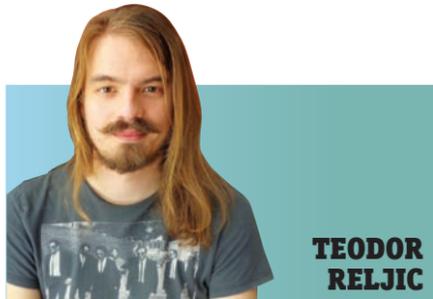


In 2018 • Valletta is European Capital of Culture

Reasons to celebrate?

What are the implications of pitching this potentially scene-changing opportunity as simply yet another 'celebration'?



TEODOR RELJIC

IN just over a couple of weeks, Valletta will officially become European Capital of Culture in 2018. The fruits of this particular labour having survived – in altered, some may even say mangled, form – across various elections and successive governments since 2011, it comes with both cultural and political baggage.

Baggage whose weight of expectation hangs heavy on the backs of various “creative practitioners” on the island; to say nothing of the Foundation whose job it is to ensure that not only does the year run richly and smoothly, but that the event secures a much-vaunted “legacy” for the island’s way of doing things when it comes to arts and culture.

Having first submitted its bid in 2011 – the same year in which the Valletta 2018 Foundation was first set up – the city and, by extension, Malta, has since shifted its approach to what we should aim for when the time comes, many times over.

From the idea of seven ‘artistic programme directors’ putting in motion a cultural programme overseen by accomplished composer Wayne Marshall – dissolved immediately in favour of a more stratified approach following a change in government in 2013, which resulted in the controversial appointment of Jason Micallef as the Foundation’s Chairman – to the equally controversial appointment of infamously boisterous film producer Mario Philip Azzopardi as its erstwhile Artistic Director (it later turned out he would only be in charge of a number of “large projects”), the Foundation has had its ups and downs in terms of public perception.

But as the fateful year edges very closely on the horizon, it seems that the Foundation has chosen to flatten – if not outright dissolve – all the seams and contradictions that it’s been blighted with since Valletta’s ‘EcoC’ bid was first submitted in 2011 (to be confirmed in 2013).

And it has chosen to do this by promising that 2018 will be the “biggest feast ever”.

“We want to put the message across that culture is accessible to everyone – it is a celebration of different peoples united by one thing – celebration and enjoyment,” the Valletta 2018 Foundation chairman Jason Micallef said in a recent television interview.

“And what we want for V18 is having culture which all can take part in, within the framework of a ‘festa’. This is the basis of our programme.”

Unwelcome: dissent?

Before we get to all that, let’s first take a look at the most recent brush with controversy that the Foundation has had to suffer through. It concerns the abrupt dismissals of its Executive Director Karsten Xuereb and Programme Coordinator Margerita Pule’ last June – a risky move considering that these were key positions, and also because both Xuereb and Pule’ had forged significant links and relationships with

a large number of artists and managers working with the Valletta 2018 umbrella.

The as-yet-unexplained dismissals led to that very rare thing indeed: the mobilisation of a sizeable sector of Malta’s “creative” and “artistic” communities into something resembling civil action. The subsequent open letter, published in the Times of Malta and demanding more transparency about the dismissals, was also largely spurred on by the Foundation Chairman Jason Micallef’s flippant claim that Xuereb and Pule’s removal was not “of public interest”.

It was indicative of a bulldozing attitude that was perhaps only bolstered further by Labour’s landslide re-election: a sure-fire way of justifying any and all executive decisions as emanating from a majority that’s “on your side” at all times. But that kind of ease-in-power also has a flip-side – i.e., that of being relaxed enough to confront certain problems – as the signatories of the petition were to discover soon enough.

A few weeks after the letter makes it to The Times, a large majority of them receive invitations for a meeting with Dr Deo Debattista – who now serves as Parliamentary Secretary for both Consumer Protection and Valletta 2018 – at his Valletta office, to “discuss their views” on the letter and its implications.

From the beginning, the whole matter took on a tragi-comic dimension. The poor secretary who penned the e-mail did so in clipped, truncated sentences that made the

the best way he knew how – making good on the other clause in this Parliamentary Secretary title.

To wit, the complaints elicited in the letter were treated as just that, “consumer” complaints, with Debattista often asking his guests point-blank whether the Foundation ever did anything to directly harm them, personally, and what could he do to help?

In a way, and given this by-default, fundamental misunderstanding, it was good to be given the opportunity to hash these things out face-to-face, and here’s hoping that a similar spirit of openness continues to be par for the course as the Foundation hits its most important stride over the course of 2018.

But more than anything, the episode revealed the fault-lines of a system that requires artists to work within the strictures of a government system. A system that views dissenting opinions as either something to be arrogantly brushed off – “not in the public interest” – or to be silenced with promises to “do better in the future”.

(The upshot of it all is that to this day – just about literally at the eve of Valletta taking on the mantle of Capital of Culture – we remain none the wiser about the dismissals in question.)

Unwelcome: party-poopers?

Reconciled to the facts of being fired or not, Xuereb seemed at peace when I caught up with him a few months after the fate-



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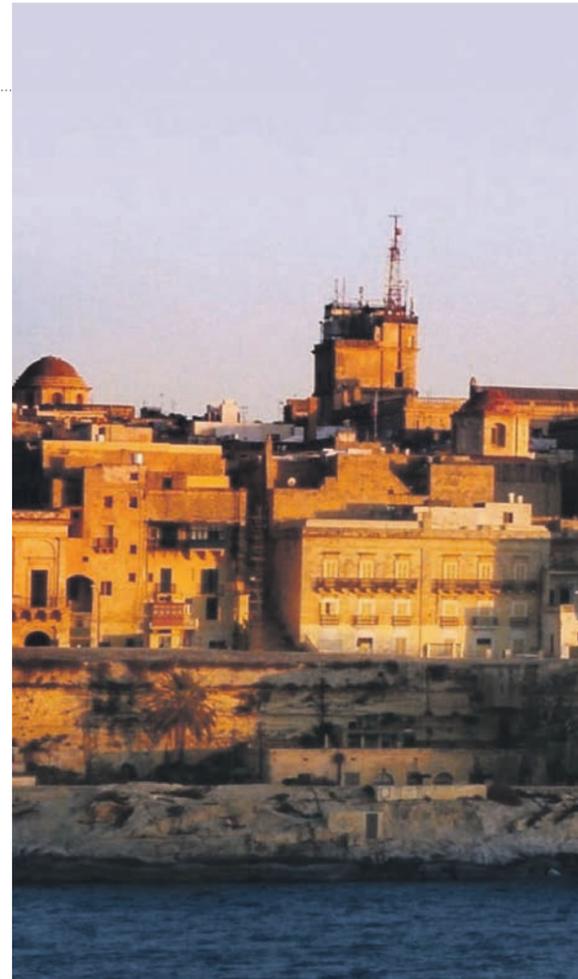
whole thing look like a Stalinist “summoning” rather than the friendly chat it ended up being in the end. Cue further outrage from artists perplexed as to why signing an open letter – supposedly a common-enough mechanism in a functioning democracy – would lead to being effectively frog-marched to the relevant ministry to “explain themselves”.

But while the actual meeting assuaged some of these sinister implications, neither did it exactly inspire confidence in the Foundation’s ability to grasp at what artists – supposedly the erstwhile social group on whose pulse it should have a firm finger on – wanted to truly get at with the letter. Instead, the well-meaning Dr Debattista was left alone to grapple with the matter in

ful event. Now free from having to pay lip service to the Valletta 2018 Foundation’s PR machine, he candidly spoke about his discomfort about the over-arching festa rhetoric that dominates the foundation’s efforts after his departure.

“What I’ve been noticing is the Foundation’s tendency to play things in the same key – that of the celebration, of the ‘festa’... almost as if to say that anything Maltese can be expressed and explained away through this atmosphere of festivity. I would have preferred to see a more nuanced and challenging approach to the programme.”

Of course, it’s hard not to give in to the temptation of speculation now that this is out of the bag: could it be that this ‘ideolog-



ical’ rift is what led to Xuereb’s dismissal? Was he just another ‘party-pooper’ building sleeping policemen for the encroaching festa march?

Unwelcome: sober thinking?

Whatever the case, it’s unlikely that we’ll ever know for sure. And either way, could there be something of value to the Foundation’s decision to choose “celebration” as a way to continue drumming up interest and enthusiasm for the year-long string of Capital of Culture activities?

During these turbulent times in both the local and international sphere, having a ‘festa’ to look forward to – as powered by the slick Capital of Culture machine, no less – might just serve as a well-deserved balm, a refuge to look forward to and allow us a nice, cathartic vent for a little while.

But that’s exactly where I would stop you – the “little while”. Because, fun and even potentially brilliant – even, perhaps, memorable – as they may be, festas, or public celebrations of any or all kinds, are by their very nature transient things; they come and they go, and the hangover has to be dealt with and we need to dust ourselves off and start another week at the grind. “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,” but that saying in and of itself implies that the work still has to be done.

The temporal dimension of this decision – the Foundation’s decision to pick ‘festa’ as their rallying call – is only one part of the problem, but it’s a pretty big one. For one thing, it flies directly – screamingly – in the face of that other motto that the same Foundation has been rolling out from pretty much day one: the idea that all the efforts put into and enacted through the Valletta 2018 machinery will aim to build a “legacy” of future events and initiatives that should – on the face of it, at least – aim to make Maltese arts and culture a stronger, more sustainable beast in the longest possible term.

But if a ‘festa’ is what it’s all about, the bar for what’s possible becomes rather limited. For one thing, nobody wants to be a party-pooper at festi, so by the Foundation’s PR logic, more sober works would jar with the overall feeling of the thing.

One wonders where, to mention just one example, the Foundation’s flagship and large-scale exhibition Dal Bahar Madwarha (The Island is What the Sea Surrounds) – which for all intents and purposes appears to channel the kind of conceptual-arts-ese that runs on a hermetic, borderline-academic tenor – would fit into the overall rhythm and groove of the ‘celebration’.



Now, that is not to say that festas cannot be repositories of deeper meaning; of ritualised behaviour that carries significant symbolic value for the given community. But that is – to once again quote Karsten Xuereb's complaints – always-already the function of the established, historically ingrained festas that happen, and

will continue to happen, across Maltese towns and villages over the entire year.

So the decision to pitch V18 as yet another – more polished and glitzy, to be sure – 'festa' of its own feels like an artificial imposition; a desperate and superficial attempt to get at something that's understandable by all and

sundry but that only scratches the surface of what we're all about.

Worse still, it actually replicates a cultural tendency that's already out there, and thriving... and redundancy should be a deadly sin for an initiative which aims to not only inject something new into the cultural tap-

estry of Maltese life, but which aims to create a lasting legacy of said newness.

The very best one can hope, then, is that once the streets are cleared of the dregs of the first batch of V18-related celebrations, which run from January 14 until the official start of Valletta's EcoC role in January 20, we

can regroup and reconsider what it is we really want the Capital of Culture narrative to be. Maybe we shouldn't be lulled into unquestioning enjoyment. Maybe a hangover is exactly what we need.

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