

# The Manoel Theatre Academy of Dramatic Art: 1977-1980

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## **Introduction**

The Manoel Theatre Academy of Dramatic Art (MTADA) was Malta's first formal theatre and acting school. It was set up in 1977 through a Technical Cooperation Agreement between the British Council, the Ministry for Education, and the Manoel Theatre.<sup>1</sup> The Academy was placed under the direction of Adrian Rendle, a theatre practitioner from England with considerable experience both as an amateur director at the Tower Theatre, an important amateur theatre group in London<sup>2</sup> and as a professional theatre maker with the Theatre Royal Stratford Atte-Bow company and on the London West End. A former teacher at the Webber Douglas and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, amongst others, Rendle also delivered workshops in a number of former British colonies, including Zambia and Uganda.<sup>3</sup> He was soon joined by Peter Cox, who was engaged as a Theatre-in-Education (TIE) Coordinator, aside from also serving as the Academy's Assistant Director.<sup>4</sup>

This essay expounds on the work of the MTADA during its first few years of operation. (Rendle and Cox left the island in 1980.) Two points frame the exposition: (1) the training given at the MTADA and (2) the possibility of an underlying national dimension to the Academy. Sources used include newspaper articles and press releases, archival material at the Manoel Theatre and, most importantly, a set of about fifteen interviews carried out with various former teachers and students of the MTADA. I would like to thank these interviewees for their time and insightful comments, especially Alfred Scalpello, Charles Falzon, Nathalie Schembri, and Margaret Agius, who were kind enough to

share their photographs of various MTADA productions. I would also like to thank Alba Florian Viton and Averil Bonnici, two Theatre Studies graduates, for their help in compiling and transcribing the interviews.

### **Technical training at the MTADA**

The MTADA offered training in dramatic art to Junior (from 14-17 years) and Senior (18-upwards) classes, across a programme of study that extended over a period of five terms. It initially also ran a separate stage-management course. Two training modes underlined these classes, what I will refer to as 'technical' and 'attitudinal' training. I will discuss the technical training first.

The technical training at the MTADA revolved around workshops in movement, voice, improvisation, interpretation, and rehearsal. Informing these was the Academy's set up as a conventional text-based drama school, with the 'policy of mounting studio productions every six to eight weeks'.<sup>5</sup> This textual emphasis comes as no surprise when one considers that Rendle was particularly proficient in conventional, proscenium-staging of classic texts, like the Greek tragedies and comedies, Shaw, Ibsen, Chekhov, Lorca, and others. The work of the actor was similarly described through a terminology that is synonymous with text-based theatre. For example, in an article in *The Times of Malta*, Rendle wrote that the art of the actor is 'to carry the spoken word clearly forward, to gain flexibility of expression and full use of the sounds. MTADA recognises this need as much as it continues to recognise the need for good emphasis, inflection and diction in English'.<sup>6</sup> This is corroborated by one of the actors (Michael Tabone), who underlined the following as one of Rendle's principles:

Love the script, fall in love with your script, even sleep with it, know every line, get a photographic memory because that is the very basic. When you know the script, every line, it is only then that you may start to give and to interpret.<sup>7</sup>

This text-based emphasis translated into a studio practice that relied on questioning as a form of actor training. Students were thus trained to create three-dimensional characters and situate these within the broader scene or play, a practice that is clearly suited to a text-based theatre. For example, Josephine Fuller speaks about the ‘the way we split it [the character] up and the way we pulled away [its] layers’.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, training sessions at the MTADA often took the form of a ‘master class’, with Rendle asking questions related to the background of the play, the character’s biography, the choices he or she makes, the relationships on and off the stage, and so on. Situating the character within its socio-political context was particularly important, as Margaret Agius notes: ‘No, I do not recall the tutors doing that, telling us how to speak the lines. They tried much more to put us in the context [of the play]. They would speak to us on that’.<sup>9</sup> This is corroborated by Josette Ciappara, who adds that this work on contextualisation would help the students not only to embody the characters but also transmit nuanced meaning about the social environment in which the characters would be situated. She gives the example of John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*. Working on the title role meant that the actress would need ‘to enter in this environment with the social background they used to live in [...]. Therefore I would not be interpreting the Duchess, but society, the soul that I would have had to discover in her’. Ciappara goes on to describe a typical MTADA session as follows:

You start saying to yourself: I am understanding this, but not this, why is this happening in this manner? Who is this character? This way you start entering into the unseen text. He [Rendle] would give you a task, telling you that work on that task would be carried out during a particular period of time. [...] ‘Here is this speech, you have to work on it and perform it.’ Or interpret it rather than perform it. You have to interpret it by that date. You would think that you would be interpreting when in actual fact he would pick on every small intonation, the smallest movement you would do, and ask you questions on that.<sup>10</sup>

Post-mortem evaluation was particularly valued. In these cases, questioning and probing beneath the surfaces of the script and the production were again the favoured training approach.

The broadest spectrum of theatre practice possible was, however, still attempted within this text-based framework. This was clear in the choice of visiting tutors, who were engaged to give six to eight weeks inputs on particular projects. These tutors included Roger Watkins, David Wylde, Lee Dixon, and Hugh Morrison. The latter was a prominent name in many interviews, and his difference to Rendle was duly noted. Morrison was described as much more physical in his approach, one whose ‘theatre was physical before even text and script’ (Josephine Fuller)<sup>11</sup>, and who would ‘work more on movement, not on the word itself, but more on the cheorographical aspect of the scene’ (Lino Mintoff).<sup>12</sup> Stephen Florian believes that it was precisely this wide pedagogical spectrum that contributed to the MTADA’s success: ‘With all the contrast they [the English tutors] presented to one another, they made the thing run’.<sup>13</sup>

Certain productions carried a clear pedagogical intent. For example, the staging of *Fedra* (1978; Racine’s text was translated by Frans Sammut) was conceived as a study of seventeenth-century neoclassical acting. Mario Azzopardi, who directed this piece, described the process as follows:

I researched Racine a lot when we staged *Fedra*. We carried out three or four months work on Racine’s system, like the geometrical arrangement of the actors for example. That’s how I staged that production, on Racine’s notebooks. I would overhaul that if I were to do it now, but the MTADA also had an academic side to it which your students had to take out with them.<sup>14</sup>

The same pedagogical emphasis was evident when the January 1979 intake, which included Michael Tabone and Manuel Cauci, staged as their first acting exercise a shortened version of *The Merchant of Venice*. Tabone described this production as ‘grotesque’ and ‘exaggerated’,



*Fedra*, 1979. Picture courtesy of Josette Ciappara

production styles which on a first level might seem inappropriate for a Shakespearean text. However, the pedagogical formation of the actors took precedence, with Tabone remarking that the ‘exaggerated’ direction not only helped the students to break their initial inhibitions and to work together as a group, but also to ‘relieve the bodies and voices [of tensions]’.<sup>15</sup> This production was also staged by Mario Azzopardi.

### **Attitudinal training at the MTADA**

Underneath these technical aspects of work was the attitudinal training. This is a term that I borrow from Robert M. Gagnè’s study *The Conditions of Learning*. Gagnè defines learning as ‘a change in human disposition or capability, which persists over a period of time, and which

is not simply ascribable to processes of growth'.<sup>16</sup> He identified five varieties of what can be learned: intellectual skills, cognitive strategies, verbal information, motor skills, and attitudes. The latter are difficult to measure, and they include such examples as the 'attitude of precision', the 'attitude of carefulness', 'competition', 'compromise', and so on. Gagné adds that while these attitudes are indeed learned incidentally, there is still a certain expectation that pedagogical contexts like schools contribute to the learning and reinforcement of these and other attitudes.<sup>17</sup> The MTADA can be seen to have partaken in this vision. In fact, the term 'attitudinal' was used by Cox to describe the work of the MTADA when he corresponded with various Secondary Schools. In his own words, the Academy offered 'a thorough grounding in the Art of theatre with a particular emphasis on [the] *attitude* towards it'.<sup>18</sup> Naturally, there was no particular class that sought to 'teach' precision or group work, but these attitudes underlined the training in a way that they could be picked up by the students. They became part and parcel of the everyday work at the Academy, silent presences but present nonetheless. Commitment was central to this attitude and students were barred from participating in other theatrical projects outside of the Academy. This commitment led Azzopardi to describe the actors taking part in *Fedra*, i.e. the first intake, as 'a scrupulously loyal cast'.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that Ninette Micallef, one of the more seasoned students, did not quiet agree with this policy. In fact, she had to decline some offers that came her way when she was still at the MTADA, even though she did appreciate the logistical necessity behind such a policy.<sup>20</sup>

The attitudinal training, or perhaps here 'formation' might be a better term to use, carried with it a certain professional inflection. This was stated in the Academy's aims and objectives, reproduced in many of the programmes of the time as to 'develop basic attitudes to acting and production that are professionally aware'.<sup>21</sup> This professional awareness must have demanded attention from the surrounding theatre context which was then still inherently amateur in nature, as Cremona and Schranz wrote some fifteen years later when they reviewed the scene for the *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*: 'Maltese theatre companies [...] have always been amateur. The country is too



*Fedra*, 1979. Picture courtesy of Josette Ciappara

small to allow anybody to earn an income solely from theatre; thus even the most dedicated actors do theatre in their free time'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the professional background of Rendle, Cox, and the other visiting practitioners was not only a standard to which the Maltese students could aspire, but also an indication of possible developments in the theatrical scene of the time, as I will discuss shortly. Josette Ciappara remembers this professional-amateur dichotomy as something that was talked about, as terms that were used within the Academy. Professionalism became synonymous with commitment, and Ciappara paraphrases Rendle as having said the following:

Listen dear, you are talking here to someone who is a professional, who came from abroad to give you this professional mentality. You will not be a part-time in theatre. You will either give full

commitment or there is no choice. [...] You are expected to attend all rehearsals. You are expected to attend all uncalled rehearsals, and I expect your full commitment. [...] There was no way you could go to a session without knowing the lines. He would say: 'You need to know your lines by tomorrow.' If you go to the session without knowing the lines, Rendle would say: 'Ok, we'll meet another day', and someone else would come in. There was no time for play, there was only time for work and good experience. [...] In this way he would show you that this was not a plaything, a club, but that theatre is something that has to be respected. That the actor has a certain dignity, a certain creativity.<sup>23</sup>

The technical and attitudinal approaches to the training come together in the following statement made by Ninette Micallef. It concerns a comment made on the link between the MTADA and the Manoel Theatre. Technically, Micallef says, the training space at the Manoel was quite limited. The MTADA practiced in one or two rooms, apparently where today is the bar area. The theatre of the Upper Secondary School in Valletta was also used as a rehearsal and a performance space. However, what the space at the Manoel lacked in technical facilities was compensated by the 'theatre vibes' (Stephen Florian)<sup>24</sup> emanating from the building, and the fact that the students felt part of the Manoel Theatre. Micallef continues as follows: 'That I remember very, very fondly. That we were really part of this theatre in a way, [...] the lovely building...it had a soul to it'.<sup>25</sup> Josephine Fuller speaks in a very similar manner:

The real benefit [from the link between the MTADA and the Manoel Theatre] was the fact that you were there. In the sense that spiritually and emotionally and the fact that you were actually in the theatre premises. There was this feeling of belonging to something that was bigger than you. [Interviewer: *The idea of an institution.*] Yes, and the fact that it was at the Manoel with the long standing history behind it was very good. But apart from that the premises no, I don't think there were any real benefits.



[Interviewer: *Just the idea of it.*] The emotional feeling, the spirituality of it more than anything was good.<sup>26</sup>

What emerges here is that any technical difficulties, in this case related to the space, were compensated by the attitudinal dimension that the MTADA exhibited, in this case through its link with Manoel Theatre. Many interviewees commented further on the advantageous link between the Manoel Theatre and the MTADA. It brought a status that ultimately drew people to the Academy, as Lino Mintoff says: 'It was like giving the carrot, even to those that were interested in doing theatre. The Manoel Theatre was the place to be, performing there meant that you had sort of made it'.<sup>27</sup> Margaret Agius agrees with this, saying that it was an 'honour' to be involved with the Manoel.<sup>28</sup> The fact that the MTADA was the first drama school in Malta also engendered a sense of pride among the first cohorts of students (Josephine Fuller).<sup>29</sup> A loop is evident here, as prestige and status brought responsibility into the picture, which further fed the attitudinal dimension of the training. The students had to respond to the standards associated with the Manoel Theatre, a responsibility which further sharpened the commitment of at least the most sensitive students.

### **Formal and Informal Training Practices**

On average, MTADA sessions were about three hours long, and held on alternate week days. The Junior classes met twice a week. Rehearsals invariably increased when productions drew nearer. Semi-official sessions on improvisation were also held on Saturday. These various sessions comprised the formal and visible training of the MTADA. Rendle, however, was also known to give a lot of informal training, and it is this lengthy training that Alfred Mallia chose to speak about when interviewed. Prior to his engagement at the MTADA, Mallia was starting to make a name for himself as a young character actor. Rendle, in fact, had seen him in the cameo part of an old man in the Atturi Theatre Production of Sławomir Mrożek's *Tango*. His first tasks as an MTADA teacher were the Junior Class productions of Karel and Josef Čapek's *The Insect Play* and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. These were followed

by two Assistant Director tasks, one with Rendle himself, the other with David Wylde on a production of John Bowen's *The Disorderly Women*. The important difference was that now Mallia was being engaged on lengthier, senior productions. Underlying these formal tasks was a lot of informal contact time with Rendle, at the MTADA premises or even at the Englishman's home in Mdina, where the work would be discussed. Mallia describes the informal training that took place over these four productions as follows:

Rendle would give you space to work, but without leaving you completely to your own devices. He would support you and every now and then he would attend a rehearsal. [...] This was one of Rendle's strongest points. In retrospect, I could say that he was building me up. In the sense that he would take you from one process to another, from one level to another so that you could mature in the way you direct and relate to the students. [...] Till that point, my training with him revolved more on the fact that he would attend my rehearsals, which we would discuss later. [...] Eventually he introduced me to the Seniors, but he did not put me directly in the cauldron, because among the students there were people who were even more experienced than I was. He would tell me, go and rehearse that character, go through this part, one on one. Sometimes he would tell me, 'Listen, today you take the rehearsal, you carry out the run through.' In this way, even the actors started seeing me as Rendle's assistant.<sup>30</sup>

It was only after this training process, spread over two years, that Mallia was given the responsibility to direct with the Senior Class a full production of Ronald Miller's *Abelard and Heloise*, in October 1978.

Far from a short training programme in direction and actor pedagogy, Mallia's training with Rendle reads as a long-term project that aims at longevity. Such a long-term process of work underlines Rendle's vision for the MTADA. More than quick results, he fully understood that the creation of a solid drama school could only take place over a protracted period of time, which is why he sought to plant roots while allowing

these the time to germinate properly: 'The only thing [possible] was to plan a programme of work based on the simplest professional structure and let the aims of training establish some roots'.<sup>31</sup> To create a sound foundation, he chose practitioners with different skills and theatrical inclinations, and these choices further enhanced the variety of the Academy's tuition. Alfred Mallia was not the only practitioner that Rendle pooled from the Atturi Theatre Productions. Godwin Scerri, one of the leading actors of that company, was also engaged to teach the Junior classes. He was perhaps the most formally trained of the Maltese staff, as he was a 1971 graduate of the Central School of Speech and Drama.<sup>32</sup> Albert Marshall and Mario Azzopardi were engaged to teach the Senior Classes. They were very different directors and teachers. Marshall had directed a number of productions for Atturi, but his name was more synonymous with avant-garde productions such as his staging of *Il-Faust*. Mario Azzopardi, on his part, was immersed in a socially committed theatre. Karmenu Aquilina's position as an MTADA teacher was secured on the strength of his annual passion play productions at the village of Għargħur.<sup>33</sup> Aquilina worked with the Junior Classes and as a producer of Theatre-in-Education (TIE) sessions.

### **The Search for a National Theatre Company**

Beyond these various training practices (technical and attitudinal, formal and informal), the MTADA played a wider role that linked it directly to the socio-political context of the time. As a starting point to this part, I would like to draw attention to the following two sources. First, I will refer to two similar statements made in separate interviews. Josephine Fuller says that Rendle 'really tried to build something but, like I said, we really didn't know what'.<sup>34</sup> The ambivalent word 'something' surfaces again in another interview, this time with Stephen Florian: 'In terms of what the school was made of, even though it was giving results, I think it was a potpourri of events trying to settle into something'.<sup>35</sup> It is on this 'something' that I would like to expound, by calling upon a second source. A newspaper article was published in the *Times of Malta* in January 1980, at a time when the MTADA was

suspended over a dispute related to whether the Maltese staff should be given complimentary tickets to attend the students' performances. *The Times* correspondent wrote about the broader dimension of the MTADA. He quoted Malta's then Prime Minister (Duminku Mintoff) as having said in Parliament that 'in the field of theatre culture we have not even started to walk' (*'f'dik li hi kultura teatrali ghadna lanqas biss bdejna nimxu'*). The correspondent underlined MTADA's contribution to this field and, therefore, questioned its closure: 'How can we expect the up-and-coming generation to take culture seriously if the Government's Academy of Drama set up in 1977 has now closed down for reasons which are not clear at all?'<sup>36</sup> Taking my cue from these two sources, I will argue that the MTADA was envisaged as a platform to create such a 'theatre culture' or 'theatre scene', one that, crucially, aspired to the national consciousness prevalent at the time.

It is, of course, both presumptuous and incorrect to say that there was no theatre scene before the 1977 opening of the MTADA. After all, theatre practice in Malta had by then already witnessed some important milestone events and productions, practices which as a common denominator all exhibited a desire to supersede the practice of *teatrin*. These included, amongst others: the festivals of Greek dramas held at the Ta' Giorni theatre in the 1960s; the development of the more physical idioms adopted by research groups like Pamela Ash's Clique, Theatre Workshop, and Henri Dagg; the more in-your-face evenings of *Xsenuru?*; Francis Ebejer's productions of his modern texts; and the formation in 1974 of Karmen Azzopardi's and Paul Naudi's Atturi Theatre Productions, and its development as Malta's closest attempt to a repertoire company. However, what was missing was a full-time theatre context, and I would like to suggest that it is specifically this void that the MTADA was set up to eventually fill.

In those years of pre-European funding, the only way in which such a professional attempt could even be conceived was through Governmental backing, which lent the Academy a marked national dimension. Some indications point in this direction. First, there is the surrounding political context. For example, the following statement made by one of

the first-intake students (Lino Mintoff), though historically incorrect, is very revealing: 'When the opportunity came up, after the change in Government, the MTADA was set up'.<sup>37</sup> This is incorrect because the change in Government occurred in 1971, with the MLP winning again the 1976 elections. The MTADA was set up a year later, but what Mintoff does here is to link the MTADA with the Labour Government of the time, a Government which was responsible for the setting up of several national bodies and institutions like Sea Malta (in 1973), Air Malta and Tele Malta (both in 1974).<sup>38</sup> Situated as it was at the tail-end of the 1970s, and in such a strong institutionalised context, it is not difficult to associate a national dimension to the MTADA, especially when one considers the strong links which it had with the Ministry for Education.

This link between the MTADA and the Ministry for Education can be discerned from the correspondences between the two, letters which the Manoel Theatre has scrupulously archived more than any other documents related to the Academy's operations. In one letter to Dr Philip Muscat, the then Minister for Education, Rendle expressed his satisfaction on having the MTADA linked to national educational programmes: 'I am glad that the MTADA programme of acting exercises in training can be made part of [the] feature which happily combines with the use of the New Lyceum and the enrichment courses'.<sup>39</sup> He saw this link as an opportunity to secure employment both for his staff as well as for the graduating students. It is also through the channel of the Ministry for Education that Rendle asked for more human resources, especially needed to take the Junior classes, and for more training space. In fact, his conclusion to a May 1977 correspondence reads as follows: 'Without permanent premises (plus the availability of a practice theatre) and approval for both technical and academic expenditure the Drama training course will be severely impeded'.<sup>40</sup>

The second indication is provided by the cultural rather than the political context. Post-independence Malta was marked by an active search for what might constitute the national identity of the Maltese people.<sup>41</sup> This was corroborated by Lino Mintoff, who described this search as a national movement:

These were progressive years. We were trying to find our identity, because we were always [following] what the foreigners would do for example. We were trying to find out what we could do, what distinguishes us from others. [...] This movement was taking place not only in theatre but also in other realities like literature, and in the organisation of things.<sup>42</sup>

The MTADA contributed to this movement with its choice of repertoire. Many texts in English were staged, but an attempt was made to balance these with various Maltese translations of classics (including *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Blood Wedding*, *Jubilee*, *Lower Depths*, *Roots*, and other). The intention was also to stage original works in Maltese, ‘where viable’<sup>43</sup>, but this proposition had to wait at least some years to come to fruition. The choice to stage works in Maltese, however, intertwined the MTADA in the broader national movement that identified language as an ideal indicator to mark the emerging’s nation collective identity.<sup>44</sup> Rendle fully supported Maltese productions. His reasoning was that the people with whom he was working, both at tutor and student levels, were to be given the time to mature in order for them to then claim ownership of the local theatrical scene. As Josette Ciappara says, Rendle could often be heard saying: ‘Listen this is your theatre. It is your responsibility’.<sup>45</sup>

The third indication is offered by the first and second intake of students, who joined the MTADA in March and in September 1977 respectively. These groups were a mixed batch. Some were clearly beginners, with little or no theatrical experience. The MTADA was, therefore, their very first step into a theatrical career. These included personalities like Josette Ciappara, Josephine Fuller, and Nathalie Schembri. However, other students were seasoned actors with much more experience, people like Joe Quattromani, Alfred Scalpello, Lina Galea Cumbo, Ninette Micallef, and Lino Mintoff. The latter, for example, says that ‘we [seasoned actors] were already acting, and we were already known to work for the general public’.<sup>46</sup> Running across the MTADA of those years, but especially within these more experienced actors, was a mute understanding that the Academy was indeed serving as a launching

pad for a possible full-time, perhaps national, theatre company. Being a member of the MTADA meant a better chance for that which, even today, many practitioners still aspire to, i.e. full-time employment as a performer.

Consequently, Lino Mintoff spoke about the training offered at the MTADA by using terms like 'formal' and 'official'. He hoped that his previous experience would be substantiated by 'the official uniform education' of the MTADA because as actors they had already taken interest and informed themselves, through reading and face-to-face encounters, with what was happening on the continent. However, these experiences were not formalised or recurrent enough, and 'the MTADA had sort of given us the formal status, [...] some formal recognition of the technique we had'. The Academy thus served as a rubber stamp, a mark of status that one had indeed gone through the 'professional' training, given by professional practitioners and built on professional continental models, and which ultimately differentiated one from more amateur and amateurish contexts: 'You were legitimizing that which we were doing. [...] [The MTADA] eventually gave us a framework'.<sup>47</sup> In this context the combination of young and seasoned actors would have been conducive to create a strong and self-sufficient company, one that would exhibit actors of different ages and with different acting registers.

The formation of actors is, however, only one facet operating within any theatre scene. No theatre scene can flourish without a dynamic audience, and the MTADA gave this its proper attention through its various outreach programmes. The short-lived Mobile Theatre Project was among these. Directed by Mario Azzopardi, the Project consisted of touring productions by a group of MTADA graduates in various local towns and villages. In May 1979 they presented *L-Erwieħ tal-Qiegha*. The project was intended to 'substitute the obsolete form of *teatrin* which still plagues the mentality of most theatre-goers'.<sup>48</sup> Excerpts of some plays were also presented during the TV show *Metronomu*, while serious dramas like *Hedda Gabler* and *Saturday, Sunday, Monday* were also filmed for television. These television production featured both MTADA graduates as well as teachers.<sup>49</sup>



*Hedda Gabler*, 1978. Picture courtesy of Charles Falzon.  
L-R: Charles Falzon, Marthese Brincat, Monica Fenech

Theatre-in-Education (TIE) productions were an integral part of this outreach, if not its main feature. TIE had three objectives. First, it contributed to the national educational curriculum because plays staged featured in 'O' and 'A' Level syllabi. These included projects revolving around the dramas of Oreste Calleja and William Shakespeare.<sup>50</sup> Other projects included, among many others, extracts from or full productions of Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*,<sup>51</sup> Arnold Wesker's *Roots*<sup>52</sup> and a production based on a Japanese documentary called *Minemata*.<sup>53</sup>

Second, TIE productions provided another acting and training outlet. Josephine Fuller says:

TIE obviously taught us a lot because audience reaction and audience participation when it comes to children is very different, so you have to be very flexible and even change an ending if you have to. [TIE experiences] were great [...] like I said because children are such an honest audience and it teaches you a lot of



how much you can actually get back. I think everybody should go through a TIE program because it really gives you a lot back that you wouldn't normally get if you did something for an adult audience. [...] I think it plays a very important part in theatre training.<sup>54</sup>

The third objective was a long-term one, and TIE sessions served as a locus to 'create' a future audience, one that would be more theatrically sensitive after having encountered good theatre at an early age. In this sense, Ninette Micallef explains that the MTADA played a socio-cultural rather than a political role because, more than staging political pieces, it brought theatre to the schools, and in this way it could 'change people's perspectives on certain things'.<sup>55</sup> In other words, it is through TIE that the understanding and practice of theatre as a full-time profession was to be promulgated: 'the only way that acting can come to mean a responsible job rather than a part-time interest is if the educational aspect is taken seriously enough to create a permanent company that services the TIE programmes'.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

In my conclusion, I would like to assess the MTADA's merits as well as any particular difficulties met during its first years of operation. The success of the MTADA is best seen in its graduating students, many of whom became active players on the theatre scene of the 1980s and after. These former students contributed to the growth and development of theatre in Malta. Among these one finds practitioners like Margaret Agius, who underlines how it was the Academy that had brought her to the attention of groups like the MADC, Atturi Theatre Productions, and, especially, Koperatturi. Therefore, the MTADA was also a scouting place, with theatre directors and producers being invited to witness first hand possible actors for them to engage. As one drama critic wrote while reviewing the aforementioned television production of *Hedda Gabler*, 'the services of MTADA in the past few years have added a wealth to the acting capacity that was available'.<sup>57</sup>

A number of practitioners involved in the more politically oriented work of the 1980s were also former MTADA students. Michael Tabone speaks about these practitioners and their link to the Academy in the following terms: 'MTADA, I think, gave most of the actors and even directors some of those ideas [on socio-political theatre]. Because they used to tell us to read and to do your research. It was a mind opening experience'.<sup>58</sup> Some members of A-teatru, like Stephen Florian and Dominic Said, were former MTADA students.<sup>59</sup> One should also add practitioners like Anthony Bezzina and Joe Quattromani, who opened their own theatre and performance schools. Another name worth mentioning is that of Josette Ciappara, who not only contributed significantly to the development in Malta of Theatre-in-Education, but also served as the Director of the Malta Drama Centre M.A. Borg in Blata l-Bajda.<sup>60</sup>

The MTADA was also responsible for broadening the repertoire of the Maltese stage, with Paul Xuereb writing in his review of Bertolt Brecht's production of *Il-Mara Twajba ta' Setzwan* (*The Good Woman of Setzwan*), directed by Albert Marshall, that '[o]nce more we stand indebted to MTADA for presenting another major play to which Malta has so far been a stranger'.<sup>61</sup> Other plays which were rarely ever produced before or since include: *The Insect Play* (Karel and Josef Čapek), *The Life and Death of Almost Everybody* (David Campton), *The White Devil* (John Webster), *The Revenger's Tragedy* (Thomas Middleton), *Tartuffe* (Molière), *Tiger at the Gates* (Jean Giraudoux/Christopher Fry), *Black Comedy* (Peter Shaffer), *Ring Around the Moon* (Jean Anouilh/Christopher Fry), *The Mask and the Face* (Luigi Chiarelli/C.B. Fernald), *John Gabriel Borkman* (Henrik Ibsen), and others.

The actual actor training given, however, is where the crux of the matter lies, and it seems that the MTADA did form its actors in the attitudinal training but less so in the more technical aspects of the actor's craft. This emerges from the interviews carried out, with only Ninette Micallef signalling technique as consequential of her MTADA training: 'that's why I wanted to join, to improve my technique. [...] Yes, it was always interesting and refreshing to work with new directors. [...] Mainly



*Hobson's Choice*, 1978. Picture courtesy of Alfred Scalpello.

L-R: Josette Ciappara, Alfred Scalpello, Chales Wyatt

I improved my technical skills rather than anything else'.<sup>62</sup> More attitudinal answers to the question 'What did the MTADA give you?' included 'the joy of discovery', 'confidence', 'a new sort of discipline in theatre', 'seriousness in our work', 'passion for theatre', and, in two separate cases, 'strength of character'. In fact, when processed through the lens of some thirty or forty years of performance work, a number of interviewees did remark in retrospect on the lack of depth in the technical training. It was only a starting point, described in one case, by Michael Tabone, as 'the abc. At least you know that these things existed [...]. At the MTADA I learnt the very basics, maybe it was the kindergarten level for me'.<sup>63</sup>

The MTADA's overall structure as a part-time, evening school meant that the training always fell short when compared to continental models like RADA and the Webber Douglas. One former student remarked that any success she might have had in her roles was achieved intuitively rather than through technical know-how, a characteristic of amateur practice in general within which the MTADA was situated and from

which at the end of the day it could not break free. Stephen Florian adds that the Academy was also limited in terms of resources: 'Ok, we had a bundle of rooms as a drama school, but did we have a gym to train stunts for example? No. Were there any proper spaces? No. They were all rehearsal rooms basically and they were used in such a way'.<sup>64</sup> Voice work seems to have been a particular problem. For example, one reviewer for the December 1978 production of *The Inspector General*, directed by Albert Marshall, commented on the diction, which was 'far from clear'. He added that '[i]t would seem that diction and voice production is one field where the Academy could do much more'.<sup>65</sup> This was confirmed by another reviewer, who commented on the same production that '[c]lear diction seems to be a major hurdle for most of the actors and MTADA should remedy this in future productions'.<sup>66</sup> At the time the MTADA did engage a certain Mary Field for speech and voice tuition, but her classes seem to have been restricted to Saturday morning sessions at her own place in Sliema.

Still, the achievements of the MTADA during the 'Rendle years', discussed here as the contribution to the national issue, the formation of future practitioners, the attitudinal training, and the broadening of the repertoire, should not be underestimated, nor should they go unnoticed by contemporary scholarly analysis as well as today's training contexts and schools. In a way, the MTADA paved the ground for future developments in actor training by creating an awareness that acting is a skill that can be trained and, therefore, systematically developed, an awareness which, arguably, paved the ground for the Theatre and Drama schools in operation today.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Ylenia Carabott, 'L-Istorja tat-Twaqqif taċ-Ċentru Tad-Drama', in *M'Hemmx Bżonn Siparju*, Mario Azzopardi (ed.) Ċentru tad-Drama M.A. Borg (Malta 2012), 61-2.
- <sup>2</sup> Alfred Mallia, 'Drama Schools and Drama Training', *The Manoel. Journal of the Manoel Theatre*, II, 1 (2000), 40-6.
- <sup>3</sup> MTADA, Performance Programme of *Jubilee and Black Comedy*, 1977.
- <sup>4</sup> *Times of Malta*, 9 June 1978.
- <sup>5</sup> *Times of Malta*, 9 June 1978.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 19 August 1979.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with Alba Florian Viton, 14 October 2013.
- <sup>8</sup> Interview with Alba Florian Viton, 18 October 2013.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with the author, 1 October 2013.
- <sup>10</sup> Interview with the author, 3 October 2013
- <sup>11</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Alba Florian Viton, 10 October 2013.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview with Alba Florian Viton, 15 October 2013.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with the author, September 2013.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>16</sup> Robert M. Gagnè, *The Conditions of Learning* (New York, 1977), 3.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 232.
- <sup>18</sup> Manoel Theatre Archives 798: 40, 'Correspondence with all Senior Schools Government and Private', Peter Cox, 11 December 1978.
- <sup>19</sup> *Times of Malta*, 24 December 1978.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Alba Florian Viton, 1 November 2013.
- <sup>21</sup> MTADA, Performance Programme of *Cavalleria Rusticana and Bodas de Sangre*, 1979.
- <sup>22</sup> Vicki Ann Cremona and John J. Schranz, 'Malta' in *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre Europe*, ed., Don Rubin, Peter Nagy, Philippe Rouyer (London 1994), 585.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with the author.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>25</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with the author.
- <sup>29</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with the author, 4 November 2014.
- <sup>31</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 19 August 1979.
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with the author, 2 February 2013.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with the author, 13 February 2013.
- <sup>34</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>35</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>36</sup> *The Times*, 21 January 1980.

- <sup>37</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>38</sup> Desmond Zammit Marmarà, *L-Almanakk tal-Partit Laburista* (Malta, 2005), 89, 221, 325.
- <sup>39</sup> Manoel Theatre Archives 798: 61, 'Correspondence with Dr Muscat on the Enrichment Courses', Adrian Rendle, 20 November 1979.
- <sup>40</sup> Manoel Theatre Archive 798: 7.
- <sup>41</sup> Oliver Friggieri, *L-Istorja tal-Poezija Maltija* (Malta, 2001), 82.
- <sup>42</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>43</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 19 August 1979.
- <sup>44</sup> Oliver Friggieri, *Il-Kuxjenza Nazzjonali Maltija. Lejn Definizzjoni Storika-Kulturali* (Malta, 1995), 99.
- <sup>45</sup> Interview with author.
- <sup>46</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>47</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>48</sup> *The Times of Malta*, 12 May 1979.
- <sup>49</sup> *The Times of Malta*, 18 February 1980 and *The Sunday Times*, 9 March 1980.
- <sup>50</sup> *The Times of Malta*, 3 October 1979 and 28 September 1978 respectively.
- <sup>51</sup> MTADA undated programme.
- <sup>52</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 18 November 1979.
- <sup>53</sup> The Times of Malta, 28 September 1978. The TIE work carried out by the MTADA during these years was much more extensive, and it deserves its own independent study. For a brief introduction to this work see Carabott, 70-2.
- <sup>54</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>55</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>56</sup> Education Division 46/47:1, Volume 1, 'The Manoel Theatre Academy of Dramatic Art, quoted in Alfred Mallia, *Classroom drama in Malta: the key to creativity* (University of Malta, unpublished MA thesis, 2002), 41.
- <sup>57</sup> *Times of Malta*, 17 February 1980.
- <sup>58</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>59</sup> *The Times*, 17 November 1982.
- <sup>60</sup> Carabott 75.
- <sup>61</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 22 July 1979.
- <sup>62</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>63</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>64</sup> Interview with Florian Viton.
- <sup>65</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 17 December 1978.
- <sup>66</sup> *The Times*, 20 December 1978.