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The **Greek Revolution** through "**Towards Liberty**" and "**In the Land of Liberty**" educational drama projects by the National Theatre of Northern Greece (2019–2021)*

Ioanna Lioutsia



Abstract

This article presents the approach, preparation, work and implementation of two educational drama projects on the subject of the Greek Revolution of 1821, realised as part of "The NTNG in Education", a series of specialised educational programmes by the National Theatre of Northern Greece (NTNG). In detail, the projects, titled "Towards Liberty" (2019) and "In the Land of Liberty" (2019–2020), were presented in primary schools in five regions across Greece. Using the sixth grade history textbook as a basis and, in particular, the events related to the besieged Missolonghi and the swiftly liberated Mani, the aim of these educational dramas was for pupils to not only get a better understanding of the historical context, but also delve into concepts such as solidarity, cooperation and teamwork, peace and freedom. An alternative way of capturing the historical past, connecting it with current concepts and themes that concern society by encouraging an experiential way of participating in learning. An attempt to help pupils shift from memorisation to critical thinking so that they can perceive and receive history differently.

Keywords: *history, refugee question, Greek Revolution of 1821, primary education, Exodus of Missolonghi, educational drama, theatre pedagogy project*

In the – perhaps not so distant – year of 1825, a pack of dogs in Missolonghi begins to realise that something strange is afoot. Food is running out, people are unhappy, the sky is grey. No one can enter or leave the city. It's up to the dogs to make their decisions and follow their own route to freedom.

This brief description accompanied "Towards Liberty", an educational drama addressed to children of primary education and, specifically, third to sixth grade pupils. The project was part of "The NTNG in Education" programme, implemented within the framework of the Operational Programme "Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning" and co-financed by Greece and the European Union.

The programme was carried out for three consecutive years (from 2019 to 2021). In this framework, the above mentioned educational drama, launched in March 2019, and "In the Land of Liberty", another educational drama introduced in the following season, toured five regions of Northern Greece (Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, Central Macedonia, Western Macedonia, Epirus, Thessaly), focusing on remote schools in border villages, where in most cases children had never come in contact with theatre as a genre.

As the drama teacher who designed and animated this educational project as well as the accompanying material (preparatory and follow-up material), I will not dwell further on numbers and statistics, but I will focus on the essence, which concerns the use of a history textbook and historical narrative in creating an educational drama. More specifically, I will focus on the ways in which educational drama can, in addition to the knowledge it offers, involve a variety of social, mental, aesthetic and psycho-emotional goals.

The subject of "Towards Liberty", setting out on its journey to primary schools in March 2019, was the Siege of Missolonghi. In planning the project, I consulted the sixth grade history textbook and the chapters about the events of Missolonghi, but also more generally the events of that entire time period. I thought it would be helpful to use identical phrases and follow the textbook's historical timeline so as not to cause any misunderstandings, agitation or confusion in the children's minds if they received differentiated or even conflicting information. However, wanting to have a comprehensive picture of the events, I also consulted other books and studies on the history of the Greek Revolution for my own personal research.

However, I did not limit myself to simply incorporating or paraphrasing historical events, nor did I engage in a mimetic, representational process of what was mentioned. Instead, I decided to shift the



focal point and approach history from a different perspective. For this reason, I chose to speak allegorically and use animals as characters in this educational drama, which have served throughout the ages as an inexhaustible source of fiction as well as dramatic and/or on-stage development of imagination. Investing animals with a symbolic character, I placed them in the society of Missolonghi at the time of the Siege and subsequent Exodus. How can we delve into the events of the Greek Revolution through a fictional, allegorical story?

With these guiding questions in mind, I proceeded to the design and final animation of the educational drama. The goal was to encourage children to see the world and history from a different perspective, avoid the high-flown, pompous or excessive – and often one-sided – praises of heroism and turn to the essence of things and the messages of the Greek Revolution of 1821, at least in the way I understood them. One of the many ways that could be used to make this happen – and which I eventually chose – was to create a dramatic context in which the narrative focuses on non-human characters who, however, are characterised by human emotions and have pertinent dilemmas, thoughts, desires, etc.

Thus, apart from the narrowly knowledge-related objectives of educational drama, which included, for example, the familiarisation of participants with the historical and geographical context of events through techniques such as *group space configuration*, the project aimed at the experiential familiarisation of participants with notions concerning solidarity, the formation of individuality within the collective, peace and freedom. In order for this to happen, a story was written that ran parallel to the Exodus of Missolonghi. In this story, the roles of animal residents of Missolonghi were taken over by participating students and the project's three actor-animators. Through their role they were called to decide on their fate, discuss with arguments, vote and, in general, take an active part in the development of the plot.



Some of the techniques used to encourage the above processes are *hot seat*, *thought tunnel*, *council* and, finally, *voting by show of hands*. I would like to note at this point that the parabolic use of animals as historical heroes tended to liberate children and provide them with the necessary safety to express themselves freely through the consequent distance created because of the fictional dramatic context, thus enhancing their active citizenship.

In the second year of the programme, the 2019–2020 season, another educational drama titled "In the Land of Liberty" was added to the educational activities of NTNG, essentially continuing the story of the dogs presented in the first educational drama. I quote the description of the project:

Mani, 1826. In the rugged but beautiful Mani, the Revolution is now over and the Wolves, residents of the area, are enjoying their freedom. Soon, Pericles arrives at their place, a dog that managed to escape from the besieged Missolonghi. He seeks asylum in Mani and hopes that he will be able to bring his friends to this place where the war has ended. Now, it is up to the Wolves to decide whether to help Pericles and the other Dogs in their quest to live in a peaceful place.

The same work method was employed in creating this project, but this time special emphasis was given to a topical issue, that is the refugee question. The wolves in Mani are called to decide: will they accept the dogs that have irregularly fled a state of war in their liberated country? The starting point of our dramaturgy was historical events as well as testimonies of Greek fighters of 1821, which refer to the effort of the approximately 2,000 survivors of the Exodus of Missolonghi to seek asylum and assistance in Eastern Peloponnese, specifically in Mani and Nafplion. My main source was the military memoirs of Greek fighter Nikolaos Kassomoulis.

I tried, therefore, to illuminate the conflicts that broke out even among the Greeks during the

Revolution in the light of a more internationalised and modern humanitarian approach. That is, solidarity *need not* be extended only from Greek to Greek, or wolf to wolf. Again, the use of animals as a symbol seemed to help children better understand the relationships and positions projected over time on issues of diversity, xenophobia, etc., without being influenced by the characters' national or racial identity. Children in the role would very often connect the dramatised events with the then-current conditions and would respond to the questions of the past through their view of the present.

Especially in this case, the use of animals as dramatic characters freed children from the reproduction of stereotypical discourse about right or wrong, coming either from their personal environment or from the educational process. On the contrary, it facilitated the expression of their own judgement, which was the product of the processes of educational drama, through the actual personal, individual formulations of each child. This happened using techniques such as *transformation*, *interview*, *take a stand* and *role on the wall*.

It is worth noting that when this educational drama was presented, the refugee issue had been rekindled, while its performances at the border schools of the villages of Dikaia and Metaxades in the prefecture of Evros coincided with intense border clashes and the presence of a large army unit in February 2020.

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project was redesigned and continued to be offered to schools participating in the programme through the online platform Sway, where short texts alternated with videos featuring the actors who, on the one hand, promoted the storytelling and, on the other, invited students – in different ways this time – to become part of the story.

In the 2020–2021 season, and with schools closed for most of the time due to the persisting pandemic, the project continued asynchronously and digitally with particular emphasis on the provision of ample print and audiovisual materials for theatre pedagogy as well as the animation, guidance and support of teachers in their effort to implement educational programmes using the techniques of theatre and educational drama.

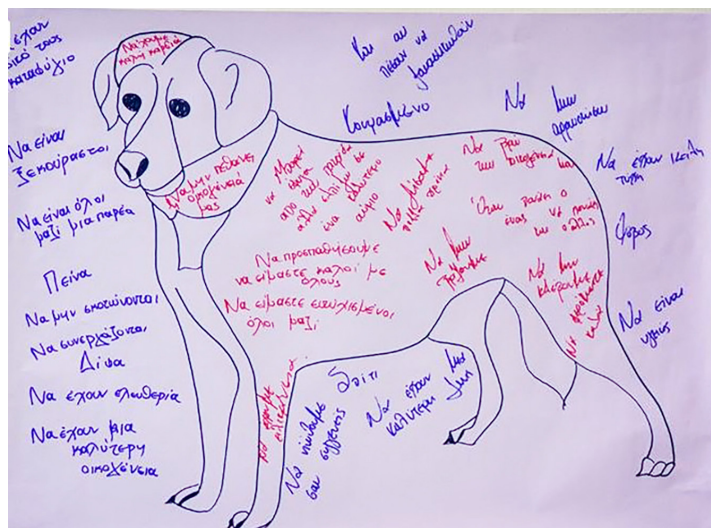
The provision of these materials, the support offered to teachers in order for them to continue engaging with the theatre pedagogy methods proposed by the project as well as the creation of teacher networks were among the goals of this project from the very beginning. The ultimate aim was the project's viability and the potential long-term impact on the educational process, proposing "best

practices" for approaching a variety of subject areas while setting psychosocial goals. The preparatory material and the material offered to schools consisted of booklets (in print and pdf formats), which included activities relating to literary texts centred on the events of the Greek Revolution, constructions and original writing.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise once again my view about the crucial importance of connecting and teaching the past through a comparative approach to the "now" of each historical moment. Through the correlation of national tradition with current concepts that respond to the language and the questions, desires and concerns of children, we are given the opportunity to use historical memory as a vehicle for approaching "sensitive" contemporary issues. In this way, history may one day be able, as a subject area, to shake off its image – repulsive to most people – as a sterile memorisation of dates, names and events and to be restored as a valuable starting point for the production of a mechanism for critical thinking and meaning-making, through the experiential learning that theatre in education can offer.

Photos: Tassos Thomoglou
(available at <https://www.ntng.gr>)

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