

On the ball



*Love football? Like a laugh? Intrigued by the idea of an artistic and raucous combination of the two? Well then you're in for a treat, as popular play *God's Official* returns for its third round of hilarity. **Jo Caruana** interviews the show's downtrodden referee, **Chris Dingli**.*

Chris Dingli is to Maltese comedy what *te fit-tazza* is to *pastizzi* – a bloomin' good partnership. In fact, if you're a comedy fan, then you're likely to have seen quite a lot of Dingli in the past couple of years. He is well-known for writing and performing in the hit *Comedy Knights* spectacle, and recently joined renowned fellow comic Malcolm Galea on stage for a *One Night Comedy Special* that sold out in under 48 hours. Plus, it's only a few months since his one-man show *Bad Dad* had parents and non-parents alike rolling in the aisles.

"All of this is a very good sign for comedy in Malta," says Chris, who recently returned to Malta to work in the genre full time. "I'm striving to broaden the stand up comedy scene here, both as comedian and

promoter. It's still in its early stages and the number of comedians and venues available are very limited, but it's gaining popularity and our stand up comedy evenings are always full."

The comic stresses that he'd like to encourage more budding Maltese comedians to try out stand up comedy. "Many people seem to be too scared to try it out, thinking that if nobody laughs then that will be the most terrible thing in the world. Trust me, it isn't! Our audiences are friendly and out to have a good time. If anything, if they know that you're new to the game, they're likely to be even more supportive!"

Meanwhile, fans will be pleased to know that Chris is returning to his roots as an actor (while keeping his comedy crown on too) in the upcoming run of hit show God's Official.

Eager theatre-goers will probably remember God's Official from its past performances, most recently in 2008. Dingli has actually watched the play twice before and, both times, says he was very envious of the actors involved. "They seemed to be having so much fun performing, and the play itself was simply brilliant," he says. "I've always wanted to perform in it, so when I was asked to join the cast not only was it a no brainer, it was also a little dream come true for me."

So, now, he'll be part of the iconic football-loving trio, which will also be made up of Steve Casaletto and John Montanaro. The team – which is being led by Mostly Harmless Productions, in conjunction with Mellow Drama, and being directed by James Calvert – thought it was time for the show to make a comeback.

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"If anything, the play is even more relevant today than it was back then, with the way the world of football has developed. So much so the script is

being made into a film to be released shortly," Chris says.

The play itself tells the tale of two passionate football fans – Degsy and Cliff – who are devastated to see the team they love relegated following some dodgy officiating on the last day of the season.

For the hot-headed Degsy, who is already struggling to cope with the break up of his long-term relationship, this blatant injustice is the final straw. So he decides to take matters into his own hands – by kidnapping the referee (Chris). What ensues is a laugh-out-loud adventure, as the hugely incompetent kidnappers struggle to come to terms with the situation.



Chris Dingli

According to Chris, the hilarious the show is famous and it all boils down to the fact that the script (written by acclaimed Liverpool playwright Robert Farquhar) is very, very funny, with well-defined and relatable characters, witty lines and ridiculous situations. "Every time I've seen this play performed, the audience fell about laughing," the actor continues. "There are few plays that can elicit such constant, raucous laughter but this is one of them."

But, while the artsy sorts out there might be wondering what football could possibly bring to the world of theatre, Chris has reassuring words to share. "Here's the thing about football and this play. If you, like myself, don't particularly follow or care about football, your enjoyment of the piece won't be diminished. Yes, there are many references to football, and funny ones too, but they come out of the situation rather than from any special knowledge of the game."

For those people who do follow football, though, there are a few Easter eggs hidden in the play. They're little jokes and asides that football lovers will enjoy, but Chris assures me that, if he understands them, so will most people. "One of the things I love about this play is that it is clearly written by someone who adores football. The way the characters speak about it is so evocative, that it has encouraged me look at the beautiful game a different way. Just listening to these characters speak about football so passionately is something I'm sure a lot of people will relate to," he says.

Audiences are also sure to enjoy the combination of three of Malta's best-known comic talents – Chris, Steve and John. In fact, the actors themselves are having quite a hard time keeping a straight face in rehearsals.

"John and Steve know their characters very well as they've both performed this play before, and that shows. Their delivery and comic timing in rehearsal is impeccable. I can only imagine how good they will be in front of an audience."

As for Chris, he won't just be keeping us amused in this show, but in several others to come – after God's Official he'll be doing another run of one-man comedy Bad Dad, before it transfers for a London run. "That will be performed in a little venue in Strait Street, Valletta, throughout May and June," he says. He's also shooting a dramatised documentary about the Britannic, the sister ship to the Titanic. And, of course, that's all in addition to his daily radio show, The Big Drive Home on XFM.

"But, first up, I am keeping my eye firmly on the ball for this one – it's a play I am really enjoying, and one I know audiences will love too. It's genuinely hilarious. I know people say that all the time about shows they're promoting, but this show will actually leave you gasping for breath, with tears of laughter pouring down your face," he concludes, with a grin.

God's Official runs on Friday and Saturday and on April 15, 16, 22 and 23 at 8pm at the Bluebox Theatre, Msida. Tickets are available online.

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