Lifestyle & Culture

Good at being a baddie

With the FM Theatre panto just a few days away, **Iggy Fenech** chats to **STEPHEN OLIVER** to discover why audiences should 'boo' him while he's playing the part of the Sheriff in Robin Hood and the Babes in the Wood.

Nothing says 'Christmas is here' more than billboards and sponsored Facebook posts advertising the upcoming pantos. In fact, over the past decade, tens of thousands have flocked to various venues to get their yearly fix of political satire, witty one-liners and double entendres.

The main character at each panto remains the fabulously-clad Dame, who, with her over-the-top character and characteristics, wins the hearts of audiences and acts as a voice of sarcastic reason on behalf of those watching the show. Yet the baddie deserves just as much praise – after all, without him or her, there wouldn't even be a story.

In this year's FM Theatre panto, which will be taking place at the Manoel, it's director and actor Stephen Oliver who will be playing the part of the Sheriff of Hawn M'hawn Xejn, a fictional village within the world of *Robin Hood and the Babes in the Wood*.

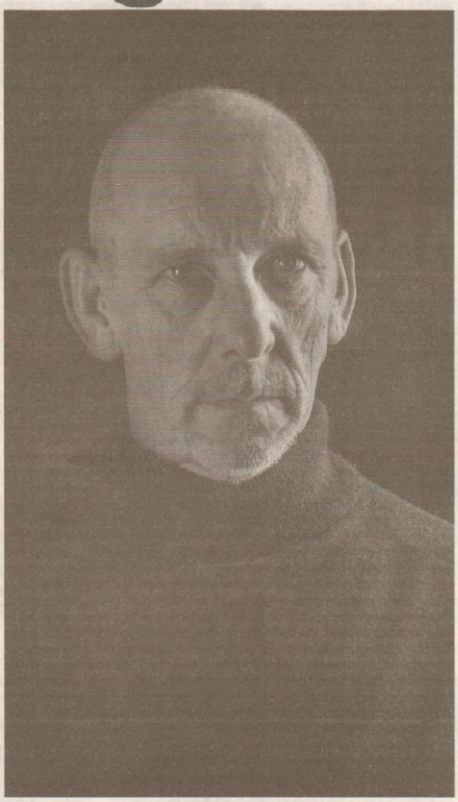
"The director, Chris Gatt, wanted me to play it very much in the style of *Blackadder* from the BBC, in that, to all of the peasants and his henchmen, he is cruel and uncompromising but, in the presence of his boss, Queen Pif Schriha, he is, of course, a complete coward... Even though he would do anything to settle for a quiet life," Stephen reveals.

"On top of all this, Edward Mercieca and Chris had this idea that he is also a failed British Shakespearean actor, prone to misquoting the Bard in the most appalling way and this is, in a sense, the running gag in the show."

Stephen, of course, is no newbie to the baddie role having played the parts of King Rat, Abanazar and the Evil Squire in past productions.

"I jumped at the opportunity," he exclaims. "Pantomime presents actors with very different challenges and not all actors can carry it off. The unique style of pantomime requires a different sense of comedy timing and portrayal of characters, yet behind the slightly larger-than-life characters, there is a truth."

Having been in the industry for over 25 years, Stephen knows exactly what he's talking about, of course. As an actor, he's trained at the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art in London, and he's worked as a professional actor and director in the UK, the USA and Europe.



> **As a young boy, pantomime was my introduction to the theatre**

Stephen is also an award-winning director, and his directorial credits include *Festen* at Blue Box, *Butterflies Are Free* at St James Cavalier, and the critically-acclaimed *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* at the Manoel Theatre in Malta, as well as *'Allo 'Allo, Equus, Twelve Angry Men, A Clockwork Orange, Animal Farm, Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the UK, to name but a very few.

He's also had a pretty successful international career, and he's directed *Godspell* at the National Theatre in Split, Croatia and the Municipal Theatre in Calais, France, as well as *West Side Story, Sweeney Todd* and *Cabaret* at the Kimble Theatre in Virginia, USA. While, as an actor, Stephen's credits include George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Iago in *Othello*, Ahab in *Moby Dick* and Pilate in *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

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Reality re-imagined

■ Nikki Petroni

Josef Kalleya's works are very ambiguous. They are challenging to comprehend, and that is because they do not abide to the conventional system of what art historian TJ Clark conceptualises as logical seeing. Looking at Kalleya's sculptures and drawings is a demanding task. One must study the artist and his works for them to make visual and intellectual sense.

According to Kalleya, the role of the artist is to materialise that which is felt by the heart and soul. In other words, the mimicking of the material world is a non-artistic endeavour for Kalleya. That which already exists in the world can be perceived by human beings in a tangible manner. Therefore art must always strive to create something new, something which goes beyond materiality itself. Being faced with this difficult position, the artist is constantly tormented, restless, anxious. Expressing something unseen through visual language is already a huge undertaking. But to render the non-material into material form is a conflicting and troubling position. The artist is fettered to materiality, whether working in traditional media or even when using digital means.

This immateriality-materiality conflict-symbiosis is at the fore of Kalleya's work. By giving the above definition to art he restructured the meaning and purpose of art. Placing this within the local context and even in the international one, Kalleya's statement is a radical one. His attitude toward the creation of art is marked with a Camusian *indifference*, as noted by Dr. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci. He saw the world for what it is, allowing him the freedom to express his own ideas and feelings without compromise. No doubt he was a courageous artist and also an innovator, and thus deserves to be studied properly.

I have already discussed the conference taking place next Tuesday 15th December called 'Peripheral Alternatives to Rodin in Modern European Sculpture'. This event is part of the Department of History of Art, University of Malta's initiative to develop disciplinary frameworks for the discussion and writing of art history. The speakers include Dr Sophie Biass-Fabiani (Musée Rodin, Paris), Dr Julia Kelly (Loughborough University), Professor Joseph Paul Cassar (University of Maryland University College), Dr Jon Wood (Henry Moore Institute, Leeds), Mr Ulrich Meinherz (Kesselhaus Josephsohn, St Gallen), Dr Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci (University of Malta), Ms Barbara Vujanović (Atelijer Meštrović, Zagreb.

Hosting an international conference is integral to this goal as academics and researchers formulate a diversity of terminologies, concepts, modes of thought according to their cultural context and subject matter. To have speakers from a number of European countries debating the same theme is one way of cultivating disciplinary awareness and maturity.

Kalleya's works and the works of several other 20th century Maltese artists need to be rethought within new disciplinary frameworks. This is something which Dr. Schembri Bonaci has been working towards through his research, and something which he persistently teaches to all his students.

To accompany the conference, a small exhibition of Kalleya's sculptures, photomontages and photographs will be launched at the University of Malta Valletta Campus. The exhibition is titled 'Josef Kalleya: Between materiality and imagination: *indifference*', exploring that struggle between idea and form which is characteristic of Kalleya's work. It a small exhibition, but one which will allow viewers time to see each work properly. Various themes were explored by Kalleya, and good examples of his varying output will be shown.

Nikki Petroni is a doctoral student in the History of Art Department, University of Malta. She is also a member of the organisational team of the Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale which is open until 7 January 2016. APS Bank is the main partner of the Mdina Biennale.

Josef Kalleya, Il Bacio di Giuda