



Troubled Waters: The Representation of Refugees in Maltese Theatre

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INTRODUCTION

Malta is at the centre of one of the most important migration routes through the Mediterranean, and the presence of migrants and asylum seekers in the country is a hotly contested political issue in Malta. As will be explained, there has been very limited integration of migrants into Maltese society, and migrants' participation in cultural life is almost non-existent. One would expect the Maltese artistic community to at least take up the migrants' cause and try to give them a voice. This has happened only to a limited extent through painting, photography, poetry, and fiction. However, and of course this is my main concern, migration is hardly ever taken up as subject matter in theatre, whether in the mainstream or in fringe and experimental theatre. While trying to understand the reasons for this near invisibility, this chapter will discuss a small number of performances which took place in Malta during the last decade that speak directly about the issue of migration in the Maltese islands in the context of political and theatrical realities in the country.

CONTEXT

The small size of the three inhabited Maltese Islands has always been linked with a fragility of the eco-system and vulnerability to any outside intervention, usually in the form of colonization. The population of the islands has lived with

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migration for much of their history, whether that be through Malta's population being sold off in other lands as slaves or as economic migrants to North Africa or Australia when the islands could not support all the inhabitants.

During the twenty-first century, however, it has been inbound migration which has often made the news in Malta. Since its accession to the European Union in 2004, the country (a British colony until 1964) has had a remarkably successful economy and has attracted migrant workers, mainly from the EU, to fill vacancies in many economic activities, from construction to gaming, from hospitality to transportation. Besides, like many Western countries, it regularly needs to recruit hundreds of medical professionals and carers from outside the EU, without whose contribution the public health system and old-age care sector would probably collapse. During the same period, Malta has seen a relatively steady flow of migrants reaching the shores on board small boats, or more commonly brought on land after being rescued in Maltese territorial waters by the national armed forces or by vessels belonging to humanitarian organizations working in the Mediterranean. Between 2002 and 2012, 16,617 people arrived in this way, but UNHCR estimated that only around 30% were still in Malta as of 2012 (UNHCR 2015). Numbers of migrant arrivals remained relatively stable during the last decade.

Within the country, citizens consider migration to be one of the major challenges that the country faces, regularly eclipsing corruption or environmental issues in surveys (see European Commission 2016, 6). Mainstream politicians compete to be seen as defenders of the country against migrants, and very little is done to integrate refugees already in the country. They are often underemployed, exploited, and given little protection by the state (Farrugia 2019, 24; *Times of Malta* 2021).

Malta has the habit of turning up at every controversy and tragedy involving migration in the Mediterranean, whether it is for sending back migrants to Eritrea when it was not safe to do so, to end up being tortured (Amnesty International 2004, 30–31) or for its repressive detention policy, for its threat to start a 'pushback' policy, or for its decision to accept the corpses retrieved after tragic crossings, but not any of the survivors. The COVID-19 pandemic made matters worse for asylum seekers as—even when saved in Maltese territorial waters and, therefore, becoming the direct responsibility of the Maltese state—several groups were refused entry into Maltese harbours (Scicluna 2020; Daily Sabah 2020).

Needless to say, migrants are practically invisible in the cultural sphere. Their marginality in Maltese society guarantees that they play no active role in cultural life and are only ever brought in to represent their origins in feel-good multicultural festivities which usually focus on food. The migrant and post-migrant theatre that has become an important voice in the theatrical scene of countries like Germany or Sweden is inconceivable in Malta. It is not an exaggeration to say that the public performances involving migrants that the general Maltese public enjoys most watching are the deportations of failed asylum seekers and the departures of flights resettling migrants and refugees in other

countries, spectacles which feature regularly on national television news and in newspaper reports.

HALF-SISTER ISLANDS: MALTA AND LAMPEDUSA

There have been only a handful of Maltese theatrical events dealing with the issue of migration in the last ten years. Most were small-scale productions based on migrant narratives, some using a verbatim theatre method. The notable exception was the Maltese production of Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa*, staged in 2016 at the St. James Cavalier Theatre in Valletta, directed by Herman Grech and performed by Mikhail Basmadjan and Pia Zammit. In this full-length play written for British theatre, one of the two speaking characters is a fisherman-turned-lifeguard on the island of Lampedusa, an island very close to Malta but forming part of the Italian Republic. As Lampedusa and Malta both have regular and direct encounters with migration, the play struck a chord with Maltese audiences. It was performed both in the original English and in a Maltese translation, as well as in a version where the Italian coastguard spoke Maltese and the Syrian second-generation migrant in the UK (changed from the original Chinese) spoke English. It is interesting that what was probably the hardest-hitting play about migration to be performed in Malta to date was written by someone who does not live in Malta or in the Mediterranean. When the play was performed in the UK, it was criticized as not considering the economic cost of migration on southern European countries (Billington 2015) and for misrepresenting the agency that the inhabitants of Lampedusa have in their encounter with migration (Zagaria 2015). However, when it was performed in Malta, it was seen as a brave and honest discussion of the issue, especially in the light of the hostility regularly shown publicly towards migrants (Wilmer 2018, 64–65).

The significance of the production of *Lampedusa* in Malta has, therefore, to be understood in the context of the dearth of other performances which discuss the issue. During the past decade, very few other theatrical productions have tackled migration as their main topic. The annual satirical performance *Bla Kondixin* (No Conditions), one of the best-followed theatrical events in Malta, often has skits light-heartedly critiquing the treatment of migrants and refugees in Malta. Other productions have always been small scale and generally involved up-and-coming artists or were led by people who are not directly involved in the arts. One example of this trend is *Limbo*, a verbatim piece about migration and integration created by young artists and performed for free during 2016. Another small-scale production was a performance of Heather Raffo's partly verbatim play *9 Parts of Desire*, as part of a project led by human rights organization Aditus in 2012 (Delicata 2012). This play, about nine women from Iraq or of Iraqi descent, many of whom are displaced, focused on the plight women find themselves in because of war. The larger project also included a photography exhibition of portraits of women, one of whom was an Eritrean migrant who told her story of suffering and migration (Tabone and

Falzon 2012). The performers in the play, however, were all ethnic Maltese, implicitly highlighting the invisibility of migrants from the Maltese stage. In recent years, no other performances of note have taken place in Malta that tackled migration. Indeed, in 2019, the London-based refugee Phosphoros Theatre Company had to cancel its shows in Malta, despite having an official invitation, because the travel documents of one of the performers were not recognized, and the troupe was deemed ‘suspicious’ (Mallia 2019).

I will, therefore, try to explain, first, why theatremakers are not very interested in discussing issues of migration in Malta, and, second, how this void is filled by a specific type of performance and one particular performer who would not consider himself part of the theatre community. As already hinted, migration is a political hot potato in Malta, with the two major political parties, who together represent around 95% of the electorate, competing over who appears more muscular when faced with the phenomenon of migrants reaching, trying to reach, or ending up in Malta. This included detention in buildings with ‘inadequate sanitation and hygiene facilities, and allow[ing] no privacy for the detainees’ (Aditus 2021). No efforts for integration were made even after refugees and other persons granted lesser forms of protection were released from detention, as authorities have always assumed that migrants would want to leave Malta and made sure they continued to feel that way. Given very limited access to the labour market, and often reduced to live in very poor conditions, many refugees continued to dream of continuing their journey towards northern Europe, a dream often fuelled by the Maltese government’s policies of trying to resettle as many of these refugees as possible (Nimführ et al. 2020, 161). These measures have proved quite popular in Malta among all sectors of the population.

In this context, taking a pro-migrant stand is associated with radicalism, anti-nationalism, and even irresponsibility. Besides human rights NGOs and a few public figures, a few artists have made their voice heard over this matter. There are also a good number of poets who have taken stands, but in fiction the issue is rarely debated. My reasoning is that many artists as individuals do have a strong opinion about migration, but it is very difficult to develop artistic products on migration that require the work of multiple artists or the mobilization of substantial resources. Unlike poetry, the publication of fiction is a commercial risk for publishers who would not want to antagonize a large proportion of their readers; likewise, theatre productions require investment that in Malta is often partly covered by corporate sponsorship and depends on spectators turning up for shows to recover costs. It appears that highlighting the issue of migration is an unpopular choice and one that most cultural producers are not keen on making.

Considering the small population of the country, one would assume that alienating that sector of the captive audience that is not comfortable with accepting asylum seekers in the country results in great financial losses. *Lampedusa* was backed by a production company called Unifaun, which had a faithful spectatorship, one that had been trained to expect being made to feel

uncomfortable in the theatre, having watched a series of plays in the ‘In-Yer-Face’ style and other provocative works (Cremona 2016, 247–248). In its original run, it was considered successful, having had a run of ten performances in a theatre that seats a little over a hundred spectators. It would be difficult to imagine plays with more disturbing content, or which breached subjects that would be more directly related to uncomfortable local experiences, going into production.

THE SPECTACLE OF SUFFERING

In his book *Distant Suffering*, originally published in 1993, Luc Boltanski discusses how difficult it has become in contemporary society to bring about compassion through representation. Our obsession with scientific objectivity has created obstacles to manifesting what he calls ‘a politics of pity.’ He uses the theatre as a metaphor of how the suffering is given a voice and transmitted from actor to spectator (2004, 26). Reading this idea literally, this transfer requires both the detached and impartial a priori position on the part of the spectator as well as his or her investment of emotional, affective, and sentimental energy to become politically committed. We all know the difficulties this process implies. What Boltanski is suggesting is not a catharsis that can be attained through the representation of tragedy in theatre, but the discomfort that would force the spectator to react. In Malta’s case, this is not even the ‘distant suffering’ that Boltanski has in mind, but an immediate, although not personal, suffering. Taking a stand on this suffering means taking the discomfort that the spectator would have felt in the theatre into their own life. Doing something about it implies doing away with some of the privileges that the spectator enjoys as a Western, probably middle-class human being that allow them to be a theatre-goer in the first place. Seen from this angle it is no wonder that theatremakers and spectators have reached a silent consensus not to approach this subject. When the fisherman-turned-coastguard in the Maltese production of *Lampedusa* shines his torch on individual spectators’ faces while searching for migrants, living or dead (Wilmer 2018, 65), the spectator is thrown out of their comfort zone bought through the price of a ticket. Following Boltanski’s analysis of the reaction required or expected from the spectator when faced with the representation of suffering, they would need to feel pity, to then become indignant as they are unable to take any course of action that would be meaningful for the sufferer whose plight they are watching. This would then lead to anger as the only possible course of action, but as representation (as in theatre) creates a distance between the spectator and the object in the real world that is being represented, anger can only be expressed verbally, therefore demanding an effort from the spectator to shift from being passive to being not only active but also eloquent—that is, performing action that is meaningful (Boltanski 2004, 57). This is a process that the typical theatre-goer will not willingly undertake.

TAKING IT TO THE STREET

There is, therefore, a gap in the theatrical scene that cannot be filled in by conventional theatre, and this is where the *Passaport* project comes in. Poet, translator, and human rights activist Antoine Cassar published the long poem *Passaport* as a booklet in the form and size of a typical passport (Cassar 2016). The poem is a declaration of the author's belief that all humans should be treated equally and allowed to move freely around the world without any discrimination arising from their national or economic background (see Cassar 2017). In very vivid language, it denounces the concept of borders as the root of human trafficking and all the abuse that asylum seekers and migrants go through in search of a better life, or simply of a life. The poem was translated into nine other languages and has been performed at many literary festivals, by the author and by other performers. It has also been used as material for several theatre productions, primarily in French-speaking parts of Europe.

However, I would like to focus on a specific event that can best be described as street theatre that took place in 2015 to coincide with the Valletta Summit on Migration in November 2015. This conference saw European leaders meeting African counterparts in an attempt to solve what they saw as the migration crisis in Europe and billions of euros were pledged to convince African governments to make sure their citizens stayed at home, whatever their reasons for wanting to leave.

Ironically, at the same time it was hosting this summit, the Maltese government was being heavily criticized for a scheme it was publicizing as 'Citizenship by Investment' but which critics consistently referred to as 'the selling of Maltese passports' (Rettman 2020). The Maltese government, especially through regular personal appearances by the prime minister of the time at international 'citizenship' fairs and conferences made a case that acquiring Maltese citizenship was a sensible option for anyone who considered themselves as 'ultra-high net worth' and could afford upward of half a million euro upfront. Beyond the benefits of belonging in a successful pro-business country, the advantages were portrayed as including access to unhindered travel and business opportunities in all EU countries.

Thus, at the same moment that Malta was claiming (like the rest of Europe, but a little more vociferously) that migrants were a burden and had to be repelled, it was offering much more than it was denying to asylum seekers to millionaires who did not appear to be in any immediate danger. This irony prompted Antoine Cassar to stage a short performance, at exactly the same time and very close to where the conference was taking place.

Unlike other performances based on the *Passaport* publication, this performance did not involve the author or any other performer using text from the book. Instead, what spectators encountered was a man standing behind a portable table set up as one would set up a stall in a car-boot sale or a flea market. The items on sale were the *Passaport* publications in several languages, with a hand-written sign hanging from the table: 'MALTA GLOBAL

PASSPORT. ONLY €5 (€649,995 discount). All proceeds go to Integra Foundation.’ The discount referred to was the difference between the price of the book and the cost of a Citizenship by Investment passport as advertised by the government. During the performance, Cassar could be seen promoting his passports, in a way that was not dissimilar to how any Maltese hawker would try to attract customers, by shouting a description of the items he had for sale. He could be heard repeating, ‘You can go wherever you want. No questions asked. No visa. No deportation. No interrogation. No humiliation. Five euros only.’ As a backdrop, Cassar had created the slogan ‘No Border,’ using revolving tiles which are a permanent fixture of Pjazza Teatru Rjal (Borg 2017, 84). This site used to be Malta’s largest theatre until it was bombed during World War II. It was recently transformed into an open-air performance space which has limited possibilities for live theatre. It is the theatre which does not speak, and therefore allows for the theatricality to happen outside its doors, literally on its doorstep.

Conventional theatre has to engage with spectators who form part of society as it is now. Theatre itself is a part of that society and depends on the survival of society as it is for its own existence, or at least it is very difficult to think of an alternative reality. What Cassar’s poetry and his street performances do is bypass all these relationships and engage directly with his readers and (few) spectators, as well as the thousands of people who must have watched the performance online as it was picked up by *The Times of Malta* website. Cassar does not need to apply for funding or in any way converse with the agencies that form part of the same state apparatus that he sees as the source of the problem he wants to challenge. In doing so, he is able to move towards what Giorgio Agamben sees as the unavoidable future of the world, one where states no longer exist, where categories of people dissolve and where the only ‘thinkable figure’ will be that of the refugee (2008, 90).

THE REFUGEE WRIT LARGE

The refugee is also the unlikely protagonist of a theatre production that could not be more different from Cassar’s street theatre. As one of the main events of the Valletta European Capital of Culture in 2018, the foundation in charge of the programme commissioned an opera by its own artistic director, Mario Philip Azzopardi. Azzopardi is a successful stage and television director who has been a prominent figure in the Maltese cultural scene during the last decade (Galea 2019, 105–108). However, he has often courted controversy by making public statements that were considered to be Islamophobic or misogynist. One of these statements was a Facebook comment referring to a young woman as ‘a sorry bitch’ for organizing a protest in central London against the Maltese government’s ‘Citizenship by Investment’ scheme while the Maltese prime minister was attending a gala dinner in the area to advertise the scheme (*The Malta Independent* 2018). A number of comments targeted Islam, equating it with Sharia law and calling Muslims ‘idiots’ who were ‘tied to a set of rules

written 1500 years ago' (Martin 2014). His choice as artistic director of the Valletta European of Culture organization was, therefore, criticized from several quarters. His role as librettist and director of the opera *Ahna Refujjati* (We Are Refugees) was all the more problematic, also as being one of the few offerings in the Valletta 18 programme to seem to be offering clear political content, besides being, by Maltese standards, a very expensive production, costing the Valletta 2018 foundation almost €400,000 and only recouping €16,000 in ticket sales (Parliament of Malta 2018).

The opera is set between an unnamed war-torn country, populated by Muslims, and another unnamed European country, and its plot revolves around a family who witness atrocities within their community and decides to seek refuge in Europe. The general theme is mercy: the mercy that is missing in the refugees' motherland and which they seek in Europe, only to be met with exploitation, walls of indifference, and hostility. The libretto is clearly sympathetic with the plight of refugees and shows them as victims of situations they have no control over. However, the way the refugee problem is framed as an issue that arises simply because of Islamic fundamentalism is problematic. People flee because they see their peaceful neighbours executed in the name of Allah (Azzopardi 2018, 1–2), and this in turn is seen as the absence of mercy in that society. No other explanations are given for the exodus of migrants towards the European coasts of the Mediterranean. The perilous journey of the migrants is condensed into a representation of their crossing the Mediterranean in a crowded boat, where the mother and one of the daughters lose their lives, to be rescued and taken to a facility that seems to be modelled on Malta's infamous detention centres (Global Detention Project 2021), where the little dignity they had left is taken away from them. Further violence and death leads the refugees to make a collective decision to return to their homeland. In the last scene we see the refugees—who after many of the named characters die are seen simply as a crowd and speak as a chorus—perform a very decisive and simple action: 'Refugees enter with their luggage, ready to start their journey back home' (Azzopardi 2018, 18).

Perhaps it is the decision to treat this sensitive material through opera that leads to actions and motivations to be seen as oversimplified and unproblematic. Just like the journey to Europe was represented as a simple, if perilous, trip, the return journey is dramatized just as simply. In terms of text, there are only a few lines between the decision to leave Europe and the final scene with the refugees carrying their luggage. This finale to the opera makes two strong statements, one which is overt and the other which is more covert. The first one is that refugees will never be integrated in European society, as the society they came from and the one they found themselves in are too different. Despite the text repeating utopic slogans about a world where colour and race do not have any significance, the clash between a theocratic non-European society and a secular Europe was highlighted in the first production of this opera, especially through a scene where the refugees were exposed to a series of tableaux depicting clubbing. This difference between cultures is cynically exploited in the

opera by a xenophobic character to foment trouble, but it is also reflected fatalistically as a truism. The second claim that the finale of the opera is making is that for refugees it is easy to return home. The war they had escaped from and that would have destroyed whatever was left of their community is no longer considered an impediment. On the contrary, the last surviving member of the family we saw making the journey at the beginning of the opera speaks for the whole refugee community when she states that their place is in the homeland.

These sentiments are admirable coming from a young refugee, but they are also very comforting for those Europeans who believe that each country should solve its own problems. As recently as May 2021, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, in a damning report, documented cases where the armed forces of Malta, rather than rescuing migrants in the Maltese Search and Rescue Zone, tried to guide them towards Lampedusa or deterred them from approaching Malta through other ways (UNHRC 2021, 15–16, 23). The army is also entrusted with running detention centres in which migrants are kept, often for many months after their arrival. Claims of inhumane conditions, as well as of physical and mental violence, are made on a regular basis. The report quoted above even records a migrant interviewee declaring ‘that some detention centre guards have taunted migrant detainees saying “go ahead, kill yourselves” ’ (33). The opera, therefore, while substantially reaffirming the difficulties refugees face in Malta, offers no solution except their return to the homeland, which is exactly the position of anti-migrant activists.

Another issue that one needs to consider when discussing this opera is representation. Edward Said defines ‘orientalism’ as the body of works created by the West to represent, and ultimately to control, the East. The justification for the creation of this body of works is that the East cannot represent itself, and therefore needs to be represented by the West (Said 1995, ix, 6). This opera seems to be a continuation of the reasoning that created orientalism, even if unconsciously. As we have said, Azzopardi was both librettist and director, while the music was composed by a tandem of a Maltese and a British musician. All the cast is made up of European artists, and there is no reference in the programme to any non-European person (or indeed any person at all) who was consulted with regards to the way refugees are represented. With all its good intentions, the opera becomes another example of the West’s perceived superiority over the East, as well as its inability to engage with their problems. The opera’s finale, with the refugees deciding to go back home, could even be seen as a triumph for prevalent policies within the EU of trying to displace the refugee problem out of European territory, rather than making a meaningful contribution to address the causes that force people to attempt the perilous crossing across the Mediterranean. That it happens to be the largest-scale (and in many senses the most official) offering about the subject coming from a country that has been at the centre of the discourse on migration in the European continent for decades is even more problematic.

CONCLUSION

Malta's encounter with refugees in recent decades has been a troubled one. In many ways, refugees and asylum seekers have become society's others, taking the blame for much that is wrong in the country. As I have tried to demonstrate, Maltese theatre has been generally reluctant to address this issue. Thankfully, unlike mainstream media like television and some newspapers, theatre has not been a part of this othering. However, with only a handful of performances which speak about migration over a ten-year period, the difficulty that Maltese theatre has in engaging with migration is evident. This difficulty perhaps reflects Malta's unwillingness to transform itself into a society that is more open to diversity. It is also a reflection of theatre's interrelatedness with society, on which it depends for its existence, whether it comes from funding that is taxpayers' money or from money spent directly and voluntarily by theatre-goers.

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