



Press Release of the Salzburg Festival

Obituary: José van Dam



José van Dam in the title role of Olivier Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*, Salzburg Festival, 1998.
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(SF, 20 February 2026) The exceptional Belgian bass-baritone José van Dam has died at the age of 85. Over a period of 30 years – in 23 seasons – he left his mark on the Salzburg Festival. He made his debut as Emilio in de' Cavalieri's *Rappresentazione di anima e di corpo* in 1968. This was followed by many further roles, mainly in the Mozart and Verdi repertoire, but also including Escamillo in *Carmen* or Jochanaan in *Salome*.

José van Dam also had a presence in Salzburg as a concert performer. Many Festival visitors have described his rendition of the bass part in Giuseppe Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* under Herbert von Karajan as unforgettable, a performance in which he starred alongside Anna Tomowa-Sintow, Agnes Baltsa and José Carreras.

With his much-acclaimed interpretation of the title role in Olivier Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*, a production Peter Sellars directed in 1992 and 1998 at the Felsenreitschule, José van Dam made Festival history.

"In a certain way, that performance changed my life," Artistic Director Markus Hinterhäuser recalls. "In this role, José van Dam was not simply a singer, he was an embodiment. He had a quiet authority, a mixture of humility and strength which corresponds exactly to what Messiaen meant when he created the role of his Francis."

Altogether, José van Dam gave 186 performances at the Salzburg Festival. As a symbol of grief, a black flag will fly over the Großes Festspielhaus.