

## **POPULAR MALTESE THEATRE – PAST AND POSSIBLE FUTURE**

A Review by (dr) PAUL XUEREB

**MARIO AZZOPARDI, ed: Kitbiet dwar it-teatrin – testimonjanzi, intervisti u analizi. Malta Drama Centre u l-Ministeru tal-Edukazzjoni. ISBN 978-99932-0-952-2 134pp.**

“Teatrin” is a word coined by our people to mean a type of popular, unsophisticated theatre performed by amateur theatre groups based to some extent on a local community. The word’s diminutive suffix denotes the patronizing way in which this kind of theatre is and was regarded by those by whom theatre is considered to be a performing art of high order, the theatre exemplified by the Athenian tragedians, the dramatists of the Elizabethan period, those of Louis XIV’s reign, by great authors of the last century like Bernard Shaw, Luigi Pirandello, Brecht, Gorky and Camus.

That is probably why very few authors have deigned to write about “teatrin” as an activity deserving of serious consideration. In fact, the present volume edited by Mario Azzopardi, who has been connected very seriously as director, stage designer and educator with our theatre, is certainly the first one to tackle the subject. It does so effectively and intelligently not only by attempting to analyse it as a theatrical form, but also – and more importantly – by describing “teatrin” as it has developed in towns and villages like Hamrun, Rabat and Birkirkara in the twentieth century. These descriptive and partly chronological accounts provide in print, possibly for the first time, a comprehensible account of what it was like to be a member of one of these drama groups mainly between the twenties and the sixties, or to be in the audience for their performances.

“Teatrin” was, and much less is, performed in band club premises or parish centres, semi-temporary premises in seaside resorts or completely in the open in village squares, and more rarely in the large gardens of private owners. The origins of “teatrin” date back to the first half of the nineteenth century when the scripts written, and performed, by authors like Luigi Rosato and Carmelo Camilleri, struck sparks in the breast of smaller middle-class people, and the new artisans whom education was now slowly reaching. Camilleri’s short farces used to be performed in a Valletta band club but also as part of programmes for opera singers’ benefit nights at the Manoel Theatre. The imitation of these pieces by new groups of amateurs mainly from the lower middle class and from the working class and their performance in a variety of venues marked the birth of “teatrin” proper, an activity that became very popular especially in the towns round the Grand Harbour.

This was important because it also marked for the first time the widespread performance of plays in Maltese, which slowly became for the lower classes what opera was for the middle and upper classes. The present volume has very little regarding this type of theatre in the nineteenth century, but one of the contributors to this volume, Marco Galea, has already thrown light on that century in his edition of a collection of plays from that period and in an article published in the journal *Il-Malti* in 2005.

What this volume does very well is to provide much information on “teatrin” in the period between the two World Wars and in the first quarter century after the end of World War II. In a chapter on what happened in Hamrun, Mario Azzopardi’s interviews elicit the spirit of fun mixed with ambition behind the several groups in what must have been the Maltese town with the greatest zest in theatre-making. The interviewees are a mixture of people like Emanuel Grima who was active in the Sons of Malta group and Maria Azzopardi nee Bottiglieri, an enthusiastic member of the audience at “teatrin” performances, who was also initiated by a kindly and better-off neighbour into the mysteries of opera at the Teatru Rjal. The groups performed in various venues, not least in the halls of Hamrun’s band clubs, programmes consisting of melodrama, farce, vaudeville and performances by illusionists, not to mention music played by the club’s band. Prices before the War were just seven pence for adults ( not too low considering the miserable incomes of most people at the time) and the audiences loved the shows, especially the women whose handkerchiefs were always at the ready for the weepy scenes in the melodramas

Originality of script was very rare, most of the writers limiting themselves to translating, abbreviating and revising mostly Italian scripts to give them a Maltese setting. Others wrote scripts based on the films they saw, such as the Italian film *I figli di nessuno*. Woe to them if they trespassed on holy ground! A group about to perform a drama based on the very popular film based on the persecution of early Christians, *The Sign of the Cross* found the hall they had booked to be inaccessible to them, following a diktat by the Maltese church that it was not to be performed. Our church, in fact, was hostile to “teatrin” which it considered to be too free from its control, and this is what led to the establishment of parish halls in which pieces approved by the Church were performed, and ultimately to the setting up of the Catholic Institute with its large theatre in Floriana not long after the end of World War II.

Mario Azzopardi’s informers and Charles Briffa, who writes on the “teatrin” of his youthful days in Birkirkara, make it clear that the actors’ enthusiasm was rarely accompanied by technical stage skills, and that the audiences treated the performances as occasions for having all sorts of fun, including the eating of fairly heavy meals. This reminds me of my own experience when performing in a large passion play by Inez Soler and Guido Saliba – technically well above “teatrin” but having some of its spirit – at the Radio City Opera House, a theatre built in Hamrun just after the War, seeing members of the audience in a balcony who had actually brought a stove along with them. Continuous talking during the performance was common, so it was not just the quality of the scripts and of the stage direction that deterred all but a very few middle class people from going to “teatrin” performances.

Joe Muscat Scerri with his Sons of Malta thought he knew it all and even dared put on his versions of some Shakespearean plays at the Catholic Institute in the early sixties, productions which I, then a young reviewer with a somewhat intolerant streak, savaged with some glee. On the other hand, the Hamrun Dramatic Company more intelligently brought in the playwright/lawyer Giacinto Tua, an experienced and sophisticated man of the theatre, to direct some productions for them. Tua was also the man who was appointed adjudicator in one of the competitions for amateur productions organized in the years

immediately following the War, and made useful remarks about what the Maltese popular theatre required in order to improve.

As new directors like Inez Soler, Guido Saliba, Ethel Farrugia and above all Francis Ebejer emerged, the old “teatrin” began to take a smaller role in the theatrical life of the country. New theatre groups like Maleth and Ribalta (founded by Nosi Ghirlando a great star of “teatrin” who wanted to perform in more artistically respectable productions) took a more sophisticated attitude towards stage production, and their choice of plays became more aligned with that of groups established before 1939, such as MADC and Goldoni. The celebrated group l’Indipendenza, founded in the late nineteenth century, had trodden a delicate path between “teatrin” and sophisticated middle class theatre, but it was dead before 1939. Perhaps it was the founding of the Manoel Theatre Academy of Dramatic Art in the seventies that pushed “teatrin” to the background where it still remains.

Mario Azzopardi, and a few theatre people like Albert Marshall who comes from mainstream theatre but experimented with his *Fra Celest* are asking if “teatrin” should be revived and become once more the local communities’ theatre of theatre across the country. I am impressed by Marshall’s arguments in favour of this, but I have my doubts whether the creation of a hybrid form of “Teatrin” based on the skills of the mainstream theatre is possible. Still, I am ready to await what the future can teach me.

I have not mentioned the chapter by Immanuel Mifsud on a seventies project to perform a passion play and farces in Rahal Gdid, Mario Azzopardi’s chapter on Francis Ebejer and “teatrin” (which Ebejer held in very low esteem but from which he garnered an actor like Karmenu Gruppeta) and another one by him on theatre in Gozo, or Joe Friggieri’s amusing short piece on an actor who specialized in performing fearful figures like Samson. I also found very interesting a letter written by the late and much beloved Charles Clews, here reproduced as an appendix; and Oliver Friggieri, not an expert on theatre but always very readable, writes elegantly on the relations between mainstream theatre and “teatrin”.

It is a smallish book, but a very rich one that should be in every Maltese theatre collection in this country.