

A twenty-first century fox



For many, 20th Century Fox is synonymous with Hollywood, having created stars and produced classic movies and blockbusters. And while its links to film franchises like *Star Wars* and movie legends like Betty Grable, Shirley Temple, and Marilyn Monroe are well-known, there's one bit of trivia few non-Greeks may be aware of: in its history, the studio has been led by two Greeks. Today, its chairman is Jim Gianopulos. **Stefanie Bailey** caught up with him during a string of lectures in Greece.

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s guest speaker at a number of talks organized by the 50th International Thessaloniki Film Festival and the Fulbright Foundation's 'Great Ideas' lecture series initiated in 2006 with the intent to nurture educational and cultural connections between Greece and the United States, Jim Gianopulos was a very popular man. Of course, being the chairman and chief executive officer of 20th Century Fox, a governor of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, a Board Member of the Motion Pictures and Television Fund and a Trustee of the American Film Institute, it comes as no surprise—everyone wanted to hear the man who had conquered Hollywood speak.

Catching Gianopulos for a private interview prior to his talks in Athens, I am daunted by the fact that he has just completed an interview in which he was told that Hollywood films today were not very good, and in turn questioned when movies would become better.

Artemis Zenetou, director of the Fulbright Foundation in Greece, with Anne and Jim Gianopulos

Clearly annoyed, (he repeated the question over and over as if attempting to exorcise it), Gianopulos's frustration was understandable-sometimes movies get caught up in politics and particularly in Greece, there is a tendency for some to verge towards anti-Americanism when the discussion comes round to Hollywood.

Considering Gianopulos was in Greece when Greek filmmakers had created a counter-film festival in protest against the Thessaloniki Film Festival's apparent pandering to America, and days after the annual November 17 march commemorating the student uprising at the Polytechnio in 1973 (that always ends at the American Embassy), Gianopulos belongs to two worlds that don't always see eye to eye-something he is acutely aware of.

"There is this strange love/hate relationship between Greece and the United States," he observes. "Despite sometimes feeling like America did not come to Greece's aid when it was needed, there is an appreciation of the support Greece got post-war. The Fulbright Foundation in Greece is an example of this." The oldest in Europe and the second oldest continuously-running Fulbright program in the world, the Fulbright Foundation in Greece has given grants to 2,400 Greeks and 1,300 American scholars since its establishment in 1948.

The idea of America being both friend and foe was reflected in all the 'Great Ideas' talks, from the John Cassavetes Theater in Thessaloniki, a press conference held at the Grand Bretagne, Athens, to a talk for students and film professionals held at the Greek Film Archive Foundation. Alongside questions that suggested American cinema is a form of propaganda and the issue of internet downloading and free distribution, Gianopulos was also asked about what could be done to improve Greek cinema, to which he maintained that the key lies in education and state support.

"I haven't managed to fix problems in Hollywood, let alone Greece!" he exclaimed at the Grand Bretagne press conference. "Cinema in Greece is not unlike cinema in other nations-they speak to the themes and issues of their own nation and they don't often travel the world. Hollywood, on the other hand, doesn't have these cultural contexts-from the very start the movies made in Hollywood were made for people from all over the world. They are films that everybody can watch."

Gianopulos is referring to the fact that Hollywood, like America, was built in part by immigrants, something that came up during his lecture at the Athens Concert Hall. Entitled *Hellenism and Hollywood: From Aristotle to Alexander* (Payne), Gianopulos revealed the figures of Greek descent that played a role in the shaping of Hollywood, from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, to Greek Americans including chief executive officer of 20th Century Fox from 1942-62 Spyros Skouras-the first Greek to run an American movie studio.

Hot on Skouras's heels were, to name a few, Elia Kazan, Melina Mercouri and her husband, philhellene Jules Dassin, John Cassavetes, Rita Wilson and 'honorary Greek' husband Tom Hanks, to Academy Award-winning director and screenwriter, Alexander Payne-otherwise known as Constantine Alexander Papadopoulos-



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Jim Gianopoulos addressing a packed Athens Concert Hall

the writer behind *Citizen Ruth*, *Election*, *About Schmidt* and *Sideways*. Throughout his talk, Gianopoulos demonstrated how Hollywood essentially belongs to everyone, including Greece. “I think the beauty of American culture is that it assimilates every other culture,” he insists.

On his own position as a Greek American he says: “I’ve always been raised as a Greek. I see myself as one-and-a half generation Greek American because my father came from Corinth and left for the United States after the war. My mother was born in New York but my grandparents were immigrants from Constantinople and she was raised to speak Greek fluently. At home, my father insisted we always speak Greek. He said when you go to school you are an American like everyone else. But first you have to be Greek. I spoke Greek with him all my life.”

Yet it was not only language that remained with him. During his lecture at the Athens Concert Hall, the mention of dramatic principles, from tragedy to spectacle, as followed by the ancient Greek writers, reveals a clear love of his Hellenic roots and its traditions—including storytelling. Essentially, Hollywood is part of a long, universal tradition of telling stories, with tales that make you laugh or cry, and others that delve deeper into the universal traits that make us human. After the two-hour talk, Gianopoulos had expressed the vital importance of a good story and in turn, a good movie.

As a child, Gianopoulos went to the cinema on a regular basis. “My grandfather used to take me to movies because he wanted to

learn English and spend time with me, so it kind of worked to both our advantages because I evolved a love of film very early on,” he recalls. On Sundays, he and his family would travel to a cinema that was rented out by Greeks specifically to screen films from Greece—comedy and other classics from the Fifties and Sixties, including the comedy stylings of “Hatzichristos and all those great comedians”.

But initially it was not the film industry that attracted Gianopoulos. With dreams of becoming a musician he admits “I always had an interest in music, and I guess you could say I was a frustrated musician who wasn’t talented enough to make a living out of it. So I went to Law School.” It was during this time he chose the role of the CIA in the Greek military junta and the dictatorship as the theme for his senior year thesis in Political Science. “But that was dopey,” he chuckles with hindsight. “What made me think I was going to find any information?!”

Of course he didn’t, and instead wrote about the history of international meddling in Modern Greek politics, thus adding weight to his assertion that “there is no CIA conspiracy in Hollywood!” When he discloses that during George Papadopoulos’s junta he regularly marched on the Greek consulate in New York, it wouldn’t seem absurd to place a young Gianopoulos on the streets of Exarchia.

With a clear social conscience, Gianopoulos also serves on the National Entertainment Advisory Council for the Anti-Defamation League and the Brady Center, and has also served on the Honorary Committees for the Fulfillment Fund and The City of Hope. In 2001 he was the honoree for the Multiple Sclerosis Society and was awarded the Humanitarian Award by the Help Group in 2005. Indeed, despite how some people view Hollywood, at least we know there is a great, big Hellenic heart at the helm of one of its largest studios.

Humble in person, Gianopoulos isn’t one to shout about his success, and probing him on proud moments in his career was like getting blood out of a stone, though he did acknowledge how far he has come. “Sure, there are moments I’m proud of,” he concedes. “I’m proud of what I achieved and sometimes flabbergasted by it. People ask me how I got here. Well, I worked my butt off between lucky breaks, and was fortunate; I worked hard, and was in the right place in the right time. I’ve enjoyed a great career of putting one foot in front of the other, so in that respect I’m proud; but I had support and help along the way.”

When citing true achievement, Gianopoulos looks to his father’s example. “I had a great work ethic instilled in me early on. My dad came to the ‘States as an illegal alien and started a business providing industrial equipment and doing repairs on ships the Greeks had bought after the war, and the business evolved from there. The notion that a guy gets off a ship barely even speaking English, not knowing if immigration is going to throw him out and despite this starts a business—now, that’s an achievement. Getting a law degree and working your way up the corporate food chain is something to be proud of, but it’s not quite the same,” he proclaims. “My father was an inspiration. I thought; if he had done that, I should try and do something myself.”

For Jim Gianopoulos, it’s that simple.