

I have always believed that writers are like pianists: they need to practise every day; otherwise they'll go rusty. One cannot write occasionally or wait for an inspiration. Writing is hard work. Essayist and moralist Joseph Joubert said "Genius begins great works; labour alone finishes them." He was simply stating that despite the clichés and stereotypes, artistic creativity has more to do with self-discipline and sheer stamina for donkey work than some divine spark. It's not even an enjoyable experience. It can be painful, tedious and terribly discouraging. It's not the first time I spent two hours staring at my computer without writing a single word. But the following day, I make myself go back to the computer and try to write again.

I subject my works to many revisions because I'm never pleased with what I write. A word might fit in better than the one I've used; a different sentence-structure might work better. Revising is an essential part of writing. Quality is refined; character is deepened; events flow better. Revision, for me, means cutting down, making the work sleeker. I believe if you can say something in two sentences, you shouldn't write five. Some parts of my last play *Ippermettili Nitlaq* were revised countless times. However, as I watched the dress rehearsal, which was the first time I was seeing it performed, I realised my script could have been better. For example, it could have been shorter. Some language could have been more natural. My works are all very different and it's hard to find the connecting thread. My maxim as a writer is: "Never repeat yourself".

I never return to a form or idea I've treated in a previous work. Some writers do, because it makes them feel safe. If an idea was successful, they know it will probably be successful again, so they do it again. But I feel a good writer should have the guts to dare to fail. Art should be about risk. You should always push yourself beyond your comfort zone. I see no point in writing, otherwise. Perhaps that's why I've written comparatively few works. I try out many new ideas but I'm rarely satisfied with the way they unfold, so I abandon them. I've always been determined never to write anything that doesn't leave a mark. I think this springs from my horror at the way human beings are simply swallowed up into a void after they die.

I am a playwright first and foremost. Drama has always intrigued me. It's the most difficult form of writing for me. There are so many constraints. I've written plays for adults and children. For example, *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* was a historical play within a play. The play operates on three planes of time and draws parallels among all three moments in history. An open-minded audience or reader will realize that the play is a treatise on political power and an invitation to distrust anyone who wields it, whatever the age. On the other hand, my latest play, *Ippermettili Nitlaq*, is set in the present. It centres on the Maltese medical profession and on medical ethics or lack of them. Yet, beyond that, the play is a reflection on how puny we human beings are. Once fate has dealt us a bad hand, no matter the strength of our will, our love or our prayers, we shall be destroyed, torn apart and torn from each other. I don't write plays only. I spent two years of my life writing *Gezzu*, a philosophical fable for adults. An innocent, optimistic spider resists society's attempts at killing off his love for life. He sets off on a philosophical journey during which he encounters various characters who represent different aspects of human existence. Writing this work was a long voyage for me as well; although it's only 10,200 words long, it was incredibly arduous to write and at several points I was close to abandoning it. Perhaps my favourite work is *Dik il-Qtajra*, a series of poetic monologues spoken by a baby before and after it is born. I wanted to express humans' determination to survive, at the cost of other lives if necessary. When it came out, however, it was considered obscene and banned. In spite of this, I remained sure that my country would move on, open up to modern times, and let the light in. Now, 30 years later, I feel this hasn't happened. Look around you. Plays are banned, newspapers silenced, university students interrogated for publishing short stories. Malta seems intent on stopping the clocks.

The play I am working on at the moment is not so much concerned with social issues. It's more about family life, selfishness, love, aging, isolation, the sense that life has cheated you. I'm working on this new play very regularly, but I still don't know where it will take me. I write with an idea but very often without a plan. I let my plot go where the characters take it. It's finding out where they're going that's the hardest part.

***How I write - Alfred Buttigieg, interviewed by Marie Benoit, The Independent on Sunday, 6-12-2009***