

Freedom and then what?

We took liberties with freedom and watched the rehearsals for Alfred Sant's last and never staged play

Freedom is a very specific nothing. It's also nothing very specific, a word that hermeneutically launched a thousand definitions but not one single meaning. Rather, it flocks together with other abstract ideas like movement and speech. It hides behind the Iron and Bamboo curtains and has lunch with the press and philosophy, with the latter attempting to define this particular abstraction using other abstractions: Heidegger using freedom as the language of purpose; Sartre spending a lifetime trying to configure freedom in the light of action, only to see Camus fell all with one single sentence - freedom is only an idea.

And like an idea, it will stay behind the showroom glass of our minds, yet suffer the extreme makeover of time. Indeed, such is the effect of time on freedom that if we were to go back 25 years, we wouldn't even recognise it. Which is where Alfred Sant's play *It-Tfal ta' Nikol Griscti* comes in handy.

Dr Sant's one-act play is the fifth and last in a series of plays written during the 1970s under the overall title of *Drammi għall-Kexxun*. It will be staged for the first time ever to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Freedom Day. Produced by Lorna Vassallo and directed by Joyce Grech, the play takes place on the day Malta ceased to be a military base of the British and brings together the Griscti family: the dying father, his two sons, their wives and his youngest daughter.

Nikol's presence is only suggested by a bedroom door left ajar on his suffering, while his character, never seen, is built upon by what the others say, or decline to say, about him. Stiefnu (Anthony Ellul), his eldest son, returns from Australia with his wife Rose. He's stubborn and scheming, perfectly aware of his capacity to influence

other people's decisions. He believes that the Maltese will gain nothing by untying their colonial knot. During the play he rebuts his wife's accusation that he's just like his father, but deep down knows that his business, like his father's, does not have a future beyond his.

While her husband slaves away at his business, Rose whiles away her time buying plastic flowers and escaping in her childhood memories. Representing those immigrants who never fitted in their new country, in the end she opts for a clean break and leaves with her new found freedom.

These characters, together with Gensu (Chris X. Grech), his wife Marija (Mariella Aquilina) and Nina (Isabelle Scicluna) are brought together and their relationships tested and consequently reshuffled against the play's two main events - Nikol's death and the birth of free nation.

It-Tfal ta' Nikol Griscti is an intense and tight character play caught in the anxiety that follows freedom. Indeed, as André Gide in *The Immoralist* wrote, "To know how to free oneself is nothing; the arduous thing is to know what to do with one's freedom."

Alfred Sant
author

It-Tfal ta' Nikol Griscti was written on the eve of March 29, 1979 to reflect on how Maltese colonial history had shaped the individual lives of people of my generation and what the future could bring. Some had left or had to leave the island over the years to find a livelihood elsewhere, or to live in personal freedom, away from the restraints of an island society.

Others had chosen to stay but then they still needed to define the kind of lifestyle they wanted for

themselves and their children. All had to face pressures resulting from the experience of long centuries spent by the Maltese in the shadow of foreign rulers, which had left among many of the older generations ingrained ways of doing things, of being cautious and of making money. Nikol Griscti is dying, while outside preparations are in full swing to celebrate the final departure of the British fleet.

Griscti amassed a fortune servicing the needs of military personnel and running stores which retailed household goods at very cheap prices to Maltese and British customers. In their different ways his three children rebelled against his authoritarian ways of doing things, but they have no certainty that what they now want to do is going to be any better than his approach. After all, Griscti did succeed in what he did while they have either been misfits, or needed to live abroad in order to do what they really wanted to do. It's time for ambiguities to be cleared or to be made more ambiguous...

On the play

Joyce Grech

director

Given that the play does not include any stage directions, I thought I would be quite free. On studying it for the umpteenth time, I started to discover that directions are hinted at and hidden within the text, which does not make me such a free director after all.

Mariella Aquilina

Marija

Marija is pregnant and suffering from constant mood swings, which take her from being the strongest link in her marriage to fearing that her pregnancy means submitting her freedom as an individual to the birth and death routine in which everyone is caught.

Chris X Grech

Gensu

Gensu's pro-British attitude is symbolised in his being an English teacher. He's subservient to any greater power, including his brother Stiefnu and his wife Marija. In fact, he can't take any decision and lets his wife Marija make up his mind for him.

Isabelle Scicluna

Nina

Nina is Nikol's youngest daughter, victim of an unhappy childhood where her mother died young and her father was always away working. She developed a laissez-fair attitude towards everything, but in the end, frees her true essence from beneath her disguises.

It-Tfal ta' Nikol Griscti is being staged in the theatre of the MLP headquarters on October 10. Bookings may be made from the headquarters or the Super 1 complex.