Past Carnival and New Year's Eve Drama in Malta

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The aim of this paper is to describe and analyse the two seasonal drama practices in Malta and Gozo within certain restrictive parameters. I'm fully aware that the old dramatic text I shall be presenting to you for the first dramatic event is but a small part of the performance. Today it is impossible to decipher the extent of its existence as a provisional text. Or is it possible to speak of the other parts of the dramatic form beyond the text, namely: improvisation and the development of the performance affected by the spontaneous decisions of the actors, movement, music, the simultaneity of production and communication, the ephemeral and unrepeatable nature of the work understood as event and action, and the amount of non-dramatic activity alongside the drama per se.

With reference to carnival celebrations in contemporary Xagħra-Gozo, Vicki Ann Cremona comments: “Carnival in [Nazarene Church] square revolved around one main event, the kumnittiva, consisting of a highly structured series of folk dances, and a farce.” This last word is qualified in an interesting footnote:

The subject matter of the farce is usually either about marriage or cuckoldry, with mock trials or notarial deeds drawn up to the wife's disadvantage. Another common theme is surgical operations, and animal intestines, liver or heart are 'extracted' from the patient. In Italy, these farces usually mark the death of Carnival...

In spite of giant steps in technology as well as development in modern Maltese drama, live farcical folk drama is still popular entertainment in Malta with the lower classes, though not as vastly popular as in past times. Adopting Steve Tillis's definition of folk drama, I would say that the Maltese rituals Il-Qarċilla [il'ar'tilla] and Il-Qarinža [il'a'riŋza] have “separate but present performers and audience, enactment over time and space using practices of design, movement, and speech, and, most important of all, a dramatic frame of make-believe action.” Here, make-believe means pretending the performance is real, and not just accepting the reality of the performance. The occasions of their performances are limited to noteworthy events and the impromptu situations and venues are not regulated — venues for Il-Qarċilla are outside in the street, and for Il-Qarinža in private houses. Their core audiences are found in the villages.

Due to cultural myopia, folk drama in Malta has received sporadic discussion over the years in the scholarship of Maltese folklore and drama. The only notable exception is veteran Maltese folklorist Joseph Cassar-Pullicino. The same themes are to be found till the late 1960s and thereafter in various areas in Malta, including my native village Qormi and its outlying villages, including Żebbuġ, Siggiewi and Marsa.

Since mediaeval times Carnival has always been accompanied by parades, masquerades, pageants, and other forms of revelry recalling pre-Christian pagan rites, particularly fertility rites. In Malta Carnival has been celebrated since at least the 15th
century, coinciding with Europe's carnivals which reached their peak during the 14th and 15th centuries. Later centuries also evince the popularity of a rustic Carnival folk drama, known as “Il-Qarċilla” with the lower classes.

“Il-Qarinża” was another magic-ritual drama celebrated on New Year's Eve, still popular in fragmentation within living memory in Malta and Gozo. Here one discovers the grotesque representation of the death of the old year and the beginning of the new one. Both rituals are defined as the earliest known fragments of comic drama on the island. Bad weather conditions might have restricted qarinża's performers to put on their act indoors.

Unfortunately we have no visual or audio documentary of either of the two dramatic rituals grounded in the Maltese reality to define the appropriate context of any performance situation, texts-in-action, the extent the text served as a guide for the performance, practices of design, movement, speech, music, and other practices associated with them that take place within a frame of make-believe action shared by the performers and audience in the more general context of Maltese culture. One must not sweep away contextualism and the performer-audience relationship in relation to the concept of framing.

With one fragmentary exception, no thick, incisive description is made of troupe/s of village amateurs as the primary audience for their performance, parading through village streets with an intentional communicative action, calling attention to the mounting of the impersonation and performance that was soon to take place, and no doubt gathering a substantial audience in its wake, audience participation and its loud repartee to every crude comment. Impersonation is common to our two folk drama events. Actors appear before members of their own community, creating a constant juxtaposition of their fictitious and mundane role.

Il-Qarċilla

The word “Qarċilla” refers to the whole folk drama celebration of a knockabout farce, including the pastry bride within the same ritual during Carnival and the person masked to represent the bride - consider that female actors participated in Maltese folk drama only since the first half of the 20th century, and in some villages since the beginning of the sixties. This masking as a representation is the essence of drama once it includes dramatic performance. We do not know, however, if conventional semiotic device or direct imitation of women's overt gender markings such as sexual characteristics, voice patterns, characteristic movement, and gesture, were used.

Action and its interlocking events, mime and mask play their functional part in Il-Qarċilla. There is an old description, dating to the second half of the eighteenth century, recorded in an unpublished dictionary Damma tal Kliem Kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal Maltin u Ghaucin written by Gozitan Canon Giovanni Francesco Agius de Soldanis (1712-70). The manuscript is to be found in the Malta Public Library in Valletta.

This game by country people takes place during Carnival, similar to that of the Gentiles .... A sweet pastry bride doll is made to the height of three or four palms, beautifully adorned with fine clothes. It is placed in a small basket and poised on the head of a masked man carrying a round cake (M. kollura) in his hand and accompanied by the rabble. Of these some play rustic instruments, others dance or sing; then, when they have gone round the village, they stop at street corners and it is customary for one of them to mimic the manners of a notary, reading in a public
burlesque marriage contract set in Maltese rhyme, in favour of the pastry bride .... After much wandering, idle talk and nonsense characteristic of Carnival, the pastry bride is eaten and the Qarċilla comes to an end with the people getting drunk with wine.  

Here the burlesque Carnival play includes the arrangement of overlapping multiple texts over the performance: verbal and/or musical and/or mimic and/or movement texts are invoked simultaneously, taking the mock-wedding plot from everyday life. It is satirical, imitating the peculiarities of individuals or groups, of funny and strange behaviour. It is a mixture of obscenities and satirical dialogues. The foreknown resolution - devouring the sweet pastry bride and general drunkenness - also sets a role for the audience.

According to Cassar Pullicino writing in 1945, “by the middle of the 19th century ... [this drama] was probably in disuse and foreign writers on Malta of a century ago make no allusion whatsoever to this Carnival pastime.” Nine years later the same author remarks that the ritual had reached its apex in Malta by mid-eighteenth century. Yet oral tradition makes various references to this “notarial drama,” as it is sometimes termed. Cassar-Pullicino himself in the same article concludes:

... [0]f the old rustic ceremonies nothing remains but a few faint survivals ... the burlesque figure of a man dressed up in a notary's clothes that is still seen about in the streets representing King Carnival.

In 1976 Cassar-Pullicino recalls the Qarċilla folk drama in post-war Malta:

A man dressed up as a Notary Public could be seen every year in Merchants Street, and in Kingsway (now Republic Street), purporting to read a register with which he occasionally shielded his face from all sorts of objects thrown at him by the bystanders or by his retinue of children and adult merrymakers.

From mid-eighteenth century down to 1798 when Malta was under the rule of the Knights of the Order of St John, revelry was part of daily life much as it was in other European countries. We can produce excerpts by reliable eighteenth century Maltese writers documenting that feasts were purposely celebrated during the time, on direct orders by the Grand Masters, lasting throughout the whole night!

Parallel to this folk drama and contemporary with it, there was a processional marriage ritual, where another “Qarċilla” featured. In Count Giovanni Antonio Ciantar's edition of Abela's history which he entitled Malta Illustrata (1772), he recalls that:

[o]n the wedding day the most respectable relatives or guests of the wedding couple would place a flimsy and transparent veil on the face of a richly dressed and bejewelled bride. It was then the custom to make cuts in the women's dresses, however new and costly, to attach in each cut a tiny gold seashell. They also used to wear certain dresses of embroidered velvet in floral designs, arabesque, almost like ecclesiastical cloaks, and we have seen several of them. The most used materials were gold or silver brocade which they called lamé. So outfitted, the veiled bride left the house accompanied by her retinue and guests, in Maltese known as haddara. Together with the bridegroom they set out to church under a canopy held by four of the closest guests called Compari del baldacchino. This was a canopy kept on purpose for use by new couples
The bridal couple was preceded by violinists and guitarists who stopped regularly to sing a rhymed quatrain in Maltese in praise of the bride or bridegroom. They were also preceded by three other men, one of whom carried a bowl full of well-made sweets, attractively displayed and decorated with ribbons or with a round flat cake called qarċilla, with two figures on top representing the bride and bridegroom, which bowl was made of clay with white glaze with yellow arabesques. Another who carried it held a large ciambella (here called collura, in Sicily buccalato), held by a sash slung over his left shoulder down to his right side, which then belonged to him. The other carried a tray with the nuptial handkerchief in the form of a tower or a pyramid or dome with the figure of St Joseph, or Baby Jesus, or Our Lady on top.

Would one suggest that through ecclesiastical influence the same term was used to refer to the two small sweet figurines placed on the wedding cake or to the cake itself? Or was it a transference of meaning from the former primitive improvised dramatic ritual to the passive, church dominated ritual procession, known to locals as ġilwa, which was condemned and stopped by church orders in mid-19th century?

According to Cassar-Pullicino, the Qarċilla folk drama has three elements typical of the genre:
- the scenic act represented at each street corner, some rudimentary action
- the man carrying the bride, the Notary reading out the contract, etc., and
- the cutting up, i.e. the sacrifice, of the bride... There was also a ritual element.

What is fascinating in the history of the Qarċilla folk drama in Malta is that the humorous, burlesque, irreverent lines - Cassar-Pullicino censors substantially long excerpts of the text in his 1954 study and later reprints with additions! - which were so popular in De Soldanis' times and the nineteenth century, were written around 1713 by Feliċ Demarco, a priest born in Bormla, Malta. We are not informed whether Demarco played some part in the direction of any folk actors performing his script. To date we can only speak of his controlling presence - in the widest of meanings - through the text of a literate outsider amid the performing group. It seems safe to assume that the audience was constantly shifting, according to the place chosen by the wandering troupe. Dramatic action was conveyed by means of a combination of narrative, indirect and direct dialogue, and descriptions. Textual evidence of the 'notary’’s inventory of the dowry suggests that the drama has always had significant comic elements, inspiring improvised dramatic action by the performers. But we do not know about any improvisational interaction with the audience, although Thomas A. Green contends that ‘audiences at folk performances are rarely truly inactive.’ Many variants were later prepared or improvised by the different 'notaries’, to such an extent that a contemporary remarks:

... the carnivalesque notary reads the matrimonial contract in favour of the bride, there in everybody's presence, in burlesque Maltese rhyme, as it variously makes the round with these Carnival notaries ...

The Qarċilla as folk drama aims at more than entertainment. It is a sociological play, presented expressly with instrumental aims: it has effective connection and deals with the daily lives of the actors and audience. It is Carnival and the context accounts for the community's right to eliminate temporarily all differences and hierarchical barriers among individuals, abolishing taboos that prevail in real life and creating a
particular type of communication impossible in everyday life being situated at a symbolic level. It expresses its concerns about and attitudes to life in a way that escapes censorship. The repetitive use of symbolic inversion, deviations from and transgression of normal patterns of behaviour, double meaning, crude, blunt vulgarity, overturning of sexual taboos and references to the lower bodily stratum, symbolic equivalence between carnival devices (e.g., cucumber/pig's phallus), and meta-dramatic pointed barbs as direct offence to the audience with various boisterous sexual connotations and rounds of insults - these are all examples of a community observing, chastising, and laughing at itself. The verse structure is simple, generally in rhyming couplets, allowing for the most straightforward conveyance of meaning.

It seems also safe to conclude that the sudden involvement of the audience excited much raucous laughter at the bucolic fantasy of some of the performers' lines written in declamatory style, as well as substantial embarrassment for the upper classes, represented by the “notary,” at the ludic representation of the community's institutions, including the parody of them aiming at social criticism and transformation. The most hilarious laughter comes closest to the point where the joke is indeed taken too far. It draws upon comic, figurative material already in a long-standing tradition in mid-eighteenth century and a good number of examples are still popular in contemporary Malta, including bombastic idioms, butts of humourous expressions, and proverbs. The various legal terms in the text betray Demarco's considerably learned hand, though his text is nothing less than a distillation of how the Maltese at the time viewed the world around them.

The significance of names in the text is that they are functional descriptions. Notary Pierotti Agrighentino “quello che non beve puoco vino” [he who drinks no small amount of wine] is the presenter who literally “presents” annually the performance and occasionally engages in dialogue with his audience. The opening frame is separated from the drama proper by the employment of this meta-theatrical figure, promising “Copia di un Contratto di matrimonio in lingua maltese, burlesco, che si recita dalle maschere nel Carnevale” [Copy of a Marriage Contract in burlesque Maltese, which is recited by the masks in Carnival]. The folk play was held outdoors during Carnival in popular locales to work up decent audiences. The performers were all men and understandably so because of the closed society at the time and the instances of obscenity, and off-colour remarks: they laughed at their own world, with all its foolishness and foibles comically exaggerated. Contemporary comments on this folk drama imply the existence of various troupes on the island and they were led by particular individuals.

Here are some relevant examples from the extant text of the original. Semiosis is at its best here, implying a subterranean current of human interaction using the Maltese sign system to accomplish communication. The play-text is extremely difficult to decipher, Ignazio Saverio Mifsud, the copier, has a horrible and inconsistent handwriting. The problem is greater if one remembers that Maltese orthography was only standardized in 1934. In attempting to decipher the text as accurately as possible, Standard Maltese orthography is used, words followed by [?] to show doubtful transcription; and parts where the mss is illegible are marked [...]. Punctuation marks in square brackets identify punctuation marks inserted or changed by the author of this paper for editorial reasons.
Symbolic Inversion of Taboo

1. Woman's Physical Description

1.1 “Inweza ... habet naturam phal tal Bacra...” (p.1)
1.1 “Inweza ... has a physique like a cow's...”
1.2 “… l-gharusa tixbah/L ommha minn wara, / U minn quddiem fiha x'wiehed jara.” (p.9)
1.2 “… the bride takes after her mother in her behind. / and from the front she is worth a second glance”

2. Heightened Phallic References

2.1 ass's penis: “żobb ta' hmar” (p.12)
2.1 “donkey's penis”
2.2 cucumber:: pig's penis: “… U tinkaram wisq ghall-hjar / Ghaliex tmut ghal nebula tal-majjal...” (ibid.)
2.2 “… And she is very fond of cucumbers / because she would die for a pig's penis…”
2.3 human penis :: needle, vagina :: eye: “gherq illi min-nu/Thit b'al gajn donnha ragel.” (ibid.)
2.3 “a needle/penis with which/ she sews an eye/vagina like a man”

3. Specific Sexual References, Including Sexual Intercourse

3.1 sexual intercourse :: fresh sausages: “... ukill tag millu patt/Illi tag mel trabi bir-riżq / Ghaliex tibia' z-zaizett frisk.” (p.12)
3.1 “… she promises him also / to give him many children [be a prolific childbearer] because she guzzles on fresh sausages [she enjoys sexual intercourse too much].”
3.2 penis for sexual intercourse and pissing: “U gandu siequ 1-quddemmija / Fiha n-nemmi-lija, u tannofs bewwelija...” (p.4)
3.2 “And he has the front leg/penis erect / To reach orgasm, and then to pass water...”
3.3 sexual act and conception: “… fuqha mitrah tas-suf ta' l-gheleiq / Biex fuqu 1-gharus jaghmel il-kerčehi,” (p.8), “… id-dukkar taghha tridu minn dak il-kbir / Ghaliex taqtghu minnha filghaxija mal-lejl jarġa' jsir.” (ibid., see also n.4 below)
3.3 “… a mattress of wool used in villages / so that on it the bridegroom helps the bride conceive;” “… she wants his tool to be of the biggest / to be able to make love a second time during the night.”

4. Infertility of Animals with Transference of Meaning to Humans

4.1 “...taghtih žewg hanžiriet[,] / Il-waha hawlija u 1-ohra qatt ma ghamlet ulied.” (p.6)
4.1 “… she gives him two sows/one infertile and the other had never borne young.”
5. Offensive Barbs Directed to the Audience

5.1 audience described as illegitimate or beasts: “Bghula ta' l-ibliet” (p.11), “intom ilkoll bhejjem” (p.14) 5.1 “Bastard townsfolk,” “You're all beasts”

5.2 victims of actor's vulgar actions (specifically defecating) or illicit sexual relations and solicited to reciprocate: “... fuqkom Sinjuri appena nahra” (ibid.), “Stennnewni naqra sa ma mmur / Jiena f'wiċċkom nahra” (p.15), “U nippromettilkom li narġa magħkom / Tridu thallu tieghi f'taghkom” (ibid.), issigilata bil-hara / Li kellu jiċċappas fuq kull min semaghna” (ibid.), “... kull min semaghni jidhol ġewwa sormi” (p.14) 5.2 “... I'll just shit on you, gentlemen”, “Wait for me a while till I'll go / [and] shit in your face”, “And I promise you to return / You must leave mine [my shit] in yours”, “... sealed with shit / that soiled our audiences”, “... may whoever heard me penetrate my arse”.

5.3 capital punishment: “'Kk Alla jamar narakom imdendlin 'il barra 1-bieb” (ibid.), “... jekk jiena narah imdendel / Ma mmurx inhollu” (p.15) 5.3 “May God order that I see you hanged outside the door”, “... if I see him hanged / I won't go and cut him loose.”

6. Breaking Wind Noisily

6.1 “Thallux xi wahda tiskappalkom.” (p.1) 6.1 “Be careful not to fart.”

7. Arse Wiping

7.1 “... ma tiswiex għall-imsi...” (p.13) 7.1 “... not worth wiping your arse with...”

8. Snot

8.1 “W el-maħta kerha tibqa’ bir-riħa.” (p.2) 8.1 “And the ugly snot leaves a bad smell.”

9. Disease

9.1 “Jekk toboġhduna taghtikom skaranzija.” (p.2) 9.1 “If you hate us may you suffer inflammation of the throat.”

10. Medicaments

10.1 “Il-hwejjeġ tas-servizzjali” (p.4) 10.1 “suppositories”

11. Chamberpot

11.1 “kantru’” (p.7) 11.1 “chamber pot”
One may also identify woman's denigration, ill-treatment by men, in contrast to very few negative comments on latter's behaviour (n. 6), and an implied pervasive subordination of women:

**Anti-Femminist Comments**

1. **Physical Appearance**
   
   1.1 hunchbacked: “... 1-għarusa hija tewmija /U minn wara ftira hotbija...” (p.12)
   
   1.2 squint-eyed: “... Minn wahda għamja werċa / U mill-ohra ma taraxejn...” *(ibid.)*
   
   1.3 large ears: “... Widnejha naqra kbar/Jixbhu lil tal-hmar...” *(ibid.)*
   
   1.4 large mouth: “... U halqha nitfa kbir...” *(ibid.)*
   
   1.5 large chin: “... Geddumha bal tal-żir...” *(ibid.)*
   
   1.6 large nose: “Imneċhirha daqs 1-Imdina...” *(ibid.)*, (see also, 1 above)
   
   1.1 “... the bride is a twin and has rounded prominent buttocks ...”
   
   1.2 “… She squints in one eye/and is blind in the other …”
   
   1.3 “… Her ears are somewhat large/like a donkey's …”
   
   1.4 “… Her mouth is a little large …”
   
   1.5 “… Her chin is like a pig's …”
   
   1.6 “A nose as large as Mdina …”

2. **Sexual Avidity**

   2.1 “… thobb tikolhom wisq il-kavati/Għaliex minn taghha ftira taghti” (p.12)
   
   2.2 “…taghmel it-trabi taghha bir riżq/Għaliex thobb tibla z-zalzett frisk,” *(ibid.)*, “… U tinkaram wisq għall-hjar / Għaliex tmut għal nebula tal-majjal...” *(ibid.)*

   2.1 “… she likes eating pastry sweets covered with honey [penises]/Because she offers [her] rounded buttocks”
   
   2.2 “… to give him many children because she guzzles on fresh sausages [enjoys sexual intercourse too much]”, “…And she is very fond of cucumbers / because she would die for a pig's penis…”

3. **Pregnant Women Pulling at the Plough** *(sexual intercourse implied)*

   3.1 “… tagħmillu patt / Illi f’dak iż-żmien illi tkun hebla. / Il-għarux ma jistax jahrat biha...” (p.9)

   3.1 “… she'll make him a condition / that during her pregnancy / he cannot use her at the ploughshare ...”

4. **Disrespect to Pregnant Women**

   4.1 “… f’dak iż-żmien illi tkun hebla/Ma jistax isuqha biex il-għarux jista' jitia' fuqha.” (p.9)

   4.1 “… During pregnancy / He cannot drive her or ride on her back”

**Negative Comments on Men**

1. debauchery: “nebula tal-majjal” (p.9)

2. excessive sexual pleasures in marriage with family running into dismal

   1. “a pig's penis”
   
   2. “... she gives him this mattress / for sexual intercourse and to enjoy sexual
poverty: “... dana 1-mitra taghtihulu / Biex fuqu jifra u jitterah. / U biex igibilha f’dan il-ghe’ra [...]” (p. 8)

3. immature adults: “... Ghadu ma nfatamx mill-bizzula” (p.14)

4. dirty arse: “... F’sormu ghandu l-ghanqbut” (p.1)

4. “... He has cobwebs in his arse [a venereal disease / haemorrhoids] ...”

5. swearing habit: “Ma jehilx f’xi hajt [...] 1-iswed / U jidghi jista[?]...” (p.4)

5. “May he penetrate a black wall [...] / And he can [...] swear ...”

6. indebtedness (pp.5,11)

7. publicly punished by lashing (p.14)

Umberto Eco’s remarks are more than appropriate here: the comic effect is realized when a rule is violated by “an ignoble, inferior, and repulsive ... character ... [We feel] superior to his misbehaviour and to his sorrow for having broken the rule [but we] in some way welcome the violation; we are, so to speak, revenged by the comic character who has challenged the repressive power of the rule.”

Il-Qarinża

This mock-death-and-life drama is more than just a perfunctory piece of ritual that precedes the collection of a reward (e.g., food, drink, and money) for the performance. It is partly a rite of seasonal passage, part of year cycle festivals, emphasizing death and the darker side of life and resurrection reflecting the transition from the old to the New Year. A graphically dramatized death takes place in this improvised play where mime is a prominent characteristic.

An old burlesque game still exists in Malta, a remnant of its ancient inhabitants and the ancient [...] scenes, for the last day of the year, eve of the New Year, or the Feast of Goddess Strena, known as collurella in Calabria. It was an ancient custom of those Gentiles who celebrated this day by dusting the main doorstep of each house and dwelling with quicklime. This use of lime would continue from year to year by private individuals, nearly always a stranger, and takes place on the last night of the year by those who make up this act in the following way. A group of idle but good-humoured fellows, some with rustic musical instruments, others are responsible for leading a man who feigns dead and lies prostrate on the ground, which “corpse” after much playing and singing, the leader of the company lifts up the arm of the supposed corpse and makes as if to give it to Titius; he takes the leg and gives it to Sempronius, and other parts of the body to others. This scene takes place inside the home of friends for their amusement, and from whom they always get something good to eat and drink, this last night while they visit households and walk around the villages, but not in towns of Malta.

In the last decade of the 18th century Maltese lexicographer and grammarian Mikiel Anton Vassalli gives further details on the dramatic, improvisatory and abusive aspects
This kind of serenade or night time concert is common in many villages of Malta on New Year's Eve, but nowadays it is rarely seen. This consisted of a large troupe of commoners who late at night set off together singing in front of the house of well-off persons to wish them a Happy New Year and in their song they used to mention the good points of the family and their relatives; those who gave considerable gifts the troupe would praise to high heavens. However, those who gave them nothing would be shamed and abusively spoken of. For the former they would leave white lime on their doorstep as a sign of good wishes for the New Year; whereas, for the latter they would leave black dust or charcoal denoting bad luck and avarice. Families who had not been generous would check their front doors early in the morning to remove the charcoal, if there was any, so as not to attract attention. May be that these have stopped twenty years ago because of the disturbance these troupes used to cause.  

In his encyclopedic book Malta Cananea (1904) Annibale Preca records that the group of singers and players carried “two enormous puppets, dressed up as a male and a female, but presenting a grotesque aspect.” For me this folk drama associated with the end of the year celebrations is intriguing. It is difficult to imagine the meaning of time in the series of household-to-household visits. One of the Qarinża troupe, personifying the old year, pretended to be dead during the performance. His companions would turn to the prosperous household and ask for money, implying that through unconditional generosity, a new substitute would be found, personifying the New Year.

As the years rolled by, I would say by the first quarter of the twentieth century, the leader of the group played the comic part of a quack doctor, reflecting the presence of ambivalent feelings towards doctors in Maltese culture. Here is an out-and-out quack as evident from the nonsensical list of cures and absurd medical procedures. The drama is a visual joke. There is also mention of grotesque images representing a male and a female, substituting real persons taking part in olden times. The various small communities involved come to terms with their fear of the impending future by laughing at the play. It is a joint venture between performers and audience.

By the second quarter of the twentieth century, or so, this folk drama was relegated to folk ritual. Cassar-Pullicino, writing in 1976, recalls that

[i]n Gozo, up to some years ago, groups of street musicians went from house to house on the morning of the New Year and played popular pieces until they received some money as a gift. In 1941 I saw lime being sprinkled on the floor of the Valletta Market stalls on New Year's Eve and up to 1939 it was customary at Luqa for the village sexton to throw some lime on the doorstep of the villagers' houses before daybreak. Professor J. Aquilina quotes the late Mr A. Cremona as telling him that he remembered how, when he was still a boy, a man called Is- Sultan used to carry a sack of lime which he smeared on the thresholds of the houses in Rabat, Gozo, while he asked for some goodwill offer on the occasion of the New Year. The Sultan used to start his round early in the morning. Aquilina comments as follows on the whitewashing: 'The white
colour of the lime is pleasant to the eyes; it suggests happiness and joy to come.\textsuperscript{33}

The \textit{Qarinža} people intrude upon the privacy of others with their knock on the door and entrance. The throwing of the lime is an allegoric motif of prosperity. Their visit is the harbinger of good luck and the quête is the celebration of the community that has shared in the birth of the New Year. Food and drink are more than a simple matter of payment for the services rendered. They are also a ray of hope for challenging the mysterious future.

In recent times \textit{Qarinža} has verged on the personal and idiosyncratic. My informants\textsuperscript{34} have confirmed with me that this folk ritual was also popular in Marsa,\textsuperscript{35} and Floriana. Other informants from Żejtun, Hamrun, and Rabat- and Xewkija-Gozo recall the event.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Maltese}

1. L-\textit{għatba mbajda}
Bajjadhieiek is-Sultan;
Tih xi haġa karità.
Halli jitma’ ‘1 dawk it-tfal.
Flok tiġiġa tih Dunjjan.\textsuperscript{37}

1.1 Ġejna tal-Qarinža wara biebek,
Aghtina minn dak li ghandek;
Is-Sena t-Tajba u l-\textit{għatba mbajda!}
Bajjadhieiek is-Sultan,
Issa hu jrid xi haġa
Imur itiha ‘1 dawk it-tfal.\textsuperscript{38}

2. Qarinž! Qarinž! Qarinž!
Gejt nitolbok wara biebek!
Ara titfixkel fl-imnara.
Taghmeldisa’ habbiet hsara ...

3. ... Jien ... niftakru lil dak li jiġi jbajjad l-\textit{għetiebi. ... Il-Furjana ... Iz-zija kienet bil-hanut tal-hwejjeg u kien ghodni narah ... kellu barmil f’idu, hekk, minn dawk li jbajdu fiħ, pero kien ikun xott, il- ... il-ġir, jixhtilha hekk, fit fit-targa u kien jghidilha: “L-\textit{għatba mbajda u s-sena t-tajba!” ... Hi kienet ... ittiħ ... xi tlet soldi tal- ... tal-fidda jew xi sikspenz .... Ma nafx ... xi haġa żghira tal-fidda .... Fid-‘39 jew it-‘38 żgur, mhux izjed qabel.... Qabel il-gwerra, kont tifla .... Min hu. le, .... ma niftakarx. Naf li kien raġel twil, iriqiq, hekk ghadni narah il-komma daqsxejn

\textbf{English}

1. The threshold is whitewashed,
The \textit{Sultan} whitewashed it for you;
Give him something for charity,
So that he may feed his children
Instead of a hen give him a turkey.

1.1 We of the \textit{Qarinža} have come at your door,
Give us of what you have;
A Happy New Year and the threshold is whitewashed!
The \textit{Sultan} has whitewashed it for you,
Now he wants money
To give it to those children.

2. Here are the \textit{Qarinža} people;
I have come to ask for alms at your door!
Watch out lest you trip in the lamp,
And thus cause three farthings worth of damage.

3. ... I ... remember the man who used to whitewash doorsteps ... in Floriana ....
My aunt had a draper’s shop and I can still see him ... he had a bucket in his hand, like this, the sort they use for whitewashing but it used to be dry, the lime, he would throw it thus, a little on the doorstep and tell her: “The doorstep is whitewashed and a prosperous New Year.” She used to ... give him ... a silver threepence or sixpence .... I don’t know ... a little silver coin .... Not earlier than 1939 or 1938 .... Before the war, I was still a young girl Who he was, no, I can’t
imxammra, hekk sa nofs ... idu.... U anki 'l ommi, allavalja kienet ... ma ... mara armla u mezzanin żghir, kien jiġi u, miskina, dik sold kienet ittihi, hu ... ghax ma kinitx tista' taghtih ċiżed ... 40

4. ... Dik niftakarha fil-fifties ... Il-Marsa. Kellna wahda jisimha Gerit, kienet xiha u ... kienu jghidulha Tal-Loqqu, niftakar. Kienet tiġi bil-barmil filghodu, tibda minn filghodu kmieni ... bil-barmil tal-ġir u taghmel mq l-ghatiebi ... Kien hemm min idahlhalha tiehu xi grokk, pereżemppju ... Kienet toqghod Azzopardi Street, niftakar... Mill-Marsa kienet .... Ma naafx x'kienet tghid .... Ma niftakarx .... imma niftakarha bil-barmil f'idha u ... u .... u taghmel hekk fuq l- ghatiebi ... Lilha kellna ... kienet xiha mdahhla fiż-żmien .... Kienet tgeżwer ... tgeżwer xi ħaġa biex kienu ġhuha ...

5. ... Jiena niftakar lil missieri, missieri Ghawdxi mir-Rabat ... u kien jghid it-tqabbila...metajkun qed ibajjadek it-targa ... kien jghidha differenti ... naturalment kien jghidha bl-Ghawdxi.u.-Il- pa kien jghid ... emm ...:

   L-ghatba mbajda,
   Bajjadtieiek is-Sultan,
   Tih xi ħaġa karità,
   Halli ġimtanzi 'l dawk it-tfal.

... [Missieri] ilu mejjet tlettax-il sena u kieku ħadħu haj ħandu erbgħa u diżghin ... u ommi ... jiġiferi ... għadha ... għandha diżgha u tmenin ... u ... hekk tghidha .... Omniau Għawdxija ... Tifmaktarha bhala tiefla, ehe .... u r-Rabat-Ghawdex .... Emm ... missieri kien joqghod in-naha ... ta' ... 1-Oratorju, ta' Santu Wistin ... Ommi remember. I know he was a tall man, thin, I can still see him in my mind's eye, with his sleeve slightly rolled up like this, half way up his arm. And even my mother, although she was a widow and lived in a small maisonnette, he used to come but, poor woman, she could only give him a penny because she couldn't afford to give him more ...

4. I remember this in the fifties ... in Marsa. We knew an old woman called Gerit ... I remember she was nicknamed Tal-Loqqu. She was very old. She used to come in the morning carrying a bucket. She used to star early in the morning with the bucket of lime and put the lime on the doorsteps .... Some used to let her in for a drink for example .... She used to live in Azzopardi Street, I remember ... she was from Marsa ... I don't know what she used to say .... I don't remember ... but I remember her holding the bucket in her hand and ... doing thus on the doorsteps .... We had her ... she was very old .... She used to mumble ... mumble something to ask for charity...

5. I remember my father, my father is a Gozitan from Rabat... and he used to say this rhyme … whilst he [the Qarinha man] used to whitewash your doorstep ... he used to recite it differently ... naturally he used to say it in the Gozitan dialect, and ... father used to say ... em ...:

   The threshold is whitewashed,
   The Sultan whitewashed it for you;
   Give him something for charity,
   So that he supports those children.

...My father has been dead for thirteen years and if he were still alive he would be 94 years old - and my mother - that is - is still alive - and she is 89 ... and ... she remembers it as a child, yes ... and in Kabat-Gozo ...

emmm ... my father used to live in the area ... of ... the Oratory of St Augustine .... My mother is Maltese
minn hawn, minn Birkirkara .... from Birkirkara .... Her mother is
Ommha Ghawdxija u ... jiżifi ċeri 1-
istess bhal missieri tghidha ... mir-
Rabat ukoll .. .

To conclude, Qarċilla and Qarinża are folk drama because, as Tillis remarks, “folk
drama is theatrical performance, within a frame of make-believe action shared by
performers and audience, that is not fixed by authority but is based in living tradition
and displays greater or lesser variation in its repetition of this tradition; its performance,
enacted over time and space with practices of design, movement, speech, and/or music,
ingenders and/or enhances a sense of communal identity among those who participate
in its delivery and reception.”

Ironically it was only last February that a satirical float participated in the Valletta Carnival after having been dormant for forty years. One must
consider that symbolic inversion, deviations from and transgression of normal patterns
of behaviour, and double meaning, overturning of sexual taboos in a Carnivalesque
celebration are all prohibited by Maltese law and this more than two hundred and ninety
years after Demarco’s text.

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Notes

1 The author acknowledges the support offered to him by Mr Philip Borg, head of the Malta Public Library, Valletta. He is also indebted to historian Dr Frans Ciappara who worked for hours with him in an attempt to read through the original mss.


6 Guido Lanfranco, *Drawwiet u Tradizzjonijiet Maltin* [Maltese Customs and Traditions], Malta, 2001, p. 207, confirms the existence of this folk drama, but does not specify locality: “Kienu jimitaw xi tabib qed idewwi, xi avukat jiddefendi Jew jakkuża lil xi hadd, xi mara Jew ragel jiggieldu bil-kliem, jimitaw xi karattru maghruf til-post, Jew jilbsu ta’ xi haga li hadd ma jaf x’kienet. Dan kollu minbarra li kienu jqoghdhu jissuttaw b’kulma jisbu taht idejhom. Hafna kienu jhhorgu jdoqqu ż-żaqq u t-tanbur biex ikomplu jallegraw il-festa.” [Trans. “They used to play the role of a doctor curing a patient or a lawyer defending a client or accusing an opponent, a man and woman parrying words, imitating some prominent local person, or putting on some unrecognisable garb. Besides, they used to pelt onlookers with whatever came to hand. Many folk musicians would play the [Maltese] bagpipe and drum to further enliven the atmosphere.”]

7 Cremona, op. cit., pp. 68-69.

8 In his definition of the concept of framing, Tillis, *op. cit.*, p. 85 remarks: “… the dramatic frame itself. in its broadest sense, is predicated simply on the establishment of a sense of otherness for the performance, of an elsewhere and an elsewhen.” Theoretically he also separates “the framed drama (the action) from the framing of the drama (the communicated and accepted agreement to make-believe).” *Op. cit.*, p. 84.

9 See n. 11, below.


11 Agius de Soldanis, G. F., *Damma tal Kliem Kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal Maltin u Ghaucin maghmhula mel Kanoniku Gianfrangesku Agius Sultana Ghauci*, R.M.L., ms. 143a, p. 287 r-v: “Giuoco di gente contadina che usasi in [Tamevalle, ed è figura di un altro scenico degli antichi Gentili ... Si forma una sposa di pasta dell'altezza di tre o quattro palmi in circa, ben omata e vestita. Vi si pone dentro un cestello, il quale viene posto sul capo d'un mascherato con in mano una grande collura o cerchio di pasta pura; costui viene accompagnato da un popolaccio, tra questi chi suona, chi balla, chi canta, quindi dopo un gran giro fatto per le pubbliche vie, si ferma ne' cantoni delle stesse strade e chi la fa da notai leggendo un giocoso ed inventive atto matrimoniale a favore della sposa ivi collocata di pasta a vista di tutti formato in rima maltese, burlesco e ridicolo, e chi prende altro giocoso uffizio, dopo vari giri, molte cicalate camivalesche, si mangia la stessa sposa di pasta, indi ubbriacati col vino, si da fine al giuoco della Karcilla.”


14 Id., “Two Ancient Maltese Customs,” p. 303.

Irrid ng 1617 John, their patron, and the centenary of the Great Siege. Every time it was an occasion for celebrations, the knights could afford to pay the expenses incurred by feasts which they celebrated since they first set foot in the Maltese islands. They were ostentatious and able organizers of such celebrations, not missing any opportunity for such feasts - the election of the Grand Master, taking possession of the keys of Mdina, the birth of a child to the French king, the feast of St John, their patron, and the centenary of the Great Siege. Every time it was an occasion for celebrations, decorations, fireworks, and illuminations.

See, Cassar-Pullicino, *Il-Maċika fil-Knejjes Taghna Music in Our Churches*, Malta, ?, vol. 3, p. 238: “Il-Banda ... fil-proċessjoni bdiet fis-sena ... 1777, bl-impenn tal-Gran Masta De Rohan, allurmeta pprọgetta u ordna illi 1-festi tal-knejjes ghandhom isiru bl-akbar pompa tant gewwa kemm barra, sabiex il-poplu jallegra ruhu u jkollu flex jedha u hekk ma jqoghdix jippilla u jehodha mal-Gvem u ma' 1-impjejji tieghu.” [Trans.: “Bands ... during processions began in 1777, Grand Master De Rohan taking it upon himself to order church feasts to be celebrated with great pomp internally and externally, to keep the people happy from alienated picking from the Government and its employees.”]

See, Cassar-Pullicino, *Il-Folklore Maltese*, ibid.: “Fl-1752 il-Konti Ciantar isemmi li ghall-festa ta' San Lawrenz [il-Birgu] kienu ngħabru hafna nefj 1-imhażen ta' Pinto, li kienu ghadhom kif testewx, biex jwaraw il-mixegha tal-faccata taghhom; u kien hemm daqq helu li baqa' sejjer il-felx kollu, waqt li l-ghonja u nies ohra resqu fuq id-dghajjes mal-moll biex jwaraw u jgawdu dik id-dehra sabih.” [Trans. “In 1752 Count Ciantar mentions that on the occasion of the feast of St Laurence [in Birgu] crowds of people gathered at Pinto Wharf which had just been completed to watch the illumination on the opposite side and there was sweet music throughout the night while the rich people and others were rowed to the opposite bank to watch and enjoy the beautiful scene.”]


According to Joseph Cassar-Pullicino, “Two Ancient Customs,” p. 303, Luigi Bonelli, who took to some fieldwork research in Malta in 1894, remarks in his “Il dialetto maltese,” *Archivio Glofołogico Italiano*, Torino, 1897, Dispensa IV, Vi, VII, VIII, “. . . il costume ... ècessato da una cinquantina d'anni, per divieto dell'autorità ecclesiastica.”

Cassar-Pullicino, *Studies in Maltese Folklore*, p. 50.

Cassar-Pullicino repeatedly and cursorily observes unreservedly: “... il-versi huma mimlija ċajt goff, u hafna minnhom mħumiex xierqà li jidhru stampati ...” [Trans.: ’... the lines are full of abusive words and most of them are not worthy of publication ....”]. See, Cassar-Pullicino, “Il-Qarċiella. Bejn Drawwa u


25 RML ms. 143D, f. 237, r.: “[il] notaio camevalesco legge 1’atto matrimoniale a favore della sposa ivi collocata a vista di tutti, formato in rima maltese, burlesco e ridicolo, che in più maniere gira per la mano di questi notai di Carnevale ...” (my emphasis) For other details on this ms., see, Cassar-Pullicino, “Il-Qarċilla. Bejn Drawwa u Drama f Malta,” p.101 n.3.


29 M Agius de Soldanis, ibid., ms. 143A, fol. 288r.: “Antico giuoco burlesco continuato in Malta, reliquia degli antici abitatori e delle antiche esrofane [sic] scene, fissato all’ultimo di dell’anno, vigilia del nuovo anno future, ossia della festività dello Dea Strena, in Calavria cosnoscio colla voce collurella. Fu costume antichissimo presso quei Gentili che festeggiavano questo gionio, di spargervi nell’esteriore scala di ogni casa ed abitazione della calcina vergine per significare colla sua candidezza prosperi e felici avvenimenti nell’anno entrante. Quest’uso delle caice continua da anno in anno da ogni persona anche privata, quasi sempre sconosciuta, e si butta all’ultima notte dell’anno, per lo piu da coloro che formano questo giuoco e del modo seguente. Un [sic] stuolo di uomini oziosi, ma di umor allegro, alcuni con strumenti contadini da suono, altri anno [sic] la cura di menare uno, il quale nell’atto si finge morto, prostrato in terra, quel cadavere, dopo aver molto sonato, giuocato, e parlato, il ceremoniere della brigata alza la mano del fmo morto e la destina a Titio, vi prende un pie’ lo regala a Sempronio, alter membre ad altri. Questa scena si fa in casa degli amici e per recare loro piacere, dai quali traggono sempre qualchecosa per mangiare e bere, dura la funzione per tutta la notte girando e camminando, cioè ne [sic] villaggi, e non nelle città di Malta.”

30 Vassalli, M. A. Ktyb yl KLym Malti. Lexicon Melitense-Latino-italum, Roma, 1796, pp. 406-407: “Questa specie di serenata o concerto nottumo solita a farsi in moiti paesi di Malta nell’ultima notte dell’anno vecchio entrando il nuovo, al presente raramente si vede. Ella consisteva in una gran compagnia di persone plebe unite insieme, che a notte avanzata andavano cantando innanzi le porte delle case di persone civili e commodi, alle quali auguravano buon capo d’anno, e narravano cantando le gesta e le azioni virtuose loro e del parentado; e chi gli dava ragguardevoli regali lo innalzava alle stelle; ma all’[sic] incontro svergognavano e raccontavano i fatti biasimevoli di quei che non regalavano. Ai primi poi si metteva sulla soglia della porta la caice Bianca ed il gesso in segno di buon anno, ove ai secondi si lasciava della polvere nera o carbone infranto per dinotare malanno ed avarizia. Le case per altro che non davano, facevano di buon mattino ricerca alia porta per levar il carbone, se mai ci fosse, e non farsi conoscere. Se da venti anni a questa parte non si fa più tal serenata a forse per dei disturbi che facevano nascere nei paesi tali comitive.”

31 Preca, A., Malta Cananea, Malta, 1904, p. 355.

32 See, Temi Zammit, “Mard, Duwa, Fejqan” [Diseases, Medicine and Recovery], Stejjer u Kitba Ohra [Stories and Other Writings], A. Cremona, ed., vol. 3, Malta, 1966, pp. 49-52. This short story, focusing on the sceptic feelings of the Maltese population towards doctors, was originally published in 1929.

33 Cassar-Pullicino, Studies in Maltese Folklore, p. 46.
This was also confirmed by one of Guido Lanfranco's informants in 1994 (op. cit., p. 168). *Drawwiet u Tradizzjonijiet Maltin* [Maltese Customs and Traditions], Malta. 2001, p. 168.

Ibid., pp.168, 170


39 Ibid., p. 41.


41 Maryanne Camilleri, 56 years old, Qormi, Malta.

42 Marija Buttigieg, Birkirkara, Malta.

43 Tillis, *op. cit.*., p. 140. (italics suppressed)