

Theatre ruin(ed) saga

John Schranz

So it would seem that the fate of the entrance to Valletta has been sealed. What was once a theatre (an opera house, to be precise) is to become an open-air venue. It is futile to try to dress it up by calling it a theatre.

There are three major mistakes. The first is trying - in vain - to justify the venue's open-air nature by saying that in Malta "we have enough theatres". Another is trying to hold that such a roofless space would be a new concept that needs to be explored. A third is calling it a 'theatre'. Let's see them one by one.

Seeking to justify an open-air venue at the very hub and entrance of our capital city by saying that "in Malta we have enough theatres" has already been tried. It is no secret that it has impressed nobody. It couldn't, because no serious defence of that untenable position was tried - indeed, the sociological, cultural, educational and political poverty of that line is manifest. Let's stop this charade. "Malta has other theatres" is like saying "we have enough churches, so let's build a bocci pitch".

The second flawed statement - saying that a roofless venue is a new concept that needs to be explored - leaves one speechless. It's not only that open-air performances in Europe are at least as old as Greek theatre, and that marvels were realised in the streets of Europe's towns and cities in Medieval times and in the Renaissance. It's not only that today's technology renders any such 'explorations' child's play. It's that in a country where open-air events by far outnumber indoor ones, such a statement is meaningless.

There are the big, mass events - festas, firework displays, Holy Week celebrations, re-enactments, political party manifestations, carnival, regattas, wine festivals, beer festivals, food festivals, Ijeli Maltin - our country throbs with them.

Then there are concerts, theatre performances, operas, ballet, son et lumières, installations and jazz festivals, rock concerts.

I have in mind such splendid settings as De Redin Bastion, San Anton Gardens, Verdala Palace Gardens, Vilhena Palace, St Paul Square in Mdina, the Esplanades of the Gozo Citadel, Fort St Angelo, Villa Bighi's terraces, Argotti, Hastings, the Upper Barrakka - The list is endless.

In all of these I have been personally involved - and countless others like me - in performances where I directed, performed, did lighting, created installations. Those spaces have one thing in common, however: if the festa calendar is carefully consulted, each of them would be an island of silence. Which brings us to the third - and gravest - error.

The word 'theatre' comes from the Greek 'theatron', literally: the place where one sees. That 'seeing' is not done with the eyes, however. It is done with even sensibility, sensitivity, insight, and even foresight. For instance, in Greek tragedy there often is a prophet - a seer, one who sees what's coming, the future, one who is sensible, sensitive, insightful, one with foresight - and so: he knows how important it

is to listen. He is Tiresias. And Tiresias is blind. Which is why he sees what others cannot see. A theatre is a place one goes to in order to see; to see what the eye does not see.

The Opera House site will not become an open-air theatre. Simply because it cannot. Open-air theatres are normally sited in wide, landscaped spaces, because sound travels and can in no way be stopped except by insulation. An open-air space at the entrance of a dense city like Valletta can never be sound-proofed. The noise of traffic passing through the streets around may, to some extent, be somehow controlled, but the noise and bustle of people going into and out of the city cannot be stilled.

Then there are the festi, each entailing a week of celebrations. Not only the ones in Valletta, but the ones surrounding it - across Grand Harbour, in The Three Cities and in their conurbation, and across Marsamxett harbour, the festi of Gżira, Sliema, Msida. Throughout the season when open-air spaces may be utilised, the sounds of celebratory fireworks, bells and bands will be there, irrevocably and unstoppably. Anybody who has either performed or been at performances where that has happened knows all too well what it means.

It is therefore wrong, unjustifiable and indefensible to say that the Opera House site is going to become an open-air theatre. What is being proposed is an open-air entertainment space where events emitting decibels that are sufficiently loud enough to drown out the surrounding noise may be organised.

Please, Prime Minister, pause, think and listen. The decision is yours to reverse.
Prof. Schranz lectures theory and philosophy of theatre at the University of Malta.

Comments

j ebejer (6 days, 15 hours ago)

Culture is about self expression. Creative performing arts are important but it is not the only form of self-expression.

The theatre/ performing space may not be the perfect venue for all forms of artistic self-expression. There are however countless activities of varying artistic and cultural content which could be held within the proposed performing space.

I am not an art connoisseur nor am I fan of the more populist forms of entertainment. I do find certain comments made by persons who perceive themselves to be artists with a capital A to be patronising to all others.

The discussion should not be about YOU the Artist or YOU the university lecturer or YOU the architect. The discussion should be about VALLETTA!

Joe Xuereb (1 week, 3 days ago)

Thank you John Schranz. If your analysis does not convince, nothing will. Quoting your good self: ' What is being proposed is an open-air entertainment space where events emitting decibels that are sufficiently loud enough to drown out the surrounding noise may be organised'. Quite! A venue, a roofless one, where the only viable entertainment would be high-decibel rock - in an Opera House, remember! - vying with sundry noises, and winning hands down. Nice, but everybody's cuppa?

What about the neighbours?

On a slightly lighter note. Someone on this or similar tread denigrated the concept of a roofless theatre and mentioned - tongue-in-cheek? - the open latrines of antiquity (I tried to find the comment but failed, the traffic here being such - analogy intended).

And I thought, I remember such Roman latrines, with mosaic floor, in Malta, somewhere near Mgarr. Can someone please verify this or tell me that I'm not dreaming of such a gem. This is a serious request.

guzexuereb@hotmail.com

One thing intrigues me. Piano's reputation could be enhanced or crushed - depending on the success or the abysmal failure of this 'toothless/palateless' wonder. Signor Piano must be very sure of himself. Hence my curiosity.

Anthony Pace Gouder (1 week, 4 days ago)

What about THE RESIDENTS in the neighbourhood ? They will have to cope with ,quote..... ""those high pitch decibles loud enough to drown any surrounding (alien) noise.

CLEARLY ITS A MATTER OF SOUND

So If its to their liking they can reap the benifit of getting free entertainment . To the contrary , ITS EITHER EAR PLUGS or A TEMPORARY EVACUATION TO IMDINA ,THE SILENT CITY . The deaf of course have no problem , but the stubborn will tolerate in patience and curse the moment this OPAVEN* was created along with the sponsors !

ps. * This being an "original" theatre as described by Dr.Gonzi (Malta deserved a theatre that is different to the ones already in existance). So lets invent a new word from your "open-air-venue' OPAVEN !

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Suzanne Muscat (1 week, 5 days ago)

.....an excellent article, I could"nt agree with you more.

Gerard Cassar (1 week, 5 days ago)

An open air theatre so close to Parliament, in both places sittings and events take place in the evening. Will not the sounds of the theatre reverberate into the parliament and make it impossible to hear speeches or even register them without interference from the open air would be theatre. It is though some one estranged to rhe arts has taken a decision without thinking. But we remember, Gonzi first statement did not refer to a theatre but to a Parliament house. It was Piano who suggested the use of the space and suggested an open air theatre for lack of funds. For lack of funds I would not suggest anything. If I don't have enough funds I would not suggest a roofless dwelling. I'll wait till I have enough funds. As simple as that.

Paul Kelly (1 week, 5 days ago)

If a space, however it is defined, is going to have a creative use, then artistic directors and producers are going to have a view on this. They are going to have to be able to produce work that will work within the space, work that will satisfying both for the creators and for the audience. Has the Government asked artistic creators in Malta, "What sort of work could you create for this sort of space and how often?" If not, why not? If Malta's artistic creators respond by saying that the proposed space is not suitable for the creation of artistic work, then the Government should think again. If the artistic creators say that the space is only suitable for a specific type of work, perhaps at certain times of the year, then the Government needs to evaluate whether the current proposals are cost-effective. For a Government to create a space without properly consulting the people who will be required to work in it and make work for it, is almost as bad as censorship.

r cutajar (1 week, 5 days ago)

dear Sir I mean prof J. Schranz could you please gather the necessary backing from the right quarters and with so much professional experts' clout Dr Gonzi will be persuaded that otherwise to your collective advice, the country's crown would have no room for the jewel

Over 60 years of unwanted roofless space perhaps another 60 years of forced roofless space at great expense

If money is the issue leave the site alone and as for the parliament new sight move it to some other venue in Valletta where the activity would generate more inclusion thus encourage more life to a still city which is idle for most of the time

J Brincat (1 week, 5 days ago)

And do you sincerely think that Dr Gonzi will revise his decision?

Dialogue is a word of the distant past used when it best suited the PN!