

## THEATRE IN MALTA

by JOE FRIGGIERI

THE two most popular forms of theatre in Malta are farce and melodrama. These are the main ingredients of what the Maltese call *tijatrin*, a term which, generally speaking, refers both to a type of theatre as well as to an entire evening's entertainment *at* the theatre.

Until quite recently, and especially before the advent of television and its spread to the majority of Maltese homes, the theatre provided the main source of entertainment for a very large section of the local population. A number of amateur theatre-companies used to go from village to village and present a three- or four-hour programme consisting of a very long 'serious' first part (*id-dramm*) and a shorter light one. The whole evening could also be divided into three sections of more or less equal length. In this case the programme (referred to as a *trypticb*) would open with a tear-jerker (*dramm*, *buzzett*, or *melodramm*), to be followed by a 'social comedy', *vudvill*, or farce and a light-weight melee of sketches and songs (*il-varjetà*) at the end.

*Tijatrin* is still very popular in Malta, in spite of its more recent and sophisticated rivals in the field of entertainment. The most popular venue for *tijatrin* is the village parish-hall. Here, under the watchful eye of the parish-priest, the vulgarity of some of the farces is kept down to a minimum and the didacticism of the drama further emphasised.

Almost invariably the situation in *tijatrin* is contrived, the plot either perfectly predictable or with a twist at the end which is hardly ever the natural result of what has gone on before. Actors will go out of their way to give the audience their money's worth of laughter or tears by generous ad-libbing. A couple of our more popular actors are in fact notorious for their ad-libbing, and sometimes it is difficult to control this even when they are taking part in a more sophisticated production.

## FARCE

There are two types of farce which form an integral part of every local company's repertoire; one is imported, the other local. Imported farce is the result of loose translations or adaptations of French and mostly Italian third-rate sketches whose authors are hardly ever acknowledged in the programme. It is based not so much on the exchange of witty repartee as on the exaggeration of physical defects, insults flung between the irate wives of gullible husbands, and the mishaps of well-meaning but rather dim servants who fail to carry out their masters' orders and as a result create widespread confusion and chaos. Hackneyed technical devices such as mistaken or double identity, wild goose-chases, talking at cross-purposes and 'double-entendre' are employed.

There is, however, a second type of farce which is much more 'Maltese' in situation and choice of characters and which, I think, deserves to be cultivated and developed. I intend to say something about this 'genre' later.

## MELODRAMA

Not uncommonly the subject chosen for melodrama is religious. In the prologue the plot is laid, while in the three acts that follow, the sufferings of a young martyr at the hand of a merciless and unscrupulous tyrant in the early days of Christianity are revealed in extreme and excruciating detail.

An example of the unexpected but welcome twist at the end is the conversion of the villain through a miracle just before curtain down. Another device which is looked forward to is the crowning of the saint in heaven amid the joy and glory of more experienced saints and winged angels. A variant on this is often the story of a more contemporary saint – such as a young virgin defending her purity against the assaults of a sex-maniac, or someone miraculously healed at Lourdes.

The Passion of Christ, with a cast made up of over a hundred actors, veterans and newcomers, is still the main theatrical attraction during Holy Week, alongside the processions in full costume with statues and characters from the Bible parading through the streets of a number of towns and villages. On these occasions the whole village becomes a natural stage. In recent years there has been a revival of these processions, and they have now become a well-advertised tourist attraction.

A more elegant variation of melodrama for the middle-classes was that of Italian Opera at the Royal Opera House in Valletta before this was destroyed by bombing in World War II.

## REALISM

More serious drama, involving more complex themes and requiring a more natural style of acting and greater discipline from actors working together under the control of a director, is of more recent origin. The effects of Realism only started to be felt in Malta after the War, mainly through the works of Ġużè Diacono, Gino Muscat-Azzopardi, and Ġużè Chetcuti, who aimed at ridding the theatre of improbable situations and blown-up styles of acting, and at replacing them by plays which depended much less on far-fetched plots and *coups-de-théâtre* and contained a rather heavy dose of social comment aimed at portraying the less attractive side of the Maltese character in a realistic light. They all seek to expose, in more or less similar ways, the hypocrisy of a closed community hiding under a veneer of self-righteousness, the 'holier-than-thou' attitude of middle-class gossipers, the hatred lurking behind the dark suspicious looks of village-women in their black dresses peeping from behind closed shutters in the heat of long summer afternoons. Spiteful and sarcastic remarks are made by people whose main business in life is to probe the private lives of others, reveal secrets, and try to unravel the mysteries surrounding real or imaginary scandals. The dialogue is venomous as the web of rumour spreads round the victim and leads to an explosion of violence with tragic results.

## EBEJER

In the early Sixties, mainly as a result of the tourist industry, new currents of thought and ways of life were introduced into an insular Maltese milieu. 'To the average, conservative Maltese', as Professor Serracino-Inglott puts it, 'it was as though a life-long addict to native folkdances had lost his head and fallen over his heels overcome by the whiskey-laden whiffs of jazz'.<sup>1</sup> A similar effect was produced by Francis Ebejer's new kind of theatre which 'happened' at the same time. One can say that Ebejer burst upon the Maltese theatrical scene with his first three-act play *Vaganzi tas-Sajf* (*Summer Holidays*) in 1962, setting the trend for a more mature and modern approach to our theatre and bringing it in line with the best modern thought and technique.

The Ebejer phenomenon came like the proverbial bolt from the blue. When nobody was quite expecting it, Ebejer brought us face-to-face with a Maltese way of expression that revealed a new wealth of possibilities.

*Vaganzi tas-Sajf* had won First Prize in the first-ever play-writing competition organised by Malta's National Theatre, the

Manoel in Valletta. In 1964, two years after *Vaganzi tas-Sajf* and the year of Malta's Independence, came *Boulevard*, a sweeping, evocative and ironic look at the human condition conceived in terms of 'total theatre', and three years later Menz. Ebejer's English play, *Cliffhangers*, was, like all his other plays, produced by the author himself and acted by a Maltese cast. This creative period culminated in *Il-Hadd fuq il-Bejt* (*Sunday on the Roof*), staged in 1971 and described as a 'national happening', the like of which had not been known in Malta ever since the good old days of Italian Opera at the Royal Opera House.

There are many factors which account for this sudden acquisition of fame, this rise in Ebejer's popularity; but it seems to me that two stand out more clearly than others. The first is Ebejer's change of style, or rather the widening of his expression, reflecting the different facets of this writer's exciting personality: from the theatre of ideas in *Vaganzi*, to symbolist-absurdist in *Boulevard*, to social-symbolic in *Menz*, to naturalistic in *Il-Hadd fuq il-Bejt*, to the use of folk-themes in *L-Imnarja Żmien il-Qtil* and *Meta morna tal-Mellieħa*.

Secondly, people's thoughts in the very early sixties had begun to veer towards the idea of political Independence. There was an outburst of enthusiasm for the arts inspired by the search for a national identity, and some of the old yardsticks did not apply any more. Our theatre desperately needed someone to point out the way and Ebejer had come along, after his long and successful apprenticeship in radio-drama. This is why the year 1962 – the year of *Vaganzi tas-Sajf* – is regarded as the beginning of a new and powerful Maltese dramatic tradition.

Ironically – and this is a pointer to what I described earlier as an intriguing development – Ebejer's best work so far, *Boulevard*, came in 1964, near the beginning of his chequered career in the theatre. At this time the right theatrical climate had not yet been created and a much later play like *Il-Hadd fuq il-Bejt*, which is less complex technically and thematically, would perhaps have been received better.<sup>2</sup>

#### EXPERIMENTAL DRAMA

There have been one or two good efforts in experimental drama during the past few years which I think deserve a mention. *Theatre Laboratory* (which later changed its name to *Teatru Henri Dogg*) directed by Mario Vella, a philosophy student now doing post-graduate research in London, used the Grotowski technique in a rather impressive production of Antonin Artaud's *The Ċenci* and in a dramatised adaptation of *Moby Dick*. This group was also respon-

sible for the choreography for Charles Camilleri's major work for organ, the *Missa Mundi*, having had a request to present a Maltese translation of Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice* turned down by the censor.<sup>3</sup> Some time later *Teatru Workshop*, directed by Albert Marshall, who works as a director for Television Malta, gave a memorable performance of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* in Maltese.

#### WHICH WAY TO GO

For quite some time now a long discussion has been going on in the correspondence-columns of the *Sunday Times of Malta* in connection with Maltese theatre.<sup>4</sup> Various correspondents have given reasons why they think the Maltese are very reluctant to watch what has been called 'serious drama' – by which is meant, generally, the 'classics', ancient and modern. A Maltese repertory company – *The Atturi Theatre Group* – was set up two years ago with the intention of staging a play a month. It has provided a very small section of British residents, with their regular fare of entertainment, ranging from plays by Ibsen, Chekov, Pirandello, Ugo Betti, and Tennessee Williams to third-rate British sex-farces which have been their greatest box-office successes. This fact has been acknowledged by *Atturi* on many occasions. It is also a recognised fact that the Maltese working-classes (the 'less well-educated classes' as they've been referred to in one of the letters) do not as a rule sponsor *Atturi* productions. And it would be as unrealistic, I think, to expect the Maltese worker to accept the type of bourgeois theatre provided by *Atturi* in one form or another, as it would be undesirable to try to convert him to it.

There is, I think, one sane policy to be pursued vis-à-vis this problem. It involves a theory of the theatre which is quite different from the one held by the present established local companies. It involves the creation of a new kind of theatre which considers the street, the factory, the school as its premises; which does not aim at 'attracting' the public but at going out to them, especially the working-classes, from whom it tries to receive on-the-spot adhesion.

The aims of this kind of theatre are not 'cultural' in the sense that word is used in bourgeois slogans like 'culture for all' or 'cultural democracy', but political, aimed, that is, at bringing about solidarity among the workers through an increase of their 'awareness', and at changing existing social structures. It seeks to change the stage-public relationship by inviting active participation by the group.

This kind of theatre in Malta still does not exist. In order to be successful it would have to be rooted, I think, in popular theatre –

or *tijatrin*.<sup>5</sup>

I referred earlier to a type of Maltese farce which deserved to be considered separately. This was a vehicle for social satire and offered the only occasion for the whole village to laugh at the expense of characters taken from the higher echelons of society – the lawyer, the notary-public (*in-nutar*), the doctor, the chemist (*l-ispiżjar*). These were the 'untouchables' of Maltese society, the privileged classes, and in farce they all came in for their fair share of ridicule. The humble peasant's down-to-earth common-sense was used as a weapon to deflate the lawyer's bombastic 'latinorum'. The notary's renowned tight-fistedness and the parish priest's platitudinous sermonising were two other targets for this kind of farce.

I think that this satirical aspect of *tijatrin*, if cleverly exploited, could offer many possibilities for the development of popular theatre in Malta. The characters and plot could easily be updated to reflect the changes which have gradually (and at times not so gradually!) changed the face of post-War and post-colonial Maltese society. The style of acting and the various 'heightening' effects of *tijatrin* can still be used; but they ought now to be made to bear on the contemporary situation, to throw light on the various problems which concern the people very closely but which they might not have succeeded as yet in focussing clearly.

This idea of theatre as a medium for creating social awareness, theatre as a political weapon using the style and techniques of *tijatrin* and developing its satirical aspects, still has to be given a chance. It is an illusion to think that the theatre – like the Church, or education – has ever been 'above politics', or will ever. If we want to create a new living theatre for our people this is, I think, what we should keep in mind and try in some way to put into effect.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> *Contemporary Art in Malta*, (Richard England ed., A Malta Arts Festival publication, October 1973), Introduction p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of Ebejer's plays, see my essay in *Contemporary Art in Malta*, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Censorship in Malta has always been an extremely irrational and arbitrary affair. In 1970, for example, a request by the *5-Arts Drama Group* to present Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* was turned down by the

ensor on grounds of homosexual traces in the script. Seven years earlier, however, Elia Kazan's film version of the play had been shown locally, homosexual kiss and all!

In an appendix to his first collection of three-act plays, Francis Ebejer tells of his ordeal with the censor in 1962 before his prize-winning play *Vaganzi tas-Sajf* could get its 'nihil obstat' from the Police Headquarters to be performed in public. The censor's objections on this occasion ranged from the ludicrous to the downright insane. A perfectly innocent phrase like 'sexual urge' had to be changed to 'outward beauty', 'the Face of God' became 'the reality of life', et cetera. (*Id-Drammi ta' Francis Ebejer: Menz, Boulevard, Vaganzi tas-Sajf*, appendix, Lux Press, 1970).

In 1969 the Censorship Reform Group sent a memorandum to the Minister of Post strongly deploring the injustices of the Censorship Law and asking for some of its provisions to be updated or repealed. The memorandum dealt with anomalies in the case of imported literature, but most of what it said about the arbitrary nature of censorship in Malta could also be applied to the theatre and films. (*ARTI*, n. 5, July 1974, pp. 130-132).

<sup>4</sup> *Sunday Times of Malta*, May 23, 1976, p. 16, and letter pages of the following weeks.

<sup>5</sup> In 1971, the Social Action Movement sponsored a small group of actors and directors interested in the idea of street theatre, and a number of successful performances were held in village squares. The idea was taken up again in 1974 by the *Centru Espressjoni Popolari* which sought to bring about a fusion of elements from the related fields of liturgy and drama. Both ventures, however, were rather short-lived.