

“Meet Caravaggio”

Docudrama Storyline – ©St. John’s Co-Cathedral Foundation

This document presents an outline of the storyline highlighting the main events of Caravaggio’s sojourn in Malta which shall be the basis of the content of the docudrama called ‘Meet Caravaggio’. A detailed script will be provided once the awarded tender contract is signed.

Event 1 – Murder in Rome

May 1606

Caravaggio duels with sword against Ranuccio Tomassoni in the Campo Marzio area, Rome.

During the fight, Tomassoni is mortally wounded, with Caravaggio fleeing the scene and later being accused of murder, a charge that can cost him his own life. He travels to Naples.

Event 2 – Arrival in Malta

July 1607

After running away and settling in Naples for a time, Caravaggio sails to Malta. With the assistance of contact he may have had with members of the Order of St John, he travelled to Malta on a galley of the Order looking for a fresh start. While entering the Grand Harbour, he would see bodies dangling from the gallows on the left-hand side. This scene was a warning to Caravaggio that there was a rigid rule of law and that he would have to control his violent temper, or he might land the same fate.

Event 3 – Entering St John’s Co-Cathedral

1607

Caravaggio walks towards St John’s Church, the Conventual church of the knights.

Caravaggio would enter the church for the first time, he reacts to the interior. There he meets the Grand Prior, the Grand Master and other members of the Order.

Event 4 – Caravaggio Knighted

July 1608

Caravaggio is initiated into the Order. He paints the image of St Jerome and another two paintings for members of the Order. Caravaggio gains the favour of the Grand Master and was commissioned to paint his portrait Grand Master Wignacourt writes for permission to

the Pope, to accept him into the Order despite the artist’s homicide charge. After a year he is knighted, and the Grand Master places a gold chain and eight-pointed cross around his neck. He can now carry a sword. Caravaggio’s knighthood is unusual, given his chequered past. In Malta, he initially respects the Order’s vows of obedience, hoping that this could help him get a pardon from the Pope.

Event 5 – Michelangelo paints his Malta masterpieces

1608

For his knighthood, Caravaggio paints Malta’s famous Beheading of St John, the only piece the artist ever signed. Caravaggio has come a long way from struggling to make a living and a name for himself as an artist in Rome. His Bacchus images and gypsy card sharps involved into the most striking images. He masters the use of the chiaroscuro to emphasis the realism for which he became famous.

Event 6 – Back in trouble

August 1608

Despite being made a Knight of the Order, Caravaggio lands himself in trouble again. Accompanied by another two knights, he shows up at a Knight’s house in Valletta, furious that he has not been invited for a social gathering. They break down the door and enter the palazzo, where music is playing, and guests are dressed up for the occasion. A fight breaks out, they struggle, bumping into a waiter who drops his tray with glasses. In the end, a senior member of the Order is seriously injured. Caravaggio and the other two knights flee from the scene.

Event 7 – Arrested and imprisoned

August 1608

Caravaggio is arrested and imprisoned at Fort St Angelo. The process would have started with having him shackled, being led along the streets by two armed guards. He would then be placed into a dark cell, awaiting proceedings.

Event 8 – Prison break

September 1608

Caravaggio manages to escape with help from unknown friends. Caravaggio could never have escaped without help. In fact, he was the first person to manage to escape from the heavily guarded fort. It is believed that a rope was thrown into his cell, which he used to climb up to the window. Caravaggio would have climbed down the fortifications and meeting up

with a fisherman who is waiting for him at the shore. He climbs into the boat and the fisherman starts rowing out to sea, towards a waiting ship. The real circumstances behind his escape remain unclear.

Event 9 – Disgraced and defrocked, but his legacy lives on

December 1608

Caravaggio is expelled from the Order. Declared a 'foul and rotten limb' of the Order, he is stripped of his knighthood, though in absentia, since he had already fled the island. The disrobement ceremony takes place in the oratory beneath his own painting of the Beheading of St John. A number of knights perform the ceremony, stripping a black tunic with eight-pointed cross from a stool. Caravaggio can no longer call himself a knight.
