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Realm of the Puppeteer

Some are intelligent but not intelligent enough to realise it. Others are unintelligent but unintelligent enough not to realise it. This is the elixir that has always perpetuated man's existence, so much the bountiful on Maltese soil. It is also directly related to self-confidence, self-perception and megalomania. Usually, an unintelligent and ungraceful person suffering of acute megalomania is better off than an intelligent one suffering of aphonia. People's leaders, or at least those that are glorified and paid to lead, should be a talented faction rather than the lucky swarm.

Lately I got inspired by leafing through Plato's Great Dialogues in the Republic. Basing myself upon my constant observation of the local political mise-en-scene, I re-read the 2,400ish year-old text with renewed agnosticism. However, some phrases still come forth as a demonstration of the philosopher's strong percipience rather than outdated predications. I particularly liked the assertion that "...when a man succeeds in robbing the whole body of citizens and reducing them to slavery, they... call him happy and fortunate...".

Particularly relevant to politics, of course, remains Plato's idea of the perfect ruler - the Philosopher King. According to such philosopher the perfect ruler should be "quick to learn, noble, gracious, the friend of truth, justice, courage, temperance".

No matter how classicism and such extreme rightist theories should be ruled out today, we could still have our ideas of what the right people to make decisions on our behalf at the highest level could be like.

Are our decision makers quick to learn? Are they noble, gracious, the friend of truth, justice, courage and temperate? Or are they slow to comprehend the people, coarse, ungraceful, the friend of untruth, injustice, cowardice and overindulgence?

I went on to combine the Greek philosopher's ideas of the ruler/s of the res publica (rightfully meaning "things of the public") with the present administrators of our res publica. It is then that I found myself in puppet theatre!

I noticed quite a few static, speechless figures painted on the backdrop. They serve to make the stage look fuller, but you hardly ever hear of them.

Some anonymous consultants or entrepreneurs handle stick and sock puppets. They write out official speeches, fill official agendas and determine official decisions. The anonymous puppeteer is what we should be aware of in our adulthood. The puppet must follow the rules and be law-abiding.

The consultant/entrepreneur faceless puppeteers can break all the rules. Among other things they can afford not being citizens of Malta and might not have, during the 18 months preceding registration (for election purposes) been resident in Malta for six months. They might be holding public offices. They might also be party to or manage companies that have obtained a contract of works or for the supply of merchandise and they might not have published a notice setting out the nature of any such contract and their interest in it.

The puppeteers do curl up beneath the stage counting the coins at the end of each show.

The ventriloquists, on the other hand, tend to stick out their head and fool us all into thinking it's the puppet who's talking. They stand grimly behind the front-liner, tipping him sotto voce in mid-speech. They look jolly and wear a smile to hide their suggestive lip-movement. We hardly take heed of them and think of them as unimportant henchmen to important personae gratae. But our hectic stage is still not done. The marionettes act there too, as directed from above! Gigantic figures toss them round by means of invisible strings, leading us to believe that their stamping legs are proof of their independence.

Once in a while some shades overshadow the puppet world during instances of bright light. These are not only faceless but also bodiless. But their shadow does throw the other puppets out of vision no matter how present they might be on stage during such eclipse.

So, are there any real actors on stage after all? So difficult to make out who the real actors are. So many puppets - too many. Whether hard wooden ones or soft Muppets, there remains not much of a difference between our politicians and these sleazy, non-human bug-eyed creatures with human attributes.

Not only do our politicians lack freedom of movement nowadays. They also seem to be fitting in to some of the Muppets' characters too. The word that has developed a number of vulgar meanings since the creation of Jim Henson's Creature Shop has come to mean both an incompetent and inanimate person. We can even see them croaking phrases such as "It's not easy being green" like Kermit the Frog, growling and uttering semi-funny jokes and laughing senselessly like fellow news reporter Fozzie the Bear, complaining of the unappreciative audience such as the blue-furred coil-nosed Gonzo the Great, making long philosophical speeches to turn out an idiot at the end or praising cheap old-fashioned performers, throwing out the real ones like Sam the Eagle.

And as to us, we're pretty like Mr Waldorf and Statler, seemingly criticising the show but paying out of our own pockets to keep it going. This we do, little knowing that shows are done for audiences and audiences encourage the staging of more of them. Cryptic gangs scheme new shows with the main aim of channelling more of our money into their inflated bank accounts. We are mesmerised with their shows and believe that the puppets are acting for us, little suspecting they're acting for them.

In the same way as we became aware of the non-existence of Santa Claus in late childhood, at such a late stage of the legislature we should all be cognizant of the existence of domineering puppeteers. We should aim at putting our politicians more on the Plato track. And ... we might even have to change theatre in order to be able to do that.