

# Theatre in Malta: Amateur Practice and Professional Aspirations

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**Vicki Ann Cremona\***

## **Abstract**

This article provides a general outline of theatre in Malta where the small size of the archipelago (316m<sup>2</sup>) makes it difficult to develop professional theatre. It evaluates the issues theatre faces when confronted by political constraints that affect cultural policies and outlooks. It looks at the growth of theatre education in Malta that has raised standards and demand for professionalization of theatre. Productions in English and Maltese are discussed, and the changes in attitude and the emergence of new authors are highlighted. The article also considers the disadvantage of the lack of proper theatre criticism and how this can contribute to raising standards and attendance.

**Keywords:** Malta, amateur, income, politics, culture, pantomime

Malta has no fully professional theatre. Those involved in the theatre in Malta cannot rely on it as a sole source of income (if, indeed, any income at all). Anyone wanting to perform on stage has to have a principal job; consequently, theatre is looked upon more as a hobby than as a profession. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to describe the Maltese theatre scene as being, in essence, "amateur." This determines both attitudes and choices: although children are encouraged to do theatre to develop their personalities, they are discouraged from taking it up as a profession.

Amateur companies range from community theatres, which cater solely for the inhabitants of their parish, village or town, to bigger companies, which also produce performances at the main theatres in and around the capital, Valletta. The two oldest theatre organisations are the Malta Amateur Dramatic Club (MADC), founded in 1910, with a membership of approximately 220 members (which makes it the largest theatre association in Malta), and the Ghaqda Drammatika San Lawrenz in Gozo, founded in 1945 (a community theatre catering mainly for a small village of about 750 inhabitants). Like many other such companies, Ghaqda Drammatika stages the traditional Easter passion plays, Christmas pageants and other plays and types of performance.

## **Politics and Its Effects on Culture and Theatre**

The development of theatre in Malta has to be viewed within the context of the political two-party system which affects all sectors, including the cultural administration of the country. There is no Ministry specifically dedicated to culture; the sector has been attached variously to the Ministry of Education, Tourism, Parliamentary Secretariat for Youth and Sports and, currently, to the Ministry for Justice, Culture and Local Government.

The Malta Council for Culture and the Arts was created in 2002, and, for the very first time, it launched an Arts Fund in 2009. A national cultural policy was established in 2011, and, the following year, Malta won the bid for European Capital of Culture (ECOC) 2018. Following a change in government in the 2013 elections, the new government repealed the 2002 law and created the Arts Council, Malta, changing the Council's senior management, committee members and the Chairman and management heading ECOC. The cultural policy was never fully applied, and evaluation criteria for the Arts Fund did not retain the same rigorous arms-length principle that had been applied formerly. Many theatre practitioners had pinned their hopes on the fact that the year-long capital of culture would contribute to a leap of quality in the arts in general and theatre in particular. The lack of a clear policy, proper artistic direction and holistic planning did not provide the necessary impetus to push theatre in new directions.

Official data concerning theatre attendance has not been collected over the past six years, and the statistics published by the National Statistics Office (NSO) date back to 2012. They indicated a very low percentage of theatregoers with an average seat-utilisation rate of 58 per cent. Each performance was shown twice on average, and six performances were staged by each theatre. There is no indication that there has been a major rise in theatregoing in the last few years.



Scene from *Raymond "Fight" Beck*. Photo: Zvezdan Reljic

The national theatre organisation Teatru Malta, launched in 2017 by the Arts Council, is a promising step for theatre development. The organisation is affiliated to the European Theatre Convention (ETC). It is described as a "theatre without walls" because it does not

have a fixed company or repertory. It is run on the basis of short-term projects (weeks or months at best) which bring together different artists who disperse once the project is over.

All the staff at Teatru Malta, as well as those of the National Dance Company, are contracted as service providers, which means that, technically, they are self-employed. Teatru Malta's artistic director, Sean Buhagiar, aims to attract new audiences to the theatre. In order to achieve this, he has turned to new themes in his programming and direction, such as boxing, as in the play *Raymond "Fight" Beck* (performed 2018)<sup>[1]</sup> by André Mangion, which brought boxing fans into the theatre for the very first time; or bird trapping (which is popular among a certain section of the population), in *Nassaba—Song of A Bird*, conceived by artist and writer Jimmy Grima. Other initiatives include the launch of an annual youth festival *Trikki Trakki*, where children perform productions specially conceived for them and directed by national leading directors such as Josette Ciappara and Malcolm Galea.

Video 1



[Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/NWfWA8mMOIE](https://youtu.be/NWfWA8mMOIE)

*Raymond "Fight" Beck*: starring Davide Tucci and John Montanaro. Direction: Sean Buhagiar. Photo: Zvezdan Reljic. Video editing: Franco Rizzo

### **The Financing of Theatre**

Although a large number of performers work for free, companies have to face costs for hiring the space and production, which can prove challenging and, ultimately, selective; especially in the more important theatres situated in Valletta, which are state-owned. Theatre companies rely mostly on box office returns or auto-finance themselves in case of difficulty. A few actors may be considered semi-professional; this is also the case for a

few theatre entrepreneurs, such as Stagecoach or Helen O'Grady, who, besides running their own theatre companies, have opened schools which are either franchises of British part-time performing arts schools, targeted mainly at children and young adolescents, or new initiatives of their own, such as Masquerade or Studio 18.

Whereas "amateur theatre is dependent on social networks, friendship and shared histories" (Nicholson et al. 7), the semi-professional companies emerging from drama schools seek pecuniary gain from their activities, and the payments they ask for are much larger than the small fees that are sometimes paid to those who consider themselves amateur. A handful of companies are registered NGOs, which allows them to open a bank account.

Limited funding for theatre productions is provided through the Arts Fund. The Arts Council, Teatru Malta and certain festivals (in particular the Malta International Arts Festival) also commission productions. Certain costs are avoided through co-production with state institutions, which enables theatre companies to avoid the cost of hiring the theatre and its equipment. Co-producers also share marketing costs. Other limited sources of funding come through private sponsorship. Certain community theatres, especially those belonging to the Catholic Church, are provided free of charge or at low rates. The University of Malta, which owns a state-of-the art theatre in the capital, Valletta, grants reduced rates to theatre projects that are in some way linked to education.

Funding difficulties are often a determining factor in the choice of repertoire. NSO 2012 statistics show that comedy was, at that time, preferred to drama. Moreover, the most popular theatre attraction is certainly the Christmas pantomime. Indeed, in many cases, box office returns from such productions help to finance a company's whole season, including other, more risky initiatives. The pantomime, originally produced by members of the British services, was performed in English exclusively by MADC between 1969 and 2007, when the financial gains it reaped attracted other companies, which now also include pantos in their annual repertoire. Meanwhile, companies performing exclusively in Maltese, notably Bronk Productions and Kumpanija Teatru Rjal, also started to perform pantos with an eye to financial benefits.



FM Productions: Edward Mercieca as the Dame in *Sleeping Beauty*. Director: Chris Gatt. Musical Director: Kris Spiteri. Photo: Justin Mamo

Two variations on the Christmas pantomime in English have also proved to be huge crowd-pullers. *Comedy Knights*, consisting of a series of satirical numbers targeted at an adult audience, was launched in 2013. More recently, in 2018, the production *Gawgaw. Panto in the Dark*, written and directed by Marta Vella and Vikesh Godhwani, was produced with the intention of including a visually impaired audience. It plunged spectators into total darkness for the entire performance, which used binaural technology. The performance, which took place in Malta's interactive science centre, Esplora, was commissioned by Teatru Malta.

### **Theatre Education**

A few private primary and secondary schools provide theatre as a subject in the school curriculum. Theatre is also taught in state schools at primary level by peripatetic teachers from the Drama Unit, but the teachers manage to visit each individual school only a few times a year.



A scene from the Festival *Trikki Trakki*, organised by Teatru Malta. Photo: Elisa Von Brockdorff, Trikki Trakki Festival 2019, Teatru Malta

Pedagogical efforts have increased awareness and demand for a more professional theatre. The University of Malta founded the Theatre Studies and Music Programmes in 1988, and these, together with Dance Studies, have grown into departments within the University's School of Performing Arts, offering degrees at Bachelor's, Master's and Ph.D. levels. It has also introduced theatre as a subject to be taken at baccalaureate level. Collaborative efforts between the University of Malta, the Arts Council and Spazju Kreattiv led to outreach courses in scriptwriting for the theatre. The Arts Council has collaborated with other public entities in providing a summer Master's class in scriptwriting that focused mainly on cinema in 2019. The Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) is now also offering courses in Theatre Studies.

Although theatre is not usually seen as a source of regular income, theatre education is highly sought after, especially on a part-time basis. Many of today's older leading actors originally received their training in this way at the Manoel Theatre Academy of Dramatic Art (MTADA), founded by the state in 1977 on the basis of a Technical Cooperation Agreement with Britain. The school offers part-time after-school and evening courses in drama; it was placed under the responsibility of the Education Department in 1994 and renamed the Malta Drama Centre. In November 2019, the school inaugurated the "Alumni Stage Troupe," made up of former students. Many private schools offering training in the performing arts have also been created. Although the more renowned are run on professional lines, the state has not enforced the obligation for instructors to have the right qualifications to teach, which has meant that levels of instruction and training vary greatly.

Other, smaller initiatives contribute to actor training, such as the annual one-act play competition by the MADC where relatively inexperienced actors, directors and writers are given the opportunity to produce a play, receiving mentorship by experienced actors and backstage crew. Following the competition, they are also provided with detailed feedback by the judging panel.

### **Theatre Spaces**

A study of theatre spaces has revealed a large number of small theatres with a seating capacity of less than 300 scattered all over the Maltese islands (Cremona et al. 2016/17). Following the publication of the study, the Arts Council launched a funding scheme to help improve theatre spaces and render them more professional in order to encourage decentralisation.

The greater number of these spaces belong to the Catholic Church and were formerly the main place of entertainment for parish communities. They also functioned as cinemas and many are now used as multi-purpose halls. The largest theatre owned by the church has an 833-seating capacity and is housed inside a multi-use building called the Catholic Institute, situated just outside Valletta. It is the venue of many performances given by amateur groups performing in Maltese, which attract a popular audience. Other theatres are situated in schools, and while some also serve as community theatres or are rented out, others are only used for school purposes. Companies are generally reluctant to tour their performances around Malta; nonetheless, Teatru Malta has encouraged this trend and has taken its productions to different localities.

The most important theatres are situated within the capitals of the two islands. The most prestigious is certainly the Manoel Theatre, built as a public theatre in 1732 by Manoel de Vilhena, Grand Master of the Order of St. John, which ruled over the islands for almost 300 years. This baroque theatre seats approximately 572 spectators. The number of theatrical performances given there has diminished in the past few years; this is due to the theatre programming (which favours concerts and operas), the high prices required to hire the theatre and the increased availability of other venues over in recent years.

Modern and contemporary performances are often housed in the theatre-in-the-round situated within the sixteenth-century building of St. James Cavalier Centre for Creativity (a venue which was recently rebaptised Spazju Kreattiv, and which seats 186 spectators),<sup>[2]</sup> or at the University of Malta's Valletta Campus theatre (which can house an audience of up to 250 and also hosts contemporary dance). Large productions are staged at the Malta Conference Centre, formerly the Knights' Sacra Infermeria, which hosts a 1,400-seat theatre.

An open-air theatre was built within the ruins of the Royal Opera House that was bombed in 1942; productions are staged there mainly in summer. The City Theatre, which was formerly part of the premises of the General Workers' Union, is also used sometimes. Alternative spaces include a disused hotel, situated in Strait Street, formerly Valletta's red-light district, and even a pub.



The interior of St. James Cavalier Theatre (Spazju Kreattiv)

Gozo, too has a series of theatres spread over the island; however, the two most important ones—the Astra and Aurora theatres—are situated on the main street of the capital, Rabat, also known as Victoria. Both have a seating capacity of over 1,200 and are run by Philharmonic societies, which include musical clubs that are affiliated to the two main churches of the town. These societies stage operas once or twice a year; such performances can only take place thanks to public funds, sponsors and, most importantly, the involvement of an army of at least 200 volunteers. The Astra also organises the annual Festival Mediterranea.

#### **Authors, Actors and Repertoire: Theatre in English and Maltese**

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, under British colonial rule, the choice of language was an important political issue. Up to the early twentieth century, Italian was the language of the courts and administration and spoken by polite society. British colonial policy imposed the use of English, and substituted Italian by English in the Maltese courts in 1914, following the introduction of English in schools in the 1890s. The fact that the new language was taught through Maltese provided added status to the local language, which was mainly spoken until the first official grammar was established in the 1920s. Maltese and English became the official languages in 1934.

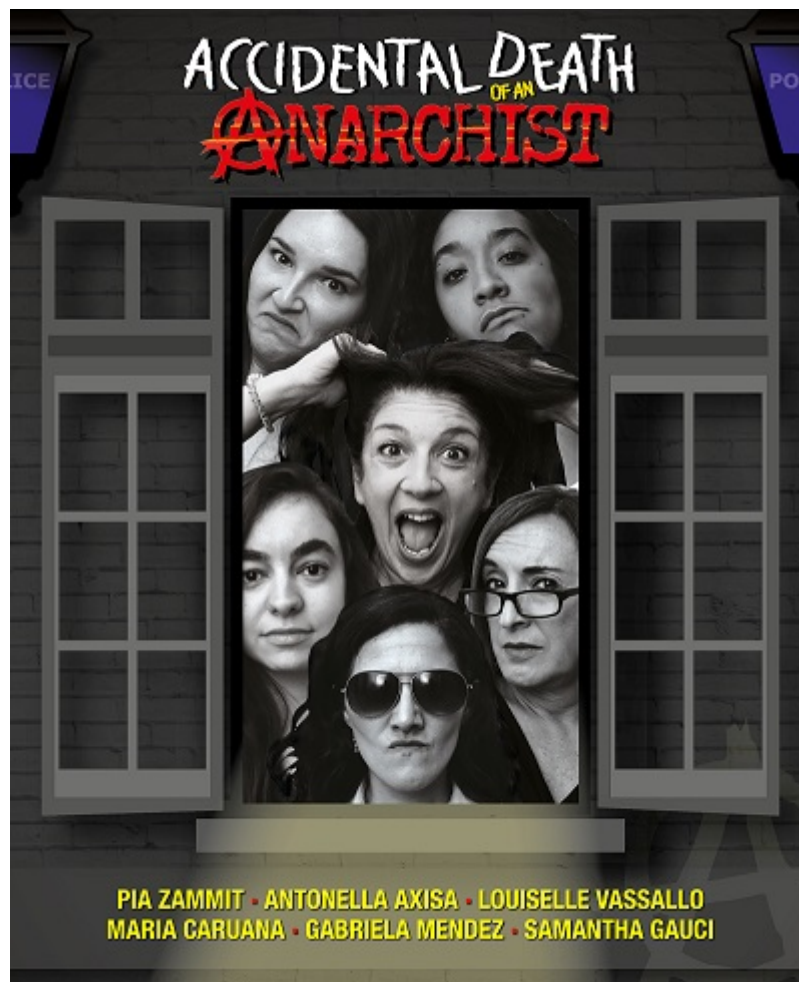
Whereas in the past theatre in Maltese appealed to more popular audiences while that in English attracted higher social echelons, this distinction is far more blurred nowadays, especially in the case of upcoming writers who produce scripts in Maltese.



Whereas local community theatre tends to be performed in Maltese, the bigger companies perform both in Maltese and in English. Some larger companies, especially those appealing to more popular audiences, perform exclusively in Maltese, while others, targeting a different type of audience, opt almost exclusively for English.

Repertoires in English consist mainly of plays written by British or American authors, ranging from Elizabethan to contemporary writers. The MADC has been staging a play by Shakespeare every summer since 1951, generally in the gardens of the presidential palace of San Anton in Balzan. Its repertoire is very wide-ranging, with recent productions including Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2020) to the more recent *Skylight* by David Hare (2017).

Other companies, such as Masquerade, which owns a blue-box theatre, focus more on contemporary plays, such as *Venus in Fur* (2017) by David Ives and Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* with an all-female cast; while FM productions has also staged various musicals, the most recent being *We will rock you!* (2019).



Masquerade: *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Directed by Ian Moore

Unifaun Theatre Productions, which stages productions both in English and Maltese, has often staged controversial “In-yer-face” plays. Its production of Anthony Nielson’s *Stitching* was initially banned by the state censorship board (Cremona 247). The

company fought against the ban for ten years both in the Maltese courts and at the European Court of Human rights in Strasbourg, where they finally won their case. Their cause contributed to removing state censorship in the theatre.

Theatre in Maltese has seen the emergence of some relatively young writers who, in certain cases, have worked in theatre groups dedicated to physical and laboratory theatre. Simone Spiteri is one such example (2014). Spiteri has written mainly for her theatre ensemble, DÙ Theatre, founded in 2004. Her most recent play, performed in March–April 2019, entitled *Repubblika Immakulata (Immaculate Republic)* was described by the author in an interview as “a family of siblings—whose lives intertwine through a general election, a village festa and a wedding—[that] acts as portal to wider metaphors of our lives and identity as a nation, collectively” (Reljic).



*Repubblika Immakulata*: Written and directed by Simone Spiteri. Cast: André Agius, Magdalena van Kuilenburg, Mark Mifsud, Kristjana Casha Akkartal, Ryan Cutajar, André Mangion, Pierre Stafrace.  
Photo: Andrew Rizzo

Another female writer, also known for her novels, is Clare Azzopardi, whose latest play, *Tebut Isfar (Yellow Coffin, 2018)* was supported by the Malta Arts fund and co-produced by Teatru Malta and Unifaun Theatre Productions. Other playwrights include the author Trevor Zahra, Clive Piscopo, who runs Theatre Lab Malta, and Ninu Borg who writes plays for popular audiences.

One of the most remarkable theatre plays recently performed was certainly *Daqxejn ta' Requiem lil Leli (A Modest Requiem for Leli, 2018)* by the poet and author Immanuel Mifsud, winner of the European Prize for Literature in 2011. The performance, staged by Paul Portelli and Theatre Anon as part of the Malta International Arts Festival, was a

superbly rendered theatrical adaptation of a poem concerning the last moments of the life of a man in a coma and used both physical action and puppetry. It included music by composer Kris Spiteri and performed by eight musicians.

Regretfully, the festival organisers commissioned only one performance of the production and considered it too expensive to repeat. This type of decision is indicative of the huge drawbacks in Maltese theatre where budgets are often inadequate and state cultural organisers lack the artistic vision to recognize, support and promote innovation and excellence.



*Daxejn ta' Requiem lil Leli*: written by Immanuel Mifsud. Directed by Paul Portelli. Music: Kris Spiteri. Visuals: Vince Briffa. Cast: Theatre Anon: Paul Portelli, Liliana Portelli, Pierre Stafrace, Douglas Cumley, Sandra Mifsud. Photo: Stephen Buhagiar

Video 2



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/vCsutDp80fk>

*From Daqxejn ta 'Requiem lil Leli*

The dearth of theatre critics who could help raise awareness of and interest in theatrical performances is another factor impeding theatrical development. Due to the fact that performances have very short runs, the few critics Malta has do not have time to write their pieces before the performances end. Consequently, any criticism published in the press is simply a post-mortem.<sup>[3]</sup>

Newspapers have resorted to interviewing actors or directors before a performance in order to help publicise it, especially when it involves known actors or writers. Often, the only reviews performances receive are those pasted on Facebook, which often lack the expert eye that would provide a clear analytical view that would benefit theatre-makers and contribute to raising the level of theatre in general.



*Daqxejn ta' Requiem lil Leli.* Photo: Louise Muscat

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### Endnotes

[1] Dates in brackets after titles of performances mark the year of performance.

[2] This centre for creativity also houses a music room, an “*art et essa*” cinema, art galleries and a café. It organises various activities throughout the year but is best known for its children’s festival, *Žigužajg*.

[3] Malta’s most celebrated theatre critic, Paul Xuereb, has not been replaced since his retirement. A large selection of his criticisms has been published in book form (Xuereb).

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**\*Vicki Ann Cremona** is Chair of the School of Performing Arts and Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Malta. She was appointed Ambassador of Malta to France between 2005 and 2009, and to Tunisia between 2009 and 2013. Her current research focuses on the relations between theatre and power. She has published internationally, mainly about theatrical events and public celebration, particularly Carnival, Commedia dell'Arte, theatre anthropology, Maltese Theatre and costume. Her most recent publications include *'Carnival and Power. Play and Politics in a Crown Colony* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018). She is a member of the Executive Committee of the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR).



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