

Money for culture

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Like Mario Azzopardi (Cultural Policy In Malta, January 13) I am more than puzzled why a high official from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism should have felt it was necessary to draw up a document laying down a blueprint for cultural policy when we have had a very elaborate document doing exactly this since 2001, and when a number of important measures, such as the setting up of the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts and of Heritage Malta, have been taken and put into effect as recommended by that document. If the document needs to be fine-tuned or added to, let us by all means see this is done, but why should anyone desire to start the whole operation again from scratch?

Although more might have been done by the new bodies, including the ones I have mentioned and the National Book Council, much has already been achieved. The excellent work that has been done and is still being done by Heritage Malta has filled with enthusiasm all the many who cherish our heritage, though many of us feel that even more would have been done if this body had been allowed to operate more freely without being subjected to the trammels of civil service bureaucracy.

In every cultural sector, however, there has never been enough money to enable Malta to make the huge leaps it needs to make after decades of financial starvation. This can be seen in the area of the performing arts where the blossoming and burgeoning of talent among theatre people and musicians, who greatly exceed in number the performers we had even 10 years ago, is not matched by the state funds available to allow them to experiment and achieve. Indeed, had it not been for sponsorships from the commercial sector, very little of great note would have been achieved.

While I have nothing in the least against the encouragement of good popular music, as well as music of a more sophisticated kind, like Clare Azzopardi (January 5), I cannot see why we should be sinking large funds into the Malta Song Festival and participation in that sorry competition, the European Song Festival. Our young composers and instrumental players, our lively and often daring young drama troupes, must be subsidised decently so they can achieve much more than they have already achieved. The National Orchestra, under its current imaginative management, should be encouraged to achieve more. The annual opera festival at the Manoel Theatre should not be allowed to depend solely on one of our banks for its financing if we expect it to produce outstanding work rather than the merely competent (and sometimes not even that) work it has been turning out.

St James Cavalier, to my mind the most exciting encourager and facilitator of creative and performing artists in this country, needs more staff and more money to go from strength to strength. This institution has been hosting many fine exhibitions in the sphere of the fine arts, but it is a shame to go on depending on it and on the restricted facilities at Heritage Malta for our creative artists to display their work. When are the funds going to become available for a purpose-built Museum of Contemporary Art? Heritage Malta has been clamouring for it since its inception.

Both major parties should include the building and staffing of such a museum in their electoral programmes.

The National Book Council has been doing some goodwork by encouraging the publication of books in this country and propagating knowledge about them. I do not feel, as Ms Azzopardi did in her article, that we need "literary officers" and literature centres. Do we need more bureaucracy? What we do need is for the National Book Council to assist authors and publishers, who would otherwise not afford to do so, to go to conferences and book fairs where the Maltese book can be made known to others.

What we do need is to have a good budget (which can be supplemented handsomely by EU funds) for a consistent and continuing programme of well-produced translations of Maltese literary works at least into the main western languages - English, French and Spanish - as well as the culturally-important Italian, and, just as important, we need a professionally-managed programme for their marketing and distribution overseas.

Perhaps the Malta Book Council should go back to awarding prizes solely to books of a literary nature. Publishers of textbooks and coffee-table books rarely require financial encouragement; they manage to make money quite nicely, thank you very much. It is the poets, the authors of experimental fiction, who struggle so desperately to make ends meet. Let us have handsomer and perhaps more numerous prizes for this kind of work.

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