

Drama in Education

Mary Doris Aquilina

The sad news of the death of the well-known Maltese linguist Profs. Guzè Aquilina, inspired my school, Lily of the Valley, Secondary School, to pay its due homage to this great writer, linguist and novelist. With this in mind we worked out a plan-of-action to adopt the work of this author and draw out its many educational values as much as possible.

The perfect choice of Guzè Aquilina's historical-romantic novel - "Taħt Tliet Saltniet", gave us ample openings where we could roam about in various fields. We decided to present the musical based on "Taħt Tliet Saltniet" for our Prize-Day ceremony. We focused mostly on the theme "Maltese Heritage". First of all we got permission to use Joe Friggieri's lyrics and Paul Abela's music.



“**Industrious “disruptions” during drama practice create a healthy atmosphere**”



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A group of five enthusiastic teachers got together and analysed the libretto, drawing out the highlights of our national history in the times of the Knights of St. John, the French and the British rule. The script was adapted and some dialogues were included to bring the story more to life. The teachers were highly ambitious in their ideas and their creativity was like a magnet drawing them close together to reach one main target - to draw the best out of every individual and to illustrate through drama our exciting Maltese history.

A series of voice auditions were held to choose the soloists and to form a choir. The

best of these were given main roles - like Mikiel Anton Vassalli - a well-known Maltese linguist; Dun Mikiel Xerri, a priest who led a patriotic group who rose against the French; Alessandru, a Maltese noble gentleman, and his fiancée Pawlina - a woman of humble origin. The funny and intricate role of the witch - "Is-Sahħara ta' Wied Għafrid", was played by a talented student. This provided some most welcome humour in an otherwise very serious drama.

The various types of dancing, mainly folkloristic, Spanish, free movement and contemporary, provided entertainment and a

continued overleaf





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link between the different aspects of the history and way of life of our forefathers. The first dance to Pawlina's song depicted the lifelong dream of every young girl thirsty for romance. The four young dancers swayed and stepped to the melodious soft tunes of Pawlina's Love-Song. The folkloristic dance showed the Maltese peasants at their best. There was frivolity, joy, cheering and rowdiness, and dancing in the village square where the crowds gathered and went on with their daily lives. The women washed their clothes at the *Ghajin tal-Hassel* and engaged in lace-making as they hummed and sang their daily happenings. The men who worked to earn a living created a contrast with the Maltese noblemen.

However, social life centred on *il-Hanuta' Dovik*. Such was the life towards the end of the eighteenth century. As the Turkish power weakened, so did the reason for the continued existence of the Military Order of St. John. The Knights, especially the young ones were becoming too idle and many of them whiled away their time in activities far removed from their monastic vows. All this was portrayed in the Spanish dance. The fourth dance provided a rhythmic round-up of Maltese history as it passed from the Knights' sovereignty to French occupation and on to the British Rule.

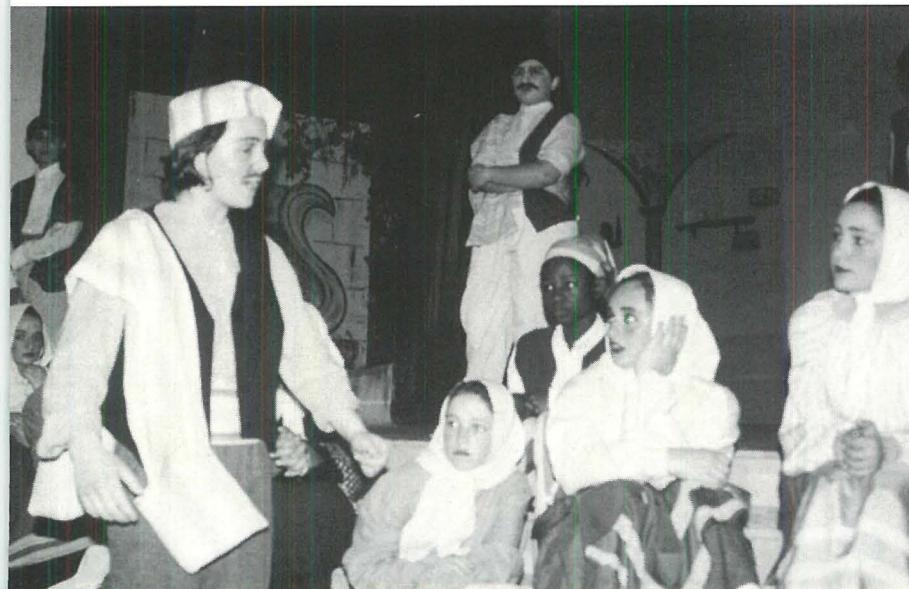
Effective teaching through drama

One can well imagine how effective teaching can be extracted from such a play. Primarily, the students were enjoying themselves heartily. Being on the stage, or practising in the hall, and not in their classroom gave them the possibility of mixing with other older or younger colleagues. They listened attentively and willingly to their teachers and enthusiastically carried out any directions they were given. Towards the end some students even managed to give their personal interpretation to their specific role. Some students stood out as being more good at it than others. However, each and everyone succeeded

in learning their role and monitoring each other. A few students whose reading was below standard, demonstrated great perseverance when they struggled to learn their lines to perfection. I could read the joy written all over their faces on achieving such a feat and I happily shared their satisfaction. This is proof enough that children can learn a lot through fun. During their rehearsals, students respected each others' role and could appreciate that their personal outcome of success depended on the good performance of their friends. They had a good opportunity to socialise and make new friends. Maybe, for some it might have been the only time of pure and sound enjoyment. There were over a hundred participants with over twenty different scenes. The diversity of the performers' characteristics, the choir and variety of scenes blended together to create a harmonious atmosphere which was shared by the audience. Yet they were disciplined enough to synchronise each and every scene together with the music. Teachers normally find it hard to believe that fun and discipline go hand-in-hand, yet watching a rehearsal leaves no doubt whatsoever of this truth. Besides students grew to love and respect these teachers more than ever because they now fully understand the pains a teacher goes through to teach them.

Prize-Day shows, when seriously produced, are a good opportunity to discover and explore hidden talents. During auditions for voices and actors, we always find out a few hidden talents. This year's “*Taht Tliet Saltniet*” was no exception. Two students are taking voice-training courses, whilst two others are learning ballroom dancing. From past experiences I found out that a few very shy and quiet students I coaxed myself into acting, now want to make a career out of it. Besides discovering talents drama helps a lot in character formation and in raising students' self-esteem which at times may be at rock-bottom level, especially in a secondary school like mine. When students experience success in drama they acknowledge their working efforts through the teachers and appraisal of the audience. They feel they are worth a lot and they start believing in their personal worth. They are important members in a drama group, they are important for the school, and this boosts their morale. This feeling becomes so strong that they all make resolutions to become better academically. They study harder and eventually do better in exams.

As educators, we make use of every opportunity to teach. Although our aim in choosing “*Taht Tliet Saltniet*” was multi-faceted, our main target was to teach our students of our adventurous national history. Both participants and viewers learnt for the first time of our main three rulers - The Knights of St. John, The French and The British. Although students may have heard of these historical events during history lessons, yet very little sinks in. Through the play, they found out how



patriotic our ancestors were, how much they suffered and heroic personalities such as Mikiel Anton Vassalli and Dun Mikiel Xerri come to life. Surely this part of Maltese history will remain imprinted in their hearts for quite a long time. They can now appreciate better the love of their mother tongue, and feel proud of being Maltese.

Emphasising Maltese folklore

Another important aspect we wanted to emphasise was our Maltese folklore. Hence we included Maltese dancing, superstitions, traditional costumes and trades, like "**Għana Malti**", "**L-Għajnej tal-Hassel**", ladies weaving and wearing the Fal detta or l-ghonnella, and farmers bil-horġa u l-milsa. We could not fail to include historical Maltese buildings and monuments where slides were projected on the big cyclorama. These slides besides creating an interesting and informative background also helped to mentally take the audience back in time.

Students with different intellectual abilities together with seven students with a hearing impairment took part. Strange as it may seem two of the latter took part in dancing. It was surprising how these students put their hands on the cassette-recorder, memorised the rhythmic vibrations they received and danced to the music quite impeccably. Although the other hearing impaired students had minor parts, yet all the group felt so proud of their role that their faces glowed with pleasure. Their parents watched them with tears of joy in their eyes.

Some may argue that putting up a play disrupts classes and therefore the whole school is disrupted. Others may argue that the school is divided between those taking part and those not taking part. On the contrary I believe that the industrious "disruptions" during drama practice create a healthy atmosphere where the hub of the activity shifts from the formal classroom environment to the more informal setting of the hall or stage.

I try to involve every member of my school so that while some are actively involved with drama, costume-making and stage-preparation, the rest of the school works on projects to complement the theme chosen. Every year an exhibition is held in the school foyer so that every individual effort is acknowledged and appreciated.

The many benefits of drama

At my school we give a lot of importance to drama. We are all convinced of its many benefits. After prize-day, participants, teachers and myself got together and evaluated the show. All of them were enthusiastic in expressing their positive remarks. They enjoyed it so much that they were sad it was all over and requested to continue rehearsing during the Summer. But the most important of all is the fact that children enjoy it. If all teachers appreciate this truth we would all surely do our best to make our lessons more interesting by including different aspects of drama, like role-playing, reciting, singing, miming or acting. The lessons would, therefore, become less formal but more appealing and interesting to students. Their 'bad' behaviour would then change to enthusiasm and joy. Students might stop considering school as a 'prison' or a place of punishment but more as a friendly environment where they enjoy themselves learning and start building up healthy relationships with their colleagues and teachers. However, to reach this ideal stage, all teachers must work hard for it by serious preparation for their lessons.

Students would then enjoy their lessons and teachers will get more job-satisfaction.

Teaching and Assessing Young Learners

The Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Programme of the Faculty of Education is organising an international conference : **Teaching and Assessing Young Learners** in Malta, between March 24-27, 1999 under the auspices of the **International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL)**, Young Learners Special Interest Group and Teaching Evaluation Assessment Special Interest Group & supported by The British Council

The conference seeks to create a forum for the discussion and review of the latest developments in the Teaching and Assessment of English as a Foreign Language to Young Learners. It will meet at the Foundation for International Studies, University of Malta.

The programme will consist of workshops and presentation/discussion sessions and will include keynote speakers: Jennifer Jarvis and Jayne Moon of the University of Leeds, UK & Rosalie Kerr of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). There will be a number of workshops intended for school administrators, teachers and parents.

The following international speakers have already confirmed their participation: Jennifer Jarvis, University of Leeds, UK, Jayne Moon, University of Leeds, UK, Rosalie Kerr, University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, UK, Patricia Sullivan, University of California-Santa Cruz, USA, Kari Smith, University of Haifa, Israel, Diane Phillips, Head of Young Learners' Courses, Bell Language Schools, UK, Wendy Superfine, Author of Primary Materials, Oxford University Press, UK, Charles Mifsud, University of Malta, Marta Sigutova, Czech Republic, Lena Borovikova, The British Council, Moscow, Ludmyla Byrkun, University of Kyiv, Ukraine, Marjana Finzgar and Milosa Gogala, Slovenia

Enquiries about the academic arrangements of the conference should be addressed to: Dr Charles Mifsud, TEFL Programme, Faculty of Education tel +356-32902164 email: cmif2@educ.um.edu.mt

Other enquiries should be addressed to: Ms Lucienne Bugeja, Head, Conference Unit, Foundation for International Studies, St Paul Street, Valletta VLT07, Malta tel +356-234121/2 fax +356-230551 (ALSO AT <http://www.educ.um.edu.mt/Educ/teaching.htm>)

The Reading Attainment of Year 2 Pupils in Malta

The Literacy Unit of the Faculty of Education, in conjunction with the Education Division, has published the findings of its first research study: *The Reading Attainment of Year 2 Pupils in Malta*. The report is co-authored by Charles Mifsud and Josephine Milton of the Faculty of Education and Greg Brooks of the National Foundation for Educational Research, England. It reports on the findings of a pilot study carried out in 12 primary schools to assess levels of literacy in Maltese and English. The report is also intended to serve as a consultation document for refining the planning of the main survey. Further information may be obtained from Charles or Josephine on 32902164 or 32903046.