

METEORA

by Spiros Stathoulopoulos



“Animated areas cleverly illustrate the characters’ inner states in dreamlike images beholden to traditional iconography... What they convey - guilt, hesitant desire, inner struggle - pairs extremely well with the otherworldly aspects of the landscape and the unspoken, uncontrollable erotic forces at work.”

Jay Weissberg, VARIETY

“Sumptuous imagery... an extraordinary feat”

Fionnuala Halligan, SCREEN INTERNATIONAL

“Magically photographed ... exploration of the sacred and the profane on a number of levels... something special”

Ronald Bergan, SLANT MAGAZINE

“The Charterhouse of Parma meets Viridiana except that even those sanctity-versus-profanity narratives do not have METEORA’s beauty of scenery or bewitching interludes of Greek-icon-style animation”

Nigel Andrews, FINANCIAL TIMES

“Not just good... great... poetic and humane”

David Jenkins, LITTLE WHITE LIES

“Unbelievably beautiful... invites to a dialogue between different church traditions - about what we mean by love toward God and love towards each other”

Michael Larsson, BERLINALE’S ECUMENICAL JURY

“Magnificent to look at... abundant visual and musical details... to contemplate religious love and love of God, desire and celibacy, infidelity in vows, God’s fidelity and an abundance of forgiveness for those who do not despair”

Peter Malone, SIGNIS (World Catholic Association for Cinema and Audiovisual)

Theodoros (Monk)

Theo Alexander

Urania (Nun)

Tamila Koulieva

Directed by

Spiros Stathoulopoulos

Written by

Asimakis “Alfa“ Pagidas,

Spiros Stathoulopoulos

Produced by

Philippe Bober, Susanne Marian

Producers Greece

Spiros Stathoulopoulos, Asimakis “Alfa“ Pagidas,

Theo Alexander, Yolanda Markopoulou

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Spiros Stathoulopoulos

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Alexandra Siafkou

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Filmförderungsanstalt

In collaboration with

ZDF / arte – Alexander Bohr, Meinolf Zurhorst



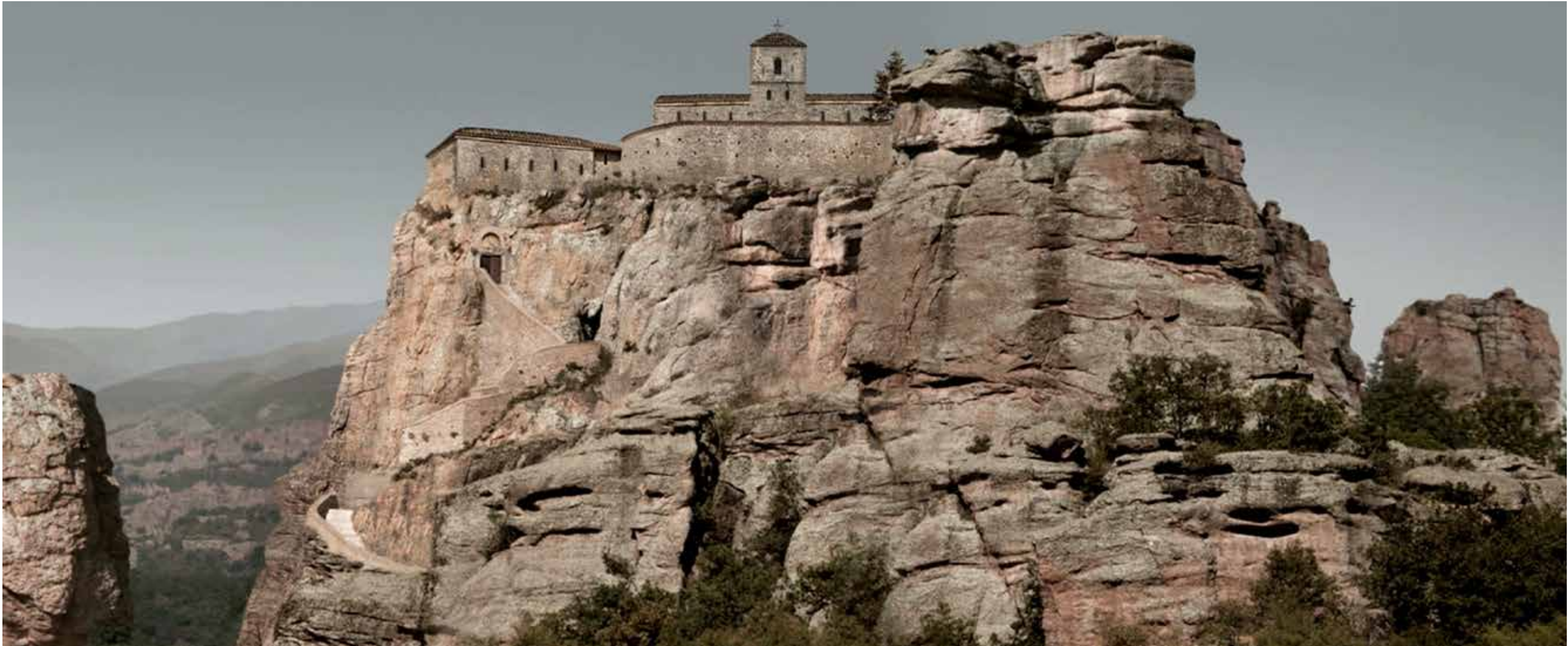
METEORA

by Spiros Stathoulopoulos

Germany / Greece, 2012, 80 min.

Short Synopsis

In the hot plains of central Greece, Orthodox monasteries are perched atop sandstone pillars, suspended between heaven and earth. Down in the valley, the eternal cycles of farm life – birth, milking, slaughter – provide a stark contrast to their ascetic world. The young monk Theodoros and the nun Urania have devoted their lives to the strict rituals and practices of their community. A growing affection for one another puts their monastic life under question. Torn between spiritual devotion and their human desire, they must decide which path to follow.



Long Synopsis

A young monk guides a nun back to her monastery built on the pinnacle of a gigantic sandstone monolith.,

The nun enters a woven net and is hoisted up along the edge of a cliff, floating dozens of meters above the plains below.

Down in the valley, the monk Theodoros enjoys visiting a farmer and watching his worldly devotion to nature's eternal cycles – sowing, feeding and harvesting – which provide a stark contrast to the solemn, candle-lit recesses of monastic life.

Up in their monasteries, places of communal living and of prayer, a secret affectionate exchange between the nun and the monk begins: Using mirrors and sunlight, Theodoros and Urania communicate across the abyss separating their monasteries. On St. Jacob's Day, the two meet for a picnic.

In a struggle between contradictory longings, Urania prays to fight her temptation, while Theodoros, contemplating the stones and valleys from atop a sandstone cliff, seeks answers in a spiritual quest.





Director's Statement

Beginning in the Late Middle Ages, orthodox monks built monasteries on top of the sandstone monoliths of central Greece - masterful human creations fused to a magnificent natural phenomenon formed millions of years ago. The clouds, which glide below the monasteries, eclipse the monoliths generating an optical illusion of suspension between heaven and earth (in Greek "Metéoros" means "suspended, hovering»).

Director's Statement

My first memories of the rocky landscape and the monasteries of Metéora go back to my early childhood. Even after we moved with my family from Greece to Colombia, memories of Byzantine Icons and the archaic rituals of Orthodox services have remained with me ever since. Hence, my critical and at the same time respectful approach to the spirituality of the Orthodox belief is always paired with reflection upon childhood images of another home that was far away – yet deeply rooted within myself.

After my first film was made in Colombia, my maternal home, I felt it was time to devote myself to a film about my paternal home. My idea was related to the sight of the monasteries from my past memories, the landscape symbolizing two very different worlds: the individuality of rural life present in the valley on the one hand, and the monastic communion in the cloudy heights on the other.

The protagonists of the film navigate between these two worlds: against their own wish, the monk Theodoros and the nun Urania have not managed to completely detach themselves from their earthly existence.

From the monastic point of view, carnal desire represents an obstacle on the path toward the highest goal, while for the farmers reproduction is an essential component in the cycle of life. Both perspectives are of a spiritual nature and only differ in their manifestation.

To me the protagonists' craving, longing, and carnal desires are not to be perceived solely as sins. They quarrel with themselves, struggle, and have yet to find their definite place. They arrive at a crossroads where a decision has to be made.

It almost seems as if this struggle is mapped upon the image of the suspended monasteries – an allegory of the human soul that has been perpetually suspended between the spiritual and the secular existence.





METEORA: Building of a Story

Like famous forbidden love stories such as Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet and Abelard and Eloise, the story of METEORA is ultimately a forbidden love story. A tale of a man and a woman engaged in something disallowed by institutional- and within their own belief system- divine law.

Initially, the real challenge with this story as opposed to the above-mentioned famous ones, was the framework. How does one character engage with the other, in a setting where there's

barely any contact? In a setting where it isn't even permitted by the faith of the characters themselves?

When we explored the possibility of what types and kinds of interaction would be possible, we were limited to very few: there were the liturgies, where a monk could potentially stand in the presence of nuns while performing the ritual; there were walks together to the places of religious obligations; there were various works and duties performed in the borders of monastery/

Building of a story

nunnery lines, - but other than these, we were very restricted.

The question was: how can we “break” some rules, yet still maintain the authenticity of monastic life? We needed a concept that would visually and narratively provide a supra-real environment where they could “meet” and “interact”, that would also show their internal yearning and fear. In comes the animation.

Although initially it was solely designed to express the monk’s and nun’s fantasies within a religious context (Byzantine hagiography), it soon became apparent that as in love, where fantasy and reality intermingle, so in our film the animations became one even, integral field of the story. They united the lovers’ subjective terrain to one seamless plane with objective reality. This way, we could show simultaneously the objective obstacles to their love, and also prelude their yearnings leading up to their union.

Once we confirmed that, it was truly possible to get the most out of it as a storytelling medium. And it really works. The dreamy substance of love, combined with the austere, iconographic universe brings out the desired suspension between love and faith, giving justice to what “Metéora” means after all: suspended.

Asimakis “Alfa” Pagidas, co-writer of METEORA





Interview with Spiros Stathoulopoulos

METEORA is an enigmatic story of love between a monk and a nun. Can you expand upon the relationship between the topography in the film and the theme of the story?

The origin of the word «Metéoros» is “suspended”. When the monasteries are viewed from below, clouds conceal the monoliths and it seems as if the monasteries are floating in the heavens above.

The main theme of METEORA is the suspension of the human soul between two poles. One pole is communal life, the monks and nuns with their communities. The other is life as an individual. In their love for one another, the monk and the nun have to make a decision between these two poles. In the film, this polarity is also mapped onto the topography: up above is life in the community; below is the individual. Central to the film is the place in-between, which I call the “area of suspension” – an area of conflict where the human soul

Interview Spiros Stathoulopoulos

is confronted with the decision of which direction to go.

The story has a timeless quality. The story could take place today or in the Middle Ages.

METEORA is timeless because the struggle in the film is timeless. The human struggle between the flesh and the soul has always existed. This timelessness is represented visually in the film: the monks still dress like they did a thousand years ago, the monasteries look essentially as they did back then, the rocks haven't changed. This quality is mixed with certain aspects of modernity. For example, you see a farmer wearing jeans, and he uses modern tools to inflate and skin the goat. So it is at the same time modern as it is archaic. The intention is to show that such fundamental themes exist and have always existed. And that we are still discussing them.

What is your own personal experience with Greek Orthodoxy?

I was raised in an environment where religion was abundant, both on my mother's and my father's side. In Thessaloniki, we lived within walking distance from at least ten Orthodox churches. Greeks born before Second World War are the last remaining generation of highly disciplined Orthodox who regularly attend Christian Orthodox churches exclusively (it is the case of my grandmother for example, who I convinced to play in the film). In my childhood I went on a road trip driving from the North to the

South of Greece. When we reached the monasteries' area, I saw it for the first time through the window. I had seen before natural beauty and also beauty created by humans, but this was the first time I experienced perfect harmony between a magnificent natural phenomenon and one of the most striking architectural masterpieces of mankind. Since then, this image has stayed with me. Today, I re-explore this setting not through the windshield of a car but through a camera lens – this time entering the Orthodox monastic life responsible for this miraculous creation.

What is the genesis of the animations and what is their function?

Visually speaking, I thought that using Orthodox Icons would be an ideal visual narrative device considering the fact that they belong to the universe of the story. But in order to reach the optimum visual narrative power of this device I originated the Animated Orthodox Byzantine Icons. Aside of using the animations to convey the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters and as a platform where their story could develop upon, the animations are also used to reference the many other myths, paradoxes and allegories of Greek or biblical origin that have underlying parallels with the story, such as Achilles and the Tortoise, Theseus and Ariadne in the labyrinth of Minotaur, redemption through the blood of Christ, and, of course, the story of Adam and Eve. *Does the inclination toward individuality differ for the monk and the nun?*

Were there specific challenges?

When Orthodox monks were persecuted during the Ottoman occupation centuries ago, they found in the monoliths' heights the toughest possible terrain, which ensured optimum protection. Even though the landscape has become more accessible over time with roads, staircases, and paths, it was still a difficult area to shoot in. Filming in the sweltering heat is not only difficult for the equipment but also for the physical and psychological endurance of the crew.

Can you describe how you filmed the monoliths, sky, and landscapes?

The light at this geographical coordinate is highly unusual, especially during the transition from spring to summer. Cloudless skies are predominant in summer, but in the late spring Greek skies can become almost mythological. In the morning, a heavy fog often hangs in the valleys between the monoliths, creating an ominous and contemplative ambience. Later in the course of the day, the clouds give way to the blazing sun and sharp, crystal clear skies and the temperature reaches well over 40 degrees. The objective was to capture this transition. I had chosen to use an anamorphic lens and to film in CinemaScope in order to shoot the immensity of the monoliths and landscapes, and decided to further study the natural light and the behavior of the clouds in order to use them as a narrative resource.

Does the inclination toward individuality differ for the monk and the nun?

The characters of the monk and the nun are complementary – their struggle is the same. But the monk and the nun are used to describe different aspects of this struggle. For example, the nun is used to illustrate the exploration of physical desires or inflicting pain to repress them. Tenderness and patience are shown through the nun. The monk is used for other trials and deliberations. Together they constitute a troubled soul.

What is the role of the flutist and of the hermit?

The flutist and the hermit are the main peripheral characters. They are steps in the "the ladder" that the monk ascends and descends between community and individual. In search for an expression of his individuality, the monk goes to the periphery of the community and finds the hermit, who has decided to live in isolation, to deprive his body of sleep and food in order to discover something about God that one cannot experience by leading a worldly life. The monk belongs to a community that likewise strives toward this spirituality, but by falling in love, he must reject the rules of his community and is confronted with inner turmoil. The monk's struggle brings him down into the valley to the flutist, a secular individual who lives alone with his crops and animals. The monk's friendship with the flutist encourages his free will and his feelings for the nun.



Interview Spiros Stathoulopoulos

Are there connections between your first film PVC-1 and METEORA with regard to the filmmaking process or your personal approach?

There is a common interest of mine in both films: the concept of entrapment as a dramaturgical device. In PVC-1, the character is trapped in a bomb; in METEORA, the main protagonists feel trapped between their life in the community and their life as an individual. But the two films have opposite resolutions of their respective entrapment situations. In terms of my filmmaking approach, I shot PVC-1 with a stabilized tracking camera system and still shots in order to convey the physical sensation of claustrophobia, while METEORA was shot mostly on a tripod in order to convey a more psychological feeling of claustrophobia.





“Up above is life in the community; below is the individual. Central to the film is the place inbetween, the “area of suspension” – an area of conflict where the human soul is confronted with the decision of which direction to go.”

Spiros Stathoulopoulos





Interview with Theo Alexander

Can you tell us how you became involved with Spiros and METEORA?

His film PVC-1 made an impact in Cannes. To my surprise, he was in Los Angeles and we met. I felt a strong artistic connection with him. A year later he called me to discuss his new project and asked if I wanted to be part of it.

How was it to work with Spiros as a director?

Spiros captures raw emotion, the truth of the moment. For me, this is the most important talent a director can possess. Working with the non-actors in the film was an exhilarating experience because you cannot be fake at any moment, with non-actors delivering an air



Interview Theo Alexander

of authenticity; the challenge is whether or not you can match them.

Do you have a personal connection to the Greek Orthodox faith?

I come from a religious family and was an altar boy in my youth. I respect the teachings of our faith.

Your character in METEORA is torn between two worlds that elicit a deep but paradoxical passion. Was this a challenge as an actor in comparison to previous roles?

I prepared the role for about three months. I visited the monasteries on the holy mountain of Athos. I lived with the monks and tried to take in every moment that I could. I discovered that most monks are extremely passionate people.

The inner conflict, the struggle is more visibly and physically expressed through the character of the nun. Do you feel that the monk was more secure in his struggle or that his actions were more intentional?

Each character in the film deals with his struggle with his own, unique way. The monk is more capable to hide his struggle when he is amongst people than when he is alone with her. It is a character choice, to hide the struggle until it erupts in our scene together.

The love scene in the cave is at once beautiful yet polemical. How did you and your co-star prepare for the love scene in the cave ?

I worked together with Tamila for several weeks before we started shooting. We improvised our scenes and developed the history of our characters. Nothing can really prepare you for a love scene in front of the camera. Tamila and I trusted each other and that played a huge part in the scene, this and the fact that we knew exactly where our director was going.

METEORA: worlds apart from working on something like TRUE BLOOD, or oddly similar?

All projects have the same challenge, and that is how you approach the truth of the moment. When the camera rolls, no matter what is the budget, it's all about capturing that truth.

What was your biggest challenge as an actor while working on the set of METEORA?

When a monk meets another monk, he bows, not to the person he sees but to the divine that the other person carries inside them. As an actor I tried to explore love in the broader sense of the word, the divine dimension of love. I tried to match my own experiences to those of the actual monks. The people I met there were so close to God that their eyes were full of light. It was as if I was looking into the eyes of a child.

Theo Alexander was born in Athens, Greece. After completing his studies in Business Administration at Boston University he studied at the Circle in the Square Theatre Conservatory in New York. Since 2010 he is part of the celebrated HBO-Series TRUE BLOOD where he portrays the critically acclaimed role of "Talbot". As a producer he has developed and is currently producing two projects: "Amazons" with "Escape Artists" and the highly acclaimed novel of Nikos Kazantzakis (Zorba the Greek, The Last Temptation of Christ) "Freedom or Death".

Theo Alexander Biography

Filmography

2007 **El Greco** by Yannis Smaragdis

2007 **Chuck** by Jason Ensler

2008 **CSI: NY - Like Water for Murder** by Anthony Hemingway

2008 **Pushing Daisies - Circus, Circus** by Lawrence Trilling

2010 **True Blood** by Michael Lehmann, Scott Winant, David Petrarca

2011 **Losing Control** by Valerie Weiss

2011 **Should've been Romeo** by Marc Bennett

2012 **Meteora** by Spiros Stathoulopoulos



Interview with Tamila Koulieva

How did you become acquainted with Spiros Stathoulopoulos and his film project METEORA?

Spiros thought of me for the role of the nun. As I saw his first film PVC-1, I instantly understood that he is an unusual director, someone who looks for new ways of showing reality, new directions

in cinematography. During our first meeting, we discussed in detail his vision of the story and I became very intrigued by this project.

What was it like to work with Spiros as a director?

Interview Tamila Koulieva

I think he is a very attentive person, toward himself and toward others. Spiros really loves his profession and is committed to it. He is thoroughly interested in the details of the each and every shot and the particularities of his characters. I like to work with people who do not just stay on the surface but invest their time and talent fully exploring a story in order to obtain the result they want on the screen.

What were the differences for you as an actress in METEORA in comparison with previous productions?

The first difference was the extensive use of long shots. This process is not always easy as one must organize the minute succession of events that take place on screen beforehand. Another challenge in the acting was to come as close as possible to the “truth” aspect, the feeling of verisimilitude that is characteristic of a documentary style. There are also non-actors in this film – shepherds, villagers, who had the great advantage of their genuine simplicity and sincerity. It’s not always easy for a professional actor to stay on the same level. Andrei Konchalovsky, for instance, used this combination of fiction and documentary in his film THE STORY OF ASYA KLYACHINA (1966) in which the real dialogues of the villagers were built into the story – and it sounded natural and true.

Are there parallels between your own story as a Greek actress of Russian origin and your character?

Perhaps, I would say that there is a parallel with my own experience, my life. It’s the habit of questioning yourself. Thinking about your life and having questions that do not have answers. And this is the essence of being human, the fact that we try to understand this world and its laws of existence. This is important to me, and perhaps this is something I share with my character.

The biggest challenge in playing this role?

It was incredibly difficult to act in all those clothes and, of course, even more difficult on blistering hot summer days. I was surprised to learn that the outer black clothing is only the first, visible part of the nun’s vestimentary code. Trust me, there are many more non-visible layers underneath! One feels bound and quite immobile. As a consequence, facial expressions and movements of hands acquire greater significance.

Did you have a certain background story of her in mind – for example, why she is there?

Of course, I tried to figure out her background – how did she come to the monastery? But then it’s something very personal and subjective ; it’s an idea or feeling you get from the character. For me, the three-dimensionality of a character is one of the most important things in cinema and theatre – a character that speaks both about its past and present.

But ultimately, the viewer should find an own truth about the character him or herself.

What do you think are the main differences between the roles of the monk und the nun?

I do not think they are very different. On the contrary, I think they are very alike in how they repress their emotions and in their inner conflicts and struggles. And also in their efforts to communicate and to avoid one another.

Her struggle manifests in more extreme acts, for example, self-inflicted pain.

The nun tries to do what she thinks is true and not to betray the choice she made to unite with God. I think the scene where she burns her hand reflects her inner struggle, pangs of conscience, a feeling that what is going on is basically wrong. That is exactly the essence of what happens to her character: her nature rebels and becomes difficult to control, and she tries to resist to that, she does not want this change in her life, does not want to let go.

In your opinion, was the rather overt sex scene in the cave toward the end of the film a “logical” step to perform in contrast to the previous subtler character development?

For me, it was more like a challenge than a “logical” step. Challenge as a sudden change. This is precisely how I understand life: Life itself is unpredictable and illogical, full of changing circumstances and surprising events every now and then. It reminds of a saying by Dostoevsky – our life is much more interesting and much more unpredictable than the wildest fantasies of fiction.



Tamila Koulieva-Karantinaki was born in 1967 in Baku (Azerbaijan). After graduating from music school, she entered the Moscow National Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) and moved to Athens in 1992. Aside from her film acting career, Tamila also teaches acting, and took part to TV-series and plays. She staged in *The Trojan Women* (2001), *Medea* (2003), *Iphigenia at Aulis* (2008) or *Beast on the Moon* by Richard Kalinoski (1999, 2010) at the National Theatre of Greece.

Tamila Koulieva Biography

Filmography

1990 **The Trap** by Rasim Ismailov
1990 **The Mystery of Handwritten Quran** by Rafael Gaspariants
1991 **A Dance in the Night (Gamis Tsekva)** by Aleko Tsabadze
1997 **Vassiliki** by Vangelis Serdaris
1997 **Tomorrow We'll Know** by Andreas Thomopoulos
2001 **Tomorrow is Another Day** by Dora Masklavanou
2003 **A Sea Apart** by Ersi Danou
2004 **Here We Are** by Stavros Tsiolis



Director's Biography

Spiros Stathoulopoulos, 1977. Greek/Colombian director known for the single-continuous-take cult film *PVC-1*. Selected in the Directors' Fortnight section at the 60th Cannes Film Festival and winner among others of the FIPRESCI prize at the Thessaloniki IFF, *PVC-1* features one woman's race against time in her attempt to gain removal of an explosive terrorist device locked around her neck. Stathoulopoulos studied film in Bogota, Colombia, before graduating with honors from the California State University. *METEORA* is his second feature film.

Filmography

2007 **PVC-1**, 85 min.

Cannes Film Festival	Premio Città di Roma - Arcobaleno Latino
Thessaloniki Film Festival	FIPRESCI Award Special Jury Award - Silver Alexander Audience Award
Sofia Film Festival	Best Actor, Alberto Sornoza Gorchivata Chasha Award

International Federation of Film Critics Award

Essential Filmproduktion is the Berlin-based production arm of Coproduction Office, and has (co-) produced films by Jessica Hausner (LOURDES; HOTEL; LOVELY RITA), Roy Andersson (YOU, THE LIVING; SONGS FROM THE SECOND FLOOR), Gaspar Noé (ENTER THE VOID), Shirin Neshat (WOMEN WITHOUT MEN) or Michelangelo Frammartino (LE QUATTRO VOLTE). Coproduction Office, founded in 1987 by Philippe Bober, is a Paris-based sales company.

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