PAST, PRESENT AND PROPOSED No.2

Recently, on television and in the newspapers, I have been seeing an advertisment placed by the tourist authority of a small island state. This shows an extremely elegant theatre auditorium. I have some memories of this theatre from a long time ago. When I saw it the building was being used as a cinema, the place was in a poor state of repair, seats broken, carpet threadbare and the walls covered with cheap paint and whitewash. The cinema was known by the personnel of the garrison stationed there - and also by the citizens of Valletta - affectionately and derisively as the "Fleapit". It was, and is, the Manoel Theatre.

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THE MANOEL AND MASSIMO THEATRES

VALLETTA, MALTA

Pip Clayton

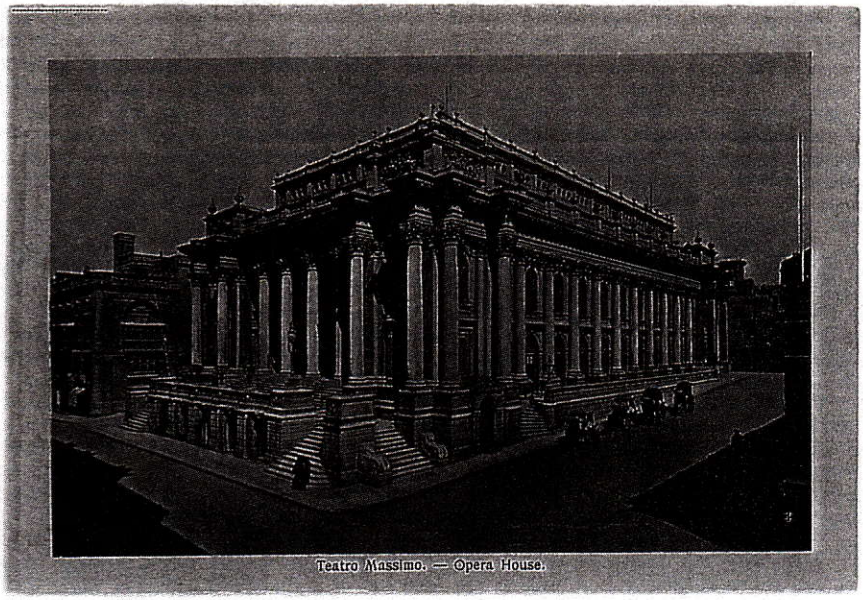
It is claimed that the Manoel Theatre is either the second or third-oldest working theatre in Europe, and is the oldest theatre in what was once the British Empire. The fact is that it dates back to the earlier decades of the eighteenth century. In 1731 the then Grandmaster of the Knights of St,John, Antonio Manoel de Vilhena, decided to build a theatre "*for the honest recreation of the public*": that purpose, in Latin *AD SUAE FUNDATIONIS AUGMENTUM HONESTAMQUE POPULI OBLECTATIONEM EREXIT ANNO MDCCXXXI* is still inscribed above the main entrance. The original interior was similar in design to the Palermo Theatre of the day, being semi-circular with straight sides leading to the stage; of course, over the years, it has been altered many times bringing the auditiorium to its present oval shape.

At first it was known at the "Public Theatre", then the "Theatre Royal", however in 1866 it was named the Manoel in honour of its founder.

The first night was on the 9 January 1732 with a performance of Scipione Maffei's tragedy *Merope* and opera was given intermittently between 1735 and the end of the century. During the first half of the nineteenth century there was a nine month season of opera each year, commencing in September until the following May. In this period twelve operas would be given of which at least five would be new works. In 1811 and 1834 the theatre was enlarged to a setaing capacity of about 480. There were nights of splendour such as the 4 December 1838 when Queen Adelaide, widow of William IV, came with a "Guard of Honour, anthems and much cheering" to a special performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* It is pleasing to note that by the 1860's thirty-two of Donizetti's operas had been staged there. Unfortunately its popularity proved its undoing, the large garrison and fleet stationed there soon made its size inadequate and in 1861 it was sold, the lovely little theatre fell into disuse and at one time it became a doss-house for beggars!

With the proceeds of the sale a new opera house, the Massimo, was built.

The Massimo, or Royal Opera House as it came to be called, took from 1861 to 1866 to build and was designed by Edward Barry, architect of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. It opened on 9 October 1866 with a performance of *I puritani* and was regarded as one of Europe's most beautiful opera houses, but its unpopular design (at least according to the Maltese) was intended to reflect the imperial bearing of the Empire. Disaster struck on 25 May 1873 when the building was gutted by fire during a rehearsal of a new opera *La vergine del castello* by Privitera. Some of the glory then returned to the Manoel, the beggars were evicted, and opera was heard once again within its walls, until, that is, the Royal Opera House - its interior rebuilt and now seating 1095 - opened again in 1887 with a performance of *Aida*. Until World War II it was one of the principal Italian houses with all opera - even including Wagner and French and Russian works - sung in Italian. Once again the Manoel seemed doomed, for a time it became a dance hall, and then later, as I have said, a cheap cinema, then fate stepped in and the Royal Opera House was destroyed by the Luftwaffe in 1942 (date given by the Maltese Tourist Office but Grove says 1943) and - to the best of my knowledge its ruins have remained an eyesore ever since.



Teatro Massimo. — Opera House.



The Manoel Theatre

Slowly the Manoel came back to life. Years later, after gaining independence, the Maltese Government acquired the building in response to public appeal. The paint and whitewash was removed from the baroque interior, the ceiling panels were cleaned and regilded with 22 carat gold, the original decoration of the boxes was restored and lush green velvet stalls replaced the old wooden seats. The forty-five boxes are identical apart from the central ceremonial box once graced by Grandmasters, Kings and Queens, (beggars), and now Presidents. More than £200,000 was spent on acquisition and restoration. Came one night in December 1960 when – to gasps of astonishment and delight from the audience – the Manoel in all its new finery opened its doors once more "for the honest recreation of the public" with a Gala performance of *Coppelia* danced by the Ballet Rambert. Now the Manoel is Malta's National Theatre. Its calendar is varied with a stream of operas, ballets, plays and orchestral concerts. Over the years it has played host to such diverse artists as Ashkenazy, Boris Cristoff, Yehudi Menuhin, Kiri Te Kanawa, the Bolshoi and Kirov Ballets, Katia Ricciarelli and the La Scala Orchestra. Recently a fine old Auberge (once the residence of the Knights of St.John) adjoining the theatre has been acquired, restored, and transformed to create a Foyer of equal beauty where recitals, lectures and art exhibitions are held. In Malta, take a walk down Old Theatre Street, look-up at the inscription over the doors, then take a tour of the theatre complex. Tours take place Monday to Friday at 10.45am and 11.30am, also on Saturday at 11.30am. Tel.22618 or 246289 to confirm. I'm sure you will not be able to imagine this gem of a theatre as the decrepit cinema I remember from all those years ago.

POSTSCRIPT

Gozo is the second largest island of the Republic of Malta, quite small, 15km long and 7km wide, it is said that it is Homer's *Ogygia* – the island where the nymph Calypso kept Odysseus captive for seven years. As long ago as the 3rd Century BC the Greek scholar Callimachus said that this was so. In 1897 the British Government changed the name of its capital to Victoria in honour of the Diamond Jubilee. Officially the name has stuck through independence but the native population still refers to it by its old name, Rabat. Victoria boasts *two* opera houses. This is due to the founding of Music Clubs over 100 years ago to provide music for the Saint's Day processions of Victoria's two churches. The friendly rivalry between the two clubs, that of St.George's and that of the Church of the Assumption (now the Cathedral) has continued to this day. In the 1960's St.George's Club built a theatre which they named the Astra Opera House, not to be outdone the Cathedral Club followed suit and named their theatre the Aurora Opera House. Both are officially listed as opera houses, and while occasionally opera is given they both really operate as cinemas. Even so, it would be fun to see them.

GEMMA DI VERGY

TRAGEDIA LIRICA IN DUE ATTI

DA RAPPRESENTARSI

NELL'IMP. REGIO TEATRO ALLA SCALA

Il Carnovale 1834-35



MILANO

PER LUIGI DI GIACOMO PIROLA

M.DCCC.XXXIV

PERSONAGGI	ATTORI
CONTE DI VERGY.	Sig.r Cartagenova Orazio.
GEMMA, sua moglie ripudiata.	Sig.a Ronzi De Begnis Giuseppina.
IDA DI GREVILLE, novella moglie del Conte.	Sig.a Bayllou Felicita.
TAMAS, giovine Arabo.	Sig.r Reina Domenico.
ROLANDO, Scudiero del Conte.	Sig.r Spiaggi Domenico.
GUIDO, affezionato del Conte.	Sig.r Marini Ignazio.

CORI E COMPARSE

Cavalieri - Arcieri - Damigelle - Soldati.

L' epoca è nel 1428 circa, regnando Carlo VII.

L' azione è nel Berry nel castello di Vergy.

POESIA DEL SIG. GIOVANNI EMANUELE BIDERA

MUSICA NUOVA DEL MAESTRO SIG. GAETANO DONIZETTI.

Il virgolato si ommette.

Le scene tanto dell'Opera che dei Balli

sono d'invenzione ed esecuzione

dei signori Cavallotti Baldassare e Menozzi Domenico.