



Malta is one great film location - Vittoriosa Wharf becomes a Christopher Columbus film set

tinsel island

Malta is not quite the Hollywood of the Mediterranean, but it is one big film set, posing as everything from Jamaica to ancient Greece, and all the bits in between.

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Photos: KRS

A year or so back, I was sitting in a café in Prague, when I got chatting with some Czech students. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, one of them asked me where I was from. When I replied "Malta", most of the faces assumed that familiar: "Ah, I see....(but I don't)" expression. One of them ventured: "Malta?...Oh yeah, wasn't that where they made the film *Midnight Express*?". An interesting response, and it's not the first time my home island has rung a bell with people who have never heard of Dom Mintoff or Hagar Qim or the eight-pointed cross. However, they have come across us indirectly through some



movie which was shot here, and in which Malta has played something else altogether.

In the case of *Midnight Express*, it was Turkey, or at least director Allan Parker's version of Turkey. Malta has also played Jamaica, Spain, Africa, New England, ancient Greece, India, Mars, and even the Arctic wastes. These islands have been described by a succession of film-makers as one big film set, and it's true. We may be a bit pushed when it comes to simulating downtown Manhattan or the Rhondda Valley, but with a little art department ingenuity, we can look like most places.

Major film and television companies have been shooting films in Malta for over 40 years. This may surprise some people, who believe our film industry began with the building of the famous surface tank at Rinella, in the early 1960s. But we were providing locations long before

took off. The driving force behind the project was the English special effects wizard, the late Jim Hole. He knew Malta well, and with half an eye on location possibilities, had scouted the area around the Rinella coast quite thoroughly. He put his idea for the construction of a surface tank to the then government, and the film facilities were up and running.

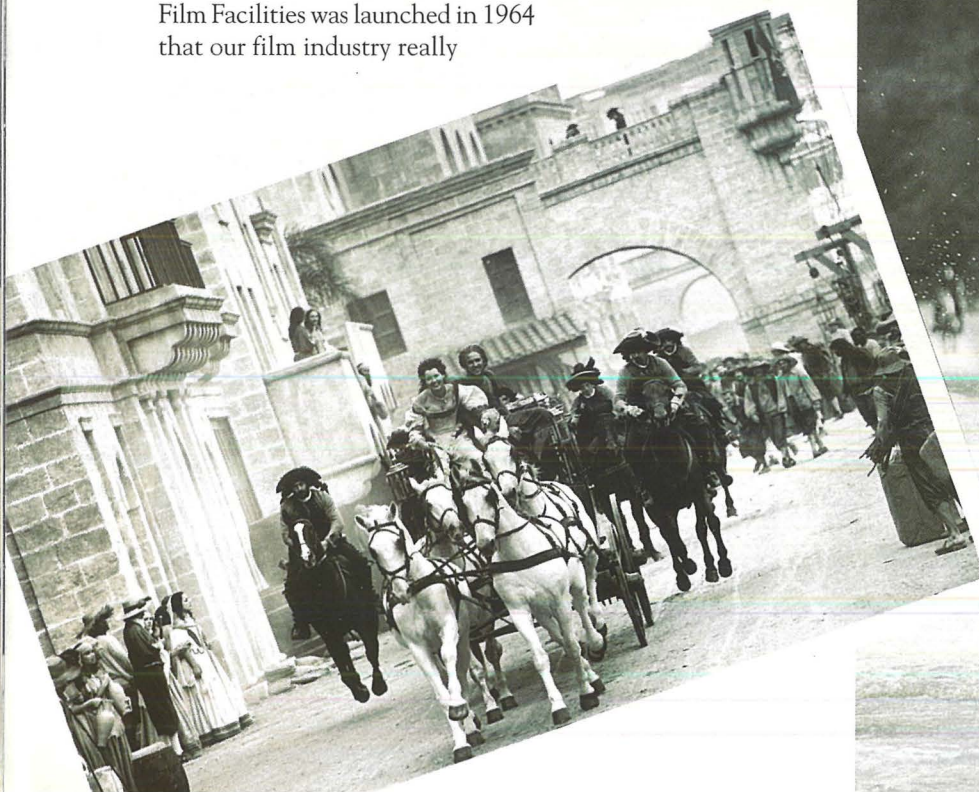
Jim Hole's ingenious - and at the time, unique - idea was to build a tank above the rocky shoreline. It would be filled with water pumped directly from the sea, and would have a 300-foot artificial horizon facing the ocean. This 'horizon' took the form of a weir arrangement, by which a constant spill of water along the sea-facing side of the tank created the illusion of infinity, when the camera was correctly positioned. Thirty years on, the tank is still in unvalued operation, and as effective as ever.

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that. The first major movie to be shot almost entirely in Malta was *The Malta Story*, which was released in 1952. Judged by today's hard-nosed standards, it comes across as a rather soft-centred piece, but in its time it was fairly typical of the post-war British film industry. Starring Alec Guinness, Jack Hawkins, and Anthony Steel, it dealt somewhat selectively with Malta's role in the Second World War, when the islands were a British colony. Even the leading Maltese characters were played by British actresses, Dame Flora Robson and Muriel Pavlow. By contrast, when *Treasure in Malta* was shot here 10 years later, practically all the leads were played by Maltese. This was a low-budget picture aimed at a young audience, and it is still trotted out occasionally on UK children's television.

But in truth, it wasn't until Malta Film Facilities was launched in 1964 that our film industry really

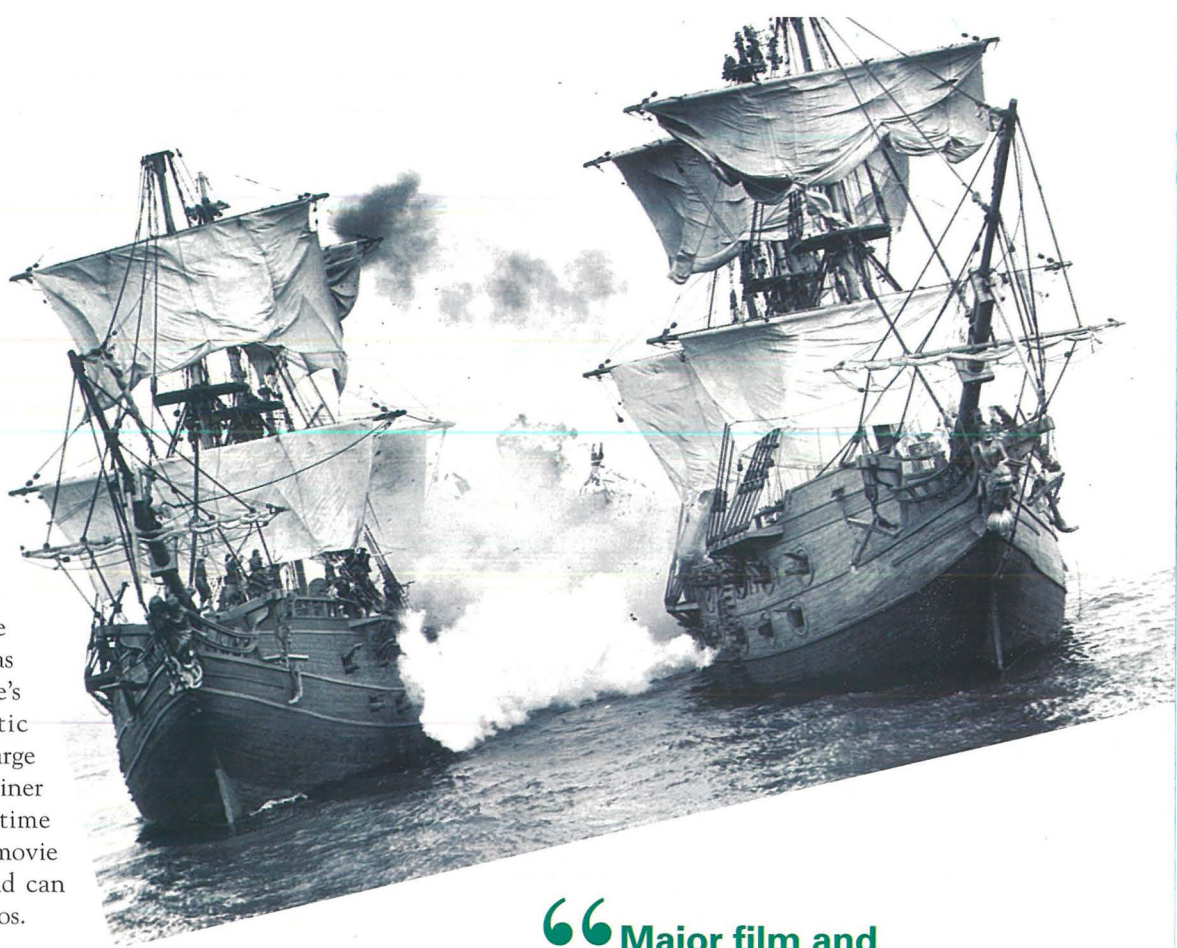
Malta Film Facilities grew up around this tank. Workshops, a stage, dressing-rooms, wardrobe facilities, make-up rooms, production offices, catering premises, all clustered round it. Later, the 19th century Fort St. Rocco,



on a hill close by, was used as an administrative centre.

Rechristened the Mediterranean Film Studios, Malta's film-making centre has continued to expand. A second, and deeper, natural horizon tank was added, in which controlled underwater shots could be taken. This last tank was built for Sir Lou Grade's financially apocalyptic *Raise the Titanic*. A large model of the ill-fated liner has stood the test of time rather better than the movie in which it starred, and can still be seen at the studios.

The *Titanic* was by no means the only box office disaster to have been shot here. Another picture which didn't exactly set Oscars night ablaze was Robin Williams' first starring vehicle, *Popeye*. Yet it did bequeath us its set of Sweethaven Village, up at Anchor Bay in the north of Malta, and this has been a popular tourist attraction for many years. But all 'disaster movies' pale into insignificance beside *Cutthroat Island*, much of which was shot here in 1994. This film has acquired the dubious distinction of being the biggest financial flop in film history.



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But the Mediterranean Film Studios have also hosted their fair share of hits, including *Midnight Express*. But apart from these high profile productions, the tanks and facilities have been used for television series like *Howard's Way* and *Remington Steel*, and countless commercials.

The Maltese islands have many attractions for movie-makers. Apart from the tanks, we have the best natural light in the world, excellent weather - which means fewer delays - competitive wage rates, and a plentiful supply of skilled labour. The studios have recently been acquired by a Maltese-Canadian media entrepreneur, Charles Falzon, and his acumen, allied to the other assets mentioned, should mean that the future of the Maltese film industry is set fair. **HF**

