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Tony Cassar Darien

# The answer lies in the brief

At a meeting of the artists who wrote to the Prime Minister registering their disappointment at the current plans for refurbishing the ruins of the Opera House, at least two weird facts emerged.

Throughout the lengthy proceedings, the local practitioners of the Arts were not consulted, while Renzo Piano's drawing for the theatre is a replica of the design commissioned by the Manoel Theatre committee six years ago. Submitted by a leading local architectural firm, an ex-minister of culture is on record stating that refurbishing the site for festival performances was practical until such time it became feasible to rebuild the long-awaited fully-fledged theatre.

Actually, when theatres dating back from earlier periods were refurbished, it was not only because they had survived fire or the ravages of war, but also because of their being perceived by the community as monuments with sufficient architectural, artistic and political significance to form an integral part of the national identity. In fact, the most remarkable feature of the immediate post-war period was the haste with which defeated European cities reopened their theatres.

As the German economic miracle of the 1950s got underway there followed an intensive programme of theatre construction. Massive

stage areas with complex technology to allow for constant scenery changeovers characterised these new theatres.

In Britain there dawned the realisation, long prevalent in central Europe, that a civic theatre, not commercially operated, was a desirable public amenity (the same thought must have influenced the Mintoff government to bequeath the Manoel Theatre to the nation having previously acquired it from the Gollcher Foundation). The London visits of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble had rallied in favour of theatre as a serious political and social force, dealing with mankind's agonies, rather than the influences of beautiful sights and sounds.

So the new theatres of Britain were proudly functional. Small playhouses were preferred to the large lyric theatres and concrete, either fair-faced or shuttered, was the medium. Paint was shunned unless it was black. What eventually became known as 'the repertory movement' deemed theatres to be facilities that would open all day long rather than just an hour before curtain-up.

In the US, new theatre construction moved over to the campus as the drama departments of the universities played a crucial role in the development of regional theatre. Total theatrical flexibility was so desirable that they coined the phrase 'adaptable theatres' and turned to machinery to achieve it.

This concerned mainly a modular floor with sections raised or lowered using complex hydraulics to place stage and audience in any configuration.

Many solutions have been proposed and tried concerning adaptable theatre. The best results have been in the small studio theatres where the tendency is to settle for just two or three basic formats. Certainly there are options and limitations. Pragmatism and compromises are unavoidable, but each decision has to result from an informed debate. This should cover type of performance, mode of operation and format of stage cum auditorium.

Performances come under four headings: 'Drama', demanding close contact between actor and audience, allowing for facial subtleties to be apparent and favourable to speech clarity; 'Lyrical', needing more rapport than contact so that facial mechanics do not intrude on choreographic images of dancers or choristers. The visual requirements need to be matched by the aural range providing a degree of reverberation to enhance the sound;

'Concert', where the emphasis is on the quality of natural sound; while for the 'Spectacle' (as in high-tech musicals or pop shows), one is after the broad visual effects, electronically processed sound and a performance that aspires to the style, quality and volume of a DVD.

A theatre's format and its operational mode are intrinsically linked. In terms of intimacy and acoustics, the differences between spoken drama and musical theatre are virtually incompatible. The great classical ballets not only need big staging but their overall impact may be lessened by being viewed too closely.

Should we build positively in one format guaranteeing excellence in a particular genre? Or should we compromise so as to provide for limited flexibility? The answer lies in the 'brief'.

For a theatre, the preparation of the brief is particularly tricky. Any future shortcomings of its required functions can be traced directly to a lack of initial clear consensus as to its outcome.

There are lots of decisions to be made and the client has the responsibility. But he must be aware of all the options, especially if he has not built many theatres before.

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The local theatre practitioners (and not just the foreign experts) must be present to discuss proposals and assess their viability. The process is necessary not only in establishing the best kind of theatre in cases where there is uncertainty but also in testing the validity of claims by lobby groups with vested interests.

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## Christians and Muslims in Arab Malta

Prof. Stanley Fiorini (*The Sunday Times*, April 25) is now distancing himself from the theory of the *dhimma*-pact. He would have saved us much trouble had he never broached the idea which, after all, he imposed on the 12th century poem by not understanding the reference to "the Pact of Old", his reading and translation.

He now trusts on "the convergence of all data, old and new, available to date", to prove his point, that of the continuity of Christianity on Gozo, another point imposed on the poem, which only referred to Christians without saying where they came from.

I find it difficult to understand Fiorini's frame of mind because of what seems to me to be some confusion of facts. He apparently rejects the radical nature of what happened in Malta (including Gozo) in 870 AD because of recent archeological discoveries allegedly referring to people at Mdina at the end of the 10th century at the earliest.

As far as I know, no claims to the discovery of Christian remains have been made. He apparently believes that survivors of the catastrophe of 870 lived on.

Unaccountably, he believes I think, that the Christians surrounding their bishop found in 1127 "were the great-grandchildren of their emancipated forefathers who after 1091 had converted to Christianity", even though I made it clear that local Christians were not involved in

what we know about the events of 1091, and he ignores what I stated quite clearly that the *ghabida* of ca. 1048 were normally understood to be black mercenaries.

Fiorini also ignores completely the relevance of yet another Arab writer who has not been properly appreciated so far by our historians, namely Ibn Hauqal, who died after 977. Before historians knew of Al Himyari's shocking facts about what happened in 870 AD, they tended to discount Ibn Hauqal's description of contemporary Malta as a 'totally uninhabited island'.

As far as I am concerned, the picture one has now is first that of a complete depopulation in 870, the only people occasionally present being those visiting the island for honey, fish or timber. Ibn Hauqal, three or more generations later, describes Malta as an uninhabited island, with visitors bringing their own provisions with them, rounding up the wild donkeys for which there was a demand on foreign markets, and hunting wild sheep.

We can perhaps add at least a further 50 years of incipient settlement of herdsmen who managed the sheepfolds or *deys* that arose in the next economic development, only documented so far by placename evidence.

Then, towards the middle and later years of the 11th century as well as during the 12th, occurred the widespread development of *rahal* centres of activity and habitation and the documented rebuilding of Mdina. Enclosed

fields (*galcae*) were arranged close to the villages to make arable operations possible.

During this period, until 1127, all the settlers were Muslim, the free people being of normal Mediterranean stock, the mercenaries, of whom there was a large number, being of African origin. There could have been, for much of the time, a varying number of Christian captives of foreign origin, and mostly of Greek culture, also until 1127, similar to those that were set free by Count Roger in 1091.

In 1127, Count Roger II, soon to be crowned king, dispersed or killed in the fighting most of the sheikhs, descendants of the *hurra* of ca. 1048, and probably all the *ghabida*, thus abrogating the Pact of Old, and subjecting the remaining sheikhs and peasants to the status of inferiority reserved for them by the Norman regime.

Subsequently Maltese poets writing in classical Arabic are found languishing in exile in Sicily, and on Gozo we have a Sicilian Greek poet wasting nine years of his life remonstrating against his forced incarceration on the little island surrounded by a Muslim population.

Incidentally, Al Himyari himself tells us that Malta was an island south of Sicily 30 miles in length, thus indicating clearly that he was following the Byzantine tradition of taking Malta, Gozo and Comino as one place under that name.

Godfrey Wetzinger  
 St Julian's

## Not-very-Piano project

I recently had quite a heated argument with a dyed-in-the-wool Nationalist Party activist who kept making the point, very vigorously, that Malta cannot support a full-size opera house. He insisted we can easily make do with the admittedly inadequate Manoel Theatre and Mediterranean Conference Centre and the (also admittedly) hardly profitable performances in Gozo.

Government thinking seems to be based on this principle, so it is not a question of whether an alternative exists. (Trevisan and Cameron have both proposed seemingly viable alternatives.)

My overall opinion on the whole Valletta entrance project can be summed up as follows:

1. This government has a criminally philistine attitude towards culture, as evidenced the abrupt axing of *Radju Bronja* some years back. (Campus FM, its natural successor, happily turned out to

be a far better radio station than *Bronja*, but that is hardly the point.)

2. The open air theatre idea is just plain ridiculous.

3. The parliament house on stilts, slap bang at the entrance of the city, is just plain megalomania. There are several practical - and more dignified - alternatives.

4. I do not really have any strong objection to the hole-in-the-bastion entrance to the city. It is a solution which has been adopted for other walled cities, and the result is not unpleasing. Look at Perugia and Verona.

Having said this, I admire Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi for taking a decision; it was about time someone did. But according to what appears to be a massive segment of the population, the decision he took is tragically misguided.

Michael Camilleri  
 Salina Bay

## Birdlife is overdoing it

I am not a hunter or a bird trapper, but I feel that Birdlife is overdoing it. How come we never see all this happening in Sicily, Greece or Spain, where illegal trapping and hunting are going on every day?

The government is spending millions of our money to attract tourists, and then Birdlife goes around Europe doing its very best

to ruin it all. This certainly is not the way to stop illegal hunting and trapping.

Because of its size, Malta is already at a disadvantage to attract tourists in a highly competitive environment. So isn't it time we all grow up and stop shooting ourselves in the foot?

Anthony Mifsud  
 Hamrun