

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT



From left: A scene showing young Noel (Jad Xuereb) with his father Richard (Gianni Selvaggi) speaking to Roger Senior (Joseph Zammit). PHOTO: SHADEENA ENTERTAINMENT 2020

Is-Sriep reviewed: a film on corruptions old and new

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Is-Sriep Regghu Saru Velenuzi is essentially a film about Malta's sordid past and sullied present.

Based on Alex Vella Gera's namesake novel, the plot centres on the attempted assassination of former Maltese prime minister Dom Mintoff.

Directed by Martin Bonnici with a screenplay by Teodor Reljic, the film, differing from its source material, places this plotline at its centre, emerging as Malta's first political thriller.

The film was financed through the National Book Council's Film Adaptation Fund, taking on the tall order of adapting Vella Gera's mammoth, prize-winning work.

Is-Sriep is set in Malta in 1984 and follows Noel Sammut Petri (Chris Galea) whose life as a translator in Brussels comes to a halt when he returns to Malta for his mother's (Tina Rizzo) funeral.

While in Malta, old connections with the Tabone family (Erica Muscat, Joseph Zammit, Joe Azzopardi and Theresa Gauci) are rekindled and questions about his father's (Gianni Selvaggi) disappearance in 1984 come back to haunt him.

Is-Sriep also follows Richard Sammut Petri's (Selvaggi) story,

depicting how a loving husband and father was slowly corrupted by an underground group of agitators (Joseph Zammit, Paul Portelli) who convince him to lead an assassination attempt on Malta's then prime minister Dom Mintoff.

The film in general is a mixed bag, but certainly a step in the right direction for local film productions. It is now the film future productions must top and whose standard must be surpassed.

Where it shines is in its subject matter – its plot amid the historical turmoil is still fresh in the minds of many of its viewers, and shrouded in infamy in the minds of others. The film may indeed prove successful with respect to its intention of instigating discussion about such a pivotal period of Maltese history.

With a plot so teeming with potential, one wonders what could have become of this film had it been afforded a bigger budget or non-pandemic conditions. Nevertheless, perhaps in part due to the richness of the story it portrays, some issues in its execution make for a less immersive viewing experience.

It is difficult to get close to the characters and their troubles. I felt throughout the film that I was being relayed information about them and their situations,

but I could not empathise with any of them, especially Noel.

Grappling with the unexplained disappearance of his father from his life, Noel's character is shown to us haunted by his spectre, unable to sleep soundly due to a recurring nightmare. We are only shown that he is haunted during those sleepless scenes; we only ever get a glimpse of his inner turmoil. It is hard to make the connection between this Noel and the one we see at the end of the film.

Noel's relationship with Frances is slightly terse and not particularly interesting. It strikes me that their relationship was more relevant to the book than the film, where the two Noels differ considerably.

An interesting feature of the film is its depiction of the perennial and fought language debate often meted out across the island. It is a debate with several underlying factors, from class to colonialism, often incurring the ire of purists and private school-types alike.

In the film, the language issue is addressed somewhat scantily, somewhat stereotypically (Roger Senior's wife is a case in point), but otherwise enough to simply highlight it. It adds barely anything to Noel's character, despite him purporting that speaking

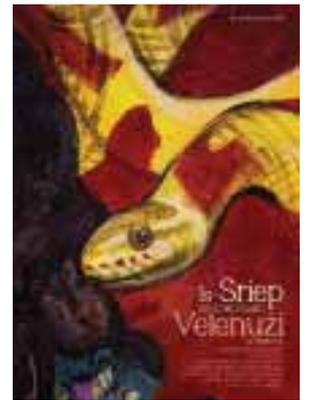
Maltese is a conscious choice he is making in spite of his English-speaking company.

In this film we are told much more than we are shown. One would have expected a more difficult viewing considering the subject matter and the genre. We are told of a purported socialist dystopia with people of opposing factions being beaten in the streets, one of whom was young Noel, and also that there is no food in shops to buy. While on the sidelines we hear a drive-by shooting under way while Richard and Roger Senior are speaking at a bar, but we see none of it.

"A film about Malta's sordid past and sullied present"

While it is not a requisite that we see absolutely every piece of the narrative, and that sometimes placing audiences on the sidelines may be the right move (I felt this worked well in the drive-by scene), some more visual cues to contextualise and rarefy the dialogue may have gone a long way. I felt that most of this film was described but not experienced.

Some scenes, on the other hand, were very well executed,



The film poster of *Is-Sriep Regghu Saru Velenuzi*

like the entire sequence outside Mintoff's house where Selvaggi's portrayal of Richard stood out considerably.

The brand of corruption portrayed in *Is-Sriep* is poignantly recognisable. From the audience sniggering at the blackouts in the film after having experienced a couple not long before, to hearing the modern day businessmen spew the cynical line "make hay while the sun shines", it is made clear in the film that the malaises of our modern days have a root in our past, and that those who do not know the past are doomed to repeat it. Showing that the corruption of old has trickled into the present was a successful feature of the film.

The future looks bright for local film productions if this is the standard we can build on. The film was a valiant effort in the right direction, not without its limitations and issues, but certainly not without the right spirit. I look forward to the productions to come.