

L-Interdett for the French and Arabs

Young author makes international breakthrough

Karl Schembri

Malta Today, 30.11.08

Dom Mintoff is arguably the most renowned Maltese politician among foreigners thanks to his antics on the world stage, but the hardships of ordinary Labourites in the 60s subjected to the Church's infamous interdiction will now also be accessible abroad as a young author's play has been translated and given remarkable prominence.



Clare Azzopardi's *L-Interdett taht is-Sodda* – staged in Malta for the first time two years ago – has been translated into French and Arabic and is being staged abroad amid highly positive critical reviews to her work providing insight into a much neglected aspect of the country's modern history.

At only 31, Azzopardi, who won last year's national book award with her collection of short stories *Il-Linja l-Ħadra*, is swiftly rising to international acclaim with her works, which also include stories for children and poetry.

Azzopardi's work was selected for French translation on the occasion of the EU's French Presidency, for which 27 original plays from 27 countries have been published by Editions Théâtrales and presented on the stage.

Translated by Cécilia Mattalia in collaboration with Olivier Favier, the play was launched yesterday at the Odéon Theatre in Paris, and it has already been selected to be studied by sixth form students at a college in Calais.

The play is also expected to come to life in Egypt next February when I-ACT – a non-profit organisation publishing Mediterranean women playwrights' works will be publishing and staging its translation into Arabic by author Walid Nabhan.

Commenting about writing on an issue which is barely touched by other Maltese writers, Azzopardi says the fact that she did not live through them, and coupled with her father's silence on the matter, may have aroused her curiosity further.

"I might have also been intrigued by the silence of the preceding generation of authors," she adds. "An author should be courageous enough to write what has never been written, that which is taboo. I believe an author should engage himself politically through his

creativity, especially in theatre as this involved the public in a direct way.”

Ironically, Azzopardi’s work is not available in Maltese as no publisher has taken it up.

“The first person to give the play recognition in Malta was director Marcelle Teuma and production company Teatru Tramm,” Azzopardi says. “We had a full house three nights in a row and a pretty good reception from the press. Publishing a theatrical piece is another matter, though. In a small island with a potential readership of perhaps a few hundred, there’s always a question of whether there’s an audience for it, and whether it would sell. I wonder if there is any publisher who would take the risk.”

Although the play is about a very particular time in Maltese history, Azzopardi says that a foreign audience should still be able to enjoy it and understand its intricacies.

“It’s not about Mintoff,” she says. “It’s a play about socialism and the power of the church in state matters. It’s about the conflicts between the church and the state. You could substitute Mintoff for many other people. As for the role of religion and the church, we’re living in a time when religious fanaticism is gaining political ascendancy in many countries. Any audience who is interested in this subject can understand the socio-political conflicts which occurred in Malta during the 60’s.”

As the winner of the book award, Azzopardi is critical of the amateurish way Maltese literature is being treated, lumped as it is with all sorts of material published on the island.

“One thinks it’s a literary prize and that is what most people call it. But it’s not,” she says. “It’s called Il-Premju Nazzjonali tal-Ktieb. And it’s the prize for all the books published in a particular year. And when I say all of them I mean it, even if there’s nothing literary in the majority of them. There is no longlisting or shortlisting. All the books are just lumped together in different categories. This is the present situation. Perhaps we should have two book awards; one for the literary books – Il-Premju Letterarju and one for all the others – Il-Premju tal-Ktieb. But then those at the National Book Council would argue that we lack human resources. I’m a bit sceptical about this. I am sure that if the right people are given the job and get paid for it, the situation could be changed. But then those at the council would say, there is no money... This leaves me speechless. It’s just a sad situation”

Azzopardi is now completing her second play, while Merlin has just published a picture book with her story for children called *Meta l-Milied Ma Ġiex*, with illustrations by Mark Scicluna.