

INTERVIEW.

OF FIDDLES, FLAIR AND TOMFOOLERY

UK-BASED ACTOR CHRIS DINGLI LIVES AND WORKS IN LONDON BUT REGULARLY RETURNS TO MALTA TO WOW AUDIENCES IN ONE CULTURAL INITIATIVE OR ANOTHER - THE MOST RECENT OF WHICH WAS THE COMEDY KNIGHTS' 12 MONTHS OF FUNNY OVER THE FESTIVE SEASON. HE TELLS JO CARUANA ABOUT HIS ADORATION FOR ALL THINGS THEATRICAL, AS WELL AS HIS UNADULTERATED PENCHANT FOR PIZZA AND ICE-CREAM.

You can't help but look up to Chris Dingli. And no, that's not because he is particularly tall (he isn't), but because he is one of the most talented and versatile performers Malta has ever produced.

Having won over local audiences in his late teens and early 20s, Chris moved to the UK 11 years ago to take his theatrical career to the next level. He trained classically at Webber Douglas, one of London's top drama schools, and has since played lead roles from Shakespeare and other major playwrights in London theatres, as well as across the UK and in Europe, whilst working on film and TV with some of the world's most recognisable names. He now divides his time between Malta and London, where he lives with his wife and baby daughter.

In Malta he is known for his popular comedy shows, the improvised Dingle Bells Malcolm Smells series with Malcolm Galea and, more recently, the satirical sketch show Comedy Knights.

His latest circus show, The Hogwallops, will tour the UK and Europe in 2015.

Meanwhile, as an accomplished violist, Chris has played as a soloist and with orchestras in London, Italy, Malta and Edinburgh. He has played as a guest with the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra and on London's Capital Radio.

Currently, Chris has several very exciting projects on the go too. There's the film Hackney's Finest - a darkly-comic British thriller in which he plays Boris, a drug-crazed gun for hire - which will be released in cinemas later this year.

"Plus, I'm looking forward to writing, producing and acting in more Comedy Knights' productions," he says with a smile. "Our Christmas show was more successful than we ever imagined it would be. We have some opportunities to create more shows and I'm looking forward to making more people laugh at our brand of humour and satire."

Finally, Chris is exploring the possibility of revisiting the last project he worked on before leaving Malta in 2004. It is an initiative that will doubtlessly thrill his local fans, not least because it would mean revisiting a past collaboration that proved very popular. "I'd be teaming up with Malcolm Galea again, which is one of my favourite things in life ever... apart from a particular type of ice-cream that is (see below!)," he grins.

What is your earliest memory of theatre?

Going to see the annual MADC panto every year. I remember being transfixed by the story and terrified of the baddies. One year, I made it onto the stage in the kiddies' scene. The dame interviewed me and made a joke I didn't understand. I was then sent backstage with an actor, and I remember being very impressed with what the back of the set looked like. The wooden struts holding scenery in place, the other actors standing around in costume; it was somehow even more magical than what was going on on stage!



Chris Dingli playing Boris in Hackney's Finest

The Manoel Theatre's backstage seemed vast to me at the time. As a performer, I remember being in a school play in Grade 6, and deliberately pretending to slip and fall to get a laugh. I was privately very satisfied when I did.

Can you remember the day you knew theatre would be the career path for you?

I was in the sixth form soirée and suddenly, girls were

interested in me. I took note of that. Seriously speaking, it was more a case of slowly realising that I couldn't imagine doing anything else for the rest of my life.

I suppose early on it was people like Alan Montanaro and Edward Mercieca who inspired me, then later on people like Tony Bezzina, Chris Gatt, Jes Camilleri and John Rosser. The influence of directors like Chris and Tony was huge, especially Tony. I remain thankful for the opportunities he gave me as a young actor to this day.

Indirectly, then, my music tutor Joachim Atanassov. Much of my professional theatre work in the UK is that of an actor-musician. Ironically, even though I chose acting over music, I still play for a living. If he hadn't pushed me so hard to practise and improve as a musician when I was young, I'd have struggled later on in life. I also played the viola to earn money in between acting jobs.

What have been the highlights of your career so far?

The sixth form soirée at Junior College was a turning point for me. Until then, I was determined to become a professional musician. I used to play music at a fairly high level, but somehow, creating something and then performing it in the soirée gave me a thrill I hadn't felt as a musician. Another key moment was my first MADC panto. This



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confirmed that theatre was my calling. I was hooked from then on.

My first experience outside of Malta was my time at drama school - two of the most difficult and yet rewarding and happy years of my life. My first job was touring the UK with a production of *Terms of Endearment*. That was a milestone. I got to experience what it is like to travel with a production, live out of a suitcase in a different town every week, and work in some of the UK's most famous theatres with some very well-known, talented and respected people.

How do you spend your down time?

I'm a TV series geek and spend way too much time watching them, and then reading about them in online blogs. I also spend way too much time reading articles on the AV Club website (a TV fan site). Actually, I do read quite a bit offline too. I read approximately a book a week. The kind of book depends on the season: winter is the time for fantasy stories, summer for pulp fiction, spring and autumn are non-fiction.

What's your favourite thing in your whole house?

My viola. I'd literally risk my life to save it.

If you could perform at any venue in the world, and with anyone, who would you pick and why?

There are so many actors, musicians and directors that I'd love to work with, I really can't choose. So, for the sake of fulfilling a childhood fantasy of mine, I'm going with Monty Python at the Hollywood Bowl or at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane.

If you were advising a friend to see one annual cultural event anywhere in the world, what would it be and why?

Hey, I'm a working actor. Come and see my next show! And bring a friend. Don't buy the cheap seats.

What upcoming local event are you most looking forward to?

The next instalment from *Comedy Knights* - which I am part of - of course.

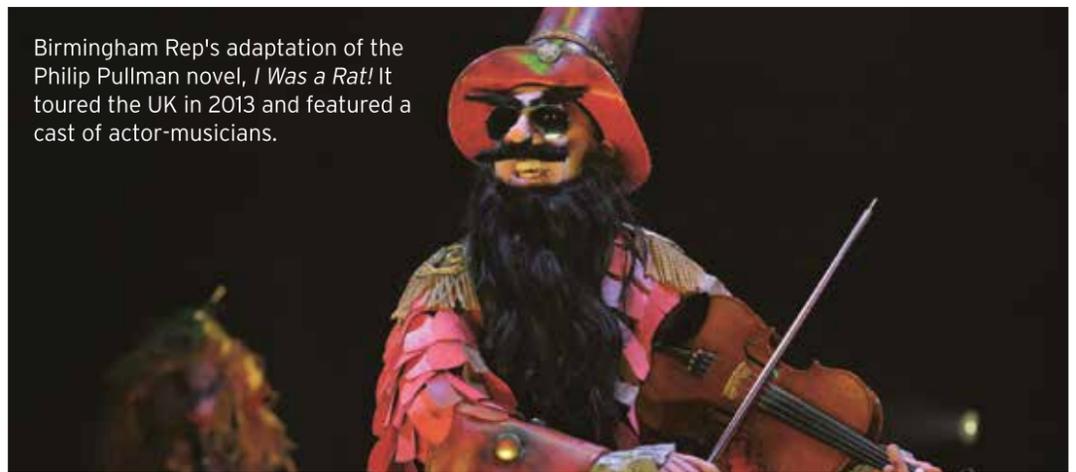
What would your last meal be?

A calzone pizza with cherry bakewell tarts and a large tub of Ben & Jerry's Phishfood ice-cream, plus an espresso. And a limoncello. Or two.

What would you never buy?

I loathe shopping but, if you force me to mention an item that I would never buy above all else, I'll say a tool kit. I'm terrible at DIY and a big believer in DFY - Done For You. In fact, as I write, a man is being paid to hook up our new washing machine.

Birmingham Rep's adaptation of the Philip Pullman novel, *I Was a Rat!* It toured the UK in 2013 and featured a cast of actor-musicians.



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