

Theatre is alive and well... and living Off-Off-Manoel.

It has been quite a while since the subject of the scarcity of local original works of drama has been tackled in a professional and democratic manner as was the case last Saturday by the University Mediterranean Institute Programme for Theatrical Studies under the guidance of Dr. Vicki Ann Cremona. In fact it's been so long - I don't remember when the last time was! What I believe emerged most clearly from the day-long debate was that, the assumption that theatre only happens on the stage of the national theatre is, at best, nothing but an illusion.

Speakers from the floor and the podium made it abundantly clear that drama, away from the media blitz cacophony, well-spoken for by George Peresso and Lino Grech, is alive and well in Malta and living (albeit frugally) off Manoel - and largely due to the fringe and popular theatres - whether these be the village-hall theatres (who vociferously cried out for support from the powers that be) or whether it be the Off-Off Manoel avant-garde (at the MITP – Theatre Anon, John Schrantz *et al*) or even the more “popular” *Dwal Ġodda* who under Martin Gauci for the past twenty years have worked steadily and in relative anonymity – but proudly – to present the the Gharghur Easter Play - a tour de force which each year attempts to provide a fresh and updated appendix to the Passion Play of yorn (an enterprise now apparently facing an undeserved early grave for pecuniary reasons). All in all one couldn't help but come to the conclusion that in spite of the paucity of fresh scripts, the theatrical expression of the Island cannot be restrained and it must out - in one form or another.

The pity of it all is that it all seems to lack a guiding spirit. My own contribution from the podium to the Seminar, amongst the complaints, complaints and comments was a call for alternating national artistic directors who would be given for a limited (two-year?) stint the responsibility for the co-ordination, as well as the origination of all Maltese original theatrical ventures, hopefully leading to a state of affairs where the necessity to keep going around in circles, copying, adapting regurgitating or importing foreign work will eventually only be a contour to the main dish meant for local consumption - Maltese original drama. (And playwrights like me can stay home confident that eventually their toil will reach their audience.) Whether what emerges needs to follow the dictum of conventional “cerebral” written drama, or whether it be the outpouring of the more “physical” controlled emotive outpourings of per-

formance theatre artists (as expounded by Frank Camilleri in his paper, “The Unwritten Text in the Research Theatre”) need not matter... nor limit us.

Marco Galea gave us the benefit of his research retracing the recent unsteady first steps of the thespian muse thus far in our hardy climate, whilst on a lighter vein, Charles Clews spoke for a less hypersensitive reaction to satirical writing, George Cassola made the case for allowing a tolerable, if not disproportionate foothold for the ever present translations on the Maltese stage. On or off the podium it was encouraging to see the revered Realism guru Gue Diacono and doyenne actress Carmen Azzopardi amongst others, stand their ground in the face of the exhortations to be heard of the younger generation. The heated debate at the Seminar if nothing else reflected the passion and deep felt concern of all those who spent some nine hours in seclusion in the Francis Ebejer Hall conclave and bore witness to their faith. And common goal.

Hopefully Dr. Cremona will find the opportunity, the energy and support to continue the debate. Amongst the institutions, people or organization which I broadsided in my paper as being possibly responsible for the present debacle of the national stage I also dared point a hesitant, perhaps unfair, finger at the University. One must admit that last Saturday’s Happening On-Campus has filled a pe-sized but important “hole” in the cultural environment and hopefully, set the ball rolling for the necessary debate to further evolve in a similar coherent and structured fashion. And not in the parochial self-serving platforms which unfortunately is sometimes so typical of the cultural elite.

A special thanks to all participating students who helped stage the event. Though we may pontificate and pass judgement on the Maltese Theatre they are the ones who will ensure – or already are ensuring – that it will one day become a reality.

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(Oreste Calleja is a playwright with various works and publications to his name: his paper “Ansjetà u Anestesija fil-Labirinti tat-Teatrin - diskors fuq demel u drammi” was read at the 2nd Seminar on the Theatre organized by the Mediterranean Institute Programme for Theatrical Studies at the University of Malta on the 1st of March, 1997.)