

This article gives a short survey of amateur theatre practice in Malta. It demonstrates that the theatre system is based almost entirely on amateur practice, as Malta does not have the audience capacity and the administrative infrastructure to support professional theatre, and only a handful of persons make a living solely from theatre. However, the development of theatre education during the last thirty years has improved the quality of acting and staging and provided more scope for tackling challenging performances with regard to both content and mise-en-scène. The article looks into the different varieties of amateur theatre-making, taking into account issues such as the differing use of the two main languages of the country: Maltese and English. It discusses the importance of community identity as well as the role the Catholic Church has played in the development of theatre. The authors examine the challenges faced by contemporary amateur theatre-makers in the light of the changes occurring in society and the new choices that these changes determine. New Western theatre styles are not only influencing both playwrights and performers, but have also changed the expectations of contemporary spectators concerning the way the performance presents social and political issues.

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# The Amateur Theatre in Malta

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## Historical introduction

Malta is the smallest country in the European Union. Although it is the most densely populated, it has the smallest population, measured at just below half a million people in 2018 (NSO *News* 1). A national survey published in 2004 showed that only around a quarter of the adult Maltese population had visited the theatre during the previous year, and more than half of these had watched less than four performances (NSO *Theatre*, viii, 15). Another national survey published in 2017 found that there had been a slight increase in the percentage of people attending theatre performances. Still, the proportion of people who watched more than three shows remained very low (4.2% of the population) (NSO *Cultural* 50). The 2004 survey also showed that most of the population was unprepared to spend much money on ticket prices (NSO *Theatre* viii). The 2017 survey did not ask the same question but still showed that the proportion of income that people were prepared (or able) to spend on cultural activities was very low (NSO *Cultural* 107).

In this context, it is understandable that in Malta, theatre is either amateur or at best, semi-professional, in the sense that it is difficult for theatre-makers and actors to earn their living through merely appearing on or working for the stage. There are only a handful of theatre actors and directors in Malta who are managing, even though with great difficulty, to make a living solely from theatre and performance, and even in these cases, they have to share the stage with amateur performers. Most have other jobs which are generally not related to the theatre; a few teach drama in primary or secondary schools on a full-time basis, many more teach on a part-time basis in private evening schools that have been founded by a handful of theatre amateurs. Radio and television work also supplements income.

Amateur companies are therefore an essential part of the contemporary theatrical scene, and also a fundamental element of the development of local drama and theatre-making. However, the professional theatre has also played an important part in the history of theatre in Malta because for more than two centuries, from the

early 18<sup>th</sup> century to World War II, Malta had a fully functioning opera theatre. This theatre employed both foreign and local artists, and there was a supporting network of professionals working for and servicing this theatre (Cremona, “The Performance of Deeds”). During periods of the year when opera performances were not allowed or not desirable, such as during Lent (the forty days preceding Easter), other professional performers were engaged, usually from nearby Italy, to provide short seasons of plays. It was only after the bombing of the purposely-built 1,100-seat opera house during World War II that having a professional theatre proved to be unsustainable. All post-war attempts at having professional theatre structures failed (see Galea “Bodies without Organs” 101–113), mainly because live theatre had to compete for audiences with cinema and eventually with television.

Throughout its existence, professional theatre in Malta was mainly an imported product. Although a good portion of the personnel were Maltese (generally musicians and technicians, as well as some of the singers), the operas performed were almost always by Italian composers and sung in Italian. As a general rule, the Maltese professional theatre followed the trends set by the major Italian opera theatres with regards to repertoire and performance styles. The influence of Italian theatre in Malta was consonant with the dominance that Italian language and culture enjoyed in Malta between the end of the Middle Ages and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Italian was the language of administration and the law courts. Most theatre activity was aimed at the upper classes of Maltese society and the colonisers themselves. Historically, it was the birth of amateur theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that set in motion the tradition of theatre in the vernacular, which is itself an important cultural phenomenon.

It was only when the Maltese language started being written, used in schools and in literature that a theatre in Maltese emerged. There was input from seasoned professional performers like Luigi Rosato (1795–1872), who worked in the only professional company of the time. However, the main energy to create a tradition of theatre in Maltese came from amateur playwrights and performers (Galea, *It-Teatru Malti I*). Around the 1840s, different groups of amateurs started setting up their small, makeshift theatres in the harbour area, mainly for the benefit of the lower classes, who could not afford the ticket prices at the main professional theatre (in which opera was performed for most of the year) and could much better relate to performances in their native tongue. These groups were often composed of illiterate or semi-literate performers and led by better-educated individuals, such as teachers or government clerical employees, who wrote for these companies and directed them.<sup>1</sup> These amateur theatres soon

1 Carmelo Camilleri (1821–1903), definitely the most successful and most prolific playwright of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as a comic actor, was a clerk; Pietru Pawl Castagna (1827–1907), another prominent playwright and director, was a school teacher who rose to the grade of Director of Elementary Schools, and in fact many of his recorded performances were by students; Mikelang Borg (1868–1939) who managed the most successful theatre company between the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, besides translating and adapting a large number of plays, probably best represents the image of the amateur in Maltese society of the period. He worked as a health inspector and as a printer;

became the main source of entertainment for the lower classes, with theatres being set up in practically every town and village by the end of the century, in small venues that were easily accessible to the local communities. These theatres were very active, performing different plays each week. A typical evening of entertainment would consist of a melodrama in five acts, a comedy and a short farce. The main inspirations were the professional performances that many of these amateur theatre-makers would have watched, either by the local opera company or by foreign touring companies, and the Italian play-texts that circulated widely in Malta. For the first few decades, most of the repertoire consisted of translations and adaptations of Italian plays, or plays from other European languages which would have been filtered through Italian translations. The more successful genres were also adopted from Italian theatrical traditions.

The popularity of amateur theatre in Maltese led to the printing of hundreds of plays between the 1840s and the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and entire newspapers dedicated to theatre, mainly amateur theatre activity. Although the repertoire consisted mainly of genres that may be considered as minor, the tradition was fundamental for making theatre accessible to a much broader sector of the population than it was before and also for the creation of many theatre spaces, some of which are still in use. *Teatrin* (literally meaning “small theatre”), as this kind of theatre was called, was also a useful medium for the expression of nationalistic and other political sentiments before its importance and popularity gradually died down in the post-World War II period. Until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the amateur theatre was a very visible cultural phenomenon in Malta. Football, cinema and, eventually, from the early 1960s, television in Maltese became direct competitors. Amateur theatre saw the number of spectators, as well as the people interested in performing, steadily decrease to the extent that many theatre companies became inactive, and others had to limit themselves to producing only a handful of performances per season.

Already in its early development in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, theatre in Maltese quickly became a vehicle for transmitting nationalist ideals and discussing issues of identity. As the struggle for the recognition of the Maltese language intensified, writing plays in Maltese was seen as a way to extend Maltese literature to new fields. Prominent authors began to write for the theatre not because they were particularly gifted as playwrights but to develop a national literature and expand national culture, which was not fully recognised or appreciated before independence in 1964. After independence, key playwrights started to be seen as significant social critics, with landmark plays being recognised as making relevant statements about the national community and the issues it faces, comparable to prominent novels or other works of literature.

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but he also published his own newspaper and wrote much of its content, managed the opera theatre on behalf of the impresario, was also active in trade unionism and helped found the Malta Labour Party.

Another vital expression of the amateur theatre in Malta is theatre in English. The British colonial period, which lasted from 1800 to 1964, saw the development of this type of theatre on the island. In the early 1800s, this started as alternative entertainment for British residents who had limited access to the main theatre that staged opera and for which tickets were allocated on a seasonal basis. This prevented many British personnel employed in the Services from finding seats because often their arrival and departures did not correspond to the time when season tickets were made available. Moreover, some British residents preferred other, more familiar, types of theatre in their mother tongue. Much of this entertainment was either a local version of plays and musicals featuring on the London stages or productions written or assembled by local British residents and Services personnel, which also referred to the local context. These performances were generally staged in theatres located in military compounds that were out of bounds to the local population. However, some groups also performed in locations they shared with the Maltese. These amateur companies introduced British theatrical genres such as the Christmas pantomime to the island. The uptake of this kind of theatre by the local population was very slow. The educated classes were too attached to Italian culture to adopt the language of their new coloniser and its cultural manifestations. It was through the creation of a new class that was sufficiently familiar with English that English genres started developing in Maltese contexts, and this did not happen before the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Galea, "The Pantomime Other" 117–120). The use of English spread after 1914 when it was declared the language of the law courts (Frendo 112). By the end of the colonial period, amateur theatre activity in English had been taken up by British civilian settlers as well as by Maltese amateurs who had become sufficiently Anglicised to feel comfortable performing in English alongside native speakers of the language. This tradition is still very healthy today, although it has also sometimes shifted into semi-professional or commercial activity. The influence of this tradition was such that British genres such as the Christmas pantomime are now performed widely in Maltese, with performances ranging from large-scale productions in central theatres to school productions.

An analysis of the state of contemporary amateur theatre in Malta needs to consider issues that determine the functioning of theatre in the country, such as demographics, the availability of training for theatre-makers and the range of performances that can be considered as amateur.

## Theatre infrastructure

The definition of amateur theatre given by Nicholson et al. is: "the work of [...] self-governing organisations whose primary focus is to make theatre" (4). Research by

the International Research Group STEP (Project on European Theatre Systems) has indicated that amateur theatre in mainland Europe is often associated with rural areas or areas outside the city (see Bremgartner 371). The case of Malta presents an anomaly. Malta can be described practically as a “city-state” due to the small size of the archipelago (316 km<sup>2</sup>), and the fact that the rural areas of the country are very limited in size and never distant from urban centres. Moreover, the ever-growing urban network has joined different villages into one continuous urban conurbation. What identifies one area from another is a community sense of belonging, which is often identifiable with a local parish and the traditions that go with it, even though Catholicism, the country’s principal religion, is on the wane.

The fact that the country is physically isolated from mainland Europe has meant that theatre in Malta did not progress at the same rate as that on the continent, nor did it always take similar directions. Development was also limited by state censorship, which was only abolished in 2012, as well as the crucial presence in society of the Catholic Church, which owns a large number of theatres and therefore exercises some control over which topics may be dealt with in the premises it holds, as well as the manner in which theatre is to be staged in these premises. Currently, Malta has several active theatre spaces that are used by a large number of theatre groups, ranging from the semi-professional companies working mainly in larger and more prestigious theatres to the truly amateur groups, often working in parish or other local environments. The main theatres are in the capital, Valletta. The Manoel Theatre (c. 572 seats) (Cremona et al., *Spazji Teatrali* 160), built in 1732, is considered to be Malta’s national theatre even though it does not possess the legal status for this title. It is used extensively for concerts and to a lesser extent, for theatre, generally of a semi-professional level. Other state-owned venues include the 186-seat theatre inside the cultural centre recently labelled Spazju Kreattiv (158), the open-air theatre Pjazza Teatru Rjal (c. 806 seats) (152) and the Republic Hall at the Mediterranean Conference Centre (c. 1400 seats) (150). Two other significant theatres are the Valletta Campus Theatre (c. 132 retractable seats) (162), owned by the University of Malta and the Catholic Institute Theatre (c. 833 seats) (138), situated just outside Valletta and owned by the Catholic Church. None of these theatres has its own performing company; they rent their premises out to companies for a fee.

Productions typically run up to six performances in the main theatres and a little longer in smaller theatres, although community theatres only stage one or two performances of a production because the potential audience does not allow for longer runs. Unlike the National Philharmonic Orchestra and the National Dance Company (ŻfinMalta), which employ full-time professionals, the recently established national theatre company, Teatru Malta, launched in 2017 by Arts Council Malta, does not employ performers on a full-time basis (see Cremona, “Theatre in Malta”

n.p.). It only contracts people who are cast for specific productions on short-term contracts. The work practices adopted by Teatru Malta follow the same lines as semi-professional and amateur companies: rehearsals are held in the evenings after the actors' working hours. As a result of this phenomenon, most theatre productions created in Malta include some characteristics that one would expect to find in amateur theatre, and many amateur performances share resources with more professional or commercial setups. To illustrate the close-knit relationship between amateur theatre and professional arrangements, we will use one of Teatru Malta's major productions (performed in September 2018) as an example.

The production was an adaptation of a 1964 play called *Boulevard*, written by Francis Ebejer, Malta's best-known playwright and novelist (Crow and Galea 25–6). Despite acquiring a reputation as a talented playwright relatively early in his life and also having a number of English-language novels published in the UK and the United States, for most of his life Ebejer worked as a school teacher, only leaving the profession when he could obtain early retirement. He directed many of the original productions of his plays, using performers from *teatrin* as well as other, more professionally trained actors. The 2018 revival of the play at the Manoel Theatre, in which the original production had taken place, likewise used a mix of professional and more amateur elements. It drastically reduced the text and mixed professional dancers from the National Dance Company, who were given the task to move and speak, with one or two semi-professional actors and some amateurs. The choreographer and the set designer were both professional artists, but the director had to perform tasks that in most professional settings would be entrusted to a dramaturg.

## Training

A direct consequence of the lack of a substantial market, as well as reliance on amateur performers to provide theatrical entertainment, even in the more prominent venues, is that the professional training of performers (actors, but also dancers and musicians) has been underdeveloped and unregulated in Malta. Popular discourse about the performing arts in Malta privileges “talent” over training. As professional acting programmes do not exist, students who aspire to train as professional actors travel to other countries (usually the UK but sometimes the USA, Italy or other countries). With the knowledge that it is extremely difficult to make a living as a performer in Malta as well as attracted by the much larger theatre industries in metropolitan centres, many do not return. Those who return very often find themselves working in environments that could be defined as amateur theatre. The self-defined Malta Amateur Dramatic Club (MADC) that is over 100 years old, was initially inspired by provincial British amateur theatre companies and amateur dramatic clubs (ADCs) in other British

colonies (see Becker 710–11). The club regularly casts professionally trained actors alongside others who were never professionally trained.

After Malta became independent in 1964, the British Council brought in two experts on Theatre in Education<sup>2</sup> in 1977, who created the first Academy of Dramatic Art, (MTADA) which offered a part-time evening course that provided technical training in movement, voice, improvisation, interpretation and rehearsal (see Aquilina 89). This course eventually evolved into a state drama school, today called Malta School of Drama and Dance, offering evening courses and run by Maltese theatre educators. Another result of this collaboration was the institution of a Drama Unit within the Ministry of Education, which supplies mainly Theatre in Education, and some peripatetic teaching in state primary schools. In 1988, the University of Malta created two programmes, one in theatre and one in music, and later another in dance, which have together now grown into the School of Performing Arts, offering degrees in these subjects at Bachelor's, Master's and PhD levels. The university also provides teacher training in drama, music and dance. At the turn of the century, a series of part-time drama schools were launched, some of which are franchises of foreign companies. These are run by amateurs or semi-professionals who wanted to make a living from the performing arts and found that the only way they could do so was to invest in education. For certain genres, some of them are among the best actors in the country. The schools offer a range of short-term or part-time courses, workshops and training programmes. This sector is not fully regulated and the quality of programmes, personnel and facilities, as well as the outcomes, vary greatly. Both the university and some of the schools hold workshops with foreign professionals. Recently, the central vocational college in Malta, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, created an Advanced Diploma in Performing Arts, which will eventually be transformed into a BA course. In 2017, a full-time state secondary school, which provides specialisation in the visual and performing arts, was inaugurated. Many of the beneficiaries of this teaching and learning eventually feed into the country's various performing companies.

## The variety of amateur theatres – the variety of performances

Although as we have seen, most theatre in Malta includes elements of amateur theatre (whether this is defined as the absence of professional training or in terms of monetary remuneration) there are also theatre formations that declare themselves amateur. One of the factors that distinguishes them is the choice of language.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Rendle was an amateur director at the Tower Theatre and worked professionally on the London West End. He also taught at the Webber Douglas and Royal Academies of Dramatic Art. Peter Cox was engaged as a theatre-in-education (TIE) coordinator.



Although English is an official language, the language spoken by the majority of the population is the national language, Maltese, and a large proportion of theatre performances are in Maltese, including most new plays written by Maltese playwrights. However, English is widely used in theatres in Malta, as British and American plays are performed regularly in the original language. There are at least two amateur companies that perform almost solely in English, the MADC on the main island of Malta and the Gozo Creative Theatre Club based on the smaller island of Gozo. The latter performs in English because it also targets English-speaking residents.

Most other amateur companies perform mainly in Maltese and are best defined as community theatres. As a general rule, their existence is connected to Catholic parishes or other religious organisations. They perform religious drama, often related to religious festivities such as Christmas and Easter (there is a considerable tradition of passion plays in Malta), but also produce non-religious theatre. They generally receive some support from the mother organisation, but sometimes face some degree of pressure to conform to Catholic teaching.

The range of performances that are produced on the Maltese islands by amateurs is extensive, spanning from melodrama to in-your-face theatre, with musicals being very popular. The range even includes opera, in which professionals flown in from abroad sing the leading roles and Maltese perform the secondary roles and chorus.

One of the advantages that amateur theatres have over their commercial or “professional” counterparts is that, while commercial theatre companies in Malta do not (with one or two exceptions) have their own theatre, amateur companies usually have easy access to performing spaces which belong to parishes and religious orders. This affiliation makes it possible for them to keep costs of production very low and also enables continuity of existence which commercial theatre in Malta rarely enjoys.

## The challenges amateur theatre faces

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, sectors of the performing community in Malta have tried to claim some sort of “professional” status. However, there has never been a consensus on what this status would entail and on what it would be based. As in many other countries, professional status and amateur status are considered the opposing ends of a spectrum. It is the ambition of most actors to lay claim to this professional status, which is generally expressed as the possibility of making a living from performing.

Unfortunately, there are very few tangible boundaries between more professional and amateur theatre, except in most cases, with regard to the quality and level of performance. Maltese funding authorities do not make distinctions between these

categories, and the criteria for allocating funds are often unclear.<sup>3</sup> However, given the supply that is locally available, even the most important venues on a national level cannot really present amateur, semi-professional or professional performances as different platforms. Consequently, reviewers do not make this distinction when writing about these performances. In fact, spectators often choose to attend performances performed by well-known, but not necessarily professional, actors. Moreover, ticket prices do not indicate the level of the performance, except in community theatres, for which tickets are usually much cheaper. In this situation, in which proper distinctions between what is professional and what is not are not made clear, neither professional nor amateur theatres benefit from conditions that would enable them to develop to their full potential.

Presently, perhaps the greatest challenge that amateur theatre faces is that it is no longer attractive to young performers, for several reasons. The sense of community, which fuelled these theatres in the past, is no longer as strong as it was, with young people having many more options for spending their free time. A significant challenge is that of television drama which, although highly popular, often produces mediocre levels of soap opera. Prospective young actors are easily attracted to the “fame” that is available to them by acting in one of the many television drama series, even if they appear practically for free, while more seasoned actors expect remuneration. It is thanks to this situation that many television dramas are broadcast because they are relatively cheap to produce, and costs are recovered through advertising.

Quick transport has also contributed to the dwindling of community theatres, as spectators can more easily attend performances in the main theatres that are mostly situated in the capital, Valletta. Another challenge worth discussing is that of prestige. Community theatres, perhaps with some justification, have become associated with very amateurish theatre, and this label is tough to dislodge. As many of these theatres are ill-equipped, they find it challenging to attract capable or ambitious performers, who choose to perform in more prestigious venues, and to attract theatregoers, who in the past would have probably preferred to attend performances in their own community. The best example of this shift can be seen with the main theatre owned by the Catholic Church, the Catholic Institute Theatre, which has siphoned off many of the better performers and a considerable portion of the spectators from parish theatres.

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<sup>3</sup> The Arts Council, Malta, founded in 2002 and originally called Malta Council for Culture and the Arts, created an Arts Fund in 2009, where artists from all sectors, not only theatre, could pitch their projects to obtain funds. The Valletta Cultural Agency, which was created at the close of Valletta European Capital of Culture 2018, issues calls for cultural initiatives, but these are not exclusive to theatre. Otherwise, some funding is provided under the form of sponsorships or advertising by private entities. Community theatres sometimes receive aid from Local Councils.

## Conclusion

The development of theatre schools and tertiary education in theatre studies has nurtured the growth of public aspiration for more high-quality performances, both in content and staging. It has also started to narrow the gap between amateur status and semi-professional performers because, although partial, more training is available. Certain theatre companies have attracted audiences because they have created plays that are daring and controversial in content. Some of these plays are either local productions of contemporary foreign works, such as *Blasted* by Sarah Kane or *Stitching* by Anthony Nielson (Cremona, “Anthony Nielson’s *Stitching*”), or have been written by Maltese authors. Simone Spiteri’s recent play, *Repubblika Immakulata*, is one such example. The play raises various social and political issues such as environmental degradation, domestic violence and the control of big business over the political class.

Much research, however, still needs to be undertaken to understand how amateur theatre in Malta functions both through instruments that are within the domain of theatre studies and as cultural and anthropological phenomena. It is also worth exploring whether systematic or increased state attention and support can be beneficial to amateur theatre or whether it might lead to a shift towards more commercial or professional theatre. Likewise, the role of training and education of performers within the amateur scene offers a new area of research that is now being addressed on a European level by STEP.

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