

Malta needs a proper opera house - Calleja

Cynthia Busuttil

Tenor Joseph Calleja has spoken of his "shock" when he learnt that the government was planning to forge ahead with the idea to shift Parliament to the site of the former Royal Opera House.

Mr Calleja, who has performed in many of the world's major theatres, believes that Malta needs a proper opera house, since the Manoel Theatre, Mediterranean Conference Centre and St James Cavalier are inadequate.

"I do not think it is in the national interest for Malta to be one of the few countries in the world which does not have an opera house," he told The Sunday Times yesterday, pointing out that even Gozo is equipped with two opera houses - the Astra and Aurora - which can stage big productions.

Mr Calleja believes the site should be developed into a multipurpose state-of-the-art auditorium suitable for musicals, opera, theatre, ballet and even special conferences to make it more financially feasible.

"Imagine the grand opening of an opera house bombed during the war. It would be an exercise in PR which the island needs since our main source of income is tourism," he said. Last week Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi confirmed that Italian architect Renzo Piano had been engaged to design Valletta's City Gate and the site of the former opera house, which has been in ruins since the war. The Prime Minister said the government decided not to include a theatre because it did not want to saturate the area.

But Mr Calleja pointed out that although it is a gem, the Manoel Theatre lacks backstage facilities and is not suited to big productions. The Mediterranean Conference Centre also lacks backstage facilities and its acoustics are not suitable for theatrical music while St James Cavalier is "little more than a hall".

Ingenious architecture can find a way of making the best use of limited space.

"I have performed at many opera houses which are not as big as the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden or New York's Metropolitan Opera House, but still do a very good job of sustaining big productions. I think more studies need to be carried out to ascertain whether the footprint is indeed not suited for a modern-day theatre," he said.

Although the major part of his career is spent in theatres abroad, Mr Calleja said he loves performing in Malta.

"In the unlikely scenario that the ruins are rebuilt into an opera house, and I get to perform there, it would probably be one of the most important performances in my life to sing as a Maltese person in a place which has so much history."

Mr Calleja is not the only one to object to Parliament being moved to the opera house site.

Although in his column today (page 13) he praises the Prime Minister's decision to engage Mr Piano, Fr Peter Serracino Inglott said:

"Readers do not need to be told that putting parliament in place of the Opera House is diametrically opposed to what I desire, like so many others who believe that it is living art that is the best expression of our identity and our major economic resource.

"Moreover, the two reasons which the Prime Minister gave for his decision are demonstrably false. They made me wonder whoever it was who had the skill to persuade the Prime Minister of them. However, I have always held that in such matters the buck stops with him."

A group against the parliament proposal formed on the Facebook website also had 1,600 members until yesterday.

On the other hand, the Republic Street Business Community Association welcomed the relocation of Parliament to the old Opera House site and expressed pride that Mr Piano had been chosen to design and commission this project. It also called on government to build a multi-storey car park beneath Freedom Square.

But the idea of a car park, together with an underground bus terminus, has been scrapped, a spokesman for the Office of the Prime Minister said. In fact, while the original project proposed in 1988 was expected to cost around €93 million, the new City Gate and Opera House projects are expected to cost between €60 and €80 million.

It is still unclear how much Mr Piano will earn for the projects. Dr Gonzi has said that the contract, which will include deadlines, is still being drawn up. According to former Valletta Rehabilitation Project head Ray Bondin, Mr Piano was paid some Lm80,000 (€186,349) by the Italian government for the original project.

Comments

philip pace (3 days, 8 hours ago)

I am of the strong opinion that Malta lacks a NATIONAL THEATRE. This theatre has to be run by the Government to provide a space for a lot of mixed stage presentations.

What we have is a mix of theatres that due to the fact that they are very expensive to hire in order for one to stage a presentation.

If the Royal Opera House would be turned as such, it would help a lot the culture section of these islands. Apart from Opera this theatre can be the spring board for many school/college presentations and it would foster the love for the theatre for the younger generation.

If the seating capacity would be around the 400-600 it would be quite ideal for such things.

But the perverse idea coming from the PM to turn it around as the Parliament does not make sense except for the few involved behind this illogical idea in order to make it as a personal business venture for themselves and not in the interest of National pride as the PM feebly tried to sell the idea.

If his idea is sponsored by people like myself than I am against it as it's not logical!

Igalea (3 days, 17 hours ago)

Vincent Debono

No Vincent.

The Germans are duty bound to build it because they destroyed it.

If what you said that German POW wanted to rebuild it, it has to be taken in the context at the situation at them time which was certainly not amenable to build the opera house when most of Malta was a total loss with most of the buildings having to be pulled down. Priority demanded the building and repairs of other buildings.

So yes, it is Germany which must make good for the damage caused by the Luftwaffe and the German Ambassador or perhaps the German President opening the new Opera House in the official ceremony.

Frank vann der Hoeven (3 days, 18 hours ago)

We lived in Malta from 1980 until 1983 and knew the place where the Royal Opera House was. I do not understand why the Maltese never rebuilt their Opera House, I hope that there are no political matters in this. I wish that the Opera House is rebuilt to its former beauty.

Frank van der Hoeven

Joseph Schembri (3 days, 18 hours ago)

I remember visiting Malta as a young boy in the late 70's thinking that those ruins were such an eyesore and having the belief that the Maltese people would eventually do something about this "elegant" car park. Well it's 2008 and the debate rages on...you know what, at this point just do something !!

Even a geometric shaped Renzo Piano glass building would be better than what you have right know.

John cassar (3 days, 18 hours ago)

Indeed malta's opera house should rise where it once stood. Never trust a politician! And it comes true once more. Whilst the city gates will be redesigned, why not overhaul this whole area and create a beautiful centrepiece including malta's grand opera house. A city with heritage listing cannot allow itself to be destroyed by self-centred politicians who are just looking after themselves; yet they should be thinking of the nation as it is the nation that pays their income. Protest I say and let your voices be heard!

mark tanti (3 days, 18 hours ago)

Money should always be spent in the interest of the many and not in the interest of the few. By building a theater only the few who have many will be enjoying so many millions while the many who have few will enjoy nothing. The many can enjoy all these millions by builing new sports complexes, new roads, new parking areas, new housing, new beaches, and much more.

martin frendo (3 days, 19 hours ago)

Give Back Valletta what is hers by right - Well said Joseph.. we can much more than just an opera house and at the same time remain sustainable .

Frankfurt Opera was rebuilt by it's citizens just over 20 years ago - let us use the venture to attract further niche markets to our Jewel in the Med.

Anthony Miggiani (3 days, 19 hours ago)

Mr. Calleja,

Bravo for speaking out and expressing an increasing voice of outrage against the blasphemy of hiring an impressionistic perit to replace the site with parliament buildings. As one of a multitude of global Maltese proud of your achievements and voicing a pro-theatre rebuild opinion that you so espouse I challenge you, due to your prestigious position, to be the catalyst to start a world-wide fund in collaboration with local banks for contributions towards rebuilding the Opera House as I have suggested here and to emails I dispatched to various Malta Gov. institutions.

Such fund's first obligation would be to wrestle the Current Opera House foundations and area away from the gov., save taxpayers' money, and plan on a locally rebuild program, even if it takes some time to accrue enough public contributory funds, as long is it'll no longer be an insensitive gov.'s decision to make.

So, first thing in order is for a massive public effort to stop the yet unfinalised contracts to Mr. Piano and any or other legalities involved. Public demonstrations in Valletta may perhaps contribute towards a reversal of current Gov. plans. This is a one-time opportunity for Maltese to impose their will!

Robert Scullion (3 days, 21 hours ago)

The present German Gov. is in no-way related to the German Nazi Gov of the 1930's & 40's. Why should it fund something that the Malta Government has itself ignored for several decades?

Percy Eugene Cartwright Jnr (3 days, 22 hours ago)

I had to leave my beloved Malta in 1964 due to the islands' economical situation then. I always remember the Royal Opera House in it's ruins defiantly standing and challenging each government after WWII to rebuilt it in it's former glory. And each govt failed to do so due to their childish and churlish political philosophies. Joseph Calleja is so right, MALTA MUST AND SHOULD HAVE AN OPERA HOUSE. What is the problem with politicians, to get their heads together, forget politics for once and a) do a real feasability study to the Royal Opera House rebuilt to it'd former glory (I know costs are always in the equation, but there are always ways to cover these costs, just ask the NSW Government how the Sydney Opera house was built) or B) AS SOMEONE SAID DEMAND , NOT ASK THE GERMAN GOVT TO SUBSIDISE THESE COSTS, AFTER ALL THEY STARTED THE WAR). Would'nt it to have been grand to attend and listen to a concert by Oreste Kirkop then.

Vincent Debono (3 days, 22 hours ago)
German Money because the Luftwaffe !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

OK Let's reason. The Luftwaffe damaged and destroyed 1 corner. German POW's offered to re-build. The Maltese then (YOUR FATHERS) said 'no' and proceeded to dismantle what was left standing.

So let's ask the people responsable for saying 'no' to foot the bill themselves - by estension of logic...

Charles Sammut (3 days, 23 hours ago)
@lgalea

German prisoners of war who were held in Malta after WW II had offered to rebuild the Opera House for a nominal sum. But the GWU objected because it would have deprived the Maltese workers of their job.

So we ended up with a car park.

Igalea (4 days ago)
HOW ABOUT ASKING THE GERMAN GOVERNMENT TO REBUILD THAT WHICH THE GERMAN LUFTWAFFE HAD DESTROYED?

IT'S ABOUT TIME THAT THEY PAY FOR WHAT THEY HAD DESTROYED.

apgrech (4 days ago)
If it's not going to be built exactly as it used to be, then please leave it as is for now hopefully future generations will be wise enough to do just that.

That building was a gem - architecturally beautiful and it will be a shame if it's not built on the same style.

D Fenech (4 days, 1 hour ago)
Parliament should be moved to the Ugly Building being developed just beside Hagar Qim. I think it will reflect the utilitarian attitude of some Parliamentarians "beautifully" ! The fresh air would also supplement the pay rise they have just given themselves!
The Ruins of the Opera House should be restored to their former glory of an Opera House!
At least, can we do ONE thing RIGHT?

Denis Catania (4 days, 2 hours ago)
An Opera House should be built at that site. With German money.

Luarence Zerafa (4 days, 3 hours ago)
"I do not think it is in the national interest for Malta to be one of the few countries in the world which does not have an opera house," How true, and Valletta must also be the only capital city in the world without a modern public (lending) library. A better parliament building may be required but it does not have to be it at city gate and occupy such a prominent site.

Should not such a prominent site readily accessible to all Maltese be reserved to activities that reach all the Maltese. From such prominent a site cultural activities would reach a bigger number of people than

parliament would.

The Malta Library and Information Association <http://www.malia-malta.org/> is proposing and promoting the idea, through a press release and an ipetition, that that Royal Opera House site should be rebuilt as a cultural centre to include a state-of-the-art modern public library right at the entrance to our city.

Charles Micallef (4 days, 3 hours ago)

The question that we should be asking ourselves is, can we afford an Opera House? or is it a priority? I am all in favour of redeveloping this war relic, but I am not sure that we can afford an opera house

WHAT WE CERTAINLY NEED to invest in our hard earned taxes in, is in reforming Enemalta as we did with the Drydocks to curtail the present abuse that goes on within this entity's operating methods.

Gerald Xuereb (4 days, 4 hours ago)

Please remove all those cars from pjazza helsien and give space to people! I fully agree with the project. Let's start now!

Eli Vassallo (4 days, 4 hours ago)

Opera house? One has to see the times when the original opera house was built. In those days the only leisure activities were associated with music and the opera. If an opera house would be built, who would benefit? Are there many opera lovers that justify the building of an opera house? Can everybody afford to visit an opera house once this is completed? Who would be footing the bill to sustain such an opera house once it is completed? Should not such a building cater for families as well given the limited areas that are available for this segment?

Pierre Agius (4 days, 4 hours ago)

The truth is that we need both a proper Parliament and an Opera House. The Palace is inadequate and inappropriate for a Parliament. On the other hand I am very convinced that we in Malta need more culture not less. The void left from culture is encroached quickly by riff- raff. As Herbert Ganado says in his great book "Rajt Malta Timbidel" culture gives self confidence to a nation. This we need in no small measures. But I think we can have both a new house of representatives and an opera house - The shopping archade at city gate is as ugly as sin.

John A. Azzopardi (4 days, 6 hours ago)

A very long time ago, as a young boy, I was in awe when I was shown a field just behind the Adolorata Cemetery. This field contained hundreds of pieces of stone, some marked and numbered, which, I was told, were salvaged from the Royal Opera House. I was further told that these stones would, one day, be put together again to their former glory.

Over 50 years have passed, and that Glorious day has not yet arrived.

Is it true that there existed this treasure hove? Is it still in existence?

Over these 50 years so many politicians have been blabbing about the rebuilding of the Opera House to its former glory.

SHAME SHAME SHAME on all those politicians, red or blue, on all those in authority, who are being paid from our pockets, who have deprived us, Maltese, and future generations, of one of our best Heritages !!

My one deep regret is that I will never have the pleasure of seeing this dream come true !

CE Agius (4 days, 6 hours ago)

Hats off to Mr Calleja, however, our dictators are more interested in their ego than the country's needs.

Who said we need another theatre for our actors(parliamentarians)?

Let the opera house be built to its original glory on the same foundations that stood to the enemy bombs.

Common sense tells me that the present foundations will be able to support the new theatre if built to its original plans.

After almost eight years since a fire burnt it to the ground, Venice's La Fenice opera house has been lovingly restored to its former glory and no Renzo Piano was involved in rebuilding it - but we in Malta have a different attitude towards our heritage.

It would also make financial sense as the foundations are there, and maybe more solid than anything that

can be built up to-day.

Can we Maltese at least for once be consulted? Can we have a referendum and see what the people want? After all the country and its heritage DOES NOT BELONG ONLY to the few in Parliament which are being paid from our taxes to ruin our heritage.

AWAY WITH POLITICS let us not be sorry again - BIEIB il-BELT huwa mera.

Charles Sammut (4 days, 6 hours ago)

What difference does it make to the Republic Street Business Community Association whether Parliament is located at the North East or South West end of Republic Street? OK, the cappuccino sipping activity might move by a couple of hundred meters but so what?

The members of the Republic Street Business Community Association are the very same people responsible for having uglified Malta's main street with their hideous and garish shop signs. Who are they to know what is good for Valletta?

Necessity is the mother of invention but its corollary is also true. Invention is the mother of necessity. Create something and you automatically generate a demand for it. There are a lot of people interested in Opera but most of them find it too troublesome to have to travel to Gozo to attend one.

Hats off to Joseph Calleja who truly has his country at heart. Or has this now become unfashionable, if not downright politically incorrect? Same goes for Fr Peter Serracino Inglott and many others who find the idea of using this site as a parliament, abhorrent.

Joseph Micallef (4 days, 7 hours ago)

This proposal by the Prime Minister looks more and more like a swan song with each day that passes.
