

## Amateur theatre in Malta

### Historical Introduction

Amateur theatre is a very important part of the contemporary theatrical scene in Malta, and also a fundamental element of the development of drama and theatre-making in the country. Historically it was the birth of amateur theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that set in motion the tradition of theatre in the vernacular, which is itself an important cultural phenomenon as well as a medium through which issues of national identity are often expressed. Until the rise of national sensibilities in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the main language of theatre, as well as the language of culture, was Italian. English also started being used in theatre after the islands were colonised by Britain in 1800. Most theatre was aimed for the upper classes of Maltese society and the colonisers themselves. It was only when the Maltese language started being written, used in schools and in literature that a theatre in Maltese emerged. There was input from seasoned professional performers like Luigi Rosato (who worked in the professional company), but the main energy to create a tradition of theatre in Maltese came from amateur playwrights and performers. Around the 1840s, different groups of amateurs started setting up their small, makeshift theatres in the harbour area, mainly for the benefit of the lower classes who could not afford the ticket prices at the main professional theatre (where opera was performed for most of the year) and who could relate much better to performances in their native tongue. These amateur theatres soon became the main source of entertainment for the lower classes, with theatres being set up in practically every town and village by the end of the century. These theatres were very active performing different plays each week. Their popularity led to hundreds of plays being printed between the 1840s and the early decades of the twentieth century and entire newspapers dedicated to theatrical, mainly amateur, activity. Although the repertoire consisted mainly of melodrama and farce, the tradition was fundamental for making theatre accessible to a much wider sector of the population than it was before and also for the creation of many theatre spaces, some of which are still in use. "Teatrin", as this kind of theatre was called, was also a useful medium for expression of national and other political sentiments before its importance and popularity died down in the post-World War II period.

Until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century amateur theatre was a very visible cultural phenomenon in Malta. There were amateur theatre companies in every village and town, and most were very active, producing tens of different plays every season. They were the main form of entertainment readily and cheaply available within the community. Football, cinema and eventually television became direct competitors and amateur theatre saw the number of spectators, as well as the people interested in performing, steadily decrease until many theatre companies became inactive and others had to limit themselves to producing only a handful of performances per season.

In contemporary Malta, amateur theatre-making has a very strong presence. The reasons for this importance are directly related to the challenges it faces to be meaningful.

## **Demography**

The first point to consider is the size of the country. Malta is a very small archipelago with a population of around half a million. Production runs typically are of up to six performances in the larger theatres (around 600 seats) and a little longer in smaller theatres. As a result, it is very difficult to sustain professional theatre practice in the country. Even a newly set up national theatre company does not employ performers on a full-time basis but only contracts people who are cast for specific productions on short term contracts. As a result of this phenomenon most theatre productions created in Malta include some characteristics that one would expect to find in amateur theatre, and many amateur performances share resources with professional or commercial setups. To illustrate the close-knit relationship between amateur theatre and professional setups we will use *Teatru Malta's* latest production (September 2018) as an example.

The production was an adaptation of a 1964 play called *Boulevard*, written by Francis Ebejer, Malta's best-known playwright and novelist. Despite acquiring a reputation as a talented playwright relatively early in his life and also having a number of English-language novels published in the U.K and the United States, for most of his life he worked as a school teacher, only leaving the profession when he could get early retirement. He directed many of the original productions of his plays, using performers from "teatrin" as well as other, more professionally trained, actors. The 2018 revival of the play, at the Manoel Theatre where the original production had taken place, likewise uses a mix of professional elements. It drastically reduced the text and mixed dancers working for the National Dance Company (which employs only professionals on full-time contracts), who were made to move and speak, with one or two professional actors, and some amateurs.

## **Training**

A direct consequence of the demographic issue, as well as a reliance on amateur performers to provide theatrical entertainment, even in the more important venues, has been that the professional training of performers (actors, but also dancers and musicians) has been neglected and unregulated in Malta. Popular discourse about the performing arts in Malta privileges "talent" over training. Professional acting programmes do not exist, and students who aspire to train as professional actors travel to other countries (usually the U.K. but sometimes the U.S.A, Italy or other countries) and many do not return, attracted by the much larger theatre industries in metropolitan centres and with the knowledge that it is extremely difficult to make a living as a performer in Malta. Those who return very often find themselves working in

environments that could be defined as amateur. Even the self-defined Malta Amateur Dramatic Club (MADC), a formation inspired by provincial British amateur theatre companies, regularly casts such professionally trained actors alongside others who were never professionally trained. After Malta became independent in 1964, the British Council brought in two experts on Theatre in Education in 1977, who created the first Academy of Dramatic Art, (MTADA) which was a part-time evening course and which offered technical training in movement, voice, improvisation, interpretation and rehearsal. This was eventually to evolve into a state Drama School, today called Malta School of Drama and Dance, offering evening courses and run by Maltese. Another result of this collaboration was the institution of a Drama Unit within the Ministry of Education which supplies Theatre in Education. In 1988, the University created two programmes, one in theatre and one in music, which have now grown into a School of Performing Arts offering degrees at Bachelors, Masters and PhD levels. The University also provides teacher training in Drama and Music. At the turn of the century, a series of part time drama schools were launched, some of which are franchises of foreign companies such as Stagecoach and Helen O' Grady. These are run by amateurs who wanted to make a living from the performing arts, and found that the only way they could do so was to invest in education. These amateurs are aspiring to professionalism, some of them are among the best actors in the country for certain genres. The schools offer a range of short-term or part-time courses, workshops and training programmes. This sector is not totally regulated and the qualities of programmes, personnel and facilities, as well as the outcomes, vary greatly,. Both the University and some of the schools hold workshop with foreign professionals. Recently, the main vocational college in Malta, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, created an Advanced Diploma in Performing Arts which will eventually be transformed into a BA course. Last year, a full-time state secondary school which provides specialisation in the Visual and performing arts was inaugurated. Many of the beneficiaries of this teaching and learning go on to feed into the various performing companies in the country. None of this activity enables its participants to make a living exclusively from performing.

### **The variety of amateur theatres – Variety of performances**

Although as we have seen, most theatre in Malta includes elements of amateur theatre (whether this is defined as the absence of professional training or in terms of monetary remuneration) there are also theatre formations that declare themselves amateur. One of the factors that distinguishes them is the choice of language.

Although English is an official language, the language spoken by the majority of the population as well as the national language is Maltese, and a large proportion of theatre performances are in Maltese. This includes most new plays written by Maltese playwrights. However, English is widely used in theatres in Malta, as British and American plays are performed regularly in the original language. There are at least two amateur companies which perform almost solely in English, one which is active on the main island of Malta, and the other based on the smaller

island of Gozo. The older MADC is more than a hundred years old and owes its origins to British residents during the British colonial period. while the Gozo Creative Theatre Club performs in English because it wants to include English-speaking residents among its spectators.

Most other amateur companies perform mainly in Maltese and can be best defined as community theatres. As a general rule, their existence is connected to Catholic parishes or other religious organisations. They perform religious drama, often related to religious festivities such as Christmas and Easter, (there is a huge tradition of passion plays in Malta) but also produce non-religious theatre. They generally receive some support from the mother organization, but sometimes face some degree of pressure to conform to Catholic teaching.

Surprisingly, the range of performances that are produced on the Maltese islands by amateurs is very wide – it moves from melodrama to in-your-face theatre, with musicals being very popular, and even includes opera, where the main parts are sung by professionals flown from abroad but the secondary parts and chorus are performed by Maltese.

One of the advantages that amateur theatres have over their commercial or “Professional” counterparts is that while commercial theatre companies in Malta do not (with one or two exceptions) have their own theatre, amateur companies usually have easy access to performing spaces which belong to parishes and religious orders. This makes it possible for them to keep costs of production very low and also enables continuity of existence which commercial theatre in Malta does not enjoy.

### **The challenges amateur theatre faces**

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the performing community in Malta has felt it to be a priority to be able to claim some sort of “professional status” even though there was never consensus on what this status would entail and what it would be based on. As happens in many other countries, but probably to a greater degree, professionalism and amateur status are considered the opposing ends of a spectrum, and it is the ambition of most actors to lay claim to this professional status, which is expressed as the possibility of making a living from performing.

Unfortunately, there are very few tangible boundaries between professional and amateur theatre. Even the most important venues on a national level, including the national theatre, accept the full range. Funding authorities do not make distinctions between the two, and the criteria for allocating funds are often unclear. The mass media do not discriminate in the attention they give to the different parts of the spectrum, and unless it is clearly specified by the theatre makers themselves it is very difficult for spectators to distinguish *a priori* between amateur performances and others that claim professionalism. In fact, spectators often choose to attend performances in function of well-known, but not necessarily professional, actors. Moreover, ticket prices do not really provide an indication of the level of the performance, except in community theatres, where tickets are usually very cheap. In this situation where

proper distinctions between what is professional and what is not are not clearly made, neither professional nor amateur theatre benefit from conditions that would enable them to develop to their full potential.

Presently, perhaps the greatest challenge that amateur theatre faces is that it is no longer attractive to young performers, for several reasons. The sense of community on which these theatres fed in the past is no longer as strong as it was, with young people having more options for spending their free time. A very important challenge is that of television drama, which though often produces mediocre levels of soap opera, is highly popular. Prospective young actors are easily attracted to the “fame” that is available to them by acting on one of the many television drama series, even if they act practically for free, while more seasoned actors expect remuneration. Thanks to this situation, many television dramas are broadcast, because they are relatively cheap to produce.

Quick transport has also contributed to the dwindling of community theatres, as spectators can more easily attend performances in the main theatres that are mostly situated in the capital, Valletta. Another challenge worth discussing is that of prestige. Community theatres, perhaps with some justification, became associated with badly made theatre, and this label is very difficult to dislodge.

## **Conclusion**

Much research still needs to be done to understand how amateur theatre in Malta functions both through strictly theatre studies instruments and as cultural and anthropological phenomena. It is also worth exploring whether systematic or increased state attention and support can be beneficial to amateur theatre or whether it might lead to a desire to shift towards more commercial or “professional” theatre. Likewise, the role of training and education of performers within the amateur scene needs to be explored better.