



Olympia Dukakis

IN THE MIDST OF A GODDESS

by Gregory C. Pappas

The research for this piece was daunting. With over 50 feature films, over 125 theater plays, over two dozen television movies and hundreds of co-stars over the years, how does one begin to profile one of the most prolific film, television and stage actresses of our time?

Start with the source, I thought. But thinking about it and making it happen were two different things. Olympia Dukakis wasn't elusive. In fact, she was thrilled to talk to a fellow Greek when I first reached out to her for the interview. But trying to track her down was tough. Between a recently released film with Julie Christie that she was doing publicity for and a current project she was preparing to film with Lindsay Lohan and Shirley MacLaine—not to mention a one-woman stage play she was performing throughout the country... It wasn't easy locking in a date.

After a flight to New York City and a subway ride to Greenwich Village, I walked into a tiny hole-in-the-wall joint called Gus' Place ("It's my favorite Greek restaurant in the city," Olympia tells me when arranging the time and date, "And it happens to be around the corner from my apartment.")

Right: Olympia Dukakis on location in Los Angeles, California



What followed was a spirited conversation about growing up as a Greek in Lowell, Massachusetts and the lessons she learned on the streets. “I got tied to a tree once and had my socks stuffed in my mouth,” she recalls. “Greeks were fighting the Italians, who were fighting the Armenians, who were fighting the Irish.”

Olympia recalls one particular time—“a defining moment” in her young life, as she calls it—when she punched a boy who had been taunting her.

“The mother of a boy I got into a fight with on the street came to my house complaining about me. She banged on our door and demanded to speak with my mother. My mother listened to her and told her that she did not interfere with what her daughter does in the street.”

It was very clear to Olympia Dukakis at that moment, that her parents would offer her all of the love and support in the world, but when it came to picking fights, she would have to protect herself and work things out on her own.

“You get yourself into these messes,” her mother told her then, “You’re gonna get yourself out of them.”

It was lessons like these—as well as three words her father repeated to her constantly in difficult and contentious times

Her autobiography, *Ask Me Again Tomorrow: A Life in Progress*, was published in 2003 by Harper Collins. She has three children, Christina, Peter, and Stefan; two grandchildren, Isabella and Sofia.

During the early part of her career, Olympia made a living mostly from the stage, without getting rich or famous. In 1974, she landed a non-speaking role as a cop in Charles Bronson’s *Death Wish*. In 1983, she played a doctor on the soap *Search for Tomorrow*.

Then in 1987, Olympia Dukakis burst into the public’s consciousness playing Rose Castorini in *Moonstruck*. Her character’s famous line “I know who I am,” when she rebukes advances from a younger man has gone down in Hollywood history as one of film’s greatest lines. Working with Cher, she recalls “was an absolute joy.”

“*Moonstruck* was a total surprise and it absolutely changed my life,” she says. “The Oscar is an acknowledgement from your peers.” She took her Oscar and ran with it, starring in a string of hit films, including, *Steel Magnolias*, *Working Girl*, *Jeffrey* and Woody Allen’s *Mighty Aphrodite* and the *Look Who’s Talking* series.

But, as she goes on to explain to me “I didn’t become an actor

I think everybody relates to her, she is everybody’s sister, everybody’s mother. She’s like an Athena; she’s a goddess in the true sense of the word.

Jennifer Aniston

(“think it through” he would advise her) that would remain with her throughout her life and would guide her through the intricate worlds of being a wife, a mother and an actress—all at the same time, until that fateful day in 1988 when everything changed.

Before talking about the Academy Awards of 1988 she is quick to remind me that hers isn’t the typical Hollywood overnight success story. On the contrary, she had been working as an actress and theater director for 28 difficult years before the award.

“It took 28 years of hard work before I won that Oscar,” she said. “And for most of those years, I was trying to make a living and raise my three children at the same time.”

Olympia was born in 1931 to Greek immigrant parents in the gritty mill town of Lowell, about an hour outside Boston. She graduated from Arlington High School and earned BA and MFA degrees from Boston University.

She was one of the founding members of The Actor’s Company at 54 Charles Street, which later moved to Warrenton Street and became what is now the Charles Street Playhouse. She has been married to actor Louis Zorich since 1962.

Together they founded and operated the Whole Theatre Company in Montclair, New Jersey for twenty years. On the faculty of New York University from 1967 through 1983, she also taught and inspired an entire generation of future film and theater actors.

to become rich or famous. I became an actor to play the great parts—Shakespeare, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, the Greeks—my god the Greeks. I love bringing ancient Greek women to life on the stage.”

She often took parts that actually led her away from the fame and fortune that acting was supposed to bring. But to her, it was always about the challenge of the role and her desire to develop that particular character.

In 1993 she met a fictional friend-for-life when she stepped into the shoes of transgender landlady Anna Madrigal for a controversial—yet overwhelmingly critically acclaimed PBS mini-series.

Long before *Sex and the City*, there was a TV mini-series called *Tales in the City*. Based on the stories by author and former newspaper columnist Armistead Maupin, the series follows the soap opera adventures of a colorful cast of characters in 1970s San Francisco.

But a PBS TV mini-series wasn’t something Hollywood stars typically do after winning an Academy Award. Anna Madrigal became the most challenging role Olympia Dukakis ever played. Despite what appeared to be a project based solely on its artistic merits and not its commercial or publicity viability, controversy surrounding the homosexual themes, nudity, and illicit drug use in the miniseries, gave PBS its highest ratings ever for a dramatic program.



“What’s nice is that people feel I represented the character without judgment,” Dukakis told me, surprised that I was familiar with the series. “People said that I brought a real humanity to the part.”

She took the role because of the challenge.

“The character of Anna Madrigal was full of the contradictions. She had been a man and that aspect of herself was still trapped inside. Talk about feeling like an outsider. It takes tremendous courage to go through such an extraordinary transition. In playing this character who went through that fire and came out the other end, I developed an understanding of the human dilemma.”

Another character she’s spending time with regularly since the 1990s is title character from the Broadway production of *Rose*. Dukakis has spent entire months at a time touring the one-woman play in cities around the world—including in England and Greece.

“I’ve done it infrequently over the years,” Dukakis says. “It’s an extraordinary piece of writing.”

Written by Tony Award-nominee Martin Sherman (*Bent* and *The Boy From Oz*), *Rose* premiered at London’s Royal National Theatre, before moving to Broadway’s Lincoln Center Theatre in 2000 to rave reviews and sold out audiences.

Rose is an octogenarian Jewish woman born in the Ukraine, who escaped the Nazis before finding refuge in the United States.

“It’s a coming of age story that demands you use everything you know and everything you’ve learned as an actress,” Dukakis says. “This woman feels she never belonged,” she says. “As a first generation Greek-American I understand that.”

Despite growing up in a very Greek environment, she always felt like an outsider in her own community. She admits that she wasn’t the poster child of the good Greek daughter, but this wasn’t a result of teen rebellion.

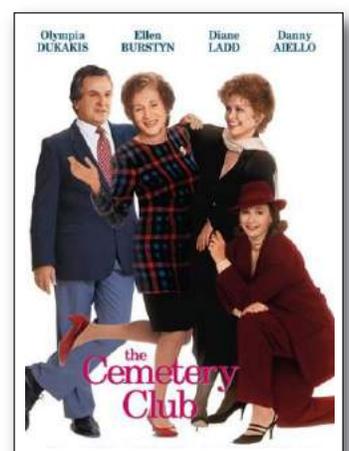
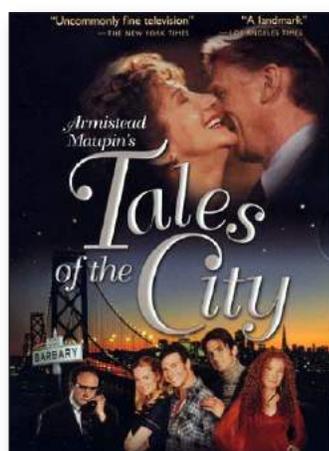
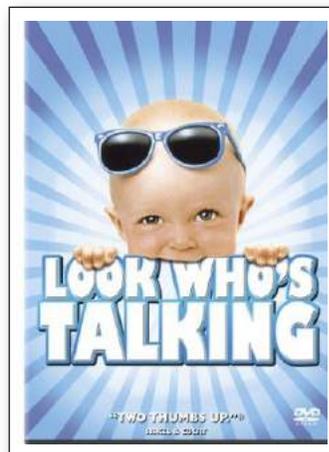
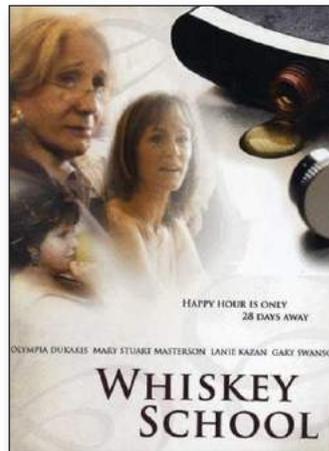
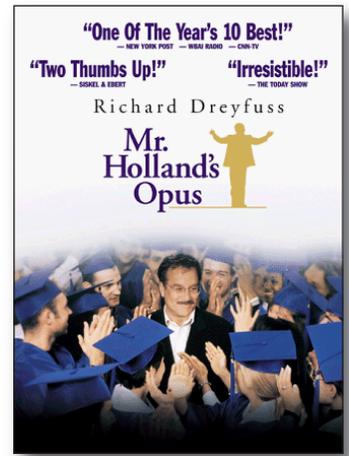
“My father always encouraged me to look deeper into things, to ask a lot of questions and to get to know myself by exploring the world around me.”

She stopped going to church when she was old enough to understand that she didn’t agree with the “role” of the female in the church. She never became a participant of the Greek Orthodox Church and thus has often felt “outside” the Greek American community.

This has never diminished her love and passion for all things Greek and for making her Greek heritage an important part of who she is.

“This is who I am,” she explains. “No one can deny this just because I don’t do one thing or another. Just because I don’t go to church, it doesn’t make me a bad Greek. On the contrary, my Greekness defines me more than any other aspect of my life and I’ve constantly struggled with—especially when I was growing up—being a good American yet always remaining true to my Greek heritage.”

Right: A small representation of films that Olympia Dukakis has starred in.



Her passion has often translated onto the stage, where she has performed some of her most famous roles, bringing immortal Greek women to life for thousands of endearing fans from coast to coast who have learned more about the Greek classics and their universal appeal.

Hecuba and Clytemnestra are two of her favorite roles she's brought to life over the years. "They are both about powerful Greek women," she notes. "And about themes like justice and war that are still prevalent today in our society, two thousand years after they were written."

But there was one Greek role she didn't take. A little known fact about Olympia Dukakis' career is that she actually turned down the role of Nia Vardalos' mother in "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" that was ultimately played by Lanie Kazan.

"I was thrilled with the young lady's success," Dukakis said with sincerity. "I'm thrilled anytime a Greek does well—especially a Greek who refuses to change his or her name." When further asked about the actual film, she explains "That movie may portray Nia Vardalos' experience, but my experiences were not that way at all. That wasn't the Greek community I was raised in. That wasn't my Greek family."

At 76 years old, Olympia Dukakis has no plans of slowing down. She's come off of some major film projects in the past few years including the complex "Three Needles" with Sandra Oh and Stockard Channing that is made up of three different stories focusing on the AIDS pandemic in which she plays a missionary working in Africa.

She also co-starred in the 2007 hit "In the Land of Women" with Adam Brody and Meg Ryan. Simultaneously that year she tackled another difficult role of Marian, whose husband was

afflicted with Alzheimer's Disease in the critically-acclaimed Canadian independent film "Away From Her" which starred Julie Christie.

Dukakis' mother had Alzheimer's. "It was a frightening period in my life. Initially I was in denial about it," she confessed. "It took some real soul searching for me to finally realize that this had happened to me and my family."

Toward the end of her mother's life, she recalls a poignant moment of clarity. "My mother said 'Oh, Olympia, I've been looking everywhere for you,' I couldn't believe it. This was after two entire years of her not knowing me at all, not recognizing me. And we talked as honestly to each other in those 20 minutes as I have talked to any human being ever in my life."

Looking back on her over four decades in film and theater she concedes that it wasn't a specific film, or a specific role that she remembers most. It was that fateful evening in April of 1988 when her life would change forever. It was the culmination of her American dream.

All she could think about as she walked up on the stage to accept the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role for her portrayal as Rose Castorini in Moonstruck was her family.

Her mother, she thought to herself, (hopefully) finally understands what she's been doing for a living all these years. Her father would have been overcome with joy if he could see her now, she thought. Her children too must be so proud of their mother. Her husband Louie was the one sitting next to her when her name was announced and her first instinct was to lean over and smack a kiss on him.

And the winner is... Olympia Dukakis. ■



I N H E R O W N W O R D S

For me, the process of assimilation has been the life-long process of allowing this line, this hyphen, to blur and soften. It hasn't been an easy process, nor has it been simply about assimilating culturally. It's been about learning to embrace the influences of my family and my heritage without letting them limit, hurt, or hinder me from becoming a better person, a better actor, a better mother, wife, and citizen. It has been about allowing my heart and my mind to open to new influences that will help me embrace life and all of its contradictions, instead of run from them. It's only now, at a relatively late time in my life, that I can even begin to articulate what it meant for my parents to come to this country and to raise children who became successful here. It's a complicated ideal, this notion of being successfully assimilated, and it had such a profound effect on so many aspects of our lives. It determined, for example, how much personal gratification my parents would delay do that they might provide us children with more opportunity, more education, more freedom than they had. And though they tried to shield us from the limitations that were put on them by the outside world, particularly in the form of ethnic bias, they were never really successful. This was something my generation had to figure out for ourselves. We had to figure out how to be good Greek daughters and sons while also becoming Americans. There were so many competing ideals of what was valued, what was honorable, what was right. The world was fraught with contradictions and the best we could hope for was not to be undone by them. Learning how to grasp and use the lessons of this great paradox has been the source of more consternation, more joy, and more growth than anything else in my life. I was taught, by example, to stand tall in the face of fear, no to shy away from obstacles, to believe in myself- even when I felt utterly defeated inside. I was encouraged to strive to be authentic, to become and American without betraying my Greek heritage; to become the authentic Olympia Dukakis.

Excerpt from the autobiography of Olympia Dukakis
Ask Me Again Tomorrow, A Life in Progress

Photo: Olympia Krassidakis

