

## FINANCIAL REVIEW

**This festival's classic Greek**

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The 12th Greek Film Festival showcases the best of the auteur-driven diversity of the nation's industry, Chris Boyd reports.

You could hardly find a better word to describe the 12th Greek Film Festival than antipodean, in its original sense of "opposite feet". Not just the extreme ends of the globe, but counter poles. Exact opposites. New and old. Comedy and tragedy.

This year, two classics and 14 contemporary Greek films are programmed for Sydney and Melbourne, with selections scheduled for other mainland capitals.

There's no Zorba the Greek this year it was a hit at the 2003 festival but there's Never on Sunday and Z. The enchanting Never on Sunday features Melina Mercouri as the original happy hooker, Ilya.

Z hails from the same decade the 1960s and could hardly be more different. It's an ugly, fast-talking thriller (set in an unnamed Mediterranean country and shot in French) about the cover-up of a political assassination, with Yves Montand playing a fearless left-wing senator.

Politics and prostitutes are two of the supporting pillars of Greek cinema.

Even Zorba is blessed with a dying pro, played by Lila Kedrova in an Oscar-winning performance. (Come to think of it, Mercouri picked up a gong at Cannes in 1960 for her pro performance.)

Four decades on, the somewhat haphazard Greek film industry is turning out some amazingly varied and occasionally very fine films. They're still obsessed with politics and conflict of all kinds and, yes, they have more than their EU quota of professional sex workers.

Oddly enough, the politics is getting lighter, more forbearing, while the courtesans who provided much relief of the comic variety are serving more serious ends nowadays.

The feel-good breakthrough hit, A Touch of Spice, (with its 1.5 million attendances in Greece alone, that's more than one for every 10 people in the nation) is hogging much of the limelight this year. And, indeed, it's the only film of the 2004 program with a cinema release locked in.

The semi-autobiographical film, written and directed by Tassos Boulmetis, follows the fortunes of a Greek family deported from Constantinople when tensions escalate between Turkey and Greece over Cyprus.

But it's more about memory and loss of gastronomy and astronomy too than it is about hostility.

While A Touch of Spice is a vitally important film for the profile and commercial fortunes of the Greek film industry internationally, it is a film about a pair of teen prostitutes aptly titled Hardcore that deserves more attention.

On paper, it sounds like an extended video-clip fantasy by the Russian schoolgirl lipstick-lesbian duo, Tatu, but Hardcore charges into dodgy territory with a fearlessness only matched by its clear conscience. It's vicious and it's graphic, but it's also impressively truthful.

Also on the menu this year are road movies, torrid domestic dramas, a version of The Cherry Orchard (with Charlotte Rampling as Madame Ranevskaya) from the director of Zorba the Greek, as well as more orthodox comedies and tragedies.

According to Ross Karavis, the director of the Antipodes Festival of which the Greek Film Festival is a part the very thing that makes Greece's film industry so unpredictable is one of its great strengths.

"Greece has a long history of auteur-driven film projects," he told the Weekend AFR from his home in West Melbourne, on Tuesday. "It doesn't have a studio system. So it hasn't been good over the past 20 years, in general, in producing movies of mass appeal."

But the industry has produced some genuinely independent directors and a stunning diversity.

"There isn't a consistent look and feel to these movies," he says. "The diversity partly reflects the structure of the industry, but it also reflects, I suspect, where people have done their training. Tassos Boulmetis was at UCLA. The director of Hardcore was at London and in the United States. I think the internationalisation of people's training and the workplace has actually also been turned into an internationalisation of sensibility."

Karavis says Hardcore director Dennis Eliades "has been influenced quite strongly by what's happening in independent American cinema, both in terms of production effects, the story that's told and the way in which it's told".

He contrasts the film with the "much more classical European-styled movie" A Song Is Not Enough, which tells of the impact of the jailing of a woman on her family. "It's just a really beautifully told story," he says. "And it's one which if it were in Italian or French would be just as believable, cinematically."

Though it tells a peculiarly Greek story about the leftist resistance to the military dictatorship in the early 1970s, A Song Is Not Enough belongs very much to a French tradition of film-making.

So why aren't there more Greek films in art-house cinemas?

"In some ways, national cinemas are now taking the place of art house," Karavis says, "which is why large film festivals have regional and national focuses." Films of a nation, he says, have "a different feel and different stories to tell".

After 12 years in Melbourne and Sydney, and thanks to recent collaborations with Palace Cinemas, the Greek Film Festival has crossed over from cultural ghetto status to broader audiences. It has gone from attendances in the hundreds to attendances in the tens of thousands. The 2004 program warrants the addition of another zero to that figure.

The Greek Film Festival is in Melbourne from September 8-21; Sydney, September 9-22; Canberra, September 16-22; Brisbane, September 23-26; Adelaide, September 30-October 4; Perth, September 29-October 3.

