Ateatru performed plays by established Maltese playwrights like Ebejer and Calleja, but the only important playwright who emerged from this organisation was Alfred Buttigieg. While he worked on several productions for the group, only three of his short experimental plays were performed by Ateatru. However, in 1986, he wrote a full-length play that was performed at the Manoel Theatre with a production team made up mainly from people who formed part of Ateatru’s core, including director Michael Fenech. This play was probably the most interesting of the decade, as it not only synthesizes the political and social unrest of the period, but also as it is the only mature local play which made good use of the experience that had been gained from years of doing political, especially Brechtian, theatre. It was also the first important historical play to be written and performed in Malta since Independence.

Alfred Buttigieg’s Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin (The Priests’ Revolt) was performed in December 1986, at the height of the political crisis we have just discussed. The ingenious plot of the play involves a group of young men training for the priesthood in 1795 who are giving a performance of a play written by their Rector about an insurrection that some priests had organised about twenty years before. When Grandmaster Ximenes ordered a ban on rabbit hunting, with the excuse that the animals needed time to repopulate, and would later serve as an important part of the islands’ food supply, there were complaints all round. The four main groups involved in the problem were the peasants, who hunted rabbit not only for food but also to keep the animals off their crops, the Knights who considered hunting a legitimate and undeniable pastime, the priests who were as keen as the Knights on hunting, and the bishop of the islands, who owned many of the fields, and who therefore stood to lose a fortune if wild rabbits destroyed the crops. When the Knights were given an exemption from this ban, the Priests were furious. Tensions flared, and there was a struggle between the Grandmaster and the Bishop to affirm authority over the islands.

At face value, therefore, Buttigieg’s play is an evaluation of an important episode in Maltese history. The historical episodes portrayed in the play, as well as the political climate in which it was written and performed, bear a close resemblance to Utpal Dutt’s Mahavidroh or The Great Rebellion. Both plays are concerned with a failed uprising against the colonizers, and both were written in the vernacular at a particularly turbulent moment in their respective country’s history; the political tension in Malta that we have referred to above, and the Naxalite rebellion of the 1970s in India. Both have as one of their main objectives the ‘correction’ of traditional historiography which privileged the upper classes of society; the aristocrats in Dutt’s case and the clergy in Buttigieg’s play.

However, the strategy chosen by the two authors differs considerably. Dutt rewrites the events of the rebellion by creating a drama focusing on a particular family, a saga of three generations of Indians whose lives become entangled in the exploitation caused by colonialism, and then in the events of the rebellion. Buttigieg, on the other hand, foregrounds the plight of the subalterns by presenting multiple narratives. As an audience, we are asked to consider the positions proposed by the different characters. When the priests decided to take on the Knights, were they doing it to defend the population of the islands from a tyrannical regime, or were they simply trying to conserve their rights to live as a privileged class in society? The subalterns have very little to say in the script prepared for performance in the play within-the-play, except to voice their anger at the foreign oppressors and to show their decision to join the revolt. However, this script is prepared by the Rector, one of the privileged few among the natives, and the narrative he is trying to push is one of national unity subject to the hegemony of the priests. This narrative
is challenged by the students who take over the performance to denounce all the seats of power present as oppressive and unjust.

The play also challenges some myths that the Maltese perpetrated about themselves. One of these is what is defined by Gayatri Spivak as ‘subaltern consciousness’ or more specifically the lack of it. When the actor portraying Mannarino had just prepared himself emotionally to enact the part in the Rector’s script where he was to urge the Maltese population to follow him in the revolt, his faith in his fellow citizens is questioned by Bishop Labini, the highest ranking member of the audience. In Labini’s words: (...) in times of poverty and despair, you’ll find many parasites who are ready to exploit the situation, and are even ready to join the enemy and take up arms against themselves to be in the good books and get something in return, however small. Don’t be impressed because you hear people complaining. They do that softly and behind closed doors, where knights cannot hear them, so that in the streets they can still greet them convincingly. And how many people are there shouting and swearing that they’ll defend their rights, and your rights ... and our rights ... and the Church’s rights. I remind you. How many people were there in your time who swore that nobody would touch Bishop Pellerano? Then he was called to Rome and everyone was silent. No protests. The Maltese have a way of retreating after giving their word. When the time comes you’ll need a spyglass to see them.

When the actor tries to argue that there were many episodes in Maltese history when the Maltese stood up for their rights and fought for freedom, the Bishop replies that the Maltese never fought to be free. They had only taken up arms to be ruled more justly or because they were afraid of falling into the hands of worse rulers than they actually had. In fact, according to Labini, as the Maltese had always been under foreign rule, they had acquired a colonial mentality, and did not even wish to be free. This interpretation is harsh, but it loses some its punch because it comes from a foreign ruler. Following Homi Bhabha, we could argue this intervention is yet another example of how colonialism dislocates and displaces the individual colonized person and defiles his culture and territory. Labini is also referring to the fact that the Maltese lack subaltern consciousness and attributes the failure on their part to bring the rebellion to a successful conclusion to this deficiency. In the events portrayed by Buttigieg’s play, it is the interpretations that wins the day, when the students decide not to go on with their play, as it would prove that the Maltese were really cowards, and failed to join the revolt against tyranny. The action on the part of the seminarians is again capable of transmitting multiple meanings. When they refuse to act out the scenes portraying the failed revolt they do so out of shame. It is the fatalism that has so often been recorded in anti-colonialist literature. Yet in taking over the play, reinterpreting it, and in the process denouncing all the sources of their colonization – the State, the Church and the dominant groups among the local population – they are devising their own revolution, one that starts from below, unlike the one attempted by the priests which was an entirely ‘middle-class’ project which had simply assumed that the subalterns would adhere to it.

The end of the play with the real life Mannarino addressing actors and audience is Buttigieg’s way of framing the events previously discussed in the play. As in Utpal Dutt’s The Great Rebellion, there are implicit references to the political situation prevalent when the play was written at various points in the play. However, it is in Mannarino’s concluding speech that direct reference to the postcolonial situation is made. By shifting the attention from external colonizers to internal ones, Buttigieg is inferring that colonialism does not end when a country starts being ruled by a number of its citizens, but when all its
citizens feel they are represented and respected. And for this to happen, there has to be a national and mainly subaltern consciousness that as yet does not exist.

54 Buttigieg A., *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin (The Priests' Revolt)*, Ateatru, Malta, 1986
58 Buttigieg A., *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin*, p. 30
59 Bhabha H., *The Location of Culture*, p. 41.

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As we have seen in our discussion of Alfred Buttigieg’s *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin (The Priests’ Revolt)*, it is usually safer to disguise political meaning in one way or another. One of the messages that this play sends out is that leaders will invariably ignore past promises and the interests of the people they are ruling. The fact that the play is set in the eighteenth century does not diminish the strength of the condemnation of the political system and the way it has been hijacked by politicians to increase their hold over the population, and sometimes, their own wealth.58

14 As seems to be the case in many postcolonial countries, politicians are accused so often of being corrupt that these accusations seem to do very little damage to their political career, even if proved. While corruption is quite often an issue in electoral campaigning, few voters seem to base the decision on who to vote for on reports of corruptions.

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The most powerful condemnation of the academic world in Maltese drama happens to be also a strong condemnation of the world of politics. It is found in *La Logique*, a monologue written by Alfred Buttigieg in 1978, performed for the first time in 1980,59 and published in 1985. The only speaking character is an ageing megalomaniac professor of logic who gives a speech in which he teaches his public how to achieve immortality. In words which sound like a pastiche of Nietzsche’s philosophy, he reckons he has achieved this goal himself, because of the immense
knowledge he has accumulated, so much so that he calls himself ‘the master’. This knowledge has made him become a very powerful man, at least according to himself. The word ‘master’ achieves a second meaning as the monologue progresses. It no longer equates simply to ‘teacher’ but becomes ‘leader’, or ‘dictator’. Intellectual power becomes political power: Today, I’m going to open the door to immortality for you, I’ll give you the key. I’ll lay in your hands a tool that can take you there; whoever will know how to use it well will get there; whoever uses it badly or ignores it will be left stranded. The science of reason is the tool, the key. You must think, use your heads, be clever, act by syllogisms, be wise. Because good wisdom is hidden wisdom; don’t put it into the mouths of fools or they’ll misuse it and don’t spread it either, as there’ll be those who exploit it for their own gain. Learn how to use it for your own needs. Learn to talk to them in parables, speak in stories, so that they’ll understand you better, they’ll love you because they understood you (they’ll say to themselves – so we’re not as stupid as we thought). This way they’ll always come to listen to you, they’ll always follow you, look at you in admiration, they’ll give you force, strength, power. You’ll become rich, you’ll grow in power, and they’ll shrink. Belittle them behind their backs, when you’re in the company of people of your kind abuse them, call them ignorant, uncultured, imbecile, morons, asses, gross, foul: abuse them so that you’ll stand out and strengthen your position. Pause. But never to their face, to their face you have to praise them, honour them, smile at them, wave to them in the street. Little by little you’ll be gaining power .... power.60

This perverse notion of knowledge as a tool that can be wedged and controlled so that some people get on in life by crushing other people is taken to extremes by the professor. He suggests to his listeners that they can achieve immortality by planning genocide or by committing horrifying murders that will compel the world to remember them. The underlying idea is that power and immortality are about the personality cult of certain individuals. Echoing Nietzsche’s division of humanity between those who are subject to the herd instinct and the superior, exceptional beings who should be above the rules that govern the others, the professor claims that only a few people are meant or are able to become immortal. Whole categories of people like blacks or women are excluded. Before long we realise that what they professor is saying, what he claims to be his vision, is not new at all. It is the way the world has always been, where knowledge is used not to help the cause of justice but to control. People have always been excluded from fulfilling their potential in life because at a particular moment they are deemed to be the wrong colour or the wrong sex or to belong to the wrong religion or nationality, or indeed simply to be in the wrong place. The professor is a satirical embodiment of a number of prejudices, including the prejudices that have enabled colonialism to become such an important aspect of the history of the last two hundred years, yet the grotesque way he voices these prejudices in no way diminishes their danger.

Like most people who have power, in whatever sphere of life it happens to be the professor finds it very hard to relinquish any of it. He knows it is time to step back, but cannot find the courage to do it, as he is sure nobody could ever be as good as him. In the end, while claiming immortality and trying to hang on, he dies. The play has a universal theme in the sense that it presents its issues as pertaining to human nature. On the other hand, it is particularly relevant to small societies like Malta where individuals, not always particularly gifted, have found it relatively easy to rise to power and where political power is very intrusive on people’s lives and usually has very few controls and counter balances.
Alfred Buttigieg’s *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin (The Priests’ Revolt)* is also a politically committed play that uses the play-within-the-play structure. In the closed environment of the seminary, a group of seminarians are performing a play written by their rector. The rector is also directing and acting as narrator to help the amateur drama production run smoothly. Among the spectator is the Bishop of Malta, who tries to exercise some control over the proceedings. The subject of the performance is a revolt a group of priests had organised twenty years before because they felt the secular rulers of the country were undermining their position of authority and privilege. 61

*Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* has great similarities with Peter Weiss’ *Marat/Sade*, another well-known play that exploits this structure. Speaking a conference on political theatre in Malta in 1998, Buttigieg himself has in fact claimed that Weiss’ play, performed in Malta a few years before he wrote his own play, influenced him particularly. Both plays are set in an institution, where a person who can exercise a lot of influence, the Marquis de Sade in Weiss’ play and the Rector in Buttigieg’s play, are supervising a performance of a play they have written themselves. In both plays there are other influential characters from outside the institution who act as censors. The two plays develop along very similar lines, with the two playwrights/directors forcing their interpretation of historical events against the censors’ interventions and the ineptitude of their actors, mental patients in one play, inexperienced students in the other. However, towards the end of his play, Buttigieg breaks away from the model set out by Weiss. *Marat/Sade* ends with the Marquis laughing triumphantly at what he has achieved with his play. His actors are so overcome by the performance that they accept the violence of the nurses rather than stop their final march. In *Ir Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* when the actors come to the most important scene of the Rectors play, the portrayal of the revolt itself, they refuse to go on. No amount of coercion from the author and director will change their mind. In the end, the Rector’s project of showing how brave his countrymen had been when they rose against a power much greater than themselves misfires. The students realise that acting out a failed uprising would only serve to revive sad and painful memories, not only because of the people who had taken part, but also for the many others who had simply stood by and watched. Instead, the students’ last contribution to the entertainment is to sing a song where they make all sorts of accusations against the different authorities, including their own Rector.

In this way, the drama that the Rector had intended is subverted. The students conclude that all people they know, who have or have had power, have abused it. Therefore the idea of projecting someone on stage as being a model for others to follow is shown to be misguided. Even when the Rector tries his ultimate *coup de theatre* and brings the real protagonist of the revolt, just out of prison, to speak to the students and to the audience on stage, the attempt is not wholly successful. First of all, by asking his hero to address the audience, the Rector shows that he has preferred politics to theatre. He believes that what has not been achieved by having an actor play Mannarino, can be achieved by having Mannarino speak...
for himself. This turn of events is in no sense theatrical. It is the invasion of a theatrical space by politicians. The attempt also fails because previously in the play, doubts had been thrown on the integrity of Mannarino. We can no longer be sure that he’s the revolutionary the Rector wishes us to see him as. We can see him simply as someone who was fighting for the right of his own category, the already privileged and relatively well-off clergy, and that this was not necessarily in the best general interest.

51 The events around which the play is built are discussed in Chapter 1, pp. 44-45

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During a period of particular political unrest, there was an upsurge of political theatre, and Brecht became a point of reference for all involved. Several of his plays were performed, including an outstanding production the *The Life of Galileo* and another one of *The Threepenny Opera*. Brechtian techniques suddenly became common in a wide range of plays, from the unashamedly propagandistic pieces which repeated the main political parties’ messages to more serious works for the legitimate theatre. While Brecht had been originally influential with theatre practitioners on the left side of the political spectrum, during the 1980s he became the primary example of what committed theatre should do to speak out against oppression was coming from, and both the Nationalist Party and the Labour Party had theatre practitioners supporting their cause more or less openly through their work.

In spite of its great popularity at the time, much of this work was mediocre, primarily because the narrow agendas of the political parties came before most other considerations. It was only on the rare occasions when political theatre managed to rise above party politics that it could really create interesting works that would have an impact on the theatre-going public, and not only that public created artificially by political organizations whenever theatrical performances formed part of political celebrations or other activities. Without doubt, the play that symbolizes the Maltese theatre practitioners’ capability of setting themselves free of the official political agendas, and creating a great work in the Brechtian tradition is Alfred Buttigieg’s *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassising (The Revolt of the Priests)*.

Alfred Buttigieg was very active in the theatre for a number of years, initially with Lyceum Youth Theatre and later with *Ateatru*. Both groups included among their ranks interesting directors, especially Stephen Florian and Michael Fenech. Fenech’s work for *Ateatru* as a director and designer is generally acknowledged to be among the highest points of the 1980s. For *Ateatru* he directed not only Brecht but also a number of other European playwrights like Alfred Jarry who are not usually performed in Malta. Buttigieg, himself one of the more important members of Ateatru, collaborated on several of these productions. Political theatre was the group’s bread and butter. During the four years of its existence, the group also managed to produce several plays by Dario Fo, including *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, a play which tells a story uncannily similar to an event that had hit the headlines in Malta. As Buttigieg himself admits, his own play is greatly influenced not only by Brecht, but also by an important play which had itself been influenced by Brecht: Peter Weiss’s *Marat/Sade*, another play also previously performed by *Ateatru*. 
The similarities between *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* and *Marat/Sade* have been discussed elsewhere in this work. However it is worth commenting on the deliberate choice Buttigieg makes in his play to go for the Brechtian elements in Weiss’s play and discard altogether the Artaudian influences. Indeed, *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* is Weiss filtered back to Brecht. There is nothing of the blood-letting of Weiss’s play in Buttigieg, and the actors are not expected to act in the Artaudian stylization that marked the *Marat/Sade*. Instead, the play is more focused on the main political issue it wants to discuss: that of showing all retainers of power as essentially self-centred spineless beings. The whole plot and all the songs lead to this one conclusion, and there is very little distraction on the way. For example, there is nothing comparable to the long discussion between Marat and Sade on such things as the relationship between man and nature in Weiss’ play, and the references to the injustices committed by the Church are not generalized as a narrative but contextualized dramatized as part of the proceedings in the play-within-the-play.

64 See pp, 269-270

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