

ALFRED BUTTIGIEG made his name with his full-length play *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* in 1986, performed by the group Ateatru which he helped found. With the folding up of Ateatru a few years later, he disappeared from the public eye but he has made a comeback since last year when his *Rewwixta* received its first general publication (it had been issued in a very small edition in 1986) and subsequently performed again at the Manoel Theatre. That play, a historical drama set in 18th century Malta, influenced technically by Brecht, had a political message to deliver in 1986 and was cleverly constructed and made an impact on many of us who saw it.

Now Buttigieg has republished three short one-acters first issued in 1985 – *La Logique*, *Bus Stop* and *Ilqugh għad-Dawl* – together with a new piece, also in one act, *Il-Gurnata Mqaddsa*. The first three have not been revised since their first appearance and show a Buttigieg who is trying to find his style, whereas the new play shows a greater assuredness, but much less adventurousness, in the writing.

La Logique is a child of its time, a monologue that satirises unmistakably a politician, now fortunately no longer active, who combined an autocratic personality with an urge to imbue one and all with his ideas on just about anything. The speaker is a professor of logic who addresses the audience arrogantly and contemptuously but shows increasing unease about his advancing age.

The more he speaks, the more he begins to rant, and when he humiliates a (planted) member of the audience wearing black make-up, his audience gets restless, and a few show openly their disapproval. Later there are laughs from the audience, and the professor begins to panic. He begins to ramble about logic, power and strength, until he falls down dead.

There is a certain crudeness in the writing; the professor is too obviously absurd in his thinking and self-esteem to produce anything but an occasional snigger. This was agitprop that was effective in its time, but not so much today.

Bus Stop is non-political, a dialogue between a man and a woman at a bus stop. We learn that the two knew each other 20 years previously, and the man thinks he can reignite the feeling he wrongly feels there was between them in the past. She, however, though friendly, has no intention of creating something which for her has never existed and leaves him abruptly. It is a slight piece, but some of the dialogue is lively, and the man's illusions have a certain pathos.

Ilqugh għad-Dawl, a piece probably influenced by Beckett, is the best of these early pieces, and has also been performed in an English version, *Sunscreen* in 1982. It is a dialogue between an old woman, who is clearly speaking from beyond the grave, and a young girl, the woman's granddaughter, whose parents hated her in the womb and abandoned her at birth and whose beloved grandmother has now abandoned her by dying.

The woman and the girl speak of their suffering and in a passage preceding the girl's announcement that she has swallowed a lethal number of pills, Buttigieg writes for them a stichomythia reminiscent of both Beckett and Pinter. The most dramatically effective scene is the one in which, utilising a white sheet on which a red liquid is thrown, the life of the girl in the womb is narrated. At the end, the girl dies and joins her grandmother in the beyond. The picture is of a gloomy existence from which death is the only exit.

Il-Gurnata Mqaddsa is completely different in spirit from the others, but like *La Logique* it is a monologue. This monologue, however, is in a comic vein, though in performance (it has not been staged

so far) it should leave a wry taste in the mouth of an audience. The speaker is a woman who is shortly to be 40, who is married to a man who is indifferent to her and seems to do nothing except watch television when she is around. Some of her words are addressed to her husband, who never reacts to them, others are interior monologies, and yet others are addressed directly to the audience.

It is Good Friday, and the husband is watching a procession on television, seemingly engrossed in it, while his wife, who seems to be trying to make him comfortable, begins to reveal her discontent with life and her marriage and her longings to have fun before it is too late. She tells the audience she is meeting a close friend with whom she intends to go to a singles bar in search of sexual adventure.

Her speech is not just unrefined but coarse, and she herself feels guilty at her mood on such a holy day. She puts on sexy underwear and a short skirt and goes out happily after having left her husband some food. What she does not realise is that her husband is planning to have a similarly exciting time, without bothering to leave the house

***The scoundrelly old politician* by Paul Xuereb, The Sunday Times, 22-5-2005**