

JO CARUANA LEARNS WHY THIS YEAR'S EXCITING EDITION PROMISES TO BE ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE YET.

WORDS JO CARUANA

MALTA'S MAJOR SUMMER ARTS FESTIVAL RETURNS



AS YOU FLY INTO MALTA, YOU MAY WELL BE WONDERING WHAT SORT OF ACTIVITIES THE ISLAND HAS TO OFFER. WELL, ASIDE FROM THE LONG-CELEBRATED SUNSHINE, BEACHES AND UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE HISTORIC SITES, YOU WILL ALSO BE PLEASED TO DISCOVER MALTA'S VIBRANT CULTURAL SCENE – AND THE UPCOMING MALTA INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL (MIAF), PRODUCED BY FESTIVALS MALTA, SITS RIGHT AT THE HEART OF IT.



Now in its 14th edition, this Festival, which has recently been awarded the EFFE label by the European Festival Academy, has been designed to champion the best that the local and international arts scene has to offer – with artists flying in from all over the world to present their work across the genres of the performing arts.

This year, renowned composer and producer Ruben Zahra has taken over the helm of the festival, in the role of artistic director. Already he is putting his unique stamp on the event, and he explains how – as part of his vision – he and his team at Festivals Malta are working to offer audiences a unique experience that will distinguish it from other festivals in Europe and around the world.

“The MIAF has a legacy of proficient artistic directors with an emphasis on excellence, contemporary performing arts and innovation,” Ruben says, adding that he intends to maintain his direction with a focus on interdisciplinary expression. “This won’t just be within the programme, but rather within curated productions. There will be events that connect artists from different art forms, as well as nationalities working together. I have no doubt that this strategy will attract audiences with an interest in a variety of artistic strands to attend the festival.”

Ruben explains that the key to this goal will be to include Malta’s unique heritage as an integral part of the events. “And our most obvious ‘raw material’ is the Mediterranean, so I am putting a stage on the sea!” he smiles.

Consequently, one of the highlights of this year’s programme is set to be the ‘Harbour Odyssey’ - supported by the Valletta Cultural Agency. This project consists of a unique sunset performance on a Turkish gulet (sailing vessel) across the world-famous Grand Harbour, accompanied by musicians, actors, acrobats and circus-artists. “It has been chartered for seven days of the Festival to present performances in different localities along Malta’s coastline as the main outreach dimension of the MIAF,” Ruben explains.

Of course, Malta is also renowned for its splendid heritage sites. So, in collaboration with the country’s national agency for museums, conservation practice and cultural heritage, Heritage Malta, MIAF will have a stage at Ħaġar Qim – one of the island’s

megalithic temples. In fact, two productions are scheduled to take place against the spectacular backdrop of Ħaġar Qim: ‘Temple Percussion’ featuring Chinese soloist Beibei Wang – co-organised by the China Cultural Centre in Malta, and ‘Ancient Voices’ – a music-dance performance featuring Maltese dancer Diane Portelli and Scottish virtuoso John Kenny playing ancient Celtic war horns and other primordial ritual instruments. “After all, you can experience great performances in a black box environment at any international festival. But only in Malta can the audience experience artistic excellence in a Neolithic temple or on the Mediterranean Sea.”

And the highlights won’t stop there. Other showstoppers are bound to include: ‘Aquasonic’ – a visually stunning underwater concert from Denmark; The Malta Philharmonic Orchestra with a symphonic programme that includes Tan Dun’s hypnotic three-movement ‘Water Concerto’ using water as a musical instrument; ‘Toujours Et Près De Moi’ – a captivating holographic music-theatre performance by Opera Erratica (UK); FLA.CO.MEN by Spanish dance artist Israel Galván, whose wild flamenco reinvention has mesmerised audiences around the world; ‘M.A.D.’ – a fusion of contemporary music and dance featuring chamber works by Ligeti, Walton and Connesson as well as music by Maltese composers choreographed by Gil Kerer and Zoe Camilleri; ‘Pope Joan’ – a theatrical work co-produced with Teatru Malta, and which tells the story of the first and only female pope to have ever lived; a double-bill programme by Malta’s national dance company ‘ŻfinMalta’; and ‘Berberio’ – an award-winning children’s performance by Zonzo Compagnie (Belgium) about the musical language of Italian avant-garde composer Luciano Berio.

“When people look back on MIAF 2019, I would like them to remember it as a cutting-edge and innovative festival with a programme of high artistic excellence but at the same time is accessible to a wide audience. I think the programme will achieve that, and I know the whole team is already looking forward to sharing this exciting experience with all those present,” Ruben adds. ✨

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The Malta International Arts Festival will be held between 28 June and 14 July. Bookings for the festival will be open soon, with a number of free and paid-for ticketed events. For more information visit www.festivals.mt/miaf