

Before and Beyond *America America*

Stathis Giallelis¹

I was born in Kalamata in 1941, at the beginning of the Nazi Occupation. My impressions of the Germans are weak, but I have strong memories of the civil war. I was seven at the time and Kalamata was a center of conflict. My father and other businessmen tried to aid some of the less well-off people and people who had been arrested for their politics. For this reason, my father was labeled a Communist. My father had to go into hiding. Even we didn't know where he was. My father had run two separate stores in Kalamata. Later, when things seemed better he went to work in Athens, but after a few days working, the Secret Police would come to tell the employer to fire him. He was only allowed to see certain friends once a year. He had his beliefs and stood by them. I respect him for that. My mother was a teacher, and she was harassed by being sent off to work in an isolated village in the mountains. I didn't go with her to the village, but stayed with my father in Athens. When my father died in 1958, I went to live with my aunt who also resided in Athens.

Even though I was a child of a left-wing activist, I did not have many problems getting work, especially when I started to be an actor. I had wanted to be an actor ever since I saw the Koundouros film *I Paranomi* (The Outlaws, 1958). The first time I ever saw anyone making a film was in the district where we lived. It was Koundouros making *Magic City* (1954). I think he was a marvelous director. *O Drakos* (The Ogre of Athens, 1956) is particularly good. I was on vacation on an island when I read in the paper that Koundouros was looking for actors. I got on the first boat to Athens. When we talked, I told him how I seen him years before making *Magic City*. He told me to come back to audition for the acting school run by Christos Vachliotis, his friend and collaborator on *O Drakos*. Vachliotis was a great teacher so I was not surprised to see about 200 people there for the five openings available. By the time I did a scene and read a poem, I thought

there were easily five people better than me already. Three weeks later, I went by the office to learn more about the film and to ask Koundouros if he needed someone to work in the office. He said he already had three assistants, but could use another. He wanted to know why I hadn't gone by the school. That surprised me. I asked why. So many were better prepared than I. Vachliotis had said others had had more training, but he saw something special in me that he wanted to see developed.

My first film credit was for *Eroica* (Our Last Spring, 1960) which was directed by Michael Cacoyannis. It was adapted from a noted novel of the same title by Kosmas Politis. I got a credit as a producer assistant. I also helped on the script. In those days, we all had multiple duties. Taking small parts was one of them because there was no money. Everyone performed, Nikos' wife, all the technical people, everyone on the set really. The Greek circle of film people at that time was close-knit and small. Thanks to Nikos, I got to meet the most talented artists in Greece. Just being in his office, was like going to the best school possible. I was there at some very intimate and creative moments. Manos Hadzidakis was there and later Theodorakis would come around. To me that was the best school, being with Koundouros all those years. I was fortunate to be credited as collaborator to Nikos for his *Mikres Afrodites* (Young Aphrodites) which won Best Director and Best Film at the 1963 Berlin Film Festival.

During this period Elia Kazan had come to Athens to have auditions for *America America*. That was a really hot summer, and I had gotten ill. Nikos had his offices in Kolonaki in his home. There was a little side apartment where I was staying. His wife insisted that I had to audition for Kazan. Even though I was ill, she physically took me to see him. Kazan spoke with everyone about their experiences. He left us saying he would call some back for a second audition. I returned to the Kolonaki office and an hour or so later, a young woman who also worked with Koundorus said I must go with her to meet an American director. When she said it was Kazan, I told her I had just seen him, but she still insisted I go with her. This meeting was more informal. I spoke a little English and he had some fluency in Greek. Later we exchanged letters. I would write in Greek and take it to Vassili Vassilikos [future author of *Z*] who would translate it into English. When Kazan wrote back, I would take the letter to Vassili and he would translate the other way. I didn't think my chance of getting the role was good. Kazan had lots of people from all over the world to choose from. Then Charles McGuire, Kazan's manager, came to see me, but didn't make an offer. I told

Vassili to write to Kazan saying this was it. If he didn't want me for the role, fine. Vassilli didn't think it was a good idea, but he did as I asked. Kazan wrote back that there was a visa waiting for me at the American embassy.

I had no money for a ticket. I borrowed enough to pay a travel agent who was a friend of Nikos, and he got me the cheapest ticket possible. I had to take a train to London to get that flight. I stayed in London for some days. I was hosted on the first night by Iakos Kambenellis [script writer of *Stella*].

I arrived in New York with literally a few cents in my pocket. I thought I could take a cheap bus into the city like in Greece. I didn't have the funds needed. I went back to the information booth and a very nice girl told me she was getting off in an hour and would drive me into town. She left me right outside Kazan's office. When Elias saw me, he gave me \$50 and told me to go out and get something to eat. I went to the coffee shop next door. When I paid with the \$50 bill, the owner asked if I was crazy. Hamburgers in those days cost about thirty-five cents. He said I could pay him next time. I came back. Turned out that I would eat there every day for the next three months. When I went back to Kazan, he found me a place to stay and provided me some language teachers. We did some improvisations and small scenes. Kazan introduced me to a French actor he was interested in. That guy was staying in some fancy hotel while I had this small place on Fifth Street and Second Ave. Finally, Kazan told me the French guy was getting the part. I was disappointed, of course, but glad I had tried. I began to make plans to go back to Greece, but then he called me a few days later and said he had changed his mind and I was going to play Stavros after all.

Kazan has given a different account of these events. He never mentions that I had acting experience because he wanted the press to think he had discovered a raw talent. I understand that, but I had spent two and half years in drama classes. The first time he wrote about me for the *Herald Tribune*, he was very complimentary, but he told the *Times* that I had pursued him. He told other stories later in his life. For years he was angry at me because I never focused on perfecting my English. That upset him very much. He thought I didn't care enough about acting. I did care, but I understand our lives are very short. I was concerned about my own personal happiness. A lot of people say of acting that you need to love it or leave it. I eventually would decide to leave it

Of course, I didn't care for Kazan's friendly testimony before HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee], but that didn't stop our friendship. I believe people in Greece never considered what happened here was so serious. In Greece, people lost their lives or their lives were forever ruined. Their children were affected. We are still thinking about the civil war. I personally don't support any political party but my belief is that government should help human beings build a better life. Which brings you to a very liberal position. Different parties have different positives. I think if we are helping our fellow human beings we are doing good politics.

After my success with *America America*, I had offers to do films in Hollywood which I didn't want to do because they were not serious films, just bachelor romantic stories and stuff like that. If I had liked the scripts, I would have done them. Then I read a script titled *The Eavesdropper* (1966) by Leopold Torre Nilsson which I liked very much. It was against fascism in Argentina. I saw his other work which I also liked. He was completely different than Kazan, very technical. His wife, Beatriz Guido, was more emotional and worked with him on the film. I played the lead role and my costar was Janet Margolin who had starred in *David & Lisa* (1962). All the rest of the cast were Argentinean. The story was about a young neo-fascist in Argentina who is hiding in a hotel. Also staying in that hotel is a group of Spanish actors who are leftists. My character spies on them. He has difficulty in understanding how intelligent people have ideas so different than his own and that they are determined to help the less well-off in society. The actors are rehearsing a play about assassinating a visitor monarch. My character thinks this is a real plot and reports them to the police. When the matter is straightened out, the actors throw him into the street. This occurs when there is a mass protest going on. Now, unlike at the beginning of film, the neo-fascist no longer is clear about what he thinks is the right and wrong thing to do.

I was glad to do a film like that, especially at that time. There were a lot of politically confused people there, and there seemed to be many generals and soldiers. My character was a rich young man in his twenties. To understand him better, I hung out at the Jockey Club in Buenos Aires. People knew me from *America America* and thought I was on vacation. Nilsson never told them about the film or my role. They didn't realize I was there to study their behavior. Then, when he announced the film, people stopped talking to us and tried to close down the film, but they failed. *Eavesdropper* was a big hit in Argentina. It also did well in some other countries in South

America too, but in most South American countries, there were attempts to stop the film from being shown.

My next film was *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966). I was in Rome when my agent called me. He told the director I was in Rome and the director wanted to cast me in a big Hollywood film with an all-star cast, something quite different from what I had done. I liked working with Yule Brynner and Kirk Douglas. Working with John Wayne was also a good experience. Like many people who worked with John Wayne, I didn't share his political views, but he was very easy to work with. He didn't care what your politics were, even if they were directly against his. I respected him for that. He was an honest, decent man. In that film, which was co-produced by Michael Wayne, John Wayne's eldest son, I played Ram Oren, a guerilla leader. The character was based on a real person who later became mayor of Jerusalem. I had a chance to meet him. Many times, when we were shooting, we would temporarily lose the use of the tanks the government had loaned us because they had to leave the desert area we were shooting in to defend the border.

That film was followed by *Blue* (1968), a cowboy movie. Ricardo Montalban played my father. I was kind of a crazy, syphilitic son who was totally nuts. He tries to rape a girl and gets killed. It's a very small part, but I liked it because I wanted to work with the director, Silvio Narizzano. One night when Silvio came to my house in LA for dinner, I had some Hadzidakis on the phonograph. Silvio went wild and said this is the man I want to write the music for my film. So we called Manos and he came to LA and did the score, which is one of the best parts of the film I think.

I thought it was strange that when Kazan made *The Arrangement* (1969) which was a sequel to *America America*, he didn't have me reprise my role. I could easily have been "aged" with makeup. But he never asked. He chose Richard Boone to play my character. I thought Boone was terrific. I think it's the best thing I've seen him in. Some people say he was a bit stiff. All I can say about that is sometimes when established actors worked with Kazan they got stiff because of his reputation, and the expectations people had of the film.

Among my least happy experience in filmmaking was a small part in a film titled *Requiem* (1970). I was in New York and I needed some money. A friend told me that Caslav Damjanovic, a Yugoslavian director, wanted me to be in his new movie, a war film. Nothing to write home

about. Ty Harding starred in it. I had a percentage of the film, but later, the producer changed the title to *The Last Rampage* to get it out of the country and he took my name off. So some people write that I “reputed” that film. It was never released in the United States.

Another film that never get a release was Jules Dassin’s *Rehearsal* (1974). When a friend told me about the film, I went to see Dassin, and he gave me the part of the head of the Polytechnical School. That film was aimed at the Greek junta. Maximillian Schnell, Olympia Dukakis, Melina Mercouri, Laurence Oliver, Arthur Miller, and other well-known personalities were in that film. Usually they gave testimonies or were in recreations of the uprising at the Polytechnic in 1973. This material was intercut by newsreel footage. Theodorakis and Markopoulos were also on the set. The film was never released because the junta fell just a few days after we completed shooting. I think it would be a good film to revive at Greek film festivals in America. It was a pleasure to work with Julie. He had been an actor himself. He always had a strong view, but he had a lot of respect for his actors and gave them lots of room.

After that I went to Greece where I worked on *O Happy Day* (1977). I had seen Voulgaris’ *The Engagement of Anna* (1975) at a museum. I thought it was excellent. I let Pentalis know I would be glad to work with him if he had anything for me. When I went back to Greece after the junta fell, Nikos told me Voulgaris was doing *O Happy Day*. When we talked, Voulgaris told me all the lead roles had been cast. I told him I didn’t care. Even if the role was small, I wanted to be in the film.

Although my father had been in a concentration camp after the civil war, I wasn’t playing my father. That was a different man with a different story from a different time. I had to enter the film’s time and the personality of the man I portrayed. I tried to imagine how that person felt. He is tortured. It was very important to see that aspect in those years of the Greek junta. My father’s story is from World War II when he was in Kalamata. He had been involved with the partisans in the mountains. He wasn’t arrested until 1952. In those days, on May Day some leftists would dress up, pin a red carnation to their vest, and go to Omonia Square. Some years everyone would be arrested. Other years no one. My mother told him not to go that year, but he did and was arrested. He was imprisoned on several of the islands and treated brutally. He would die in 1958 as a result of being tortured. You could be released from the camps if you signed a statement that you renounced your past beliefs. He wouldn’t do it. My father never liked to talk about his politics.

But I remember one night when I was just eight or so that his cousin came to our house. Our cousin was with the police force and took a great risk in warning my father that he was going to be arrested. He and his friends tried to disappear, but they were caught. I remember going to see my father at the prison house. There was a small courtyard filled with hundreds of men. They were packed like sardines and the fence had barbed wire. He was taken to Tripolis for trial and was in a group that managed to escape. Eventually things were straightened out. Before then, my mother and I ran our stores. What would happen, even after my father came back, was that a guy would enter our store when we had customers and shoot his gun in the air. People stopped coming. That's when we sold the stores and went to live in Pireaus

Getting back to my next American film: *Children of Sanchez* (1978) had nothing to do with Greece even though it deals with civil war and ethnic conflicts. Victorio de Sica was supposed to direct that film that in some ways was meant as an heir to *America America* with a Spanish angle. Originally, a super-star cast was planned, including Marlon Brando. Then Hall Bartlett who had rights to the script decided he would personally direct. Anthony Quinn, Katy Jurado, and Dolores Del Rio got the lead parts. When I auditioned, I had the sense they had wanted Mexican actors for all the major roles, but even so, I got one. A few weeks later I was in Mexico working on the film. Most of the actors were Mexicans who worked in Hollywood. When I was criticized for not being a Mexican, Anthony Quinn spoke up for me by telling the newspapers that, "I've played Greeks lots of times, so now we have a Greek playing a Mexican."

Children of Sanchez was followed by *Panagulis Vive* (Panagoulis Lives, 1980), a four-part mini-series made for Italian television. The director/writer of that film was Giuseppe Ferrara. I knew his work, but I didn't know him personally. Manos Hadzidakis had done scores for Ferrara films, and Ferrara called him and said he was thinking of me for the lead role in his new film. He sent the script and I called him right away that I wanted to do it. I went to Italy for a month where we worked on the script to keep it Greek. I mean there were a lot of Italians working on it, and the film was based on the book by Oriana Fallaci who had been Panagoulis' companion. There was talk in Greece about doing a film about this man who had tried to assassinate the leadership of the junta. Ferrara tried to make a deal with a Greek producer. I was a go between. The Greeks made impossible demands, and Ferrara decided he would do everything in Italy. My concern was that I was a Greek actor working with Italians. I wanted to be sure the Italian sets looked like Greece.

We got Yannis Kalaitzis, an excellent set designer to come to Rome. In Italy, they shoot silent and put the dialog in later. So I spoke in Greek and English, and they dubbed in the Italian after.

I always study the character of the person I am playing. If you don't have the information then you make up a story. In this case, there was plenty of information to work from to understand the character of Alexandros Panagoulis. I don't like directors who are so sure of how they want a scene, but it's the responsibility of an actor to do the scene that way. Sometimes when I see a film with my wife, she says the actors were terrible, I say, no, I've seen them work very well, so it's the director. But you always try to pass on your ideas. Of the directors I worked with, I liked Kazan, Dassin, and Voulgaris very much. They were all open to actors. Ferrara was also good with actors. He never told me what he thought I should be doing. I made many changes in how Panagoulis was depicted. I also thought the film had too many words, so I tried to cut that down. There was one scene I disliked very much. I kept talking about it with his assistant who was a Greek girl who had been born in a concentration camp. Her brother was a leader in the KKE [Communist Party of Greece] in Greece. Ferrara wanted to know what we were jabbering about. I gave him a ridiculous answer about needing to go out to eat. Eventually, he figured out the problem we had and changed it. Changing is hard when the scriptwriter is on the set. A script girl is important here. If you change some words in the dialog she can let it pass or she can rush up to the director and tell him the actor is saying his lines wrong.

I wasn't able to consult with Oriana Fallaci who was Pangoulis' companion and wrote about him with great passion. I did meet with an Italian newspaper woman who had been jailed in Greece for what she wrote about the Panagoulis. I met his brother Stathis who was then a politician in Greece. Panagoulis was not a man of the left. His family was center-right, but he fought against a group of people who had ruined the Greek democracy.

I even met his mother. She loved the film and invited me to her home for dinner. She took me into his room and said I could take anything I wanted as a keepsake. I said I couldn't do that. I was just an actor. But she gave me one of his pens. I still have it.

I was delighted that the series as successful in Italy as *The Eavesdropper* had been in Argentina. But this is another film that never got an American release. I think the problem was that it dealt positively with an attempted assassination of a head of state.

I was weary of making films that were not distributed in the United States. More importantly, I wasn't being offered roles of the kind I wanted. Working conditions in Greece were very difficult, but I did manage to do one film *I Tragedoui des Patouli* (The Song of the Return). There is too much politics in Greek films, not politics politics but that crazy interference and obstruction of creativity. Then a friend of mine who worked at the United Nations in New York offered me a job doing educational work. I went and I liked it. I ended up staying with the UN for twenty-six years. Now that I am retired, I might go back to film if there are some good roles for me. I was quite intimate with Greek filmmakers active in the 1950s and 1960s, but I have lost contact with the new people. I know and respect the work of Angelopoulos and I know Voulgaris but I'm not really familiar with the current world of Greek cinema. Rather than film, I'm more interested in doing something for the Greek stage. Maybe *Death of a Salesman*. Nikos [Kondouros] took me to an opening and I was pleasantly shocked by how good the actors and directors were. You don't see serious theater in New York anymore.

¹This account is derived from a multi-hour interview conducted by Dan Georgakas in 2013 during the New York Greek Film Festival when the festival was honoring the fiftieth anniversary of the release of *America America*.