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‘Art is what the world needs at the moment’ | Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci

As the Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale gets underway across various venues of the old capital city, we speak 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’

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Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci • Photo by Ray Attard

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 Biennale was being held to attract and challenge ideas of different races, religions, approaches, cultures. We have welcomed big names not only from Europe, including the Nobel-prize winner Dario Fo, but also authorities in the art scenes in Chile, China, Russia and organisations like Caravan, ArtNaked and the Musée Rodin in Paris.

What has the collaboration between the various entities that comprise the Biennale been like?

As with any ambitious project, it took time, patience and a lot of convincing to bring key players on board. The Mdina Cathedral Chapter has been particularly collaborative and open to ideas that challenged those usually associated with such an institution. The Chapter not only offered all its venues, which are not usually open to the public, but it embraced wholeheartedly the rebirth of the Biennale with its different dimension, welcoming different believers and non-believers to exhibit their expressions of art in, no less than the Mdina Cathedral and Museum.

Mind you, all this has been studied and carried out careful with a lot of respect towards all that is sacred. But they allowed it to happen nonetheless. This is a huge message to the world particularly during these troubling times when violence is being justified in the name of religion. The Biennale, standing at the meeting point of East and West, North and South, with all the religions and lack of them in between, sends out the message that where there is goodwill and dialogue, even divergent cultures can sit together with great respect and understanding of each other.

What would you say are some of the significant visual arts highlights at the Biennale this year?

I can assure you that every work of art has been studied and scrutinised carefully, not only for its relevance to the theme but equally important for its artistic value. Artists travelled from all over the world to propose their works. This is their passion, their love, their expression, their soul. They are very possessive of their creation, and rightly so.

Because there was another message I wanted to communicate through this Biennale, every artist is self-funded; as difficult as it was, I didn't want this Biennale to be another commercial platform, a money-spinner and this created huge strains on everyone concerned. So you can imagine how painful it was for me as artistic director, to having established an excellent relationship with an artist, agree or disagree with his expression of art, acknowledge the expense he would have incurred to propose his work and having to communicate in certain circumstances that the work did not fit with the Biennale's objectives.

After this uncomfortable exercise, I can assure you that every piece of art is special in its own way and it would be very unfair to point certain artists over others. For sure, this Biennale offers every medium of expression from oil paintings, to acrylics, sculptures, installations, video art and digital media. In parallel, we have a full calendar of events with performing arts, debates, workshops, talks and seminars by international authorities in the art world.

Given that the Biennale is taking place in Mdina – a well-preserved baroque jewel of a city – are you worried that the art may be overshadowed by the surroundings? How did you set about tackling this?

Mdina as a location is a big challenge. The whole old capital has a character of its own, needing no decorations. On the contrary, unless you are sensitive to its artistic architecture, it is very easy to slip into big eyesores that jar with the feel of the city. Integrating all these contemporary pieces of art, by no fewer than 110 artists from 27 countries including Malta, into the surroundings and highly prestigious décor and art in all the exhibition venues was a great challenge that caused me sleepless nights and endless discussions with the artists.

Tough job… as my role was not to please anyone but to convey the Biennale's message in the most artistically expression. This was not a white gallery wall where you install a framed picture. Finally, I think, together with my team we have created a space and a final result that challenges people to look at Mdina in a different way.

These are, of course, sensitive times for interfaith dialogue. Do you hope the Biennale will somehow help in this regard?

This is a sad period in the history of humankind where interfaith dialogue is fading and giving way to violence and hatred. Art comes from the soul and it communicates peacefully. Without imposing itself, it transmits love and beauty. It is what the world needs at the moment.

APS Bank is the Main Partner of the Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale which runs until January 7. For more information visit mdinabiennale.org