The exciting new play performed at the Manoel last weekend, *IR-REWWIXTA TAL-QASSISIN*, is the first full-length play by Alfred Buttigieg whose bill of two one-act plays made considerable impact on the small but faithful audiences of Ateatru last season.

Last Sunday’s sizable audience at the Manoel, a predominantly young one, responded with glee and delighted surprise to a work which is not only brilliantly conceived and skilfully constructed by also an ingeniously oblique, humorous and very thought-provoking commentary on contemporary politics in this country.

Buttigieg owes a debt to Brecht and to Peter Weiss of *Marat/Sade* as well as to a notable Maltese predecessor, Alfred Sant’s *Fid-Dell tal-Katidral*, but his play is fresh and vigorous to such an extent that any discussion of models becomes purely academic. He has taken to heart Sant’s attack on neo-colonialist authors who write about Malta’s masters in the past rather than about the Maltese people itself, for *IR-REWWIXTA TAL-QASSISIN* is on one level about the vicissitudes of our ancestors in the 18th century and their sufferings at the hands of their foreign rulers.

**PLAY WITHIN A PLAY**

The play’s main dramatic impetus is provided by the constant shifting in time, space and viewpoint between a historical event, the Rising of the Priests in 1775 under Grand Master Ximenes de Texada and its enactment on stage by a company of Maltese seminarians exactly 20 years later. The play within the play is directed by the Rector of the Seminary, who is soon revealed as a propagandist for Grand Master de Rohan whose allegedly kindly and enlightened rule the Rector wishes to contrast with the despotic rule of Ximenes and of Pinto, his predecessor.

Unfortunately for the Rector, his students have different ideas. They come out with lines he never wrote into the script; they insult Bishop Labini (a historical character) who has come to see the play and they refuse to perform the climactic scene of the rising, for they say it will only commemorate the cowardice of so many Maltese and so demoralise the present generation. They show the Rector as well as the audience they refuse to be used.

The Rector tries to cancel out the effect of his cast’s rebelliousness by bringing onstage the real Don Gaetano Mannarino, the hero of the 1775 rising whom Rohan released after 20 years of imprisonment. Incidentally, Mannarino was actually released not in 1795 but three years later, after the Order had been driven out of power.

Mannarino, however, lets him down as well for he makes an impassioned appeal for a consensus on basic principles among all the Maltese people and a determination to fight any ruler who goes against those principles. *Jien nemmen li l-glieda taghna hi maghna nnifisna, kull wiehed minna mieghu nnifsu’* he says, and warns against those who (like the Rector, of course) evoke the evils of the past solely to shut out the evils of the present.

**CONTEMPORARY TARGETS**

It was a pity that in Michael Fenech’s generally intelligent, well-judged production of the play for Actors Studio, the impact of Mannarino’s address was muted by its being read out by J.P. Borg from a lectern as if it were a sermon. Moreover, the Rector’s closing remarks, which include a snide reference to
Mannarino’s persistent idealism even after long imprisonment, were allowed to go unchallenged by his normally boisterous seminarians.

Who are the contemporary targets in the play? Partly because he has to be faithfl to historical fact and partly, I suspect, because he believes that few contemporary public figures are free from blame, Buttigieg has few characters who are clearly goodies and others who are clearly baddies. Certain parallels, however, are very clear. The replacement of an autocratic Old Man by a Younger Man who promises much but turns out to be as bad as his predecessor was immediately seized upon by the audience as a parallel to political events of the last decade. The Church comes out pretty badly too, as it fights for its privileges and for those of the clergy, and takes a passive attitude when its members are beaten up, killed or sent to prison for life.

The chief target of the play is neither a Prime Minister nor a Bishop, but the Common Man for it was he who let Mannarino and his rising down, despite his sufferings under the rule of the Order. Clearly Buttigieg puts the main attack on the Common Man in Malta in the mouth of a foreigner, the Italian Bishop of Malta Labini who interrupts the play within the play and predicts to Mannarino, on the eve of his uprising, that he will be deserted by his fellow countrymen, who, he says, can easily be bribed away and are content to be governed by foreigners. After all, even Mannarino himself was fighting not to get rid of the Order but to get back certain rights from the Order. Even the Rector feels insulted by Labini’s sneer as – I fear – we all feel insulted when an outsider tells us a few home-truths.

Buttigieg has made some changes from the text he published a month ago, the most significant being the addition of a new character whom he calls the Narratur. This character, represented as a young priest, has taken over a number of the Rector’s speeches spoken by Ivan Fenech with a cheekiness, a cheerful impudence, whoich helped to give the play within the play that uninhibited joy in tilting at authority which makes the best student performances.

Further revision of the play should, I feel, concentrate on the second Act which s burdened by the overlong scene between Labini and Mannarino and perhaps on the ending which is not altogether satisfactory. The lyrics of the various ballads, set attractively to music in a mainly jazzy idiom by Manoel Pirotta, need considerable polishing. Buttigieg’s prose is certain superior to his verse. A detail: ‘process’ should have been used and not ‘guri’ for Mannarino’s trial. Trial by jury was introduced to Malta by the British.

EXCELLENT CONTROL

In his direction Michael Fenech successfully concentrated on presenting the two layers of the play’s significance in an amusing manner, making sure all the time that the fundamental seriousness of the piece was clear. It is true that sometimes his cast got a little out of hand and guyed some scenes more than they ought to have done, and there were also times when the minor characters slowed down the action and produced embarrassing gaps, but these were exceptions. Fenech’s direction of the pageant of Maltese history (with its ironical refrain about St. Paul) and the climactic rounding by the seminarians on the Rector and Bishop in Act Two was excellently controlled. Indeed his handling of the crowd scenes was often very imaginative and made good use of the small stage at the Manoel. The various elements of the production – action, dialogue, pageantry and music were well integrated, and I feel sure that with a longer run the production would have settled and become superb.
One complaint. Why did no one tell Fenech and his cast the correct pronunciation of ‘Ximenes’? The cast included a number of very talented performers. Renald Galea was a smooth Rector who could, however, lose his calm when pushed and Dominic Said was an interesting Mannarino, sincere and determined but far from inspiring. Mario Attard’s Ximenes was haughty and harsh, though I would have liked more contrast in those scenes where he reverted to being a seminarian, and Joe Camilleri’s Bishop Pellerano was unctuous and timorous – a good comic performance.

It was a good idea to cast two veteran actors J.C. Caruana and J.P. Borg, as Bishop Labini and the real Mannarino respectively. Caruana, despite a few uncertainties, handled his long scene with Mannarino quite deftly and Borg’s long speech, despite the handicap of being read out rather than delivered, was sincere.

*Mannarino 86 by Paul Xuereb, The Sunday Times, 28-12-1986*