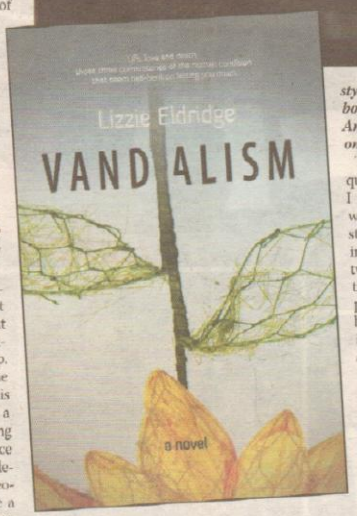
Far from black and white

Glasgow-born writer and actress Lizzie Eldridge cements her connection to Malta by publishing her novel Vandalism – the first novel she wrote, but not the first she published (that would be last year's Duende). She speaks to TEODOR RELJIC about finally publishing the heart-wrenching novel, and how she avoided slipping into soap opera stylings despite its intense plot

Lizzie Eldridge • Photo by Jacob Sammut



This isn't the first novel you've published, but it's the first one you've written. How does it feel to finally be releasing it out into the world?

Vandalism has been part of my life for a very long time and yet seeing it now, in its current form, makes everything seem quite new again – particularly because Pierre Portelli's cover brings a very different edge to the book, and to my own perception of it. There's a kind of resonance, too, between the structure of the book – its continual movement between the present and the past – and the position of the book in terms of my own life as a person and a writer.

As a newly released publication, Vandalism is very much part of my present in a way that joins up the dots between the start of the writing process and where I am now. I wouldn't quite describe this as a feeling of completion because that seems too finished and finite. But there's definitely something magical in the realisation that the very first novel you wrote is now out there in the public domain with a whole new and independent existence of its own.

Were there any significant changes that you made to it before sending it off to be published by Merlin? And how did you feel about revisiting the book after all these years?

Originally the dialogue was written in Glaswegian as the novel's set in my home city of Glasgow, but I amended this in order to communicate with a wider readership. I also changed the name of the central character to Moira and this again related to the desire to reach a wider audience. There were spelling issues surrounding my initial choice and I didn't want to pointlessly detract from the story by leaving people wondering how to pronounce a character's name. Another issue that came up involved the use of phones. This might sound crazy now but when I began writing the book, mobile phones were not so widely used so I did have to make a few adjustments to accommodate this rather significant change! A book may be an eternal commodity but nothing dates a story more than technological anachronisms. And unfortunately or otherwise, technological advances move much quickly than the good old-fashioned pen!

I don't know if this coincided with the release of the iPhone 4, 5 or whatever version we're currently on but it was the summer of 2013 when I revisited the manuscript of Vandalism for what was to be the final time, and I was intensely aware of the disparity between working on a story which takes place in a grey and rainy city and sweating it out in the heat of the Mediterranean sun.

On a slightly more serious note, I guess going back to the book after quite a few years triggered thoughts about where I was now and where I was then, a reflection process which necessarily embraced the personal and professional. One aspect of this was that I was returning to Vandalism after having written and published Duende which inevitably meant I was making comparisons between the two. As a consequence, my main realisation was that although they're very different books, at the level of form, content and style, the 'me' that is the writer making my journey through life has a consistency in terms of my obsessions, the things which intrigue me about life, the way I perceive these and express them through the written word. Yes, there's a kind of existential time-wobble going on but to know you've changed and grown while the core of you remains the same is, ultimately, quite comforting.

How does one write about cancer grief and a highly-charged love triangle – both of which are significant features of Vandalism – without descending into soap opera stylings? Is the tone of the book key in this regard? And how did you work on it?

That's a really pertinent question and I'm not sure I have the answer. The writing is, at times, almost stream-of-consciousness in that it switches between one emotion and the next, between the present and the past, between the real and the imagined, and so on. It all emanates from the responses and perspective of the main character, Moira, and so there's quite a strong and distinctive narrative voice as a result. She also comments on the action at times and maybe this serves to undercut the possible melodrama of some of the situations.

On the face of it, if you set out the central action in black and white – a woman has an affair with a man from her past while her best friend's dying of cancer – it could sound a bit cringe-worthy – and it's why I shiver when it comes to writing a synopsis of the book. But I think the basic situation allows for the unfolding of a story which reflects the complicated and often messy nature of real human emotions and real human relationships. I think you can safely say that in Vandalism life is far from black and white, and the nature of the writing style reinforces this. Although not a conscious intention on my part – it was just the way the book got written with the character's voice being fundamental to this – I think the writing style is fairly direct and has a brutal honesty but, at the same time, you always find the poetic. And there you go. I think I've pretty much summed up my essential perception of life itself.

What do you make of the Maltese literary scene? What would you change about it?

It would be difficult and unfair of me to comment as, to my shame, I still can't speak Maltese. This excludes me from engaging with the work of, for example, Trevor Zahra, Immanuel Mifsud, Clare Azzopardi, Leanne Ellul, Loranne Vella, and others. The fact there's so much material written in the Maltese language says a lot in itself and reflects the huge amount of creativity evident in Malta. It's a tiny island but characterised by an abundance of creative energy. This was what struck me when I first came to Malta in 2005 to perform in a show directed by another Maltese writer, Simon Bartolo. There was something tangible about this creativity and it kept me coming back until I moved here permanently in 2008. It was here that I wrote and published my other novel, Duende, and it was here that I found the support from Merlin Publishers for the publication of Vandalism. So to say that Malta has been good to me is an understatement.

The fact that it's a small island with a language of its own is also – and understandably – one of its limitations, and this is true across all the arts. Ongoing efforts are being made by the Arts Council Malta to professionalise the cultural and creative sectors, and thus increase the international platform for Maltese artists and work being made here. As it stands, in terms of the publishing industry, the budgets and resources are smaller to start with, and this limits publishing as well as distribution capacities. So the market is necessarily smaller – and this is true across all the arts – if financial restrictions mean work made in Malta can't be equally shared on the international stage.

Vandalism is published by Merlin Publishers and is available at all book stores

'Art is w

As the Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale gets underway across various venues of the old capital city, TEODOR RELJIC speaks to its artistic director Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci about its aims to serve as a positive interfaith platform in these difficult times, aiming to make good on its theme of 'Christianity, Spirituality and the Other'

The Biennale has of course been a long time coming – with necessary time factored in for planning and preparation. Now that it has been launched, how would you describe the journey from idea to actuality? Has anything changed, or evolved, since you first hit the drawing board?

The Mdina Biennale traces its roots back to the previous Christian and Sacred Art Biennales of the 1990s. However, contrary to the previous Art Biennales organised by the Mdina Cathedral Chapter, this year's edition has taken a radically different approach towards art and faith. The theme for this edition of the Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale is 'Christianity, Spirituality and the Other', with particular emphasis on The Other since it encompasses all forms of belief, or the lack of it.

Of course, since the theme has been decided a lot of water has passed under the bridge and adjustments, challenges, discussions with artists have been happening every single day until the very last day.

What hasn't changed since day one, however, are the parameters of the theme – the Biennale had to reflect and embrace wholeheartedly a multicultural and international approach. Despite the challenges, those goalposts never shifted and yet the Biennale grew beyond anyone's expectations, including mine.

Malta is internationally known to be a melting pot of cultures and the word has spread that a Bien-