Maltese Audiences and Theatre in English – choice and controversy

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Abstract: Anglophone theatre is spread across the world, mainly due to Britain's colonial past and the global diffusion of the English language. Although Malta achieved independence from Britain in 1964, plays in English, generally by English authors, continue to dominate the Maltese stage. This essay traces the development of theatre in the English language in Malta, giving a brief overview of its growth under colonial rule, and presenting its current state. It distinguishes between English theatre, that is, theatre written by British or American playwrights, and theatre in English which is written or devised by Maltese authors and actors. It discusses efforts towards more professionalism, given that theatre in Malta is mostly amateur, except for some semi-professional companies. It shows how the choice of English theatre in Malta has often depended heavily on two main characteristics: success in the West End, or the polemical quality of the subjects dealt with giving rise to public discussion, also due to Maltese cultural characteristics and religious choices. It examines the choice of Anglophone authors on the Maltese stages, and the reasons for their selection, as well as any influence they may have exerted on local writers. It shows how English-language theatre was initially the expression of colonial power, and how progressively, it was used to express Maltese political dissent, and exploited to fight for freedom of expression in the theatre, and the abolition of censorship.

As in many other countries under the rule of empire, theatre productions in English started out as a colonial phenomenon, after Malta became a British colony in 1800. The islands obtained their independence in 1964 and became a republic ten years later. Very little has been written about theatre in Malta in general, and even less about English

theatre on the islands. The place and importance of theatre in English in the Maltese contemporary scene can be better grasped if it is placed against the historical evolution of theatre on the islands. This article presents a first effort to trace the development of theatre in English in Malta and presents the research that has been carried out up to now, which is derived mostly from newspaper articles commenting on performances, companies or theatres. It will show how English-language theatre was initially the expression of colonial power, providing entertainment mainly for British troops stationed in Malta. It will discuss the formation of Maltese theatre troupes acting in English, and show how progressively, theatre in English was used to express Maltese political dissent, and later exploited to fight for freedom of expression in the theatre. It shall distinguish between English theatre, that is, theatre written by British or American playwrights, and theatre in English that is written or devised by Maltese authors and actors.

Before the arrival of the British, theatre productions on the islands of Malta and Gozo were generally staged in Italian, and this tradition continued well into the twentieth century. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, performances in the Maltese language also started to appear (Cremona 2014: 131). The first recorded play in Maltese, a melodrama entitled *Caterina, ix-Xbejba ta' l-Irdum* (Caterina, the Maiden of the Cliffs), by Luigi Rosato (1795-1872), was staged in 1838 (Galea 1997: viii) and this trend started to spread across the two islands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The performance took place in a public theatre, today known as Teatru Manoel,[1] which had been built in 1732 in the capital, Valletta, by the ruling Order of St John of Jerusalem (known as the Order of Malta). In 1861, the British ordered the building of a Royal Opera House, despite Maltese disapproval (TNA 193, 1861). This was paid out of Maltese coffers and was intended to provide a larger space to entertain the British troops and subjects stationed in Malta. It was first inaugurated in 1866 and rebuilt five years after it burnt down in 1873, only to be bombed in 1942. Whereas professional companies were – and still are - brought over from abroad, all local theatre companies in

Malta are amateur, although there is a marked drive towards greater professionalism both in acting and staging.

From Theatre for the Troops to General Public Entertainment

At the dawn of the twentieth century, although Malta had been under British domination for a hundred years, theatre in English in the Maltese islands was not as flourishing as one would expect. While the Maltese bourgeois classes frequented the theatre mainly to watch opera,[2] the British stationed in Malta created amateur companies to stage English-language performances intended to entertain their comrades, British military and naval personnel, and their families. Various companies sprang up, with the participation of both British men and women (Xuereb 2010: 34). English theatre and entertainment companies were also brought over for the troops' amusement and provided distraction both for the British residents and the Maltese. Perhaps the most renowned of these was the Bandmann Repertoire Company (Balme 2015), which visited Malta in 1901 during a tour of the British colonies, travelling as far as India (DMC 2 January 1901: 2). Through a phenomenon of acculturation, Maltese dramatic companies, inspired by the British initiatives, as well as by the Italian "Risorgimentisti" exiles who sought refuge in Malta, also started developing their own dramatic companies, producing performances in Italian or Maltese (Galea 2010: 12).

The major theatre buildings were managed by Italian or Maltese impresarios, however, new private spaces of performance started to appear. Theatre in English was also staged in various places including private houses and the naval canteen, which was periodically transformed into a theatre to entertain the troops. Although at the time, the British and Maltese amateur actors never mixed, British and Maltese spectators started mingling more and more in the theatrical venues, giving rise to new inspiration in manners, dress, and theatre forms.

The last twenty years of the nineteenth century were rather tumultuous ones and were very much linked to what became known as the "Language Question", that is, the primacy of Italian, which was the

official language of administration and the courts, or English, the language of the colonialists, and which the British wanted to impose instead of Italian. Maltese was still considered a dialect spoken by the lower classes, until its status as a language was officially recognised in 1932. The Language Question became closely linked to the insistent demand of the Maltese for self-government, and it was on this political basis that it was fought. However, it meant that a whole section of the public stayed away from attending performances in English, either because they did not understand the language, or because they did not want to learn it or be associated with anything English in any way. Moreover, apart from a handful of persons appearing in chorus numbers, the first time any proper speaking part was given to Maltese actors in an English play was in 1949, when an upper middle-class Maltese couple, Victor and Marguerite Mercieca, were given important speaking parts in the play *The Chiltern Hundreds* by William Douglas Home (Mompalao de Piro 1985:47).

Both before and after World War II theatre audiences, who were used to opera and operetta, enjoyed British works such as *Captain Reece of the Mantelpiece* by Robert Marshall, first produced in 1914, or those by Gilbert and Sullivan, as well as "Reviews" which included various popular British songs. American musicals, particularly those by Rogers and Hammerstein, were later introduced on the Maltese stage,[3] but were already well known through cinema. English plays, particularly those by authors such as Noel Coward, Ben Travers, and A. A. Milne were frequently staged, some only a few years after having been staged in the UK. This was the case, for example, of Terence Rattigan's *French without Tears*, performed in 1940, only four years after it premiered at the Criterion Theatre, London. British entertainers, such as the actor and comedian George Formby, came to Malta during the war (TOM 3 September 1943: 4).

Theatre in English took a new impetus just after the war also thanks to the launch of drama festivals. The first festival, composed of one-act plays, was organised in 1945 by an Irishman, James Allen, who belonged to the Malta Unit of the Christian Movement Toc H[4]. Al-

though the majority of actors in a company had to be composed of British service personnel, the groups were allowed to "supplement their casts with civilians" (TOM 23 October 1944: 3). The festival took place in the Command Hall of the British troops from Monday 11 to Saturday 16 February 1946 (TOM 9 February 1946: 5) with three one-act plays every night, and the best three re-staged on Saturday. The companies could not use scenery or backdrops, though props were allowed. An English professional, Miss Frances Mackenzie, from the British Drama League, was the final adjudicator (TOM 11 February 1946: 5). Although Toc H sponsored the third Festival, which was launched on 17 February 1947, responsibility for its organisation fell to the Malta Drama League, which had been founded in March 1946 and was affiliated to the British Drama League (TOM, 23 March 1946: 5). It allowed both English and Maltese dramatic companies to participate, as well as combined Anglo-Maltese groups (Schranz, Cremona 2000: 585).[5] Maltese spectators were allowed to enter the Command Hall to watch the performances (TOM 14 December 1946: 5).

English Theatre in Malta after Independence

Malta achieved independence from Britain in 1964, but the production of plays in English did not dwindle. Malta's oldest theatre company, the Malta Amateur Dramatic Club, founded in 1910 and better known as MADC, had formerly only allowed British citizens to perform in the plays it produced. After independence, it started accepting more Maltese into its acting ranks, following the advice of Lord Louis Mountbatten (Mompalao de Piro 1985: 66). However, it was only in the 1970s that the company committee and the bulk of the actors were mostly made up of Maltese (Galea 2017: xvi). The company is known traditionally for two annual performances: a play by Shakespeare, and a Christmas pantomime. Since 1951, MADC has staged a Shakespeare play every summer in the grounds of the President's (formerly Governor's) summer residence at San Anton Palace, in Balzan.[6] Initially, this was the only annual performance where

Maltese had some speaking parts. The company produced its first pantomime, *Aladdin,* in 1911 (Mompalao de Piro 1985: 113) but the tradition of the Christmas Pantomime was only developed later by the Ariel Players, a company that was made up of members from the Royal Air Force. In 1978, the Ariel Players was disbanded due to the withdrawal of the British forces from Malta. The MADC took over the pantomime tradition and was the sole company to produce this type of Christmas entertainment until 2008 (MI, 20 June 2008).

Today there is a choice of pantomimes, both in English and Maltese, and they attract the largest audiences, and consequently the greatest revenue, for the companies who stage them. For this reason, there is stiff competition among the various companies to attract the public to their shows. The scripts are penned by Maltese authors, and though the characters are generally taken from fairy tales, the plot also deals with very Maltese topics, especially hot political issues. Christmas 2018 saw the launch of a new kind of pantomime, called "Pantomime in the Dark". The performance, in English, took a Maltese mythical bogeyman, "GawGaw" as its subject. It took place in pitch darkness. The audience was asked to put on headphones and made to touch different textures and experience a variety of smells. Endorsed by the President of Malta, its stated aim was to "focus on the inclusion and involvement of the visually impaired, because Panto is everyone's to enjoy" (MT*,* 5 December 2018)[7].

The fact of allowing more Maltese into a company that was initially restricted to British actors meant that the MADC became the springboard for many local actors and directors, some of whom were to rise to great prominence on the Maltese scene. In particular, Francis Ebejer (1925-1993), perhaps the most famous playwright and director in Malta to date, directed his first English play, *Marching Song* by John Whiting in May 1963, with an all-English cast (Mompalao de Piro 1985: 64) – one month before the author's death and ten years after its first production. The play, which deals with the nature of violence and of personal responsibility, has been defined as "anti-melodramatic" and as being written in a "spare style" (Trussler 1966: 146). It was

certainly appreciated by Ebejer, who in 1961 had won first prize for his *Vaganzi tas-Sajf* [Summer Holidays] in a competition organised by the Manoel Theatre, which had become Malta's most prestigious theatre. This play was staged by another company, Maleth which, at the time, only staged plays in Maltese, and only started producing plays in English in 2000 (Galea 2017: xvii). Ebejer, who wrote plays both in Maltese and in English, was highly influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd, in particular by Samuel Beckett, and his play *Boulevard*, produced in 1964, has echoes of *Waiting for Godot* and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author.* Three years later, he tried his hand at directing a musical, *The Boyfriend*, by Sandy Wilson, first performed in London in 1954. In 1971, the play was turned into a film starring Twiggy and directed by Ken Russell. The high standards set by Ebejer in theatre direction were to become one of his hallmarks. The MADC did not present any plays in Maltese before 1969, when it staged *Ir-Raheb,* written by Erin Serracino Inglott and directed by then upcoming Lino Farrugia.

Another important company producing plays in English was the British Institute Players, a drama company founded in 1944 by Major Cathcart Bruce and made up of both English and Maltese amateur actors. The company was run by the British Council and enlisted the services of British professionals to help train actors (Farrugia 2002: 40). Ethel Farrugia, who at the time was working for the British Council, was responsible for organising a course in professional drama which led to the opening of the first theatre school in 1977: the Manoel Theatre School of Dramatic Art (MTADA).

Comedy and thrillers featured predominantly in theatre programmes in the sixties. Noel Coward, and later Neil Simon, as well as George Bernard Shaw's *Plays Pleasant* often appeared in the programmes. British touring companies acquainted the Maltese public with a range of plays, from comedies by William Douglas Home, to more reflective plays such as *The Edwardians* by Vita Sackville West, Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie, Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne, or Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party.* These new trends in-

fluenced Maltese choices: MADC produced Pinter's *The Caretaker* in 1969, nine years after it premiered in Britain (Mompalao de Piro 1985: 119). The choice of using young directors was to prove decisive as they brought about considerable change in the choice of texts and direction. Moreover, British influence also opened Maltese theatre up to new international theatrical developments. The presence in Malta of British authors such as Nigel Dennis and his wife Beatrice contributed to renewing acting methods. Peggy Ash, the wife of the British Consul who had spent time in Poland, introduced the new training methods of upcoming international directors such as Jerzy Grotowski, which led to the founding of the group Teatru Workshop. The work of one director in particular, John Schranz, was to influence the creation of a number of small companies working on physical theatre in the early 1990s.

Theatre and Protest

In the 1970s and 80s, with the rise of the Malta Labour Party to government and its anti-colonial policies, Maltese language and identity were deliberately emphasised to the detriment of English. Consequently, although English plays continued to be performed at the Manoel Theatre and elsewhere, the production of Maltese plays within this main theatre increased. Interestingly though, many new companies sprang up, producing plays in English that had never been shown to Maltese audiences, and new theatre spaces were found or adapted. Comedies, particularly by Alan Ayckbourn or Neil Simon, were popular choices. Moreover, the Maltese discovered various authors through new, young directors who were determined to propose alternative texts, such as Max Frisch's *The Fireraisers* or Maurice McLoughlin's *A Letter From the General,* or American texts, such as Arthur Miller's *View from the Bridge*, and in 1978, a memorable production of *The Crucible.* In 1979, a new, semi-professional repertory company opened its doors. This was the Atturi Theatre Group, led by Karmen Azzopardi, who was considered one of Malta's finest actresses. The company, performing both in English and Maltese (original

texts as well as translations) managed to attract a niche audience that became loyal to it because of the quality and versatility of its performances, which tackled new themes. It introduced many modern British playwrights to Malta in a new theatre space, lodged within a purpose-built playhouse situated inside the ballroom of a luxury hotel, the Phoenicia Hotel, on the outskirts of Valletta. It produced plays that had recently appeared on the London stages, from comedies such as Alistair Foot and Anthony Marriott's *No Sex Please, We're British* in 1974, three years after it was launched in London, to more serious ones such as the Pulitzer Prize winning: *The Subject Was Roses*, by Frank Gilroy, or Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Other companies began to imitate Atturi's repertoire: MADC staged plays such as *Butterflies are Free* by Leonard Gershe, which it actually managed to take to Solihull in the UK. One of Malta's main theatre critics, Paul Xuereb, stated that "the weaknesses of the production are due mainly to the performers" (Galea 2017: 73), a recurrent problem when theatre can only rely on amateurs.

The political situation in Malta in the 1980s was very tense as a large proportion of the population protested against a government that stayed in power mainly due to gerrymandering.[8] A new type of theatre for the Maltese public, expressing political questioning and dissent, began to develop. Newly-founded, as well as older companies used theatre to probe, challenge and even condemn the then current state of affairs. The most important of the new companies was certainly Ateatru, a dynamic group of young people who created a sort of theatrical organisation that encouraged actors and directors to stage works that had never been seen in Malta before, providing a minimum of financial aid to help them develop their productions. This group staged original works in Maltese and English. Plays which dealt with political themes, such as Howard Brenton's *Hitler Dances,* or those raising social issues, such as *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* by Peter Nichols – which deals with a couple's acceptance of a child with cerebral palsy – were preferred. Ateatru also began to translate into Maltese English authors, such as Harold Pinter, as well as non-English playwrights – such as Dario Fo, Jean Genet, Fernando Arrabal or Ber-

tolt Brecht – whose style influenced Maltese playwrights such as Alfred Buttigieg. Ateatru was accused of being an "anti-socialist" group by the Labour newspaper *Weekend Chronicle* because of its choice of plays that contained subversive elements (4 April 1987).

In 1987, the Nationalist Party won the elections. The change in government helped to release much of the social tension that had accumulated. In the theatre, this was reflected in the late eighties and early nineties by a spate of comedies. However, plays by Peter Schaffer, Michael Frayn and translations of authors such as John Bowen were also staged. Meanwhile the rise in experimental theatre reflected that occurring in other countries. This was the period when British companies such as DV8, Frantic Assembly or Théâtre de Complicité were being constituted as "collectives" and developing in the wake of other foreign companies such as Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret. Many of these companies were influenced by the work of directors like Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook. The Maltese companies followed an evolution that was similar to that developing on the continent and also partly in Britain, albeit on a much smaller and amateur scale. Devised theatre, with its process of physical training and work that focused mainly on the body, grew in importance. Rather than adopting texts written by established playwrights, the groups preferred to develop their own. The British Council contributed to this new tendency by bringing over a series of performances and workshops that were based on devised and physical theatre. This type of theatre created a generational divide, leading theatre critic Paul Xuereb to exclaim:

> Young people are much readier to accept sheer virtuosity as the main ingredient of the theatrical art. Moreover, a generation tuned to the garishness, stunts and surrealistic atmosphere of a thousand video clips is psychologically prepared for what, to me, is a show whose surface gorgeousness and ingenuity frequently serves to distract the audience from perceiving its hollowness. (2017: 224)

Xuereb's disapproval contrasted greatly with the plays' popularity, and this type of theatre reached a peak in the nineties, with the formation of a number of groups practising devised theatre.

Training Actors for the Stage

Between the 1950s and early 1960s, the British authorities and the British Council took great pains to help professionalise radio presenters who would later move on to television. Such was the case, for example, for the first Maltese TV presenters such as Charles Arrigo (1929-2006), who had also been trained for radio, as well as new voices such as Mary Grech and Charles Abela Mizzi, all of whom received training at the BBC studios and were to work for the Malta Television Service (MTV), inaugurated on 29 September 1962. A few actors were also provided training in the UK; this was notably the case of Ethel Farrugia (d. 2017), who was sent to a "comprehensive drama course" in London (Farrugia 2002: 40) and trained with the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. Farrugia performed in various British theatres before returning to Malta and was to become a leading actress and director. Karmen Azzopardi also received training in London: she attended the Actor's Studio and was trained as a broadcaster by the BBC.

Nothing much was done by way of training up to 1977, when MTADA was set up by means of a Technical Cooperation Agreement between the British Council, the Ministry for Education, and the Manoel Theatre. The school laid "text-based emphasis" on training (Aquilina 2015: 91). It was headed by the English theatre director and actor Adrian Rendle, who was assisted by Peter Cox, an expert in Theatre in Education. The two men continued to foster British theatre traditions through the acting styles they taught, as well as the repertory they chose for their students both through the Junior (14-17 years) and Senior (18+ years) courses. The school later changed its name to the Mikelang Borg Drama Centre and continued to stage plays in English as well as Maltese, or English translations of plays by authors such as Molière or Chekhov. Plays by Shakespeare were part of the school curriculum, however, more contemporary plays such as *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas were also staged. More recently, in 2012, the Teatru Manoel Youth Theatre (TMYT) was formed under the direction of Scottish theatre practitioner Denise Mulholland as part of the theatre's education programme,[9] and has proved a launching pad for young actors. Most of

the productions, which were based on devised theatre, were in English. The company has now been taken over by another UK practitioner, Ian Moore. Moreover, British drama schools, such as Stagecoach and Helen O'Grady, have opened franchises in Malta. However, a number of young people aspiring to become professional actors go abroad, particularly to Britain, to specialise in acting.

The beginning of the new millennium was marked by a series of initiatives to promote the arts. The most important among these were the formation of an Arts Council, which prepared a cultural policy for Malta that was launched in 2011, and a new space which was Malta's millennium project: St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity. This space, situated in Valletta, comprises a small theatre, music room, rehearsal rooms, *art et essai* cinema, and art gallery space. It was an ideal place to bring the arts together and create collaborative projects between different art forms. The theatre was inaugurated by a British performance, sponsored by the British High Commission, called *England our England,* which put together a sequence of texts by three British actors making fun of Britain and Britishness. The centre was to house important playwrights, such as Edward Bond, who spoke of their art and led workshops. Moreover, in collaboration with the University of Malta and Arts Council Malta, the Centre housed other authors such as the Oxford-based Macedonian writer Stefan Goranowski, the award-winning English playwrights Fraser Grace, well known for his play *Breakfast with Mugabe* and Cathy Crabb, author of *Beautiful House, Moving Pictures,* and *Beyond the Fourth Wall.*

Theatre and Censorship

New trends and controversial subject matter in contemporary English-language plays and productions provided the means for theatre to confront taboo subjects in Malta. These plays created huge polemic when first staged on the island, used to more generally conservative productions, certainly in Maltese-language theatre. At the turn of the twenty-first century this theatrical confrontation led to a struggle against the censorship board, known as the Classification Board of

Film and Stage, which had been constituted in 1937, and ultimately, to the total abolition of censorship in 2012.

The tussle was already present in the 1990s, when censorial action was taken on the grounds of blasphemy. In 1996, the British company Cheek by Jowl staging John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* was asked to remove a scene where the Duchess, played by Anastasia Hille, kicks a cross across the stage in sign of despair at the knowledge that she will be imminently murdered. Moreover, Hille was not allowed to appear nude on stage. The censorship raised huge controversy in the papers. The next year, the Reduced Shakespeare Company was banned from producing *The Bible – the Word of God*, again for the reason of blasphemy. However, plays such as *The Vagina Monologues* by Eve Ensler, staged in 2002, provided direct confrontation with taboo subjects. The play inspired the author Trevor Zahra to write a male equivalent, produced in 2008, called: *Minn wara ż-*żipp (From behind the zip). One Maltese production, *Porn the Musical*, with lyrics written by Malcolm Galea and music by Kris Galea and Boris Cezek, participated in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2009. The show, initially acted by Maltese amateur actors, was transferred to Off West End the next year, where it was performed by British professionals at Theatre 503 and directed by Paul Robinson (Honeycombe 2010).

Meanwhile, Malta had discovered *In-Yer-Face* theatre. In March 2003, the British actor Nigel Charnock performed his solo play *Frank* at the theatre belonging to the University of Malta (now known as Valletta Campus Theatre). Paul Xuereb commented on the actor's "limitless ability to take risks with his audience, that enabled him to needle that audience on the values and traditions prevailing in that society" (STOM, 2 March 2003). That same month the censorship board tried to stop the performance of Patrick Marber's *Closer* and withdrew its decision after the Maltese company, Theatreworx, appealed. Another theatre company, Unifaun, and its director Adrian Buckle, were determined to continue to show this type of theatre to the Maltese public. Their production of *Paul* by Howard Brenton in 2007 was only allowed to go on stage after they had removed a scene that was considered of-

fensive to the Virgin Mary. In January 2009, their play *Stitching* was banned outright. This decision sparked off a veritable war against censorship, which was fought in the Maltese courts on the basis of the right to freedom of expression. The author, Anthony Nielson, even came to Malta to testify in court (Cremona 2016: 249). The ban was upheld by the Maltese courts in November 2010, and the decision was confirmed by the Maltese Constitutional Court in 2012. In 2013, the company took the case to the European Court of Human Rights and in May 2018, eight years after the Maltese court's decision, the judgement was overturned and the company was awarded €10,000 in legal expenses and another €10,000 in damages (TOM, 15 May 2018). The play was staged at the Manoel Theatre Studio in September 2018. On 12 July 2012, the Minister for Culture announced the removal of censorship and stated that theatre companies were henceforth allowed to classify their own productions (TOM, 12 July 2012: 12). Since then, Maltese efforts to write *In-Yer-Face* pieces, including by Adrian Buckle himself, have been made, and nudity and blasphemy on stage are now accepted.

Other controversial topics have been brought to the stage thanks to English-language authors or translations. This was the case with *Lampedusa* by Anders Lustgarten, performed in 2016, which deals with topics that have greatly affected Malta and the Mediterranean: illegal immigration, the drowning of hundreds of migrants, as well as poverty and welfare. The play was staged both in English and in a Maltese translation on different nights. The Welsh playwright Brad Birch was commissioned to write a play inspired by corruption in football by the recently launched national theatre, Teatru Malta. His play, *Game,* was performed at the Malta Football Association's Trophies Lounge at the National Stadium at Ta' Qali in June 2018.

Very recently, verbatim theatre styles, inspired by English theatre trends, have been adopted to address challenging issues. The journalist, playwright and director Herman Grech decided to use theatre to discuss abortion, which is illegal in Malta under any circumstance. All debate about the subject in public fora and newspapers has been wrought with emotion. Through his playscript, *De-terminated*, the

author's intention was to try and stage a discussion about the subject "without hysteria" (MT, 11 October 2018) taking advantage of the fact that theatre provides a captive audience who are forced to listen to both sides of the argument unless they walk out. Grech's text, in English, was based on interviews conducted in 2017 with Maltese women who had gone through abortion and men who had experienced this reality, as well as with pro- and anti-abortionist activists, and tried to present their arguments without taking sides.

Legacy

What is the legacy of English theatre in Malta? British theatre is a main point of reference for any Maltese company wanting to perform, also due to the strong links established through time, and the fact that English, one of Malta's two official languages, is understood and spoken by the majority of the population. The bulk of foreign texts staged in Malta are English, especially those having obtained success on the London stages. Maltese theatre buffs travel to Britain to watch plays. British influence on Maltese playwriting is still very much present; themes and trends in Britain have influenced Maltese authors writing their own playscripts both in Maltese and in English. Various devised performances have also been produced in the English language.

This study has established the direction for a much deeper study on theatre in the English language in Malta. It has shown how theatre in English developed initially as a colonial phenomenon, but gradually created collaboration between English and Maltese actors and directors. Professional training for actors and directors was first introduced by British experts who enabled the development of a higher level of theatre production. In part, this training continues to be led by British directors. Moreover, contemporary British plays have been staged to voice political dissent and to oppose censorship. Certain Maltese playwrights are also choosing the English language to express controversial ideas. In sum, British theatre and English plays will continue to remain a beacon towards which Maltese theatre is attracted and against which it can measure itself.

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1 The theatre is named after the Portuguese Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1663-1736, ruled 1722-1736) who ordered it to be built. It was run by a foundation, called Fondazione Manoel, that was set up by the Grand Master himself (Xuereb 2011: 2).

2 Opera attendance increased greatly in the course of the nineteenth century, and was spread across all social classes (Miceli 1999:21).

3 *South Pacific,* staged by MADC and directed by Ian Cox, was staged in 1970. The musical was staged on Broadway in 1949, and the film was produced in 1958.

4 A play reading and discussion about the organisation of the Festival was held at the Headquarters of Toc H was held in November 1944 (TOM 1 November 1944: 4).

5 In June 1946, a Maltese writer, Nikol Biancardi organised a festival for plays in Maltese (*Times of Malta*, 25 June 1946: 8), and in October of the same year, the Malta Drama League organised a playwriting competition for plays in the Maltese language.

6 In 1938, a play by Shakespeare was staged there for the first time. *As You Like It* was presented as a charity performance in aid of the Civil Hospitals (Mompalao de Piro 1985: 38).

7 The authors, Marta Vella and Vikesh Godhwani, are both trained actors, and Godhwani lives in London and works professionally in the London theatres.

8 In the 1981 elections, the electoral commission shifted the electoral boundaries in such a way as to favour the Malta Labour Party (PL), which remained in power.

9 The programme, known as Toi-Toi, was the brainchild of musician and music therapist Rosetta Debattista, who created a series of programmes to open the arts to the broadest possible audience, ranging from very young children to senior citizens. Teatru Manoel Youth Theatre and Teatru Manoel Youth Opera are offshoots of this programme.

10 Scottish-born Denise Mulholland directed the TMYT from its founding in 2013 to 2018. The Youth theatre is currently directed by Ian Moore.