

New book on Strait Street - A cash cow that ran dry



The Old Vic Music Hall in Strait Street, Valletta was opened in 1881 by an Englishman called Wally Britton. The music hall was taken over by Paul Dowling in the 1930s. Notice the elegance of the foreign entertainers on the stage and that of the Maltese musicians. Strait Street is the subject of a book published yesterday.

The most renowned street on this island is undoubtedly Strait Street in Valletta, popularly known as Strada Stretta.

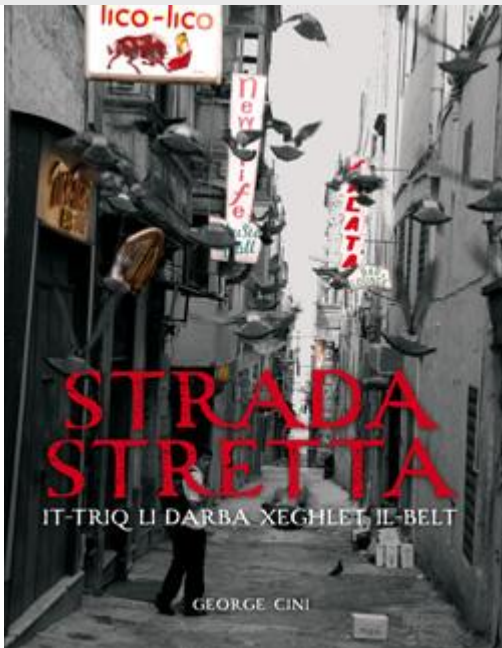
This not to mention the fact that the street sticks like a fossilised icon in the collective memory of most members of the British forces and other navies that had spent time at The Gut, as British servicemen had named this street. Sadly, the street is now deserted.

Strada Stretta: It-Triq li Xegħlet il-Belt (Strait Street: the street that once breathed life into Valletta), written by George Cini, has just been published. The book is the first of its kind as it provides an oral history of this infamous street through a series of interviews with some of the most colourful protagonists who worked in, or knew, this street well.



A Maltese performer imitating Al Jolson.

Strait Street is an alley that was full to the brim with bars, music halls, restaurants and lodging houses. Wine, women and song were the ingredients that made for such an allure. The fascination was akin to that of mythical sirens that tempted weary mariners.



Prior to World War II, the street was alive with the sound of swing. Smartly dressed musicians won their stripes down The Gut as they accompanied showgirls and other entertainers brought over from England, the US and Hungary among other places. The amount of money that was made in Strait Street is beyond comprehension when one considers how poor people were at the time.

“For example, not taking tips into account, musicians earned £7 a week when the average weekly wage of a civil servant was about £1.10s.

Through the use of tokens, barmaids made loads of cash for the drinks they ordered on their own behalf and on behalf of clients.

“It was the type of alley one visited to seek vices of all kinds,” Mr Cini said. Rev. Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, president of Fondazzjoni Temi Żammit, said the book was an example of Malta’s oral history and praised Mr Cini for managing to find the real protagonists of Strait Street.

He spoke about his wish to revive the street to bring it back to its traditional cultural roots.

“Plans have been submitted to the planning authority to bring it back to what it was before,” he said during a press conference at the Castille Hotel.

The book includes photographs being printed for the first time and vivid watercolours by Paul Caruana that spice up the stories of some of the key players of Strait Street of yore. The book was designed by MediaMaker Ltd and printed at Progress Press by Allied Publications.

The book can be bought from main booksellers or online by going to www.timesofmalta.com and clicking on the section
