

Find out more about the history of The Lysicrates Monument and the historical antecedent of The Lysicrates Prize.

In 18th Century England, it was the custom for well-bred young men to embark on the Grand Tour of classical sites in Italy and Greece. They would bring back to English society a love of classical proportions in sculpture and architecture, and would make copies of monuments and statues for their own estates. A favourite model was the charming Choragic Monument of Lysicrates, which stood alone in Athens in the Street of the Tripods. In the world there are over 30 copies of this enchanting folly, but probably the best situated is the one standing today in our own Botanical Gardens, made of golden Sydney sandstone.

The tastes of the 18th century are all around us in Sydney. You have only to look at the elegant Macquarie Lighthouse in Watsons Bay, and the Barracks and St James' Church in Macquarie St. Although built in the early 19th century, they are perfect examples of the 18th century's fondness for graceful proportions and symmetry. In many ways, Sydney, much more than Melbourne, is the child of the 18th century (even the name New South Wales is perhaps more charming and imaginative than that of any other Australian state). Sydney's leading citizens, even after the 18th century had been and gone, shared the English love of the beauty and harmony of the sculpture and architecture of that era, and it is to that fondness that we owe the lovely little example in our own city.

The Sydney Lysicrates Monument was commissioned in 1870 by Sir James Martin, an Irishman with English tastes, a brilliant self-made lawyer, the son of a groom, who, Sydney-fashion, rose to prominence from humble beginnings. (The hub of Sydney, Martin Place, is named after him). Martin, Premier of New South Wales in the 1850s and 1860s, had been a lover of classical Greek culture from his student days, a passion which informed his friendship with NSW Governor Sir John Young, the former Lord High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands. Young most probably provided Martin with the measurements of the original Lysicrates Monument.

The house Martin lived in, in Potts Point, was called Clarens. Clarens is the name of the idyllic village described by the 18th century French writer Jean Jacques Rousseau in one of his novels, and here we have another of Sydney's many links with the 18th century. It was in Clarens that the 1870 copy of the Lysicrates Monument first stood, right on the shore of Sydney Harbour. Martin's favourite poet was Byron, and, very remarkably, Byron actually wrote some of his most vivid poetry while sitting inside the original in Athens, which at that time was still a hollow circle of columns.

In 1943, the original site of the replica was chosen to house new dockyards for the Australian Navy, and Clive R. Evatt, the NSW Minister for Education (a noted philhellene who, later, received the Royal Order of the Phoenix from Greece), had the monument moved to its present site – a perfect spot for a perfect little artefact.

We have, so far, seen on this spot an English Governor and an Irish Premier. We cannot omit a Scot, and fortunately we have to hand the sculptor of the monument, Walter MacGill, originally from Edinburgh. Three years after finishing the Lysicrates Monument, MacGill carved the sandstone piers of the Woolloomooloo Gates of these Botanic Gardens, which stand only a few hundred metres away.

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So here we now have an Athenian monument in the sandstone of Sydney, in a land the ancient Greeks never knew existed. But I think the architects of Athens, and the English lovers of 18th Century beauty, would surely have approved.

John Azarias

A highlight of the Athenian calendar in the 5th and 4th Centuries B.C. was the annual Great Dionysia Festival. Rich sponsors, called *choregoi*, commissioned plays and hired troupes of declaimers and actors to perform them, accompanied by poems and music. The sponsors and troupes competed with each other for the highly prestigious prize, a trophy in the shape of a tripod, and the winner was expected to build a monument to his success and triumphantly place the tripod on top. A whole street in Athens, called the Street of the Tripods, was devoted to these monuments, and today in modern Athens, the Street of the Tripods still exists, the *Odos Tripodon*. But in today's street, only one original monument is still standing, the charming and elegant one erected by a certain Lysicrates, the *choregos* who won the prize in 334 B.C., at the dawn of the Hellenistic Age.

Dionysus was the god of theatre, and accordingly, the original monument was dedicated to him, and has a frieze with scenes from his life. But we in Sydney have another link with Dionysus. The name "Sydney" is commonly held to be an English version of the French "St Denis", which in its turn is a Gallic version of "St Dionysius", who was named after the god. It seems somehow fitting that the god after whom Sydney was, however indirectly, named, should be present, right here in the place where Sydney was founded. Is it fanciful to imagine that, present as he is in this spot, Dionysus is Sydney's *poliouchos theos*, its guardian deity?

We can be proud that in Sydney's Botanical Gardens, we have probably the most beautiful of all the 30-odd copies of the Lysicrates Monument in the world today. But its Sydney sandstone faces the salt winds off Sydney Harbour, and so, over the years it has been eroded in several places.

One Saturday morning earlier this year, my husband John, who is steeped in the Hellenistic culture of Alexandria, and I were taking a walk in the Botanical Gardens. He knew the original monument in Athens, and has always been charmed by this lovely golden copy, in such a spectacular location. But as we walked nearer, its crumbling portions became more and more evident. So he made up his mind that, as a gesture of gratitude to his adopted country, he would raise funds towards the restoration of this jewel which, apart from being a beautiful ornament to the city, harked back to a noble Greek heritage. And this he has done. The monument is being restored with these funds, with supplementation from the Government of New South Wales.

But as we stood in front of the monument, I too had a thought. Since the origin of the monument lay in a theatre competition in ancient Athens, why shouldn't we too have a theatre competition of our own in the Sydney of today, associated with the monument, and celebrating its restoration? I knew that in Australia we certainly had the flair. I knew we had great playwrights, directors and producers. What a fantastic way to showcase and celebrate those talents, and, just maybe, do it every year, just like the Great Dionysia Festival, which was an annual event. We could even use the Athenian method of voting to choose the winner, that is, the use of pottery shards by each member of the public.

John and I approached the Griffin Theatre, which taps into Australian theatrical talent for a living, and they were enthusiastic about running the contest. With some additional assistance from the NSW Government, John raised further funds to finance a competition for the first act of a new play, which the winner of the competition will complete, and the Griffin Theatre will produce. The three best first acts will be performed for the audience to choose the winner. And the venue will be the Botanical Gardens' Band Lawn where, in Victorian times, the Sydney public would stroll and listen to an ensemble playing popular tunes.

So the result of that walk in the Botanical Gardens, a unique new addition to Sydney's cultural landscape, will be revealed on the evening of 30 January 2015 for the first time, in those same Botanical Gardens, two thousand, three hundred and forty-eight years after Lysicrates triumphantly raised his tripod in the air in front of a wildly cheering audience in a city on the other side of the world.

Patricia Azarias

John & Patricia Azarias are responsible for commissioning The Lysicrates Prize and, together, initiated the restoration of the historical monument in the Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney.