

Malta in dire need of a national theatre – Joseph Calleja

by FRANCESCA VELLA

Turning Valletta's bombed opera house into a national theatre could be a fantastic global public relations exercise for Malta, world-renowned Maltese opera tenor Joseph Calleja told The Malta Independent on Sunday in an e-mail interview this week, while he was in Munich preparing to sing the role of Rodolfo in his favourite opera, La Boheme.

Malta is the only country in the developed world that does not have a national theatre, he said in reply to questions on the Royal Opera House, whose ruins have defaced the entrance to the capital city since the Second World War.

Mr Calleja points out that a national theatre, on this site or elsewhere, should not be exclusive to operatic presentations.

“A new theatre should be able to accommodate the whole plethora of performing arts, including symphonic concerts, vocal symphonic concerts, recitals, dance, unplugged rock and pop events, musicals, pantomimes and other forms of theatre, as well as operetta and opera.”

Without going into specifics and reasons that have been mentioned before, Mr Calleja said, neither the Manoel Theatre, nor the Mediterranean Conference Centre (MCC) are equipped to stage all forms of the performing arts.

Regarding the government's apparent intention to move the House of Representatives to the opera house site, the tenor said that people in the know, including architects and politicians, have told him that there are several buildings in Valletta that could be turned into a Parliament House with minor modifications.

“The MCC and Fort St Elmo have always cropped up as two possibilities. Both Parliament and a national theatre are essential needs. However, I personally think that, if anything, this country is in dire need of more cultural than political awareness.”

He said few would deny that the Maltese are among the least culture-oriented citizens in Europe, not to mention that the country must also rank near the bottom of the European chart as regards government investment in cultural institutions.

Opera houses and theatres are still being built in cities such as Toronto, Copenhagen, and even in Arab countries, said Mr Calleja, so there must be plenty of professionals who could give advice on how to make the opera house site work.

Should a national theatre be built on the site, he asked, why not take up some space from Freedom Square to add to the space of the theatre, or to incorporate a much needed art gallery?

No matter where a new theatre is built, Mr Calleja said the Maltese need to have a decent centre for the performing arts to call their own. At the same time, it would serve as a space for international artistes to mingle and express themselves, giving the country the cultural boost it badly needs.

“It is a pity that a government that has achieved so many great things for Malta still fails to understand the importance of a solid investment in the arts – an investment supported and run by competent people and not by the usual political appointees.”

Speaking about financing the arts, Mr Calleja said profit should not be the ultimate goal of cultural events. Culture is, after all, an important part of a holistic education system, he said.

Malta could also do a lot more to tap into cultural tourism, he said. Turning the bombed opera house into a national theatre would be a great public relations exercise for Malta.

If properly handled, the news could generate excitement across the globe. This interest could then be exploited to launch a proper performing arts festival in Malta, he said.

“Imagine a musical event (not necessarily opera) performed inside the theatre and concurrently screened live to the people in Freedom Square – a scene familiar in many a European city during the spring and summer months.”

The Maltese tenor remembered having launched his UK career at the Wexford Opera Festival 10 years ago.

“Wexford’s tourism infrastructure is nothing like Malta’s”, said Mr Calleja, “not to mention our excellent airline and well-connected airport. And yet the festival managed to successfully attract thousands of patrons from all over the world year after year since the 1950s.

“This is one of the forms of cultural tourism that Malta has not yet tapped into, and it really begs the question: why is the country not doing more to boost this crucial sector?”

Mr Calleja said the seeds of cultural interest have to be sown in the early school years, by giving more importance to different aspects of the performing arts in the curriculum.

Many studies have shown the benefits of playing classical music to an infant, while others have indicated that children exposed to classical music have a higher IQ and a better aptitude to learn several languages.

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