III

Michael Cacoyannis and Irene Papas on Greek Tragedy

Marianne McDonald & Martin M. Winkler

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following interviews were conducted by Marianne McDonald via telephone in November and December 1988 from a list of questions prepared by both of us. Mr. Cacoyannis and Ms. Papas then reviewed the transcripts. They appear here somewhat abridged from their earlier version in *Classics and Cinema*. Material unrelated to the subject of tragedy and to their films of Euripides has been omitted.

As writer, director, editor, and producer, Michael Cacoyannis has been instrumental since the 1950s in making Greek cinema internationally renowned. He was the first to star Melina Mercouri (*Stella* [1955]), and his 1964 film of Nikos Kazantzakis's novel *Zorba the Greek*, which won three Academy Awards, has become a classic, making the title character's name a household word. Besides this film, Cacoyannis is best known for his three adaptations of tragedies by Euripides: *Electra* (1961), *The Trojan Women* (1971), and *Iphigenia* (1977). These films were made in the order in which Euripides wrote his plays, although the mythological chronology is reversed. Classical scholar Hugh Lloyd-Jones has said about the first of them: "Cacoyannis has a touch of genius. He's kept the spirit of Euripides' play and put it into film terms. In fact, he may have improved it."

With his films, and in his stage productions of tragedy, Cacoyannis has provided new accounts of some of the central Greek plays and demonstrated their timeless appeal. *The Trojan Women*, made abroad when Cacoyannis was in exile from Greece, which at the time was under a military dictatorship—what he has called "the Fourth Reich of Greece"—carries clear overtones of modern history. His early film *The Girl in Black* (1955) had already told a modern story in terms of ancient tragic themes. Cacoyannis has also staged operas and plays by Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, and Luigi Pirandello, among others, both in Europe and in the United States.

The year she played the eponymous heroine in Giorgos Tsavellas's film *Antigone* (1961), Irene Papas achieved stardom with the title part in Cacoyannis's *Electra*. Among numerous other films, both Greek and international, she played Helen in *The Trojan Women* and Clytemnestra in *Iphigenia*. Irene Papas also acts on the stage, appearing, for instance, in Cacoyannis's production of Euripides' *Bacchae* in New York City. In television films of the *Odyssey*, she was Penelope in Franco Rossi's international European production of 1969 and Anticleia in Andrei Konchalovsky's American version of 1997. She has had memorable roles in Costa-Gavras's political thriller *Z* (1968) and in Ruy Guerra's *Eréndira* (1983), written by Gabriel García Márquez. She acted for Cacoyannis again in *Sweet Country* (1986) and *Up, Down and Sideways* (1993).

1. Michael Cacoyannis

Could you say something about your use of the ancient classics and of history as a means of artistic expression in the medium of film? You are actually dealing with two different things, mythology and history.

Yes, except that Greek mythology is to a great extent based on history, so its characters are not necessarily mythological inventions. Take, for instance, Agamemnon and the whole family of the Atridae. One could certainly say these were historical figures elevated to mythical stature. They were used by poets, especially tragic poets, as dramatic characters and invariably elevated out of their true historical contexts. And that is what I find fascinating. The way they were presented, say, in the fifth century B.C., did not evoke any dim past, but powerfully reflected the cultural and philosophical climate of a civilization that transcended time. The mythical characters, in the way they are made to express themselves in the tragedies, do not come across as primitive people of the twelfth century B.C., the time in which their stories took place. They are not imprisoned in their age or in any age. And that's why they are still alive today and can speak basic truths. That's why they touch us.

Why do you think this would touch us more than a modern work which directly addresses current reality? What can the classics add to this?

The Greek plays are among the greatest texts ever written. The characters are only the means for great minds like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and

Euripides to express their attitude toward universal human problems. I am not interested in the "true" Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, or Oedipus. I know them through Sophocles and the others. I don't know what the "real" Oedipus was like. The Oedipus who means something to me is Sophocles' Oedipus.

Why did you choose Euripides rather than Aeschylus or Sophocles for the basis of your films?

It's because of the way Euripides explores the human condition. He attacked social evils of his time and shaped the historical legends to serve his ends. He was deeply concerned with the corrosion of human values in Athens during the Peloponnesian War. Parallels between the myths and his time easily spring to mind. I find the psychological makeup of his characters more multifaceted than in the other playwrights, who were more bound by traditional forms, although, within these, Sophocles struck a perfect dramatic balance. The ritualistic aspect of Aeschylus' masterworks is very difficult to put on the screen, to transpose cinematically. I think there is a great film to be made of *Oedipus*, but not necessarily of *The Persians*, which is a great play for the theater.

Do you think Euripides is more concerned with psychology than with history?

Yes, he is concerned with our faults, with the fractured aspects of human nature. Man being mortal, being arrogant and selfish, imposing his will on others—these are all things that concern us to this day. That's why, in effect, Euripides is closer to modern audiences.

Why, out of the whole body of Euripides' works, did you choose Electra, The Trojan Women, *and* Iphigenia in Aulis?

The idea of a trilogy wasn't there from the beginning. In fact, the whole concept started with *Iphigenia*, which reflected my feelings about war. Although it's the last of the three films, it was the first of the tragedies I had scripted. It had to wait quite a long time. But having made *Electra* I became convinced that the films could work as a unity. Unfortunately, we have lost their companions, the other plays in their individual trilogies, but here, although the films are drawn from different trilogies, there is an inexorable sequence of events within them. Euripides was a pacifist. He exposes the futility and folly of all wars, where there can be no clear-cut victor or defeated; he shows that everybody suffers. The idea that evil begets evil and revenge begets revenge is a predominant theme in all three plays. Also, I think that they may be his best works, alongside *The Bacchae*, which, to me, is a mind-boggling masterpiece.

The three plays, as well as The Bacchae, *also deal prominently with women. Are you particularly interested in the theme of suffering women? Do you have some feminist concerns with all this?*

Women in Greek tragedy have an important role to play. Feminist concerns predominate in Euripides, and this is why I never understood why some scholars have called him a misogynist. That is really outrageous.

What are your views about the situation of women in modern Greece? Do you see any connections to ancient Greece, and is there some kind of commentary on women's place in modern Greek society in your films of the tragedies?

I think there are connections between ancient and modern Greece. Women in Euripides are always raising their voices against oppression. And—well, who could be more liberated, from a modern point of view, than Helen or Clytemnestra, who rules with an iron will and a harsh tongue? Even though Clytemnestra paid the price for it, nobody would call her "poor Clytemnestra." There is, in fact, an interesting parallel between Medea and Clytemnestra: they both did a great deal to help Jason and Agamemnon. And they both paid their men back in blood for their betrayals.

Both men took up with another woman, Creusa and Cassandra. Agamemnon had even been prepared to kill Iphigenia.

When confronting Agamemnon in Aulis, Clytemnestra reveals that she never loved him. But over the years she accepted her role and became a good wife and mother. As far as the people were concerned, she was a model wife, mother, and queen. She even warns Agamemnon about the monster he will release in her if he should kill Iphigenia. She had compromised because she had come to believe that he was worth it, in a sense. And then she finds out. . . . From her point of view he is a murderer, corrupted by power.

Did you find that working with Irene Papas made it easier to convey these aspects of Clytemnestra's character?

I had identified Clytemnestra with her before I made the film. She wasn't really cast, she was part of the decision to make the film. I'd had no other image of Clytemnestra in my head. It's that extraordinary physique of hers, and the power that goes with it. When Irene cracks, it's like a stone that cracks. There is no sentimental self-pity. Her cries are not hysterical; they are defiant cries against the order of things. When I was working in America, staging tragedies, I always found it very difficult to ex-

plain this to American actresses—that there is a kind of impersonal anger bottled up inside. It's not a narrow anger; it's like a challenge to the injustice of life. I think people who experienced centuries of oppression—I don't want to narrow it down to Greeks—know much more about this. Certainly Jewish people do. It's almost like a national trait handed down from generation to generation. It's not a question of having suffered personally; it's as if the voice of suffering echoes through time. You can hear it in Greek and Armenian laments, for instance.

Where did you find the actress who played Iphigenia?

That was luck. From the moment I decided that Iphigenia should be a very young girl, that narrowed down the field and made it an extremely difficult part to cast. I started searching for a young actress who wouldn't look older than sixteen, then I accidentally met a girl of twelve who had actually no acting experience but who happened to have that quality I mentioned before in regard to Irene, the looks, which are very important, the physical framework, shall we say. To go with this, she had a natural intelligence and poise beyond her years. Emotionally, she was immature. But I cast her anyway. I thought, if I can use that immaturity and push her to the level of subtle maturity that Iphigenia herself achieves through suffering, within a matter of hours practically—if I could work such a trick with the actress [*laughs*]—it would be a wonderful correspondence with the role. In a sense I had to violate, temperamentally and psychologically, a young girl to make her able to absorb and cope with the emotional demands of the part. In that I was very lucky; I could do it without hurting her.

Her interaction with Irene Papas as Clytemnestra was most interesting: the experienced actress and the inexperienced. It worked perfectly.

Yes, it did.

What do you think about stage plays being translated into films?

Obviously, I have nothing against that. Plays, after all, are based on dialogue and character, and very often they lend themselves even more to the screen than do novels. Novels often express philosophical states and attitudes which are very difficult to translate to the screen. As long as filmmakers are not absolutely tied down by a text, they are not making "film theater," which was never my intention.

You transformed the plays into something new, rather than merely illustrating a play on the screen.

I also took liberties. I edited or rearranged the text. I took liberties particularly with the chorus.

You added characters, too.

Yes, sure. In *Iphigenia* I added Calchas, I added Odysseus; I had to. In *Electra* I had peasants talking. I didn't add any characters unrelated to the plot, but visually I explored what on stage only happens in the wings.

In Iphigenia, *the viewer is very much aware of the army and of the power it possesses. You certainly have enough people there; it's an oppressive mass.*

Yes.

Why did you add Odysseus and Calchas and give them such large roles?

The way they come across to the audience is as Euripides evoked them via the characters who discuss them, especially Menelaus and Agamemnon. With film, I don't feel limited to the few actors of ancient theater. I can bring in the people who are being mentioned and make them real. If Euripides had written the script himself, I don't think he could have left those characters off-screen.

How do you see the character of Achilles in Iphigenia? *You have kept his self-involvement. But don't you see a change in him, in that mutual affection grows between him and Iphigenia, as when they look at each other in the courtyard at the end?*

That I preserved absolutely intact, the way it is in the play. When I staged the play in New York, this feeling came through the moment they looked at each other. There is no question that, once he has seen her, Achilles is willing to defend her to the death. And I think love is a strong motivation in her, too. Not wanting him to risk his life for her sake conditions her acceptance of death. All that makes sense. Achilles is the only character in *Iphigenia* whose whole text I used. His arrogance and the reasons for it are in the original. Until he sets eyes on Iphigenia, his outrage is provoked not by pity but by the insult to his honor, to a hero's inflated ego.

His philotimo?

Yes, it's *philotimo*, but in the most negative sense. It's a narrow, arrogant pride. And I think that was one thing that came across about him on the screen. He tells Clytemnestra: "If only Agamemnon had asked me personally, I would not have hesitated for the sake of Greece." That's his response to a mother's desperate pleas. Not a thought at the moment for the trapped girl. What also comes across is that Clytemnestra can't get back at him and has to accept his help, even if it is for the wrong motives. All that matters to her is her daughter's life.

Concerning Iphigenia's decision: Weren't there several paths which you could have taken in interpreting Euripides? Do you think you took a positive one when she falls in love with Achilles?

What she does is crystal clear to me. What you could call negative in my approach is not to accept that Euripides can be interpreted in such a way that she becomes infused with sudden patriotism. Strength, yes—and defiance toward the army clamoring for her blood. She says: "I won't give them the pleasure of seeing me being dragged off and wailing. If I have to go, I shall go proudly, and of my own free will."

Do you see her as having a sense of loyalty to her father as well?

Yes, I do, but compassion even more than loyalty, stirred by his anguish and remorse. Once you are trapped and you know you are going to die, something happens inside you, something that gives you the armor to cope with that passage to nothingness, or to the other world.

In other words, if she has to die, she might as well die heroically?

Well, perhaps not heroically, but with dignity. She is aware that her refusal to die would plunge everybody into bloodshed. Not only would she herself be killed, but also her mother, her father, Achilles. In the film you feel this even more because of the power and danger which the surrounding army represents. I made a point of establishing the threat of a discontented mob in the opening sequence, just as I wanted to make clear Iphigenia's first instinct: fear and the desire to escape. So I had her run off into the woods and be hounded down and dragged back. All this is not in the play.

The way you direct the hunt for her parallels the deer hunt at the beginning of the film. A little girl being ruthlessly hunted down—this involves the audience emotionally, particularly if they remember the deer's frightened eyes when they see Iphigenia's. And then her transformation, her change of mind, becomes all the more effective. But this is contrary to Achilles saying that she made a virtue of necessity: "You see there is no way out, so you are determined to be heroic."

At face value, certain parts of her last speech might be considered patriotic: "They will teach the barbarians a lesson." But to anyone who knows Euripides' views about the Greek motives for the Trojan War—I touched upon this earlier in connection with the Peloponnesian War—this kind of rhetoric lacks conviction.

Is she not simply repeating her father's words?

Yes, I think she is, but even his are spoken in desperation. He says, "I would let you off if I could . . ." And this is probably the only thing Clytemnestra by that point cannot absorb: that he is a broken man. If he could call off the expedition, he would, but by that time Odysseus has told the army. There is no escape for Agamemnon.

You bring out this ambiguity in him, and we even pity him.

Still, he does pay an altogether inhuman price for his ambition. He was confronted with the choice of being the supreme general or of refusing to sacrifice his daughter. It's a tormenting choice, but he makes it. Not, I think, because he is swayed by an oracle which, to him, reeks of political intrigue. He clings to the hope that nature will prove the oracle wrong after all: "By the time I send for her and she gets here, the winds are bound to blow and we'll be off." He's playing for time.

Why did you eliminate the gods? Did you try to convey the force of the gods—necessity, retribution, fate—or any of these concepts?

My aim was to interpret Euripides. Fate, which involves human responsibility, is a recurring theme in his plays, but he does not relegate it to the whims of the gods and is very critical about the way his characters behave in order to appease their conscience. He invariably uses the gods to diminish their stature and what they reflect about human nature. We know his philosophical position on religion very well. One doesn't have to resort to his satirical evocation of the gods, in whom he clearly did not believe, in order to get that across. To show them on the screen would be alienating to modern audiences, who should identify with the characters and be as moved as Euripides intended his audiences to be. And they are—deeply moved, I know. It is not a question of any particular religious faith. That can keep changing. Euripides' faith transcended the concept of the gods and soared above and beyond them, not only with reverence but also with the humble awareness that human knowledge, whatever its achievements, can never fathom the supreme power, the divine justice, which shapes our mortal destiny. In *The Bacchae*, the message is clear: "Knowledge is not wisdom." No doubt Euripides would have something to say about the hubris of our scientific exploits today and about the violation of nature. Of course he understood the need for religion. People cannot cope with the unknown; for instance, their fear of death. What he warned against was using the gods as scapegoats for one's own evil deeds.

Do you have a political message in your films? Are they, for instance, anti-junta?

They are against any form of political oppression. I made *Electra* before the junta.

What about Iphigenia*?*

That it is antimilitaristic, antiwar, goes without saying, but dramatically, not didactically. It exposes the arrogance of rulers who, in their thirst for power, have no regard for the lives of others—they bring about death arbitrarily and senselessly. The depiction of such situations and of the suffering that results is what makes Euripides so uniquely powerful.

Do you see a parallel in Iphigenia *to the Cyprus situation, as* The Trojan Women *might have related to the Melian disaster as recounted by Thucydides?*

Every major crisis or conflict, every tragic situation that happens in the world can be related to Greek tragedy. It covers the whole range of the human condition—as does Shakespeare, of course. You can relate everything, at any time, to Shakespeare's plays. They and the Greek plays are like mirrors in which you can see all of life.

Do you think art can influence politics?

I wish I could say it does. If it were so, after *The Trojan Women* there should have been no more wars. But the greatness of art is that it goes on raising its voice regardless, to quote Edith Hamilton.

Do you see a connection between your Euripides films and some more openly political films, such as Z?

No, because the tragedies are not dealing with transitory political problems. What comes across when we watch them is that history repeats itself. Political upheavals are simply part of the universal pattern of human folly.

What about the use of modern languages? Does modern Greek express tragedy as well as classical Greek? And what about English, the language you used for The Trojan Women*?*

Great texts survive in any language. My earlier parallel to Shakespeare applies here, too. Some of the best Shakespeare productions, especially on film, were not made in English or by the English. In Greece the plays are performed not in the original but in modern Greek, and translating them is almost as challenging a task as it is to translate them into English. Edith Hamilton's translation of *The Trojan Women*, I think, is masterly. I doubt that the play has been translated into any language as well, including modern Greek. Sartre, who had been commissioned to do the French translation which I staged in Paris, did a freer adaptation, brilliant in parts but not as consistent in power.

When you film in Greece, do you feel that the countryside can add something to the film? Mycenae, obviously, seems to do just that.

Certainly with *Iphigenia* and *Electra*, which is a pastoral tragedy, but it depends on the subject matter. With *The Trojan Women* it was less so, because I saw its setting as a parallel to a concentration camp in a foreign country, in this case Troy. I made the film in Spain, where I found a better location than I could in Greece, a huge expanse of walls surrounding a city in ruins. Making films of that quality is problematic, and not only in Greece, because they do not fit into any accepted commercial patterns. Afterwards everybody says: "How wonderful," but believe me, such films are made with spit and blood. They are not produced with enough money. It's like begging for favors to get any backing for them.

What is your working relationship with Giorgos Arvanitis, who was the cinematographer on Iphigenia*? Were you influenced by his visual sense or style?*

I don't think he imposes his style. No man other than the director can, or at least should, do that.

So you basically tell your cinematographer what to do?

Well, you do, but you also rely on his talent to deliver what you want. I ask for a certain light, for example, to convey the harshness of the landscape.

In Iphigenia*, that worked very well; both the landscape and the heat came across with great power.*

The degree of stylization in my films is dictated by the emotional impact I am aiming at. I don't just want to dazzle people's eyes. I want to get to their hearts, to move them—shock them and move them. That way I arrive at a kind of cathartic experience.

What do you think about the cinematic treatments of tragedy by other directors?

I don't believe in updating the tragedies, forcing the characters into modern dress, which amounts to diminishing their dramatic power, or in setting them in some mythical limbo. There is a serious misunderstanding in that approach. For instance, Pasolini and Greek tragedy: Pasolini did not make Greek tragedy. He made very striking films about the myths on which tragedy is based. My aim was to make films about the tragic dimension given to the myths by great writers, not to discard it for the

bare bones of a plot. What makes the plots work from my point of view is the timeless power given to them by the playwrights. Pasolini's *Oedipus* is set in a very primitive society. And absolutely no inner torment of Oedipus is suggested. But, of course, he was aiming at something totally different. It has nothing to do with Greek tragedy. It has to do with mythology. There is a great confusion about the two.

Why did you create such a striking death scene for the widow in Zorba the Greek? *In ancient tragedy acts of violence occurred offstage.*

Yes, but you had to be aware of the violence because you saw its end results. You were supposed to be tremendously shocked. To see Oedipus staggering out, bleeding, is a culmination of the horror which occurs offstage but is transmitted by the messenger in mercilessly realistic detail, building up to a final cathartic scream.

What is your opinion about eliminating masks, which you don't use in your films? Without them you would see blood running down Oedipus' face.

To me, the human face seen in huge close-up on the screen is even a kind of mask. The ancient Greeks used a lot of effects by way of their stage machinery, which was very advanced. They loved spectacle. Of course, I don't know to what extent they used blood streaming down masks and clothing. But I would not imagine that they evoked pity by downplaying the horror.

Tyrone Guthrie used masks in his Oedipus Rex.

Guthrie only filmed his theatrical production. When he staged *Oedipus* with Laurence Olivier in London, mercifully he didn't substitute a mask for his face.

Tony Harrison's Oresteia, *the BBC production by Peter Hall, was also filmed with masks.*

Again, they only filmed the play. That's a different thing. A mask on the screen would be an absurdity. Even in the theater I don't like using masks. Masks were used in ancient times because they were shaped in such a way that they could project the actors' voices and also because the parts of women were played by men. So they had to use masks. When today's directors use masks, they even put them on the women. So it doesn't really make any sense. The mask was a convention, acceptable to audiences at that time. When staging the plays today, you have to take into consideration the sensibilities of today's audience. I don't use masks because that way I would only tell the audience: "You are looking at a museum piece."

Why should I put such a barrier between audience and author? I would in effect be saying: "I'm doing a conducted tour for you, an academic reproduction of how the tragedies were done." We don't even know exactly how they were done, because we have no record of that. What is certain is that the authors aimed at the most immediate impact.

When you look back on your work with Greek tragedy as a whole, what overall impression do your films give you?

You know, people forget, or rather, they are allowed to forget by the distributors' neglect. It's already been so many years since I made these films, and sometimes I feel as if the tide had swept over them. Every now and then they are shown on late-night television or in art theaters, but I don't believe that their appeal is restricted to an elitist kind of audience. In France, for instance, *Electra* was a big success, playing for nine months in the center of Paris, yet you can't get the distributor to revive it. That's the disheartening thing about film: It is the most popular art, if you want; at the same time, it is the most expendable. You have to keep reprinting copies at great expense, and the print itself is very easily damaged and useless after a time. One can't help feeling a little frustrated, after all [*laughs*]. I desperately want to preserve my films. On the other hand, I am thinking of what I can still do, not of what I have done. That's what keeps me alive, in a sense, not to sit down and say, "Well, you haven't done too badly," and stop creating. There is comfort to be drawn from the fact that all three playwrights—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—were active until a ripe old age. And they created masterpieces. But they, one adds with a sigh, were geniuses. And they didn't have to waste their energy chasing after vulgar moguls for funds.

2. Irene Papas

How do you feel about the role of the classics in modern cinema? Do you think they still speak to us today?

By producing and acting in them, you show what you feel about them. This means that you trust the philosophy that exists in the words and the plot situations, and these can be transferred into modern means of communication because "cinema" is a modern word for communicating. But when you express the emotions and thoughts of ancient people, they need modern means of expression. The classics have the same things to say, in a different way, in any period. I believe that, because a classic is a classic, it is also the most modern, the most appropriate for any time. Otherwise

the classics wouldn't be alive. If these texts didn't tell people the same truths all the time, they wouldn't be meaningful. There have been many writers whose works survived because of their quality and their truthfulness, and, as art, they are the most timeless and most important things in the world.

Do you think their quality lies in the poetry?

Well, these works can't be put into categories. They have everything, they are not one-dimensional. They have poetry, they have ideas, they have truthfulness, they have form, they have emotions. They are very much a whole. That's why they have been imitated so much. My father used to say that one phrase of ancient wisdom was worth volumes of modern words because the modern world likes to dilute things. Ancient thought is a concentration in the most simple and direct way. As the Greeks say, the best and shortest road to a point is the direct one.

Do you think special acting techniques are necessary in dealing with these texts?

No, I don't believe that. I believe that there is the same way of feeling, then and now. On the classical stage you might have used a louder voice, because some people were seated far away, but you always use the same soul. On the other hand, sometimes you need certain powers that otherwise you don't need. The power of the voice to convey the power of emotions is extremely important. An actor needs to be at his best, physically and mentally, to perform well. We have to. If you don't have your body, the instrument of your profession, always at your disposal, you are limited.

You have great physical power and presence in your roles.

Japanese do in their theater. I know that in Japan you must have training, so it's like polishing the roots of your soul.

Do you use methods different from your stage technique when you are acting in films?

Not at all. It's the same process; the only difference is that you decide about the appropriate means at the particular moment of filming.

Do you have a different technique for ancient and modern parts, such as Electra or the politician's widow in Z?

Again, no. The method of expressing yourself is the same. It may take different shapes or forms.

You have said that you prefer films to the stage.

That's because I can see what I do, and I like to have a record of it—you can give your best and correct what you don't like. And you can give the public what you think is the best you can do at the time. Once you have done that, it's like a finished work of art; it exists by itself. You don't have to repeat it. And you don't later ruin it by an inferior performance, either. On the stage you do the same thing again and again, and once you have squeezed out of yourself whatever you can do, it becomes forced work. You do your best for your audience, but soon you become a machine repeating the same thing every night.

On both stage and screen, you often impress your audience with the independence and zest which you bring to your work. Is there a driving force inside you, a particular creative principle?

I have no secret. I think it is your attitude to death that makes you behave and act in certain ways. Death is the greatest catalyst in human life—how you approach it, what it means to you. All people have to face it and make a decision about it which affects their lives: whether to go on living or to commit suicide, whether to wait for death or not to wait for it. While you're waiting, what are you doing with your life? Are you doing right, or are you doing wrong?

Do you think ancient literature, especially tragedy, can help answer this question?

I don't know. When I was doing *Iphigenia in Aulis* in New York and the Vietnam War was raging, I felt that Euripides hadn't done a thing to stop wars. Poor Clytemnestra was shouting "Murder, murder!" while people in Vietnam were being killed. So what good did Euripides do? None. And he was the best of all.

Aristotle speaks about the pleasure of tragedy in his Poetics. *Doesn't a tragedy present its audience with both a learning process and a pleasurable experience?*

It is not that pleasurable. I don't like to act, to tell you the truth.

You don't like to act?

No, it's nerve-racking. But then life doesn't usually permit me to be as truthful as I can be doing tragedy.

When you are playing a part in a tragedy, do you think you strike a universal chord in human beings?

I don't know if I do. I have no means to know that. I only know when I feel right. Then something happens.

Do you see a political message in the ancient plays?

I believe in everyday life, in everyday decisions. Of course, you act politically, and this is the same thing in the films and in the ancient dramas. But party politics is a completely different matter. It's one thing to be a Republican, Democrat, Communist, or whatever; it is another thing to be a political human being. As Aristotle said, man is a political creature, and every decision you make is political. I think ancient Greek drama goes beyond mere behavior; it addresses human existence itself. There are political films or plays which deal only with questions of behavior, so they last a decade or twenty years, but when the political system changes, they are forgotten.

Costa-Gavras makes political films, such as Z, *in which you acted.*

Costa-Gavras uses situations that are factually true, so it is very natural that he will make overtly political films. His talent is to take situations chronicled in a newspaper and to turn them into tragedies, not simply politics. He's very talented that way and makes beautiful films because he extends bare facts beyond their time, making them eternal and addressing lasting truths. Michael [Cacoyannis] takes things that are both political and mythic-eternal in form, but Gavras takes a political event and from that he extends it into a tragedy. Really, however, both deal with something which goes beyond mere reality.

Michael Cacoyannis has said that the mythology he uses is, in a sense, also historical.

That is his talent. He takes myth and makes it true, and Gavras takes truth and makes it myth.

When you acted the part of the wife of the politician who is assassinated in Z, *did you feel or experience something different from playing Clytemnestra in Cacoyannis's* Iphigenia?

In *Iphigenia*, I had a challenging part. Z was much easier, because it was a small and very definite part. I think that Clytemnestra is a victim of the situation.

Does playing a realistic, modern role affect your acting?

If I don't play a realistic Clytemnestra, I am done for. I don't play her like somebody who doesn't exist. I play her as if she were existing right now, as a real person.

So you make the women in both kinds of parts our living contemporaries?

That's right.

Do you have the freedom to create your parts?

That depends on how closely you work with the director—how you coincide with the point of view the director has, because he's the one who decides in the end. So you are not the absolute creator, but you are part of a creation that is also somebody else's. But I had the great fortune to work with Michael close to his point of view. So I participate in bringing out what a particular role means, what we are going to make out of it, which choices we are going to take.

So the two of you shape your roles together?

Oh, sure. I bring in ideas and practical suggestions, and we talk at length about how he sees the part and the whole situation. Of course, I cannot say I am the director, but I contribute to the creation of my role, also theoretically. Sometimes you are called on to interpret only practically, and the theoretical framework is decided by the director. But with Michael I have both.

Cacoyannis has told us that he made certain of his films with you in mind.

Yes, Michael likes my way of acting. The realism. And he prefers me because I'm not an obstacle to his way of seeing things. Sometimes an actress, even if she is very, very good, may have a technique that is incompatible with the director's; it can be an obstacle inhibiting the director's passion. In such a case the creative passion of Michael cannot function.

Cacoyannis implied that you have certain physical qualities besides your acting ability, and when you portray somebody pushed to extremes you can feel it inside yourself.

Well, I cannot see myself from the outside, but I know that I don't hold back. In a way, the responsibility of an actress is to be generous. It's like a confession, an emotional generosity. Why should you be an actor if you are hiding something? That would be impossible.

Is there a difference between Cacoyannis's and Costa-Gavras's directing styles?

Of course, people are different, but I love them both, and in one way or another I was creative with both of them because I liked the subjects they were filming and, in general, the way they make films. Michael has peaks of passion; he is masterly with moments of strong passion. On the other

hand, Gavras has what could be described as a cool passion, which creates emotional peaks in the audience. He treats his subject matter with detachment. He presents more of a counterpoint; Michael just throws himself into the fire. But both are very passionate people. With Michael I played the most beautiful roles I have ever had.

Would you tell us something about your roles in his films of Euripides?

The first part I played was Electra, and it was very exciting. It was breathtaking for me, and I was there from the beginning to the end. I saw every shot as it was done, and I would participate. At the end, when we finished shooting, I had a fever for three days! It was too intense for me. In *The Trojan Women*, I had a smaller responsibility for reasons that had to do with the production. I wasn't there all the time. I had a very big part again in *Iphigenia*, and I was closer and participated a lot more.

Did you prefer playing one particular role to any other?

I can't answer that, because it is not possible to answer. To prefer Electra to Clytemnestra, to prefer Clytemnestra to Electra—you just can't do that.

You once mentioned that you wanted to play Andromache in The Trojan Women, *but that Cacoyannis saw much more of Helen in you. Would you have preferred playing Andromache?*

I wanted Andromache because she has that terrific scene with the boy [her son Astyanax]. For an actress, that is a gift. But the other part, Helen, was a very big challenge for me. So, finally, Michael was right because that part needs more acting; more meaning had to be put into it. Andromache would have been easier. It's difficult when you play a role that is more ambiguous. It is not advantageous, the role of Helen. Andromache by nature takes your heart away. As Helen, you really have to sweat.

As Helen, you have a kind of burning, intense beauty. The audience can understand why men would die for you.

Well, but that's not acting. I don't believe that physical attributes are either your fault or your merit. What you choose to do with them, and how you approach your part, that is your art.

Is there a feminist strain in Cacoyannis's films, in the way he deals with the women who are at the center of the tragedies?

It is Euripides who's for women. He saw the underdogs in them, just as in the slaves. That's because they were a kind of suffering animal.

In Electra, *he portrayed Clytemnestra more sympathetically than Cacoyannis did in his film version.*

Sometimes, when I see *Electra*, I think that Euripides might be angry with us because we gave Electra all the rights. It's a modern interpretation. When I played the Sophoclean Electra [on the stage], I felt it was not that her mother is not right, but that her mother in being so afraid of revenge behaved very badly to her children—conflicting rights and duties, as so often in tragedy. When you become a dictator you can become subject to what you wanted to rectify. When you kill somebody for doing something evil you yourself become a killer, somebody evil, so what you wanted to avoid you actually become. Revenge is a vicious circle.

Do you think that Euripides' Electra is more concerned about her own position and her inheritance than about revenge for her father?

Well, why should she have to marry a peasant? Clytemnestra just throws her out. In Euripides sometimes nobody's completely right and nobody's completely wrong. Especially in *The Bacchae*. Nothing is simple. And this is one of the challenges for me.

What in particular would you teach other actresses?

I would try to facilitate their souls to be free. But to teach a soul is very difficult—to teach truth or truthfulness. I believe that art is the truest thing in the world. And that's what an actor should strive for.

Classical Myth & Culture in the Cinema

Edited by
Martin M. Winkler

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2001

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford New York
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Cape Town
Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kolkata Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi
Paris São Paulo Shanghai Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

This volume is a revised edition of *Classics and Cinema* published 1991 by Associated University Presses, Inc.

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Classical myth and culture in the cinema / edited by Martin M. Winkler.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-19-513003-0; ISBN 0-19-513004-9
1. Myth in motion pictures. 2. Mythology in motion pictures.
I. Winkler, Martin M.
PN1995.9.M96 C59 2001
791.43'615—dc21 00-056665

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Contents