

Maltese writer Alfred Buttigieg - whose play *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* was revived recently - admitted he found it increasingly difficult to write after hitting the highest point with what he considers his most important work.

Mr Buttigieg said in an interview with *The Times* that he had been overwhelmed by the thought that writing a better work would be "next to impossible".

"I am such a perfectionist I stopped writing after *Ir-Rewwixta*. Besides, I don't consider myself a writer. Writers write on a regular basis, whereas I don't write regularly at all," Mr Buttigieg said, explaining that he had little time left once his responsibilities as father and headmaster were over.

Raising his left eyebrow as he spoke, the writer with a walrus moustache said he had been pleasantly surprised by people's reactions when *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* was revived last February.

Recounting a priests' revolt against the Order of St John's high-handedness in 1775, the play drew parallels with the precarious political situation of the 1980s. It had been hailed as an anti-establishment work when it was first staged.

Mr Buttigieg said he had been sceptical about re-staging the play: "I thought the title was not likely to attract crowds. It gives the impression it's one of those boring and archaic Maltese plays nobody wants to watch".

He said the play had been much more relevant when first staged. "Michael Fenech [the director] asked me to scribble some fresh lines but I didn't want to change the text. When I first wrote the play I wanted to be historically faithful. In the end, I had to give in and made minor changes."

Though the script was not changed, the play was still accepted and found to be relevant two decades later. Mr Buttigieg pointed out that certain lines were no longer relevant.

"Some expressions, which had been outright criticism against the Church for example, did not have the same impact in the second staging, mainly because the Church became more and more irrelevant as an institution in the past 20 years. Criticising the Church today is like flogging a dead horse. But, at that time, the criticism was justified because the Church used to stay mum when faced with a precarious political situation."

Mr Buttigieg's friendship with Mr Fenech, known for his satirical plays, goes back to their early childhood. As early as 1981, Mr Fenech, then involved with Lyceum Youth Theatre and *Ateatru*, directed plays authored by Mr Buttigieg, including four short plays - *La Logique*, *Bus Stop*, *Ilqugh ghad-Dawl* and *Il-Gurnata Mqaddsa*.

"At the time, I was seeking new forms of theatre," Mr Buttigieg said, explaining how his writings need to be seen in the theatrical context in which they had been staged.

"However, I cannot classify my writings within a particular genre or style. Each work is different from the other," Mr Buttigieg said.

Two other works, not plays this time, were *Gezzu* (1982) and *Dik il-Qtajra* (1983). The former was a kind of fairy tale for adults dealing with Mr Buttigieg's favourite subjects - life's beauty and his wish for immortality. The latter was a collection of writings by "an unborn baby".

"I had been obsessed with immortality in my earlier years, because I couldn't accept that human life could come to an end like that. This is what compelled me to write. I was never that religious and hardly ever believed there is life after death, so I was always troubled by these thoughts."

Asked if he preferred theatrical texts as a literary form, Mr Buttigieg said theatre was one form like any other, yet a very good one to reach larger audiences in Malta where writers "will never be able to publish thousands of copies of books".

Mr Buttigieg said a theatre piece has to be relevant otherwise "there's no reason for writing it in the first place. This does not only count for Maltese works, as I've seen foreign works which were irrelevant. But Maltese works are still too serious. I feel playwrights want to preach and teach and all too often end up stating the obvious".

Mr Buttigieg said he was thinking of writing a play based on the Great Siege of Malta.

"I have been wanting to write something on these lines believe it or not." He laughed. "I want to treat it in a humorous manner, however, and it would be nothing like the conventional stuff we see about the Great Siege," he said.

Writer plans funny play on the Great Siege by Massimo Farrugia, The Times, 9-5-2005