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Spirtu pront in St Albans

Naima Morelli meets up with two Australian artists who are recording an attempt to keep għana spirtu pront alive in Melbourne.



The St Albans group of għannejja.

Australian artists Sonia Leber and David Chesworth are researching the Maltese community in St Albans, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia, for their new video project called One from Mosta, Two from Zabbar.

"Deep in the heart of St Albans, Maltese immigrants have maintained the tradition of spirtu pront, a kind of għana singing style," say Leber and Chesworth.

"We were interested in how these finely-executed song duels involve part song and part public argument, not to mention part entertainment and part public psychotherapy."

Having always worked with sound in their art, the duo is interested both in the technical aspect and the social valence of spirtu pront.

"The singing is extremely skilful, in a loud and tightly strained voice, exemplifying Malta's dual Arabic and European influences," they say.

"The ritual incorporates a cadence where everyone respectfully renounces their insults and emphatically reconfirms the need for friendship."

How did you first approach the Maltese community in St Albans?

We first encountered the Maltese community when we were working on a project for the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne. There are several Maltese clubs in Melbourne and one club in St Albans specialises in preserving the Maltese singing tradition għana.

Incredibly, each week there are two hour-long għana sessions as there are only just enough singers for these two sessions. It is a loose arrangement.

People arrive at the club and the designated organiser for that evening allocates each singer with an opponent. In this way the singers are truly spontaneous and the topics for the song duels cannot be prearranged.

What does the għana represent to them?

Like most aural traditions in different countries, the għana tradition within the Maltese diaspora is primarily a way of preserving language.

The songs are sung in what is called the antique version of Maltese that is much older than modern Maltese.

But it goes beyond the desire to preserve language. The fact that the experience is performed live is paramount as each singer has his improvisatory skills on display.

He who can use language and singing skills within this strict form receives much respect. There must be a fine balance between cajoling and ridiculing... ultimately, reaffirming friendship and re-establishing respect for one other.

What is that attracts you the most in għana?

For us, as artists, the għana form presents a unique form of public argument.

Each singer devises new ways to test his opponent through smart and witty retorts, perfectly pitched and cadenced into the strict rhythms of the song.

Within this form there are many opportunities to play out various fields of social relations in this rather public display.

Are such Maltese traditions being passed on to the next generation of Australian-born Maltese?

It is interesting that traditions are more likely to be preserved intact in the diaspora than in the original country.

There are still għana festivals in Malta. Għana societies in both Malta and Australia maintain a healthy and strong interconnection.

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However, there are very few younger Australian-Maltese singers able to master the complexity of the old form of Maltese language. Still, there are a few.

What will the final video look like?

For this project we decided to focus on the four singers in one of the many għana sessions that we filmed, where tension between singers was most interesting.

The shifting body language and facial expressions of the singers were very communicative and without understanding the language, you can see that there is a tense staging of attack and counter-attack.

The audience can also experience the fact the singers might actually be very personal in discussing a long-held grievance.

Are the arguments in the video staged or are they real?

The arguments are drawing on real life and there is a sense that, without carefully-chosen words, the airing of grievances can plunge the friends into deeper conflict.

One argument centres around a singer having worked for the other as a builder's labourer, putting in good labour and the boss not paying him enough and not treating him well.

Watching the argument, it is hard to know what aspect of this argument is real and what is staged for public display.

How do you depict the St Albans community in the video?

In our video we show the surrounding environment of the club as one of great community spirit and comradeship.

It is an overwhelmingly male domain, but these people who gather together every week display a close physicality and joy in each other's company as they gather around the bar, then attentively listen to the għana sessions and sit close in deep discussion around the shared tables.

Artists like to think that the ritualised public conflict of għana produces a kind of shared social harmony or brother-hood of relationships that can be ritually tested and pronounced healthy at the end of each session.

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