

WORLD FILM LOCATIONS MALTA



Edited by Jean Pierre Borg and Charlie Cauchi





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WORLD FILM LOCATIONS MALTA

EDITORS

Jean Pierre Borg and Charlie Cauchi

SERIES EDITOR & DESIGN

Gabriel Solomons

CONTRIBUTORS

Giovanni Bonello
Marcelline Block
Rebecca Cremona
Guillaume Dreyfuss
Monika Maslowska
Jake Mayle
Kenneth Scicluna
Marc Zimmermann

LOCATION PHOTOGRAPHY

Jean Pierre Borg
Mark Cassar
Jake Kindred
Robert Racaru
Stefan Starface

LOCATION MAPS

Greg Orrom Swan



PUBLISHED BY

Intellect
The Mill, Parnall Road,
Fishponds, Bristol, BS16 3JG, UK
T: +44 (0) 117 9589910
F: +44 (0) 117 9589911
E: info@intellectbooks.com

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MALTA FILM COMMISSION

Bookends: Bus terminus (Mark Cassar)
This page: St John Street, Valletta (Jake Kindred)
Overleaf: On the set of *Gladiator* (2000)



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JEAN PIERRE BORG
AND CHARLIE CAUCHI



INTRODUCTION

World Film Locations Malta

IN A DISTINCT DEPARTURE FROM the other editions that make up the *World Film Locations* series, this book is concerned with an island rather than a city. Given Malta's diminutive size, both in terms of its population (approx. 420,000) and land mass (316 km²), we have re-shifted our focus to concentrate on Malta in its entirety, thereby also including the sister islands of Gozo, Comino and Cominotto. This book draws together essays from film scholars, film historians, film-makers, heritage conservationists and industry professionals, calling attention to significant films, cultural movements and key players in the process.

A little under a century ago, Malta's appearance on-screen was mainly influenced by its strategic position at the heart of the Mediterranean and its status as part of the British Empire. The islands therefore featured in a number of British films that focused on military operations, specifically those associated with World Wars I and II. After Malta gained its independence in 1964, productions originating from outside the United Kingdom also saw the benefits of using Malta as a filming location. While the types of genres became a little more varied, it was the water tank at Rinella that proved to be a draw. Here we must acknowledge the work of a number of key individuals, including Benjamin Hole, Lino Cassar, Paul Avellino, Nancy Calamatta and Ino Bonello, amongst others. However, it was Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, which was filmed in Malta in 1999 and released in 2000, that is generally seen to have reinvigorated Malta's film servicing industry, boosting Malta's cinematic presence in the process.

From *Gladiator* onwards, Malta made a concerted effort to attract more foreign productions to its shores, including the establishment of a film commission and the introduction of financial incentives. Since then, Malta has matured into a 'film friendly' island, successfully attracting a wide range of foreign productions, not solely because of the surface sea-facing water tanks, or its ideal climate, but also thanks to its versatile natural and architectural landscape. Although local film-making has been slow to take off, much change has taken place in recent years, with the introduction of national incentives and structural changes to support Malta's own film-making output.

In a book of this size, one can only offer a taster, rather than an exhaustive analysis, of film-making within the nation, be it foreign or Maltese. But we hope that through the examination of a broad range of film titles, alongside the more focused Spotlight Essays, that this publication will whet the appetite of locals, travellers and film enthusiasts alike. †

Jean Pierre Borg and Charlie Cauchi, Editors

MALTA

Island of the Imagination

Text by
**CHARLIE
CAUGH**

NETS, WOOD, PAINT, GRIT, GRAVEL – all have been applied to the sandy limestone surface of this island archipelago, and all in the name of cinema. Malta's rural and urban landscape has functioned as a veritable blank canvas, ready to be shaped by the film-makers that visit and to serve the requirements of their own particular narratives. Epic tales, adventure films, spy movies – the island has made many a generic transformation over the years. On occasion, Malta flickers on the big screen in all its natural glory and, albeit rarely, is even given the chance to play itself. But more often than not, the country acts as a surrogate for other places – either real or fantasy spaces, set in contemporary or distant times, often disguised to the point that it is rendered unrecognizable to those who know it well.

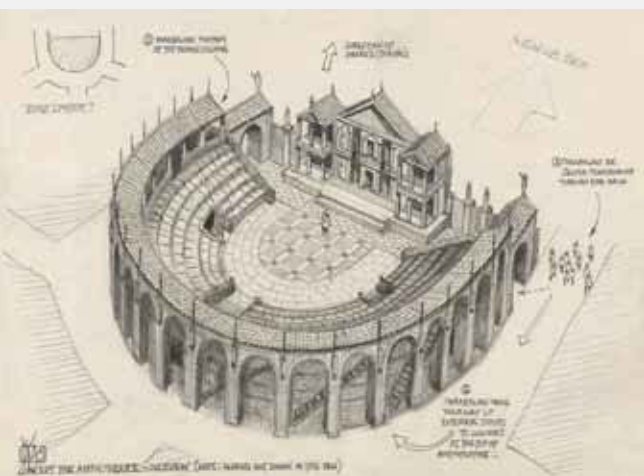
Writing as someone who has a strong connection with Malta, I find that my own cultural identity, age and life experiences can often conflict with the cinematic representation placed before me. At times running counter to my own lived-in knowledge, these on-screen manifestations lead to a desire to pinpoint each exact location and to unpick the geographic reality of each scene. When watching a film I know was shot on location in Malta, I occasionally find that I become more preoccupied with the off-screen spaces, with what lies beyond the image, rather than the image itself. What do these props, edits, camera angles conceal rather than reveal? Do not read my lack of engagement with the film as disinterest. Rather, the more difficult it is to verify a particular place can be seen as testament to the director's vision and, more importantly, the skills of the countless other individuals that make such transformations possible. And lest I forget, the versatile actor at the heart of it all: Malta.

My own emotional attachment aside, architect Conrad Thake describes Malta's landscape as being 'highly discontinuous in its physical structure, reflecting the diverse settlement patterns and

urban forms that were introduced over various centuries by Arab and later European cultures' (p.38). A palimpsest of past conquests and cultures, it is Malta's hybridity, its position between the East and the West that makes it suitable to convey the reality that it purports to represent. Take Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005) as a prime example; a tour de force for production designer Rick Carter, costume designer Joanna Johnston and cinematographer Janusz Kaminski, who are all incidentally close collaborators of the renowned director. The film's central premise has Mossad agents travel to Athens, Beirut, Nicosia, Rome, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and the West Bank to carry out their operation. In reality however, the production team barely used a fraction of the 316 km² that make up the Maltese islands.

In this case, certain aspects and features inherent to the chosen landscape were singled out and accentuated, while others were obscured or camouflaged. Either way, through the collaborative efforts and critical eye of the production team, each chosen space took on a personality of its own, demonstrating that objects, decor and colour can be an integral part of filming on location. To highlight a few examples, Valletta's baroque architecture is foregrounded to stand in for Rome; while Sliema, with its bustling seafront and intensely developed promenade of Bauhaus-esque apartment blocks, bears an uncanny resemblance to Tel Aviv – with some fine sand also thrown in (quite literally I expect) for good measure. Add a classic car here, some stay-press fabric there and, once you de-saturate the image, we have not only travelled to two completely different parts of the world, but both spaces have also transported the audience back in time to the 1970s.

Although *Munich* can be seen as a period drama, the island's rich history also attracts productions that are preoccupied with distant myths. The realist background that period films like *Munich* strive for are rejected in pictures like



Above left © Guy Hendrix Dyas / right © 2009 Mod Producciones

Gladiator (Ridley Scott, 2000), *Troy* (Wolfgang Peterson, 2004) and *Agora* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2009) in favour of something more spectacular. In search of a landscape that can reinforce the historical image and add ideological precision to the overall narrative, many productions have exploited Malta's classical antiquity to restage the past. It was *Gladiator* that reignited the trend for epic tent-pole pictures, harking back to the Hollywood of the 1950s and 1960s, when titles like *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956), *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959) and *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960) dominated the box office. Unlike these latter-day films however, many of the modern epics are able to successfully combine the real and the digital to re-create a historical setting. However, it is the construction of elaborate sets that adds to the splendour and spectacle. The transformation is not incantatory. It takes the involvement of a lot of skilled individuals for a production to take shape, and Malta has a history of providing artisanal work of a high standard. One need only look to *Agora* and the large-scale set pieces that dominate the image as confirmation of the incredible craftsmanship that is available on the island. The film proved to be a great opportunity to showcase local talent.

Besides Malta's ability to flaunt its fluid identity, when disrobed, Malta's anatomy is often used to accentuate its exoticism. The island's rocky beaches and seascapes, bathed in a golden light, have been incorporated into many productions, though mostly as an anonymous background filler. 'I did not fly all the way from New York

City to wherever the f#\$k we are...,' shrieks Amber (Madonna) in *Swept Away* (Guy Ritchie, 2002). In a sense, this loud-mouthed American has a point – the specificities of the location are skirted over in this film (in this particular scene, the 'wherever' is Vittoriosa Waterfront) and in many others, to exploit the standard myth of the idyllic Mediterranean setting. In contrast to the picturesque depictions, when Malta is named it is usually in the context of World War II or the British Empire. Given Malta's crucial position during World War II, it is understandable that film-makers would connect Malta to this turbulent time in history, either tackling it explicitly in films like *Malta Story* (Brian Desmond Hurst, 1953), or by embedding it in the narrative to add context.

Nevertheless, it is very rare that Malta's national history and contemporary social issues make their way on-screen. But this is slowly starting to change, with film-makers, screenwriters and artists who inhabit the island (either as nationals or citizens) starting to produce work that is told from an internal viewpoint. Local cinematic activity has already started to give rise to a number of productions that are not only rooted in this geographical context, but also embrace Malta's identity, traditions and characteristics. Examples to date include the work of Rebecca Cremona, Kenneth Scicluna, Mark Dingli, Martin Bonnici, Pierre Ellul, Bettina Hutschek, Jean Pierre Magro, Monika Maslowska, Joshua Cassar Gaspar, and many others whose imaginations have been sparked by this little island, allowing audiences to engage with it through cinema in new and exciting ways. ✚

MALTA

maps are only to be taken as approximates



MALTA LOCATIONS

VALLETTA

MEDITERRANEAN SEA



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MALTA STORY (1953)
The Royal Opera House, Republic Street, Valletta
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2.
TREASURE IN MALTA (1963)
Bus Terminus, Valletta
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3.
GIUSEPPI (1972)
Il-Mandraġġ, Valletta
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EYEWITNESS (1973)
Upper Barrakka Lift, Valletta
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A DIFFERENT LOYALTY (2004)
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MUNICH (2005)
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AGORA (2009)
Valletta Ditch, Valletta
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PLANGENT RAIN/DAQQET IX-XITA (2010)
Strait Street, Valletta
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THE DEVIL'S DOUBLE (2011)
St John Street, Valletta
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12.
WORLD WAR Z (2013)
St Dominic Street, Valletta
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THE CUT (2014)
East Street, Valletta
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MALTA STORY (1953)

LOCATION

The Royal Opera House, Republic Str., Valletta



DURING HIS NIGHT-TIME DESCENT on Maltese land, RAF pilot Lt Peter Ross (Alec Guinness) turns to his flight companion Eden (Hugh Burden) and says, 'I would like to see Malta in daylight. I believe there's some very interesting Megalithic remains.' 'Well,' Eden wistfully replies, 'there are certainly some very interesting remains on Malta nowadays, Megalithic or otherwise.' Set against a backdrop of rubble and rations, director Brian Desmond Hurst evocatively illustrates the hardship suffered by the Maltese during World War II by interweaving authentic locations and archival footage. *Malta Story* was filmed and released just over a decade after the Siege of Malta, a battle that occurred between Allied and Axis forces from 1940 to 1942. The film's temporal setting is 1942, when Malta, still a British colony, suffered severe bombardment by Axis aircraft. The courage of the Maltese did not go unnoticed, that very year King George VI awarded Malta the George Cross for bravery. This sequence focuses on Ross and his inamorata Maria (Muriel Pavlow), who have joined the throng on the ruins of the once majestic Royal Opera House to listen to Governor Gort broadcast this news to the nation. The site was itself a casualty of war. Situated in Valletta, the Opera House was designed by British architect Edward Middleton Barry in the late 1800s. Initially it was a prestigious performance venue: this neoclassical structure catering mainly to Malta's elite. In fact, Guinness appeared there in 1939, when he played Hamlet in a production staged by the Old Vic Theatre. After its wartime destruction however, the Opera House remained derelict until it was redesigned by Renzo Piano and renovated in 2013. This image, heavy with the pains of the past, lies in stark contrast to the Valletta of now, a city reimaged, standing out on a global stage of arts and culture. ➔ **Charlie Cauchi**

Photo © Jean Pierre Borg

Directed by Brian Desmond Hurst

Scene description: Crowds gather as Governor Lord Gort speaks to the nation

Timecode for scene: 0:39:19 – 0:39:27



TREASURE IN MALTA (1963)

LOCATION

Bus Terminus, Valletta



THE GIANT MALTESE CROSS decorating the long-lost Kingsway Gate overlooking traditional multicoloured Maltese buses, all neatly organized around the imposing Tritons Fountain, is a carefully choreographed postcard of Valletta in the 1960s: a Valletta which is no more. The buses have been replaced by modern ones, while the entrance to the city is now a Renzo Piano work of art. The scene is set for yet another chase sequence in which Tom (Aidan Mompalao de Piro) and Sukie (Marylu Coppini née Ripard) seek to rescue their father, abducted by a comic trio of crooks intent on nabbing the legendary golden statue of Calypso. Jiminy (Mario Debono), a local boy, becomes their sidekick and guide, as the children try to save the day. Like all the other films made by the Children's Film Foundation, *Treasure in Malta* is an enjoyable family adventure promoting values such as team work. However, having been generously supported by the Malta Tourist Board, *Treasure in Malta* practically became a two-hour advertising campaign, displaying stunning Maltese landmarks and traditions. Long before acknowledging or harnessing the modern concept of screen tourism, the Board understood the potential of showing Malta on-screen in a film that would reach over thirty countries and be dubbed in a dozen different languages. *Treasure in Malta* is nothing short of a time capsule and an evocative testament to the beauty of the Maltese islands. ♣️ **Jean Pierre Borg**

Photo © Mark Cassar