

The Crisis of the Theatre

Commercial theatre has been undergoing a rather drastic reversal of fortunes. During the second half of the sixties and most of the seventies, Maltese theatre enjoyed the interest of stable and at times expanding audiences. Plays in English and Maltese were being performed by a number of troupes, both amateur and semi-commercial. New directors came forward with bright ideas and a professional approach to the craft of play making. A younger generation of actors and actresses also emerged, with a strong commitment to serious drama.

As the seventies drew to an end, the enthusiasm and promise started to fade. Audiences shrunk and the choice of good performances became more restricted. Apathy among company impresarios, directors and actors compounded the problems. How did this change happen, and does it spell the death of "commercial theatre" in Malta, making "serious" drama very much a minority interest? Mounting concern at the prospect led a number of drama experts, grouped under the name of "Theatre Campaign", to organize a day long seminar last October, on the state of the theatre.

Packed Houses

Many factors account for the spread of interest in the theatre up to the early seventies. English language productions were mainly staged by the oldest existing theatrical group, the MADC ("Malta Amateur Dramatic Club"). The large British community in Malta, made up of servicemen stationed on the island and settlers who arrived during the sixties, provided a large pool of people interested in acting and backstage work, or willing to spend an evening watching a play.

Though at the time, MADC was largely run by British residents, numerous Maltese actors participated in their productions, and the Club's activities were also patronised by Maltese theatre-goers. Packed houses watched

such productions as Chekov's "The Three Sisters" or Coward's "Blithe Spirit", featuring British and Maltese performers. All actors and backstage crew provided their services free of charge, profits going to the Club's coffers. In summer, MADC was responsible – as it still is – for the production of a Shakespearian play at San Anton Gardens. This tradition, which was started in the thirties, has been maintained year after year, with very few gaps.

On the Maltese language front, theatre obtained its impetus from two radically different elements. The traditional *tejatrini*, consisting of parish hall pochades, developed a more professional presentation. Actors who had come in contact with MADC's relatively stringent codes of acting and stage management, expected the same approach to be followed in Maltese productions.



Francis Ebejer: Packed Houses

Maleth, which was the oldest Maltese language grouping, gradually started to put on plays that had better polish. Slowly, the use of such outdated techniques as the prompt in a box at centre stage, was abolished. Quite frequently in the past, the prompter's hissings to prod the memories of under-rehearsed actors, could be heard from all corners of the house. Another factor which helped to improve standards, was the impact of television, as TV drama in Maltese immediately attracted a huge audience.

Professionalism

More important than these developments however, was the series of plays written and produced by Francis Ebejer during the sixties and early seventies. The originality of these productions was that they proved it was possible both to have Maltese language drama dealing with contemporary issues, and to attract large audiences to come and watch it.

At the time they were shown in very competent productions, plays like *Boulevard* and *Nhar ta' Hadd fuq il-Bejt* were accounted difficult to understand, but still managed to run many repeat performances before packed houses. In the wake of Ebejer's success, a younger generation of directors, actors and writers appeared, who shared his belief in the possibility of making local theatre intellectually stimulating and entertaining.

The search for professionalism led many to turn away from amateur productions. One problem was that when actors were asked to take on parts for radio and TV against payment, they tended to downgrade their commitment to amateur productions, whose rehearsals clashed with radio and TV schedules. The belief was that the



The Godfather: An Atturi Production

problem would diminish if drama production became “commercial”. Also, the rising audience interest justified claims that those taking part in drama productions should be financially recompensed. Organizations like Malta Talent Artists were set up, to organize productions on business lines, with all participants being paid according to set rates.

As the commercial possibilities became apparent, actors and backstage personnel sought to organize themselves on a professional basis. At one point, a scale of payment rates covering leading and minor roles, as well as rates for backstage jobs, was established, and was meant to apply across the board for all commercial productions.

Atturi

Still, during the seventies, the dominant role on the theatre scene was taken by the *Atturi* group, set up in 1973 by a small nucleus of actors and actresses. The ambitious aim of the group was to produce an average of a play a month (summers excluded), and to do so at a profit. At first, *Atturi* met these targets handsomely. Plays

were initially performed at the Phoenicia Hotel.

Once a month or so, the hotel’s ballroom was converted into a theatre for a series of English language productions ranging from lowbrow farce to highbrow

tragedy. Among those who directed *Atturi* plays, were Ebejer and representatives of the “new” generation of directors like Victor Soler, Albert Marshall, Mario Azzopardi and Lino Farrugia, the latter being himself one of the group’s founder members.

In those years, audience levels were still high and the optimism (not to say overconfidence) of theatrical groups was so buoyant, that there was little co-ordination between them. On occasions, MADC and *Atturi* were running performances separately on the same nights.

Meanwhile, smaller groups of experimental theatre makers went through sporadic bouts of highly creative activities, followed by quick dissolution. Among the groups of dedicated amateurs who made a mark in the seventies, were the *Tejatron tat-Triq*, the *Tejatron Henry Dogg* and the Manoel Theatre Dramatic Academy, established by the government to train young people in the skills of acting and drama production.

However, the economics under-

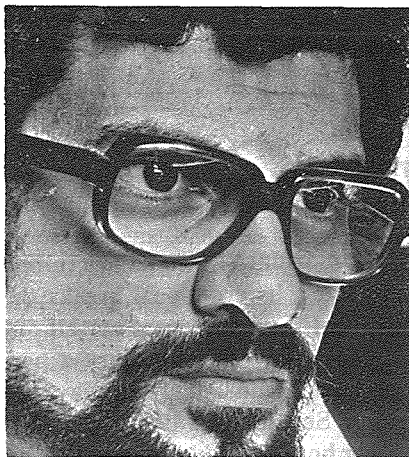


Is There Still Hope for the Theatre?

lying the Maltese theatre were changing. With the closure of the British base, a sizable chunk of the market for performances disappeared. So did many part-time contributors to the work of putting a play on. One beneficial side effect may have been that the decision making posts at MADC were now almost completely taken over by Maltese nationals.

Rising Costs

Also, the costs of producing plays increased. *Atturi* had to transfer their productions from the Phoenicia to the De Porres Hall in Sliema. The cost of putting on stands for spectators in the hotel's ballroom, and dismounting them after each production, became prohibitive. At present, though the old scale for payments to actors has lapsed with the demise of the actors' union some four years ago, leading actors are paid anything between Lm30 and Lm50 for their participation. A production can cost as much as Lm1000. If two years ago, the government had not lifted entertainment tax on theatrical performances, "serious" commercial drama would have become non-viable.



Lino Farrugia: Dwindling audience interest

More seriously perhaps, by the end of the seventies, Maltese theatre had failed to renew its potential audience. The age of the average audience attending performances has risen, and young people are staying away from the theatre. Lino Farrugia, now a veteran producer for the *Atturi* group, says that the real dilemma is how to revive people's interest in the theatre. Curiously, he adds that on the acting side of the stage, there is no shortage of young enthusiasts.

For a director, the problem in fact now seems to be that there is a total dearth of actors in the 30 – 50

age range, as most have dropped out. For next summer's Shakespearean production, MADC are proposing to put on "Othello", just because this play requires a relatively small cast of "mature" actors.

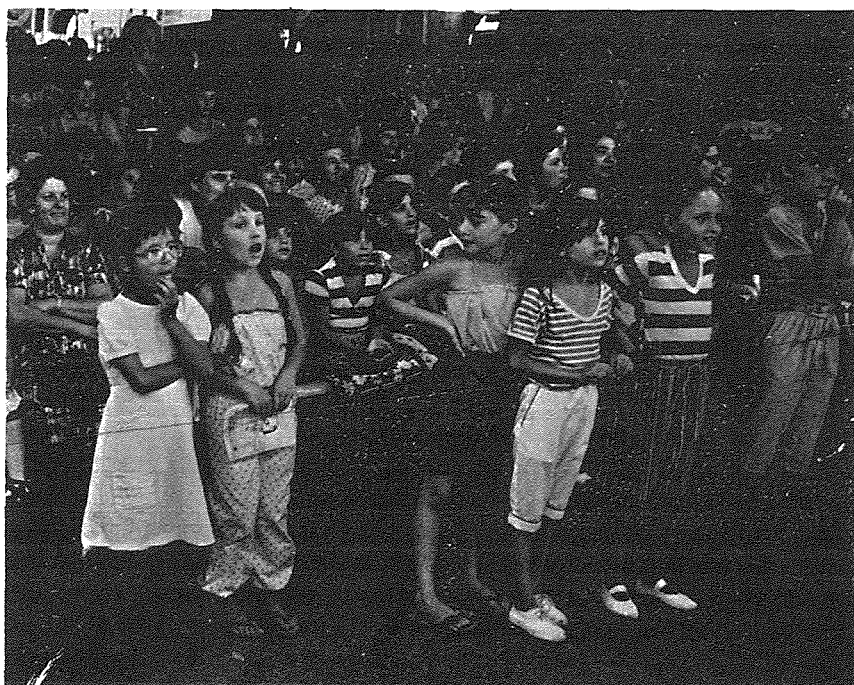
Also, according to Farrugia, local theatre is suffering from the departure or hibernation of most of its best directors, people like Albert Marshall, Mario Philip Azzopardi and Saviour Pirota, all of whom have emigrated.

Present Day Successes

Even so, all is not gloom on the theatrical scene. The market for Maltese language pochades is booming once again, helped by the failure of television to put on the kind of teleserial that galvanised public opinion some years back. Popular, parish hall type plays that are being put on at places like the Catholic Institute, are enjoying surefire successes, if based around some well known comedian.

On a more highbrow level, there are teams of dedicated amateurs, mostly young people, who are working very hard to present quality productions – groups like AST Ateatru which last December produced an interesting version of Peter Weiss's "Marat-Side". Unfortunately, there can be little assurance that such groups do not follow the same road as their predecessors of the seventies.

Once again, Maltese theatre is at the cross-roads. It is caught in the press of growing production expenses, shrinking audiences and a lack of certain types of technical and artistic personnel. Is drama going to revert to the production in series of parish hall farces? Can the *Atturi* and the remaining organizations of the seventies, recapture a new lease of life and glamour? Should future expectations be based on the talent existing in the new, experimental groups? The answers to these questions still need to be found. [E]



Will they come to the theatre when they grow up?