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Iddi Dun Ġorġ: Queering Saint George Preca

Tyrone Grima and Christopher Vella

Abstract

This practice-as-research project explores the life and the writings of the only Maltese saint, Father George Preca, from a homoerotic perspective. By using hermeneutics of suspicion and hermeneutics of reclamation, the researchers of this project question and investigate the latent queer aspects of the spirituality of this saint, juxtaposing them against the wider context of queer Catholic spirituality. These insights gave birth to the writing of an original script in Maltese called *Iddi Dun Ġorġ* (Let Your Light Shine on Us, Father George). This paper analyses the theoretical framework that has influenced the artistic project. Among other things, it focuses on the writing of the script, as well as the feedback provided by a focus group which led to the development of the second draft.

Key words

queer spirituality, hermeneutics, scripting, Maltese history, theology

Father George Preca (1880–1962) is to date the only Maltese person to have been canonised by the Roman Catholic Church. This is particularly astounding, considering the influence and the relevance that the Catholic faith has had over centuries on the Maltese sociocultural landscape. This unique privileged position in the Maltese devotional circles, alongside the fact that Preca founded the Society of Christian Doctrine, a religious movement of lay persons whose mission is the formation of children and the youth in Catholic catechism, makes the saint a highly revered figure in Malta. Hence, it is with trepidation that we embarked on this artistic research project that attempts to rock the boat by exploring the queerness of the saint, or rather, by investigating his spirituality from a queer lens, albeit in a theatrical work of fiction. Yet such exploration is important: queer people have been excluded from religious institutions and their narratives have been silenced. This project allows the community to ‘reclaim, re-instate, and re-imagine their sensual, erotic dimensions [...] the more so since this has been so denied and demonized in the Christian tradition’ (KELLY 2019: 4).

Comfortingly, this is not the first transgressive attempt to queer Preca. Chetcuti (2009: 154), for instance, portrays him as ‘a self-deprecating and non-accepting gay man’ and ‘[h]is Society promoted a homosocial environment, creating a smoke-screen around Preca’s sexuality’. However, this is the first time that the reflections on Preca’s sexuality will be embodied in a theatrical production. This paper, though, only focuses on the first stage of this project: the development of a script. The starting point of the analysis of the construction of the theatrical narrative is the theoretical framework that influenced the journey. An analysis of the spirituality of the saint and his prolific writings is henceforth embedded in specific insights provided by queer theology and queer spirituality, to unpack the hidden (closeted?) layers of meaning, that in turn will enrich the creative process. The second half of the paper shows the application of these insights in the writing of the script, demonstrating how the feedback offered by a select focus group was pivotal to its development.

Before embarking any further, it is also important to juxtapose this paper against our positionalities as authors to better comprehend our contribution to the process. We are a bisexual married couple, involved in LGBTI activism, and practising Catholics. We both have been active in the Society of Christian Doctrine, although one of us, Chris, was a member for over twenty years, whereas Tyrone never became a member officially and left the Society before he turned eighteen. As a historian, Chris focused mostly on the context in which Father George lived, framing it against the queerness of the saint. Tyrone, besides being a theologian, is a theatre practitioner and researcher in the Performing Arts. He has a deep interest in the interface between queerness, spirituality, and theatre. His objective in this project was to pen an original artistic work, inspired by the queer dynamics in the spirituality of the saint. As the main author of the paper, Tyrone is using the first-person singular in the second part of the paper, unless referring to parts of the project where both of us engaged together.

Theoretical framework

Christianity has frequently relegated the sexual to the brutal forces of humankind in its history. The Christian religion has ‘manifested an unsettling aversion to sex, as if it were something dirty, illicit and which could potentially tarnish the human soul’ (VELLA 2024: 84). Jesus Christ, and consequently, most of the saints, have been presented as desexualised and de-eroticised beings (ALTHAUS-REID 2000: 114). Jordan (2003: 86) explains how the images of the crucified Christ do not seem to depict his genitals, and that ‘[t]he loincloth must cover a vacuum. Nothing under the loincloth [...] His loincloth is made to cover our eyes’. This prudish attitude reveals that ‘[w]e are afraid of how we might respond to a naked Saviour’ (JORDAN 2003: 87).

These negative portrayals of the sexual are not only problematic on a theological or intellectual level. They are often the causes of scars on the psyche of several individuals (KELLY 2019: 77). This becomes even more acute in the lives of queer people, who experience religion in a radically different manner from the rest of the heterosexual Christian population. Indeed, ‘[u]nlike straight youth, they have experienced most mainstream religion as something that condemns their deepest emotional and sexual desires, and often their very sense of self’ (KELLY 2019: 77). The Christian tradition does not offer the queer community any role modelling: there are no official narratives of spiritually mature queer persons who have embraced their orientation or identity. On the contrary, it tends to offer and promote (erroneously) sexual abstinence as a way forward to spiritual development (KELLY 2019: 189). This lack of visibility of integrated role models can produce an internal split for queer people, notably in their late youth (KELLY 2019: 133). The tension between wanting to lead a morally acceptable life, in accordance with the religious denomination that they adhere to, as opposed to their taboo desires, nested in their privacy, can be overwhelming and shameful (KELLY 2019: 111). The consequences of this tension can be devastating, often stalling the development of the person with deeply entrenched feelings of guilt and brokenness (KELLY 2019: 190). For a healthy progression, sex and sexuality need to be integrated with spirituality (KELLY 2019: 173).

Can the queer identity be reconciled with the Christian belief system? It is towards mysticism that we need to direct our attention to grapple with this question. Halperin (2007: 9) maintains that the language of Christian mysticism approximates the queer reality. Kelly (2019: ix-x, 27) sustains this perspective in stating that ‘the Christian mystical tradition has the capacity for profound renewal and that its wisdom can inspire and guide, while also being critiqued and enriched by, contemporary queer people’ and that mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux have used homoerotic language to capture the mystical phenomenon. The merging of the cataphatic and the apophatic approach in mysticism allows for this depth to resonate with the queer person. The apophatic approach emphasises surrender and emptying, aspects that queer people go through when rejected in society, whereas the cataphatic tradition is grounded and focuses on the encounter with the Divine through the material (including the physical) and the experiential (KELLY 2019: 33). The mysteries of the Christian faith are onto-

logically queer because they surpass, and transgress, manmade, socially constructed procedures (TONSTAD 2018: 32–33). This queerness reaches its zenith in the Pauline letter to the Galatians (3:28): ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’.

The crossing, and arguably defying, of boundaries in the Sacramental life also provokes reflection on a queer level, for the Sacraments are an encounter between the Divine and the human, whereby the spiritual is transmitted through the material. In Catholicism, this can be seen resoundingly in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. The penetrative act in the receiving of communion, when Christ enters the human body, makes it ‘intimate and [a] sacred moment [...] of lovemaking’ (GOSS 1999: 302). It is a deep-seated desire for Christ as a male person (or whichever way Christ is perceived). Kelly (2019: 225) relates how the gay men that he interviewed for his study on queer mysticism spoke about their sexual encounters by using Eucharistic terms. One of the interviewees also described how he felt Christ’s presence as he was making love to his partner, resulting in a mystical threesome (KELLY 2019: 145).

Furthermore, Catholicism, which by its very definition implies universality, celebrates the mystery of the one in the many. United in the singular body of Christ, the Catholic Church is composed of a myriad of realities (CHENG 2011: 108). In practice, however, the Roman Catholic Church fails its community in not honouring this principle, especially in relation to the queer population. The reason behind this denied connection with the queer community might be the underlying fear of the exposure of a secretive camp subculture in the priesthood. Since this subculture is not embraced and acknowledged, it can be harmful psychologically (JORDAN 2000: 186). The priestly vocation, on the contrary, should be akin to the process of coming out because he (and why should it only be a he?) testifies ‘God’s inclusive love, God’s creative diversity, spiritual-sexual integrity, and harmony among sexual orientation’ (GLASER 1998: 14–15).

Another means of merging theology with queerness, beyond the structures of organised religion, is art, since ‘queer images are used to reflect upon and speak back to queer lives’ (GREENOUGH 2020: 44). The contemporary increase in art that queers Christianity is due to the fact that ‘the conventional Jesus is no longer adequate’ (CHERRY 2007: 8). Storytelling, which is a basic component in the art of theatre, is a poignant tool in generating queer theologies, particularly if rooted in personal experiences. Greenough (2018: 26) explains that the relationality imbued in stories makes them empathic and transformative.

In this light, the stories of saints can be re-read to offer queer people the missing role models that they require in their spiritual development. These stories can facilitate the integration of the queer person’s sexuality and identity with spirituality in a holistic approach. Cheng (2011: 114, 118) maintains that ‘[f]rom the perspective of queer theology, saints can be understood as the *breaking of radical love*’ and that ‘these saints are witnesses to a love so radical that it is able to touch us through the normally impenetrable boundaries of time and space’. In essence, saints queer the fixed distinctions between the ordinary and the miraculous (CHENG 2011: 114). Although they

are ordinary human beings, they have reached profundity in their spiritual lives, at times even capable of performing heroic acts. Furthermore, their stories can be read erotically from a queer angle. An apposite example of this is Burrus' work on hagiographies, reinterpreting them to showcase erotic relationships that these saints might have been engaged in (CHENG 2011: 116). This makes them not only relatable, but more importantly, a beacon of hope for the queer person who wants to invest in the spiritual life.

The next section of the paper will investigate how this attitude of the Catholic Church towards sex and sexuality permeated the mentality of Saint George Preca since he was a product of his own times. Hence, his spirituality will be assessed against the developments of moral theology in Catholicism in the period in which he lived. After having delineated the context, the paper will proceed by elucidating the queer elements, that despite the social background, surface in the mysticism of the saint.

Saint George Preca in his historical context and writing

Saint George Preca lived from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries in what was then the British fortress colony of Malta. Internationally, and for the universal Catholic Church, these were turbulent times characterised by the Second and Third Industrial Revolution, two World Wars, Imperialism, Decolonisation, and the Cold War. For the Church, it was marked by the continuing tsunami of Modernity with potent political ideologies and new worldviews challenging the illusion of cultural 'hegemony' of Catholicism and Christianity in Europe, and the Church's 'under siege' (BOKENKOTTER 1990: 229) reaction lambasting all modernity. Gregory XVI's *Mirari Vos*, Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*, Pius X's condemnation of *Modernism* and Pius XII's condemnation of *Communism* are indicative of this approach that looked with scepticism and suspicion at the Modern world (JODOCK 2011: 1). The reaffirmation of papal supremacy and infallibility at Vatican Council I and the Church's close alignment with social-conservative (even imperialist) forces in society highlight an entrenched Church keen to assert the ultramontane *milieu* (MCGREEVY 2022: 111–215). There were also, however, opposite forces in the Church encouraging a more conciliatory and dialogic approach to modernity exemplified by Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* and the inspiring work of Jacques Maritain and the *Ressourcement* movement in the interwar period and right to the doors of Vatican Council II (MCGREEVY 2022: 216–244). Interestingly too, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, there was an intriguing wave of Catholic revivalism in worship and devotion in the grassroots that encouraged popular devotionism and pietism (HEIMANN 2006: 70–83).

The Church on the eve of Vatican Council II was 'dancing on the edge of the volcano' (SCHLOESSER 2014: 3), and *Dun Ġorġ* as he was affectionately known by the local population, was quite aware of this struggle, as was the Catholic Church in Malta. His approach was not at all revolutionary, and his content and style were hardly *Ressourcement* material. The topics he dealt with in his catechesis were the traditional ones that

all priests in his time used to deal with, mirroring the same concerns of the Church in Malta, that was more worried about the infiltration of Protestantism and anticlericalism than other subversive threats that were more common abroad (VELLA 2024: 89). He warned about Protestantism and Communism (VELLA 2001: 20, 37; VELLA 2011: 24), and his impetus to teach the local population was to create a working-class movement to counter the Socialist appeal and address the ignorance among the Maltese that made them easy prey to foreign and local proselytisers (BORG 2000: 76; VELLA 2011: 24–31). It is probably also no coincidence that one of his first writings that outlined the creation of a Corp of trained catechist-deacons was written in the same year that Pius X issued his all-out condemnation of Modernism and his clarion call for catechists (VELLA 2011: 25–27). While definitely not a revolutionary, Dun Ġorġ's decision to create the Society of Christian Doctrine, was decisively innovative, precisely because no one (in Malta at least)¹ had thought before of tapping into the dormant potential of lay people – who until then were expected to be mere passive spectators and devout followers of liturgy and prayer. Indeed, it was rather scandalous (maybe queer too in the modern sense) to trust the lofty study of theology to the *bifolchi* – the ignorant sons of the common masses! (SAMMUT 2001: 9).

In terms of his engagement with issues of sexuality and family life, his response reflected the worldview of the Church on these issues. Certainly, they were not 'favourite' topics of ecclesiastical discussion or catechesis for the Church of his time, and the epistemic shifts of the later 20th century in these areas were certainly a 'largely unexplored territory' (SCHLOESSER 2014: 5). A cursory evaluation of his corpus of writings reveal only a few sporadic references to sexuality in general – especially in the earlier years of his pastoral ministry. It is interesting to note that references to sexuality and family life become more evident in his writings in the 1940s and 1950s in the publication of the so-called *Karti Manwali* [Manual Papers]² issued regularly from the 1940s – at a time when local Church-directed publications on the same subject also started to emerge (VELLA 2024: 93).

The anecdotes about his life, however, highlight a certain ambiguity on his own sexual orientation. Although none of these anecdotes 'prove' anything about Preca's sexual orientation, and remain ultimately only suggestive, reading them from a queer modern lens can throw suspicion and consequently question potential dynamics of a latent sexual and erotic nature. Early in his childhood, he experienced a vision of a very handsome young British officer who apparently gave him a golden watch. Later in life, he would claim that this was the Archangel Michael, and the watch represented a model of constant prayer which he called *Arloġġ Museumin* [The Watch] that guided the members of his Society to recite a prayer every fifteen minutes (ANON 1979: 26; BONNICI 1980: 77–78). In the early days when he founded the Society, he also used to take a young member called Eugenio Borg for weekly walks under a carob tree

1 The idea was not entirely new in Europe where movements of lay people who were actively involved in apostolate were already present in France and Germany (AUBERT 1978: 133–138).

2 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Maltese are the authors'.

where he spent long hours instructing him in the faith (ANON 1979: 4). This almost exclusive attention was directed towards this one person who eventually became the first Superior General of the Society and his closest lay companion (BONNICI 1980: 128–129, 161, 163). Another priest was also said to be very close to him (BORG 2005: 7). Furthermore, his love of God and the expression of this love in his mystical writings was almost homoerotic, as evidenced in his striking word-portrait on Jesus in his seminal book *The Sanctuary of Christ's Spirit* (PRECA 1992: 100–101) and other writings such as the *Salm Vangeliku tas-Sirjaku* (PRECA 2007: 60–64), as well as his reference to Christ's sayings as 'the Voice of the Beloved' (ANON 1979: 9).

Yet, he was quick to warn people against exclusive expressions of love and called upon his members to express disinterested love towards all. He was also quick to warn against same-sex expressions of intimacy, alerting one youth who was lured by an older man, that this could lead to damnation (ANON 1979: 22–23; BORG 2021: 89–90). He wrote about ways to combat temptations of the flesh (PRECA 1997: 44–45; PRECA 1992: 71), cautioning against fornication (PRECA s.a.: 77–78), inordinate sensual pleasures, and urging the pursuance of chastity (PRECA 1999: 14–15, 40–41; BONNICI 1977: 121–123; BONNICI 1989: 53–55, 150–151). While he preached love and respect, his approach was particularly wary of the 'world', presenting an almost Jansenistic view of 'worldly pleasure'. In fact, he warned that God's spirit cherishes all that human nature despises (PRECA 1992: 80; PRECA 1998: 21). He was distrustful of the 'talkies': strongly recommending those who came to him for confession and spiritual direction to avoid watching films at the cinema (BONNICI 1977: 26) and instructed his members to avoid all forms of public entertainment and all forms of frivolous clothing (BORG 2021: 240–241). His members, in fact, refrained from smoking, kept short haircuts (which made them seem like prisoners), and wore jackets and long trousers even in summer – that made them seem strange even to contemporary people (BONNICI 1981: 211–214, 216; BORG 2021: 168–169). Although the members of his Society evangelised through their presence in the world of work and in the teaching of catechism to children and youth, they practically lived a life of *clausura* through a rigorous form of detachment, with the obligation to live celibacy, and with the added direction to avoid all forms of familiarity beyond their immediate family (BONNICI 1981: 77, 79–81, 209, 211), reflecting Christ's 'You are in the world but not of the world' Johannine dictum.

It is worth noting too that dealing with the reality of the human person as a sexual being was entirely unheard of in the priestly formation of Preca's time. Not surprisingly, studies on sexuality as part of the regular ongoing formation of his *soġġi* (members) were only introduced a decade or more after his death, while the male and female branches of his Society kept a strict separation for most of the 20th century. The relational was expressed as a love for others that was completely desexualised and bereft of outward emotional intimacy, which Dun Ġorġ expressed as an agape-type form of 'disinterested love towards all'. In this way, in a sense, Dun Ġorġ 'queered' his contemporary society through his own eccentric behaviour (in the early days, for example, he used to kiss the feet of men he met on the streets) (BORG 2021: 21–22), and the queer

appearance and behaviour of his own disciples, which challenged contemporary social norms and distinguished him from other priests of his generation. Would that necessarily make him queer though? His complete obedience to his superiors and his firm support for religious convention point him towards ambiguity at best in this regard.

Methodology

These insights served as a source of inspiration to interpret and to frame the homoeroticism in the writings of Saint George Preca within the fictitious context of the narrative of the play. The main tools that were used, and that led to the final creative product, were the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of restoration. Kelly (2019: 88) advocates these hermeneutics on the grounds that the queer community ‘experienced firsthand the oppressive impact of a distorted, literalized sacred figurative language that has been shaped by, and that remains complicit in, systems of domination’. In this process, the writings of the saint are critiqued suspiciously to allow the queer and erotic subtext to emerge more strongly and vividly. The devotional symbology in the religious language, frequently depicted and conveyed in a heteronormative manner, is questioned and stripped away. The original oppressive text is thus deconstructed. This results in a vacuum, which is then addressed through the hermeneutics of restoration: the possibility of latent queerness in the narrative is unearthed or recreated, reclaiming the narrative in language that now becomes relevant to the community. The resulting new version is not only fresher, but undoubtedly more meaningful to the community. The hermeneutics of restoration permit the sacred texts and symbols ‘to be redolent with meaning once again – not as expressions of prepositions or blunt facts but rather in their capacity to hold and convey multiple meanings; to point beyond themselves; and to evoke wonder, mystery, and new possibilities’ (KELLY 2019: 88).

In the case of Preca’s writings, the hermeneutics of suspicion helped in unpacking his mystical visions. Beneath the devotional language, deployed excessively and intensely, lie expressions of homoerotic desire. For example, he relates his reminiscence of his encounter with the Archangel Micheal by using adjectives generally referred to in depicting handsome men. He describes him as ‘a young tall man and of unparalleled beauty’ (ANON 1979: 26). The same inference could be drawn from his eulogy of the Body of Christ, where he praises each body part in association with a virtue, stating that ‘All of your body parts, oh Jesus, are an object of adoration for us’ (PRECA 2007: 60). The hermeneutics of suspicion pose the question of whether potentially Preca was projecting any suppressed homosexual desires onto his mystical visions. As stated earlier on, this does not prove, or disprove, anything about Preca’s sexuality, but it does create a space where the queer person can re-imagine possibilities. Through the hermeneutics of restoration, the repressed and oppressive figure of George Preca, traditionally presented as a person who condemned non-normative sex and infused a culture of celibacy and abstinence, is transformed into a person who had sexual

attractions, which he expressed poetically through his writings. These hermeneutics bypass the more conservative aspects of his spirituality and bring to the forth queer elements that can generate a dialogic relationship and conversation with the queer community.

This hermeneutical approach in the writing of the script was also embedded in the classical model of spiritual development. The play was divided into four scenes, representing the four stages of spiritual growth: the awakening; the process of detachment; the stage of illumination; and the unitive stage. These four stages were presented in a manner that reflected the intimate interface between the coming out process and the deepening of the relationship with the Divine.

The first draft of the script was tested out in a public reading. A focus group of nine persons was invited to provide their feedback. The group was composed of a balance between practising Catholics and non-religious persons, as well as a balance between group members who identified as male, and others who identified as female. There was also a mixture of DSG (Diverse Sexualities and Genders) activists, and theatre practitioners. The practitioners were professional actors, directors, and producers, with several years of experience in the industry locally and abroad. The DASARTS methodology was used to gather the feedback. The objective of this methodology is 'to empower the artist who is getting feedback on his or her work, to go beyond the pronouncement of judgments, to allow fundamental criticism, to create a sense of (self-) discipline for the sake of precision and clarity, and last but not least, to increase the enjoyment of giving and receiving feedback' (AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS s.a.).

The focus group members were asked to share what worked in the script, and what they needed more of. In a constructive manner, this facilitates the process for the playwright to understand better the dynamics of the play that resonate, and to identify areas that require further depth, modification or total restructuring.

The next section will analyse the first draft of the play, showing how the hermeneutics of suspicion and restoration inspired the creation of the script. In the latter part of the section, I will discuss how the focus group led to substantial changes in the second draft.

The artistic product

Iddi Dun Ġorġ (Let Your Light Shine on Us, Father George) is a monodrama, with comic moments. The intention is to stage this play in one of the professional intimate theatres in Malta's capital city, Valletta, which is the cultural and artistic hub of the country. The theatre scene in Malta, unfortunately, is a small scene, attended mostly by persons of a more liberal frame of mind. Statistics indicate that performances are only shown on average twice in Malta in theatres whose capacities range from 100 to 1,000 seats (CREMONA 2019).

In this monodrama, I decided to have only one character on stage in order to focus on his process of integrating sexuality with spirituality. The other characters

are never seen. Their purpose is to serve as a vehicle for the protagonist's issues to be exposed, and although they are not meant to be two-dimensional figures or archetypes, the focus undoubtedly should be on the protagonist exclusively. This can create constraints that require lateral thinking in the construction of the script: (a) how can the exchange with the other characters be presented in varied and creative manners?; (b) how can the reactions of the other characters be mouthed by the protagonist without sounding superfluous or coerced? The first hurdle was easier to overcome. To offer respite to the actor, as well as to the audience, I introduced in the script a few sequences in which there was a phone call or a radio announcement. In these situations, the other is heard, but never seen, leaving the visual focus on the protagonist. The other difficulty was harder to address. In creating dialogues between the protagonist and the other characters where only the central character is speaking, I included details and reactions which the audience might have already realised were happening, but which needed to be included to justify the presence of the 'invisible' other.

Scene 1: The awakening

The first draft of the play introduces a thirty-three-year-old man, who was a former member of the Society of Christian Doctrine and now works as a sexton in a chapel dedicated to Saint George Preca. The community he lives in is preparing a religious procession to escort the statue of Saint George from the chapel to a garage where an artist will restore the statue to its former glory. Viktor is a very judgemental and bitter person who is harsh on people who are not in conformity with the teachings of the Catholic Church. He constantly and passionately recites the prayers and quotes from the writings of Saint George Preca, without realising how erotic they sound, and has an aversion towards the cinema or any other form of public entertainment. His accentuation of the erotic references generates suspicion of his latent and suppressed sexuality. This mirrors the suspicion of the suppressed sexuality in the writings of Saint George Preca.

Scene 2: The process of detachment

When Viktor opens the glass case where the statue is kept, a transformation occurs in which Viktor becomes the statue, and the statue becomes human. The now 'human' Father George Preca is an old man, fully in touch with his sexual desires, prowling for sexual encounters. In vain, Viktor appeals to the villagers who come to the sacristy to pray in front of the statue. They cannot hear him because his voice is enclosed in the statue. The frustrated Viktor is escorted to the garage for restoration. In the process, he is touched by the artist, a hunk who oozes sexual libido. Undoubtedly, this section of the play subverts the traditional figure of George Preca, who promoted

deprivation from any form of physical or affective contact, and projects onto the protagonist Preca's hypothetical closeted sexuality, represented by the entrapment in the statue.

Scene 3: The stage of illumination

Although initially resistant, Viktor succumbs to his deeply locked up fantasies to be touched by a man, and the enjoyment of such an experience retransforms him into a human being, this time aware of his sexuality. The terrified artist flees, and Viktor confronts George, asking him to swap places again, since the objective of the transformation has been reached. George is initially unwilling and encourages Viktor to loosen up and be more sexually experimental. Preca also celebrates pleasure, be it sexual or social, such as the watching of films at the cinema. He also discloses more information about his friendship with Eugenio Borg. The hermeneutics of restoration are applied in creating a scenario whereby this friendship between the two men is reimaged erotically.

Scene 4: The unitive stage

Despite George's disclosure, Viktor is not ready to integrate the sexual with the spiritual. He needs George to be the statue, locked up in the glass case to safeguard and sustain his devotionality, and not make him depart from his comfort zone. A physical struggle arises, leading Viktor to lock the statue back up in its niche. Back in the sacristy, Viktor is visited by the artist, who is still under shock. Viktor's attempts to clarify what happened are counteractive: the artist faints as he becomes conscious of the supernatural episode he was involved in. Viktor does not know what to do next, but as he is trying to figure out this new chapter in his life, he is serene enough to lie down on the floor and hug the artist. The ending provides the spectator with multiple possibilities. By reclaiming the image of Saint George Preca through the hermeneutics of restoration, viewers can engage further and determine how they would like the narrative to proceed. Their image of Preca, and by extension of his spirituality manifested in the Society of Christian Doctrine, has been deconstructed, allowing for a fresh reading which encompasses in it the sexual.

Feedback by the focus group

The members of the focus group appreciated the challenges inherent in the writing of a monodrama. However, they remarked on the excessive exposition in the dialogues with the 'invisible' characters which impinged on the pacing of the play. Their recommendation was to trust in the intelligence of the audience and reduce, or possibly

eliminate totally, any form of exposition, particularly in the middle section of the script where there was a noticeable dip.

One of the female focus group members insisted that the only woman referred to in the play – Gwen, the woman who Viktor judges for living in sin with his brother – needed more development to ensure that the female voice is represented too in this piece dominated by males. Most of the focus group disagreed, on the premise that the other characters were there to support Viktor in his process, and not on their own merits.

The theatre practitioners in the focus group encouraged me to extend the surreal factor in the play. Influenced by Woody Allen's film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), the idea of crossing a medium fascinated me and opened a plethora of possibilities. Whereas in Allen's masterpiece, the screen character becomes a real-life person, and eventually takes the protagonist with him into the movie, in this play the statue and the protagonist swap realities. The magic of this surreal element was appreciated by the focus group who believed that this could have been exploited to provide more surreal situations in the play.

The use of language was also appreciated by the focus group, commenting on how realistic it sounded. However, a focus group member suggested introducing more phrases that are typical of the members of the Society, such as *Peace be with you*, the greeting phrase used when encountering someone, and *Verbum Dei Caro Factum Est* (The word of God was made flesh), which is the inscription engraved on the badges that the members of the Society wear.

The focus group appreciated the humour in the play. Viktor is entrapped in his own illusion before he commences his spiritual journey, and this disconnection from his own feelings and sexual desires, makes him larger than life. In the first draft, though, his reaction to the discovery of sex, makes him a lustful and pathetic person, and consequently, unrelatable. Too many things happen to him, and he goes through too many changes in the journey within a restricted amount of time. He denies his sexuality; is disgusted at sexual acts which he regards as lewd and perverse; experiences carnal pleasure; falls in love; and comes out of the closet. All this in twenty-four hours! The group recommended tightening the focal point. This would allow a smoother and more credible development arc which the audience could connect with, and which would allow the required humour at the beginning of the piece to seamlessly transform into a deep-rooted struggle. This would also create a framework to portray a wider canvas of emotions. By curtailing the 'events', the emphasis would fall on the contrasting emotions of the character.

One of the theatre practitioners expressed the view that the piece did not offer anything new. According to him, this is the story of a gay man who does not want to accept his sexual orientation because of his religious upbringing, a theme explored and done to death. He suggested that the play required a *coup de théâtre* which would surprise the spectators. Although this subject has been portrayed in the arts on an international level, I believe that in Malta it is still a very relevant subject that has hardly been presented specifically in an original piece in the Maltese language in

the theatre. The religious identity still matters in Malta: the latest census conducted reveals that 83% of the population still considers itself as Roman Catholic (BORG 2023). In fact, most of the other group members did not agree on the importance of introducing a 'surprise' element because their curiosity lay in discovering and learning more about the inner struggle of the protagonist. They encouraged me to develop in more depth the struggle that torments a gay Catholic man in his process of integration between two significant polarities that can seem to be, and often are experienced as conflicting.

An interesting and polarising discussion that ensued in the focus group was on the sexualisation in the script. Whereas the DSG activists claimed that the sexual scenes were appropriate and pertinent, the focus group members who leaned towards a more conservative approach felt that these scenes were too graphic and could have been tamed down or could have explored instead other non-sexual aspects of the queer life. One member was concerned that the piece did not give importance to forming strong and healthy relationships, and that it might be upholding the image of the Catholic Church as a space where closeted gay men can comfortably hide and avoid being true to themselves.

These suggestions gave birth to the second draft of the script. After discerning the feedback offered, I decided that the sexual part was important in the play, and contrary to the desire of some group members, increased it, even though there were sexual sequences in the first version which were edited out in the second version, such as a sadomasochistic scene between Viktor and Father George. An important modification that occurred was in the characterisation of Father George Preca, and his attitude towards sex. This impacted on Viktor's emotional voyage. Whereas in the first version, Father George was depicted as a predator whose thirst for sexual encounters is unquenchable, in this version, he is a more balanced person, in touch with his sexual desires, and endorsing sexual liberation. From a grotesque personage, he was changed into a character full of wisdom who offers insights to Viktor.

A surreal element that was elaborated upon in the second version of the script is the inclusion of the two other religious images in the sacristy: the statue of Saint Michael the Archangel, and the icon of Christ. These images were chosen because they feature significantly in the biography and mystical writings of the saint and contain strong homoerotic undertones. In the second version, these statues also come to life, and in several moments of the script, physically move around, interacting with Viktor.

Although I did not feel strongly on the necessity of adding a 'surprise' element to the play, since this should not be a piece dependent on twists to engage spectators, nonetheless, I included a mysterious element in the second version of the script that accentuated sexual fantasies even more. Before the swapping sequence, a courier knocks at the door, leaving sealed boxes at the sacristy. These boxes are referred to periodically until in the second half of the play, it is discovered that they contain ritualistic paraphernalia, similar to the ones used in the Maundy Thursday liturgy celebrated by members of the Society of Christian Doctrine. Viktor, trapped in the statue, cannot stop a sex scene between two men set against this liturgical background.

The psychological struggle was also given more importance in the second version. After experiencing carnal contact, Viktor is split between the sense of fulfilment, even on a mystical plane, as opposed to the oppressive teachings of the Church that still deprive him from being authentic to his feelings. Despite Father George's support, Viktor still pendulates from one polarity to the other in his attempt to open Pandora's box and unpack constructs that have shaped him throughout his entire life. Viktor's limited, and still premature, engagement does not allow him yet to integrate these two important aspects of his life. This is a journey that takes months, and frequently years for most people. However, the audience is left with a sense of hope and possibility that eventually Viktor will mature in this journey.

In the second version of the script, I also introduced another female character which not only allowed me to develop the female voice further, but also to address another concern of one of the focus group members, who commented that none of the characters were in line with orthodox Catholic teaching. This group member felt that to be more representational, the script should include a more 'balanced' Catholic person, who is not too liberal but neither too orthodox. I introduced the character of Superior Hilda. (The term 'Superior' is used by the Society of Christian Doctrine to denote the appointed person who runs the house where the Doctrine classes are held.) She is an announcer who presents programmes of a religious and spiritual nature on the community radio. Despite her strong and authentic commitment to Catholicism, she is the person, together with the other female character, Gwen, who at the end of the play recommends the way forward to Viktor, by telling him that all that matters is love, and the rest will eventually fall in place.

Conclusion

In summary, this research project highlights the following insights:

1. The Maltese theatrical context still requires works of a queer nature, written in the national language and that speak clearly to its audience about realities that it can relate with. Despite the number of examples of queer characters featuring in plays staged in Malta, the country still does not have a tradition or a legacy of queer performance (GRIMA 2024: 110).
2. Even though the last ten years have witnessed a growth in secularisation in the country, and a political change of landscape as a result of the implementation of liberal and progressive laws in relation to gender expression and sexual orientations (LEĠISLAZZJONI MALTA 2015, 2017), religion still remains important. However, local theatre has hardly ventured into exploring the interface between Catholic spirituality and queer spirituality. This research project, and the script that emerged from it, shed light on this interface by showing that the struggle to integrate sexuality and spirituality can still be challenging in Malta. The struggle

is an important aspect in the journey of integration and needs to be featured in a play that queers a religious figure.

3. The spirituality of Saint George Preca has homoerotic aspects in it. Furthermore, his friendship with the first Superior of the Society of Christian Doctrine, Eugenio Borg, can be interpreted from a queer perspective. The feedback from the focus group enabled me to develop the character of George Preca in the play as less of an oversexed and indulgent person (which, of course, he was not) to a person who attains liberation when he recognises the sexual in him (something which he could not do in his lifetime but was given the space to do in this play). By recognising the homoerotic in the writings and the life of Saint George Preca, the contemporary gay Maltese man can find a way forward to integrate his Catholic identity with his orientation. However, the nuances of this insight need to be examined further lest it might be read in a reductionist or idyllic manner. There is the risk of retrospective projection. The contemporary person can transfer onto Saint George Preca his needs and desires, morphing this historical figure into what he was not. Preca can never be a perfect role model: his admonitions against non-normative sexuality, albeit distinctive of the period in which he lived, cannot be cancelled or erased. However, the re-imagining of the saint can use the potential queer elements in his writings and life to reinterpret him queerly and subsequently to form a connection with the contemporary gay person.
4. Surrealism and symbolism are pertinent and powerful aspects that can be used to convey meaning and significance. The play merged in a surreal manner Catholic liturgical and religious symbols, such as the niche, the village procession, and the religious rituals, with the sexual awakening of the protagonist to demonstrate through the theatrical medium how these two seemingly dialectical polarities can be bridged. Indeed, symbolism and surrealism are important 'tools' that can be used to mitigate the controversy that such a subject entails. Theatre deploys metaphors to communicate with its spectators on various levels. Whilst retaining the human element in queering a religious personage was fundamental, the symbolic levels made it easier to delve into the queerness which might have been excessively irreverent for some Maltese spectators if presented in a raw and blatant manner. Although theatre in Malta is frequented by liberal-minded persons, the figure of Saint George Preca can attract more conventionally religious people. Our aim in this project was to create a space of reflection which is challenging without being offensive or distasteful.

These insights also demonstrate how urgent and germane the staging of this play is in the current context of the national creative ecology, as well as in the sociopolitical landscape. Although the first phase of this research project terminates here, as researchers we believe that the subsequent limbo period will offer a valuable time to secure a strong infrastructure to be able to produce the play. It will also provide a space to reflect further and to enrich this process as it moves forward to its next chapter, in its attempt to generate a much-needed conversation on the historically religious figure

of Saint George Preca from a queer lens in order to highlight the aspects of his spirituality that reverberate with the local queer community.

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