

ILIAS G. MIKONIATIS

THE GREEK WAR OF INDEPENDENCE ON THE LONDON
STAGE 1821-1833

[ΛΕΥΚΗ ΣΕΛΙΔΑ]

The Greek War of Independence was the source of much inspiration on the London stage. Almost every year between 1821-1833 there was at least one play which had subject-matter connected in some way with the Greek cause.

On Monday, 19th November, 1821 «an entirely new grand Melo-Drama, interspersed with song, dance, action and characteristic combats» was performed at the Coburg Theatre. It was entitled *The Greeks and the Turks; or The Intrepidity of Jemmy, Jerry, and a British Tar* (plate 1).¹ Though the libretto, written and arranged for stage presentation by J. H. Amherst, has not survived, we can deduce from the title and the information given in the playbill, that the central theme was the conflict between Greeks and Turks in the environment of Salonica, a city harbour, which during that time was the most important in the Ottoman Empire, second only to Constantinople. The popular theatrical types Jemmy and Jerry were taking part in the play under the command of their grandmother Fan Fireproof, «ardent in the cause of Greece and universal Liberty». An English Tar shipwrecked off the coast of Salonica, played by T. P. Cooke who introduced his incomparable naval hornpipe, was another character in the play, connecting the Greek revolution with the liberal feelings of the British people. The scenery was by C. Tomkins (d.-1844) and Clarkson Stanfield (1793-1867), and it ran the gamut of the Romantic picturesque: mountains, caves, sea-view by moonlight, harems and oriental dwellings. Stanfield had been in the navy and his marine scenery was outstanding. He was also an inventive machinist. All these talents are well echoed in what is described in the playbill as «a grand view of the sea, and a naval engagement, to effect which, the whole of the stage will represent waves in motion, a fort bombarding and a Grecian fleet in action». In the show there were also «a distant view of the Bay of Salonica» and «the interior of the Fort at Salonica», probably adapted, as was usually the practice,

1. Playbill, 19/11/1821. British Library.

from topographical drawings or prints. The book by Henry Holland *Travels in the Ionian Isles, Albania, Thessaly, Macedonia, &c, During the Years 1812 and 1813, London 1815*, must have proved indispensable to both playwright and scenographers. It is a book which conducts the reader mainly to northern Greece, and pays more attention to Modern than Ancient Greece.² Stanfield at least should have had knowledge of it, because he had made a print copying one of the book's illustrations namely that of the «Seraglio of Suli»,³ under the new title «The Rocks of Suli».⁴

In Holland's book there is also a very interesting account of Ali Pasha's government and a description of the landscape of his dominion in Epirus. Among the engravings in the book there are two of the capital Ioannina. The play-goers saw similar representations at Covent Garden, painted as stage scenery by the Grieves and Hodgins the younger for J. H. Payne's *Ali Pacha; or The Signet Ring*.⁵ This was performed on Saturday October 19th, 1822.⁶ In scene I of act I there was «on the right of the audience the city of Yannina stretching out in perspective along the borders of a large lake. On the left a chain of rocks. In the centre of the lake an island, with a fortress upon it».⁷ The main theme of the play is the last days of Ali Pasha, the bloodthirsty despot of Epirus, who had become notorious throughout Europe. However the cause of the Greek liberty is present in the whole play. Words such as «Liberty and vengeance!» (act I, scene I) are said by Zenocles, a Suliot chief and central hero of the piece, as well as admonitions of the type «Sons of heroes start from your lethargy! Crush the insulters of the land of glory, show the expecting world that Greece is not extinct, and give some future Homer themes for a mightier Iliad» (act I, scene III).

2. For a description of Salonica, its inhabitants and its environment see pp. 311-332.

3. Between pp. 450-451.

4. THE ROCKS OF SULI.

-Drawn by C. Stanfield A.R.A. from a sketch of Dr Holland.

-Engraved by J. Cousen.

5. The play was written by J. H. Payne and altered by J. K. Planché with additional songs. See Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama 1660-1900*, Cambridge, 1955, vol. IV, p. 377. It was published in Dolby's *British Theatre 1823-1825*, vol. XI, 2.

6. Playbill, 19/10/1822. Bodleian Library.

7. Act I, scene I. Dolby's p. 9.

The closing scene, too, depicted the triumph of Greeks, as Zenocles was appearing amid the flaming ruins of Ali's palace with the standard of liberty. «Mr Payne», we read in the critical remarks which preface the Dolby's edition of the play, «availed himself of the temporary notoriety of Ali Pacha, and the popularity of the Greek cause to produce this neatly executed trifle».

In England this sympathy for the Greek revolutionaries took concrete form with the formation of the London Greek Committee on 3rd March 1823, which continued active for about two years. That committee displayed much energy: for months philhellenic articles were sent to the London and provincial papers and banquets and exhibitions were organized.

On Monday, 24th November 1823 a «New Greek Melo-Drama» entitled *Lazaria the Greek; or The Archon's Daughter* (plate 2)⁸ was staged at the Coburg Theatre. It was under the immediate patronage of the Committee. In the playbill of the première and under the heading «Greek Cause» Londoners read the following: «The great struggle in which the Greek Nation is engaged, has occupied the attention of every friend of humanity, and every heart imbued with honour and sensibility, echoes these words, GREECE is fighting for LIBERTY! All mankind declare the numerous deeds of COURAGE and VALOUR achieved by this Brave People, deserve to be recorded in letters of GOLD, and handed down to posterity as worthy [of] their great Ancestors. The Manager of the ROYAL COBURG THEATRE, impressed with the universal feeling which pervades all classes of Society in behalf of that unfortunate Land, and ever anxious to forward the interest of that virtuous and laudable Cause, has rendered his Stage the vehicle for exciting public interest, in their behalf, by the production of a SPLENDID GREEK MELO-DRAMA under the IMMEDIATE PATRONAGE of the Noblemen and Gentlemen forming the Greek Committee».

However not only was there a direct appeal to the audience in favour of the Greek revolution, but also the story, though we do not today know the text, must have been full of passages in the same spirit. The hero Demetrius Lazaria, a Greek slave, would have been involved in thrilling situations with plenty of patriotic action. The scenery was by Wilkins, Phillips and R. Jones, and among other scenes a

8. Playbill, 24/11/1823. British Library.

bazaar, splendid gardens, the court of the Vizier, prisons, and a dungeon in the Acropolis (sic) were introduced. In those Romantic surroundings an allegorical ballet dedicated to liberty and, of course, desperate combats were performed. Finally the catharsis came with the triumph of the patriotic cause and the total defeat of the Turks.

Only a week later, 1st December 1823, another melodrama was announced at the same theatre. It was J. Dobbs's *Petraki Germano; or Almanzar the Traitor*,⁹ based this time on the heroic deeds of the people of Laconia during the first days of the revolution. A quotation from the *History of Modern Greece, London 1823*, on the top of the playbill shows that the playwrights of historical melodramas took material from different sources. It reads as follows: «The mountaineers of Tayyeta overturned in a delirium of transport the Trophies of dishonour with which its barbarous Conquerors had polluted its Soil, they were the first to give impulse to all the rest of the Provinces and to rekindle the Sacred Flame of Liberty. Sparta may take honour to herself for having preserved even to this day, among her Offspring, some few Men who possess all the heroic Spirit of their Fathers».

Contributors to the stage presentation were the same people as in the *Lazaria the Greek*. Leclercq directed the whole production. Jones painted the «fortifications and distant view of Laconia by moonlight», Phillips «a grand hall of Council», and Wilkins «a rocky Amphitheatre», where an invocation Hymn and Chorus were introduced. There were also other Romantic settings: «A view of Missatra» (sic), and «interior of the Cave of Candia», where a desperate combat between Maaz and Omar—two heroes of the play—took place.

After the Coburg and Covent Garden it was inevitably the turn of Drury Lane to offer its stage for a Greek melodrama. *The Revolt of the Greeks; or The Maid of Athens*,¹⁰ written by C. E. Walker, was acted for the first time on 10th June 1824. It seems probable that it was presented on the occasion of Lord Byron's recent death at Messolonghi on

9. Playbill, 1/12/1823. British Library.

10. Playbill, 10/6/1824. Bodleian Library. It was acted 18 times until July 14th 1824, and repeated one more time in the new season, on Nov. 27th 1824. The manuscript of the play submitted to the licenser is preserved in *Lord Chamberlain's Plays*, vol. III, May-July 1824. See British Museum, *Catalogue of Additions to Manuscripts Plays Submitted to the Lord Chamberlain 1824-1851*, London, 1964, p. 3, 42867 (2).

19th April. The poet had been member of the Drury Lane Committee of Management from its reopening in 1812 until 1816. It is not only the second part of the title, which brings to mind his well-known poem,¹¹ but also, according to the playbill, «in the course of the piece the celebrated song of *Sons of the Greeks, arise*, the words by the Late Right Honourable Lord Byron» was heard.¹²

The plot turns upon the efforts of Ida, the Maid of Athens,¹³ to help the escape of her father from the prison of the Pasha, where he had been confined for a long time. This is at last accomplished by the revolt of the Greeks who overcome the tyrant and rase the citadel to the ground. The scenery presented to the audience the «fortifications of Athens» and «the exterior of the Pasha's palace with a view of the sea and distant islands» painted by G. Marinari, «a chamber in the Pasha's palace with distant view of the Acropolis» and «a cavern on the sea shore by moonlight» painted by David Roberts, while Andrews had designed the «interior of a Turkish cottage».

The following notice for the play appeared in *The Drama*:¹⁴ «We are sorry to see Mr Walker who has capabilities for a much higher walk of dramatic writing, employing his talents on the formation of bombastical melodramas. Let him bring forth the best of its kind-what fame can he hope to acquire, what profit can he expect to reap. We advise him to turn his thoughts to something of a most solid description, and leave this puerile sort of authorship, these rakings of the dramatic dung-hills to Mr Barrymore and other equally celebrated caterers of the Minor-houses».

This is a judgement that reflects the position of melodrama in the early nineteenth century. However, although it was attacked on many fronts in it «consisted all that was vital and popular in the theatrical world». It was Romantic in character and attention was devoted to the spectacular. Manager, actor and author tried to catch the fancy of the public by offering excitement through exaltation of humanitarian

11. *Maid of Athens, ere we part*. See Byron *Poetical Works*, edited by F. Page, Oxford, 1975 (paperback) p. 60.

12. *Translation of the Famous Greek War Song, Δεῦτε παῖδες τῶν Ἑλλήνων*. See Byron *Poetical Works*, op.cit., p. 60.

13. *Woman; or Ida of Athens* was the title a ofoue volume romance written by Miss Sydney Owenson, later Lady Morgan, in 1809.

14. *The Drama; or The Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, vol. VI, 1824, pp. 184-5.

values and scenic effects. Themes taken from history, ancient and modern, were popular. The playwrights went further afield to treat of inhumanity and kindness, tyranny and liberation, in places as different as France, Poland or Greece.

Greece in particular offered great opportunities for theatrical representations, because her name had so many significant connotations. The present fighting for liberty was conducted by people who were the immediate heirs of Classical Greece, the source of all the liberal arts, a fact pointed out by scholars and philhellenes. Moreover it was a Christian nation struggling against oppressors whose barbarism was generally accepted. On the other hand the Greek settings on the stage were of the utmost interest. Classical ruins were combined with Islamic architecture and oriental surroundings which attracted so many minds of the period, all spiced with picturesque costumes and weapons, warm colours and impressive ornaments. The everlasting appeal of names like Athens or Sparta met those of Chios and Missolonghi, well-known because of the bravery and sacrifice of their inhabitants in the war, and immortalized, in the second case, through the poetry and death of Lord Byron.

The Siege of Missolonghi; or The Massacre of the Greeks,¹⁵ was the title of a melodramatic spectacle at the Royal Amphitheatre (Astley's) acted on 10th July 1826. The dramatic fall of that city into Turkish hands happened on 10/11 April 1826. The theatrical representation of such a late event shows the startling impression it had on Europe, as well as the political alertness of the liberal Europeans. The day after the first production of the play, the *Morning Chronicle*¹⁶ published a long poem entitled *Lines on the Fall of Missolonghi* by Helen M. Williams, just below the Astley's advertisment in the theatrical review column.

Author of the piece was J. H. Amherst, who introduced among the imaginary and historical characters, those of Ibrahim Pasha and Admiral Miaoulis. Spectacles, however, called not so much for speech as for action. So the real 'creator' of the show may be considered the famous Andrew Ducrow (1793-1842), a true-bred horse-rider and showman, who was responsible for «the equestrian evolutions, combats,

15. Playbill, 10/7/1826. Victoria and Albert Museum

16. 11 July, 1826.

marches and the whole of the stage arrangements». The scenery was by Walker and his assistants. In every act the first scenes were concerned with the besieging forces of the Turks. Ibrahim's troopers in triumphal pageantry, exercises and manoeuvres of the cavalry, songs and ballets, supplied, as the bill announces, with elephants and camels were shown. The last scenes on the other side led the impressionable audience inside Messolonghi amid the desperate defenders of the city:

Act I. Part of the city of Missolonghi by starlight.

A faithful picture of the Horrible Famine which reduced the noblest families to Death. The heroic Resolutions of the Greeks to suffer any extremity, rather than submit to their Oppressors. The Upper and Lower Rampart, in which will be introduced the celebrated GREEK WAR SONG written by Lord Byron, and addressed to that heroic People. In this last scene of First Act, recalling the Resolution of the Greek Women to Perish Sword in Hand, will be presented one of the most effective and striking Pictures in Nature; and for execution, unexampled on the Stage. FIFTYEIGHT of the principal Performers will head the Cohorts, and every idea of reality to the Groupings of COMBATANTS, MALE and FEMALE.

Act II. Interior of Missolonghi.

Devotion of the Greeks—Siege of the Turks—firing of the Mine, Terrific Explosion, laying the CITY IN ASHES. Massacre of the Inhabitants. Final destruction of Messolonghi.

After the fall of Messolonghi the Greek cause seemed for a moment to be dangerously threatened with failure. However, on the 6th July 1827, by the Treaty of London, England, France and Russia agreed to impose their mediation, and later in that year in the battle of Navarino naval forces of the three Powers utterly destroyed the Turko-Egyptian fleet. News of Navarino reached England on 20th November. That 'untoward event', received with such disapproval by the British Government, caused great enthusiasm among the people.

On Monday Nov. 26th, at the Coburg Theatre *The Britons at Navarino; or The Destruction of the Turko-Egyptian Fleet*¹⁷ was presented, «a new grand, local nautical and national drama, in two acts found on recent occurrences». It was written by H. M. Milner, the music by T.

17. Playbill, 26/11/1827. British Library.

Hughes and the scenery by Danson. Turks, Greeks and Allies are the protagonists, with the importance of the English involvement, as was to be expected, expressly pointed out.

In Act I the devastating fury of the Turks in Morea and the extreme distress of the Greeks perishing with fire and hunger are described. This «dreadful spectacle» is continued in act II, when we hear about the decision of Codrington, the British Admiral on the *Asia*, to put a stop to the atrocities of the Turks. The battle begins accidentally, caused by some firing on the part of the Turks against a cutter sent by the frigate *Dartmouth*. Finally the Ottoman fleet is destroyed and «Britain and her Allies obtain a Glorious Triumph on behalf of Freedom over Cruelty, Treachery, and Oppression».

A panorama of the same sea-battle was part of the traditional Christmas pantomime at two playhouses, Covent Garden¹⁸ and the Surrey Theatre,¹⁹ on 26th December 1827. Panorama and diorama were two characteristic forms of early 19th century entertainment. They usually showed landscape and seascape views or battles mostly of an informative character. Panorama was pioneered by Robert Barker (1739-1806), an Irish portrait painter. Moving or stationary it was simply a vast painting conveying illusions of reality. Diorama was invented by Louis Daguerre (1789-1851), scene-painter and photographer, in 1822. It was a kind of transparency painting. The illusion was created by perspective and light effects.

The naval panorama of Covent Garden was painted by David Roberts (1796-1864), and was the nineteenth scene in the sequence of scenery as described in the bill: «Number 19. Grand Panoramic Naumachia, representing the Passage to Gibraltar, then to Archipelago, with an endeavour to give, as near as Scenic Power will afford, a Representation of the Battle of Navarino, by the combined fleets of England, France and Russia, opposed to the Turko-Egyptian Fleet; The Panorama terminating with an Allegory, representing the Genious of England, France and Russia, hovering over their brave heroes of the Ocean». *The Times*²⁰

18. The title of the pantomime was *Harlequin and Number-nip; or The Giant Mountain*. It was characterized by Henry Grabb Robinson as one of the most splendid he ever saw. See *The London Theatre 1811-1866, Selections from the Diary of H. G. Robinson*, ed. The Society for Theatre Research, London, 1966, p. 120.

19. The pantomime was *Harlequin and the Astrologer of Stepney; or The Enchanted Fish and Fated Ring*.

20. 27 December 1827; see also *Morning Chronicle*, 27 Dec. 1827.

spoke of that representation as «the strongest feature in the pantomime», which «was loudly and deservedly applauded», while the *London Literary Gazette*²¹ remarked that it was «a most powerful and beautiful work of art».

The moving panorama of the Surrey Theatre was much praised by the critics too. *The Times*²² wrote: «It is illustrative of the late marine tour of the Lord High Admiral. It gives a lively picture of ships and docks at Sheerness and Portsmouth, and of the fleet at Spithead, and concludes with a magnificent representation of the late naval engagement at Navarino. This last was admirably got up and reflected great credit on the taste of the painter and the skill of the machinist. The whole went off with great effect and was loudly and deservedly cheered». It was designed by P. Phillips (d.-1846), and one of the scenes, that depicting the position of the allied squadrons just before the battle, was published as a colour lithograph²³ (plate 3).

A moving panorama of the Battle of Navarino was also painted by C. Stanfield, D. Roberts and others employed by J. B. Laidlaw in 1827/28. It was toured in England, Holland and in Germany²⁴. In 1831 a panorama of the same event by Charles Langlois (1789-1870) was shown in Paris.²⁵ An engraving was published soon after that performance (plate 4).

The holidaying public during that Christmas of 1827 were also afforded a ballet at Sadler's Wells, called *Welcome Home; or the Return from Navarino*. It showed «the reception that the British heroes

21. No 571, 29/12/1827, p. 847.

22. 27 December 1827.

23. Situation of the combined fleets at the close of the Battle of Navarino, as represented at Surrey Theatre, in the splendid pantomime of *Harlequin and the Astrologer of Stepney; or The Enchanted Fish and Fated Ring!*...Produced December 26th, 1827.

-P. Phillips lithog.

-Printed by W. Day, 16 Gate Street

-Published by W. Kenneth, Dramatic Repository, corner of Bow Street, Covent Garden

Colour lithograph, 24×33 cm. University of Thessaloniki Library, I. Tricoglou Collection.

24. See Pieter van der Merwe, *The Spectacular Career of Clarkson Stanfield, 1793-1867*. Tyne and Wear County Council Museums, 1979, pp. 81, 83, 94.

25. H. Honour, *Romanticism*, London, 1979, p. 357.

would meet in England upon their return from Navarino.²⁶ And after that, on 26th May 1828, Navarino was again the subject-matter of a spectacle named *The Battle of Navarino; or The Arab of the Red Desert* at the Royal Amphitheatre.²⁷

This event, which brought great national pride to the British people, marked out for Greece the beginning of the end of her war of liberation. By 1829 Greece had secured virtual independence of Turkey.

Consequently after 1827 the Greek revolution ceased actually to catch the imagination of playwrights and the audience. However the Romantic qualities of those stories were strong enough to prevent their total eclipse from the London stage.

The Greek Family,²⁸ written by Barrymore and Raymond, was a melodramatic spectacle produced at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane on 22th Oct. 1829. It was placed in the rocky country of Suli, well-known to the English public because of the heroic deeds of Suliotes against Ali Pasha of Epirus. The scenery by G. Marinari, Andrews, Adams and Stanfield depicted «a Greek farm house and grounds» a «dilapidated Greek Temple» «the grove of palms» and «mountain pass by moonlight». These were the picturesque surroundings where Greek patriots were fighting against the Turks, while at the same time a certain domestic effect was aimed at. All, presented without much originality, were based on time-worn clichés. The play was «unanimously condemned» as the *Gentleman's Magazine* epigrammatically wrote.²⁹

Zelma; or The Triumph of the Greeks (Royalty, 1830)³⁰ and *Senekos the Greek; or The Ensign of Freedom* (1833)³¹ were two other plays with probably the same combination of Greek national events in a historical landscape, and Romantic stock heroes and heroines always in distress, as we can at least infer from the eloquent titles. After that and till 1850 only once again does one meet a play inspired by the Greek

26. *Morning Chronicle*, 27 Dec. 1827.

27. A. Nicoll, op. cit., vol. IV, p. 430.

28. Playbill, 22/10/1829. Victoria and Albert Museum. The manuscript of the play with the title *The Suliote; or The Greek Family* is preserved in Lord Chamberlain's Plays, vol. XXXIII, Sept.-Oct. 1829. See British Museum, *Catalogue*, op. cit., p. 18, 42897 (7).

29. November 1829, vol. XCIX, 2, p. 460.

30. A. Nicoll, op. cit., vol. IV, Hand-list of Plays, p. 612.

31. A. Nicoll, op. cit., vol. IV, Hand-list of Plays, p. 532.

War of Independence. It was «a grand ballet of action» called *The Greek Renegade; or The Fall of Missolonghi* (plate 5). It was performed at Astley's Royal Amphitheatre on June 9th 1845, and its debt to Lord Byron is emphasized in the bill of the first night.³²

During the thirties indirect references to the Greek revolution can probably be traced and in some other plays, as in Rossini's *Siege of Corinth*, subject and title also furnished by Byron.³³ The opera, played at the King's Theatre in 1836, is set in the time of the Turkish attack in 1715. However, among the extant designs made by the Grieves, that of a *Greek Church*³⁴ (plate 6) is undoubtedly influenced by the imagery imposed by the plays with revolutionary themes. With the main hero standing in front of the altar ready to fire the train and so be buried together with the Turkish invaders under the ruins, it recalls similar stage-fireworks from melodramas like the *Siege of Missolonghi*.

The Greek productions which we have tried to describe came into realization because they were expressing the audience's wishes, as interpreted by the playwrights, actors and managers of those days. They were, of course, conducive to sympathy for the revolutionaries but their role for the Greek cause was extremely marginal. It is in far more austere theatres that the liberty of nations is won.

Σπουδαστήριο 'Ιστορίας της Τέχνης

ILIAS G. MIKONIATIS

32. Playbill, 9/6/1845. British Library.

33. See *Times* Nov. 9, 1836.

34. University of London Library, Grieves Designs, no. 464.