



## FOR JOURNAL AUTHORS

Post Publication

CONTACT:  
Journals Staff  
journals@psu.edu

820 N. University Drive  
USB 1, Suite C  
University Park, PA 16802  
[www.psupress.org](http://www.psupress.org)

### Permissions and Reuse

The Pennsylvania State University Press has a liberal author reuse policy. You are free to post your published manuscript on your personal website, in your university's repository, and in other nonprofit or governmental open access repositories without requesting permission. This grant of permission, however, does not include sites such as Academia (academia.edu) or ResearchGate (researchgate.net), which are commercial websites. With written request and permission, you can reuse your article in your forthcoming publications at no charge. PSU Press encourages authors to refrain from reuse until one year after publication. All permission requests should be submitted through our [online permission request form](#).

### Hard Copies and Subscriptions

If you are interested in purchasing a hard copy of the issue in which you published, you are entitled to 50% off the single issue price. Authors are also eligible to receive 20% off an individual subscription using the code psuj20. Please contact JHUP customer service and verify your author status in order to receive these discounts. PSU Press journal fulfillment services are managed by JHUP:

Johns Hopkins University Press Fulfillment Services  
P.O. Box 19966  
Baltimore, MD 21211-0966 USA  
Toll-free: 1-800-548-1784 (Outside USA and Canada: 410-516-6987)  
Fax: 410-516-3866  
Email: [jrnlcirc@jh.edu](mailto:jrnlcirc@jh.edu)

### Offprints

Contact us for a quote! The minimum order for offprints is 25 copies.

### Recommend a Journal

Alert a library to a journal by sharing subscription details provided by the press. Contact us for more information.

### Stay in Touch!

[Sign up](#) for our mailing list and be notified about new titles, journals, and catalogs.

# *The Human Quest for Meaning: Theatre as a Vehicle for Dialogue*

TYRONE GRIMA  
MALTA COLLEGE OF ARTS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

CHRISTIAN COLOMBO  
UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

[ABSTRACT] “The Human Quest for Meaning” is a critical analysis of a theatre project and its post-performance webinars held to discuss the thematic of the production. The theoretical framework of this project investigates in a qualitative manner to what extent a performance can serve as a medium to facilitate dialogue on existentialist issues. The article juxtaposes this study against a literature review embedded in the Christian and non-Christian framework of existentialist philosophy. It proceeds by elucidating further on the methodology endorsed. Taking as a basis the production *Agnes of God*, the aim was to create a platform of dialogue between theists and atheists. This objective is studied through interviews and questionnaires held with the actors, the academics who gave keynote speeches in two webinars, and the audience members. The insights allowed the researchers to delve deeper into the question that this project is asking through an in-depth analysis.

[KEYWORDS] spirituality, existentialism, theatre, dialogue

## *Introduction*

Religion and faith have been the basis of the Maltese cultural identity for many centuries and the Roman Catholic Church has contributed

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.5325/ECUMENICA.16.1.0001](https://doi.org/10.5325/ECUMENICA.16.1.0001)

ECUMENICA: PERFORMANCE AND RELIGION, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2023  
Copyright © 2023 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

significantly to the development of the social and political fabric of the country. In fact, the second article of the Maltese constitution does not just state that “the religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion,” but goes as far as to state that “the authorities of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church have the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong” and that “religious teaching of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Faith shall be provided in all State schools as part of compulsory education.”<sup>1</sup>

A 2007 survey of Maltese people found that over 99 percent of the respondents believed in God, with 99 percent of believers identifying as Catholic.<sup>2</sup> Contrasting these findings, in a 2018 survey, 94 percent of survey respondents identified as Catholic while only 64 percent considered themselves as practicing members.<sup>3</sup> Around 4.5 percent of respondents in this 2018 survey considered themselves atheist or agnostic, as opposed to 0.7 percent in 2007. The 2018 figures were more or less confirmed in the “State of the Nation” survey carried out by the Office of the President of Malta in 2021.<sup>4</sup> The trajectory is quite clear. If the statistics concerning the younger generation are anything to go by, it is likely that this shift will accelerate, since the number of atheists among the 16 to 25 year-old population is close to double that of the 8 percent of the whole population that identifies as atheists.<sup>5</sup>

As has occurred in other countries, particularly in the Western hemisphere, faith has become optional in Malta.<sup>6</sup> There are three possible reasons for this shift in the Maltese reality. The new millennium brought in with it the democratization of the internet, whereby the Maltese could transcend their insular, islander mentality by becoming more aware of contemporary developments in other countries. This was reinforced by Malta’s admission to the European Union in 2004, which increased exponentially the flow of Maltese leaving the country and other Europeans coming to live in Malta.<sup>7</sup> This cross-fertilization of ideas, and the exposure to contemporary ideologies, set the terrain for a shift in mentality. Furthermore, a change of government in 2013 was crucial to the process of secularization. The Labour Party replaced the conservative Nationalist Party, which had been in power for seventeen years. The Labour Party adopted a more liberal approach and promoted secularization.

As a result, a wave of not-unexpected reaction, often rooted in religious fundamentalism, has come from both sides: theists in Malta frequently

present a scenario of apocalyptic doom whereas the atheists/non-theists perceive believers as incapable of detaching from their deep-rooted need for religion. A rise in fundamentalism, witnessed in other countries, too, has been “regarded by others with alarm as a symptom of growing irrationality and intolerance in everyday life.”<sup>8</sup> As Charles Taylor explains about increasing secularism, generally, it is imperative to: “avoid the naïvetés on all sides: either that unbelief is just the falling away of any sense of fullness, or the betrayal of it (what theists sometimes are tempted to think of atheists); or that belief is just a set of theories attempting to make sense of experiences which we all have, and whose real nature can be understood purely immanently (what atheists are sometimes tempted to think about theists).”<sup>9</sup> Every person seeks to find meaning and purpose in life, and Victor Frankl asserts that this search is their “primary motivation in life.”<sup>10</sup> However, the development of religious and nonreligious fundamentalism in Malta has hampered such searching and often makes it difficult for individuals to be authentic—that is, true to themselves—in their social relationships. Atheists are still expected to behave in a Catholic way—to make the sign of the cross before meals, for example. Whereas, in more liberal circles, individuals feel ashamed to state that they are practicing Catholics.<sup>11</sup>

Against this backdrop, the project “The Human Quest for Meaning” was conceived to challenge fundamentalism. Its *point de départ* is human experience and desire for meaning and significance in life, whether in a religious context or not. The project was held locally, not only because both researchers are Maltese but because the rapid shift that occurred in Malta, as indicated by the statistics given above, makes the study relevant to Malta’s contemporary reality. The project searched for open dialogue in a nonjudgmental manner. Different walks of life present different methodologies for finding meaning in life. Although religion offers a platform for finding meaning, others have found ways beyond or apart from religion, such as through the acquisition of knowledge or in the arts.<sup>12</sup> The starting point of this project was the experiential commonalities that atheists and believers share in their thirst for authenticity, and the assumption that the secular frequently overlaps with the religious, and vice-versa.<sup>13</sup> This project took into account that a process by which a person finds authenticity is nonlinear, complex, and often shrouded with questions and doubts.<sup>14</sup> In this light, the journey becomes more important than the endpoint.

The project aimed to answer this question: “To what extent can theatre be used as a vehicle for dialogue?,” a question that has been explored from the dawn of the theatrical encounter. The existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, juxtaposed against the theology of Simone Weil and Rudolf Bultmann, provided the project’s framework. Another key influence was the work on anatheism by the Irish philosopher Richard Kearny. John Pielmeier’s modern classic and critically acclaimed play *Agnes of God*, converted into a film by the same writer in 1985, was selected as a platform. The reason behind this choice was twofold: the script is riveting and engaging, but furthermore it deals with the tension between theists and atheists in a poignant manner.

The play’s narrative focuses on a psychiatrist, commissioned to evaluate a cloistered novice nun accused of slaughtering a baby to whom she had just given birth. The performance develops into a compelling duel between the psychiatrist, who is an atheist, and the Mother Superior of the convent—the former trying to save the novice Agnes from the traumas she endured as a child, while the latter is trying to protect her from the secularizing snares of psychiatry. While this conflict constitutes the main tension in the play, there are several other elements at play, making the script rich in its offerings to different audience members. A significant, additional theme is belief in miracles, and hence in the intervention of the supernatural, which gives hope to Mother Superior, desperately wanting to believe that Agnes is a gift from God. On the other hand, Dr. Livingstone, the psychiatrist, believes that every story has a happy ending, and this is what keeps her trying to help Agnes. Therefore, there is significant parallelism between these two women and yet they pull Agnes in opposing directions. This is a poignant metaphor for the theme of “otherness” and the tension that alterity may cause. In Agnes’s eyes, the two women are others to each other, and she is captured in the struggle between them. The male–female binary also features in a striking manner in this play. Although the protagonists are all female, the absent presence of men is notable, in references to God, to the mysterious father of the child, and to the male-dominated church hierarchy. Before accounting further for the methodology that this project followed, it is imperative to consider the particular notion of *otherness* in this project.

## *Conceptual Framework*

Central to the dialogue between theists and atheists is the concept of “the other.” Otherness is what defines us as human beings, and yet as Umberto Eco succinctly argues, this fundamental notion within human reality causes much fear and anxiety.<sup>15</sup> The fear of otherness may be due to the power dynamics on which Sartre elaborates by presenting the conflict between the “I” and the “you.” The self wants to assimilate the other into its reality, whereas the other does not identify with the self.<sup>16</sup> Sartre maintains that there is never a state of equality in relationships: it is either a form of *trans-descendence* (that is looking down at the person), or *trans-ascendence* (looking up at the other).<sup>17</sup> For balance to be attained, these power dynamics need to be discarded. Dialogue cannot occur if one talks from a position of superiority. The Christian believer should not seek refuge in the comfort of tradition, and the atheist needs to detach from the security that empirical science offers. Richard Rorty articulates this process as a transition from the metaphysical to charity.<sup>18</sup> Where this transition is the aim, the encounter between individuals shifts from a philosophical one, which attempts to prove a perspective, to a reaching-out in dialogue and in action.

Theatre can create a balance in power dynamics and allow this transition to dialogue to happen. Theatre does not necessarily attempt to explain but it can offer the audience an experience where they can relate with the characters on stage. Although audience members will not always “love” each character, by penetrating their reality they can understand the characters’ reality better. For the duration of the play, audience members can be in relation with, and to, each character. Theatre often creates a space whereby, without losing identity, the self can see the reality of the other without feeling threatened by its presence. A performance, thus, has the potential to be nonhierarchical and dialogical,<sup>19</sup> and to allow the exchange and the challenging of ideas. The theatrical dynamic allows us to suspend prejudices or strong ideological perspectives because we are freed by, and from, the portrayal of the narrative, since we know that the enacted story, though we might relate to it, is not our own. This allows a level of detachment where reflection can occur. Theatre also has the benefit of using metaphor and symbols, and as the existentialist theologian

Rudolf Bultmann argues, deep realities in human existence can only be captured through metaphors and symbols.<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaardian philosophy expounds on the notion that a story evokes existential questions and invites the listener to partake in a journey—or, it may be more correct to say, in multiple journeys.<sup>21</sup>

The encounter with the other will not necessarily lead to a change in viewpoint, but it can provide a fertile terrain in which empathy can be nurtured.<sup>22</sup> The role of the performer or the director is not to impose an agenda but to create an empty space where dialogue can occur. Self-emptying (*kenosis*), and not self-imposition, can make an artistic work authentic.<sup>23</sup> In philosopher Simone Weil's vision, art should not be destructive or exploitative. By analogy, art should not operate in the consumerist manner of eating, by which persons transform food into energy for themselves. Rather, art should correlate with gazing at food, since Weil believes that "le beau est ce qu'on désire sans vouloir le manger" ("the experience of beauty is desiring something without wanting to eat it").<sup>24</sup> As Jerzy Grotowski stated, the performer "must stop thinking of himself all the time."<sup>25</sup>

The theatrical challenge lies in the mechanics of the process: How can communication happen without being violent, without imposing one's personal agenda? Opting for a clinical approach that portrays both sides of an argument in a presumptively neutral manner is similarly risky. This approach can result in a sterile scenario in which no dialogue occurs, or else it can create a new, synthetic reality that is not authentic to either of an argument's poles. Robert Leach believes that "each spectator is manufacturing her or his own kind of meaning."<sup>26</sup> The practitioner/performer should not be afraid of these multiple readings but should see them as an opportunity for more dialogue that can result in transformation. Even if a person does not change their opinion, they can still be marked, and, by consequence, transformed through the theatrical experience.

In his study of anatheism, Richard Kearney develops the concept of otherness further by denoting the other as the *stranger*. This word is not presented as a negative term. On the contrary, in Kearney's vision, the stranger is a moment "of sacred enfleshment when the future erupts through the continuum of time."<sup>27</sup> Certainly, the encounter with a stranger is oftentimes daunting because it involves exploration of the unknown, but it is only through the absurdity of such risk that the potential beauty of discovery can occur. Borrowing an analogy from Friedrich Nietzsche,

the process is akin to walking on a tightrope, with all the perils involved. Indeed, in Nietzsche's account, the tightrope walker falls off the rope and dies, but does so happily.<sup>28</sup> The encounter also places a person in a place of vulnerability, exposing their nakedness to the stranger. This vulnerability leads Kearney to articulate a fundamental point: dialogue is not a space in which to explore commonalities. If such were the case, the encounter would be reductionist. Certain religious positions "may actually *need* exposure to foreign teachings."<sup>29</sup> Exposition of what is vulnerable within us does not reveal that we are the same but that we are indeed different. When we have allowed ourselves to be intimate and to expose our innermost core, without fear, to each other, we can then celebrate the beauty of our differences.

The process of embracing the stranger can be facilitated by the theatrical experience: a culture of openness allows the audience member to grow as an individual, but also in tandem with others, including, and possibly particularly, with the others who are different.<sup>30</sup> The theatrical experience can convert the unmapped terrain of the unknown into an opportunity for an encounter with the alien other.<sup>31</sup> Hence, theatre often does not present a harmonious encounter: without a trauma there is no drama. The theatre, thus, often thrives on conflict. But "conflict" need not be antagonistic or destructive. When the strangeness of conflict is exposed, authentic dialogue can take place.

## *Methodology*

Our understanding of otherness was fundamental to the methodology embraced in this project, which aimed to account for a wide variety of perspectives by selecting five categories of participants. All these participants were invited to watch a performance of *Agnes of God* as well as to participate in two webinars that were held to assess the extent to which a theatrical performance can generate dialogue. Due to the restrictions imposed by the local health protocol, no immediate post-performance discussions could be held in the theatre after each performance. This lack of immediacy was mitigated by holding the webinars a few days after the production was over.

The first audience category was the general public. A controlled audience, specifically handpicked for the purpose of answering the research



question at hand, would have been ideal, but the COVID pandemic made this practically and financially impossible. The performances were scheduled for December 2020, shortly after the second wave of the pandemic. Although in Malta the professional theatre had recommenced and theatre buildings were reopened, the seating capacity was reduced, and most people were scared to attend. It was very difficult to find people who would commit to attend. We decided to make tickets available to the general public, while at the same time we actively encouraged attendance by those with religious and humanist backgrounds. This promised more open results since the participants were not handpicked, but, regretfully, it implied that contact with the participants could not be made beforehand since most tickets were bought in the last few days before performance. After having watched the performance, audience members were invited via email to answer a short questionnaire. Completed questionnaires revealed that the audience attending the performances were a mixture of theists, mostly Christian, and atheists. Approximately 48 percent of audience persons considered themselves believers, although only 23 percent of the whole audience were active affiliated members of an organized religion. The remaining audience identified as atheists.

The second category of participants were selected academics from a spectrum of disciplines, who could supply the researchers with further data and insights in the pre-performance phase. Their role was to initiate the discussion on themes in the play. Their starting point was an analysis of a pertinent theme that emerged from the script. This analysis was then shared online either as an oral presentation or as a short written paper. Gail Debono, a Humanist and forensic psychologist, and Carlo Calleja, a Catholic priest and academic specializing in moral theology, focused on religious conviction and ethical responsibility. Debono presented her analysis by answering a number of interview questions on video, while Calleja uploaded an academic reflection. Simone Azzopardi, a historian with a particular interest in the history of feminism, and Pauline Dimech, a highly involved member of the Catholic Church and an academic focusing on pastoral theology, contributed longer written content on womanhood. All the material was made available on a Facebook page, as part of the marketing campaign to attract people to watch the performance and to engage with audiences actively.<sup>32</sup> The material was posted during the four weeks leading to the first performance.

The third category was a cohort of eight students reading for a degree in the performing arts at the University of Malta. The students were invited to engage in this study as observers of the whole process from the pre-performance to the post-performance phase. At the end of the project, they were asked for their reactions through an essay, in which they were asked to examine how this project could serve as a case study for using theatre as dialogue. The students were asked to contribute to this project because the researchers believed that the presence of the younger generation, currently studying the performing arts, would provide the research with a particular and pertinent reflection that may not have been captured by the audience, who, as anticipated, was mostly composed of older people.

These three categories intersect with each other. The students and most of the academic contributors watched the play and completed the questionnaire. Some of the academic contributors did not watch the performance because they felt unsafe to be in a public space due to the pandemic and the project did not have sufficient funding for live streaming. A cost-free live stream would not have been adequate since a static camera would not capture the dynamics of the theatrical production and do justice to the study. Despite various hurdles, the allowed seats, forty-five per night, were sold out for four out of five nights. In total, two hundred people watched the performances.

The play's performers constituted the fourth category. The cast was composed of professional actors. Simone Ellul was entrusted with the role of Dr. Martha Livingstone, the court-appointed psychiatrist, whereas Isabel Warrington played Mother Miriam Ruth, the convent's Mother Superior, and Kyra Lautier was cast in the role of Agnes, a novice in the convent. The actors were interviewed to provide their insights on the experience. These interviews were held online a few weeks after the performances, allowing the performers enough time to ponder and reflect on the process. The last category was the authors of this article, who were involved in the process as observant-participants: Tyrone Grima, a leading professional director, directed the play and co-produced it with Christian Colombo. In compliance with the ethical procedures of the researchers' academic institutions, all participants who were actively engaged completed a consent form, in which they acknowledged that they were aware of the nature of the project and that they contributed to it willingly.

The full version of the play in English was performed over five nights, December 5-7, 2020, at the Valletta Campus Theatre, a black-box theatre that is regularly used for professional, ticketed performances and is considered to be one of the leading current venues in the local professional sector. The two webinars were held on December 8 and December 10, 2020. The first webinar focused on psychology, ethics, and religion, and the second one on the position of women in the church and in religion, generally. A climate of safety was created by allowing contributors from the project's second category of participants to set the discussion, using *Agnes of God* as a starting point, including Carlo Calleja and Gail Debono for the first webinar, and Pauline Dimech for the second webinar, with the late addition of Theatre Studies professor Vicki Ann Cremona. The two webinars, each lasting two hours, were moderated by Christian Colombo. The webinars are available online.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Project: Audiences and Performers*

To what extent did the theatrical production of *Agnes of God* create a space of dialogue between believers and nonbelievers, and what emerged from this dialogue? What did the theatrical experience contribute to understanding the nature of such a dialogue? In this section, these questions are analyzed through the “voice” of the various participants, as they expressed themselves in their completed questionnaires, in the webinars, and in interviews.

This project encouraged participants to think and to raise doubts of an existential nature, such as whether God exists and what is the purpose of life. One of the participants in the webinar, Fr. Aurelio Mulè Stagno, claimed that the production helped him to question himself, society, the Church, and the manner in which we relate with each other.<sup>34</sup> The production also made it possible to question important topics, such as faith. The participants felt that this questioning is fundamental to the growth of the individual, as indicated by one participant's questionnaire response: “faith is more about a relationship and less about intellectual submission . . . a relationship that is taken for granted and is never questioned, is unhealthy. So it is with faith.” More than half the respondents to the questionnaire confirmed that the play was a strong medium by which to instigate such questioning. As actor Isabelle Warrington claimed, the theatre “creates a

scenario . . . it is a very powerful tool because you are putting people in a particular situation, you are showing all angles of a situation.”<sup>35</sup> Although she was referring to her perception on theatre and how it impacted her in her career, she was also linking this insight to her understanding of how the production of *Agnes of God* could have affected the audience. On the other hand, an interesting observation that emerged from one of the respondents was that “a more modern story set in contemporary times and addressing current issues would be required for me to properly relate to it [the narrative presented in *Agnes of God*].”<sup>36</sup>

The play presents the two opposing viewpoints succinctly in such a manner that the believer empathizes with Mother Miriam Ruth, even though they can comprehend the behavior of the psychiatrist, whereas nonbelievers relate with Dr. Livingstone. Most respondents of the questionnaire felt that after the performance they became even more sympathetic to different and divergent points of view. They remarked that observing the interaction between Dr. Livingstone and Mother Superior made it easier for them to engage with the perspectives of the opposing polarity. This was also evident in the webinars, where the participants understood each other’s perspectives: the believers embraced the arguments presented by the atheists on the harm that religion can cause, whereas the nonbelievers recognized the value and importance of faith for the believers. As actor Simone Ellul confirmed, “As a person whose faith is a bit shaky, playing the role of an atheist was interesting and certainly helped me see a different perspective.”<sup>37</sup>

The key to the performance’s creation of a dialogue between oppositely positioned parties, according to audience member Fr. Robert Falzon, is the fact that the performance centers around a story. According to him, stories foster relationships. They generate interest in the other, and they allow for communication to occur because the narrative of the story becomes more important than the issue itself. A person is no longer a label, but an individual with a story that needs to be shared.<sup>38</sup> Theatre is an excellent vehicle for the transmission of these stories. Theatre can provide a platform where the audience helps characters go through an emotional arc that leads them to recognize their deep-seated wounds and to embrace the ghosts from their past. According to some audience members, the theatrical performance of this project conveyed these moments of healing where communication and emotional connection were possible.<sup>39</sup>

The reaction of audience members clearly demonstrated that two polarities of a dialogue do not need to be in agreement with each other. Nor must dialogue be free of confrontation. Most participants agreed that in dialogue there is a moral responsibility to be sincere and to identify shortcomings or injustices, particularly when those shortcomings are “justified” by a belief system or ideology. This moral responsibility is furthermore accentuated when these injustices lead to the suffering of a vulnerable person. In *Agnes of God*, the characters make radical decisions based on their ideology. Dr Livingstone crosses boundaries more than once in her therapeutic interventions whereas Mother Superior does not want Agnes to be the subject of scientific study. In both cases, Agnes is the victim. As Fr. Carlo Calleja stressed, the interest of the vulnerable needs to be safeguarded, and any issues of abuse dealt with accordingly—a perspective that was reinforced by Gail Debono, who was impressed by the way that Lautier, as Agnes, used her voice to convey how the other characters damaged her and stunted her growth. However, moral responsibility is not only limited to our capability to identify and to intervene in any injustice that the other might be committing. Relationships cannot flourish unless the individuals have a heightened awareness of the self, including any injustices they themselves committed. Entering dialogue in an intimate way necessitates the recognition of one’s own demons. Isabelle Warrington claimed in the first webinar that one aspect of the performance that impacted her deeply was the struggle that Mother Superior had to reconcile with her own personal failures and shortcomings, which were the cause of her irresponsible acts.<sup>40</sup>

In the eyes of the audience, the two main characters of the play are not role models in the art of communication, and not all audience members perceived the dynamics depicted in the play as healthy or as a beacon of hope for a world where theists and atheists can bridge their differences. As Fr. Aurelio Mulè Stagno, a participant in the second webinar, pointed out, the performance strongly depicted reality as nuanced and full of complexity.<sup>41</sup> Another audience member stated in the webinar that the play is not about the tension between religion and science, but about figures of authority in society, who are so engrossed by the desire to succeed and who are so hampered by their own shortcomings that they do not have the required emotional literacy to be able to dialogue. In the second webinar, Professor Cremona argued that both Mother Superior and Dr. Livingstone operate in reaction to the violence in their past that prevents them from developing

relationships. According to Cremona, the play is a play about power, but equally about the unravelling of the demons in each of these women, as they play tug of war with Agnes's life.<sup>42</sup> They are incapable of listening: Mother Superior only wants to hear Agnes's angelic singing and the psychiatrist only wants to hear what happened to the baby. As actor Kyra Lautier stated, "[Agnes's] needs are acknowledged especially when it becomes convenient for both of these [other] characters."<sup>43</sup> This ineptitude is part of what the audience members referred to as an intergenerational trauma: Agnes is the fruit of the abuse of her mother whereas Mother Superior and Dr. Livingstone carry the wounds of unhappy childhoods. These ghosts of the past prevent the characters from communicating deeply and significantly with each other, and keep them closed in their own reality, lacking the capability to reach out.<sup>44</sup> One of the students expressed in the second webinar that the two characters, representing the polarities of a dialogue, cannot comprehend each other, even though they switch roles by the end of the performance: Mother Superior realizes that Agnes is not a mystic, whereas Dr Livingstone seeks recourse to the sacramental life. But in the eyes of this participant this dual realization does not lead to any dialogue.<sup>45</sup> Theatre, in this case, exposes unhealthy dynamics in a way that shows the factors that prevent dialoguing from happening.

Another interesting outcome, particularly evident in the younger voices, is that the play did not answer any questions and did not complete the work for the audience. On the contrary, it presented a conflicting situation and offered the audience members the possibility to make their own resolutions. These younger voices felt that the project did not create a bridge for dialogue but supplied the raw material for the audience that could decide, or otherwise, to create this dialogue. Kyra Lautier felt that in this production the audience will get "to the point where they will be encouraged to have these discussions and debates and they will also want to see to what extent religion or personal values should come into play."<sup>46</sup> Performing arts student Denise Perini stated that this production of *Agnes of God* "leaves it up to the spectator to determine whether or not there is synthesis between the two poles."<sup>47</sup> Another student, Jan Niklas Termin, commented that the character of Agnes does not offer the audience any answers.<sup>48</sup>

The production not only stimulated an intellectual discussion on whether, and how, it is possible for persons from opposing polarities

to dialogue together, but also generated a space where persons felt safe to express their own vulnerability as rooted in challenging and at times bitter and painful experiences with fundamentalism's efforts to prevent growth from occurring steadily. Dr. Pauline Dimech bravely shared how the play spoke to her, as a woman committed to the religious life, and made her ponder how, throughout her life, her actions were motivated by a desire to obey males in authority.<sup>49</sup> The oppressive patriarchal system is constantly lurking in the play, even though it is not embodied. It is present in the male hierarchy of the Church, as much as in a male-dominated judicial system, both of which condemn Agnes, the former for her loss of virginity, the latter for the slaughtering of her baby. These issues, as well as others, such as the dynamics of relationships and the meaningfulness of life, spurred the participants of this project to share life experiences, demonstrating how deep the impact of the play was.

### *Conclusion*

These outcomes show that theatre can be a vehicle that spurs people to think and to converse. By witnessing a narrative, albeit metaphorically, the audience is drawn into a universe that may not be a reflection of their immediate reality or perceptions. This process increases and develops empathy toward these other, "foreign" realities. Sharing of narratives is powerful because irrespective of whether or not one is in agreement with a character's philosophical framework one cannot deny or negate the character's story. Most audience members claimed that the theatrical experience allowed them to empathize with other world-views, whether from a theist or atheist perspective, through the process of asking themselves fundamental questions of existential import. The outcomes of this project also accentuate how important it is to keep on exploring the theatre as a vehicle of dialogue, needing institutional support and infrastructure.

Of course, the encounter with the other will not necessarily lead to a change in viewpoint, and it may well be the case that it does not even produce a definite result. If it does, it is often without any clarity. The complex dynamics of the process demonstrate that the encounter is embedded in doubt. Such uncertainty featured extensively in the results obtained through the project's questionnaire, whereby a significant number of

participants gave less importance to establishing the truth than to the psychological wellbeing of the individual, indicating that a fixation on an absolute truth can be detrimental to relational dynamics and to psychological wholesomeness. As one of the participants stated, “these questions are very difficult to answer in a general way” and “there are many questions to be addressed before the above questions can be answered.”<sup>50</sup> Kierkegaardian philosophy warns that an attempt toward clarity could only result in further obscurity. The important truths in life can never be understood.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the “understanding of human nature . . . should not be viewed primarily as a formal or fully developed anthropology or ontology concerned with objective certainty.”<sup>52</sup> As the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich says, “Doubt, and not certitude, is our human situation, whether we affirm or deny God. And perhaps the difference between them is not so great as one usually thinks.”<sup>53</sup>

The project gathered enough energy and momentum to allow its producers and academics to explore what spill-over benefits can be considered for future initiatives. As a first step, a report was sent to the Catholic ecclesiastical authorities of Malta with our findings and reflections on the project. This was well received and after two positive meetings, there seems to be fertile ground that could see the materialization of further, collaborative projects. At this stage it is unclear what shape or form this collaboration may take, whether a series of other one-off projects or, more optimistically, a more permanent space of encounter (in all the senses of the word), whether involving a series of playful exploratory events, or static and dynamic, multimedia exhibits. What is sure at this early stage of our plans is that art—especially theatre—has a central role to play in facilitating the exploration of otherness in a compelling and creative way.

TYRONE GRIMA read for a BA in French and Theatre Studies from the University of Malta, as well as for a postgraduate degree in Education at the University of Malta and in Dramatherapy at the University of Roehampton. He researched the effect of Dramatherapy on the spiritual life of clients for his MA dissertation in Theatre Studies. His doctoral thesis presented an integrated model between detachment and the relational in the writings of Simone Weil. As a theatre practitioner and director, Tyrone’s most cherished productions are *Bariona* (2010); *Children of a Lesser God* (2015), and of course *Agnes of God* (2020). He is currently a lecturer in the Performing Arts at the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology, as well as a part-time lecturer at the University of Malta



in the School for Performing Arts. His field of academic interest is the interface between spirituality and the theatre, as well as the application of queer theory in performance.

CHRISTIAN COLOMBO is a lecturer, computer scientist, and a resident academic at the University of Malta. He has completed his PhD in 2013 in the area of runtime verification and compensating transactions. Aside from his work in computer science, Christian has a number of interests, particularly in the areas of philosophy and secular humanism. He is currently the chairperson of the Malta Humanist Association and works as a humanist celebrant.

## NOTES

1. Constitution of Malta, Legislation Malta, accessed June 29, 2022, <https://legislation.mt/eli/const/eng/pdf>.

2. "Conclusion of Survey on Religion," *Times of Malta*, January 28, 2007, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/conclusions-of-survey-on-religion.28217>.

3. Kurt Sansone, "MaltaToday Survey: Maltese Identity Still Very Much Rooted in Catholicism," *Maltatoday*, April 2, 2018, [https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/data\\_and\\_surveys/85738/maltatoday\\_survey\\_-\\_maltese\\_identity\\_still\\_very\\_much\\_rooted\\_in\\_catholicism -.YYOqrdnMLUI](https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/data_and_surveys/85738/maltatoday_survey_-_maltese_identity_still_very_much_rooted_in_catholicism -.YYOqrdnMLUI).

4. "What the Experts Say about 'State of the Nation' Survey Results, June 7, 2021, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/what-the-experts-say-about-state-of-the-nation-survey-results.877127>.

5. Monique Agius, "60% of people with low level of education give importance to politics, survey shows," *Newsbook*, June 4, 2021, <https://newsbook.com.mt/en/60-of-people-with-low-level-of-education-give-importance-to-politics-survey-shows/>.

6. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

7. Taylor also demonstrates how the electronic media, as well as migration, had an influence, albeit partial, on the rise of secularisation (*Secular Age*, 424, 436).

8. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.

9. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 14.

10. Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press / Simon & Schuster, 1985), 121.

11. Facebook message to author, June 29, 2002.

12. Frankl, *Man's Search*, 87–88.

13. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 25.

14. Claire Maria Chambers, *Performance Studies and Negative Epistemology: Performance Apophatics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 6.

15. Umberto Eco and Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, *Belief or Nonbelief* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997), 94–95.

16. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 388.
17. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 430.
18. Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo, and Santiago Zabala, "What Is Religion's Future after Metaphysics," in *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 56.
19. Nicola Shaughnessy, *Applying Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 199.
20. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1960), 67.
21. Marcia C. Robinson, "Kierkegaard's Existential Play: Storytelling and the Development of the Religious Imagination in the Authorship," in *Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts*, ed. Eric Ziolkowski (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 77.
22. Richard Kearney, *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10.
23. Katherine T. Brueck, *The Redemption of Tragedy: The Literary Vision of Simone Weil* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 38.
24. Simone Weil, "Cahier VII," in *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers, Volume VI: La Science et l'Impensable (septembre 1941-février 1942)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 459.
25. Quoted in Jennifer Kumiega, *The Theatre of Grotowski* (London: Methuen, 1985), 225-26.
26. Robert Leach, *Theatre Studies: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2013), 194.
27. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 7.
28. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: The Folio Society, 2005), 12.
29. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 178.
30. Jerzy Grotowski, "Towards a Poor Theatre," in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Eugenio Barba (New York: Routledge, 2002), 36.
31. Chambers, *Negative Epistemology*, 40-41.
32. Christian Colombo, "Agnes of God," Facebook, accessed June 29, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/agnesofgodtheatremalta>.
33. Christian Colombo, "Webinar 1: Psychology, Ethics, and Religion," YouTube Video, 1:59:38, December 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRqY7yPpvkQ>; Christian Colombo, "Webinar 2: Femininity, Church, and Religion," YouTube, 2:04:25, December 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KC8onRy32s>.
34. Colombo, "Webinar 2."
35. Isabelle Warrington, interview with author, April 6, 2021.
36. Grima and Colombo, "Questionnaire on *Agnes of God*."
37. Simone Ellul, interview with author, April 9, 2021.
38. Colombo, "Webinar 1."
39. Colombo, "Webinar 1."
40. Colombo, "Webinar 1."
41. Colombo, "Webinar 2."
42. Kyra Lautier, interview with author, April 9, 2021.

43. Lautier interview.
44. Grima and Colombo, "Questionnaire on *Agnes of God*."
45. Colombo, "Webinar 1."
46. Lautier interview.
47. Denise Perini, "Staging the Unanswerable: An Investigation into *Agnes of God* as an Applied Theatre Performance," Essay, University of Malta, January 31, 2021.
48. Colombo, "Webinar 1."
49. Colombo, "Webinar 2."
50. Grima and Colombo, "Questionnaire on *Agnes of God*."
51. See Jonathan Rée's introduction to Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (London: Folio Society, 1985), x.
52. Robinson, "Kierkegaard's Existential Play," 72.
53. Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 97.

#### WORKS CONSULTED

- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Barba, Eugenio, ed. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Brueck, Katherine T. *The Redemption of Tragedy: The Literary Vision of Simone Weil*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1960.
- Chambers, Claire Maria. *Performance Studies and Negative Epistemology: Performance Apophatics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Colombo, Christian. "Webinar 1: Psychology, Ethics, and Religion." YouTube Video, 1: 59:38, December 15, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRqY7yPpvkQ>.
- . "Webinar 2: Femininity, Church, and Religion." YouTube Video, 2: 04:25, December 15, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KC8onRy32s>.
- Eco, Umberto, and Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini. *Belief or Nonbelief*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997.
- Frankl, Victor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Washington Square Press / Simon & Schuster, 1985.
- Grima, Tyrone, and Christian Colombo. "Questionnaire on *Agnes of God*." Google Form.
- Kearney, Richard. *Anatheism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*. London: The Folio Society, 1985.
- Kumiega, Jennifer. *The Theatre of Grotowski*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Leach, Robert. *Theatre Studies: The Basics*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. London: The Folio Society, 2005.
- Perini, Denise. "Staging the Unanswerable: An Investigation into *Agnes of God* as an Applied Theatre Performance." Essay, University of Malta, January 31, 2021.

- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. London/New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Shaughnessy, Nicola. *Applying Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Shook, John R. *The God Debates: A 21st Century Guide for Atheists and Believers (and Believers (and Everyone in Between))*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Tillich, Paul. *The Eternal Now*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963.
- Weil, Simone. *Écrits de Marseille, Volume II: Grèce-Inde-Occitanie*. Paris: Gallimard, 2009.
- . *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers (1933–septembre 1941)*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.
- . *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers, Volume VI: La Science et l'Impensable (septembre 1941–février 1942)*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997.
- Zabala, Santiago, ed. *The Future of Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Ziolkowski, Eric, ed. *Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018.