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Maltese Productions of Classical Theatre in the Post-WWII Period

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In this short survey of Maltese post-War theatre productions of works by the great dramatists of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, I shall say but a few words on what was produced in the first years following the end of WWII, since Carmel Serracino has published two fine studies of this period.² I shall only say that it was two members of the newly set-up branch of Britain's Virgil Society, Frank and George Mifsud Montanaro, who persuaded the Society to produce Plautus's *Captivi* in 1947 and the *Orestes* of Euripides in the same year. The productions received encouraging reviews in *The Times*, but clearly had shortcoming especially in many of the actors' English intonation and pronunciation. What was clearly a much better production was that of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, performed in 1948 by the fairly new theatre group, B.I. Players, and directed by Alec Cathcart Bruce, director of the British Institute, who had had experience of classical drama in performance when a student in Britain. That same year, the Virgil Society performed its last production, that of Euripides' *Hippolytus* to a small audience and again without great success, but in 1950 Cathcart Bruce put on for B.I. Players a production of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in Gilbert Murray's fine verse translation, a production greeted enthusiastically by *The Times* reviewer, T. Cyril Parker. The end of Cathcart Bruce's tenure as director of the British Institute, and the earlier departure of the Mifsud Montanaro brothers to study in overseas universities, meant that the growing enthusiasm for classical drama in performance was temporarily dampened.

There were no new productions of the original Greek and Roman plays until the 1960s, but the B.I. Players were responsible for the production in 1955 of a play by Jean Anouilh based on a great Greek tragedy, the *Antigone* of Sophocles,³ which not only captured the austere grandeur of the original but made it a mirror of the German Nazi harsh occupation in France when Anouilh wrote it.⁴ This play uses a one-man chorus. The actors playing the despot Creon and the tragic

¹ Paul Xuereb is the Malta Classics Association's 2017 Honorary President.

² Serracino (2016) (2017).

³ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 2/2/56.

⁴ Tyrone Grima's production of the Anouilh *Antigone* appeared after this article was written. I shall only say that Grima courageously and controversially gave the production a setting in a circus, some of the performers having been trained in circus techniques by circus professionals.

heroine Antigone came in for much praise. Another interesting production of the Anouilh play by the visiting Theatre Studio West appeared in our own century in 2009, with the chorus taking the form of non-speaking dancers.⁵ Another play based on the Sophocles play, by the 18th century Italian author Vittorio Alfieri, was performed in 1969 but greeted frigidly.⁶

Joe Friggieri's direction of the Sophocles *Antigone*, in a Maltese version by Oliver Friggieri (1989), which I described at the time as 'very fine and sometimes majestic'⁷ was, like all his theatre work, intelligent. His Creon was 'a tyrant too big for his boots' and his chorus present only as voices emerging from masks embedded in a wall, while dancers expressed the spirit of the choral odes. The spoken choruses were sometimes hieratic but as so often not always comprehensible. A much more recent production (2011), Philip Leone Ganado's English version by the poet Seamus Heaney and bearing the title *Burial at Thebes*,⁸ was set in modern times and played in the small University Greek theatre. There was a small chorus the leader of which, a trained singer, sang one of the odes, while atmospheric music was played by a violinist in full view of the audience. Larissa Bonaci was an impassioned Antigone. Not perhaps a great production, but certainly one that left its mark.

In 1968 the University Players ambitiously put on a Festival of Classical Theatre in the Greek theatre at what was then St Michael's Training College, Ta' Giorni. There were three productions: *Edipu Sultan*, a Maltese version of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Louis Azzopardi, which Francis Ebejer, who reviewed all three Festival productions for The Sunday Times of Malta, described as extremely beautiful; Aristophanes' *The Poet and the Women* in an English version by an unnamed translator; and Euripides' *Electra*, also in an English version.

Edipu Sultan,⁹ directed by Albert Marshall, brought out this great play's tragic elements and its exciting dramatic development, with a full chorus. However, Francis Ebejer did not like the chorus, which he said was subjected to too many and too frequent regroupings. It was struck by bad luck when the actor playing Oedipus, the author of this paper, was struck by mumps a few days before the first night, leading the director to go out script in hand to read out the part. I plucked up enough courage to do the part on the second and third nights, but the illness had dried out my mouth considerably, so though I managed to get through all the long and splendid speeches, I suspect the result was not impressive. Aristophanes'

⁵ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 1/11/09.

⁶ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 28/6/68.

⁷ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 6/8/89.

⁸ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 15/8/11.

⁹ *It-Torċa*, 25/8/68; *Sunday Times of Malta*, 25/8/68.



Agave (Pia Zammit) and Cadmus (Manuel Cauchi)¹⁵

*The Poet and the Women*¹⁰ was directed by Mario Azzopardi, and Francis Ebejer seemed to have disapproved of the play's 'feminist conspiracy to be rulers of men' and described the chorus of Athenian women as 'singularly mild and supine'. The third play, Euripides' *Electra*,¹¹ was directed by James Falkland, an English professional actor, who was busy with a number of theatre productions for some years until he decided to leave and try his luck in Nairobi, Kenya, where he seems to have done very well. According to the reviewer's mainly negative review, the main success lay in Antoinette Soler's angry and vengeful Electra, and in the high standard of the choral speaking.

Oliver Friggieri's successful version of *Oedipus Tyannus, Edipu s-Sultan*,¹² was performed at the Manoel Theatre many years later, in 1989, with Carmel S. Aquilina trying to overcome the problems of the small proscenium stage, some of which he did, though not the problem of what to do elegantly with the important chorus when it is not speaking. John Suda as Oedipus and Manuel Cauchi as Teiresias were powerful in their important scene, which they performed with the necessary austerity, but Suda's speeches following his blinding were badly over the top, reminding me of Method Acting of the extreme kind.

Agamemnon was given an open-air production in the Greek theatre at Ta' Giorni in 1971, directed by Lino Farrugia.¹³ Daniel Massa liked my playing of the title role, and especially the scene where Agamemnon seems to scorn the gods, leading the adulterous Clytemnestra to prepare herself triumphantly to murder him. Massa disliked the production's visual poverty but liked the small chorus's fine speaking of the choric odes.

¹⁰ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 25/8/68.

¹¹ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 1/9/68.

¹² *Sunday Times of Malta*, 7/5/89.

¹³ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 22/8/71.

Of the two productions of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, the fairly recent (2011) production of John Greig's gripping English version, directed by Toni Attard,¹⁴ was easily the more successful. Dionysus was portrayed by Kurt Castillo as an androgynous creature antagonised by the hostility shown by Pentheus (Philip Leone Ganado) to the god's cult. He avenges himself by persuading Pentheus to eavesdrop on the Bacchantes, in woman's costume, at the same time making him bring out his hidden gay personality by commanding him, 'Come out!' (the director's addition), thus making him a victim of the Bacchantes who kill him and behead him. The chorus of Dionysus's worshippers, the Bacchantes, were successfully transformed into Gospel singers.

The 1983 Maltese version of the same play, *Allat Imġarrfa*, by Ġuże Gatt,¹⁶ was directed by Dominic Said who saw the tragedy as 'a spiritual journey towards what is transcendental, a painful struggle until contact is made with the divine' and failed to bring out forcefully the conflict between uninhibited living and the voices of caution and restraint. Said used guitar music and primitive African-style masks for the chorus who moved in a poorly choreographed manner.

The *Medea* of Euripides, in Oliver Friggieri's Maltese version,¹⁷ was performed by DÙ Theatre in 2008. Directed by Simone Spiteri, who also played the formidable title role, this witch creature who kills people, including her own sons, was depicted as a woman who has been sinned against as foully as she is now sinning, an archetype of all women who have been badly treated by men. Strangely enough, at the end of the tragedy, Medea was depicted not, as Euripides wrote, flying off victoriously in a chariot drawn by a dragon, but being dragged down into Hades as punishment for her crimes.

Another *Medea* in Oliver Friggieri's version, in 2003,¹⁸ directed by John Suda, again showed Medea as a woman also to be pitied and not just reviled and hated, but the title role suffered from the performer's overdoing the passion, sounding more like an angry fishwife than a tragic heroine.

In John Schranz's English version of *Medea* in 1981,¹⁹ most notably the protagonist was played by two actresses, linked physically by a long train depicting the duality in the character. The production was a strong one, but I criticised it at the time for its being a kind of social tract in favour of the children in a marriage.

¹⁴ Galea (2017) 481ff.

¹⁵ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 2/11/11. Photo by D. Zammit Lupi.

¹⁶ Galea (2017) 118f.

¹⁷ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 11/5/08.

¹⁸ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 28/9/03.

¹⁹ Galea (2017) 96f.

The *Hecuba* of Euripides²⁰ and its sister-play *The Women of Troy*, both in Maltese versions, appeared within a week of each other in 2001 (the former at the open-air Ta' Qali Theatre, the latter indoors at St James Cavalier). Both are centred on the figure of Hecuba eager to avenge the killing of her husband King Priam and other family members by the Greeks at the siege of Troy. *Hekuba* (Maltese version by Alfred Palma) was directed by Žepp Camilleri. He gave the choric odes a discreet musical accompaniment, but the choir did not convince as an essential part of the action. As Hecuba the veteran Karmen Azzopardi may have been past her prime, but she strongly brought out the old queen's tragic character.

In-Nisa ta' Trojja,²¹ a student production directed by Marcelle Theuma, sees Hecuba also after the siege of Troy but with mainly different characters such as Cassandra here present but merely referred to in the other play. She gave the play, with a somewhat shortened text, a vaguely contemporary setting, and at the end reintroduced Cassandra to give a speech, not present in the original text, about a future in which men will no longer be insane enough to cause war. Her two-person chorus was not very effective, and her young Hecuba could not reach the right tragic stature.

Perhaps I should mention a show, *Fragments of love*,²² in which a Greek group Machina, directed by Lydia Lytro, presented scenes from the plays of the great Athenian tragic writers, such as *Agamemnon*, *Antigone*, *Prometheus* and *The Phoenician Women*, to illustrate the workings of 'eros' in these plays. The director did not limit love to the sexual kind, but included, say, that of Antigone, whose love is fraternal, or even that of Prometheus, whose heroic defiance of injustice is born of his love for his people.

Coming to comedy, the only production of more or less the original text I could find was that of the Roman Plautus' *Amphitruo*,²³ a farcical comedy in which Jupiter assumes the form of Alcmena's husband, Amphitruo, who is away fighting, in order to seduce her. He is peeved when Alcmena shows him that she is enjoying his love-making because she is sure he is her husband but makes her conceive the demigod Hercules. The play was to influence writers like Shakespeare in *The Comedy of Errors*, with its two sets of identical twins. The only version of the play I have seen was a freely adapted Italian one by Sant Stern, using, unlike Plautus a chorus which is non-speaking but acts out events that have happened offstage. Directed by Sergio Ammirata, this was a hilarious production with such features as Jupiter's greatly amplified groans, fit for a great god like him, as he makes love offstage.

²⁰ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 8/7/01

²¹ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 8/7/01.

²² *Sunday Times of Malta*, 5/3/08.

²³ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 23/5/99.

Very enjoyable plays based on Plautus were written by later writers of which *Amphitruon 38*, by the French Jean Giraudoux, written in the 1930s, remains famous. He made it into a very elegant comedy which, while celebrating the glory of conjugal love, hints at some reservations, but one or two scenes inevitably take on the tone of a French farce. A 1983 production for MADC²⁴ directed skilfully by Alfred Mallia, had an excellent Alcmena in the shape of Monica Attard. Another version by the 19th century dramatist Kleist²⁵ was directed in 2003 by the German director Frank Hoerner with an Alcmena who believes strongly in conjugal love and is so shocked when her husband accepts Jupiter's paternity of the child conceived by Alumna of Jupiter, that she aborts the foetus instead of bringing forth the giant baby Hercules. I must confess that, in my opinion, the modern theatrical work that summons up best the fun and hilarious confusions of Plautus is Sondheim's *A funny thing happened on the way to the forum*,²⁶ a musical, directed by Chris Gatt in 1997 with a hilarious scheming servant, Pseudolus, played by Edward Mercieca. As far as I know there were no productions of comedies by Terence.

Aristophanes, however, attracted more productions. The year following the production of *The Poet and the Women* in the 1968 Festival, Albert Marshall directed a colourful production, with splendid bird costumes by Mario Azzopardi, of *The Birds*²⁷ at Ta' Giorni. I also think with pleasure of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, in a Maltese version, *Shab* (2004),²⁸ by Franklin Mamo with additional references to contemporaries like Tony Blair by Farrugia himself, directed *con brio* by Lino Farrugia in the open air at the Tal-Qroqq University campus. This play's comical attack on Socrates' teaching was seen by Farrugia as relevant 'to what is happening in Malta where relativism in ethics dominates young people and the foundations of religious belief were being eroded.' Farrugia introduced the figure of Zeus, not in the original, played most comically by Nancy Calamatta who dominated the scene without saying a word. I should add that in his last full-length play, *L-Għanja taċ-Ċinju* (2011),²⁹ about the death of Socrates, Joe Friggieri skilfully brings in a scene from an Athenian performance of *Clouds*.

In 1991, Saviour Pirotta directed an open-air production of Aristophanes' *The Knights*³⁰ in a Maltese version, *Il-Kavallieri*. Pirotta tried to make the play aimed originally at attacking the demagogue Creon, not only as outrageous as the author had meant, but brought in an element unintended by Aristophanes. He makes the defeat of Il-Kunzar (standing for Creon) not just a political defeat but a triumph of

²⁴ Galea (2017) 120ff.

²⁵ Galea (2017) 382ff.

²⁶ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 30/3/97.

²⁷ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 24/8/69.

²⁸ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 8/8/04.

²⁹ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 16/10/11.

³⁰ Galea (2017) 225ff.

gays over straight women, with Il-Kunzar played by an actress as a woman with great penis envy. The production was found so outrageous by some members of the audience that applause at the end was quite sparse.

Also successful was *Il-Parlament tan-Nisa (Ecclesiasuzae)*³¹ in a 1995 Maltese version by Joe Friggieri who also directed. In this famous comedy, the women of Athens manage to dominate Parliament by withholding their sexual favours from men and is as clever as it is ribald. I described it at the time as ‘an uproarious no (few?) holds barred production which has surely made theatrical history in Malta.’ It may have been as coarse as they come, but in it the women are also used by Aristophanes as creatures who can persuade men to stop their hideous war-making.

2000 Żring (1996),³² which I described in my review as an admirable Maltese version of *The Frogs* by Joe Bonnici who also directed it, is not perhaps a good choice for performance in the modern theatre, and the scene of the crucial poetry contest between Aeschylus and Euripides was simply boring. At the time I suggested that a modern production could perhaps replace the contest between dramatists with one between a traditionalist poet like Dun Karm and a modernist one like Mario Azzopardi.

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³¹ *Sunday Times of Malta*, 23/7/95.

³² Galea (2017) 126f.