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HOOKED ON A PASSION TO PERFORM

As applications for new courses at the Malta Drama Centre start pouring in, RITA SCIBERRAS takes a look at the changing profile of the largest, state-sponsored institution for the performing arts on the island and checks what's on the Centre's menu for 2011-2012.

Rewind to January, 1977. Some forty senior and junior would be actors make it to Valletta to join the Manoel Academy of Dramatic Art (MTADA), under the directorship of the late Adrian Rendle, one of the artistic directors of Stage Sixty at Theatre Royal and tutor-director at the Webber Douglas Academy. MTADA carried a big sounding name which in effect, was much too big. Originally the idea, based on a Technical Cooperation Agreement with Britain, was to create in Malta the first ever full time acting training school, but it soon became clear that the island did not have either the infrastructure or the financial means to embark on such an ambitious project. To this very day, Malta does not have its own full time drama school.

But that doesn't mean that the compromise to create a part-time, evening school did not pay off. Thousands of drama students were trained at the MTADA, as it was then known and its present day equivalent, the Malta Drama Centre, named after Mikelang Borg, the colourful actor, author and impresario of L'Indipendenza, the immensely successful company he created as far back as 1884. The forty-odd modest intake of students from the late seventies, which comprised of some of the best talent still walking the boards to this very day, has now peaked to 422 students, according to last year's statistics.

In 1994, the Drama Centre was transferred to the Ministry of Education after the Manoel Theatre decided it could not longer sustain the project. New premises, complete with a modern performance studio and rehearsal rooms, were built in Blata l-Bajda and this allowed for more experimental expansion.

For the past fifteen years or so there was a consistent increase of students, at starter, junior, intermediate and senior levels and classical dance classes were introduced to complement mainstream drama training. But that was only the start of a very significant evolution. "For the past eight years or so, the Drama Centre has been changing its profile radically," explains Mario Azzopardi, its current coordinator. "Numerous new courses were introduced, from dance drama to musical theatre, documentary drama, community theatre, therapeutic drama, costume design and manufacture and diploma courses in association with prestigious foreign bodies like the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art and Trinity & Guildhall of London", he explains.

"We wanted to provide skills to meet current trends and demands, including devising outreach drama programmes with vulnerable social groups, like people in rehab, irregular immigrants and residents in homes for the elderly. It's a tall order, but luckily we have full support from the Ministry of Education and the family and the Lifelong Learning Directorate at the Education Division," says Mr Azzopardi.

Most courses, in fact, lead up to certification from overseas institutions (and are duly recognized by the Malta Qualifications Council), including the London Academy, the Royal Academy of Dance, the National

Association of Dance Teachers (UK) and the Alianza Flamenca, which has its base in South Africa. Results achieved by students are excellent and this should be harnessed to the untiring efforts of the tutor-directors, both local and foreign.

Another important feature of the Malta Drama Centre has to do with its overseas connections. Besides an uninterrupted flow of foreign directors from the European mainland, the Centre is often engaged in multinational drama projects with emphasis on social content. One of the most recent and most successful multinational undertakings saw the Community department travel to Greece to research and perform a devised drama "provoked" by the health hazards of electro-magnetic antennas. Another project, this time in Austria, dealt with the problems of identity in a post-modern, often cynical age and was awarded for best creative practice in 2009.

One very important scheme sees the Malta Centre embark on the fully fledged production of classical texts for the stage. For the past three years the Centre has been involved in tripartite ventures involving the Manoel Theatre and the American Embassy. The programme kicked off with the presentation of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* and Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo,* which marked the American playwright's centenary of birth this year. TV-Guide can now disclose that the next production will handle Eugene O'Neil's controversial *Desire Under the Elms.*

For the 2011-12 season, the Malta Drama Centre is extending its list of courses even further. Regular sessions in Classical Egyptian Dance (more popularly known as Belly-Dancing) and Zumba will be offered for the first time and a special class in Personality Drama and Drama for Capability will be undertaken by a fully qualified director from Britain. "These very valuable sessions are about learning to be able," explains a student who followed a year's course last year. "Besides self-discovery and communication skills, the course is unparalleled in so far as perceptual learning goes."

To meet ever-growing demands, the Centre will also introduce pre-primary ballet sessions and "recreational drama" for very young kids. On the academic end, students will be offered entry to the Associate Certificate in (theoretical and practical) drama , run jointly with Trinity College & Guildhall. Professional certification at a slightly lower level on the other hand, can be taken with the London Academy of Music & Dramatic Art.

The long list of courses together with the ever increasing volume of students, young and not so young means that the Centre is getting smaller in physical dimensions. But its staff have been heartened by the good news that the Ministry has located a specific site to build a state-of-the art College of Art to incorporate the Drama Centre, the School of Music and the School of Art. According to staff members, this will be an excellent opportunity for collaboration: "We are in for some exciting times ahead, and our students deserve it."

Application forms to join any of the courses the Malta Drama Centre has to offer, come October of this year, can be downloaded this month from the Centre's website at www.maltadramacentre.org and all those interested can obtain further information by phoning 21-220-665.

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