friends and collaborators.

We welcome this cultural policy of openness to the international scene and we hope that it will be maintained, because we need it to continue to open up European circuits to Latin American art.

Our Festival has grown tremendously over the past 30 years, expanding across many regions. However, today I would like to address one aspect that has given me, and all of us who tirelessly strive to make Chile a fairer place, a great deal of hope.

Eight years ago, we launched a programme called Theatre in Education, which opened a long-awaited door to bringing performing arts into public schools. In seven schools in Santiago, we have created a space of support in which children and teenagers can express themselves freely, with theater at the heart of it all.

These schools are incredibly vulnerable – 30% of their students are immigrants – so much so that, at the beginning, the children did not even dare to introduce themselves or say their names. They were afraid of everything: rejection, bullying, not being heard, and not being seen. The program has been so successful that it is now on the verge of being implemented in every school across the country, not just a handful.

I firmly believe that theatre is a master key that brings people closer together and helps them to communicate, forgive, and heal. To make it a part of the school curriculum is to invest in the human and cultural capital that will give us dignity as citizens.

And this is crucial because through theatre, we can begin to rebuild the basic fabric of society and repair the parts that have been damaged. Chile once was a solidary and humanist society that believed in collaboration and had a strong and admirable social fabric. However, after the dictatorship it has been extremely difficult to rebuild what was lost, even in democracy. We have not been able to reclaim or to recover that sense of community and belonging. Instead, we have organized ourselves around the neoliberal idea of *every man for himself*, standing alone as individuals, rather than as a collective body.

In light of the protests we saw five years ago in Chile, as well as in other countries, our reflection is that these social outbursts stem from the desperate cries of those who want to be part of something that the system denies them.

Through theatre in the classroom, children and teenagers learn to connect with one another, to see themselves in others, to work with others, and to trust others, regardless of differences. Theatre is a powerful gateway to a diverse and nuanced society.

I have faith in the performing arts. A thousand-fold faith that humanity can reconnect through shared emotions. Through the arts, we will return to what is human. Therefore, our message is simple: MORE HUMANITY. To stop and reconnect with the present, with our community, with nature, and with our very essence through art.

This is why MORE HUMANITY is the slogan of our 2025 Festival.

Before I close, I must mention that just last week, we celebrated the world premiere of “Vaca” here in Weimar, a co-production of the Teatro a Mil Festival by the talented Chilean playwright and director Guillermo Calderón. Thank you for making this possible.

I warmly invite you to our upcoming 2025 Festival, to enjoy summer in the Southern Hemisphere and to see performing arts from all over the world, works that are political, avant-garde, family-friendly, street-inspired, conceptual, experimental, immersive, and more. You are very welcome at this wonderful festival that originated in our small country and that today is a kaleidoscope of artistic diversity that brings a bit more joy to all of our lives.

May you all have a wonderful afternoon and even MORE HUMANITY.