

Augustinian Influence on Maltese Theatre

The relationship between the institution of the Catholic Church and the theatre in the West has been ambiguous. The same Church that condemned the theatre on the grounds that it reminded it of the suffering and humiliation that the Christian community experienced in some forms of theatrical events practised in the Roman Empire, referred to as the “theatre of the demons,”¹ is the same Church that four centuries later reintroduced the theatre as a vehicle to spread the fundamentals of Christian theology to an illiterate congregation. The notion of theatre, associated with immorality and idolatry of false gods, was reclaimed by the Church as a means to kindle its community with the spirit of faith.

Over the subsequent centuries, this tension persisted. The Catholic Church at times reacted negatively to the content of plays, as well as to the circumstances under which theatre was performed. For instance, the Catholic Church became critical and suspicious when, at the end of the Medieval period, it began to lose its stronghold over dramatic representations with the advent and popularity of secular plays, some of which presented irreverent entertainment.² In the Renaissance, secular theatre, particularly comedies, were deemed as corrupt, with St Carlo Borromeo criticising performance as disturbing public order and calling for all actors to be exiled from cities.³ *Commedia dell'Arte* was also

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¹ Christine C. Schnusenberg, *The Relationship between the Church and the Theatre* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1988), 11

² Mario Azzopardi, *It-Teatru f'Malta* (Malta: Publikazzjonijiet Indipendenza – PIN, 2003), 47.

³ Mario Azzopardi, *Verġni Sagri, Demonji u Boloh għal Alla* (Malta: Horizons, 2013), 34-35.

considered as detracting the flock from following religious sermons.⁴ These fears led to extreme actions, such as the Archbishop of Paris forbidding the clergy from celebrating marriage ceremonies of actors, and from refusing to administer them the Sacrament of Extreme Unction or a burial in Christian consecrated land.⁵ In the last two hundred years, the theatrical works of Emile Zola and Jean-Paul Sartre were condemned and included in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.⁶

Nonetheless, the Catholic Church also realised that the theatre could be an effective tool, used to transmit Christian values. For example, the Jesuits in the Counter-Reformation believed that the theatre could promote Catholic dogma as a reaction to the theology propagated by the Protestants. To achieve this objective, the Jesuits introduced theatre in their colleges, firmly convinced that it was an efficient methodology to pass on Catholic teachings to the young at an early stage.⁷ St Philip Neri used theatre to preach the gospel, by acting like a jester and parading around Rome with a monkey on his shoulders.⁸ St John Bosco also believed that theatre was as a form of education as well as a space to nurture the well-being of the youth.⁹ In the last century, Catholic theologians and scholars have recognised that the theatre makes a person introspective,¹⁰ providing a platform to the performer to penetrate the depth of human psychology and developing further the sense of otherness, thus building community.

This paper will focus on the tension in the relationship between the Church and the theatre within the local Maltese context, showing whether, and if so, how, Catholic spirituality impacted on the local theatre scene. The motivation for this research is partially a personal one. After having spent most of my teenage years regularly attending the Society of Christian Doctrine (M.U.S.E.U.M.),¹¹ I left just before entering University where I commenced my studies in Theatre.

⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁵ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Penguin, 2011), 799.

⁶ “Banned Authors – who got on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum,” Europeana, <https://www.europeana.eu/en/blog/banned-authors> (accessed May 14, 2021).

⁷ Robert Birley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism, 1450-1700* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1999), 129.

⁸ Azzopardi, *Vergni Sagri*, 37.

⁹ For further information see, “Stagnoli Saverio: Don Bosco e il teatro educativo salesiano,” Teatro Educativo Salesiano, <http://www.teatrinodonbosco.it/studio/studi-98> (accessed October 30, 2020).

¹⁰ John M. Berry and Frances Panchok, “Church and Theatre,” in *U.S. Catholic Historian* 6, no.2/3 (1987): 158.

¹¹ The Society of Christian Doctrine (M.U.S.E.U.M) is a Maltese Catholic society founded in 1907 with the aim of teaching the Catholic Catechism to the young.

One Saturday evening, on my way back home after having watched a play at the Maltese National Theatre, I met a catechist who had taught me when I used to attend this society. On asking me where I had been, I answered proudly that I went to the theatre, naively thinking that my preference of a cultural event over the bawdier nightclubs would have earned me respectability in the eyes of this man. Instead of the desired reaction, the catechist looked at me suspiciously, and possibly disappointingly, advising me to be very cautious of my choices. Certainly, this was the reaction of one individual, and not the generic attitude of the entire institution. Yet this episode evoked in me the question whether a level of apprehension to the nature of the theatre might still be lurking in certain segments of, or at least in particular individuals actively involved in, the local Catholic Church. This apprehension has older roots. The friction was already evident in the first half of the nineteenth century when the Catholic Press condemned the political activism prevalent in the Maltese theatrical scene.¹² It was also perceived as promoting immorality by glorifying or romanticising lewd acts such as adultery.¹³ This mentality permeated the beginning of the twentieth century where the Maltese Catholic Press attacked the theatre as the reason why the Church authorities were disrespected since theatre alienated the people from the spiritual dimension of their lives.¹⁴

Counterbalanced against this dynamic is the influence that the Catholic Church had over the development of theatre in Malta. Particularly in the mid-twentieth century, the local Church recognised the power of the stage to promote moral values.¹⁵ Parochial halls encouraged new plays that were rooted in Catholic values, utilising theatre as a didactic tool.¹⁶ In the same manner, the Salesians made use of the *Juventutis Domus*¹⁷ to spread Catholic teaching in a less formalised way, with a special emphasis on the young.¹⁸ Hence the theatre was advocated by the local Catholic Church as a vehicle of formation, and reformation. However, not only has the Catholic Church been a powerful reality

¹² Azzopardi, *It-Teatru f'Malta*, 92.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

¹⁷ The *Juventutis Domus* is a building run by the Salesians in Sliema, which includes the theatre.

¹⁸ James Spiteri, "Juventutis Domus: Carmelo Galea's Contribution to the Salesian Didactic Theatre" (BA diss., University of Malta, 2011), 65.

in the social and political fabric of the country,¹⁹ but it was also the first point of encounter with the world of drama for several theatre practitioners. From my initial research, presented at a later stage in this paper, as well as in my own experience, a considerable number of persons in Malta would have watched, or taken part in their first performance, in a Church setting, be it in their parish or the Catholic Church school they attended, or a religious organisation that they were affiliated with in their childhood.

This complexity indicates that attempting to analyse the relationship between the Catholic Church and the theatre in Malta is a Herculean task that cannot be developed adequately within the constraints of an academic paper. One of the foremost challenges is that the Catholic reality is a wide one and encompasses many diverse spiritual expressions. Although all Christocentric, and share common fundamentals, such as the respect to the Papal authority in Rome, these spiritualities have their pertinent differences. This difficulty spurred me to focus on one spirituality, embodied in a specific religious order, namely the Augustinian Order. This choice was made for two reasons. On a practical level, they were the first Order to reach out, in a very obliging way, when I disseminated the rationale of this project to the religious orders in Malta. The second reason for my choice lies in the fact that the Spiritual Founder of the Order, St Augustine of Hippo²⁰ (354-430 AD) was one of the Church Fathers who was vociferous against theatrical practice. In his autobiographical *Confessions*, he asks God to 'look on these things in mercy, Lord, and deliver us who call upon you now.'²¹ In his perception and experience, theatre promoted lasciviousness. He sustains this argument by alluding to the works of the Roman playwright Terence who introduced Augustine to the use of sexually laden references.²² Augustine also opposed the theatre because, like Plato, who was a significant influence on his philosophical thought, he believed that the theatrical representation was an illusion. The illusionary in the theatre distracted the audience from the need to relate with each other in everyday life.²³ This research project provided an opportunity to examine how this Order transited from an approach that

¹⁹ For further information on this dynamic see, Mario Vassallo, *From Lordship to Stewardship: Religion and Social change in Malta* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979).

²⁰ The Augustinian Order was officially founded in 1244, much after the life of Augustine. The saint is considered to be the Spiritual Founder since their spirituality is based on his life and writings.

²¹ Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions*, I.9, trans. E.M. Blaiklock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 25.

²² *Ibid.*, I.16, 31.

²³ *Ibid.*, III.2, 59.

condemned the theatre, to an embracing attitude, and how it integrated the thoughts of its spiritual founder on the subject, to what is happening in the contemporary reality of the Augustinian family. Finally, I also believe that the dynamics of this Religious Order incorporate aspects which are inherent and relevant to other Catholic spiritualities as well.

A case-study will be presented, focusing on the plays and theatrical activities of an Augustinian priest, Rev. Rafel Azzopardi OSA (1911-1998). The texts²⁴ will be examined, as well as the experiences of those who knew this playwright and who worked with him. Some of the uses (and misuses) of theatre, identified in the introductory section, will also be referred to, and expounded upon, in the case-study. Through the texts and the interviews, it will be possible to elicit the traits of Augustinian spirituality and how these traits manifest themselves within the theatrical practice of this playwright. These traits will then be juxtaposed, and challenged, against the experiences of current and local theatre practitioners who had significant contact with the Augustinians, thus understanding whether the spirituality of the Order left an impact on their work. Most of these practitioners were male and have been in contact with the Augustinians since they were educated in the Augustinian college, which is an all-boys school. I also interviewed the Rector of St Augustine College, Rev. David Cortis OSA, to help me understand the role of drama in his leadership strategy of the College, as well as the drama teacher at the same College who is also a theatre practitioner. These insights will allow me to analyse the level of influence that the Augustinian Order had on theatre in Malta.

Case-Study

Developing a Catholic Community

The plays of Rev. Azzopardi are mostly of a religious nature and lack artistic depth. They have a clear Catholic agenda, communicated in a didactic manner, as was the case with numerous theatrical works issued from, or approved by, the Catholic Church, as seen in the above section. Azzopardi's plays also display the common fears of the period when he wrote his works. "Ejja Ġesù Bambin"²⁵ (date of writing is unknown) reflects the post-war fear in the Catholic world that the Communist ideology would spread further and threaten religious practice.

²⁴ The plays are archived in the Augustinian friary in Victoria, Gozo. Unfortunately, not all of his plays survived. A significant number of works mentioned by some of the interviewees could not be found in the archives.

²⁵ *Come, o Baby Jesus.*

In “Dak li hu ma’ Alla ma jhassru hadd”²⁶ (1974) the mother of the protagonist is hostile to his girlfriend because rumour has it that she wears trousers, which according to her should only be worn by men. Although the mother is depicted as old-fashioned, the play reveals the concern about the development of women’s rights. The plays also tends to use too much exposition, giving information in an explicit way that, although relevant to the audience, does not sound natural. This approach to theatre writing might initially come as a surprise, considering the fact that Rev. Azzopardi was an academic. In fact, he read for a Doctorate in Theology at the prestigious Gregorian University in Rome and graduated in 1939. On his return to Malta, Rev. Azzopardi lectured in Philosophy and Theology at the National Institute for Ecclesiastical Studies of Maltese Religious (INSERM).²⁷ Shortly afterwards he was promoted to the position of Head of Department of Moral Theology within the same institution. He also wrote articles for the Press and for the periodical journal issued by the Augustinian Order.

Having said so, the style of the theatrical works written by Rev. Azzopardi need to be understood within the context in which they were performed. He wrote most of his works for two communities. The majority of the references to his writings will focus on the dynamics with the strongly knit community that he nurtured at the Verdala Palace.²⁸ In 1952 he was appointed Chaplain of the Buskett Chapel (housed in the Palace) dedicated to St Anthony the Abbot, where he served till 1986. In these thirty years, Rev. Azzopardi instilled a sense of community by organising several cultural activities with the household that worked for the Palace and lived on the premises, and the families of farmers in the vicinity. These activities included religious plays (although there seem to have been some exceptions of secular plays)²⁹ that were staged after the Christmas

²⁶ *Whatever is with God, cannot be erased.*

²⁷ The National Institute for Ecclesiastical Studies of Maltese Religious (INSERM) was founded in 1968 to organise courses in Philosophy and Theology for male Religious who were still in their initial formation.

²⁸ The Verdala Palace is found in the Buskett Gardens, in the limits of Siggiewi. The Buskett Gardens are a woodland park, landscaped by the Knights of the Order of St John for hunting. After 1916, it became the official summer residence for the Governor under British colonial rule. From 1986 onwards, the Verdala Palace has become the summer residence of the President of Malta. The chapel, referred to in this paper, is annexed to the Palace and the servant quarters, now the residency of the caretakers, is found a few metres away from the Palace and the Chapel.

²⁹ Interview with Helen D’Amato, Jessie Micallef and Gina Sammut, 1 September 2020. Helen D’Amato, Jessie Micallef and Gina Sammut are three sisters who were brought up in the Buskett area and who participated regularly in Rev. Azzopardi’s plays.

midnight mass in the early sixties. Despite the small size of the chapel, this annual event became a landmark for the community, and its fame and popularity were soon to extend to the town of Rabat. The apparent absence of theatrical scripts written for this community is redeemed by the vivid memories that the participants in these plays had and shared with me in the interviews.

The other community was called the Crusaders. This was a Maltese lay organisation and Rev. Azzopardi was responsible for the Rabat branch. Theatrical performances were also organised with this community which catered for the youths of the families that lived close to the church of St Mark which belongs to the Augustinian Friars who have a friary annexed to it. Rev. Azzopardi lived in this friary for most of his religious life. These performances were held in other localities such as St Paul's Bay, Bormla and Tarxien, and in the Parochial Hall in Rabat. The scripts written for this community varied from religious plays to secular farces and dramas. Pauline Ciappara, a woman who took part in these productions, maintains that these plays were not directed by Rev. Azzopardi, unlike the ones of the Verdala/Buskett Community, and she also has doubts whether he even wrote them, although she did admit that as a young girl she was not privy to such information. As far as she could remember Rev. Azzopardi produced and organised the events. He delegated to the leaders of the community the responsibility of taking care of the other artistic roles.³⁰ This was contradicted by Sr Josephine Gauci, an Augustinian nun who prior to her Religious Vows, was one of the leading Crusaders in Rabat. She even played the title role in one of his plays about St Joseph (date unknown). Sr Gauci confirmed that Rev. Azzopardi had authored and directed the plays and that most of the works that I consulted in the archives in Gozo were penned by him.³¹ The Augustinian friar might have also written and staged some plays when he lived in the Gozo community towards the end of his life but there seems to be limited information about this.³² Attempts to contact people who took part in these plays held in Gozo were not successful.

Rev. Azzopardi's theatrical projects need to be constantly juxtaposed against the reality of these communities. Most of his "actors" in the Verdala/Buskett community were not highly educated people but persons brought up in an agrarian context. He used theatre as a means to reach out to them and to foster in them the sense of community. Even though the Crusaders comprised young

³⁰ Interview with Pauline Ciappara, 26 September 2020.

³¹ Telephone conversation with Sr Josephine Gauci, 18 December 2020.

³² Interview with Rev. Salvino Caruana, OSA, Rev. Paul Muscat, OSA and Rev. Reno Saliba, OSA, 29 July 2020.

people who came from a wider range of social classes, including the educated, the objective of the friar was nonetheless a spiritual one. He wanted to contribute to the religious formation of these young ladies. Rev. Prof. Salvino Caruana is of the opinion that Azzopardi used the theatre as a vehicle for his pastoral work and Rev. Paul Muscat believes that he specifically chose to write about saints to be more accessible to the young,³³ who might perceive these narratives as more engaging. Although capable of writing highbrow literature, as can be seen by his more academic works, Azzopardi wanted the community – both the participants, as well as members of the audience – to relate with the material presented. His skill was to ground his intellectuality in such a way that he could connect with his community through the plays that he wrote.³⁴ One of his greatest talents was this capability of adapting to the community that he worked with.³⁵ This mirrors the approach that St Augustine embraced. He was capable of writing lofty treatises and yet produce sermons that were comprehensible to the congregation in Hippo. He even penned a parodic song based on a folk tune so that the common people could identify the heretical thoughts which were popularised by the Donatists.³⁶

The sense of community is undoubtedly the main paradigm that emerges in the theatrical practice of Azzopardi. This dynamic can be examined on two levels. On one level, the implementation of the theatrical projects instilled the sense of community. In the case of the Verdala/Buskett community, the weekly rehearsals, starting as early as in October, implied that the young girls who took part in the plays (only girls acted³⁷ and it seemed that they were under the age of twenty-five, possibly because after that age many of them got married) had to remain together on the premises after Sunday Mass. As a result of the strict discipline of their director, these women grew closer to each other. In the interviews, they shared memorable experiences, including being rewarded at the end of each project with a present such as a scarf and some vermouth! He also

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Interview with Rev. Peter Paul Cachia, OSA, 12 September 2020.

³⁶ Gabriel McDonagh, *St. Augustine of Hippo* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1982), 14. Donatism was a heresy that developed in the Christian world in the fourth century. It claimed that priests need to be flawless in order to administer the Sacraments.

³⁷ When I asked Twanny and his sister Tereza Mifsud why boys did not participate in plays, they answered that the boys were shy and that Rev. Azzopardi had more contact through his pastoral work with the girls. They also remarked that the mentality was different: boys and girls were not allowed to participate in activities together (Interview with Twanny Mifsud and Tereza Mifsud, 19 July 2020).

nurtured the communal spirit by encouraging the actors to be involved at all levels of production, such as the sewing of costumes.³⁸ The props were manufactured by Twanny Mifsud, whose family lived, and still live, in the precincts of the Palace, since they are its caretakers. Mr Mifsud had the unofficial role of stage manager, procuring all that was necessary for the performances, including the curtain that was set up in front of the altar to separate the audience from the acting space.³⁹ Mr Mifsud was perceived as the “big brother” by all the girls who participated in the plays. He also took care of the lighting, consisting of spotlights, for the productions.⁴⁰

The other level of community-building can be seen in the choice of themes presented in the dramatic texts. In “San Tarcisju” (1957), a play staged at the Astoria Theatre in Rabat,⁴¹ possibly by the Crusaders, the Church is presented as the ideal community that transcends family ties. In cases of divergent views, the Christian’s prime alliance is towards the ecclesiastical community, although by the end of the play the pagan father of the protagonist, depicted as the villain intent on persecuting all Christians, converts and becomes a devout member of the Church. In “Dak li hu ma’ Alla ma jhassru hadd,” the friction that arises in the family is resolved as a result of the Christmas spirit that fosters the value of forgiveness and union. This presents the family as a model of community, although secondary to the ecclesiastical one. Azzopardi’s vision of community, besides being ecclesiastical, is also eschatological. Community is built to nurture Catholic values as a means of salvation. Pauline Ciappara believes that Azzopardi’s main intention was to use theatre and the arts as a medium to draw the youth to the Church and to ensure that they are provided with moral values.⁴² This belief was reaffirmed by the Mifsud siblings.⁴³ Rev. Paul Muscat held the view that Azzopardi used the theatre to evangelise, particularly the young.⁴⁴ The Church

³⁸ Interview with D’Amato, Micallef and Sammut. Although Ms Micallef mentioned that the costumes were sewn by the community itself, the other two sisters were not certain whether they sewed them, provided by themselves or whether they were procured frequently from the Crusaders.

³⁹ Interview with Mifsud.

⁴⁰ Interview with D’Amato, Micallef and Sammut.

⁴¹ Rev. Paul Muscat, OSA also makes reference to a play about the same saint. (Interview with Caruana, Muscat and Saliba). As a child, Rev. Muscat was part of the Verdala/Buskett community and watched a number of Azzopardi’s plays in his childhood. It is not clear whether the same play that Azzopardi wrote for the Astoria Theatre was also used at the Verdala Chapel.

⁴² Interview with Ciappara.

⁴³ Interview with Mifsud.

⁴⁴ Interview with Caruana, Muscat and Saliba.

is the congregation of believers in Jesus Christ that reaches the culmination of their communal journey in eternal life after the trials of this earthly experience. The community, irrespective of its nature, is a microcosm of the Church, and by default becomes a vehicle in the journey to the Celestial Kingdom.⁴⁵ This concept is strongly present in Augustine's colossal work *The City of God* in which the tension between citizenship on earth and citizenship in Heaven is explored.⁴⁶ As the Augustinian scholar, Donald X. Burt explains "God's home is in Heaven, but here on earth he has a place in the hearts and soul of those devoted to him."⁴⁷ In the more advanced stages of spiritual development, the Christian will give more importance to the dynamics of the universal, as opposed to the personal, thus showing how community was imperative in Augustine's vision.⁴⁸ However, Azzopardi's understanding of community did not limit itself exclusively to the spiritual realm but extended to the social too. Wellbeing was seen in a holistic manner. The Verdala/Buskett community remained grateful because as a result of his relentless energy and perseverance, basics such as the provision of water, electricity and a bus stage were installed.⁴⁹ Azzopardi's objective was to make the community self-sufficient, encompassing in it all services, including the liturgical services and activities that are generally associated with a parish.⁵⁰ In true Augustinian spirit,⁵¹ the values of justice and fairness were strongly present in the manner Azzopardi ensured that the community would be guaranteed their basic rights, thus showing that his pastoral approach was a grounded one.

It also seems that the sense of community is a guiding principle that permeated the life of Rev. Peter Paul Cachia, another Augustinian friar who was one of the students of Azzopardi, and who still has strong memories of his sense of community building. He even admits who he has been marked positively by the harmony that Azzopardi fostered within the community. This was achieved through Azzopardi's sense of humour and his sensitivity in dealing with other

⁴⁵ Peter Paul Cachia, *Santa Rita minn Cascia* (Victoria, Provincja Agostinjana Maltija, 2017), 73.

⁴⁶ Jacques Fontaine, "The Practice of Christian Life: The Birth of the Laity," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, eds., Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff and Jean Leclercq (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 16:475.

⁴⁷ Donald X. Burt, *Reflections on Augustine's Search for God* (Minnesota: Liturgical, 2003), 112.

⁴⁸ J. Patout Burns, "Grace: the Augustinian Foundation," in *Christian Spirituality*, 344.

⁴⁹ Interview with D'Amato, Micallef and Sammut.

⁵⁰ Interview with Mifsud.

⁵¹ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, II, 21, trans. Gerald G. Walsh, Demetrius B. Zema, Grace Monahan and Daniel J. Honan (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1958), 72-75.

people. Rev. Salvino Caruana, who was also a student of Azzopardi, reiterates the same experience. Caruana referred to the period when Azzopardi was appointed Prior of one of the Augustinian communities and how he showed respect to each member of the community entrusted in his hands. The communal value was also reflected in the importance that Azzopardi gave to the moments of prayer in the community. Rev. Paul Muscat also has fond memories of the activities that Azzopardi used to organise for them. Rev. Reno Saliba praised Azzopardi's fine communication skills which, according to him, are the foundation of community building. Saliba narrated how Azzopardi used to make it a point to converse during meals to foster a communal spirit. Rev. Saliba also insisted on Azzopardi's selflessness, which emerged strongly in his pastoral work and approach at the retreat house in Gozo during the last phase of his life.⁵² It was also important for Azzopardi to be a source of happiness to the community,⁵³ a value that was also mentioned by the Verdala/Buskett interviewees.⁵⁴ He was seen as a fatherly figure, on one hand patient, and on the other hand ready to burst into a fit of anger in moments of anxiety. However, this was perceived in an endearing way.⁵⁵

The sense of community is a fundamental principle in Augustinian spirituality. It was pivotal in the life of the spiritual founder who found refuge and support in the monastery of clerics that he established in Hippo.⁵⁶ In this monastery, all belongings were shared together on the model of the community of the first Christians as depicted in the Acts of the Apostles (2:44). The Augustinian has the responsibility to be constantly attentive to the needs of his brethren.⁵⁷ The Augustinian lifestyle underlines the belief that by living the same ideal as a community, the friars can mature spiritually together.⁵⁸ Augustine also roots his spirituality on the communal life in Trinitarian theology. Human beings are created in the image of God. The Christian God is a relational one: ontologically the three persons of the Blessed Trinity are in a constant communion of love. Hence, the life in the community is perceived as a path that leads to divinisation. In this light, the monastery becomes a hub for the education of love to actualise on

⁵² Interview with Caruana, Muscat and Saliba.

⁵³ Interview with Cachia.

⁵⁴ Interview with D'Amato, Micallef and Sammut.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ McDonagh, *St. Augustine*, 13.

⁵⁷ Cachia, *Santa Rita*, 32.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 72.

this earth the relational dynamics of the Trinity.⁵⁹ Rita of Cascia,⁶⁰ an important figure in Augustinian spirituality, also built community by reaching out to the physical and spiritual needs of the outcasts, particularly the widowed, the orphans and the poor.⁶¹

The communal spirit is fostered extensively nowadays in the Augustinian College in Malta. There is a strong sense of family which is palpable.⁶² The college seems to foster a bottom-up approach in its pedagogical philosophy. This is reflected both in the relationship between the leadership team and the staff, as well as between the teachers and the students. The Augustinian friars, who are part of the leadership team, frequently participate in the activities that the college organises to interact further with the student community. This communal spirit is extended to the families, and drama is used specifically to attain such an objective. A talent show was organised in 2019 and the families of the students were invited to enjoy themselves in a relaxed atmosphere. Ms Abigail Williams, the current drama teacher on the Primary Campus of the College, also appreciates this communal spirit. Previously, she worked in another church school where she felt that such a spirit was absent and that the Augustinians give a lot of importance to this dynamic.⁶³

The same thing cannot be said for the managerial *modus operandi* that was adopted in the Augustinian College in the past. Current theatre practitioners,



Figure 1 The wedding photo of one of the actresses of the Buskett community. Rev. Rafel Azzopardi second from the right.

⁵⁹ Mary T. Clark, "The Trinity: The Trinity in Latin Christianity," in *Christian Spirituality*, 283-286.

⁶⁰ Rev. Azzopardi was also a great devotee of St Rita of Cascia, an Augustinian saint, whose devotion he sought to disseminate in all the communities that he resided or worked with. Ironically, Azzopardi does not seem to have ever written a play about the life of St Rita of Cascia.

⁶¹ Cachia, *Santa Rita*, 32.

⁶² St Augustine College, founded in 1848 in Valletta, today comprises the primary campus situated in Marsa and the secondary campus in Pietà.

⁶³ Interview with Abigail Williams, 25 August 2020.

who attended the college, did not feel this sense of community and even reported that they felt ostracised. This was attributed to a feeling of aloofness that the Augustinian friars seemed to convey. The theatre practitioner and visual artist, Salvu Mallia, who describes himself as rebellious and individualistic, questions the communal spirit of the Order. Mallia was brought up in the Augustinian culture. As a child he lived close to the Augustinian friary in Valletta. His uncle was an Augustinian friar; he attended their college, in those days located in Tarxien; and embarked on the initial phase of formation in the Augustinian Religious Life. According to him, prior to the reform initiated by Vatican Council II, most of the Augustinians were unapproachable, focusing more on the hermetical element of their spirituality, at the expense of the communal. They were very territorial, lacking a pastoral vision and not embracing the world outside the confines of their friary. Each friar had his own niche of work and operated in isolation of the rest. The religious hierarchy was clearly defined and the lay were evidently at the bottom of the pyramid. Mallia feels that his early life, which was so intertwined with the Augustinian Religious Life, led to eventual difficulties in adapting to the secular reality. The experience with the friars did not help him to overcome his shyness and this resulted in initial challenges when relating with the opposite sex. His only experience of fraternity was his interchange with the Augustinian students. He has lovely memories of the plays that they staged together. After leaving Religious Life, Mallia perceives theatre as his refuge and refers to it as a source that provides a sense of family now that he lost his religion. Possibly introduced, at least partially, to the theatre by the Augustinians, he turned to theatrical art in his search for community. This might imply that despite the aloofness of the Augustinians, they still provided him with an implicit, albeit underdeveloped, sense of community. The underlying question is whether the practitioners who were exposed to Augustinian spirituality engaged in the theatre because they did not find the sense of community in their experience with the Augustinians, or because the seeds of the communal were sown in their formative years as they interacted with the Augustinians. This tension represents the conflicting polarities in Augustinianism between the hermetical life and the communal aspect. This tension is also reflected in Mallia's multidisciplinary talents. The hermetical side of the Augustinians is mirrored in his work as a fine artist whereas theatre practice is embedded in the communal.⁶⁴ A brief overview of Mallia's career clearly shows that both sides were important to him. Unlike his experience with religion, though, it was theatre that developed his interpersonal

⁶⁴ Interview with Salvu Mallia, 27 August 2020.

skills.⁶⁵ The playwright Simon Bartolo also reaffirms this lack of communal spirit and sense of belonging in his experience at the College in the eighties.⁶⁶ Actor and playwright Clive Piscopo does not have positive memories of his College days (1995-2000) and sensed a lack of acknowledgement. Although lip service was given to social values, these were not implemented in practice. As a child coming from a lower economic profile, he felt marginalised and disadvantaged. The drama lessons at the College did not instil in him any form of confidence and were not of much help to address his introverted personality. To counterbalance this negative experience, Mr Piscopo referred to an episode in which he was awarded the prize of loyalty, showing that, nonetheless, communal values were, up to a certain extent, celebrated.

The importance given to the communal spirit is also questioned in the light of the lack of knowledge that the friars who lived with Azzopardi had of his theatrical ventures. Although they were aware that he wrote and produced plays, not all of them seem to have enough awareness of what he did. This provokes a shadow of a doubt on the relational dynamics of the community. A community would be expected to take an active interest in the endeavours of each of its members and this seemed to be missing in this particular context. Rev. Azzopardi used to bridge this seeming gap by roping into his activities the Augustinian students who were in their stages of formation at St Mark's friary in Rabat, by asking them to attend the cultural activities and even participate by taking on production roles such as the design of posters.⁶⁷

The Search for Truth

The participants of the theatrical projects at Verdala also praised this Augustinian friar for using the arts to elevate them on the social ladder. According to Salvu Mallia, he made art accessible to them in a period of time when art was only accessible to a very restricted part of the Maltese population.⁶⁸ Rev. Reno Saliba believes that one of the strongest reasons that motivated Azzopardi to write and stage plays was pedagogical.⁶⁹ An underlying inferiority complex could be noted in the interviewees from the Verdala/Buskett community who were aware that in their youth they were looked down upon by society since they

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Interview with Simon Bartolo, 24 August 2020.

⁶⁷ Interview with Cachia.

⁶⁸ Interview with Mallia.

⁶⁹ Interview with Caruana, Muscat and Saliba.

lived in the countryside.⁷⁰ Azzopardi's contribution in their lives was perceived as an educational process which not only imparted them with knowledge, but furthermore permitted them to believe more in themselves and not to be introverted, a perception that contrasts significantly with the experience that Mallia had with the Augustinians. Jessie Micallef, one of the women who participated regularly in these cultural activities, stated that she benefited greatly from them in her personal development.⁷¹ The growing popularity of the Christmas event that attracted people outside the community to watch these performances was meaningful to their collective ego.⁷² The chapel could only house sixty to seventy people, and so those who could not find a seat had to stay outside or else be turned down.⁷³ The us/them mentality marked their perception of the social order. These "outsiders," a term which the members of the Verdala/Buskett community made use of to create a distinction between themselves and the people living in the town of Rabat, were considered to be more educated and cleverer. These theatrical experiences may not have developed a love for acting. Apart from the plays that they acted in with Azzopardi, the Buskett sisters only refer to one other play that they, or the other members of the community, participated in at the Salesians' in Dingli.⁷⁴ However, it did enrich them in their development and in their self-esteem.

Despite the amateurish nature of these productions, Rev. Azzopardi's attitude to the Performing Arts was holistic, thus demonstrating the importance that he attached to the education of the arts. Performances for the Crusaders were held in the context of a cultural evening which would include singing, dancing and poetry recitals.⁷⁵ The texts included ritualistic elements in them such as processions which could easily have been sung too, although none of the persons interviewed referred to this aspect. He also organised a choir for the Verdala/Buskett community and taught them how to sing in Latin. He even used to engage the services of a priest to teach them musical notes and how to sing.⁷⁶ Azzopardi encouraged and ensured that Twanny and Tereza Mifsud learnt how to play the piano.⁷⁷ The Christmas midnight mass plays were also preceded by

⁷⁰ Interview with D'Amato, Micallef and Sammut.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Interview with Mifsud.

⁷⁴ Interview with D'Amato, Micallef and Sammut.

⁷⁵ Interview with Ciappara.

⁷⁶ Interview with D'Amato, Micallef and Sammut.

⁷⁷ Interview with Mifsud.



Figure 2 The Verdala Chapel. The area in front of the altar is the space where the plays were staged.

poetry recitals.⁷⁸ His sense of perfectionism may also be reflected in the approach he endorsed. He provided training for the young actresses of the Crusaders by recruiting a certain Salvu Azzopardi to coach the girls in emotional expression. Training was also provided for dancing. Rev. Azzopardi recruited the services of an Italian lady who taught the choreography to the girls and the young ladies. In the case of the plays for the Crusaders, rehearsals commenced six to seven months before the event to attain the required standard. He also gave importance to the aesthetic qualities of the productions. His team comprised a seamstress, Mrs Bella Vassallo (and her helper, Gejtana Azzopardi) to create the costumes.⁷⁹ The same applied to the plays staged at Verdala where the altar was dressed up to create a set. The application of make-up and the use of wigs were also incorporated to make the plays more pleasing to the eye.⁸⁰ This search for beauty is evident in the works of the practitioners that were exposed to Augustinian spirituality. The desire to externalise the beauty of the Divine through the rituals of the liturgy seems to have impacted Salvu Mallia who describes how, as a child, he used to build

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Interview with Ciappara.

⁸⁰ Interview with D'Amato, Micallef and Sammut.

models of churches. This heightened sense of ritual was eventually translated artistically in his *mise-en-scène*. I particularly remember ceremonious scenes, almost Baroque in nature, such as the grandiose and effective opening scene of *The Elephant Man*, a play that Mallia directed in 1998 at the Mediterranean Institute Theatre Programme (M.I.T.P.) at the Old University in Valletta, with a panoramic sequence of the different circus activities. Mallia appreciates that this familiarity with the liturgy enriched him and that it seeped into his artistic praxis. Mallia refers to how his religious knowledge influenced his perception, even on an artistic level, in his staging of Goethe's *Faust* in 1999 and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in 2001.⁸¹

Azzopardi also had a methodology for casting. He believed it was useful to type-cast according to the personality of the actor. The Verdala/Buskett community also mentioned nostalgically that he had a particular directorial approach which was meticulous and disciplined. He explained and demonstrated to his actors how they had to express themselves emotionally.⁸² He approached the script as a working script, which developed accordingly during rehearsals, and encouraged actors to make the lines their own and improvise them if they got stuck.⁸³ These dynamics reflect two important aspects of Augustinian spirituality that are inherent to theatre practice too. Practitioners need to have a deep knowledge of psychology, not only to interpret the intricacy of the roles on stage, but moreover to deal with the complexity of the relationships of all the artists involved in a production. Intimately linked with this is the importance of artistic rigour and discipline. Clive Piscopo recalls that discipline was also highly important in the management of the College. Both values are reflected in his personality and in the way he runs his productions.⁸⁴ Mallia also considers discipline to be important, not only in the theatre, but also in ensuring social welfare. According to him, the Church was pivotal in instilling the sense of right from wrong through corrective measures.⁸⁵

The dynamics outlined in this section, namely the importance of education, the love of beauty, psychological depth, and discipline, are different facets of one of the salient aspects of Augustinian spirituality – the search for truth through knowledge. St Augustine is said to have written more than 4,000 sermons,⁸⁶ apart

⁸¹ Interview with Mallia.

⁸² Interview with Mifsud.

⁸³ Interview with D'Amato, Micallef and Sammut.

⁸⁴ Interview with Clive Piscopo, 6 October 2020.

⁸⁵ Interview with Mallia.

⁸⁶ McDonagh, *St. Augustine*, 14.

from numerous works that have influenced Western Philosophy and Theology. The search for truth is intimately linked with the communal life. The Christian can love the others in the community through the wisdom acquired through faith.⁸⁷ The ultimate search, and the most meaningful one, is the search for God, the source of truth. St Augustine's belief that the human being is created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*) is intertwined with the intellectual faculty that the human person has: the individual can only grapple with the beauty and the awe of this mystery through his intellectuality. It is knowledge that nurtures the relational, particularly the relationship with the Transcendent.⁸⁸ St Augustine does not imply that only the learned can relate with God. His understanding of knowledge and intellectuality is not exclusively book-based but refers essentially to the developing awareness of the person. This form of intelligence allows the person to relate with the Divine through the internal life.⁸⁹ In the words of the current Rector of St Augustine College, there is a direct link between the development of self-awareness and the search for truth.⁹⁰ In the light of these concepts, the local Augustinian Province has realised that theatre can be a poignant tool in this quest. This was particularly evident in the work done on the Primary Campus in 2019 which focused on the theme of finding the truth in yourself and in God. Ms Abigail Williams transmitted this value through the artistic activities done in the preparation for Prize Day.⁹¹ Mallia also attributes his search for authenticity to his formative years within the Augustinian community. It spurred in him his rational faculty. In his case, however, this led to the conclusion that God does not exist, or if he does, he is not an all-powerful God but a being who has limitations as human beings do.⁹²

At the core of the dynamics presented lies the importance that the Augustinian Province gives to drama. A shift has certainly happened in the last years where the Augustinians realised the role that the theatrical art has in society. This is manifested by the way the subject is promoted in the curriculum in the college run by the Augustinians. Back in the fifties, when Salvu Mallia was at the College, art was considered a waste of time. In fact, Mallia recalls when he was sent to the Rector's office to warn him that his love for art will not lead anywhere in life.

⁸⁷ Clark, "The Trinity," 283.

⁸⁸ Bernard McGinn, "The Human Being as Image of God: Western Christianity," in *Christian Spirituality*, 317.

⁸⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.IV, 62.

⁹⁰ Interview with Rev. David Cortis, OSA, 30 October 2020.

⁹¹ Interview with Williams.

⁹² Interview with Mallia.



Figure 3 One of the drama activities organised at St Augustine College.

Theatre was something ‘foreign’ to the Augustinian reality, and art was looked down at, although Mallia also refers to some friars who loved music, such as his uncle, Rev. Consiglio Mallia.⁹³ Simon Bartolo had a different experience and his comments are reflective of an educational system that was evidently in a liminal space of transition, causing the playwright to be uncertain as to what extent his education impacted on his artistic development. Bartolo certainly owes his introduction to drama as literature to the College. The first texts that he was exposed to were Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Oreste Calleja’s theatrical works and Francis Ebejer’s⁹⁴ *Hitan*. The College also motivated him to write, and he appreciates that his first attempts at writing occurred in his formative years with the Augustinians. Bartolo also recalls two significant activities organised by the College: a lecture by Francis Ebejer and another one by the theatre director, Joe Quattromani. Otherwise, the College did not influence his practice in the theatrical world, particularly considering that he was only offered drama lessons for one year at the age of thirteen as an extracurricular activity after school hours. These lessons were held because the College decided to participate in an

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Francis Ebejer (1925-93) and Oreste Calleja (b. 1946) are two prominent Maltese playwrights.

interschool drama competition.⁹⁵ The fact that the College decided to involve itself in this competition displays an open attitude towards the subject, although not open enough to include it in the school timetable. It is also important to remember that in the eighties most schools in Malta did not teach drama regularly. Bartolo does not remember any staged plays held at the College for events such as Prize Day.⁹⁶ This 'tension' of an absent influence is synonymous of a phase in which the College seems to recognise the potentiality of theatrical art but was afraid to invest too much in it, leaving artistically inclined persons, like Simon Bartolo, unsure of whether the College was a determining influence in one's career. Clive Piscopo stated that as students they only had drama lessons once a week till the age of twelve and that these did not leave any conscious effect on his development as a practitioner. Frequently, Piscopo did not participate in or get chosen for any of the drama productions held at the College.⁹⁷ However, the inclusion of drama in the timetable denotes a change in the attitude towards the subject. Rev. David Cortis believes that the College has given importance to the subject in the last years, although when the Primary Campus was opened in 2010, drama was side-lined slightly until the more fundamental infrastructure was solid.⁹⁸ According to Abigail Williams, the subject now is given prominence and all students are included through it. The College is also ready to update resources on a regular basis and has revamped the theatre hall to ensure better pedagogical practice in the teaching of the Performing Arts. A hands-on approach is fostered, rooted in the belief in experiential learning. Williams also mentioned that the current chaplain, Rev. Terence Spiteri, works hand in hand with her to include the use of drama in the celebration of the liturgy. Rev. Spiteri is also open and willing to the use of theatre as a vehicle. Williams explained how he encouraged her when she decided to work on the theme of friendship through Invisible Theatre.⁹⁹

The relationship between drama and the Augustinian Order needs to be placed in a wider context. As referred to earlier on, St Augustine harshly condemned the theatrical experience. Rev. Cortis places this perspective within

⁹⁵ Interview with Bartolo.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Interview with Piscopo.

⁹⁸ Interview with Cortis.

⁹⁹ Interview with Williams. Invisible Theatre is a form of theatre developed by Augusto Boal, a Brazilian practitioner, in which an act is held, generally in a public space, without the 'audience' being aware that they are watching actors perform. This form of theatre has a strong interactive element and is used to address issues of a social and political nature.

the framework of Augustine's spiritual journey. The spiritual founder of the Order was not against the theatrical expression as much as he was contrary to the impediments that it causes in the quest for truth. This attitude was based on his experience of a theatre that promoted lewdness, violence and idolatry.¹⁰⁰ He also maintained that the illusionary in the theatre was an *ersatz* of the beauty of the Divine.¹⁰¹ Rev. Cortis also reckons that the significant paradigm shift that occurred after Vatican Council II in Augustinianism impacted positively on the relationship with the world of the Performing Arts. There was a clear transition from an emphasis on a detached lifestyle to an attitude which fostered openness and dialogue with the world, including the world of culture. Nonetheless, St Augustine promoted the art of rhetoric, which has strong elements of the theatrical.¹⁰² The Augustinian tradition always had the potential of creating a bridge of dialogue with the theatre, but this was actualised to its full potential in the last fifty years, and in the local scenario in the last twenty years.

Maintaining Order or Reinforcing the *status quo*?

In trying to understand the influence that the Augustinians could have had on the local theatrical sector, it is also important to study the dialectical tension, present in the Order, between conservatism and liberalism. Each of the three theatre practitioners interviewed for this study, challenges, in his own way, the *status quo* and defies the norm through artistic expression. Simon Bartolo wrote one of the first LGBT plays in Maltese, and the first one to be staged at the National Theatre.¹⁰³ Salvu Mallia has directed numerous plays that tackled controversial subjects such as Brecht's *The Rise and Fall of Arturo Ui* (translated and adapted to Maltese as *Arturo Ui u l-Gangster*) in 1988 and his highly successful production of *One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* ten years later. In fact, Mallia describes his

¹⁰⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, I, 32, 63-4.

¹⁰¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 4, 64-5.

¹⁰² Interview with Cortis.

¹⁰³ "Jiena nhobb, inti thobb," penned by Simon Bartolo and staged at the Manoel Theatre in February 2014 by Staġun Malti, under the direction of Sean Buhagiar, is undoubtedly the most commercially successful LGBT play written in Maltese, which stirred a controversy with more fundamental non-Catholic Christian groups. ("Jiena nhobb, inti thobb takes centre stage," Independent, <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2014-01-26/arts-and-culture/jiena-nhobb-inti-thobb-takes-centre-stage-3789520899/> (accessed December 10, 2020). The first LGBT play written in Maltese was penned and directed by this researcher in April 2009. The play was called *Michel* and was held at MITP.

directorial style as “anarchic.”¹⁰⁴ Clive Piscopo has also written and staged plays which were not afraid to address sensitive issues. Arguably his most well-known and successful work is *Meta ġrejna wara x-xemx*, written and directed by Piscopo in 2019. How far is this liberal approach a reflection of the Augustinian spirituality that potentially influenced these practitioners?

Williams perceives the Augustinians as liberal because they are always open to feedback and to new ideas. She shows that even though the spiritual founder is referred to at the College, the Augustinian spirituality is not coerced or imposed onto the students. She also says that although the educators are given information about St Augustine and his spirituality, this is not drilled forcefully onto the staff.¹⁰⁵ This was also the experience of Simon Bartolo, forty years earlier, who explained that even though the Augustinians are not extremely liberal, they never imposed their beliefs on their students but provided them with the adequate guidance.¹⁰⁶ This does not mean that the roots of Augustinianism are not highlighted at the College. The visual semiotics are undoubtedly strongly present. Rev. Cortis explains that activities, such as a quiz on the life of the spiritual founder, are organised to provide the students with a sense of identity and belonging. There are also Augustinian quotes, as well as visual images, displayed in the corridors of the college and in the common areas. Cortis believes that as a community the spirituality is conveyed through the values that are instilled in an experiential manner.¹⁰⁷

Bartolo and Piscopo seem to have a less categorical reaction to the question, and it can be said that on the whole they perceive the Order as not tilting strongly to either side of the two polarities. Piscopo considers a number of Maltese Augustinians to be traditional and conservative, with a few exceptions who are liberal and progressive. In general, he classifies them as being in the middle.¹⁰⁸ This mid-way approach makes the impact of the Augustinians even more ambiguous and invisible. It is not a radical approach that advocates strong, and at times, controversial changes. Neither is it a reactionary attitude whereby structures are imposed to maintain and safeguard a rigid social set-up. The influence of the Augustinians is more subtle, and subtlety can be interpreted in

¹⁰⁴ “[Watch] ‘It’s a shame – we don’t even know our own history,’” https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/interview/51470/tv_presenter_Salvu_Mallia#.X9Isl9hKjcs (accessed December 10, 2020).

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Williams.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Bartolo.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Cortis.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Piscopo.

a less clear-cut manner, depending on the history, experience and temperament of the individual.

Conclusion

The Augustinian Order offers an interesting case-study to understand the complexities of the Catholic influence in Malta on the sector of theatrical practice. The communal aspect, as well as the importance given to knowledge, are fundamental concepts that seem to have left an impact of some measure on local practitioners who were exposed to the Augustinian spirituality. However, this influence is abstruse, and frequently seems to be more of an implicit rather than an explicit nature. This does not imply that there has not been any form of influence, but that the influence is often latent and possibly unconscious.

This study has its limitations which may provide an opportunity for further research in this field. It focused on the influence that the Augustinian Order had on three practitioners. Although from the spadework done there are not many prominent practitioners in the local field that had a clear link with the Augustinians, extending this research to include other viewpoints will serve to enrich and deepen the process. Furthermore, the Augustinian Order only represents a small percentage of the Catholic reality in Malta. There are only twenty-five Augustinian priests and brothers currently. This means that the potential impact is limited. There are many Catholics whose prime inspiration is not Augustinian. By examining the influence of different and diverse spiritualities of other Religious Orders, Congregations and communities on the development of current theatrical practice, it will be possible to investigate the effect of Catholicism on the local theatre in a broader manner. The objective of this study was to initiate an exploration and a dialogue on the subject, hoping that the conversation will grow as scholars study this subject from a myriad of angles.

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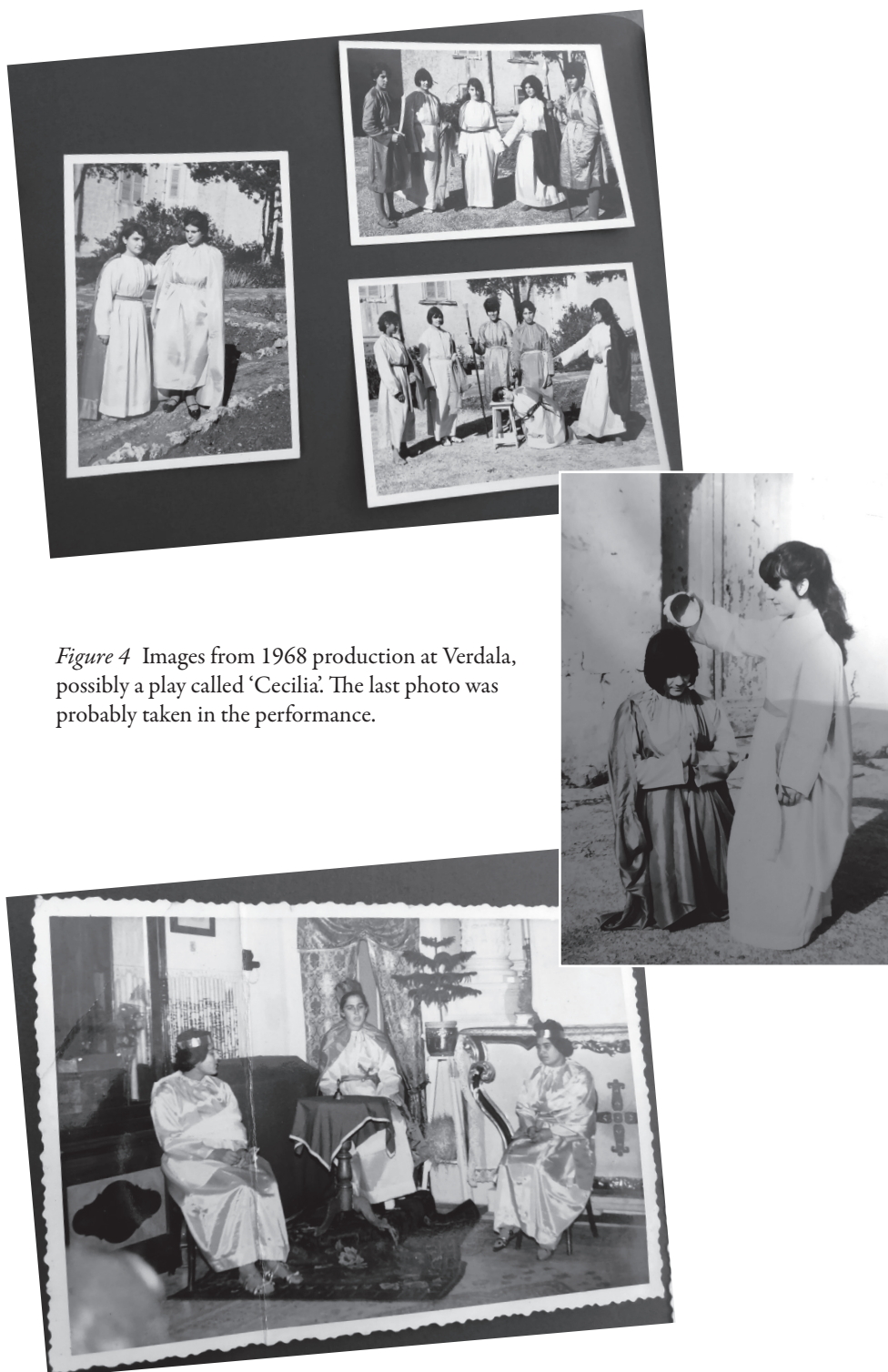


Figure 4 Images from 1968 production at Verdala, possibly a play called 'Cecilia.' The last photo was probably taken in the performance.