

Maltese politics has not changed since the days of the Order of St John when Grand Master Pinto ruled Malta.

This is one of the main themes driven home by *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin*, one of the most entertaining Maltese plays I've watched at the Manoel Theatre in months.

Alfred Buttigieg's script, accompanied by Manoel Pirotta's musical score and staged by satiric director Michael Fenech last weekend has proved itself to be a piece that endures the test of time.

The play describes a revolt which occurred in 1775 when priests rebelled against the Order of St John's rule. The rule of Pinto, the high-handed Grand Master, had just ended and the Maltese were delighted to see Francesco Ximenes take his place. But their fervour for the new leader soon dwindled as the new grand master burdened the local population with measures harsher than those of his predecessor.

Besides removing many of the clergy's privileges, Ximenes prohibited rabbit hunting. Dun Gaetano Mannarino and a group of dissident priests organised an uprising, thinking the people would join them, only to realise that the grumbling Maltese population chickened out when it came to bite the bullet.

Twenty years after the revolt took place, the rector of the seminary wants the seminarians to stage the events on stage. His aim is to highlight the despotic rule of previous grand masters in contrast with the benevolence of the present ruler Grand Master De Rohan. The students refuse to stage the uprising and the play takes an "unpredicted" twist. The technique used by the writer is that of a play within a play which, though not original in itself (it was widely used in theatre worldwide, especially by masters like Shakespeare), always creates an amusing atmosphere.

Explained in the 1980s context when *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* was first staged, parallels between the priests' revolt in 1775 and violent oppression at the time of its staging become evident immediately.

Almost 20 years have passed since 1986, the year when *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* was hailed as an anti-government play. Ironically, this is almost the same time lapse between the repressed priests' revolt in the time of Grand Master Ximenes and the reign of Grand Master De Rohan when, in the play's context, the seminarians staged the revolt.

The seminarians playing rebel priests were probably too young to remember the event when Dun Gaetano Mannarino led the unsuccessful revolt. Like the characters, the predominantly teenage audience filling the theatre auditorium last Sunday (Buttigieg's text became compulsory exam stuff two years ago), surely do not remember the political turmoil of the 1980s when *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* was staged for the first time. Most had not even been born in 1986. Others, like the undersigned, were just toddlers experiencing their first school days when, after having heard mates babble politics at school, went up to their mum and asked her: "Do we side with Eddie or with Karmenu?"

The young audience in 2005 not only understood the play but also identified with it, which goes to show that a second staging *Ir-Rewwixta tal-Qassisin* was a good idea even if 1980s-style street protests and bludgeoned faces on *In-Taghna's* front page are not in fashion any longer.

But the way politics and people's rights are juggled in the name of power has remained the same.

The play, which has been described as humorous, thought provoking and mischievous, is interestingly combined with tunes composed by Manoel Pirotta. The members of the orchestra, positioned beneath the stage as they are in opera, were clad also dressed as priests. I am told the producers sought to reproduce costumes as faithfully as possible to the habits of the era.

The play was successful in terms of ensemble, and therefore in the way actors and action flowed on stage - a sign that the production was prepared with dedication.

It had been a long time since I watched a play that was peppered with themes questioning the relationship between church and politics, the manipulation of history and ignorance of it, national identity, the privileges of the clergy, workers' rights and many more.

What I found to be rather didactic, and therefore boring, was the second part of the play, especially when Bishop Labini speaks on the sovereignty of Malta and the fact that the Maltese could only explain their own identity in function of their rulers. This part, however, drove home the question of whether the Maltese are independent in spirit and mentality even though independence was officially gained more than 40 years ago.

Dun Gaetano Mannarino's appearance at the end of the play and the warnings directed at the audience was something which I felt did not work, first because the actor's words were not pronounced clearly and secondly because the play's denouement had already occurred.

At first glance, unearthing this theme seemed to be really out of date, especially since the author used a didactic style typical of political texts of the mid-twentieth century. But I must admit that, after a few discussions I had with people after the play, the words uttered by Bishop Labini's in the conversation with Dun Gaetano, namely that the Maltese are only apparently courageous and chicken out when it comes to sticking their neck out, did make sense in a present context. Didactic does not mean irrelevant, I thought, so a Maltese play staged almost 20 years after it was written having a multitude of themes which are still very relevant today is no small feat.

With the words of Bishop Labini ringing in my head as I write this piece, I think of a seminarian's words addressed to the audience towards the end. "I thank you for the applause you are about to give us," he said. The audience promptly applauded.

***Priests, rebellion and Maltese chickens* by Massimo Farrugia, The Times 7-3-2005**