

Melina Mercouri: Actor, politician and champion of culture (1920-1994)



The Greek actor and politician Melina Mercouri brought a fire and passion to everything she did; from gracing stage and screen in the early part of her life, to fighting the fascist junta that took control of Greece in 1967 and campaigning for the protection and promotion of culture as a politician.

Mercouri was a leading theatre actor in Greece before becoming an international film star with her award-winning performance in “Never on Sunday”. She became politicised by the 1967 coup d’état in Greece and spent the following years campaigning around the world for the removal of the colonels’ junta. After democracy was restored in 1974, Mercouri returned to her homeland to begin a political career. She became Greece’s longest serving Minister of Culture and in her role as a champion of Greek and European culture had many achievements, especially the creation of the European Capital of Culture initiative.

Born into a prominent Athenian family on 18 October 1920, Maria Amalia ‘Melina’ Mercouri seemed destined to go into politics like her father, United Democratic Left party Minister Stamatis Mercouris, and her grandfather, Spyros Mercouris, who had been mayor of Athens. This would prove to be the case but it took over four decades before she became actively involved in politics, playing a leading role in the struggle against the colonels’ junta that took control of Greece after a military coup in 1967.

Before this political epiphany, Melina was one of Greece’s most celebrated actors. A year after graduating from drama school in 1944, she played Electra in the National Theatre of Greece’s production of Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Her breakthrough performance was as Blanche Dubois in the 1949 production of Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Soon after, Mercouri left for Paris where she lived and acted until she returned to Greece in 1955. During a period of her career where she appeared in classic plays including Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and Anouilh’s *L’Alouette*, she joined the theatre actors’ trade union movement and her political journey began.

Mercouri’s film career took off in the late 1950s and she found international acclaim in the role of Ilia in the Oscar nominated *Never on Sunday*, winning the Best Actress award at Cannes in 1960. She reprised the role in the 1967 stage version on Broadway. It was during this theatre run in New York, on April 21, that a group of right-wing army officers, led by Brigadier General Stylianos Pattakos and Colonels George Papadopoulos and Nikolaos Makarezos, seized power in Greece in a coup d’état. Mercouri soon became one of the most prominent leaders of the expatriate movement to overthrow the junta and had her Greek citizenship revoked by Pattakos as a result. Her famous riposte to this was “*I was born a Greek and I’ll die a Greek. Pattakos was born a fascist and he’ll die a fascist*”.

Throughout the junta’s 7-year rule, Melina travelled extensively to campaign against the dictatorship, spreading awareness about the situation in Greece and calling for the isolation and removal of the colonels. This outspoken opposition led to an assassination attempt in Genoa, Italy, but Mercouri remained undeterred and continued campaigning against the junta until it fell in 1974.

After democracy was restored, Mercuri returned to Greece where she helped to form the Pan Hellenic Socialist Party (PASOK), and became actively involved in the country's women's movement. She became a member of the party's Central Committee and was being elected to Parliament in 1977 with the highest number of votes in the whole of Greece. After this victory, she devoted all her energy to politics and culture.

When her party won the 1981 elections, Mercuri was appointed Minister of Culture, a post she held for 8 years, during which time she brought the culture portfolio to the forefront of Greek politics. Her achievements as Minister of Culture transformed her country: from the integration of the archaeological sites of Athens into a traffic-free area, to introducing free access to museums and archaeological sites for Greek citizens as part of an overall education effort. She launched the campaign for the return of the Parthenon marbles on display in the British Museum and, unsurprisingly, she actively championed Greek theatre and cinema.

One of her greatest achievements was the establishment of the European Capitals of Culture, with Athens chosen as the first capital in 1985. This followed a meeting she organised with the Culture Ministers of the ten EU Member States during the first Greek presidency of the Council in 1983. Pointing out that although there was no reference to cultural issues in the Treaty of Rome, which established the European Economic Community (the forerunner of the EU), Mercuri encouraged the other ministers to join her in efforts to increase cultural awareness across Europe. This was the first of what would become regular meetings between Europe's Ministers of Culture, which still continue.

Mercouri's involvement and influence in Europe deepened in 1988 during the second Greek presidency of the Council when she began campaigning for dialogue and cooperation with the countries of eastern Europe at a time of great upheaval. As the Cold War ended and the Iron Curtain was destroyed, Mercuri was a leading instigator of the European Cultural Month initiative, which launched in 1990 and focussed on central and eastern European countries in particular.

Mercouri continued to act on stage in the early 1990s while remaining as a member of parliament. When PASOK returned to power in 1993, Mercuri returned to the Ministry of Culture, where she focused on establishing links between culture and education at all levels.

Melina Mercuri died on 6 March 1994. She left behind her husband, the film director Jules Dassin, with whom she worked regularly throughout her acting career.