

What a magical Royal Voyage of Italians, Hellenes and others!

# The “Queen of Italy” took everyone on its sail again!

FANTASTIC JOURNEY! FANTASTIC EVENING!

The fact that the Factory Theatre at Marrickville was literally a full-house last Tuesday evening 26 May reminded everyone of the full “Regina d’ Italia” (“Queen of Italy”) steam ship taking its own passengers from the homelands of Italy, Greece and elsewhere, in 1924, to the unknown land of “Down Under”, Australia, through the film ‘Dall’Italia All’Australia’, literally meaning ‘From Italy to Australia’. The film was shown within the programme of the 27th Greek Festival of Sydney.

What a trip, what a journey that was on the screen! Viewers “became” the passengers of the 45 day long trip from Genoa, Italy, passing by the Ionian islands and Crete, Greece, south to Port Said in Egypt, with more passengers embarking on its journey through to Colombo, Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka), straight down to Fremantle, Western Australia (first Australian port), Port Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.

The historic footage of the film was a real treasure! Despite it being a silent film, with original and authentic subtitles in Italian, produced back in 1924, it “spoke to everyone’s heart” in the audience. Accompanying the film was a brilliant four-member live troupe who played along Italian, Greek and English music, depending on which part of the world the “Regina d’ Italia” was sailing. The ‘Viaggiatori’ (The Voyagers) was composed of Kavisha Mazzella (Aria award winning singer, guitar, accordion), Irine Vela (bouzouki, mandolin guitar) David De Santi (accordion) and Mark Holder-Keeping (saxophone, clarinet). Their contribution to the evening was applauded constantly.

The departure of the “Regina d’ Italia” from Genoa and the passing by of Sicily and Calabria was accompanied with tarantella music and other Italian traditional songs. As she passed by Greece and reached Egypt to “collect” tens of Greek passengers, the live band played Greek traditional songs and music. The arrival in Australia had typical “aussie” tunes being heard, the most prominent one being “Waltzing Matilda”.

In September 1924, this vessel brought 504 migrants from southern Europe to the South Seas. The passengers included some 130 Hellenes, mostly from Kythera, Castellorizo and Cyprus. However, it was discovered on the night that not only these Hellenes made their way to Australia, but also Hellenes from other parts of Greece, including Cephallonians, Cretans, Samians, Macedonians and Thracians to name a few! Some of the audience members had some direct or indirect links through their ancestral lines of



those Hellenes on the “Queen of Italy”. On the steamship, there were also Yugoslav, Arabic-speaking and Jewish migrants as well who made their journey to the southern hemisphere.

Italian Film Director Angelo Drovetti in 1924 went ashore in Colombo, Sri Lanka to film the place and its people, and later Fremantle, Port Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. Viewers had the opportunity to marvel at the people and the cities back then. It was no surprise then that the most comments were made about Sydney and the way it looked at the early part of the 20th century. One could see Fort Denison, Sydney Harbour (without the “Coat Hanger” bridge, as it was built in 1932) and Taronga Zoo (the animals have not changed much since then!)

The film ‘Dall’Italia All’Australia’ was first screened in Milan city, north Italy in 1925. However, after that year, this treasure of cinematography was locked away, out of sight, out of mind. Later on, it was discovered by Melbourne journalist and writer, Tony De Bolfo, during research for his book ‘In Search of Kings’ that chronicles another passenger ship from the same line called ‘Il Re d’Italia’, (The King of Italy) - 1927. Tony spoke at the beginning of the screening at the Factory Theatre, as a special guest of the night, outlining his mission being to showcase this historical masterpiece to audiences in Australia and therefore get people to appreciate even further the historical roots of the migrant history of Europe to Australia. An Italian himself by origin, he was able to identify with the whole migrant experience and the search of a new land from his immediate and extended family from Italy.

Dr Panayiotis Diamadis, history teacher, active member in the Greek-Australian community and President of the Australian Hellenic Educators’ Association of NSW, of Epirotan descent, who was also the other special guest, provided a historical context of the film in Greek and English, with an emphasis on the Greek connections with this particular steam liner and in general about early migrant stories. He

stated that the evening of the screening of the film was also of historical value as it had never been shown to a Greek-Australian audience before and history was made in Sydney on that night! He also conducted a Question and Answer session at the end, responding to a variety of people’s queries about the film.

Dianna (Adamantia) Fatseas, a young Kytherian descent Australian person, was congratulated for her initiative to promote the film in the wider Greek-Australian community. She had been the founding and passionate link between all participants in its presentation and worked tirelessly to bring the whole show to a lasting memory crescendo. As she said, “this is a heritage film” and her vision and inspiration to be shared and viewed by the Greek Diaspora, after her “discovery” of it at the Maritime Museum in the past, was to her a significant historical moment.

The end of the presentations saw some of the descendants of those early migrants on the “Regina d’ Italia” get onto the stage and talk about their ancestors’ stories. One of them was an 87 year old Greek lady, whose father came out on that ship; a very touching story, as she unravelled how her father embarked on it and made his way to the fifth continent. This sentimental segment was the pinnacle of the evening, as everyone witnessed and de-

clared. It was this human touch and link to the past that will be cherished by all and will remain in their hearts.

Amongst the guests were Australian born Greek descent from the Dodecanese islands NSW Attorney General Mr John Hatzistergos, the President of the Greek Orthodox Community of Sydney and NSW Mr Harry Danalis, who welcomed everyone to the evening on behalf of the 27th Greek Festival of Sydney as this important community event comes to a close after 2 months of successful presentation, Fairfax community newspapers journalist Kevin Sadlier, SBS Greek program journalist Efthymios Kallos, Greek newspaper “Kosmos” owner Theodoros Konstantinou, Greek media representatives, famed Greek-Australian singer Helen Zerefos, AHEPA (Australian Hellenic Educational Progressive Association) representatives, GAPA (Greek-Australian Professionals Association) representatives, members from the AHEA (Australian Hellenic Educators’ Association of NSW), other Presidents and committee members of various Sydney Greek Associations, teachers and many people of the younger generations. Amongst the audience were some Italian members, who equally appreciated the film as it “spoke” in their language.

The master of ceremonies was performed by Ourania Karteris, Chairperson of the 27th Greek Festival of Sydney whilst the refreshments and the very tasty mezedes including octopus souvlakia, dolmades, potato pies, galaktoboureko and other Greek delicacies, offered by “Georges Mediterranean Bar & Grill”, King st. Wharf at Darling Harbour, whetted everyone’s appetite before the sentimental journey with the “Regina d’ Italia” (“Queen of Italy”), which undoubtedly has now formed part of the Italians’, Greeks’ and other new Australians migrants’ history.

*Dimitrios Kametopoulos*

