

And the Winner is Olympia Dukakis

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In 1988, the year that Olympia Dukakis won the Academy Award for best supporting actress as Rose Castorini in *Moonstruck*, “Dukakis” became a household word. Looking confident and beautiful in a sparkling, lacy black dress, Olympia held her Oscar up high, saying “Okay, Michael. Let’s go!” referring to her cousin Michael Dukakis, who had put in his bid for the Democratic nomination for president of the United States. The Dukakis clan had made it in America, but that journey had been difficult. The details and culture embodied in that journey had a profound effect on the sensibility Olympia Dukakis had brought to her work in theater and film.

The Journey

In 1914, the Dukakis family had fled Turkey to escape certain death at the hands of the Young Turks. Constantine, Olympia’s father, and his sister fled with their parents after their father had been warned that they would be slaughtered if they remained. Michael Dukakis’s father and two other brothers had already left to avoid conscription in the Turkish army. The Dukakis family settled in Lowell, Massachusetts, the textile mill town.

Lowell was where Constantine Dukakis met Alexandra Christos, Olympia Dukakis’s mother. The Christos family also had experienced hardship. Alexandra Christos came to Lowell with her family from a poor village in Mani, Greece in 1907 when she was six, the youngest of seven children. In 1925, before she got married, Alexandra lost all but two of her seven siblings in an automobile accident. Shortly afterwards, her father and mother died. Olympia’s mother

Alexandra never recovered from her loss. What her mother described as the “closing of her heart” affected Dukakis profoundly.

Olympia Dukakis was born in Lowell on June 20, 1931. Dukakis had a hard-scrabble life, disheartened by the trials and tribulations that her mother and father faced and further disheartened by the restrictions put upon her by the Greek community. The unacceptability of the non-Greek community that was manifested in Olympia’s earlier years continued well into her adult years. Her agent told her that when trying to book her, he was asked, “Why doesn’t she change her name?” “Can she speak English?”

Dukakis recalls the comment that Loretta Lynn made about her cousin Michael Dukakis: “How can I vote for a person when I can’t pronounce his name?” She told a Canadian news reporter that “It was this horrible ethnic slur that never failed to stir up old memories of what we had to fight against on the streets of Lowell, Massachusetts, where Greeks were pitted against the Irish and the Armenians.”¹

Being of Greek descent made Olympia feel like an outsider. As a young teen, her physical appearance made her feel even more so. She didn’t like the bump on the bridge of her nose she had inherited from her mother. At age 18, with her father’s consent, she had surgery to rid herself of it, although she refrained from getting a pug nose, preferring to retain a Hellenic nose.

In the Greek family of the 1940s and 1950s, Greek women were supposed to be good housewives and mothers. The husband was king. Alexandra did not question her husband. In her memoir, *Ask Me Again Tomorrow*, Dukakis states that Alexandra would let her husband tell her to “shut up” when she ventured an opinion, and if they were going out, and he didn’t like her dress, he would tell her to go back upstairs and change it. She even put up with his philandering. No matter what, she continued to cook and clean and be a good housewife. Her mother’s behavior caused Dukakis to lose respect for her.²

“Honor” mattered in the Dukakis home. Her mother had followed the rules that would bring honor to her family and tried to emblazon these rules on Olympia’s psyche. She told her the story of the young woman in the village who slept with her lover. The woman’s brother was called back from America. He grabbed his rifle and shot his sister, not the man, while she was

picking olives in a tree. He shot her dead despite her assurances that they were to marry. Olympia says, “At this point in the story, my mother clapped her hands three times – once for each crack of that rifle. Then she ended the story by saying, ‘And then she dropped like a fig to the ground.’” This was a true story.³

Dukakis rebelled against the whole Greek patriarchal system and the traditional code of honor. This was despite, or perhaps because, her mother trying to hold her in check by using physical force with whatever was handy, “stick, spoon, or switch.” She says, “She would come after me with a ferocity that was terrifying.”⁴

Dukakis was not about to be dictated to by the mores of the Greek community. A competitive girl who was good in several sports, she became the New England fencing champion, winning the title three times. She decided to become an actress, even if it wasn't the career path of a Greek girl and rendered her even more of an outsider in the eyes of the Greek community. She followed her passion. She got a bachelor's degree in physical therapy from Sargent College of Boston University so she could work and earn money. After completing two grueling years of compulsory field work in physical therapy, working with victims of the 1950s polio epidemic, she enrolled at Boston University, where she earned her MFA in theatre.

Although Dukakis did not follow all the mores of the Greek community or become active in Greek fraternal organizations or the Greek Orthodox Church, she has embraced the Hellenic ideals she learned from her parents: the Greek work ethic, the importance of giving back to the community, and the priority of family. Honoring the mandate that “much given so much is expected of you,” she has been involved in various projects of the Greek community. For example, she has been the narrator of the three documentary films made by the Greek Heritage Society of Southern California about the Greek Americans of Southern California. Dukakis also appeared in *Rehearsal* (1974) in a cast featuring a roster of international stars who wanted to be protest the Greek junta of 1867-1974.⁵

More recently she has been the force behind the young filmmaker Stavroula Toska, an immigrant from Greece who is a friend of Dukakis' daughter. “My life changed 180 degrees the moment I met Olympia,” Toska says, “She took the time to listen to me at a critical point in my life when I needed direction of how to realize my goals and dreams She helped me find my

voice and the message I wanted to tell.” Toska is in awe of Dukakis, “blown away by her passion and strength and her tremendous sense of self as a human being.” Toska describes Dukakis as curious, generous with everybody, intelligent, and with a sparkle in her eyes. She considers her a “mentor, friend, and like family.”⁶

Toska had come to Dukakis for advice on a script she had written. Dukakis said, “What I knew of Stavroula’s spirit and heart was nowhere to be found in this script.”⁷ Dukakis gave her *Greek Women in Resistance* by Eleni Fourtouni.⁸ Dukakis had been so moved by the book, which included journals and interviews of women who were incarcerated in concentration camps during and after the Greek Civil War, that she had held on to it for 30 years.

Several weeks later Toska returned and told her, "Olympia, we're going to Greece to find these women and interview them. We've been doing research all this time; many of them are still alive. We're going to make a documentary about them."⁹ Toska, a first-time film maker, threw herself wholeheartedly into the production of the film. It took her on a journey of self-discovery; she learned that her own grandmother had been incarcerated.

Toska’s award-winning film *Beneath the Olive Tree* (2016) relates the stories of the women who were imprisoned during and after the Greek Civil War.¹⁰ Not only did Dukakis light the spark that started Toska on this adventure, but guided Toska during the six-year process it took to produce the film. She became the narrator of the film and as the executive producer assisted with fundraising and consulted Toska during the writing and editing.

Dukakis has given back not only to the Greek community but the community in general. She takes an interest in combating domestic violence and has raised money for that cause. She has also supported arts education, literacy, environmental issues, equal rights, and charities that support Alzheimer and osteoporosis outreach and research. She has been diagnosed with the latter.

In 2016, she received the Impact Award as part of the 2016 Sarasota Film Festival. The award was presented through the auspices of the Gulf coast chapter of UN Women, which works toward the empowerment of women around the globe. She was praised not only for her “tough, unforgettable female roles” but for her activism. Her work to obtain higher wages and better benefits for those working in home healthcare services was singled out.¹¹

Her fervor for helping others is shared by her husband of more than 50 years, fellow actor Louis Zorich,¹² who supported the rationale behind their founding the not-for-profit Whole Theatre in Montclair, New Jersey. Dukakis said, “I wanted to be part of a theater that produced plays that dealt with issues important to the human condition, plays that could change the way people see their lives, plays that confront how we see ourselves and what we make of our existence.”¹³

Dukakis was involved in all aspects of the theater: acting, directing, raising funds, and managing the staff. The Whole Theatre chose to do the classics, such as those by the ancient Greeks, Chekov, and Shakespeare, as well as cutting-edge work, such as the play *Spare Parts*, which was about two lesbians who talk their friend into helping them have a baby, a play that created a controversy within conservative circles.

The theatre company reached out to the community by developing educational outreach programs like *Thunder in the Night*, a spin-off troupe that toured New Jersey’s schools and talked about drugs, AIDS, child abuse, poverty, and discrimination. Whole Theater had also presented programs for the disabled and hearing impaired and the disadvantaged. The Whole Theatre was still functioning when she won the Academy Award. It wasn’t until 1990, after nearly 20 years that the Whole Theatre closed, a result of the drying up of funding.

Dukakis’s role in *Moonstruck* came directly from the work she had done in the theatre. Nora Ephron saw her performance in the play, *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, for which she won her second Obie Award. (She had won her first in 1962 for her role in *A Man’s a Man*.) Ephron recommended her to Mike Nichols, who was directing the movie version of Ephron’s novel *Heartburn*. Even though none of the scenes she was in ever made it into the final cut, Nichols liked her work and cast her in the Broadway production of *Social Security*. Norman Jewison, who was casting *Moonstruck*, came to the play twice. He saw that she had the right “comic timing” and cast her as Rose Castorini.¹⁴

Making Films for Hollywood and National Television

Winning the Academy Award for her role as Rose in *Moonstruck* was a turning point in her film career. Winning made her feel accepted and valued. She was no longer an outsider. Winning the award also made it possible for her to be more selective about the roles she would

play. Prior to winning the Academy Award, Dukakis, her husband, and three children had struggled. Her husband had spent the preceding five years recovering from an automobile accident. She had been the sole support of her family and was putting her daughter through college on credit cards. When Dukakis was asked about how she felt about winning the Academy Award by several interviewers, she responded that she could now put her three children through college and be a good provider.

The importance of family comes across loud and clear. In her memoir, she says that the high points of her life are “Christina, Peter, and Stefan.”¹⁵ She speaks very highly of her husband in her memoir and interviews, saying she achieved her dream because she was supported by a man who loved her and wanted her to be happy. Her family has been a constant source of support, and she values it greatly. When she was having a particularly difficult time suffering from depression while studying for the theatre, her cousin Stelian, Michael’s older brother, offered to pay for her to see a psychiatrist. She and her husband have also been a support for their families. In an article written in 1991 for the *Los Angeles Times*, Mark Dondey wrote about her husband’s nephew, the Notre Dame and Bears football player Chris Zorich, who is now athletic director at Prairie State College. Louis and Olympia would sometimes send Louis’s sister the money to pay rent for her and her young son when they lived on Chicago’s Southside.¹⁶

Despite the difficulties she had with her mother when she was growing up, Dukakis and her husband welcomed her into their suburban home in Montclair, N. J., when she started showing signs of dementia and failing health. They retrofitted their dining room to accommodate her. By the end of her mother’s life, Olympia had made peace with her; she felt that her mother had “opened up” her heart to her.

Her experiences in her family, the Greek community, as well as in the rough streets of the multi-cultural industrial city of Lowell, Massachusetts has informed Dukakis’s career. The acting part in *Social Security* that led to her getting her the role in *Moonstruck* was one she decided she wasn’t going to audition for. She questioned how she, a 50-year-old Greek actress, could play the part of an 80-year-old Jewish woman. Her husband talked her out of giving up. “Play your mother,” he said.¹⁷

In *Moonstruck*, where the close-knit family dynamics in many ways parallel that of the Greek community, she scolds her daughter, played by Cher, “Your life is goin’ down the toilet!” In a television interview with the Canadian television host, George Stroumboulopoulos, she said that was her mother’s line to her.¹⁸ She also mentions, in another interview with Martha Wade Steketee, that her character Rose Castorini “was probably more Greek than Italian.” She said, “Greek women hold their punches for when they want a knockout blow. Greek women do revenge good.”¹⁹

Dukakis exhibited the courage to stand up for herself on the rough streets of Lowell. When she was eight, she beat up a boy who had been harassing her. Later, she had the courage to follow her passion for acting despite the difficulties she faced. Her Greek American fiancé at the time did not have that kind of backbone. Although he had said he loved her, and they had been secretly engaged, he rejected her in favor of the girl his parents had selected for him to marry.

The feeling of rejection that Dukakis had kept under wraps came out to sabotage her while she was a theater student at Boston University. She started weeping and couldn’t proceed when playing a scene where her lover decides to leave her for another woman. Ultimately, however, she worked through her feelings, recited her lines, and emerged as a true professional. She credits Peter Kass, her teacher at Boston University, not only for teaching her to acknowledge and use her emotions, but also for teaching her the craft of theater so that she could take control of her emotions. She in turn has imparted the lessons she has learned from those who taught her and from her own experiences, by teaching other actors. She was a master teacher at New York University for 14 years and continues to teach and encourage actors in workshops and seminars in NY and throughout the country.

She describes her brother, actor Apollo Dukakis,²⁰ with whom she has performed, as “an extraordinary versatile actor - a brilliant chameleon.”²¹ The same adjective can be applied to Olympia. She keeps changing with each role she plays, whether it is a Jewish, Italian, or Eastern European matriarchs, a suburban mother, an upper-class southern belle, a “butch” lesbian dressed in men’s shirts and sporting a short haircut, or a transgendered landlady.

“I love transforming,” Dukakis says. “It’s the fun part of acting. It’s the easy part, actually. But it’s getting harder and harder for actors to do. You have to have a LOOK, it has to

be CURRENT, the body has to look this way. This is the enemy of transformation.”²² In her memoir, she wrote that she liked roles “that challenge me, or better yet, scare the hell out of me. I aspire to do dangerous work that feels risky.”²³ Being older has not dampened her spirit or sense of adventure. She keeps evolving by playing roles that pose a challenge.

Dukakis has been in over 150 stage shows and over 100 film and television productions, which have given her the opportunity to play a variety of roles. In *Steel Magnolias* (1989), in order to play an upper-class southern belle, she learned to speak with a “plantation” accent; for that role she was nominated for the American Comedy Award for Funniest Supporting Actress in a Motion Picture. In *Look Who’s Talking* (1989), *Look Who’s Talking Too* (1990), and *Look Who’s Talking Now* (1993), she played a controlling mother and an impossible comedic mother-in-law.

For the *Cemetery Club* (1993), she changed herself into a middle-aged Jewish widow; in *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (1995), a strong but sympathetic high school principal; for the romantic comedy *Picture Perfect* (1997), she became the exasperated mother of a young executive played by Jennifer Aniston. A role that took an extreme amount of transformation was her portrayal of the 100-year-old hunchbacked mafia mother in the comedic *Jane Austen’s Mafia!* (1998). For *The Thing About My Folks* (2005) she becomes a terminally ill wife and mother. In *Away from Her* (2006), she played the wife of a man who has dementia. She brought her own experience to that movie since she had experienced the heartache of having her own mother suffer from dementia.

She has been in three films directed by Canadian director Thom Fitzgerald, whom she admires greatly. They include *The Event* (2003) and *Cloudburst* (2011), where she gave outstanding performances. She won two Best Supporting Actress awards for her role in *The Event* where she played the mother of a man dying of AIDs. In *Cloudburst*, she garnered several awards for her portrayal as a foul-mouthed lesbian who manages to spring her lover of 31 years from a nursing home where her granddaughter had placed her. This physically and emotionally demanding film follows the couple’s adventures as they are fleeing in a beat-up pick-up truck to Canada to be married. These roles, as well as the role of Anna Madrigal, the transgendered landlady in the 1990’s *Tales of the City* and *More Tales of the City* television mini-series, has

made her an icon of the LGBT community. She had the honor of being a grand marshal in the 2011 San Francisco Gay Pride parade.

Her most recent films have included the comedy, *7 Chinese Brothers* (2015), where she is the cantankerous but loving grandmother of a hard-drinking slacker grandson, and *The Infiltrator* (2016), a crime thriller in which she plays the infiltrator's brash, comic talkative aunt. With roles of this kind, Dukakis has continually showed the vitality and contributions of women of diverse political, sexual, and cultural backgrounds. Rather than disguising her aging as many actors attempt, Dukakis has explored the realities of life as it actually evolves chronologically.

Dukakis is being filmed for another movie being created by Harry Mavromichalis, a documentary about her life titled *Undefined* that is described as an "honest and intimate portrait of an exceptional woman in constant motion."²⁴ Mavromichalis sums up why he selected that title for this film: "Dukakis has spent much of her life telling society not to define her as a woman, or as a Greek, or as an actress that does ethnic roles."²⁵

Dukakis has acted in numerous television productions and television movies, too many to list them all here, but a few give a sense of her range and her impact on popular culture. The same year she worked in *Rehearsal*, she starred in *Nicky's World* (1974), a made-for-television film that deals with a Greek family whose Manhattan family bakery burns to the ground. She appeared in the popular series *In Search for Tomorrow* as Dr. Barbara Moreno, who romanced Stu Bergman, played by Larry Haines. For her role as the feisty Dolly Sinatra, Frank Sinatra's mother, in the television mini-series *Sinatra* (1992), she was nominated for an Emmy Award. She was nominated for another Emmy Award for her supporting role as Mother Babette in *The Messenger: Joan of Arc* (1999). In the joint BBC/HBO television film comedy *The Last of the Blonde Bombshells* (2000), she was cast as a forlorn alcoholic trumpet player living in Scotland. Dukakis played the librarian's mother, who want her son to get married and settle down, in *The Librarian: Quest for the Spear* (2004), *The Librarian: Returns to King Solomon's Mines* (2006), and *The Librarian: Curse of the Judas Chalice* (2008). Dukakis appeared as a victim advocate in the Canadian television series *Sex and Violence* in 2012 & 2013, and in 2014 she appeared in the television movie thriller *Big Driver* based on a Stephen King novella.

She has participated as an actress or director in scores of off-Broadway shows, including many produced by the Public Theatre. At the Whole Theatre, she appeared in: *The Rose Tattoo*, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, *The Tempest*, *Singing Forest*, *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Titus Andronicus*, *A Man's a Man*, *Electra*, *The Trojan Women*, *Peer Gynt at the Public Theatre*, *Hecuba*, and *Mother Courage and Her Children*.

Her Broadway credits include *Who's Who in Hell*, *Social Security*, and the one-woman play *Rose*, which features an 80-year-old Holocaust survivor who is now living in Miami. She first appeared in *Rose* at the Royal National Theater in London in 1999, then went on to Broadway. She continues performing that role, which has earned her an Outer Critics Circle Award and Drama Desk Award nomination, at various venues throughout the United States and Canada. She continuously learns from the characters she portrays. Regarding the play *Rose*, she says, "There is a line in that play that always resonates with me, 'Maybe there is a joy in not belonging.'"²⁶

Her character in the movie *Away from Her* said, "I'm trying to decide to be happy." When asked about that quote during an interview with Johanna Schneller, Dukakis replied, "I kept that idea, that happiness is a decision. I'm going to do today the things that will make me happy, I'm not going to focus on this or that. There's a lot of leftover stuff in the back of the refrigerator."²⁷

Now in her mid-eighties, Olympia Dukakis is confident and happy, reflecting on her life with a sense of humor and enjoying her family which includes five grandchildren. Her film and theater credits keep growing. Her audiences respect her ability to create strong women of various ages, classes, religions, ethnicities, and sexual preference. She continues to be an advocate for social justice off and on the screen. Not least of her accomplishments has been her portrayals of ethnic women that defy the usual and often demeaning stereotypes characteristic of mainstream media

¹Johanna Schneller, "Olympia Dukakis: 'Part of my personality is sexuality, at 81.'" *The Globe and Mail*, March 8, 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/olympia-dukakis-part-of-my-personality-is-sexuality-at-81/article9513342/>

² Olympia Dukakis, *Ask me Again Tomorrow*, New York: HarperCollins, 2003, page 79.

³Dukakis, *Ask Me*, page 50.

⁴ *Ibid*, page 69.

⁵ The cast included Melina Mercouri, Mikis Theodorakis, Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman, Stathis Giallelis, Laurence Olivier, and Maximilian Schnell. The film was written and directed by Jules Dassin. It recounted the student rebellions of the Polytechnic School in Athens that triggered the fall of the junta. The film was never released as the junta fell a day after shooting on the film ended. The film is available on DVD.

⁶Phone interview of Stavroula Toska by author, October 19, 2016.

⁷ Olympia Dukakis, "Beneath the Olive Tree," *Huffington Post Entertainment*, September 4, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/olympia-dukakis/beneath-the-olive-tree-documentary_b_1854408.html.

⁸Chicago: Lake View Press, 1986.

⁹Dukakis, *Huffington Post Entertainment*.

¹⁰Best film: Thessaloniki Documentary Film Festival; best director: LA Greek Film Festival, best documentary: Sarasota Film Festival; best feature: Indie Film Festival.

¹¹Kay Kipling, "Oscar Winner Olympia Dukakis Shares Some Very Unexpected Acting Advice. The Oscar-winning star received the Impact Award for her career on and off screen," *Sarasota Magazine*, April 8, 2016, <https://www.sarasotamagazine.com/articles/2016/4/8/actress-olympia-dukakis-honored-at-sarasota-film-festival-luncheon>.

¹² Mainly performs in theater and television. He had a continuing role in the hit television show *Made about you* (1993-1999) He has appeared in films such as *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (1988), *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984), and *Rehearsal* (1974).

¹³Dukakis, *Ask Me*, page 32.

¹⁴*Ibid.* page 19.

¹⁵Dukakis, *Ask Me*, page 178.

¹⁶Mark Downey, "All Heart: Despite Tough Times, Chris Zorich's Mother Had a Way of Showing Her Son That It's Still a Wonderful Life," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1991. [Http://articles.latimes.com/1991-05-12/sports/sp-27281-cris-zorich](http://articles.latimes.com/1991-05-12/sports/sp-27281-cris-zorich).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, page 17.

¹⁸George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight Television Show, January 13, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6PeXlxLff4>.

¹⁹Martha Wade Steketee, "event musings: moonstruck reunion: 'they're real but a little larger than life,'" *Urban Excavations: Fragments Inspired by Stage and Screen*, *Urban Excavations.com*. October 9, 2010, <https://urbanexcavations.com/2010/10/09/moonstruck-reunion-theyre-real-but-a-little-larger-than-life/>

²⁰Apollo Dukakis has mainly performed on television. He has been in major hits such as *Seinfeld*, *L.A. Law*, and *E.R.* His film work includes *Last Action Hero* (1993).

²¹Dukakis, *Ask Me*, photography insert.

²²Schneller, "Olympia."

²³Dukakis, *Ask Me*, page 196.

²⁴"Olympia Dukakis Undefined," <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/2114795696/olympia-dukakis-undefined/posts/861035>.

²⁵ Gwen Orel, "Fundraiser for film about Olympia Dukakis to be held in Montclair," *NorthJersey.com.*, October 9, 2015, Last Updated: Sunday, October 11, 2015, <http://www.northjersey.com/arts-and-entertainment/celebrities/fundraiser-for-film-about-olympia-dukakis-to-be-held-in-montclair-1.1429813?page=all>.

²⁶Dukakis, *Ask Me*, page xi.

²⁷Schneller, "Olympia."