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## GREECE IS THE WORD



For a quarter of a century, the Hellenic Centre has provided a home-from-home for London’s Greek and Cypriot communities and an open door for anyone interested in the culture, history and language of one of the world’s most fascinating civilisations. The Journal meets its inspirational director

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In November 2008, the newly-elected prime minister of Greece, George Papandreou, turned to his nation and the rest of the world and made a grave declaration. “Our economy is in intensive care. This is without doubt the worst economic crisis since the restoration of democracy,” he said slowly. It wasn’t news, as such—the Greek crisis had dominated global headlines for months—but it was shocking to hear it so explicitly confirmed. In the months and years that followed, between 350,000 and 400,000 Greeks emigrated in search of greener pastures: some headed to northern Europe, some to the United States or Australia, and somewhere in the region of 40,000 ended up here in London, often looking for work in the finance sector, the law and the health service. “They came here with nothing,” recalls Agatha Kalisperas, “but slowly they found jobs, and started to look for cultural connections—and found us,” she smiles. “The demand for events soared.”

Agatha is director of the **Hellenic Centre** on Paddington Street, which this year celebrates its 25th anniversary. Sandwiched between the Georgian townhouses and plush new apartments on Paddington Street, this Greek and Cypriot cultural centre—housed in a building that was previously the Swedish Gymnastic Academy, then a teacher-training school—is an emblem of London’s vibrant multiculturalism. Unlike many such centres, it is independently funded, a fact that helped it to survive the 2008 crisis. “In London and in Greece, many government-funded philanthropic projects fell during that time, so it was a good thing in the end that we stood alone,” explains Agatha.

The money to open the centre in 1994 came from a variety of sources: there were donations from the Greek and British governments, but also from banks, individuals and communities. The building, now in one of London’s most prestigious postcodes, came into their hands through sheer luck and happenstance. “They were looking for a building anywhere, really, and could afford this. At that time this area was quite different. It seems unbelievable now, but Marylebone back then was quite run down.”

What a difference a quarter century makes—to an area, and also to the interactions of a diaspora. For Agatha, the biggest change besides from Marylebone’s metamorphosis has been the advent of social media. “It’s how young people communicate. In the last three or four years, it has increased our visitor numbers hugely.” The irony of this is that were social media around in the early 1990s, the centre might not have happened at all. “Back then, the Greeks and Greek Cypriots in London were nostalgic. There was no Facebook, flying home wasn’t so easy, and they wanted a place to socialise and share their interests and culture.” An ambition which today would probably wind up in a Facebook group was realised in real estate—and the result was a home for Hellenism that drew Londoners of all nationalities, intrigued by the building, brought along by Greek or Greek Cypriot friends, or drawn by the eclectic mix of poetry, music, lectures and art.

### **Serving local people**

“Our aim is to serve the local people,” explains Agatha. “It’s why our events are in English. It’s why we’re based in central London, rather than one of the more Greek areas.” Every week, hundreds of people congregate in this elegant 20th century building to experience art, music, drama and lessons inspired or created by Hellenic peoples. You don’t get that with a Facebook page, or an Instagram story. “We have exhibitions. We have lectures. We celebrate Greek New Year and Greek Easter. We are the only cultural centre that offers almost everything, and where many of the events are free, and over the years our programme of events has got much richer.” The only issue they don’t engage with is politics, she continues, on account of their independence from governments and political parties—and in these fractured times, that doesn’t seem a bad thing at all.

Of course, Londoners have long been interested in Hellenic art and culture. You only need to look around you: at Cornwall Terrace, All Soul’s church or almost anything by Robert Adam. The geometric simplicity and Corinthian and Ionic details speak of an obsession with classicism that reached its peak in the Victorian age. Romantic poets like Shelley and Byron turned to their Greek predecessors as paragons of poetic beauty, democratic politics and corporeal and spiritual yearnings. Their female contemporaries—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mary Robinson—reimagined the works of Sappho and Homer. Meanwhile, from 1801 to 1812, the 7th Earl of Elgin transplanted the extraordinary marbles from the Parthenon to the British Museum, where they would become a source of inspiration to British artists—and grievance to the Greeks—to this day.

“They have good knowledge about the ancient Greeks, the English,” Agatha muses, when I ask her how Hellenism has evolved since the 19th century. “I think that enthusiasm still exists. It is what encourages us to keep going.” I point out that British schooling on Greece largely centres upon Achilles, the minotaur, and making Medusa masks out of pipe-cleaners. How does the centre encourage us to look beyond myths to the real and present day? “We try to have events not only about the ancient Greeks, but about modern architecture, modern art and music,” she says. An exhibition investigating the relationship between text and paper in fashion through disposable paper dresses is running until the end of February. “The paper dresses were a trend in America in the 1960s, but it was a Greek person who collected them.” Indeed, it is this new, global Greekness—one that transcends and incorporates other cultures—that the Hellenic Centre is so adept at bringing to the London stage.

“London is such an exciting, cosmopolitan place,” Agatha enthuses feelingly. “That’s why, despite the weather, I have stayed here for so many years.” One of the more significant ways in which the Hellenic Centre engages with the city’s community is through Greek language lessons, for which they now have 350 students, spanning 40 nationalities and every age from 18 to 80. “Some students have houses in Greece. Some students are married to Greeks—or want to be,” she grins, “and the standard they reach is amazing.” English may be the world’s lingua franca, but the number of people getting themselves to the Greek in the name of love, business and leisure shows no sign of slowing.



### **Wagner's muse**

The centre has surpassed itself in drawing up an events programme for its 25th anniversary year. Towards the end of February, music historian Helena Matheopoulos will discuss Wagner and Greece, and how the country became the muse for his music. In March, poet Natalie Katsou and photographer Yiannis Katsaris will launch their first book together, focusing on cross-cultural communication, language and the idea of homeland. There are lectures on everything from archeology to Brexit; plays from Greek playwrights, both fledgling and fully matured; Greek music from non-Greek musicians; and non-Greek music from Greek musicians. "Most of our lecturers are not Greek, and we exhibit art from non-Greek artists," says Agatha, "but everything has to have a Hellenic connection." Even the children's Easter workshop involves making a traditional Greek Orthodox candle, as well as the usual hunting for chocolate and painting eggs.

Children are an important part of the Hellenic Centre. Many of the Greeks and Greek Cypriots who left in the wake of the economic crisis were professionals moving with young families, or professionals who have since had families. A cultural centre in which children and adults can connect with their homeland's traditions plays a vital role in keeping their sense of heritage alive. Though English is the predominant language of events, "we recognise the young children who have come recently with their families are not yet familiar with the language, so we do some Greek plays for them," smiles Agatha. As they get older, the Hellenic Centre can provide a potential platform for aspiring artists. "This is one of our missions: to help young people promote their art and their music, and act as a springboard for them to develop and have a career."

Only a few weeks ago Agatha found herself at the Royal Academy of Music watching an opera, the costumes for which had been made by a Hellenic Centre alumnus. "He'd done costumes for theatre here when he was younger, so it was lovely to go and see his work," she smiles. "When you're young, it's so hard to find somewhere to perform or exhibit. Here we can offer a space." Though arts funding is not what it was since before the crash, in Greece or in London, "people continue to do their best to promote their culture". For a while, much of the art was angry—"people were starving; there were plays about the crisis"—but it has mellowed now, into a shimmering legion of subjects. The Hellenic Centre is not short of proposals. "There is still not much money given in Greece for cultural events these days, but it hasn't affected us a great deal because we have so much demand, from people wanting to put events on and wanting to attend."

### **Lecture to book launch**

The Hellenic Centre's main income comes from hiring out its magnificent venue to businesses for conferences, meetings, events and parties. The funds from these rentals support the cultural work: a balance of activities marked out in a series of green dots on Agatha's whiteboard diary. "The black dots are venue hire. The green are cultural activities. We have to balance the number of events which give us income with those that don't, but we're lucky in that we have such a nice venue to hire out." In this way, the Hellenic Centre programme survives from month to month, lecture to book launch. "We get some donations, but it is a daily struggle to keep this place going without any sponsorship."

Their only real fright came during the financial crisis, when businesses stopped all but essential spending. "Suddenly our income was halved. We managed because we'd saved, but it was a very shaky period. Every year we have to be careful." They've won several awards since then, including an OBE for Agatha herself, and have welcomed various important visitors—princes and prime ministers among them. Yet Agatha's real achievement ("My team's achievement," she corrects) is "to have survived. To still be here, hosting events for the community. That itself is an achievement to be proud of, nowadays."