

Editorial

Cultured encouragement

Before analysing what Malta's cultural policy should be, the first question should be why and whether we actually need one.

The underlying principle is that what constitutes culture and art is not necessarily commercially viable. A play, concert or art exhibition that does not draw the crowds is not necessarily any less artistic; in fact it is often the contrary. You cannot simply leave it to market forces to determine what deserves an audience and what doesn't.

A cultural policy should encourage the new and experimental and not merely provide an intravenous drip for the traditional. Easier said than done. The voices of the old establishment speak far louder than those who have so far never been heard. Yet, are Renzo Spiteri or Etnika less relevant to Malta's cultural landscape than ghanas or band marches? Were they the result of any policy?

Drama, music, art and dance groups have all performed in innovative venues, in the process attracting new audiences. Should the government subsidise a production merely because it has illusions of grandeur that preclude humbler, cheaper venues?

Likewise, performers are no longer limited to a handful. New ones crop up all the time. Not all survive, which is also as it should be, provided the ones that go off stage do so because they are not up to it rather than because of lack of support, of whatever type.

Many will be willing to argue that the lack of a national policy encouraged cultural/artistic entrepreneurship.

The private sector is providing the performers, the venues, even the training and overseas opportunities. The more there are, the more the forces of competition will drive down prices and drive up standards.

So what gaps would a national strategy fill? The teaching situation is a far cry from a few decades ago when MTADA - the academy of dramatic art - was set up as a national entity. In addition to the state drama, art and music schools, there are now numerous private operators offering coaching, even if not always to acceptable standards. Nonetheless, what could a national entity offer that they do not?

The problem lies not with the mediocre majority but with the gifted handful. These are the ones who need to move beyond what Malta could offer with its scant resources. These are the ones who need to go to top schools and academies to seek skills as well as inspiration. The truly promising often manage to move away on their own steam, often thanks to more and more scholarships being offered by the private sector. But Malta is too small for more than a few to make a living out of culture and art, the real watershed between amateur and professional. No cultural policy will ever change that.

If we want to raise our cultural profile, we need to be ready to invest in the promising and give them the chance to spread their wings. No opera house, no amount of subsidies for St James Centre for Creativity or the Manoel Theatre, no Academy for the Performing Arts will ever create a Joseph Calleja, a Renzo Spiteri or a Gabriel Caruana. Scholarships, visiting tutors, opportunities and, most of all, due and meaningful recognition, might.

A think-tank has now been set up. What will it achieve that the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts did not? What can it come up with that was not spelled out in the 2002 Strasbourg report?

Culture and the arts are not dead or dying. Look around. They are thriving. In the vacuum left by the national policy.

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