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Arts & Living



Scene from Argyris Papadimitropoulos's *Wasted Youth*, which had its premiere as the opening night film of the Rotterdam International Film Festival.

Screen Time

Life in the Time of Cholera

As Greece's recession deepens, diaspora Greeks especially have become increasingly anxious about its impact on day to day living. And their looking to film to fill in the blanks left by news reports and economic analyses.

By Angelike Contis

In a scene from Costas Kapakas's comedy *Magic Hour*, Diomedes, played by Renos Haralambides, remarks: "I have information that because of the economic crisis, the banks will collapse and they'll write off our debts." It's reflection of what many Greeks believed—that is, that if the banks went belly up, then their personal debts to these banks would disappear—and perfectly captures the frequent referencing of supposedly insider information about almost everything.

Greek film has offered diverse images of Greek society, but filmmakers have found a common framework for these in the recession. Their perspectives were a welcome window on Greece's current woes—and made for the most-discussed and most-attended movies at the annual Greek film festivals in Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles this past year.

"Films like *City of Children*, *Magic Hour*, *Unfair World*, and *Two Men and a Baby* address the financial crisis, either dramatically or comically, but always with an astute sensitivity. Characters in these films react to the situation, question it, try to understand it. Their lives are affected by it. There is no denying it," says Jimmy DeMetro, creative director of the New York Greek Film Festival, which drew some 3,800 people this year.

Childbirth unites urban people on the edge in the Giorgos Gikapeppas's *City of Children*, as the story cuts between several bleak stories. In *Magic Hour*, a failed filmmaker and a man who has just lost everything embark on a road trip—in a hearse. Both *Unfair World*—a fiction film by Plato's *Academy* director Filippos Tsitos that was Greece's entry for the Oscars—and the documentary *100* focus on the role of the law in a fractured society. Filmmaker Gerasimos Rigas, who came to the New York event, gained rare access to



Film critic John Petrakis, as head of the Chicago Greek Film Festival jury, announces the FilmHellen Awards.

Athens's "100" emergency call center to make his film.

The police also play a central role in *Wasted Youth*, a film co-directed by Argyris Papadimitropoulos and Jan Vogel. It cuts between the stories of a young skateboarder and his friends and a policeman in a personal crisis. The film opened the 40th Rotterdam International Film Festival and was shown at three of the four major Greek film festivals in the U.S.

The corruption of Greek government institutions is addressed in acclaimed director Sotiris Goritsas's *All Saints*, which was shown at the San Francisco festival. The film, according to the program notes, is about an intern at the All Saints Hospital who "discovers that everyone who works in the Greek public sector is part of an absurd tragicomedy." It goes on: "He finds out how a system that is designed for the well-being of everyone has become an insane instru-



The New York Greek Film Festival drew some 3,800 people this year.

ment of torture that grinds everyone down, whether they're a saint or not."

Kleon Skourtis, who chairs the San Francisco Greek Film Festival, notes that for over two years the program has included films revealing a Greece in crisis. He points out that Yorgos Zois's short film *Casus Belli* was one of the first to show people lining up for food in today's Greece. *On the Sofa*, a 2011 documentary looks at suicide, a previously taboo topic in Greece. The public is often "a little shocked" with such films, he adds, noting: "They don't expect these things to happen in Greece."

Another film screened at several festivals was Yorgos Siougas's *Burning Heads*, a tense mother-sons dynamic about a family members of immigrants from Russia. Different faces of immigration and being a social outsider are major components of Alethea Avramis's *The Foreigner*, which was shown at the Chicago Greek Film Festival, Dimitris Athanitis's *Three Days of Happiness*, which was shown at Los Angeles, and Yorgos Georgopoulos's black-and-white *Tungsten*, which was also featured on multiple festival programs. And while migrants had been a frequent preoccupation of contemporary Greek film, at least, Christos Karakepelis's documentary *Raw Material*, looked at a group of Roma relying on Athenians' waste for their livelihood through the prism of the recession.

Nikos Franghias, the transplanted Greek filmmaker who revamped the Chicago Greek Film Festival under the not-for-profit FilmHellenes, says Greece today is best drawn by Kostas Chaliasas's *Raus*. Just two-and-a-half minutes long and available on Youtube.com, *Raus* shows a mother telling her young son that they must leave Greece as she pulls him along dirt track. The boy stamps his foot and declares "I will stay *here!*" to which his saddened mother replies "here, where?" as she shows him a map from which Greece has been wiped off.

But not all films about Greece's economic crisis are as stark or dramatic. Yorgos Papaioannou's *Super Demetrios* reminded audiences in Los Angeles and Chicago of Greeks' deep sense of humor as the tongue-in-cheek Thessaloniki production offered up a superhero for today's Greece.

Franghias points to no less than a "creative revolution" in Greek cinema. "Since 2009, as you know, the film landscape has changed completely. Greek films produced almost with zero budgets are getting distinctions in top European and International festivals" But he notes that Greek filmmakers are looking outside of the country for opportunities to take it to the next level. He explains they "can't go on working on 'guerilla filmmaking' terms forever." He points to Stelios Kammitsis, director of *Jerks*, which won the FilmHellenes Award for Best Feature, as an example of one of these bright talents.

Greek filmmakers' ability to make any film at all is not lost on the festival organizers. "I'm impressed how directors have embraced bad news and gloom and have tremendous energy, making so many movies lately," says Skourtis. He's observed a new synergy among filmmakers in Greece and a resourcefulness when seeking out funds in new platforms, such as site Indigogo.com.

DeMetro notes: "Working in a painfully challenging time that makes funding difficult if not impossible, Greek filmmakers are turning out films that people want to see."

In Chicago, the FilmHellenes are working to bolster filmmakers in Greece. "Our new pilot project, in its infancy, FilmHellenes Pro, bears the vision of connecting experienced Greek filmmakers from around the world with possible investors," says Franghias.

All four festivals are relatively small and young. Franghias notes



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that Chicago's the all-volunteers Greek film festival began with \$25,000 in 2011 and aims to reach \$40,000 next year. The New York Greek Film Festival, now in its sixth year, works with a \$100,000 budget; the event is sponsored by the Hellenic American Chamber of Commerce and the Hellenic American Cultural Foundation with major support from the Niarchos Foundation. Meanwhile, the organizers of the San Francisco Greek Film Festival proudly point out that their volunteers have raised over \$50,000 over the past nine years for the Center for Modern Greek Studies and the Nikos Kazantzakis Chair at San Francisco State University. It is the oldest Greek film festival in the U.S. and planning a special tenth anniversary event for 2013.

Money is always an issue in organizing such events and some believe the closer collaboration among the Greek film festivals in the U.S. could trim some costs, for instance insurance and shipping of film copies. And knowing that financial support from Greece is an impossibility, the festivals are becoming more creative in finding funds. One example: the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens donated the Cycladic statuette replicas presented as the FilmHellenes Awards. All are also on the look for synergies and sponsorships that can help them bring guests from Greece to their festivals. Such exchanges, say festival organizers are vital for the festivals and Greek filmmakers. Guest directors can engage with festival-goers, helping them understand Greece and obtaining a better understanding of the diaspora themselves. "They make a connection," says Skourtis.

While offering a window on today's Greece is a part of each festival's mission, the programs include a number of films about Greece's past too. *My Sweet Canary*, Roy Sher's film about rebetika singer Roza Eskenazi, has been a major draw at several U.S. festivals over the past two years. And Vassilis Loules's *Kisses to the Children*, a film about Greek Jewish children who survived the second world war took the audience prize at the Chicago Greek Film Festival. Nonetheless, Skourtis says the San Francisco festival will continue to seek out films that reflect Greek reality today. "We are touching a nerve," he says. "We are on the right track."