

DECEMBER 8, 2018

# Christmas TIMES

TRADITIONS

What the dames wore

GLITZ AND  
GLITTER

*Roast, bake and mix*

TIMES  MALTA



# Christmas

## TIMES

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### EDITOR'S NOTE

There is something in old photos. Perhaps a particular tone which only colours the past, rather than the present. A patina of the past that suggests, unlike the long, speaking parts that belong to the gloss of the present.

Maybe it's the way people struck a pose for photos – self-aware yet shy. And smiles which speak no words but, unable to read the future, hint at hope.

Describing his favourite Christmas photo, Nicholas de Piro d'Amico Inguanez recalls a moment – captured in the sepia tones of an old photo – of the family gathered on Christmas Day in 1971. The drawing room is decorated for the festive season. The presents are unopened, waiting their moment of ripped glory. And the Christmas tree sits on the grand piano, strutting its hour upon the stage.

"It's a glimpse of something that is no more," Marquis de Piro says. "A painful and happy memory."



Memories are like onions – a weeping condensation of layers that simultaneously hold pain and happiness. It's like the grand opening to *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope."

A few days will pass and this Christmas will be a memory. It could be happy or painful. And it could be both. But it will be a memory – and in time, memories go beyond their first reading and achieve a complexity that is not bound by adjectives or adverbs; a preciousness that shines from behind a photo.

Stanley Borg



### LIVE CRIB IN LIJA

A derelict farmhouse in Robert Mifsud Bonnici Street, Lija has been transformed into a walkthrough live crib, complete with a waterfall, mechanically-propelled windmill and animal pens.

The crib is being blessed by Archbishop Charles Scicluna today and will be open on weekends and public holidays until December 25.

Oranges, honey rings, date-filled pastries and mulled wine, besides other Christmas-related items, will also be on sale at the premises.

COVER PHOTO BY ALISTAIR LOWELL

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This publication is being distributed with the *Times of Malta*.

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Isabel Warrington.  
PHOTO BY DRAGANA  
RANKOVIC



# IT'S A KIND OF MEDIEVAL MAGIC

Two of this year's pantos take the middle ages as their inspiration. **Veronica Stivala** goes behind the frills, the glitter and the wonderful silliness of the dames' costumes.

## SHE'S GOT BEANS!

An axe, a toilet roll, a *borma*, a reusable shopping bag, food supplies, deodorant... You will be forgiven for thinking this may sound like the shopping list of an environmentally-friendly giant. And you would not be too far from the truth, as they are the items Lady Frakassat (played by Michael Mangion) carries around with her.

Despite being a poor lass with just a cow and a rickety roof over her head, Lady Frakassat has quite a wardrobe. The mother of Jack, of the eponymous beanstalk, this larger than life lady has eight

costumes: she starts off with a racy number since she has to resort to the oldest profession to earn her living – however, being such a resourceful character, she still manages to conjure up a different costume for every scene as the story unfolds.

Isabel Warrington, the talented fingers behind the costumes is excited to be designing for Mangion's first solo dame.

"I'm really looking forward to seeing what character he'll create," she enthuses.

A fan of simple, clean lines, she admits going outrageous is not always easy. Though this is key when designing for the dame. >



One of Isabel Warrington's sketches for Lady Frakassat's costumes.



Some of the cast of *Sleeping Beauty*.

The dame is called Nanna Kola, so the ladybird features a lot in her designs. She is Princess Aurora's Nanny so she has a lovely matronly quality about her, mixed in with a little bit of dare-devil (as seen in her first Born to be Wild costume...). Of course, she is full of life and very cheeky, so her costumes reflect that too.

Mercieca was a huge influence on the designs, they explain.

"His is a traditional dame, big and blousy with a heart of gold and he likes more traditional costumes." The designers explain how they are always quite inspired by the styles of the British dames, but then like to give the costumes "a bit of a Maltese twist". Mercieca's dame is very curvy and they enjoyed playing up on his figure: he wears a very padded bodysuit

– the bodysuit alone weighs a considerable amount – then the sequins and glitter are piled on. "It's no wonder he loses weight over the course of the run," giggles Mulholland.

She adds how the fact that "Mercieca is an old hand at this sort of thing and can make just about anything work", they still try to make sure that the costumes suit whichever scene he has. So, for instance, if it's the chase scene they make sure he has enough leg-room to actually run! The two dressers Mercieca has to himself are worth their weight in gold as they strip off one costume and have him completely re-dressed, accessorised and shod in a matter of seconds.

Star among Mulholland's favourite

Nanna Kola in FM's *Sleeping Beauty*.

dame costumes is the World Cup-inspired costume.

"It's so colourful and funny and the headpiece is amazing," she comments. She also half reveals that they have a few 'trick' costumes which transform into something else "but [is] not telling [us] any more than that"!

One of the most fun parts, they reveal, has been the making of the hats and headdresses.

"They really knew how to rock a wimple in those days and they paid a lot of attention to their hair and their hats," comments Mulholland, who goes on to say how she has had a lot of help to make "all the crowns and hennins and escoffins – and we have extended our vocabulary to actually know what those words mean". As has this writer. ✨

*Sleeping Beauty* is being staged at Teatru Manoel at 3pm and 8pm on December 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 and January 2, 3, 5. There will be another show on January 4 at 8pm and on January 6 at 3pm. Tickets are available from [www.teatrumanoel.com.mt](http://www.teatrumanoel.com.mt)



“The dame is a caricature, traditionally played by a man, who is the central character in the panto, so right from the start you need to think of exaggerating the features and making her look larger than life,” she says, adding that “it’s lots of fun because you can be as creative and silly as you want”.

Lady Frakassat is rather loud and coarse but she does try to look her best, despite her poverty.

“This was a good starting point for my designs,” notes Warrington, who also found inspiration in Malcolm Galea’s witty and entertaining script which gave her lots of scope to experiment.

Speaking further about inspiration, Warrington reveals how she likes to design according to the actor’s physique and mannerisms. Mangion is of average height and has good proportions, therefore she chose to make him look like a woman who’s past her prime, a bit stout but doing her best to cling on to her youth.

“I did this by giving him full skirts, fake corsets and big boobs. The high heels, accessories, hair and make-up all help enhance the vulgarity of the character,” she comments.

Now, while the big costumes are great fun for both audience and designer, they need to be practical. That, agrees Warrington, is part of the challenge.

“When designing for the stage, especially a production like panto, you need to keep the actor’s comfort and safety in mind as well as technicalities like quick changes from one costume to another.”

Apart from that, there are also the limitations of the set. Very often the dame emerges from some bizarre contraption or ‘flies’ in, therefore it’s important that you know what their intended movements on stage are going to be before you start designing. She explains how striking a balance between being bombastic and practical is a collaboration between the set designers, backstage crew and costume department who discuss any issues during the production process. However, she admits, there are instances when unforeseen issues crop up when they move to



Lady Frakassat in MADC's Jack and the Beanstalk.

the theatre. These have to be addressed during the technical rehearsals to ensure there are no hitches on curtain up.

With the story being set in medieval times, Warrington has been given a golden opportunity for costume design. One of the most bizarre items of the medieval period is the headgear.

“I think it must have been the era when hat designers were the most creative. This was the ideal inspiration for the dame’s headdresses!”

Just from the costumes, the production already sounds like a lot of fun, as panto always is. Warrington is adamant to acknowledge the team of skilled people who helped turn her sketches into a reality. She adds how it has become more difficult to find such people because, sadly, many tend to choose more lucrative careers, but she encourages those who love the stage to come forward if they love the other side of the stage too.

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*MADC's Jack and the Beanstalk will be performed at MFCC Ta' Qali at 7.30pm on December 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 and January 3, 4, 5, 2019, with matinee performances at 3pm on December 26, 29, 30. Bookings now open at [www.madc.com.mt](http://www.madc.com.mt). Tickets start from €10 and are available at a reduced rate for children aged three to 11. Children aged two and under enter free with a toddler ticket but must have a reserved seat with parents or guardians.*

## BIG AND BLOUSY WITH A HEART OF GOLD

Pointy hats galore and lots of veils, some World Cup references and a sci-fi futuristic scene... even writing about panto has you put the oddest of phrases next to each other.

Marika Mercieca and Denise Mulholland have been having a ball designing the costumes for FM's *Sleeping Beauty*.

“Designing for the dame is always fun because there are no limits. You get an idea, such as a giant birthday cake hat complete with candles, four tiers of sponge and icing and nobody says, ‘Oh no, that’s too much’. Plus Edward [Mercieca, the dame] is a really good sport, even though some of the headpieces weigh several kilos and cause a lot of neck-ache he never complains,” they note enthusiastically.

The role of costume designers for panto gave their imagination “the opportunity to really run riot which is refreshing and it encourages you to think more creatively”. They were spoilt for choice with the beautiful medieval fairy tale of *Sleeping Beauty* and “really went all in for the middle ages style this time and tried to include an element of that styling in each of the dame’s costumes”.