

FILM AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION DVD

Interview with Oliver Howes & Riri Ioannou Questions by Paul Byrnes

Q: Oliver, can you tell us what was the genesis of the idea that you would make a film about the Greek community?

OH: A producer, Gil Brealey, came to Film Australia from the ABC. He was quite a livewire. He had the idea of making three half-an-hour dramas saying something about the Australian character. I think at that time that not very much was going on in the film business and I was one of the lucky three directors to be asked to come up with an idea about what Gil wanted, a film about young people. Being a migrant at nineteen, I thought I'd do something about what used to be called New Australians. Film Australia thought the general idea of doing something about New Australians was good and that's what I researched and wrote.

Q: How did you do that research?

OH: I really wanted the film to be realistic. It was very important to come up with something real about whoever those New Australians were and what they were thinking about. I approached it fairly academically at first. I read lots and I went to see Professor Zubrzycki in Canberra. I think he was one of the fathers of multiculturalism. I asked where can I go? Who should I film? I didn't really want to do it about an English migrant like myself. He said, one of things you could do is film with the Greek community. Why? Well, we had to select a community.

It could have been Lithuanians or Maltese but we thought why not the Greek community? And that's what I researched. I went down to Melbourne because I had a contact with a woman who worked in the Department of Immigration, she was a Greek Australian. I hadn't been talking to her for very long when some office workers came in and said you've really got to go higher than this. You've got to go right to the top, and within about half an hour I was whistled right through to see a top mandarin. He asked what we were doing. I said we were thinking of doing a film about Greek Australians, a drama. He asked why it had to be Greek? I said it didn't have to be Greek but it was quite a good idea and there were good reasons, they looked to be helpful and interesting people. He said you don't have to do it about Greeks, you can just do it about New Australians generically. I explained that I couldn't, not as a drama, because they would actually be speaking in Greek. From there on, I got into the subject of the Greek community. It was very interesting.

Q: Riri, what was the first you heard about this project?

RI: I had a relative, my brother-in-law, whose position was printing a university newspaper, a Greek paper. I saw the ad [about it] through the paper. At that time I was doing my HSC and keen to apply to attend NIDA, so I thought it was a good opportunity. I thought I fitted the position vacant ad, I was Greek and I was interested in film.

OH: She certainly filled the position.

Q: Tell us a little about your life at that point?

RI: I had been in Australia for nine years. My family came from Egypt. We're Greeks from Egypt. We built a house and lived in the southern part of Sydney, near Cronulla. There weren't many other New Australians in our area, I think I was the only Greek girl in my high school. Looking at it

in retrospect, I was so busy trying to be an Australian, I didn't realise the impact becoming an Australian had on my life. For instance, it was like leading two lives. I had two different names. My teachers couldn't pronounce Riri, which was my family name. So I was called Rina. It was like that until I was in my thirties. I kept my Greek culture at home very quiet, to be accepted by others. I strove to excel in English and be a top student and I didn't involve my family in my school life at all really.

Q: In many ways that's a typical experience of first-generation migrants. That was the subject of the film. Were you conscious if the film was like your life or not?

RI: There are aspects of the film that were like my life. Others, I felt, were not true. For instance, my experience as a New Australian in Australia was that most families moved here to ensure that their children attained the highest possible education, profession or traineeship. They were enabled to lead more affluent lives than their families had experienced. The story was of a girl, Toula, who had been removed from school so that she could support her brother to finish his education. I had heard of this happening in my mother's time, she was born in 1915 when it wasn't the done thing that girls went to school, and later due to the impact of war. I hadn't heard of, or experienced, anything like that in Australia. I know that most families would work two jobs. The wife, who may have never worked before in Greece or Egypt, wherever they came from, would get a job. If they ran a family business, the young people would work in the business, but only in addition to studying for a degree. I hadn't experienced that part of the story. The part where Toula goes out with a young man behind her parents' back, puts make-up on without her father's approval ... and what else did she do?

OH: She was not allowed to wear the short mini, was she?

RI: I didn't experience that part of it. My parents were modern as far as how we looked. But I really wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend and I did. I did a few unconventional things that my sisters couldn't have done. My parents weren't as strict as Toula's parents but the aspect of doing what I wanted to do without their knowing, I did do that, yes.

Q: Oliver, when you were planning the film, what sort of family were you looking for and what sort of story were you trying to tell?

OH: I had an idea that the Greek people from small islands who had been farmers and fishermen would perhaps have some problems with how their kids reacted when they came to a metropolis like Sydney, in a new culture with a new language. The idea was not just about Greeks and Australians, but generation conflict between young and old people. That fitted in with Gil Brealey's idea of doing something about young people. Having thought about a Greek community, I wondered how to actually find out about this. The way I did it was to go to high schools and talk to senior high school kids. I went to Fitzroy High School in Melbourne, where the headmaster wheeled me into a class and said 'Oliver Howes want to talk to the Greek students here'. About a third of the class was Greek and there was a great cry of 'all the wogs up, all the wogs up'. All the Greeks got up and we walked out to the library, where they sat down and looked at me in silence. I had to say what I really wanted. I didn't know how to put it, I said, 'you speak Greek at home and you speak English during the day? Is there some sort of division going on here?' As soon as I said that, bang, all those students had a huge, huge reaction. I couldn't keep up when taking notes on all the different stories they came up with. This fitted wonderfully for me because that's what I wanted, a sort of documentary approach to how people were feeling. I suppose, being kids or young people the stories had a lot to do with what Rina was talking about, who you could go out with. I think that the people from the small Aegean Islands were not very liberal in their approach. I

think Rina's family being from Egypt are more sophisticated people than the general line of people that I was talking about.

Maybe that's the reason why you saw something different to what I did. What the Greek Australian kids wanted and what their parents wanted were rather different. It was summed up, at the end of the session at Fitzroy High School when a beautiful girl sort of draped herself around some big hunk of a fellow and said, 'it's like this during the day. But when I get home at night it's not on, I'd never get away with it.' When I saw that I knew I'd struck pay dirt.

Q: Let's talk about shooting the film, the first impressions of making a film, the locations and any difficulties you had in the making of the film.

RI: Well, for me, it was a wonderful experience. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and everyone was very kind and encouraging. I thought we had a great time.

OH: My impression was that the Greek actors, all of whom were amateur, were very warm, responsive and sympathetic. Although it's true it was the first time I directed anything even approaching this sort of drama, I didn't have a lot of problems. The crew were great. We had a great cinematographer, Kerry Brown. Film Australia was very, very supportive. Film Australia executives might have worried a bit because there was a question about whether this was an unusual departure for Film Australia — and it was. Until that point Film Australia, which was then called the Commonwealth Film Unit, was basically doing things like corporate videos for government departments. What stock-in-trade we had was very rudimentary documentary. In fact, the then producer-in-chief had not allowed a very senior director to direct his own part of a documentary shot on the sound stage. He got a British film director in to do it for the director. So it was a very unusual thing, very soon after that point, for Gil Brealey, the producer, and Dick Mason, who was head of production, to actually ask three very inexperienced directors to something really very ambitious.

Q: Can you name the three directors?

OH: Yes, the three directors were Peter Weir, who'd done some things on his own, Brian Hannant and myself. At the time, I think, we were all production assistants, not directors, and we weren't paid as such. We were delighted to have this extraordinary opportunity.

Q: Did you have time to do rehearsal?

OH: Yes, I think the rehearsal time was quite generous. I can't remember how long the shooting schedule was. It was shot in a very documentary way, which is what I wanted. There were scenes around Marrickville [in Sydney]. The main terrace house where the Greek family lived was actually four terrace houses. There was a big vacant house in Rozelle for the downstairs and also the bathroom where Riri does this fantastic make-up stream down her face. It was something a real actress produces which a director could never call for, and she did it. Riri's bedroom upstairs was in South Dowling Street. The balcony where she throws the mini skirt down into the street was in Redfern, and I think there was another house too. It was shot like a feature film but it was also rather documentary in style and we did have time for rehearsal.

Q: Tell me how you selected Riri for the part.

OH: Casting is just about the most important thing in filmmaking, but it wasn't easy. In 1970, no actors' agents had Greek people on their books. I couldn't find any Greek actors. There might be one or two but not appropriate to the part. I had to find actors in the Greek community. We advertised in places like the *Hellenic Herald* which is where [Riri] found the advertisement. I also had young Greek girls ringing up for the main role, and the conversation would go like this: 'Hello is that Oliver Howes? My dad doesn't know this but I could be your girl for this half-hour drama.' I'd ask, 'Can you come to Film Australia for a screen test?' She'd say, 'Oh, no, no, we can't tell dad about that'. Then I'd say, 'Can you meet me at the milkbar down the road?' The answer would be 'No, I'm very sorry, we can't do that'. When Riri rang up it was a very different phone conversation and she came around for the screen test. She was obviously could handle the part with great sophistication and had a wonderful girlish, almost innocent quality but was not naïve.

Q: You must have had some doubts, when did you have it proved to you that you'd made the right decision?

OH: Screen testing I had great doubts. I had an assistant, Meg Stewart, the writer, and I made Rina go through the same screen test shot about five times. I was saying, is she right? She looks right but is she really? Could she really do it? It's very difficult when the film depends on the one part and you've got to get that one part right. She was doing it different ways, and Meg said she was doing it marvellously different ways. But she could do it the same way too and the screen test was the proof.

Q: Riri, were you scared when you came for the audition?

RI: I wasn't. I actually found it all very easy. The only part that I found difficult was the voiceover. I had to try the voiceovers a couple of times and my voice, probably because I wasn't an experienced actress, just didn't come over as well as I think was probably required. But I found the rest of it very easy. I remember a couple of times telling Oliver they wouldn't say this, they would say it differently. And Oliver and the crew would look at it again and would rephrase.

OH: Sure.

RI: That was lovely because the family were able to contribute and that made it more meaningful to us.

OH: That's right. It made the actors feel secure and one or two people actually said, hey, this is like my life. Of course that is what we wanted.

RI: I think the funniest part of it was the little old lady.

OH: Oh, they were wonderful, the grannies.

RI: One used to chain smoke non-stop between the sets. It was quite a contrast to watch who she was portraying. She was quite a trendsetter in her own right.

OH: She was a tough old lady who'd come from Turkey. I think in her young life she'd been kicked out of Turkey. I don't know where she'd gone after that. But she was wonderful, and very unselfconscious. I suppose our inexperience may have shown in the way we could have got better shots. I think with more experience I would have asked for more improvisation. It's true that the

Greek made-up family, because they were all from different families, did make suggestions and coalesced as a family in a wonderful way. But for my part I would have done better to do more improvisations.

Q: Were you worried about having a film in which people spoke Greek on screen?

OH: That was always the intention. It was absolutely of primary importance that both Greek and English were there. In fact, the father resolutely speaks Greek, whereas the son, Stavros resolutely replies in English. It didn't worry me. I don't speak Greek but I had a Greek dialogue coach there and he made sure that everything was OK. I thought the mixture of Greek and English was working quite well.

RI: I think it worked well too.

OH: Right at the end, the Greek father played by Theo Coglouris, who was a drummer in his normal life, breaks into English as a compromise to engage his kids. He says that they are the important people now. They're going to take over the whole world and have to look after it too. And just as we recorded that, the sound recordist doing the mix said, my god, the old bugger speaks English! It was a good moment.

Q: Did you have much knowledge of the Greek community?

OH: There was quite a lot of talk in the press about New Australians. I didn't have any knowledge of [the Greek community] apart from being a migrant myself. I really set out to try and discover it, mostly from those Greek students at high schools and with the actors. There were other people who helped enormously. The Greek community is actually many, many communities. Every island in the Aegean, the Peloponnese and elsewhere in Greece has their own community here. There's another community called the Greeks from Egypt. Those are people from places like Alexandria and Suez; many are intellectuals like Joseph Carwana who was a stalwart of the Greek newspapers and intellectual life of the Greek Australians. Those people helped enormously in my research and my understanding. They also became a core of people I could rely on — for instance, in the end scene in the Greek cathedral where people stream out of the church with their candles and say in the dark, 'Christos Anasde'. Those people are not from Samos, a small island in the Aegean, some of them are from Egypt.

RI: My family line is from Kastellorizon, a very small island but I was born in Egypt and so was my mother.

Q: Riri, what was the reaction in the Greek community when the film came out?

RI: I'm not aware of the reaction of the Greek community myself because I didn't have much contact with the Greek community, apart from my own immediate family. I received a huge reaction from my local Australian community at Miranda. I became quite well known and I think also there was an acknowledgment that indeed I was Greek. What was difficult for me would be being in a car on a Sunday going for a drive with a group of friends and they'd say, 'let's not park here' — this would be in the Royal National Park — 'there's too many wogs around'. And I'd say, 'I'm one of them'. They'd say, 'no you're not, you're different'. So [after the film] was the first time as a young person in Australia where there was some acknowledgment from my peers and from my school that indeed I had another culture at home. And it was due to this film.

OH: I didn't know that and it's music to my ears. It's a great thing because I think in the 60s, although in theory people accepted New Australians, the emphasis was on Australians. You had to be Australian. In fact, when we were doing sit-down rehearsals the question came up, what are these young people doing? The answer was they we're trying to be Australian. I remember that really struck home to Joe Hasham, who's not actually Greek but he played a good sort of boyfriend and went on to make a reputation in *Number 96*. His character's name is Ianni but, in fact, he calls himself John. That was almost always the case. There'd be someone at Film Australia who'd be called Mike and eventually you'd find out his real name, Macek.

RI: That was pretty typical.

OH: Shortly after the film, I saw a girl going around with Toulas on her t-shirt and I rushed up to ask: 'Is that your name?' She said, 'Yeah, but there was this film called *Toula ...*', and she seemed proud of it so I was happy.

Q: What was the purpose of the film? What was its subject?

OH: I knew the subject and the question but how do you directly state what the subject is in the dialogue? Gil Brealey, the producer, and I had talks about this. We eventually wrote in a line that gave a hint at the beginning of the film of what the film was directed towards. It was about the New Australians, Australia and generational conflict. Toulas says, 'I think it's easier for the parents, they don't change much, living in the middle of Sydney, surrounded by a whole lot of other Greek people. But it's different for us.' [To Riri] Do you remember that?

RI: Yes, I was on a bus.

OH: And that rang true?

RI: Yes. I think as you get older you appreciate more what your parents actually undertook. They left a country that's absolutely loved and adored, and a lot of times left loved ones behind because, you understand, elderly people couldn't migrate. We left a great-aunt who had lived with us all our lives, and we weren't able to bring her here until my father had a secure house and an amount of money in the bank to support her. By the time we managed to do that, and we got her approval [to migrate], she died. I think, from a young person's point of view, Toulas may have said that because of the pressures on her and the changes that she and her brothers experienced. I'm fifty-two now, and I think if I had to go and live in another country which didn't speak my language, leaving my mother and father behind, it would be devastating.

OH: I think that it was very hard for people in the 60s, maybe even harder in the 50s. It may be easier now for migrants, I'm not sure. I think that people's attitudes have changed a lot and I think Australia is a bit more accepting. But migration is always a hard thing to do. I think I had a hard time and I'm English. I didn't even have to learn a new language and I suffered for years. I don't regret it but ...

Q: Tell us about the distribution and screening of *Toulas*?

OH: The three half-hour dramas that we made started off being justified as kid's education. But when they were made they were deemed to be pretty interesting. Film Australia took them to Bruce Gyngell at Channel 7 who was an enormously effective executive in television and he was full of praise for these films. They were broadcast nationally on Channel 7. In fact, Bruce Gyngell went as far as saying that they were some of the best television he had seen and he was going to run them

without commercial breaks. They also went to Melbourne Film Festival and, I think, the three of them got an AFI award. They were also seen overseas.

RI: I didn't know they got an award.

OH: I don't think we got individual awards but we got a silver medallion, and there was something at the Melbourne Film Festival for *Toula* as well. The film *Michael* got a top award as well.

Q: Riri, what was your family's reaction to you being in the film?

RI: My family was aware that I was interested in the profession of acting, although my mother and father could not understand it. They would prefer that I studied at university and became a teacher — I eventually sacrificed a teacher scholarship to go to NIDA. As far as the movie was concerned, I didn't inform [my parents] adequately about it. I remember they were quite cooperative because I tried to be very independent by that stage. I was the third daughter and they were older by the time I was nineteen. I think I had worn them out a little bit so I was quite independent and they weren't always aware of what I was doing. I remember one day, I had to be in North Sydney early in the morning for a shoot at the chemist where Toula's buying make-up. I had to ask for a lift to the station very early in the morning from my father and I think that's when he actually expressed his suspicion and concern about what kind of movie this was. I had to justify that, in fact, it was a genuine movie. I think he was quite angry about it and I had to talk my way out of it.

The premiere, I thought, was also quite funny. One of my sisters was sitting next to my father and when the young man kisses Toula, apparently my father just jumped out of his skin to see his daughter being kissed by another actor. [laughs]

OH: ... kissed by Joe Hasham, who was great. It was a beautiful scene. I remember coming back that day and after we saw the rushes people just said they were beautiful. It's the backlighting, the reactions, the way you and Joe were together, and the girl's first kiss. It's not an easy thing to do and, anyway it's a key moment.

Q: Were you reluctant about any of things you were asked to do in the film?

RI: No. I found the filming interesting, I was interested in the way the camera worked and Oliver is very kind. He would take me around and have a look at the sets. Oliver may not remember, he invited me to attend the recording of Mozart from the orchestra. Yeah, it was wonderful. He also took me to see the recording of some of the other movie as well with Judy Morris. So I actually got an introduction into filmmaking and a tour at the same time. I found it quite pleasant. I didn't experience anything that I wouldn't like to remember.

OH: I'm glad you say that, I think a lot is due to Theo Coulouris who played the father. I think he set a tone within this stage family, he and his wife in real life, Ketty Coulouris, were the mum and the dad. Theo was this warm authoritative figure. He's not a big man or a tough guy but he has a presence. If he'd been tough and rigid and demanding he might have been a caricature of the heavy Greek father but he isn't. He has a light touch, [to Riri] perhaps also like your dad, I don't know ...

RI: Yes.

OH: ... genuinely worried for his daughter and what can go wrong in this new country. Will she be like an Australian girl who changes her boyfriends, every so often? We could see the worry there.

RI: I know that when I did inform my father that that family was involved, Theo and his wife, they were known to them. Once I named a good family it seemed to put my family at ease that it was a genuine movie and it was depicting a good family. One thing struck me when I recently saw the video of the movie. There's a scene where the family's at a Greek dance and Toula's dancing with the young man. I know that he would have been under some scrutiny to be allowed to dance with her. I wondered how it was that he went against the Greek norms and didn't introduce himself to the family before he took her out.

OH: The first time he sees Toula, he goes to ask the dad for permission to ask Toula to dance.

RI: Oh right.

OH: Yes, he does do it right and that's why he's allowed to dance. Even then, I think the father would be quite suspicious. In fact the first kiss takes place in a demolished house, then she runs away.

RI: They go out without the father's permission, so the young man's going against the Greek tradition as well, isn't he?

OH: He is going against the Greek tradition but he is trying to be an Australian, and he's trying to be very cool.

RI: As they all are. As we all were.

Q: Riri, do you think it's different now for kids of Greek origin at nineteen years of age?

RI: I don't think it really is different. I don't think that life for young people from other cultures is different to what it was in the 1960s. What is different is that there is more acceptance of families from non-English speaking backgrounds, particularly on the educational side of society. What is different is that there are more opportunities and there's a reflection of a range of diverse cultures, in our communities, shops, foods that we eat, movies that we see, and books that are available. I think, ultimately, the family does try to maintain as much of their cultural values as they can, particularly when it's linked to their religion and morals. Families from other countries usually see themselves as having higher morals than the Australian society. I don't think that's different. What is different is that there's more acceptance of the other diverse cultures in Australia. Also other cultures are appreciated more. Ethnicity and its values are appreciated more. There's also an acceptance that families do speak other languages and that a young person or child might speak more than one language. I currently work in early childhood and that's a very good area to take into consideration, supporting families of other cultures and ensuring that there's a cross-cultural perspective in early childhood.

My children have been brought up in the Blue Mountains where there's a lot of community awareness and a lot of artists. They've been encouraged to respect their culture and my children are half-Greek and half-Australian. They haven't really mixed with a lot of other Greek young people. One of my sons recently visited Melbourne and, having never been there before, he was just amazed to see the shop windows and the amount of Greek people living in Melbourne. He approached a group of young men and said, 'I'm Greek too.' He was astounded because they replied, 'We're all Australians now.' He had never come across that before. Being half-Greek, he's been encouraged to make this part of his culture known and he's taken an interest in it but he had

never come face-to-face with other Greek people of his age negating it. I thought it was interesting that he had never come across that. That was just this year.

Q: What are your feelings about the film now?

OH: I am proud of *Toula*. I think it was an achievement for Film Australia, or the Commonwealth Film Unit, to actually get it going in the first place. I'm delighted to have been the person to direct it and write it. The cast was great and the reaction from the Greek and the Australian communities was very good. I don't see any negatives there at all. I suppose the best thing about it for me is that, I believe without exaggeration, it was ground breaking. Before it was made almost nothing, if not nothing, had been done with the experience of New Australian people or migrants. That possibility explains why Greek people, including [Riri's] father, were suspicious of it. People we filmed in the streets — we had a car with a Hellenic Driving School sign — would be suspicious of our camera because in the late 60s and early 70s people were suspicious. I think of the film as being a breakthrough for filmmaking in general and filmmaking about New Australians in particular. I think it was important and I think it did help change attitudes for the better in Australia.

RI: At the time it was important to me because it was an opportunity to experience filmmaking. I didn't really appreciate it as much as I do now, being older. I don't think I appreciated the value to the Greek community then as I do now, seeing it from a different perspective.

Q: Oliver, can you tell us what it was like to work in Film Australia in the late 60s?

OH: I joined the Commonwealth Film Unit in 1963, it was later called Film Australia. It was just about the only place you could get to do films. At that time very few, if any, films were being made and the stock-in-trade was doing government information films. There was stuff about migrants but it was all about migrants working in factories canning peaches. Stanley Hawes, the producer-in-chief, demanded that every film was shot on 35 mm, even the most basic information doco, and most films were long-shot followed by close-up followed by another long-shot, together with a voice-of-god narration. That's how films were made, as information from the top to the bottom. So it was a huge seachange to actually start to film real people with hand-held 16 mm film — where the cameraman or cameraperson could go in and choose their subjects and see intimate reactions — or to research and write carefully scripted drama. You could get into quite complex social issues like migration and what happens to migrant kids. The technology had changed, the thinking changed and the results changed. I think film itself became important when it really had not been that important before.