

Arts-based social interventions: First results of the AMASS testbed.



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AMASS acting on the margins
arts as social sculpture

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Malta



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Being Positive about being HIV-Positive: Tackling stigma and misinformation through Theatre-based research

Raphael Vella and Isabelle Gatt

University of Malta

Keywords - theatre based intervention, HIV knowledge, sexual health, stigma reduction

The research project 'Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture' (AMASS) has involved partners in the development and implementation of various arts-based studies with different social groups. While planning for the AMASS testbed, the University of Malta opted to work on a different societal challenge for each experiment. The testbed covered areas as diverse as health, migration, urban development and gentrification, intellectual disability and challenges faced by the elderly. This variety allows for a broader reach and dissemination of results amongst different communities and stakeholders in the country. Reaching more communities potentially gives more publicity to the goals of socially engaged arts, hence

helping to give social engagement a more strategic role in cultural discourse and policy on a national level.

1. This article will describe a pilot study conducted by the University of Malta AMASS team in 2020-2021, focusing on the team's work with a creative entity, an NGO and themes that evolved throughout the development of the study. A more detailed analysis of assessment strategies will be presented in a separate University of Malta article. For its pilot study, the University of Malta team decided to focus on a topic that is largely characterised by misinformation, stigma and harmful stereotyping in the local context: HIV. The topic was suggested by the team's supporting

creative enterprise, Culture Venture, while the research process was developed over a series of meetings that involved various stakeholders, including MGRM (Malta LGBTIQ rights movement). Research on this project was quite challenging, given the fact that the topic is considered sensitive and relates to the health conditions of persons living in Malta and also Maltese individuals based outside the country. Initial meetings suggested that this ‘taboo’ topic was discussed openly by virtually nobody in the country and that there was no real ‘community’ of persons living with HIV. This meant that, throughout the project process, the researchers and the artistic team collaborated closely and were consistently mindful of the socially sensitive aspect of the subject. Spaces for feedback from the participants, MGRM as well as other theatre practitioners were put in place at crucial points of the process to ensure the subject was dealt with ethically and sensitively. The methodology used throughout, starting from the interviews, which were administered by the MGRM, to collect the participants’ stories right through the scriptwriting and the performance considered the treatment of the participants and their right to confidentiality and anonymity (Sieber & Stanley, 1988). Two work-in-progress zoom reading sessions were held for a select invited audience, made up of MGRM members and theatre practitioners, whose feedback after each session was taken on board with consequent significant changes made to the script and the very title.

Arts-based research methods in educational and community-based settings are well-researched (Coemans & Hannes, 2017) while arts-based research projects with participants in medical environments or individuals experiencing challenges affecting their health such as arts-based health research (ABHR)

are benefitting from an increase in interest amongst academic communities, health care workers, artists and policy-makers. Research making use of health-related arts-based methods has shown enhanced engagement of audiences and participants in their participation in the arts (Parsons et al., 2017). Arts-based methods in health settings have been shown to provide researchers, especially those working within a researcher-as-practitioner paradigm, with meaningful information about lived experiences of health and illness (Archibald & Blines, 2021).

In studies relating to arts-based research about HIV, it has been found that participatory, arts-based approaches to research contribute positively to HIV-prevention interventions and other interventions relating to gender injustices (Wood, 2012). Performance-arts based projects about HIV with young people have been shown to have educational benefits and to improve baseline HIV knowledge amongst workshop participants (Campbell et al., 2009). International research in fields like Cultural Geography about countries with a high prevalence rate of HIV has shown that the arts can help to counter fear and taboo and facilitate dialogue, leading to attitudinal and behavioural change (Nabulime & McEwan, 2010). In contrast, no research about participatory practices in the arts and HIV exists until now in Malta.

The pilot study at the University of Malta revolved around the societal challenge of stigmatisation and misinformation about HIV in Malta by focusing on this research question: How can theatre advocate for the rights of persons living with HIV? This question was approached through a combination of arts-based methods, qualitative methods and quantitative methods of research, which has been shown to facilitate integration of data as well as data analysis

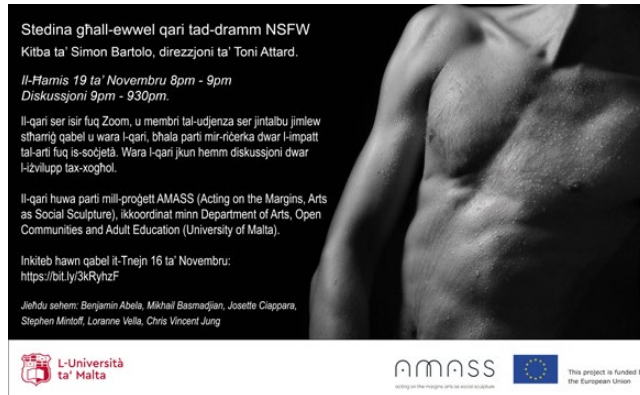


Fig. 1. (left) The poster used for the online rehearsed reading of the performance. Photo: Chris Jung

Fig. 2. The poster used for the performance. Design: Bloom Creative

and concept formation (Archibald & Gerber, 2018). The project in Malta aimed to involve persons living with HIV in the creation of a script leading to a play in Maltese about their lived experiences. However, participating persons living with HIV in Malta contacted by MGRM requested complete anonymity due to the stigma associated with their condition. This meant that the participatory aspect of the creative project was largely indirect, and negotiations between participants and the research team always passed through an intermediary support group, MGRM. Christian Jung, a Danish HIV activist and also an actor by profession, was the only person living with HIV who accepted to take part in the whole process and in fact, he also performed in the play. One of the main outcomes that emerged from the arts-based, qualitative and quantitative methods that the team employed is that persons living with HIV in Malta feel stigmatised yet would like to portray their condition in a positive light. This led to the final version of the play being given a new title (*Il-Pozittivi* or 'The Positives') and publicised as a comedy. This change in title and

overall approach to the theme was also reflected in the poster used to publicise the play: while the first poster (Figure 1) used for the rehearsed reading showed a rather ambiguous naked male torso in black and white, the second poster (Figure 2) used for the online filmed version had a bright pink background and showed the colourful characters in a playful mood.

Data collection methods were varied. Anonymous interviews between social workers and persons living with HIV were conducted in the early stages of research. Other MGRM members were also invited to participate in an online survey prepared by the University of Malta research team. Data generated during interviews and discussions with a participating actor living with HIV helped to develop the play's script. An online rehearsed reading with an audience composed of MGRM members and members of the local theatre community was held. The reading was followed by an open discussion, during which several aspects of the play like the script, characters and social issues surrounding HIV in Malta were debated.



Fig. 3.A still taken during online rehearsals with actors and production team.

The audience was also invited to participate in an evaluation survey. Following this rehearsed reading, the script writer and theatre director revised the play's script based on audience feedback and the title of the play was changed. Delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and other factors led to some changes in the play's cast. A second online reading was held with a limited audience for further feedback. A theatre owned by the University of Malta was then used to rehearse and film the play in a more professional setting, and two audiences made of members of the research team and MGRM members functioned as the play's audience. MGRM members present at these performances were invited to fill in paper and pencil audience surveys. Unfortunately, the numbers of people present during these events was restricted due to Covid-related regulations in place at the time. Finally, the filmed play was shown online to

a general public, and all viewers were invited to fill in online audience surveys. MGRM members were also invited to attend this online filmed event in order to collect their feedback through the audience survey. Several dissemination activities on social media, television and the press helped to throw a spotlight on the play and HIV-related challenges.

An analysis of the integrated data shows that there is an interest to use the arts to contribute to the promotion of the rights of persons affected by HIV. This emerged in the pre- and post-assessment surveys and also in the interviews with persons living with HIV conducted in the initial stage of the research project.

Fig. 4 (page 106). The characters of 'Axel' (Stephen Mintoff) and 'Marcus' (Chris Jung) during the performance. Photo: Elisa von Brockdorff





Fig. 5. The character of 'Susan' (Josette Ciappara) during the performance. Photo: Elisa von Brockdorff

The idea that art can be used to raise awareness of the realities of persons' lives was discussed during the interviews. A large percentage of audience members in the first online reading also indicated that they would like to learn more both about HIV issues and about similar artistic activities. Many participants in the survey evaluated the online reading positively and indicated that their expectations of socially engaged arts are high. The majority also indicated that they would consider attending similar artistic events in the future, which demonstrates that there is definitely scope for other researchers and theatre companies to develop projects revolving around similar health-related societal challenges in Malta.

The data also revealed that *Il-Pozittivi* had made the audience understand the challenges that people living with HIV face because of stigma, lack of information and misinformation in Maltese society about this condition. Various members in the audience mentioned that, prior to watching the performance, they were not aware that the medication exists for persons living with HIV that helps them get an undetectable viral load, and that this means that they do not pass HIV on, not even through sex. The audience reported clear significant positive changes in HIV knowledge and HIV awareness after watching *Il-Pozittivi*, and consequently their attitudes changed. Previous international research based on theatre-based interventions, also about sex health

education, mainly targeted towards adolescents have shown similar results. The fact that *Il-Pożittivi* was performed in Maltese by an all Maltese cast, except for one actor, could have made it all the more real and relatable for the audience; Lieberman et al.'s study in 2012, reveals that when the actors resemble the audience in terms of age, gender, race, the theatre based-intervention is more effective, certainly more than the traditional teaching methods which the control group in the same study was administered. Not only are such interventions more effective and acceptable than traditional teaching methods but the effects also last longer (Lieberman et al. 2012; Lightfoot et al. 2015, Taggart et al. 2016). *Il-Pożittivi* clearly had an impact on people's attitudes towards discrimination and this was done mainly through changes in HIV knowledge and HIV awareness and the empathy with the characters.

An important category that emerged from a thematic analysis of the interviews was the utter lack of communication and support amongst HIV positive persons in Malta. There is no real community or support group and the reason for this is fear and stigma:

I would like to have more contact with other people who are positive, I guess, and see what I could do, that is part of the reason of why I wanted to take part in this (project). (Participant 2 – interview)

But it remains a desire, a desire and simultaneously a fear to reach out, that is echoed by other participants in their interviews. This theme was picked up by the script writer and developed in *Il-Pożittivi*. One of the key messages underlying the whole performance is actually the beauty of connecting; connecting and helping others who are living the same challenges

with HIV. This theme is a red thread that weaves through the tapestry of the script. Susan, the only female character living with HIV in the play, is a bubbly, loud, perhaps overfriendly character at times (Figure 5). She is the one who starts a conversation at the clinic where none of the clients dare talk to each other. She gives out her business card to them while her house is an open house for all and in the last scene she manages to get all the characters together for a feast where all lies are revealed. *Il-Pożittivi* portrays the possibilities, opportunities and impact that having the right attitude to life and connecting with others could result in.

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