

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Challenging Tide

Stavros Lillitos  
Theatro Technis  
(2009)

*The Challenging Tide* is a quintessentially Greek play by the Greek Cypriot author, Stavros Lillitos. It dates from 1952, completed when the author was 33. He had settled in the UK from an early age. He joined and fought with the British army in the second world war. His play, *The Challenging Tide*, revolves around the Greek Scapanes family and how the members of the family react to the unfolding events of social and political life in Greece between 1936 and 1944.

From the moment the audience enters the performance space, they are transported in a flash to the interior of a house in Athens in 1936. The setting is unquestionable and music, production values, and the actors' stances, a result of sensitive direction from George Eugeniou, all work together to bring about this magical transformation. As the story unfolds, we are introduced clearly to family members. Their relationships and values gradually reveal themselves.

Helen and Nestor Scapanes (played by Yvonne Delahaye and Darren Chancey) have three children. Their daughter, Anna, is introduced as a home-making fatalist, although there is intelligence and feistiness to her character. Their sons, Alec (sometimes referred to as Alex by the cast) and Yiannis espouse varied values: Alec is an idealist: a dreamer, a poet and an angry young rebel not afraid to follow his ideas through into action. A trade union leader, he is labelled as a communist after Metaxas comes to power and ends up fighting in the Civil War. Yannis is a calm and peaceful man, who is down-to-earth and enjoys working the land. When his farm is commandeered by the Germans, he joins the army, his Arcadian visions transformed into more martial ones.

Their nephew, Tasos (played with fire and intensity by Darryl Nelville) is ambitious, and has joined the police force. He will do anything to secure promotion, position and influence. They are joined by the local priest, Father Nicholas, played by Will Simpson, who believes "might is right". And thus the arena is laid out in which traditional social and religious values meet modern ones head on and sibling rivalry and generational conflicts abound. In Act II, the cast is expanded to include Christine and Peter Psaros, Helen's sister and brother-in-law, (played by Lennie Varvarides and Tim Shiafkalis). They have had to throw themselves on the mercy of their relations after their house was bombed. Their new energies provide new sparring matches between personal values, duty and the pressures of having to put up with rationing, Civil War and difficult personalities.

Lillitos' writing is clear, precise and well-thought through. Refreshingly so. In fact, one of the joys of this play is how his characters present ideological stances. They are argued out and pitted against each other like a closely-woven musical score. The tension builds slowly, almost imperceptibly, over two acts, gathering force and culminating in a *dénouement* which is shattering and superbly executed, ultimately expressing the futility of intellectual posturing when faced with the basic realities of life, death and bread.

The play demands an experienced cast although it covers a period of 9 years, the particular time span is one in which lives are curtailed and ageing accelerated in equal measure. It starts well and ends superbly. By the second act, the more experienced actors manage to convey a sense of character development, but other members of the cast leave the audience to fill in blanks or add details for themselves in the middle. Where the actors come from a Greek background, they add convincing natural gestures and endearing insights into characterisations and motivations. Yvonne Delahaye's interpretation of Helen's character is, by contrast, very English. The same goes for Will Simpson's unconvincing portrayal of Father Nicholas, never quite making up his mind as to whether the priest is stupid, timid, naïve or dissembling. This leads to an unbalanced production, which somehow still doesn't detract from the overall effect. In fact, there is a certain charm to the end result, a play by an expatriate, performed by a cast of expatriates and Graecophiles and produced by a company with a 50-year history of putting on performances related to expatriate communities.

What is more unsettling, however, is the lack of attention to detail in a textually very clearly-defined period piece. The musical choices are inspired, but the cuts and splices which usher in the different scenes are brutally and jarringly executed. The low budget limitations are obvious, but while Tasos' smart black is completely acceptable as a substitute for police uniform, Doc Marten-style boots worn by other male members of the cast seem garishly out of place. The lurex-shot knitting wool which Christine busies herself with never existed at the time, and the internationally-renowned Greek bouzouki classic, "Never on a Sunday", which Anna hums at one point, was not composed until the 1960s. The director, George Eugeniou, is obviously experienced and good at what he does. He should know better.

But the production saves the best until last with Lennie Varvariides giving an outstanding performance as Christine, going beyond the quintessentially Greek, to the quintessentially universal. Her performance alone is worth far more than the price of admission. Combine that with quality writing, and the other points fade into relative insignificance.

*Until 30th January*

**Reviewer:** [Leon Conrad](#)