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Fr Peter's Perspective

Will it happen in Valletta?

Prof. Serracino Inglott

In spite of the excellent certificates Malta has been receiving on its economic performance, paradoxically we are lagging behind in the area of the greatest long-term importance: innovation. Yet our "millennium project" was the opening of St James Cavalier as a 'Centre of Creativity'. Just a few steps away from the ruins of the Barry Opera House, it will shortly enter into its eighth year of existence. You were a prime promoter of the project. Are you happy with what it has done for Valletta, especially in the light of the new projects for Greater Valletta?

It all began with (yet another) botched competition for the rebuilding of the Opera House. The architects had been asked to pack into a relatively meagre space many more activities than could be accommodated. So the jury, of which I was the chairman, recommended that the nearby Cavalier, then being used wastefully as a printing press, be made part of the Arts Centre project. Moreover, the adjoining open space was apt to be frequented by buskers and the like. The entrance to Valletta could easily be pictured becoming as exciting a place as Piano had envisaged.

St James was called Centre for Creativity and not Centre for the Arts precisely because the idea was for it to help combat the division between science and the arts. Many of the arts today, electronic music, for instance, require scientific knowledge. The Creativity Centre was supposed to provide the space and (expensive) equipment needed for this kind of joint scientific-artistic creative endeavour, St James has tried to open a 'window' on science but on the tiniest of scales.

Are you saying, therefore, that a serious attempt to bridge the division between art and science in our culture has yet to be made?

Obviously, a proper science museum is still needed. By 'science museum' I mean a hands-on affair, more like a super laboratory, a platform for discovery, ideally accompanied by an interactive science park. It might even be a good idea to use the current Natural History Museum as a starting-point for development; it needs rehabilitation anyway.

The museum could also serve as an informal meeting point for researchers, both scientists and artists. Fondazzjoni Temi Zammit recently organised a Researchers' Week at St James that included a joint arts-science installation using videos and other material by Ruth Bianco. The foundation could be associated with setting up and running the kind of science museum we are talking about. It might well attract EU funding. However, we should not wait for that. A modest start could be made with already available resources ideally through an institutional set-up which avoids bureaucracy.

The Arts Village that has also long been clamoured for is still missing. This should be a place where there are laboratories for artists - studios - where they can revive the old methods of teaching art through apprenticeship. Ideally this would be open to tourists who could see artists at work and acquire their works. It should also offer hospitality to foreign artists.

There are at least as many art lovers as there are hunters and although they are not as violent, many of them love art enough to be willing to vote for the party which seems to show most appreciation for creativity.

The Malta Council for Culture and the Arts, of which you are a member, has been through yet another Malta Arts Festival. Is the festival living up to its name as the country's arts event of the year?

This year's festival provided us with the historic occasion of seeing Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret. This is perhaps the most prestigious theatre group now performing anywhere in the world. Barba is often spoken of as a disciple of probably the greatest theatre man of our time, Jerzy Grotowski.

The special interest of Barba's visit lies not only in its having afforded us the possibility of watching great performances but also of observing the group's processes of creation.

Then the Summer University of Performing Arts (SUPA), which was part of the festival, helped to set up a structure of value lasting beyond the festival's duration. The festival also, through the public-space performances by the Brazilian Clowns and others, showed the political and cultural potentiality of street theatre.

However, the festival still lacked a theme or anything that could serve as a mark of identity that can facilitate its proper marketing abroad. At any rate, it should not be the function of the MCCA to organise events, since the council should rather be evaluating and aiding the enhancement of artistic activities. The MCCA is doing its best to adjust to its proper role, but the law setting it up seems to have remained unfamiliar to many sectors of the Government - including some that condition its operations.

There may have actually been an attempt at giving the festival a theme, making it a showcase of Mediterranean art mainly through three Egypt-originated performances. By far the best was a performance in the Palace Courtyard where three musicians who combined, in a very original way, European and Arab traditions gave a thrilling example of cross-Mediterranean dialogue. Also the alternative Egyptian films shown at St James provoked an excited discussion in which the Egyptian Ambassador himself took an active part. It is through such events that Malta can live up to its claims of being a cultural melting pot at the heart of the Mediterranean.

Prof. Serracino Inglott was talking to Nicole Bugeja.
