

Youth devising multimedia dance theatre production

ABSTRACT

The article documents the process of creating a mixed media dance theatre production in Malta which was presented at the Marinando Festival, in Italy. This is a unique Mediterranean youth theatre and video festival based on the theme of the sea. The festival is unique both for its educational objectives on the theme of the sea, fishing and nutrition, as well as artistic and professional development objectives for both actors and theatre makers. Working collaboratively with theatre professionals, choreographers and media artists a group of young people, aged 11 to 16, devised a multimedia piece that helped them explore and experiment with stylistic modes. The starting point was a newspaper article and music by a local composer who uses recovered local Maltese folk instruments weaving together indigenous and regional traditional strains with classical European influences and contemporary genres. The article discusses ways of how the facilitation of the devising process was approached and the challenges met through this process. The young actors/dancers were interviewed at intervals and asked to keep journals to capture the evolution of the piece through research, improvisation, photography, filming, dialogue and rehearsals. The performance Xandru u X-Xixa (X&X) was the result of a process of collaboration between director, choreographer, young performers and media artists, a genuine melting of people and media, which made each component indispensable to the other.

KEYWORDS

dance theatre
video projections
photography
devising a performance
youth
mixed media

The Marinando Festival

Think of an Italian medieval city close to the sea in Puglia where all the buildings and surrounding bastions are painted white, and then imagine a festival at the end of summer where youth from schools and theatre groups from Italy and its neighboring Mediterranean countries gather to present original theatre productions and videos. The festival is called Marinando, and all the productions are about the sea. The festival is a week long fertile meeting space for young people with a programme of cultural outings and Arts workshops. The main aim is to raise awareness regarding the *sustainability* of the Mediterranean Sea as well offering an opportunity for cultural exchange as youth from different countries work together through the Arts. In September 2010 I was invited to take a group of young people to participate in the 2011 festival edition. The group, working under the name of Teatru Zazz, was made up of youth people aged between 11 and 16, eight in all; some had a strong gymnastics and dance background, while others had some acting experience. Since the production was to be performed in Italy to a mostly Italian audience, it was decided that the piece would be essentially physical and visual with little script in Maltese which would be translated into Italian subtitles on screen. On board, besides the theatre producer/ director, were two choreographers, and a filmproducer and his team.

First phase of building a collective creation- looking for a story line.

The storyline was based on a newspaper article. A recent local fisherman's tragedy, which had a mysterious ending, was chosen from the newspapers. A sturdy fishermen's vessel seasoned in Marsaxlokk, the main remaining hub of the Maltese fishing industry, sailed off with four men and an 11-year-old boy on board never to return. The vessel manned by an experienced skipper, was overdue in returning from an expedition to catch swordfish and as the delay grew, so did the disconsolate feeling of dread among the brethren fishing community of Marsaxlokk.

The fisherman's vessel had exploded and caught fire, but the skipper and crew survived the explosion only to go through an ordeal at sea holding on to rafts suffering hunger and mostly thirst besides the dangers of the

sea and sun beating mercilessly on them. Only the skipper survived the ordeal to tell the story. He had miraculously survived without drink, food or shelter in the open seas for seven long harrowing days.

The surviving skipper told his rescuers of his despair when they had seen an aircraft flying over them, yet their desperate efforts to be spotted passed unnoticed. Up till then his son was still alive but later on in the day the boy had closed his eyes and appeared to be dead. The father stubbornly held on to his child until the continuous flow of the waves loosened his grip.

The idea of using this tragic story emerged during a brainstorming session with a colleague of mine Peter Serracino Inglott in September 2010. Peter, a philosopher and playwright, came up with this idea and we probed further into translating the story on stage. Further research was done about this tragedy with the youths: TV news, interviews with the surviving fisherman and victims' relatives were found through the internet and streamed news bulletins.

The story was explored and worked upon through drama conventions such as hot-seating and role play. The youths really empathized with the father and son's story as well as with the other crew members.

I really like the sea. I like to go with my father and nannu when they go out to sea for three days. This is such an adventure! I help my father, he's the captain of the boat you know, and he shows me how to navigate the vessel ... and I am learning how to catch fish and I help out with the deck duties. My mother gets a bit worried and does not like me to go, I can see because she always has tears in her eyes when I go with father.

(Karen hot-seated as the skipper's son 24/6/11)

and Karl during role-play:

I am not scared. As long as I am with father and nannu, I am ok. It is very cold at night, the sea is freezing. It is very hot during the day, the sun is scorching, I am so thirsty ... but it is a matter of hours now before someone finds us, I am sure. Oh I am so thirsty, but father warns me not to drink from the sea, so thirsty, so dry...

During discussions following a hot-seating exercise, it was clear that the youths especially the two eleven-year olds in the group were deeply impressed by what happened to the skipper's son and had really reflected about how each crew member must have felt:

I think that maybe his father should not have taken Theo with him on such a dangerous trip, but then, for him, since it was his work maybe he did not see it as dangerous, it was ... well.... his work, his life. And I imagine that just like I look up to my dad as being my hero so did Theo, and since he had lived with his father doing this, then going out at sea was normal, a part of life.

Suzanne (24/6/11)

It is like my father likes car rallying which is dangerous but I think of it as fun, as exciting, and I never think of the danger really. I can imagine Theo still felt safe as he was still with his father. He must have been brave though, out in the open seas. Who knows what big fish they saw. I read that they had some flesh bitten by fish. It must have been very scary and it must be terrible for his poor father now left without his son.

Bennard (24/6/11)

We looked through Maltese haikus and poems that could help us develop the spoken part of the script and also wrote in an innocent love scene. The technique and ideas used for this scene emerged during vocal exercises and physical improvisation workshops using the poems as a starting point.

Fantasizing different endings to this story

The truth of this tragedy in itself is incredible; how the skipper survived one whole week without food and drink in desperate weather conditions. Moreover he saw his son and crew members, one of whom was his father, die one by one and yet he survived this ordeal as if only to be able to narrate what happened. And yet this tragedy is shrouded in mystery and there was much speculation as to why the vessel exploded.

One of the exercises the youths were set was to ask themselves - what if we could give this a different ending- how would it be? .

All the suggestions made were creative, some really out-of-this-world-fantastic. Bennard, the fourteen year-old in this group was quiet and listened to all the others and finally he said:

You know what, I am fascinated by documentaries of how animals often save the lives of their owners or of children. In documentaries I have seen, it seems that animals can detect earthquakes and tsunamis that are about to happen, either through a sixth sense or because they much sharper senses like ehm bats, for example, who can find food using echo. So, what if ... in our story, the fish, the underwater creatures, sense that the humans are in danger after the explosion and they save them by pulling them ashore, so we will actually have a positive ending?

(Ben 7/6/2011)

This was a contribution that formed part of the script. The story was given an alternative positive ending- a modern fairytale ending – rescue is at hand within the sea world, the generous sea world and its wondrous creatures which come to the rescue. The story started becoming our story.

Story elements and Expressive Media used

The story developed collectively with a melting of media (Xenakis, 1985): dance, theatre, music, video and photography, into an art form that is not limited by the means of expression, but is rather intentionally about artistic expression itself. In X&X, there were scenes where the different media were used, but also scenes which consisted of live acting only, others were there was music and dance only and scenes where only video projections were used.

As the different sections of the story were planned, the original idea of the story set in two worlds was adhered to. These were:

- a) the world representing life at the fishing village/ above the surface of the sea
- b) the underwater world.

The following is a breakdown of the scenes in the two different worlds briefly describing the scene and the expressive media used in each scene:

a) Scenes in the fishing village and at sea (a mix of video, photography and dance theatre)

1. Intro – video girl with background of sunrise over sea – reciting poem about the boy who disappeared- symbolizing all those who loved the sea and left their lives there
2. Creating the Marsaxlokk atmosphere- dance, vocal orchestration of sellers' calls, video with detail shots and seascapes edited to music score (Music choice – Zifna dance interspersed with orchestration of live seller's calls)
3. Tender love scene before parting to go to sea (poem- vocal score and playful physicalization of the poem –focus is entirely on the two young actors with no projections)
4. Fishermen's dance movement sequence: sailing away, movements based on sailing and fishing with screen photography shots/video projections as a backdrop
5. Men at sea: video sequence shooting desperate men holding on to rafts, flashbacks to happy thoughts, helicopter hope, waiting and solidarity (no live dance/acting).
6. Lamentation: as the village weeps symbolized by woman in black lycra-tube dance synchronised to dance captured on video in broken down detail shots. (dance inspired by Martha Graham's mythical dance Lamentation. Video here is not used as a backdrop but to provide close-ups of the dancer)
7. Drifted ashore video transition to dance . (use of video on its own with an acting scene linked to the ending as if a fade-in-fade-out transition from video to live)
8. Welcoming the survivors celebratory dance sequence including echoes of the vocal orchestration of the sellers' calls. (live performance- no projections)

b) Underwater scenes (all live dance sequences)

- 1) Introducing the sea world - playful scene – cage lowered- creatures innocently explore cage – dance
- 2) Saving the fishermen- the sea creatures pull the fishermen to the safety of the shore.

Colour and music were important elements that distinguished the different scenes or rather, the world above-the-sea and the undersea-world.

Images and Colour schemes



Photo 1 Colour scheme seaworld- costumes were all in dazzling blues and greens

The costumes and props which were kept to a minimum provided the colour schemes for each scene. Distinctly different colour schemes were used to differentiate the sea world from that above the surface of the sea.

The colour palette for costumes used above-the-sea scenes was intentionally restricted to black and white except for the village dance which also includes red (costumes as well as the few props used: textile, wheel-cart and apples). However the screen with projections was the backdrop for dynamic colourful scenery in these scenes. The fact that the costumes were mainly dark reduced reflections.

The underwater-world costumes were designed in different hues of vibrant blues, and greens. The back curtain was lit in blues and purple. No projections were planned for these scenes where the atmosphere was created by the costumes, lighting and the music with the focus being on the dancers who were all female. The only prop used in these scenes was the cage which was lowered and raised from the grid.

Projections were limited to the above-sea and land scenes. During the celebratory village dance portraying life in the fishing village, still projections dynamically edited to the rhythms of the music were included to provide a colourful background intended to evoke the lively colourful atmosphere at the Marsaxlokk market therefore creating a sense of location for our audience. Colourful images of the sunlight and boat reflections dancing and shimmering

on the sea were also projected as a backdrop to the sailing-away dance piece with the four youths in simple masculine black attire danced through a choreography inspired by fishermen's and sailor's actions. Here the locations chosen for filming were mainly local seascapes as a visual backdrop to the dance on stage.

For the other scenes, such as the Lamentation Scene, the projections were mainly used to amplify details of body and facial expressions.

Music

Music formed an important underlying structure of this performance. Music is an intensely perceptual experience (LeDoux, 1996), which physiologically happens on two levels – one extremely fast, pre-processing, associated with the perception of sound relevant to survival, and the other, at a much slower processing rate than any of the other senses, allowing the perception of sound as tone, timbre and location. Research shows that possibly several emotion-related neural systems at deeper levels in the brain interact with the high-level cortical structures that are engaged in processes such as perception and decision-making (Damasio, 1998; LeDoux, 1996).

The music we worked with was key to creating a particular perceptual experience for our audience and was intended to create a sense of location and culture as well as emotion. The music chosen for the above-water scenes were mainly by Ruben Zahra, a local composer who uses recovered local Maltese folk instruments weaving together indigenous and regional traditional strains with classical European influences and contemporary genres. So the feel of the music had an ethnicity to it which immediately placed the story in the Mediterranean.

The choreography worked with and was inspired by this music while the video editing used the music to create visual rhythm, even using slow motion as the rhythm of the music slows down. For example, there is a flashback scene where the men are shipwrecked and each starts remembering his happy life back in the village, there is a circle dance shot with the cameraman positioned in the middle of the circle using a stabilizer and panning the camera as he turned round to capture the happy faces of the dancers jumping on the spot; the focus is on the happy faces with the landscape background a blur. The music and film in slow motion convey the longing to return to safety and happiness back on land.

The video on its own is effective but when combined with the music and edited to its rhythm can evoke much stronger emotional feelings and experiences. Neurophysiological research using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) and focusing on music-visual stimuli by Baumgartner et al (2006) reveals that emotional pictures evoke a more cognitive mode of emotion perception, whereas congruent presentations of emotional

visual and musical stimuli rather automatically evoke strong emotional feelings and experiences.

Finding out the groups' skills.

It was imperative that the artistic team learned about the skills the participants in order to celebrate these in the production. Workshops for the first two weeks included ice-breaking exercises, warm ups, vocal exercises, drama games, improvisations using different starting point techniques with actors/ dancing working individually, in pairs or in groups. The stimuli for the various physical improvisation we worked on were: music, poetry, statue games with transition movements.

Parallel to the physical improvisations from which the choreography of the pieces were inspired, we also started working with the youths on photography and videos for the projections.

Photography/ Videography Projections – a rationale for including these as an integral part of the production.

An integral part of this production were the projections on the hanging screen at the back of the stage. The actual placing of the projector meant dedicated and persistent pre-production experimentation, as the projector location (front projection) had to be placed strategically to avoid shadows on the screen and stage lighting interference. However the results proved to be well worth all the efforts and experimentation by the technical department. Besides the aesthetic and dynamic aspect of using video/photographic projections thus rendering the performance multimedia there were other equally important objectives for using these. We knew we had to work with minimal props and scenic elements since we had to travel with this production and we had zero budget for freight costs. The projections, an important part of the language of the piece, were also intended to be used to provide links and transitions in lieu of black outs which would have slowed down the pace of the piece and broken the flow which I wanted to avoid at all costs.

The introduction of the show was, in fact, a video projected on the screen at the back of the stage while the stage floor was in darkness to allow the stage hands the time to clear the stage and set up for our performance which followed minutes after the previous performance by another group that same evening. The projected video was planned to set the scene indicating time and place as well as to create the atmosphere we wanted the audience to experience. All videos were shot outside on locations using natural local land or seascapes.

So while the stagehands set up silently placing the few props we needed on stage with lights switched off, an extreme close-up of one of the actors, Suzanne Buttigieg, was projected. In the background was the sea, as she recited a poem in Maltese (subtitled into Italian for the Italian audience) over the sound of the sea:

Maltese Poem

English translation

| | |
|--|--|
| <p><i>Naf tifel li tela' mill-bahar. Naf tifel li farfar tfulitu Fuq medda ta' ramel.</i></p> <p><i>Naf tifel li x-xatt kien pajjizu U l-mewg kien id-demm jigrì fih. Naf tifel li rega mar lura Fil-bahar, Fil-qiegh.</i></p> | <p><i>I know a boy who came from the sea I know a boy who shed his childhood On a stretch of sand</i></p> <p><i>I know a boy for whom the sea shore was his country And the waves were the blood in his veins I know a boy who returned To the sea To the bottom of the sea.</i></p> |
|--|--|

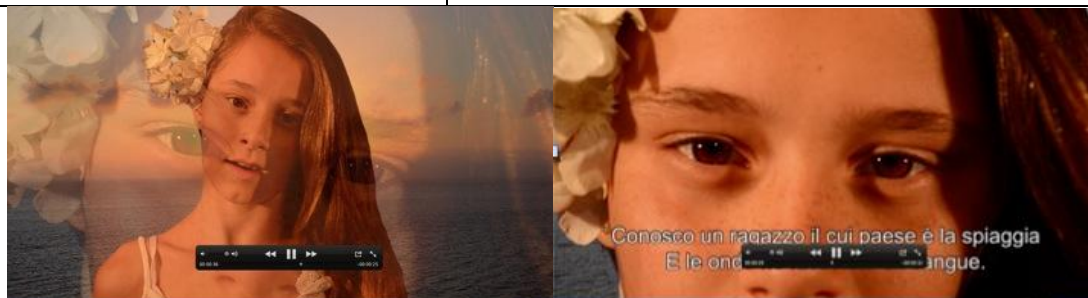


Photo 2 opening video- actor reciting poem with translation subtitles

Projections for the opening sequence: establishing the context.

We discussed the idea of using photography for the first dance scene. This dance piece introduced the characters and flashes of their relationships, and was intended to present life in the fishing village, the colorful market by the sea and particularly the sea with its picturesque fishing vessels typical of Malta called *luzzu* and *dghajsa*.

Three participants of the group were keen on working on this media aspect besides acting and dancing. They were given some general information about photography and instructions as to how to use the camera with examples as to lighting and composition. We went to the fishing village very early one morning on a weekday. Their remit was to capture the spirit of the place. They were given creative freedom, but we had shown them examples of artistic photography to explain about composition and detail photography. They were asked to pursue their personal vision, and could choose to work in colour or in black and white. The objective was to see what would capture their imagination. The focus was on their ideas of the place rather than on technique. Danjel, who was actually quite a keen young photographer who liked to experiment with angles and techniques was given a digital SLR camera, while the other two had compact digital cameras with X3 digital zooms.

The exercise was to shoot photos or dvd snippets of details. They were invited to focus on picture composition. The idea was to capture the atmosphere, the spirit of this simple and colorful village, or rather, the seascape, the fishing vessels, the colours and the movement.

Close-Up detail photography

The instructions the youths were given was to capture details; details as a way of exploring an individual personal vision, rather than shooting the landscape or seascape with sweeping vistas and dramatic views.

When we went to shoot the photographs at Marsaxlokk I discovered many details, like the way the sun rays are refracted through the dazzling blue sea and reflected on to the boat. Also details like the eyes on the fishing boats really fascinated me. They obsessed me, and I took loads of these detail shots. Danjel also took many of these and yet his photos and mine are so different, because of the parts of the boat we took with it, the colours we focussed on, how close we zoomed in and where in the framing this was placed. So, each eye on the boat became our own eye, it made the photo personal, the detail and the way you shoot it is personal. (Ben -age 14- from his journal dated 1/8/11)



Photo 3 detail of boat by Ben

Danjel, aged 16 and the eldest of the group of youths, articulated his thoughts of how he experimented to get certain unusual results with surprisingly lucid and analytical comments. His explanation showed that not only was he experimenting but analysing what he was doing.



Photo 4 detail of boat by Ben

Danjel came up with some interesting blurred photos which he blurred on purpose:

life is so slow and calm especially at five o'clock in the morning. It was so silent there, and I tried to create movement before life started like. Because though all seemed calm, I imagined what these boats go through in rough weather out at sea. What I did to create this was to move the camera as I took photo. So I got a blur into the image.

(Danjel –age 16- from his journal dated 2/8/11)

Since the other two only had compact digital cameras with X3 zooms, they, in fact, had been made aware that if they zoomed, they would miss out on image quality and that it was actually possible to achieve the same 3x digital zoom effect using an image editing software later on the computer and that the advantage of doing it later is that it could then be decided exactly which portion to crop and how much to enlarge (3x, 4x, ...). However we were mostly interested in teaching them about composition and we wanted them to select the framing on site especially when trying to capture what a subject is doing, then it was important this was shot at the right moment. However since it was mainly detail shots and seascapes we were after they could work on cropping and enlarging effects after with image editing software. Since they were aware of the loss of image quality once they cropped or zoomed with their digital cameras they tried to get real close-ups by going as close as possible to the images.

Suzanne, the youngest, 11 years old, was fascinated by the images of the reflections of the colourful boats in the sea as well as to how the sunlight in the sea reflected back on to the surface of the boats. Besides bringing these aspects out the photos she took, she also spoke about what she tried to do during the feedback session:



Photo 5 detail photo of boat reflection in the sea

It seemed like the sun and the sea were dancing together and as they jumped, as they played, this was reflected on the surface of the boats. The result is a bit like an abstract painting done by the sea, the colours and the sunlight

(Suzanne –age 11- feedback session 15/8/11)

These images were eventually used as part of the projections as scenery. The editing done by a visual media graduate in our team, used initial establishing shots and then edited in detail photographs and video shots to the rhythm of the music while taking into account what was happening live on stage.

On the left is Photo 5 taken during Fishermen's Dance movement sequence: sailing away, movements based on sailing and fishing with screen photography shots/video projections. The media artists took a number of photos for the projections but also included those taken by Suzanne, Bennard and Danjel during the photo shoots when they experimented with taking detail shots of the sea. The aim of these projections was to provide a colourful sea background to the dance of the fishermen sailing away.

Photo 6 is from the Market Dance, an energetic dance portraying life at the fishing village of Marsaxlokk. It also introduces the different characters and their relationships. The backdrop is one of the photo projections of the colorful dghajsas and luzzus.

Photo 6 Fishermen's sailing away dance with detail photography projection





Photo 7 The Market Dance- portraying the lively market and introducing the characters and their relationships. The projection, consisting of photos edited to the music rhythm, setting the scene.

The Video Scenes : Men Cast Adrift and Men Cast Ashore

The two scenes Men Cast Adrift and Men Cast Ashore consisted of solely video projections edited to music with the second one , Men Cast Ashore mutating into a dance on stage.

Cast Adrift video projection scene

This scene involved a video projection of the shipwrecked fishermen in the open seas and music to portray the desolation and desperation of the men intrepidly hanging on to dear life. The music was interspersed with sound effects of helicopter and flashback transition sounds as the men remembered their happy life on land which gave them the will to cling on to their flimsy makeshift rafts. Sound effects of rotor blades turning and engine sound of a helicopter approaching overhead and leaving added to the feeling of desperation as hope faded further away.



Two screen shots – boys hanging to rafts, waving at helicopter, happy reminiscences.

This video included flashbacks to the fishermen's life in their village, this was the hope that kept them alive those long days as they waited for help to come. Some of the flashbacks echoed parts of the script or dance.

Cast Ashore video projection scene

This video featured the four fishermen cast ashore following the dance sequence where they were assisted by the sea creatures to safety from the open seas. The opening shot zooms in from a long shot of the stretch of beach and sea with the men cast ashore to close ups of their faces as they struggle to stand on their feet with one of the older ones assisting the boy. These positions are picked up by the same male dancers as they enter stage for the live final dance which starts off with these four dancers who are then joined by the women who rejoice in their return.



The Lamentation Scene

A dancer in a black lycra tube (reminiscent of the *ghonnella*, a form of women's head dress and shawl, or hooded cloak, unique to the islands of Malta) dancing alone on a black bench representing the feeling of dread and lamentation of the fishing community back in the village when the men cannot be found. The music track used is instrumental with the wailing sound of a female and seagull sounds.





Originally the idea was to film the dance and project the close-ups live amplified on to the large screen as a backdrop to the dancer dancing live on stage. However, besides the technical risks, this would have entailed additional human resources and equipment. It was later decided that shooting the dance on location at a beach locally and editing it to the music was more professional and effective in creating the atmosphere. We shot the footage at 5am on a deserted beach north of Malta as dawn broke and the sun stole over the hill breaking through the mist and the burnishing morning sky. The early morning light provided some mist rising from the sea creating the mood of the cold morning.

The concept for this projection was to capture details of the movements and facial expressions amplifying them and evoking emotion, besides portraying the atmosphere by the sea against which the dancer was shot. The challenge in this for the dancer was the precision required to be in synch with the movements on the video projected behind her.

Conclusion

X & X was developed using different media with a melting of these at times (Xenakis, 1985). Moving and still projected images were key to the design of X&X. The screen in theatre has a lure that can be overpowering (Moran 2010) and we were very much aware of this while devising X&X. The devising process and the feedback from the selected audience to whom the work-in-progress was shown made us discard some of the original ideas and projections as we experimented to get the right balance and mix of the different media without detracting the audience's attention from the live actor. Still images were used as a backdrop, providing a sense of location as well as an aesthetic scenographic element. Moving projected images, which also included faces, were mostly used on their own to provide important links. These were planned strategically to allow for costume changes since actors were playing more than one role. I concur with Moran's (2010) conclusion that moving images including human faces distract the audience's attention from the live performer, however, in the case of the dance Lamentation, the role of the screen close-ups was to amplify the live performer's facial expressions and highlight detail. On a huge stage, the screen made the dancer all alone on the bare stage seem even more lonely and desolate which was the effect we were after.

It is hard to tell how audiences process information when watching a multimedia production, much depends on their baggage and their culture; each spectator is offered an amalgamation of the different media so s/he can select what to focus on making this a highly individual spectatorial experience.

X&X (Xandru u X-Xixa) was the result of a process of collaboration between director, choreographer and media artists, a genuine melting of people and media, which made each component indispensable to the others.

Original concept by Isabelle Gatt and Peter Serracino Inglott
Produced and directed by Isabelle Gatt (Teatru Zazz)
Choreography by Sarah Vella and Caroline Carta
Music by Reuben Zahra
 Andreas Vollenweider (Birds of Tilmun)
Costume Maker Louie Noir
Actors/ Dancers: Claire Azzopardi, Karen Bartolo, Bennard Buttigieg, Danjel Sky Buttigieg,
Suzanne Soleil Buttigieg, Caroline Carta, Karl Cumbo and Simon Gravino.
Video and photography production by David Micallef
Cinematography and editing by Matthew Muscat Drago
2nd Unit Cinematography Andrea Grech
Set PA Lisa Abela
Backstage Crew (live): Samwel Buttigieg
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