

# THE THEATRE IN MALTA

(Part two)

Ebejer's second play, *Boulevard*, is probably his best thitherto, a magnificent example of total theatre. It is hard to believe, in fact, that it has never been performed since its brief run in 1964. The author's own production of this play brought out all its poetry by means of harmonious decor, costume and lighting, elegance of the acting and quasi-choreographic movements, and varying rhythms in the pace. The play itself is based on a series of images both in the dialogue and in the action, and sometimes reaches a highly poetic level of expression. Ebejer here detaches himself even more completely from a realistic idiom than in *Vaganzi tas-Sajf* and presents a number of human predicaments in their essence without the hindrance of realistic conventions. His hopelessly lost characters, are contested by Gregorex, a religious leader, and Blonk, an artist manqué turned rebel. First one, then the other, wins, but at the end both have to give up, and both are revealed as two faces of the same coin, authoritarians and cynics.

*Boulevard*, like the later but much slighter *Vumbarala Zungare* is a profoundly pessimistic play which presents man as unredeemable because of his profound egoism. *Menz*, the play that followed

*Boulevard*, takes just as gloomy a view about human society, but expresses a cautious optimism about the individual human being. Another non-realistic play, it is about an old man, the Menz of the title, who arrives in a strange town and incurs widespread hostility by his refusal to conform. He finds himself arraigned before Ludilla B, Governor of the city – a lesbian who is the antithesis of the mother whose memory still obsesses him – and brain-washed into submission. He has two friends, however: Ġoġ, who is executed for having defended Menz, and Tereza, who helps Menz escape the ultimate breaking of his spirit. The loathsome taximan and cake-seller, with their animal masks (reminiscent of *Animal Farm*) are thus defeated, and even Razz, the timid bureaucrat whom Tereza loves, joins Tereza in her defiant stand at the last curtain-fall. Menz's stand for individualism has not been a vain one, even if the future remains perilous.

*The Cliffhangers*, written originally in English and subsequently translated by the author under the title *L-Imwarrbin* (*The recluses*) belongs to this early group of plays, both for its theme of an ineluctable past and in its use of non-realistic techniques. The



*Karnival* by Francis Ebejer. Manoel Theatre (1977).

(Photo Credit: Paul Xuereb)



*A Street Car Named Desire* directed by Joe Friggieri – an Atturi production. From left to right: Teresa Micallef, Godwin Scerri and Carmen Azzopardi  
(Photo Credit: Paul Xuereb)

“entertainment” scene in Act Two, in which a “play within a play” is used, as in *Hamlet*, to bring guilt to the surface, can be paralleled by the *logħba* in *Boulevard* and Ludilla B’s circus in *Menz*.

His television play *Hitan (Walls)*, shown in 1970, marks a moment of transition from the non-realistic group of early plays to the realism of the plays that were to follow. Its theme is love and its power to demolish the walls of prejudice and traditional enmity which men so often build round themselves. The love of an unsophisticated young *gay* and a young Jewish girl destroys the hold, based on hatred and guilt, which an old Jew has over his household. The dialogues range from the straightforwardly realistic to formal counterpoint.

With *Il-Hadd fuq il-Bejt (Sunday on the roof)* Ebejer opened a series of plays having no longer an indefinite but a specifically Maltese setting. *Il-Hadd fuq il-Bejt*, like its successors *L-Imnarja Żmien il-Qtil (Mnarja: a time for killing)*, *Meta Morna tal-Mellieħa (The day we went to Mellieħa)* and *Karnival (Carnival)*, explores the relations between the different social classes, but it is also a remarkable study of sterility: the physical and emotional sterility of Rita, the memorable female protagonist, is contrasted with the physical fertility of her friend

Lina, the emotional fertility of her husband and sister, and the creativeness of a young artist.

This play’s excellent characterisations and the theatrical effectiveness of Act Three, in which the climax takes place against a sky lit by fireworks, are not found in *L-Imnarja Żmien il-Qtil*, a sensitive but not altogether convincing play about losers and winners in the games of life and love, burdened with unsubtle symbolism and a couple of farcical minor characters. *Meta Morna tal-Mellieħa* is a dramatic treatment of a theme explored by Ebejer in one of his English novels, *In the Eye of the Sun*: the search for one’s roots, the abandonment of an artificial town life for a life closer to nature, tilling the soil, seen as the source of material and, in some mystical way, spiritual strength. It is a play notable for its formidable matriarch, Ċensa, one of the most vital characters Ebejer has created, through whom the life force sweeps, and a monolithic symbol of the old Malta.

Ġorġ and Louise, two teenage characters in this play, suggest that only their generation, freed from the prejudices of the past and armed with a science that can make traditional husbandry much more efficient, can redeem Malta from the past and present mistakes. In his most recent play, *Karnival*,



*Dehra mill-Pont* (translation), by Arthur Miller. From left to right: Lino Grech, Marlene Schranz and John Suda.

(Photo Credit: Paul Xuereb)

Ebejer, depicts the clash of an aristocratic, dying Malta and a parvenu but more vital Malta, and seems to conclude, even more optimistically, that salvation may lie in the present, if only the old and the new endeavour to reconcile their differences.

Even Ebejer's most realistic plays gleam with moments of poetry and never lack long, aria-like speeches (sometimes too many of them) which seem to correspond to the old-fashioned soliloquy, that excellent device which opens a window into a character's soul. Ġużè Diacono, on the contrary, prides himself on being a strict realist, but his conception of realism is a puzzling one since he considers G.B. Shaw, that author of brilliantly

mannered plays, to be a realist. In fact, one of the most effective scenes in any of Diacono's plays, the mystical experience of Sor Wistina in the one-act *L-Gharusa (The bride)* is conceived in non-realistic terms, a conception underlined by the way in which the scene was directed, with the author's approval, on the two occasions I have seen it. On the whole, however, Diacono does adhere fairly closely to a realistic idiom in his plays, written in the 'forties and 'fifties and mostly succeeds in his intention of writing, to quote him, "a faithful reproduction of everyday conversation in the dialogue, shorn of exclamations or uncalled-for invocations; words and expressions chosen not for their beauty, or for didactic or oratorical effect, but for their objective truth ...". Of his one-act plays, *L-Gharusa (The bride)* and *Ir-Raġel li Kienet Thobb (The man she loved)* are the most effective. The latter, based on the same theme used by Christopher Fry in *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, has as its protagonist a female character whom Diacono acknowledges to be non-realistic, "a caricature of feminine inconstancy", but the play has an atmosphere of harsh realism that is theatrically most effective.

Diacono's best play is his three-act *L-Ewwel Jien (I come first)*, a cynical play about egoism which Diacono sees as the mainspring of all human acts. In this play Victor kills his mother's lover but such is his selfishness that when his mother, for once generous, offers to say it is she who has committed the murder, he refuses the offer because her sacrifice would cleanse her soul but leave him guilty forever. It is a well-constructed play that moves inexorably to the final curtain when Victor rushes out to the waiting police after having shrieked to his mother, "I killed for you, and for you I go to the gallows." Diacono's other three-act *Erwieh Marbuta (Souls in chains)*, a retelling of the Samson and Delilah story with World II Russians and Germans replacing Israelites and Philistines, makes less dramatic impact than *L-Ewwel Jien* because of the weak characterisation of Samson, but has a powerfully ironic ending when the protagonist, after having helped the Russian guerrillas defeat the Germans, is killed by the Germans and his corpse dragged out as ignominiously as Mussolini's, by the Russians who still think he is a vile collaborator. The dialogue in this play suffers from a number of "literary moments".

Like Diacono, Ġużè Chetcuti, better known as a novelist and poet, aims at realistic effects in *Il-Kerrejja (The tenement house)* and like him is not always able to adhere to this programme. Thus the deranged Kruċa is a character out of a 19th Century novel or melodrama, and the close of the play has a formal neatness with little of the photographic realism he says he wishes to create. *Il-Kerrejja* depicts in vivid colours the communal life of a slummy

tenement house during World War II, and shows how individual joys and sorrows are shared and thus made sharper or milder. As in his novels, Chetcuti shows a mastery of the unrefined but vital speech of the working-class, prose that sometimes becomes poetry through the freshness and concreteness of its imagery. His other plays, *Imħuh Morda (Diseased minds)* is greatly inferior to *Il-Kerrejja*. Its slender plot of love and jealousy is peopled by cardboard characters some of whom tend to philosophise most of the time. The ending is crudely didactic.

Diacono and Chetcuti belong to a generation that grew to maturity between the two world wars, a period when the lessons of realism were learned in Malta, one or two generations later than in continental Europe as was the way formerly with fashions penetrating into Malta. Oreste Calleja, a writer born the year after World War II ended, is, not surprisingly, an anti-realist, even when, as in his television play *Ċens Perpetwu (Long lease)* he uses the outward trappings of realism, a realism he subverts by his use of an amplified heart-beat sound effect at a number of moments and by the play's climax in which the corpse of a dead national hero, surrounded by selfish intriguers and profiteers, mysteriously shows signs of life, symbolising the permanent victory of the old values over the meanness that is trying to subvert them. Like *Ċens Perpetwu*, *Satira (Satire)* is a mordant satire on modern society written as a radio play and subsequently adapted for the stage. In this absurdist farce, Calleja cruelly but comically dissects bureaucracy and then shows how an unemployed scientist finds himself a permanent job as undertaker by providing corpses galore: an allegory of the way in which the military-industrial complex keeps itself permanently prosperous.

Calleja's *Iġsma Ihirsa (Phantom bodies)* is a haunting one-act play in which he makes use in Pirandellian fashion of "Commedia dell'arte" characters who come to life when a solitary spectator comes to watch their comedy and end up by killing him when he dares show signs of disapproval of their wretched offering. Only Pierrot, who does not wear a mask and has tender feelings, is horrified and feels guilty, whilst Pantalón, for instance, shuffles off the guilt on to whoever has given him his mask. It can be seen as an allegory on two levels: on one level, the development of drama in Europe, and more recently locally, from that of two-dimensional to three-dimensional characters, and, on a deeper level, the development of Man from a blind, fatalistic creature into a feeling creature who tries to understand why he has been thrown into this world. It is a disheartening play, since Pierrot ends by committing suicide. Calleja wrote these plays when in his early twenties. He no longer lives in Malta and has produced nothing for a number of years.

Also young and also not as well-known as ought to be is Alfred Sant, many of whose plays, which are intellectual but also interesting theatre, have not been published, and some not even performed. His first piece was a TV play, *Min Hu Evelyn Costa? (Who is Evelyn Costa?)*, a Pirandellian piece about identity. An early play for the stage, *Sett (Set)*, performed in 1970, is an attack on neo-colonialism in Maltese political and academic life. Sant gives the impression of not having developed his theme sufficiently, and even a play written seven years later and considerably more mature, *Fid-Dell tal-Katidral (In the shadow of*



A scene from Alfred Sant's *Fid-Dell tal-Katidral*. Sant switches from a rehearsal of a play set in 16th Century Malta to the people producing it and launches a strong attack on neo-colonialism in Maltese theatre  
(Photo Credit: Paul Xuereb)

*the cathedral*) gave me the feeling, when I saw it performed, of driving on towards its goal almost breathlessly. It is, however, a work that cannot fail to hold the intelligent spectator, as Sant switches from a rehearsal of a play set in 16th Century Malta to the people producing it, and launches a strong attack on neo-colonialism in the Maltese theatre. When his latest play, *Qabel Tibda l-Inkjesta (Before the inquiry)* which won a play-writing competition in 1978, is performed, it is not unlikely that a worthy successor to Ebejer will be revealed. He is the only Maltese dramatist so far to have tackled political themes with subtlety and depth.

Maltese dramatists of today and of tomorrow are fortunate in that the level of dramatic direction and acting has risen considerably, especially during the last fifteen years or so.

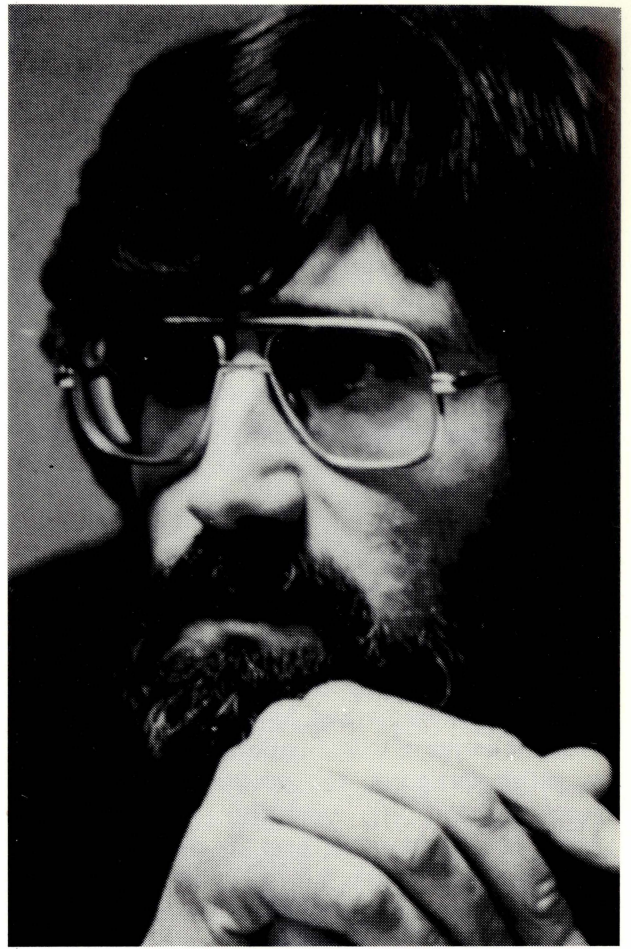
The professionalism Ebejer aimed at in his productions influenced a number of young directors like Mario Azzopardi, Joe Friggieri, Albert Marshall and Victor Soler not only to have an overall vision but also to pay much more attention to detail. More recently, the Manoel Theatre Academy of Dramatic Art (MTADA) has turned out interesting young directors like Saviour Pirotta and Michael Tabone, and more than a few actors and actresses of considerable promise.

The rise and fall of the Atturi Theatre Group marks the latest and most ambitious attempt to set up a semi-professional theatre in Malta. Set up in 1974, this Group's driving force was a small group of persons: Paul Naudi, Karmen Azzopardi, Victor and Antoinette Soler. For some years it succeeded quite admirably in its aim of presenting a new production each month, but it went into a decline when audiences started dwindling as a result of a number of circumstances, and financial problems became acute. The vacuum left by *Atturi* has been filled by *Ilwien '83* who have made a promising start but are likely to meet many of the problems that dogged *Atturi*.

Experimental theatre groups have helped to keep the Maltese theatre from fossilization. Initially *Theatre Workshop*, founded by Pamela Ash and continued for a time by Albert Marshall and John Schranz, and Mario Vella's *Teatru Henri Dogg* and in the past few years *Ateatru* and *Actors' Studio*, and Saviour Pirotta's productions with groups set up ad hoc, provided and still provide refreshing alternatives to the conventional theatre of established groups like M.A.D.C. and Maleth. On the other hand, only these established groups have the resources to present large-scale productions of Shakespeare, panto and musical comedies.

(Concluded)

Paul Xuereb



Mario Azzopardi, poet and a young professional drama director  
(Photo Credit: Joseph Azzopardi)

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