

## **From “Other” to “One of Us”**

### **The Changing Image of Greek Americans in American film: 1943-1963**

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All new immigrant groups arriving in the United States are regarded with suspicion and scorn. Over the course of decades, most eventually become accepted as full-fledged Americans. Greek immigrants of the Great Migration (1880s-1924) faced particularly negative images when they arrived and were often considered quasi-Europeans at best. This perception was reinforced by silent era movies and the first decade of talking pictures in America. With the exception of sponge divers in Florida, films almost exclusively portrayed Greeks as gamblers, wrestlers, and others on the fringes of society where criminality is common.

The negative image of Greeks got a near instant makeover in 1940. The cause of that change was the success of homeland Greeks in routing the invading armies of Benito Mussolini, the first defeat for fascist forces in World War II. Greek valor was celebrated by Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin. Greek soldiers were featured on the covers of *Life*<sup>1</sup> and *Time*<sup>2</sup> magazines. At least eighteen major newspapers highlighted the victory, often with considerable references to ancient Greece.<sup>3</sup>

A fundamental shift in the image of Greek Americans from negative or marginal to positive is visible in a score of Hollywood films of various genres made during the war era. By the early 1960s, the upgraded perception of Greeks became entrenched and has never abated.<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon illustrates how cinema mainly reflects rather than shapes public perceptions. It also underscores the need to consider numerous films when speaking of ethnic images rather than singling out a film as transformative or an expression of public opinion.

### The War Years: You're in the Army Now

Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt had asked Hollywood to make films affirming the commonalities of the ethnic and native-born communities in America. One of Hollywood's responses after America entered the war was to make films with combat units composed of native-born Americans, European immigrants, and the children of European immigrants. The two groups initially are uncomfortable with one another and sometimes in open conflict, but by the end of the film, they have become the proverbial "band of brothers."

During the 1930s the best-known Greek in mass entertainment was Nick Parkyakarkus,<sup>5</sup> whose "bits" were filled with malapropisms and other humorous elements. The Parkyakarkus image was adjusted to meet the needs of war. In *A Yank in Libya* (1942), his quasi-European features and fractured speech become American assets. He is serving his nation as an undercover spy who masquerades as an Arab and utters Paryakarkusisms in the bazaar. He only reveals his true American identity when he elects to aid a lost American couple. That same year, in the musical *The Yanks Are Coming*, Parkyakarkus sings "Zip your Lip," a song about the security demanded by the war.

A virtual paradigm for Greek American profiles during World War II is *Mister Lucky* (1943) which stars Cary Grant as a Greek American who is transformed from being a gambler into to a self-sacrificing patriot. Although Grant makes no effort to Hellenize his established acting persona, he plays Joe "the Greek" Adams (Joe Bacopolous), a gambler who assumes the identity of a dead gangster in order to avoid the draft. Joe then schemes to use a war charity as a cover for new gambling operation. His nefarious ways begin to change when he becomes attracted to wealthy socialite and do-gooder Dorothy Bryant (Laraine Day), who believes him to be a philanthropist. As his affection and respect for Bryant grow, Bacopolous questions the direction of his life. His doubts are catalyzed when he receives a letter from his mother in Occupied Greece. The letter which is translated by a Greek Orthodox priest informs him of the horrible actions of the Nazis in Greece. Driven by what has become love for Bryant coupled with his mother's account of Nazi atrocities, Joe abandons his plan to defraud the war charity and signs up for the merchant marines. Although a civilian force, the merchant marines made up the crews for the cargo ships taking war materials to European allies. A considerable percentage of

these ships were successfully targeted by Nazi submarines. Thus, in ninety minutes, Hollywood has transfigured an a-moral, draft-dodging ethnic into a loving, patriotic American.

Another film about the merchant marines is *Action in the North Atlantic* (1943). It deals with the survival of a multi-ethnic crew whose cargo ship has been torpedoed. Marginal roles as Greek seamen are played by well-known character actors Frank Puglia and Pedro Regas.<sup>6</sup> A.I. Bezzerides wrote some of the film's dialog. Bezzerides would later script *The Angry Hills* (1959), which is set in World War II and has Robert Mitcham working with the Greek resistance.

Two examples of Greeks in direct combat films are *Destination Tokyo* (1943) and *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949). In *Destination Tokyo*, a submarine crew questions the loyalties of a Greek American nicknamed "Tin Can" (Dane Clark) when he does not attend the funeral of a fallen sailor. In a confrontation that threatens to become violent, Clark reveals that the death of a shipmate has led him to solitarily brooding about the fate of his family in Greece. He eulogizes "the birth of democracy" in ancient Athens and totally wins the comradeship of his shipmates. Later, he will be given the honor of launching the first torpedo in Tokyo. In *Sands of Iwo Jima*, a brave Greek American is killed in action due to inadequate support by a xenophobic American. None other than John Wayne, an icon of Americanism, angrily berates the xenophobe and declares the heroic Greek American is the "real" American.

*The Guns of Navarone* (1961) offers variation on the benefits Greeks bring to the American war effort. Anthony Quinn plays a Greek officer and James Darren is Spyros Papadimas, a Greek-American commando. They are essential figures in a team that seeks to demolish a seaside artillery stronghold threatening Allied military and civilian shipping. A subplot in what proves to be a successful mission involves Spyros coming to terms with his sister Maria (Irene Papas), the tough leader of a local Greek resistance group assisting the commandos. Before a tearful reconciliation, Maria berates him for never writing to her once he immigrated to America.

The trauma of the war in Greece is a sub-theme in the Spencer Tracy-Katherine Hepburn hit *Woman of the Year* (1943). Hepburn wants to adopt a Greek war orphan, but Tracy, her husband, believes she is just using the boy to assuage her own feelings about what it means to be a modern woman. Their disagreement is resolved when the orphan prefers to remain with other

Greek refugees rather than being part of American marital jousting. This choice is not shown as an inability to break with old world culture but an assertion of identity.

A returned World War II vet is the main character in *Go Naked Into the World* (1961) which is based on a novel written by Tom T. Chamales. Nick Stratton (Anthony Franciosa) just returned from military service falls in love with gorgeous Guilletta Cameron (Gina Lollobrigida) after a night of sex. Pete Stratton (Ernest Borgnine), his father, is a Greek immigrant who has become a millionaire via his construction projects in San Francisco. Pete is a rough-talking individual of relatively low culture but devoted to his notion of Hellenic traditions. He plans for Nick to marry the daughter of a wealthy Greek associate. When Nick brings Guilletta to his father's wedding anniversary party, Pete informs his naïve son in vulgar terms that his "love" is a high-priced call girl. He and many of his male guests have been her clients. Guilletta, of course, truly loves Nick and is not interested in his potential for inherited wealth. The film is a potboiler with a spectacular tragic ending, but for the first time the American screen deals with a Greek American millionaire, however crude his personality may be. In a rare display of social outrage, Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* expressed anger at how Greek Americans are portrayed in the film. He thought the seriousness of the Chamales novel had been cheapened and its characters poorly presented.<sup>7</sup>

Greeks are again portrayed as valiant warriors in films focused on the Korean war. In *The Bamboo Prisoner* (1954), a run-of-the-mill B picture, a Greek American is among the captives in a prison run by Chinese. More complex characterizations and issues are found in *It's A Big Country* (1951) and *The Glory Brigade* (1953) which featured inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts.

*It's A Big Country* is an anthology film of eight separate episodes that celebrate the racial and religious diversity of the United States. One episode stars Gene Kelly as Icarus Xenophon, a Korean vet. Xenophon visits the mother of a Jewish soldier killed in Korea where he fought alongside Xenophon. Some sobering moments follow when the mother bitterly decries anti-Semitism in America. Happier moments follow when a beautiful Hungarian American (Janet Leigh) falls in love with Xenophon. The father of the proposed bride (S.Z.Sakall), however, sounds a recurring ethnic theme. Although he has no specific dislike of Greeks, the father is convinced that Hungarians must only marry other Hungarians. Love, of course, prevails, capped with a climactic scene in the ice cream parlor owed by Xenophon.

*The Glory Brigade* (1953) revolves around a brigade of fighters Greece has committed to fighting for the United Nations in Korea. American officers assert that they and their men do not wish to work with a foreign unit in a joint operation. An exception among the officers is Lt. Sam Pryor (Victor Mature), a Greek American known for his courage and beloved by his men. He commits his unit to the joint operation. As Pryor leads his men to their first rendezvous with the Greeks, he brags about the bravery of "his people." When the two units meet, there is congenial kidding between Pryor and Lt. Nikolas (Alexander Scourby),<sup>8</sup> who commands the Greeks.

In the battles that follow, the Americans are battered and a number of incidents cause them to suspect the Greeks lack the courage needed for behind-the-lines combat. After a detachment of Pryor's men is slaughtered by the Koreans, he concludes Greek cowardliness is to blame and bitterly denounces the Greeks. The Americans eventually discover the Greeks actually have behaved with great bravery and self-sacrifice. A significant element in that realization relates to the insights of a mainstream American corporal (Lee Marvin). The two commanding officers continue to squabble over tactics but come to see that a battlefield victory can only ensue if they mesh their skills. The film ends with the cigarette-smoking Greek American affectionately placing his arm over the shoulders of the pipe-smoking Greek as they leave the battlefield in a helicopter.

Greek culture is embodied by Nick Dennis, Nico Minardos, Costas Morfis, and John Verros who play Greek soldiers, usually conversing in Greek. All appeared in other Hollywood films, often playing Greek characters. Real-life Father Patriankos conducts a religious service during the film, and there is a brief episode of Greek dancing. This is one of two films about Greeks made by Twentieth Century-Fox in 1953. Perhaps not coincidentally the studio was then headed by Spyros Skouras.

### **Cityscapes**

Most Greeks immigrants and their offspring are urban dwellers. During the era under discussion, 90% of Greeks resided in urban areas with more than half of the Greeks living in or near nine cities.<sup>9</sup> The Hollywood of that period is famed for its film noirs, detective stories, and urban dramas. Greek characters slowly became fixtures in such films, often in scenes in which diners set a mood at a time when Greek cuisine was still a novelty. Two films of 1950, *Side*

*Street* and *Panic in the Streets*, have a plot element in which non-Greeks deal with foods associated with Greeks.

*Side Street* revolves around gangsters who have murdered a woman. An autopsy report informs Captain Walter Anderson (Paul Kelly) that the night she was killed she ate lamb kabob, eggplant, and baklava. The Captain is repulsed and makes disdainful remarks about such edibles, labeling them "garbage" that only Greeks and Syrians eat. A follow-up scene occurs at Les Artistes Restaurant, a middle-brow eatery. The well-dressed manager (Angie Poulos) speaks in excellent Greek to a formally uniformed waiter (Sid Tomack) who responds in more agitated, demotic Greek. The waiter remembers the diners well due to the fact that the man left no tip. At a police station, he identifies the man last seen with the murdered woman, which leads to the case being closed. Reviews of the film then and in current websites have made fundamental errors in identifying the owner as a Syrian or identifying the owner and waiter as Turks.

*Panic in the Street*, directed by Elia Kazan, was shot on location in New Orleans, mainly in the harbor area. An autopsy of a murdered man who has just illegally entered the United States establishes him as a carrier of a disease similar to the bubonic plague. A public health official (Richard Widmark) initiates a hunt to locate those who had been in contact with the dead man to prevent an epidemic through preventive vaccinations. The only clue to where the infected man had spent time in America is that *souvlaki* is found in his stomach. The medical officer is not familiar with *souvlaki*, but a detective indicates it's a "tasty" lamb dish available at Near Eastern restaurants. The investigators ultimately arrive at a Greek restaurant owned by Yanni Mefaris (Alexis Minotis)<sup>10</sup> and his wife Athena Rita (Aline Stevens). Wary of dealing with police, the couple does not reveal that the dead man had eaten in their restaurant. Athena, who has been infected, dies from the disease within a few days. Yanni now cooperates with the medical/police team and names the dead man's companions. Of Hellenic interest is that this is the first known use of the word *souvlaki* in a Hollywood film. Another Hellenic twist is that Kazan cast himself in the very minor role of mortuary assistant. More generally, the fear of the police is not depicted as stupidity but a result of how bad the police in the old world had been. Kazan also inexplicitly inserted a Greek language scene in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951).<sup>11</sup>

*Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) features Nick (Nick Dennis),<sup>12</sup> as a decidedly boisterous Greek car mechanic who is the only friend of Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker), a rough-and-tumble

private detective. Nick usually greets Hammer by shouting "Va-va-voom. Pretty Pow!" This is a reference to the two times Nick has dismantled bombs planted in Hammer's car. When Nick is murdered by having the car lift he is working under lowered to smash his body, an enraged Hammer vows vengeance and takes actions that result in the film's final resolution. The buddy-buddy relationship of Nick and Mike is a common American film coupling of cultural mavericks.

French critics/filmmakers associated with the newly launched *Cahiers du cinema* voted *Kiss Me Deadly* one of the ten best films of the year and considered it a model for the emerging French New Wave. Francis Truffaut was particularly supportive of the film. The script of A.I. Bezzerides, the offspring of a Greek father and an Armenian mother, had taken little from the original novel other than its title.<sup>13</sup> Bezzerides' own novel, *The Long Haul* was adapted for the screen and renamed *They Drive by Night* (1940) starring Humphrey Bogart and George Raft as teamsters dealing with corrupt owners and market manager who imperil the lives of drivers. One of the minor truck driver characters in the film is a Greek played by Pedro Regas

After entering the ranks of screenwriters, Bezzerides wrote two films with characters linked to his first-hand experiences about truckers and the citrus industry: *Thieves' Highway* (1949) and *Juke Girl* (1942). *Thieves' Highway* deals with various ethnic groups involved in hauling citrus to market in California. Quite often they are cheated by the wholesalers. In the first scene, Nick Garcos, the film's hero, gets out of a cab in front of his home and hears Greek music being played. Garcos will become a leader of truckers seeking social justice. Unlike the novel, which explicitly identifies Garcos as Greek, other than the initial music, the film does not specifically establish that Garcos or his parents are Greek.<sup>14</sup>

*Juke Girl*, made before *Thieves' Highway* also has a character named Nick Garcos (George Tobias) who is referred to by others as The Greek. *Juke Girl* exposes how Florida's packing houses and management exploit truckers, family farmers, and migrant workers. Ronald Reagan plays an idealist migrant worker who leads a workers revolt. He also gets romantically involved with the somewhat cynical Ann Sheridan, the tough, working class juke girl of the film's title. At one point the farmers physically square off with thugs hired by the packing house. Among the hard-pressed farmers who resist is Nick Garcos, who is killed. Why Bezzerides used

the same name for a character in different films set in different parts of the country has never been clarified.

Another Greek truck driver has a minor role in *Double Indemnity* (1944), the legendary film noir. The Greek is being grilled by an insurance inspector played by Edward G. Robinson regarding a claim Robinson is sure is fake. The immigrant confesses his guilt, but Robinson judges the Greek to be a "regular guy" trying to get by in hard times and lets him off with a warning.

Greeks populate the scene in many workplace and urban films. Drawing on pre-1940 models, a Greek American wrestler is the vicious killer in *The Naked City* (1948).<sup>15</sup> His ethnicity is casually stated, but not explored. He could just as easily have been a Russian, Swede, or a Turk. A key plot element in *Mr. Reckless* (1948), a film set in the oilfields of Louisiana involves restaurateur Gus Patrokios (Nestor Pavla) who is engaged to a woman half his age. A Greek couple are supporting players in *The Lone Wolf Meets a Lady* (1940), a Greek American costars as a federal agent in *The Undercover Man* (1943), and Greek Americans have walk-on roles in *Incendiary Blonde* (1945, a gangster film, and in *True to Life* (1943), a comedy. A Greek immigrant who has been duped by gangster is sympathetically portrayed in *Twelve Hours to Kill* (1960), and Telly Savalas plays a comical gangster in *The Man From Diner's Club* (1963). Candy stores, ice cream parlors, and especially Greek diners appear ever more frequently in urban films. By the 1960s, savvy detectives cease to sneer at Greek-identified food, such as oil, yogurt, oregano, and lamb souvlaki.

### Greeks At Sea

Greek sailors were stock characters in silent films, usually playing unsavory characters. An exception to those images were films depicting the sponge-divers of Florida. At the turn of the century, sponge fishing in the United States was limited to shallow waters due to the simple masks used while in the Dodecanese, sponge-divers used new equipment that allowed for much deeper diving. When experienced Dodecanese divers from the Dodecanese arrived in Florida and the Caribbean, they quickly dominated the industry.<sup>16</sup> The new diving practices, however, were perilous and the long-term diving had deleterious effects on the human body. An American commission in 1940 concluded that no work in America was more hazardous. The mortal danger



faced by sponge-divers and the colorful images of ships operating in the Gulf of Mexico were the inspiration for a number of Hollywood films

Economic tensions between Greek sponge-divers in Tarpon Springs shaped the narrative of *Down to the Sea* (1936). Two Greek sponge fishermen battle over the affections of a young Greek girl whose father controls much of Florida's sponge industry. The Greeks are depicted as skillful mariners and successful business people with highly emotional and aggressive personalities. Scenes of Epiphany services in which youths dive into shore-side waters for a cross thrown by a high-ranking cleric are included. More unusual are scenes depicting medical cupping to relieve the painful bends that divers can be subjected to from overexposure underwater or improper retrieval.

Two years before *Down to the Sea*, Hollywood had made *Sixteen Fathoms Deep* (1934) which would be remade as *16 Fathoms Deep* in 1948. The original *Sixteen Fathoms Deep* spotlighted Alex (Lon Chaney Jr.) a heroic Greek sponge-diver who wants to own his own boat and marry his girlfriend. He ultimately prevails against Theo Savanis (George Regas),<sup>17</sup> a money lender who unsuccessfully conspires to destroy Chaney's reputation. The remake fourteen years later offers a more sophisticated and positive perception of Hellenic culture in America. The film begins with a voice over by Ray Douglas (Lloyd Bridges) a non-Greek diver looking for work in Tarpon Springs. As he walks around the harbor and its adjacent commercial hub, he is so impressed by what he sees that he declares Tarpon Springs to be a model American small town.

Much of the narrative of *16 Fathoms Deep*s deals with the mechanics and dangers of sponge diving. On-site filming with actual sponge boats and standard diving gear enhances the film's sense of authenticity. The plot revolves around Mr. Dimitri (Lon Chaney Jr.) whose schemes to control the sponge trade result in the death a young diver. This is a reversal of Chaney's role in the original film where he was the hero. Villainous as Mr. Dimitri and his cohorts may be, the Greek community as a whole, complete with romantic subtexts and family squabbles, is treated with great respect and does not allow Mr. Dimitri to prevail. Once again, there is a scene of Greek youths diving for a cross during Epiphany services. Arthur Lake, known for his slap-stick Dagwood Bumstead roles, plays a foolish but well-meaning tourist, an instance when the native-born American, not an immigrant like Parkyakarkus, plays the buffoon.

The cycle of Tarpon films hits a high in *Beneath the Twelve Mile Reef* 1953). Tony Petrakis (Robert Wagner) is a spirited Greek youth living in a traditional Tarpon Springs family. He works alongside his father, Mike Petrakis (Gilbert Roland), a sponge diver who owns his own ship. Having a hard time finding sponges in the area traditionally harvested by Greeks, Mike decides to make an early morning run into Key West waters, the territory of non-Greek fishermen led by Thomas Rhys (Richard Boone). When the locals discover the presence of Greeks, there is violence and a dramatic face-to-face confrontation between the Petrakis and Rhys families.

The story takes a significant turn when Tony becomes romantically involved with Rhy's beautiful and rebellious daughter Gwyneth (Terry Moore). Arnold Dix (Peter Graves), Gwyneth's rejected boyfriend, takes offense. The ensuing fight between Tony and Peter is partly about defending territorial rights, partly about jealousy, and partly about whether Greeks can be considered as equals by native-born Americans. After Mike is killed diving in dangerous waters, Tony takes command of the ship. More violence with the Americans follows after Americans looting a Greek ship accidentally set it ablaze. Infuriated by the attitudes of their elders, Tony and Gwyneth elope on a sponge boat. Gwyneth's father pursues them with the goal of stopping the romance by whatever means necessary, but ultimately, not wishing to lose his daughter, he respects her decision to wed Tony. Final scenes show the Petrakis family affectionately embracing their American bride and the Americans grudgingly accepting Tony Petrakis as an equal.

*Beneath the Twelve Mile Reef* is the first film to use Cinemascope for underwater scenes. Cinematographer Edward Cronjagger took full advantage of new cameras that allowed tracking divers at work in sponge beds amid various fish, fossils, and vegetation not visible from the surface. The expanded width of Cinemascope productions also allowed Cronjagger to render memorable seascapes. His work earned him an Oscar nomination for Best Cinematographer in color.

Rock Hudson, then at the onset of his career, provides a brief off-camera introductory narrative in the opening sequence and all the major roles are played by established Hollywood actors. A song in the film titled "Bringing Us Together" was written by Greek American Andrew Ladas. The script is by A.I. Bezzerides from his own short story and the supporting cast includes

a number of Greeks.<sup>18</sup> *Beneath the Twelve Mile Reef* was made by Twentieth Century Fox in the same year the studio made *The Glory Brigade*.

During the post-war years, the sponge industry was devastated by the "red tide," a sea fungus that destroyed sponge beds. The economic situation was worsened by the availability of new, inexpensive mass-produced artificial sponges. Prices for now scarce natural sponges rose and demand collapsed. Tarpon Springs survived by evolving into a colorful tourist attraction with a very modestly revived sponge industry, but it no longer attracts Hollywood's interest.<sup>19</sup>

### Westerns and Musicals

Westerns and musicals were among the most popular genres in the Hollywood studio era. Greek characters are marginal in these genres, but that they begin to appear at all in the films of the 1940s and 1950s is noteworthy.

Given that Greeks did not emigrate to America in large numbers until the 1900s, their presence in any "cowboy film" is surprising. A Greek American, however, appears in *Silver Canyon* (1951), a Gene "the singing cowboy" Autry film. Peter Mamakos,<sup>20</sup> plays a Greek muleskinner, who speaks to his mule in Greek. Similarly, in *Gunpoint* (1955), the last film of wartime hero Audrey Murphy's attempt at film stardom, Nick Dennis is a mountain medicine man who occasionally speaks in Greek. More significantly Greek cowboy heroes such as the Mexican Cisco Kid never evolved.<sup>21</sup> Greek actors usually were cast in westerns as Mexicans or Indians.<sup>22</sup>

Surprising exceptions to the scarcity of Greek characters in westerns are *Tribute to a Bad Man* (1956) and *Outlaw Queen* (1957). The films are further distinguished for featuring Greek women as lead characters. Both also use Greek music to develop the Hellenic identity of the Greeks. *Tribute to a Bad Man* was produced by the prolific MGM studio while *Outlaw Queen* was the only picture ever made by Ashcroft & Associates.

*Tribute to a Bad Man* is set in the Colorado Rockies of the 1870s. James Cagney stars as Jeremy Rodock, a hard-bitten land baron who plays by his own rules, sense of justice, and code of honor. Trouble arises when his rough treatment of rustlers drives his sweetheart, Jocasta Constantine (Irene Papas),<sup>23</sup> into the arms of cowhand Steven Miller (Don Dubbins). The

beautiful and alluring Jocasta is portrayed as being proud of her Greek heritage, somewhat headstrong, completely self-sufficient, and highly opinionated. At one point in the film, Jocasta sings to Rodock in Greek. Rodock ultimately restrains his worst instincts. The film was a Hollywood also-ran that rarely merits comment in writing about James Cagney or Irene Papas.

*Outlaw Queen* also was a standard western. Christina (Andrea King), the only daughter of a Greek immigrant family that includes four brothers, rejects the traditional role of subservient and dutiful daughter. She is convinced that given her extraordinary skills as a trick shooter, she can make a fortune performing in shows staged in what was still a "wild" west. She is supported by her Uncle Jim (James Harakas) and his partner Andy Trinas (Andrew Ladas), musicians who bill themselves as *The Strolling Troubadours*. The trio gets jobs in a frontier city gambling saloon owned by a man named Conway (Stanford Jolley). Christina wins a considerable amount of money in a poker game with Conway when Uncle Jim sits behind Conway apparently singing a Greek song but actually calling out the cards in Greek so Christina can win. The Greek aspects of the film began to fade as the narrative fills with actions taken by Conway against Christina, who has opened a rival saloon. The culture markers for the film are not Hellenic but the lore surrounding western women such as Belle Starr and Annie Oakley. Nonetheless, it is intriguing that a major Hollywood studio and an upstart venture opted to star very independent Greek women in a genre dominated by males.

Like the Westerns, Hollywood musicals had their heydays in the studio era. One of the most famed choreographers of musicals was Hermes Pan,<sup>24</sup> who choreographed all nine of the famed black-and-white Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers films of 1933-39 as well as their only color film, *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949). Pan worked very closely with Astaire on perfecting Astaire's dancing routines and then coached Ginger Rogers on how to respond. Pan won an Academy Award for dance direction for his work on *Damsels in Distress* (1937) and Oscar nominations for *Top Hat* (1935) and *Swing Time* (1936). Pan occasionally appeared as a dancer in films of the 1940s and 1950s, but he was better known as choreographer for hits such as *Silk Stockings* (1953), *The Flower Drum Song* (1961), *Kiss me Kate* (1963), *My Fair Lady* (1964), and *Finnian's Rainbow* (1968), in which he also appeared. Pan later worked in television and won an Emmy for his *An Evening with Fred Astaire* (1985). During his long career, he amassed

93 television and film credits. Although Pan had a strong Greek identity, none of his work involved Greek dancers, Greek music, or Greek dances.

Greek themes are virtually non-existent in Hollywood musicals even when a star dancer is of Greek heritage. The dancing career of George Chakaris, Hollywood's most famed Greek dancer, is a case in point. Chakaris was only twelve-years-old when he got his first dancing credit as a choir boy in *Song of Love* (1947). Other dancing credits followed in *The Great Caruso* (1951), *Meet Me in Las Vegas* (1953),<sup>25</sup> *The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T* (1953), and *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (1953).<sup>26</sup> In these movies, he was usually only one of a group of male dancers, but his work was increasingly admired by dance directors. Chakaris would achieve stardom and win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role as a young Puerto Rican gang leader in *West Side Story* (1961). Although he had well over fifty television and film credits, he rarely portrayed Greek Americans and when he did so, they were minor characters.

*The Pink Panther* (1963) has a brief appearance by Fran Jeffries who performs what critics termed "a showing-stopping samba." She is identified as a "Greek cousin" in a single irrelevant scene in this famed comedy.<sup>27</sup> Greek American characters also appeared in films such as *Pot of Gold* (1941), a romantic musical with a character named Mrs. Poppaklis, and *The Princess O'Rourke* (1943), a romantic comedy that included a Greek café owner and his wife.

Greek American characters in musicals are even scarcer and less important than in westerns. Greek music never found a place in Hollywood other than in films set in Greece such as *Zorba the Greek* (1955) and films featuring specific Greek American individuals or families such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002).

### **Cinematic Jewels in the Ethnic Crown**

Two remarkable films, *Dark Odyssey* (1957) and *America America* (1963), deal in stunning ways with the spirit of Greek immigrants. *Dark Odyssey* was conceived, written, and directed by William Kyriakis,<sup>28</sup> a recent college graduate. Although this turned out to be his only feature film, William Kyriakis would have a successful career making industrial documentaries. *America America* was made by Hollywood veteran Elia Kazan, who characterized it as his favorite film. Kazan also made *The Arrangement* (1969), a sequel to *America America*, and for decades afterward, he would unsuccessfully seek financing in Greece and the United States for

*Beyond the Aegean*, a third sequel to *America America* in which his hero returns to Asia Minor. American producers turned him down because of the financial and artistic failure of *The Last Tycoon* (1976). Greek funding was denied due to Kazan's having "named names" for the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

*Dark Odyssey* (1957) opens with the arrival of a young sailor, Yannis Martakis (Athan Karras),<sup>29</sup> in the port of New York. Yannis is not an immigrant but on a personal mission to slay the man who "ruined" his sister in Greece and drove her to suicide. As he strives to find the exact location of the address he has for the man he seeks, Yannis is befriended by Niki Vassos (Jeanne Jerrems), a second-generation Greek American. A romantic relationship develops between them, but Yannis does not reveal his reason for being in New York. Niki's parents are delighted that their daughter has found "a good Greek boy" to be her beau. They are far less happy that Helen (Rosemary Tom), their younger daughter, is dating Jack Fields (Edward Brazier), an American. Yannis becomes upset when he is involved in deceiving Niki's parents about a picnic with the sisters that secretly includes Jack. A fight ensues between the two men which is less personal than a clash of cultural assumptions.

Kyriakis films scenes of the daily life of Greek Americans living in Washington Heights at a time when it housed many Greeks. The Vasso elders, played wonderfully by Ariadne and Nicholas Zappoukayas,<sup>30</sup> have adjusted well to the new world while a baptismal party held in their home, church services, and other ethnic elements demonstrate their continued identification with the "old country" culture. The story unfolds with sequences depicting New York tourist sites, street scenes, Greek night clubs such as the Egyptian Gardens on Eight Avenue, and other places that have since changed greatly, if they still even exist. A section of the harbor of New York that has become the plush Battery Park City housing complex is shown when it was a dock used by hardy tug boats manned by a single person to haul raw material up and down the Hudson River.

When Niki learns why Yannis has come to New York, she pleads for him to shed the feuds of the old world and make a fresh start in America. Mrs. Vassos, who emerges as one of the most sophisticated individuals in the film, also strives to convince Yannis to abandon the old and embrace the new. Taking her own advice, we see Mrs. Vassos and her husband accept Jack as a potential son-in-law. Yannis remains torn between his love for Niki and his need for

revenge. At a party given by the Vassos family, a tormented Yannis is obsessed with his choices. Wielding an antique sword, he expresses his anguish in a brilliantly performed *tsamiko* in what is probably the single best exhibition of Greek dancing in American film. Ultimately Yannis cannot free himself from the obligations of the old world. This results in a fatal outcome for all concerned. *Dark Odyssey* never rises to the status of a classic tragedy, but like the film noirs made in that era, it is a melodrama with remarkable staying power.

*Dark Odyssey* happens to be one of the first independent feature films made in America. This largely stemmed from the invention of new lighter weight cameras that made on-site shooting economically possible. Being a true low-budget enterprise, the filming took three years to complete due to financial shortfalls and actors attending to paying jobs. When the film was released, *The New York Times* hailed it as, "Thoughtful, unpretentious, and creatively turned....Messrs Kyriakis and Metzger rate a warm welcome to the movie fold."<sup>31</sup> Despite such praise, *Dark Odyssey* did not find a commercial distributor and remained virtually unseen and unknown until it came out as a DVD in 1999.<sup>32</sup> At that time, *The Daily News* compared the film to the work of John Cassavetes and judged it "...a thoroughly warm and enduring drama that doubles as an evocative time capsule portrait of 1950s Manhattan." The film has since been shown at festivals, but largely remains unknown to the general public and mainstream film critics.

Another unusual aspect of this unusual film involves its first screening venues. In the 1950s, Greeks owned most of the theaters in the Times Square area.<sup>33</sup> Kyriakis was sure a Greek theater owner would be happy to screen a Greek-centered film, but he was told that was not possible unless there was a version in Greek. At considerable expense and effort, Kyriakis was able to get the film dubbed. The theater screened one version in Greek and the other in English.

*Dark Odyssey* was fifty years ahead of Hollywood's mass audience, but totally on time regarding the nature of Greek American life in the 1950s. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* made in 2002, would revive some of the ethnic themes of *Dark Odyssey* by giving them a farcical rather than a tragic dimension, but *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* sorely lacks *Dark Odyssey*'s authenticity. Although conceived by, starring, and produced by Greek Americans,<sup>34</sup> the film indulges fading stereotypes rather than exploring the actual Greek America of the twenty-first century.

*America America* (1963) is based on the real life of Avraam Elia Kazanjoglou (aka Joe Kazan), director Elia Kazan's uncle. The film begins in a small Anatolian village at the end of the nineteenth century when the Ottoman Empire was in crisis. Due to ever-mounting Turkish oppression, the Greeks in the region fear ethnic cleansing is at hand. Stavros Topouzoglou (Stathis Giallelis) is entrusted by his father with the family treasures and sent to Constantinople to arrange for the family's escape to the metropolis. Stavros's private dream, however, is to go to America.

The film chronicles the foolishness, naiveté, exploitations, sufferings, betrayals, and moral compromises that mark Stavros's journey. Rather than an homage to a heroic relative, *America America* uncompromisingly reveals the negative aspects of its hero, which often outweigh his positives. After losing all of his family's fortune and squandering his social contacts, Stavros focuses on going to America. He eventually achieves a trans-Atlantic crossing by becoming a gigolo to a married Armenian woman. Even more critical is his relationship with Hohannes Gardashian (Gregory Rozakis) an Armenian with whom he often interacts on his journey to Constantinople and then America. On board the ship to America, Hohannes, who is terminally ill, commits suicide by jumping overboard so that Stavros can assume his identity and enter America legally. In the final scene, Stavros has become shoeshine boy, a common occupation for young Greek immigrants of that time. We also see his family waiting for him to send for them, and we understand his determination to do so as soon as possible.

Although all but the closing scenes take place in Asia Minor and many were shot on-site, the idea of America hovers in the film's imagination as a nearly impossible dream. This mood is captured by the music of Manos Hadzidakis. Kazan pulls no punches in exposing the harshness and brutality of Anatolian life, particularly the persecution and discrimination directed against Greeks and Armenians by Ottoman authorities, even before the genocides of 1915 and 1922. No other American film comes close to capturing the emotional, physical, and political obstacles faced by the millions of Europeans who undertook emigration to America during the Great Migration (1880-1924). *America America* ends with a voice-over by Kazan who states, "I am a Greek by blood, a Turk by birth, and an American because my uncle undertook this journey."

*America America* earned considerable critical praise in America but did poorly at the box office. Europe audiences and critics were more supportive. Despite the film being overly long



and disjointed with some very poor performances in various segments, it has steadily gained in stature. What distinguishes it long term is that it does not glamorize the immigrants as moral paragons and it does not romanticize the America of their dreams, but it retains considerable respect for both.

### Post-1963 Images

The images in American cinema of Greek Americans as wrestlers, gamblers, colorful sailors, and various unsavory marginal Americans before the 1940s gave way over the next twenty years to a variety of changing images that ended with a return to the beginning with *America America*. The bootblack of *America America* will become the successful ad man of *The Arrangement* just as most Greek immigrants will thrive in the new world with their achievement capped by the certainty their children would be even more prosperous. Greek Americans would remain diner owners in many films, but films generally had a host of other Greek characters from every class of American society. These new images included a philanthropist, art collector, copywriter, dentist, architect, golf pro, antique dealer, mayor of New York, car designer, journalist, biologist, screenwriter, opera singer, CIA agent, civil rights advocates, various plutocrats, and everyone in between.<sup>35</sup> Greek Americans even made it into the superhero genre with the character Electra appearing in various films and featured in *Elektra* (2005).

Even the Greek gangster was mainstreamed. Individual gamblers were replaced by gangs that dealt with selling dope, weapons, and other mainstays of organized crime. The appearance of Greeks in these roles, however, had less to do with Hellenic identity than Hollywood opting to make films with gangs of different ethnicities. This was partly in response to Italo-American protests that *The Godfather* series had left the impression that only their culture generated organized crime. The ethnicity included in the new films was mainly a sprinkling of ethnic props to give more variety to otherwise interchangeable scenes, storylines, and characters.<sup>36</sup>

With the blossoming of independent filmmaking from the 1970s onwards, there was a spate of Greek-oriented films, usually shot on site with acting as well as directing and writing by Greek Americans. The films often sought to give a more nuanced view of the Greek-American community than the images of mainstream cinema provided. Although none quite hit the standard of *Dark Odyssey*, much less the epic nature of *America America*, they resolutely took

on issues of outmarriage, gay life styles, second generation biculturalism, and social problems affecting Greek Americans.<sup>37</sup> None found a mass audience.

Comparing the films of 1940-1960 to pre-1940 and post-1960 films underscores why scholars cannot isolate any one film as somehow encapsulating Greek American culture or altering the status of Greek Americans. At best, commercial and independent films embrace changes in progress and thus reinforce emerging rather than established norms. The role of Greek-heritage directors, screenwriters, and actors in establishing Greek identity on film is minimal compared to the trends of the film industry in general and changes occurring in society. Looking at the whole sweep of Greek American images in American film, the fundamental change was that Greek Americans prior to the 1940s were an exotic or distrusted "other" while the Greek Americans of the post-1960s increasingly were perceived as an ethnic community with which all segments of American society could identify. The films made in the 1940s-1960s clearly reflect that change as it was taking place.

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<sup>1</sup>A Greek soldier is featured on the December 15, 1940 cover.

<sup>2</sup>The November 4, 1940 cover features King George. The December 16, 1940 cover features the image of Greek General Papagos.

<sup>3</sup>New York's *Journal American* and the *New York Daily Mirror* both correlated modern Greek fighters with those of the heroes of Thermopylae. *The Boston Globe* (December 1, 1940) declared, "The Greek spirit is deathless."

<sup>4</sup>All of the films in this essay are treated at greater length in the Greek American filmography available from the University of Michigan at: <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/modgreek/windowtogreekculture/cultureandmedia>

<sup>5</sup>Parkyakarkus, sometimes referred to as "Parky," was a recurring Greek American character in ten feature films and at least five shorts of the kind that accompanied feature films in movie houses of the 1930s and 1940s. His real name was Harry Einstein. He became so identified with the comic character he first created as a vaudeville act that he tried to make it his legal name. Parkyakarkus (park your carcass: sit down) was famous for fracturing the English language and first gained national fame in thirty-nine appearances on Al Jolson's radio show, "The Lifebuoy Program." He later repeated his success on the Eddie Cantor radio shows. In his films, many of them featuring vaudeville acts, Parkyakarkus performed with Hollywood's top personalities, including Bing Crosby, Ethel Merman, Ann Southern, Eve Arden, Eddie Bracken, Veronica Lake, Eddie Cantor, and Milton Berle.

<sup>6</sup>Pedro Regas (1897-1974), like his brother George Regas (1890-1940), was one of the few Greek actors who was able to transit from the silent screen to talkies. He almost always played an ethnic character, usually a Native American or Mexican. He appeared in more than 100 films and television shows.

<sup>7</sup>Bosley Crowther, "Beyond Belief: *Go Naked into the World* Opens at the Capitol," *New York Times* (March 11, 1961).

<sup>8</sup>Alexander Scourby (1913-1985), noted for the beautiful resonance of his voice, appeared in 11 films, the most famed being *Giant* (1956). He preferred working in the theater and lamented that most of the films he appeared were not of outstanding quality. Many viewers mistook him as English, but he was of decidedly Greek heritage.

<sup>9</sup>These figures are confirmed by the federal census reported in Charles C. Moskos, *Greek Americans: Struggle and Success*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 1980, second edition, pages 64-65. The US Census Greek American Community Survey 2006-10 reports that some 20% of all Greek Americans lived in the New York metropolitan area. This data is analyzed in Peter C. Moskos and Charles C. Moskos, *Greek Americans: Struggle and Success*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 2014, third edition, pages 185-186.

<sup>10</sup>Miniotis, a highly-respected actor in Greek theater, spent a short time in Hollywood where he appeared in major roles in seven films, the most notable being *Notorious* (1946). He was married to Oscar-winner Katina Paxinou.

<sup>11</sup> One of the men who plays poker with Stanley Kowalski (Marlon Brando), the male lead, is identified as Pablo Hernandez (Nick Dennis). Early in the film when Pablo passes Blanche du Bois (Vivien Leigh) and her sister Stella (Kim Hunter) in the courtyard of the Kowalski home, Dennis speaks in Greek, calling the two women, cute birds. Dennis probably used Greek to amuse Kazan, but the Greek lines remain in the final cut, perhaps an ethnic in-joke meant to suggest similarities in ethnic cultures that chronically like to stress their uniqueness. Kazan might also have been testing to see if critics would take notice. Most have not.

<sup>12</sup> Nick Dennis (1911-2008) appeared in twenty-three films and scores of television shows. He often played a Greek character.

<sup>13</sup> Albert Isaac Bezzerides (1908-2007) was employed by Warner Brothers in the 1950s where he became an intimate friend of William Faulkner. Bezzerides contributed to numerous films and got full credit as scriptwriter on six. Bezzerides later helped create *The Big Valley* television series. He appears in long segments in two feature length documentaries about him: *Buzz* (2005) directed by Spiro Taraviras and *The Long Haul of A.I. Bezzerides* (2005) directed by Fay Efrosini Lellios. Silvia Richards, Bezzerides' wife, was on the Hollywood blacklist of the 1950s.

<sup>14</sup> Producer Darryl Zanuck drastically altered the film as conceived by Jules Dassin and based on the Bezzerides novel. Dassin had to flee the United States to escape the blacklist so could not defend his cut. For decades, Bezzerides thought Dassin had been responsible for these changes.

<sup>15</sup> The director is Jules Dassin, future husband of Melina Mercouri.

<sup>16</sup> For overview of Greek American sponge-divers see Tina Bucuvalas, "The Greek Communities of the Bahama and Tarpon Springs: An Intertwined History," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*. Vol.38 # 1 & 2 (2012), pages 29-70.

<sup>17</sup> George Regas (1890-1940) was one of the few Greek actors who was able to transit from the silent screen to talkies. Like his brother, Pedro Regas (1897-1874), he was often cast as a Native American or Mexican. Typical of his roles in nearly one hundred films, in his last, *The Mark of Zorro* (1940), he played Sergeant Gonzales.

<sup>18</sup> John Conatos, John George Gladakis, James Harakas, Demetrios Mitsora, John Pappas, Michael Pappas, and George Psourakis are mainly local people hired for the film. James Conatos had been in *16 Fathoms Deep* (1948). He befriended Elia Kazan and had walk-on roles in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *Viva Zapata!* (1953). Harakas, a musician, would also appear in *Outlaw Queen* (1957).

<sup>19</sup> A family of Greek sponge-divers were incorporated into the plot of the adventure/thriller *The Harbor of Missing Men* (1950) and Greek sailors appear briefly in *Ain't Misbehavin* (1955), a musical comedy. These are relatively insignificant compared to the feature films and even documentaries such as *The Sponge Divers of Tarpon* (1932), a brief ten-minute film narrated by Lowell Thomas now available as a DVD.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Mamokos (1918-2008) was a character actor with credits for 185 film and television appearances. He usually played a negative ethnic character. Those roles included Greeks, Native Americans, Latinos, French, Italians, and Middle Easterners. He played Greeks in films such as *A Dream of Kings* (1969) and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1968).

<sup>21</sup> Two films showing Greeks in the West were made for PBS in 1982: *King of America* and *My Palikari*. These were part of a wave of films with ethnic topics made by PBS to foster greater respect for and understanding of immigrant and ethnic history in America.

<sup>22</sup> An example in aces is that the three star roles of *Land Raiders* (1969) are Telly Savalas, George Maharias, and George Coulouris who play Mexicans. George Maharis had 69 credits as a film and television actor. He starred in the hit *Route 66* (1960-63) and had roles in hits such as *Exodus* (1960) and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961). He did not play Greeks in any Hollywood film. George Coulouris (1903-1989) had a distinguished film career and an equally distinguished television career. He amassed 140 acting credits, including roles in *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Mr. Skeffington* (1944), and *Joan of Arc* (1948).

<sup>23</sup> Although Papas was highly respected in Greece, this was her first role in an American film. She was never enamored of Hollywood and aside from *Zorba the Greek* she was not given substantial roles.

<sup>24</sup> Hermes Pan (Panagiotopoulos) (1909-1990) was choreographer (originally designated in Hollywood credits as dance director) of nearly 50 films.

<sup>25</sup> George Chakaris (1934- ) appeared in 38 films (mainly as a dancer) and 44 television shows, including 9 episodes of *Dallas*. He appeared as himself in *Jekyll & Hyde - Together Again* (1984), a comedy involving hallucinatory drugs.

<sup>26</sup> George Chakaris, still at the onset of a long career, was billed as George Kerres in *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *The Five Thousand Fingers of Dr. T*.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffries, who was of Greek heritage, was a regular on the cabaret scene where she partnered with husband Dick Haymes, a noted vocalist of the era.

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<sup>28</sup> The film was conceived, written, and directed by Kyriakis. Radley Metzger mainly served as a technical director. Dan Georgakas interviewed Kyriakis about the film and published an account in *Senses of the Cinema* Issue 9 (September 2000).

<sup>29</sup> The Thessaloniki-born Athan Karras (1927-2010) was internationally recognized as a master of Greek folk dancing. He worked closely with the legendary Dora Stratou for her Greek Dance Theater and Foundation. His own dance studios were frequented by Hollywood celebrities such as Ginger Rogers, Marlon Brando, Bo Derek, Telly Savalas and Omar Shariff. Karras formed or personally assisted numerous Greek dance groups in America, taught university courses, and worked closely with numerous Greek American organizations. He had a score of film and television appearances.

<sup>30</sup> The couple often appeared in Greek language plays staged in New York.

<sup>31</sup> From press release that accompanied the DVD of the film. Had been shown to Georgakas by Kyriakis in their interview in 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Even this was a fluke. Metzger had developed a reputation as master of soft porn movies. First Run Features, a distributor, wanted to release all of his films in a DVD format and included *Dark Odyssey*.

<sup>33</sup> The Greek ownership of many theaters in mid-town New York is an untold story. An odd aspect of that is when the theaters showed porno films, they often started with a conventional film from Greece and only shifted to the porno film when satisfied there were no police present. This led to a rumor in Greece that Greek actors had gone to New York to make money being in porn films.

<sup>34</sup> The film is based on a comedy sketch by Nia Vadalos, who is the female lead. Veteran actor Michael Constantides is the lead male actor playing what is almost a Parkyakarkus type. The producer is Rita Wilson, who also acts in the film. Co-producer is Tom Hanks, who converted to Greek Orthodoxy when he wed Rita Wilson. A literal score of Greek actors appear in various roles.

<sup>35</sup> Examples include director of school of the blind: *The Miracle Worker* (1962); art collector: *Catalina Caper* (1967); advertising executive: *The Arrangement* (1969); dentist: *Husbands* (1970); architect: *The Tempest* (1970); golf champion: *Babe* (1975); antique dealer: *A Perfect Couple* (1979); mayor of New York : *City Hall* (1986); car designer; *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* (1988); journalist: *Eleni* (1985); biologist: *Godzilla* (1998); screen writer: *Everything for a Reason* (2000); opera singer: *Callas Forever* (2002); CIA agent: *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007); and civil rights advocates: *Goodbye, Miss Fourth of July* (1988).

<sup>36</sup> *Five Aces* (1989), *Men of Respect* (1990) and *Bullethead* (1998) are three examples.

<sup>37</sup> *Do You Wanna Dance?* (1997); *Goodbye, Miss Fourth of July* (1988); *Astoria* (2000); *It Could Be Worse* (2000); and *Everything for a Reason* (2000) are among the most interesting.