

Opera in the balance

Fiona Galea Debono



Manoel Theatre chairman Peter Fenech: "There is not even one production house that wants to stage an opera once a year!

That is why we do it, because nobody else wants to!"

Photo: Jason Borg.

The chairman of the national theatre strongly opposes having another opera house, believing there were only 700-odd people interested in the art, shedding doubt on their genuineness and the survival of opera.

Peter Fenech has the experience of the BOV Opera Festival to back him; it has struggled for the last decade, the latest edition leading to a €90,000 loss.

"No chairman in his right mind would put up another opera on that basis. So what has to give? The opera? Its formula? Do we need more sponsors despite the substantial funding from BOV?"

Putting up an opera was so expensive it was never expected to fund itself but neither could the theatre just keep on losing money.

"The numbers are simply not there!"

Dr Fenech categorically stated that whoever said Malta needed another opera house did not know what they were talking about, referring to them and their opinions as "hullabaloo".

Tenor Joseph Calleja was among those who believed Malta needed a proper opera house because the Manoel Theatre, the Mediterranean Conference Centre and St James Cavalier, all in Valletta, were inadequate.

But Dr Fenech warned about its feasibility, not only from a financial perspective but also from the human resources and patronage point of view.

"Let's talk sense... There is not even one production house that wants to stage an opera once a year! That is why we do it, because nobody else wants to!"

Dr Fenech questioned whether those in favour of an opera house actually bought a ticket to the theatre's festival. The answer: "We had two operas of excellent quality. Riders To The Sea sold under 20 per cent.

"Where are the opera goers? Those who love opera would have come?"

For the Magic Flute, apart from the sold-out night to foreigners, the bulk of the audience was invited and the theatre could not even sell the remaining seats to the "so-called opera lovers, those who are so willing to criticise but do not attend".

Dr Fenech understood artists wanted a better opera stage but said that did not necessarily have to come by building a new opera house... Refusing to spell out the other alternatives, he simply said: "It will come!"

The problem was not the building cost but recurrent expenditure. A new opera house required human resources, which were sorely lacking. "We already have problems finding technical staff for the theatre. At one point we even had to bring over lights personnel from the UK," Dr Fenech said.

The theatre invested in the engagement of musical director Brian Schembri, who spent days putting up a programme with top European musicians. But it lost money on practically every musical event this year, Dr Fenech admitted.

"Where are these people? Why? Are they only prepared to criticise? Do they only come to be seen at the theatre?"

Dr Fenech did not see the scope of throwing money into an event that did not attract audiences.

However, he acknowledged that the national theatre had the distinct role of providing for the cultural areas that had no supply, so he was not prepared to throw in the towel.

The future of opera at the Manoel required lateral thinking because the traditional formulas were not successful, Dr Fenech said. The market had to be offered the product it wanted, which could be a shorter or more spread-out version of the festival, or a change in formula.

The theatre was committed to the Bank of Valletta until 2010 but would be discussing whether the agreement needed to be changed, he said, auguring, nonetheless, that it would be extended for another five years.

A post-mortem is being made and Dr Fenech planned to propose changes.

Nevertheless, he said, "as a responsible committee, we should have opera on our calendar. I do not only make economic considerations, otherwise we would not be where we are today".

Comments

Anthony Farrugia (1 week ago)

I tend to agree with Dr Fenech regarding attendance at opera performances compared to the huge production costs. It appears that those who complain (traditional Maltese gem-gem) do not want to put their money where their mouth/pen/keyboard is; the days of freebies and free lunches are over and you pay for what you get.

smone camilleri (1 week, 1 day ago)

Is Dr Fenech trying to ignore the fact that there are two theatres (opera houses) in Gozo that play to a full house each and every year? The seat capacity is not 600 but 1200 and more for each theatre.

If there are really so few people who are interested in opera, it is the duty of the government to educate youngsters in classical music/opera. Only education can help us get rid of the idea that classical music/opera is only for nerds. Thanks to the music school we already see a few youngsters attending concerts/operas. Go to any opera house/concert hall abroad, as I do regularly, it is a pleasure to see how many young people there are in the audience. Get them interested, offer them prices they can afford and they will flock to "serious" music.

I fully agree with Joseph Calleja - we need a PROPER Opera House.

Emmanuel Marmara' (1 week, 1 day ago)

Mr.Peter Fenech....You don't have to use the OPERA HOUSE just for operas (because it's name is so)..I don't know how much you travel abroad, but a lot of opera houses/theatres are used for more than an opera and most of them are used to stage shows of all kinds. I for one happens to go almost twice a month to attend for these fabulous shows and the majority of the Maltese (because I ASSURE YOU ,YOU'RE ONE OF THOSE VERY FEW), WANT TO SEE THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE IN IT'S FORMER GLORY,NO MATTER WHAT. SO you keep to your operas and let the rest have what we want. On the other hand Mr.Peter if you're afraid of competition, that's your problem. Please Mr.Editor I hope that you bring my comment and to the full,because lately I don't know why you did not bring my comments at all or you take the substance out of it.

Ian Waugh (1 week, 1 day ago)

Why can't they see the wood beyond the trees here?

The PM states that there's 'saturation' of theatre in Valletta and all the spin merchants go running round creating spin and counter spin massaging one statement!

They are like the chicken with no head.

What is all this?

Who knows? Theatre could subsidise Opera! It doesn't take an economist to work out that for heavens sake! It works in every other European state.

Is Valletta going to be lumbered with a three hundred year old 'acting national theatre' with all its historic beauty and none of the modern facilities for 21st century performers and producers?

It is crazy on so many levels! If you go against certain opinion you are "being political" or an "interfering foreigner".

I bet any money the outcome will either be a political building or some second-rate appalling compromise ... again!

Just bring theatre back to the Opera House bomb site ... 67 years in the waiting and still the debate rumbles every so slowly onwards.

I give up on this ... I really do!

P Attard (1 week, 1 day ago)

At last Peter Fenech who can speak with authority and make sense on an issue in which he has direct experience has said it bluntly. Having another theatre for the occasional opera does not make economic sense, whatever certain letter writers / critics / columnists may say. I have before me the ticket prices for opera in central Italy this summer. In one theatre prices range from E150, 120, 90, 70, 40, 20, 15 - you would rather stay at home watching opera on video rather than sit in a 40, 20, 15 seat. Another theatre will be selling tickets at E70, 50, 40, 20 - again, you would not sit in the cheaper seat and enjoy the evening. Both productions are heavily subsidized by the Provincia and the Comune together with leading financial and commercial institutions. We simply cannot afford running another national theatre. Not even the critics and the columnists would want to pay taxes for white elephants when we have existing theatres (in Malta and Gozo) that could satisfy the very limited demand ... at a huge loss.

Timothy R. Chilvers (1 week, 1 day ago)

I agree that one opera house is enough. I saw the BOV festival, and very good it was, especially Riders to the Sea. But it was disappointing the numbers present - but even with a full house, would you break even? A great friend of mine was a member of the direction of the Geneva opera house, and even with full houses, and an average of 6-8 performances of each opera, a govt. subsidy and sponsorship was needed - verb sap. Also, the BOV festival seemed poorly advertised - nothing from the bank to its customers, no advertising on the radio, etc. The answer might be: subsidy, advertising, and suitable programmes to take advantage of a splendid theatre - perhaps like Wexford, or a range of baroque operas; anyway, a coherent programme, well advertised and sponsored.

John Azzopardi (1 week, 1 day ago)

Many seem to think that having a proper opera house in addition to the existing theatres would solve the problem and balance the equation. What everyone is forgetting is that they would still have to pay to watch performances. Or are they expecting it would be for

free? I am sure that everyone can understand the high costs connected with putting together such performances and bringing over performers from abroad. Such costs need to be recouped. Hence the tickets. There is no escaping having to pay for tickets whether there is a new venue or not. Unfortunately, we have grown to expect handouts from all and sundry.

Joseph Cauchi (1 week, 1 day ago)

Some are saying if a new venue is in place, people will flock to it and they are giving the example of the then new cinema complex in Paceville.

Yes up to a certain extent, this venture was quite successful; however I hazard a guess if this success is still as relevant today!

I agree with the Chairman Dr. Peter Fenech. He is talking sense.

L Coleiro (1 week, 1 day ago)

Who wants to pay 60 Euros for an opera whose theater seating and boxes is in a state of discomfort, squeezed and tide.

Let's say; paying 20 euros for a concert is acceptable some how or another to stay in an uncomfortable place causing strain & 20 euros are not that much apart of experiencing physical discomfort, C.Sammut spotted it right "I remember some years ago, cinemas all over the island had closed. Then when a state of the art venue was built, it was a huge success"

What opera culture needs to get revived is absolutely a new venue! A decent presentation and a comfortable placed to suits today's needs. Thus opera is imbedded in the Maltese genes. One have to go to some festas, people in cottonera, mosta, zebbug, zejtun flock to hear the operatic antiphons by famous composers. The spirit is still there, it's the creativity of the promoters that have failed.

Inutli nibqaw inraqqu l- pannu bil qaraa hmar u nipretendu nies li jiffullaw. A decent place would start a new era.

Anthony (1 week, 1 day ago)

I've never attended an opera concert in my 22 years of living, but would definitely love to, and preferably on a regular basis -- after all, Culture would remain Culture, and incomparable to modern trends and fads. HOWEVER...

...I don't consider myself a cheap person, but when you look at the the tickets' price tags, and think of all the food and necessities you could buy at the end of the week -- guess what wins? Yep, opera would not feed you.

Don't be greedy and reduce the ticket fees! I'm sure this'd allow for a wider exposure and a larger audience, especially amongst the youngsters!

Luke Gatt (1 week, 1 day ago)

@A Camilleri

That's because they are free of charge. People go anywhere obviously, if it is free of charge

If i may i ask would you pay 50 60 90euros to go an opera?

Ramon Casha (1 week, 1 day ago)

What do you mean another (sic) opera house? There are NO OPERA HOUSES on this island. Not every theatre stage can double as an opera house.

Mario Tabone-Vassallo (1 week, 1 day ago)

Il-fatti juru li l-Manoel sikwit gheri ghal kuncerti tassew tajbin. Ukoll ghal l-opri, ma jinbieghux il-biljetti kollha. Jkun genn tibni tijatru iehor meta ma hawnx xhieda ta' htiega. Dan kollu meta hafna biljetti jkunu moghtija gratis! Barramindan, hemm id-Dar tal-Mediterran li tista' tkun lok ghal ftit opri li jinghataw Malta jekk tinsab il-htiega. Mort Savonlinna u postijiet ohra apposta biex nara jekk dan kienx possibli bil-limitazzjonijiet tal-palk tad-Dar tal-Mediterran u konvint li possibli. Naqbel 100% ma Dr. Fenech fuq dan

A Camilleri (1 week, 1 day ago)

Has he never heard of the Astra and Aurora operas in Gozo? or the hundreds of music productions that fill churches, town halls, car parks and fosos throughout the year? The reason the Manoel can't keep up is exactly this attitude. Who wants to patronise an institution that insults its patrons, and is run by a bunch of snobs who think they are members of an exclusive elite?

Is the problem with the Maltese people, or is it with an opera management who has grown increasingly out of touch, doesn't know the first thing about market, and who fails to adapt itself to the wishes of its patrons?

Dr. David Pollina (1 week, 1 day ago)

Insert Crocodile tears :-)

Don't put up a proper Opera House to compete with us...

Joseph Calleja is right - the Manoel Theatre is just not adequate. It is a great theatre, but not a great Opera House, as we once had.

Considering the anti-competitive policies of both the Manoel and MCC (both chaired by Dr. Fenech), not much weight can be placed in his 'opinion'.

Charles Sammut (1 week, 1 day ago)

This is a terribly defeatist attitude from some one who should know better. I remember some years ago, cinemas all over the island had closed. Then when a state of the art venue was built, it was a huge success.

I get the feeling that Dr Fenech is simply smoothing the way for Renzo Piano's plans. Of course Mr Piano does not have a free hand in this project and we all know what some people would like to see instead of the Opera House.

'L appetito vien mangiando. That's what the Italians say. And I firmly believe that presented with an attractive and appetising table, people will flock to it.

Vania Lamanna (1 week, 1 day ago)

I strongly believe there are far more people than the 700 suggested by Mr. Fenech who are interested in opera in Malta and Gozo, along with several younger people, myself included. A deterring factor is most probably the price of tickets during this time of recession. I currently live near Naples and have yet to go to the famed San Carlo to hear one of their productions. I am waiting for a particularly good one-spending Euro 100-150 per person is a lot of money. There are not too many people who can afford that on a regular basis, much as we love the music and arts. Of course, producing an opera is expensive too, between the costumes, paying the artists, orchestra etc, so I fully understand the price behind it, but unfortunately, the cost is prohibitive after life's daily bills and what nots are paid.
