

THE MANOEL THEATRE

by

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In 1731, Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena wishing to erect a theatre for the "honest recreation of the people" purchased, from the Priory of Navarre, two houses having a frontage on Old Theatre Street for the sum of Sc. 2,186. The Grand Master paid a further Sc. 2,000 to the Navarese knights to enable them to reconstruct the two remaining houses of their Priory (Nos. 87 and 88, Old Mint Street) which henceforth became known as the New Priory of Navarre (1), and which at the time of the French Occupation in 1798 were occupied by two knights of the Order, Ascona and Spoletta. (2)

Prior to the erection of this theatre plays and theatrical productions in general were held in the great hall of the various auberges, and in the records of the Deliberations of the Langue of Italy one often finds mention of such entertainments being held by the Italian knights, in their Auberge, for the amusement of their friends; we even find the record that on February 2, 1697, some Maltese gentlemen presented a play in the Auberge d'Italie.

After some disturbances during the Carnival of 1639, women were debarred from attending these shows.

The theatre, which today is known as the Manoel Theatre, was similar in design to the Palermo Theatre of the time, (3) and according to the report of Francesco Zerafa and Antonio Azzopardi, architects of the Manoel Foundation, the new theatre occupied an area of $94\frac{1}{2}$ square canes. This was later rectified to 93 square canes $2\frac{1}{2}$ palms. (4)

Work on the theatre started immediately after the signing of the deed of purchase, and was completed in 10 months. It was inaugurated on January 19, 1732, when the Italian knights presented the play "Merope" by Maffei. (5)

The first impressario of whom we have record was Melchiorre Prevost Lanarelli in 1736, and the last Giovanni Le Brun in 1866. From 1768 to 1770 the impressario was a woman, a certain Natala Farrugia.

Grand Master Manoel fixed the rent to be paid by the Impressario at Sc. 320 per annum, of which Sc. 80 were paid for rent from Easter to August, Sc. 120 for the Autumn, and Sc. 120 from Christmas to Carnival.

From the records we learn that when dances or "veglioni" (masked balls) were held in the theatre, the pit was raised by scaffolding to the level of the stage, and we find that on August 22, 1778, regulations were passed for the lighting of the theatre and corridors on these occasions, and the shading of lights, in any manner, was prohibited.

(1) *Repertorio Fondazione Manoel*, R.M.L. Treas. A. 25 fo. 65.

(2) *Lettres ecrites par la Commission d'Administration depuis le 9 Messidor*. R.M.L. Ms. 527 page 31.

(3) SCICLUNA, Sir Hannibal P., *Buildings and Fortifications of Valletta*, in 'Malta and Gibraltar', London, W.H. & L. Collingridge, p. 215.

(4) 1 cane=2 yds. $10\frac{1}{4}$ ins. — 1 palm= $10\frac{2}{7}$ ins.

(5) *Compendio del Giornale del Sac. Fra Gaetano Reboul*. R.M.L., Ms. 20.

It was the usage, in those days, for the Impresario to make the whole company sleep in the boxes of the theatre, and in order to avoid scandal, this was also prohibited in 1778.

The theatre probably underwent considerable modification and decoration in 1783, as on September 9, 1783, a certain Natale Marini of Rome sent Comm. Scozzini, one of the Commissioners of the Manoel Foundation, a plan and model of the interior and stage of the theatre, complete with scenery and illumination. We read that the model was displayed before the Inquisitor, many Grand Crosses and Knights, and such was the admiration, that the Commissioners of the Foundation decided to add a further ten Louis, as a bonus, to Marini's invoice of Sc. 49. (6)

When the French occupied Malta in June 1798, a troupe of Italians were acting at the Manoel Theatre.

At the sitting of the Commission of Government held on the 4 Messidor year VI of the Republic (21 June 1798) (7) it is recorded that the Directors of the Theatre had been ordered by General Junot to pay the actors, as well as members of the orchestra, double their wages. The Directors had then reserved the right to have recourse to the General Commanding the Fortress to make a new arrangement every night that the receipts did not balance the expenses. They now found that they had paid out 3,000 écus for food, salaries, voyages of actors and rent of houses, and that they were obliged to pay 450 écus per month to the said actors and 40 écus per night to the orchestra and attendants. Under these conditions the Directors of the Theatre petitioned the General Commanding the Fortress to direct that the spectators in the parterre and gallery should henceforth pay 4 taris each, those in boxes in the first tier 8 taris, and those in the second tier 6 taris, and that in future the actors and orchestra be paid at the previous rates.

The Commission of Government was of the opinion that:—

1. Actors and actresses could only ask for salary as stipulated in their contracts.
2. In the interest also of the Impresario or Directors, it was necessary to moderate the price of seats to encourage spectators to attend the theatre.
3. The prices proposed by the Directors were proportionate to the means of the inhabitants.

At some time during the French Occupation, the well known Maltese composer, Nicoló Isouard, became Commissioner of the Theatre. Nicoló Isouard left Malta on the capitulation of the French garrison and henceforth worked in Paris where he enjoyed a considerable reputation.

Writing on the 30 Ventose year VIII of the Republic, Bosredon Ransijat (8) relates that the theatre, which had remained open up to that time, had now been definitely closed on the insistant demand of the actors, who could no longer subsist owing to the rise in the cost of living. The troupe had been ask-

(6) *Diverse Scritture relative alla Fondazione Manoel*, R.M.L., Treas. A. 32.

(7) *Registres des Délibérations de la Commission de Gouvernement*, R.M.L., Arch. No. 6523a, fo. 55.

(8) BOSREDON RANSIJAT, *Journal du Siege et Blocus de Malte*. Imp. de Valade, Paris, an IX, page 96.

ing, for some time, to leave the beleaguered city, but the Commander-in-Chief, considering that the garrison had no other amusement than the shows at the theatre, had up to the present refused their demands, and in order to appease them he had given them some help. However, now finding that he could no longer afford them this help, he had to accede to their request and allow them to go out of the city into the country occupied by the insurgents.

Writing again on Germinal 20, year VIII, (9) Bosredon Ransijat stated that as the garrison had shown some dissatisfaction at the cessation of the shows, General Vaubois, who had always endeavoured to please the troops, had retained the actors willynilly and had reopened the theatre.

On Floreal 20, year VIII, the troupe finally obtained permission to leave the city. (10)

Bosredon Ransijat further relates, on Prairial 10, year VIII, that Maltese amateurs had replaced the Italians with success, this meaning that comedy now replaced opera at the theatre, which seemed more agreeable to the garrison which flocked in greater numbers to the shows, which were the only form of entertainment in the city, except for some dances which had been held during Carnival. (11)

When the French left Malta, the theatre evidently re-opened, as an English gentleman, (12) who accompanied Abercrombie's expedition to Egypt in 1801, wrote:— "La Valette possesses an opera, small indeed, but neat, though much out of repair. Italy and Sicily supply it with very tolerable vocal performers, and it is a very agreeable entertainment for the garrison. It was excessively crowded every night by the officers of the expedition, to whom it was a great source of amusement. The price of admission is one shilling."

The impresarios for 1801-1802 were Filippo Izzo, Gaetano Fossati and Francesco Casaccia. In 1801 the melodrama "Elisa" by Mayr was presented and the "Passione di Cristo" by the Maltese composer Francesco Azzopardi in 1802. (13)

In 1812, under the Governorship of Sir Hildebrand Oakes (1810-1813), the pavement was changed and the stage restored at a cost of Sc. 9736. 3t. 19 grs. The name of the theatre which had hitherto been "Teatro Pubblico" was changed to "Teatro Reale"; in 1866 it was named "Manoel Theatre."

When Queen Adelaide, widow of King William IV, was in Malta (1838-39) she often attended shows given in this playhouse. She was present at the operas "Elisir d'Amore", "La Gemma di Vergy" and "Lucia di Lamermoor" which was given as a gala night in her honour. It is related that she took a special interest in the soprano Camilla Darbois, whose *soiree d'honneur* was held under her august patronage. (14)

(9) Ibid. page 205.

(10) Ibid. page 215.

(11) Ibid. page 229.

(12) WALSH, Thomas, *Journal of the late Campaign in Egypt*, London, for T. Cadwell, Jnr., and W. Davies, 1803 page 30.

(13) ROLANDI, Ulderico, *Musica e Musicisti in Malta*, in "Archivio Storico di Malta" Vol. I, Fasc. I, page 20.

(14) Ibid.

The building was repaired and given an improved appearance in 1844, and was adorned with stucco and enlarged to have eight more boxes making them 67 in number divided into tiers; however, in 1861, it was given by the Government on perpetual lease to Dr. Salvatore Mifsud and Anacleto Conti for an annual ground rent of £235, (15) and in 1862 the directum dominium was sold to Emmanuele Scicluna for £7,833.6.8. (16)

After the opening of the Royal Opera House in 1866, the Manoel Theatre fell on evil days, and it is said, was converted into a dormitory for beggars who paid 1d. per night, but when the Royal Opera House was burnt in 1873, the beggars were turned out and grand opera once more held here pending the reconstruction of the Royal Opera House. The impressario at this period was E. Zimelli.

In 1889 the theatre became the property of Carmelo Arpa, a chemist, and later was acquired by the Gollecher family who spent a considerable sum of money in re-decorating it in 1906-7, under the direction of the architect Gustavo Soler. During these modifications the parterre boxes were removed. In 1956 it was requisitioned by the Malta Government and has since been redecorated and modernised.

(15) Records of Notary Luigi Vella of 6 May 1861.

(16) Records of Notary Luigi Vella of 9 September, 1862.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

P. CASSAR, *The Maltese Corsairs and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem*, Reprinted from "The Catholic Historical Review", Vol. XLVI, No. 2, July 1960 (U.S.A.) pp. 137-156.

In this masterly study Dr. P. Cassar traces the progress of Maltese piracy from the period of Arab domination in the 9th Century to the setting up of the Court of Oyer and Terminer by the British in October, 1815. The important role of privateering activities in the economic life of Malta since the Middle Ages is aptly stressed. The author gives the names of various Maltese sea-captains. One of them, the 15th Century Michele da Malta, is the subject of an unpublished study by Professor L. Butler who has been carrying out research in the Maltese Archives for several years.

Dr. Cassar's study follows right upon two articles in last year's "Melita Historica" on similar or related topics, i.e. R. Cavaliero's *The Decline of the Maltese Corso in the 18th Century*, and G. Wettinger's *Coron Captives in Malta*. Cavaliero's article deals more fully with Maltese piracy in the 18th Century in its international diplomatic setting; Cassar's covers the pre-Order period as well, and the organisation and control of privateering in Malta are perhaps better explained. The two studies, however, are complementary, and should in fact be read as two aspects of the same subject.

Dr. Cassar uses his sources well, and there is little one should add beyond expressing the hope that he will give us more scholarly articles like the one under review.

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