



Mario Azzopardi

**“Theater action as a mediating force
in urban cultural development”**
« Le théâtre en tant qu’outil de médiation
dans le développement culturel urbain »

Head of the Malta Drama Centre

Mario Azzopardi has been directing the Malta Drama Centre, a state institution, for the past five years. He is also one of the pioneer directors involved in the running of the first Drama Academy in Malta which was created in 1979. Besides his interest in mainstream and pedagogical drama, he is committed to the exploration of social issues using theatre as an investigative and expressive tool. He is involved also in cultural journalism and lectures on social and political Theatre at the University of Malta.

Mr Azzopardi is also a noted published writer in Malta and was one of the leading poets who brought about the literary revival of the Sixties in his native island. Recently he has published his first collection of social issue stories for adolescents. He has worked at Malta's National Theatre and national broadcasting and between 1998-2005 formed part of the Cultural Policy Unit within the Ministry of Education and Culture, entrusted with the research and drafting of Malta's first Cultural Policy. He is very engaged in conducting workshops and drama projects in European countries.

Mr Azzopardi holds a professional Diploma in the Theory and Practice of Education, obtained cum laude, and a Masters of Philosophy in Community Theatre.

Directeur du Malta Drama Centre, Malte

Mario Azzopardi est le Directeur du Centre Dramatique de Malte depuis 2003 et l'un des fondateurs de l'Académie dramatique de Malte créée en 1979. Ses intérêts professionnels se portent sur la pédagogie du théâtre, mais également sur l'exploration des grandes problématiques sociales à travers le prisme du théâtre en tant qu'outil d'expression et de recherche. Il enseigne le journalisme culturel, et le théâtre politique et social à l'Université de Malte.

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“Refugees live in a divided city in their minds, between zones in which they cannot live, and zones which they may not enter” Elie Wiesel.

The reception and social integration of asylum seekers and refugees is a major challenge facing Europe before the close of the first decade of the 21st century. According to the UNHCR, it is estimated that the current number of refugees in Europe is about 9 million.

Almost invariably, added to overt or implicit racism and xenophobia, if not also physical aggression, asylum seekers have to face specific problems related to employment, communication skills and above all an intense culture shock.

The continuous arrival of the “boat people”, as they have become known, has provoked very negative reactions in large segments of the Maltese population. They argue that Malta is much too small to take the influx and the financial burden. Since 2002, when the issue started to become significantly worrisome, 11,300 asylum seekers arrived in Malta as human cargo, on 339 boats. This year alone, 2,522 Africans, mostly from Somalia, Eritrea and Egypt, hit Malta or were rescued at sea by the island's tiny fleet belonging to the Armed Forces. Many were reported dead, including children. Very often, if not detected by patrol boats from Malta or Italy, the Africans are forced to swim the last kilometre to reach land. Many of them drown because they cannot swim. Many more drown because the boat or dinghy sinks.

No one can know for certain where the Africans are coming from, but water patrols assume that they are leaving by the hundreds from Tripoli or Sfax in Tunisia, a well-known location for assembling the refugees against payments of 1,000 dollars a head.

Eighty six per cent of Africans arriving in Malta are men, 10% are women and 4% are children. The asylum seekers are held in nine open centres run by the Government, seven Church homes and at the Peace Laboratory, a retreat centre run by Franciscan monks. Psychologically, the pressure of such numbers has been perceived as



"intolerant" by many Maltese, who are living on the most densely populated island (1,700 people per square kilometre) in the Mediterranean. To understand the numbers in a European context, given Malta's demographic the arrival of 2,500 asylum seekers in Malta in 2008 would be equivalent to 400,000 clandestines in Italy or 1.3 million in France.

The Maltese Government has landed a dramatic and unenviable situation. International agencies like the UNHCR, Amnesty International, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, the Paris-based International for Human Rights and other sources have harshly criticised the Government's detention of illegal immigrants. The situation in detention camps (sometimes referred to as tent-cities) were described by European agencies as "shocking", "miserable", and places of "depression, frustration, indignity and demoralisation", where women and children "were kept as prisoners" and where the only form of protest was manifested by hunger strikes so that "the inmates" could be allowed to speak to the media.

Mounting pressure from international agencies and the EU Commission forced the Government to publish in 2005 a Policy Document on Irregular Immigrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers. The document promised among other rights, the social inclusion of asylum seekers, sensitivity to the physical and emotional needs of persons in detention and even respect for cultural and cultural diversity, pledging the organisation of recreation activities.

On the other hand, growing sections of the Maltese population have pressed the Government to take Malta's case before the European Union Council. In 2007, Malta submitted a proposal to the EU Council so that immigrants rescued outside the search and rescue zone of an EU country (such as Libya or Tunisia) would be allocated on a proportional basis among all EU countries.

At European level, Malta has been clamouring for a burden sharing Policy to contain the ever-increasing influx of such persons from Africa. It was only late last September (2008) that Malta managed to push for and secure a Migration Pact whereby member-countries of the European Union would commit themselves to a "voluntary" scheme to receive some of these illegal immigrants. For the Social Democrats in opposition, this was not enough and the Government was accused of "caving in" and condescending to European powers.

Even many Maltese citizens are claiming that this is not enough and there has been mounting pressure and opposition to clandestine, who are now emarginated. Tensions continue to escalate as the two far-right parties, structurally tiny but garnering hidden support from many people, have taken again to the streets of the capital city to protest that Malta is being hijacked by Black people. The melodrama is mixed with hate as Africans are now seen as "threatening the livelihood" of the Maltese people. Africans are even perceived as "enemies of Christianity", a totally erratic impression derived from the great crusades between the Knights of Malta and the Ottoman Turks. Prejudice, intolerance and even fundamentalist allergies to African people in Malta are rife and one would never see a Maltese taking to an African on the street. It has become taboo.

Moreover, a Parliamentary member of the Socialist Party stirred a scandal when he proposed that "special buses" for Black people should be scheduled by the Transport Authority to take Africans from their open centre to the City. Outside City Gate, regular groups of Africans, unwelcome in other pubs and coffee shops, assemble in a depressed area to smoke, chat and perhaps create percussion rhythms on wooden stools. Violence at the so called Paceville (City of Peace) erupts at regular period as bouncers block Black people from going to the dance floor, or even enter the establishment. Rejection and depression recently claimed its first victim : an Arab hanged himself when he was still in police custody.

Ironically, Africans from open centres are hired and picked up very early in the morning when they are needed to work on jobs which the Maltese are increasingly reluctant to accept for themselves, including garbage collection, disposal of waste and dangerous, unprotected work on construction sites. The pay is miserable and Africans are totally exploited. Many of them travel on old bicycles bought with their first mean wages, a perilous way of urban mobility of Malta's heavily congested streets and because of reckless drivers.

The socio-psychological implications are serious and lamentable. On its part, the Malta Drama Centre, a state institution located in two kilometres away from Valletta, felt strongly that it should deal concretely and creatively to "defuse" a situation which was becoming more and more dangerous. The arrival of thousands of Africans to Malta had fired feelings of racism and xenophobia. The presence of these clandestine immigrants in detention centres or in open centres in the inner harbour town of Marsa again, two or three kilometres from Malta's capital city, had started to provoke very aggressive behaviour by Maltese groups, who took to town and marched in protest. Violence erupted, journalists were attacked and there was also organised crime against persons and organisations who favour a decent, dignified treatment of the asylum seekers.

Journalists' private residences were attacked and vehicles belonging to the Jesuit Refugee Service were torched. Racist speakers were brought before the Courts but this tended to make "heroes" out of the perpetrators, especially since by that time, two new extreme right wing parties, the *Imperium Europa* and *Alleanza Nazzjonali* were formed, networking with hundreds of followers via the internet and sometimes in urban centres.



The situation aggravated the tension in urban localities, especially the harbour area, where immigrants line up every morning to accost persons and companies for work, which is paid miserably and which has stimulated action by Malta's leading Trade Union and the Catholic Church.

THEATRE AND URBAN POLITICS

Within this scenario of hard-core, local and foreign politics, what intervention can culture and the arts make? How can they mediate? How could they penetrate such obtuse circumstances? How can the tangible and the intangible aspects of culture come into play? Can culture, and in our specific case, the performing arts, become catalysts to neutralise rigid old paradigms and traditional schemas and prejudices?

In the light of such a situation, the Malta Drama Centre has tried to give its practical share to defuse mounting discrimination against Blacks through cultural action and, more specifically, through drama and dance. The Drama Centre, runs a Community Development Programme, exploring, investigating and devising projects on such issues as estrangement, isolation, urban getthoism, domestic violence, addiction and youth problems. The Programme is run by Maltese tutor-directors and participants include teachers, social workers, nurses, manual workers and white collar wollar workers. Experts from the fields of sociology, psychology and medicine are asked to assist voluntarily during forum-theatre.

Community theatre action is normally "mobile" - the projects are first researched and devised and then are taken out to towns to target groups. But there are times when the Drama Centre invites particular audiences to its premises (eg. young offenders or ex-prisoners) for studio productions.

In 2005 and 2007, the Malta Drama Centre decided to take up the issue of clandestine migration. Two separate methods and indicators were outlined:

- A. In the first instance, the Centre made the necessary contacts with one open centre and a tent-city, in the inner harbour location and the more "detached" southern part of the island. The contacts yielded twelve voluntary African participants (10 men and 2 women), coming from twelve different Congo tribes. They worked with two female Maltese stage directors to mount a presentation of African drama, singing and dance-drumming. The project would boost not only their indigenous talent but affirm their right not to estrange themselves from their own original culture, in tune with the Government's own Policy Paper of 2005. Another objective was to acclimatize Maltese audiences to the rich, even exotic performance of the Africans, which would serve as a creativity lever to affirm measures of social integration.
- B. The second project involved several other countries, namely Italy, Austria, Germany, Lithuania and Turkey and was funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme. The research methods, in the shape of narratives recounted by authentic refugees in the participating countries, were employed by the respective participants in the project, while the Malta Drama Centre was entrusted with coordinating actual training in Rome, with a view to transform the "prose" narratives of the asylum seekers into dramatised action, which would then be filmed and shown to refugee communities, NGOs, social and care workers in respective municipalities.

Both projects left a big impact.

We wanted both projects to focus on the implications of dealing with good practice, positive impact and reconciliation, taking into consideration the cultural rights of refugees and asylum seekers. We also wanted to make an unequivocal political statement through cultural intervention. Apart from the performance value the Africans offered so spontaneously, we gave our audience the opportunity to become "accomplices" in a creative event supporting refugee identity. At the same time we emphasised a counter-statement denouncing prejudice against such people.

With the first project, called **Katanga**, new paradigms of cultural cooperation were immediately established. The project was so successful that it was then transferred to the Jesuit Refugee Centre and also to the capital city, specifically at the National Creativity Centre. Six performances were held and venues were packed to capacity. The Africans ended up every show by inviting the audience to go on stage and dance with them. They were also remunerated with 75% of all gate money. The media was extremely supportive and leading papers carried double pages in full colour, while the project also featured prominently in the official **Kultura** magazine published by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. There were plenty of suggestions, including the concept of the Africans forming a legal cooperative and present shows in Maltese hotels as evening entertainment, but the idea was dropped after the Congolese performers decided they would not wish to stay for a long time in Malta, since their main destination was mainland Europe and perhaps, America.

In fact over the past 3 years, the United States accepted to rehabilitate 144 asylum seekers from Malta while over the same period of time, six European countries accepted to receive 83. This represents 0.7% of all arrivals and it is clear that EU countries have to step up their act and assist in easing the problem.



Speaking to a leading journalist from The Times, the paper with the largest circulation in Malta, the leader of the Congolese performers explained that for them, the public performance was a golden chance to show who they are and that they are proud of that identity. Another performer explained how in their country, improvised, unrehearsed music and dance-drama is part of everyday life and that they wanted to cherish the memory.

For the second project, which materialised first in Rome and then in the respective partner countries, it was not possible to use real refugees to go on stage. The programme, called ***In From the Shadows***, had a more formal structure, since a script had to be assembled from the "memory stories" compiled in all countries. The dramatised text then had to be transferred first on stage and later on screen in a version by Malta's Education TV-Channel. The dramatised action highlighted crucial moments in the refugee stories, basing sequences on three key phases namely

- (i) separation - involving reason for abandoning the homeland;
- (ii) transition - actual hardships incurred in the move;
- (iii) incorporation - or integration, meaning the status in the eyes of the new community, with failure or success.

Displacement is mostly about loss, although it also means the persistence of memory. Migrants' life stories, if we are ready to listen to them, have often an amount of baselines which can offer a bi-directional process. The illness of exile, as one African writer, Mandla Langa, put it, is not so much a geographical as a state of mind, something that branded you and threatened to consume you.

But should the illness of exile leave one maimed for life? The question begs for engagement and vigorous debate. And of course, fortified, cultural commitment.

OTHER INITIATIVES

- In 2002, when the issue of the boat people started to intensify, the Ministry of Education & Culture reached agreement with the Armed Forces of Malta for the provision of special transport for refugee children held in tent camps to attend special sessions in creativity and free expression in the city.
- That same year, the Ministry focused on a group of unaccompanied adolescents from Africa and the ex-Soviet states to search their memories through stories, drama and painting. The sessions were held at Liberty House, which was turned into a proper, residential home the year before.
- In 2004, inspired by Kofi Anan, the Secretary General of the UN, the Jesuit Refugee Service Malta organised a multi-cultural programme at their retreat house in the town of Mosta. Local families were invited to interact. Traditional Eritrean food was served live music animated the evenings and then the refugees were invited to share their experience with the Maltese.
- In the summer of 2004, Maltese volunteers created "a season of fun" for refugee children. They were introduced to splash-and-fun parks, cinemas and yacht cruises. Practically, all the odd 30 African children who participated grew up together in detentions centres which by that time, had acquired a notation reputation and were widely condemned.
- In November that same year, a first African Festival, featuring African drummers, textile colouring, fashion and indigenous gastronomy was organised at the University of Malta. The protagonists, mostly young immigrants, came from Libya, Nigeria, Morocco, Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt.
- In 2006 the Malta Drama Centre launched a project which investigated the fate of Palestinians trapped in occupied territory in the West Bank. The theatre project, presented at the Centre and the University of Malta, relied on eye witness reports of Palestinian refugees who had somehow escaped and landed in Malta. Running under the title of *Il-Ferita* (The Wound) the project also made extensive use of smuggled film footage and poetry by Palestine's national poet, Mahmoud Darwish.