

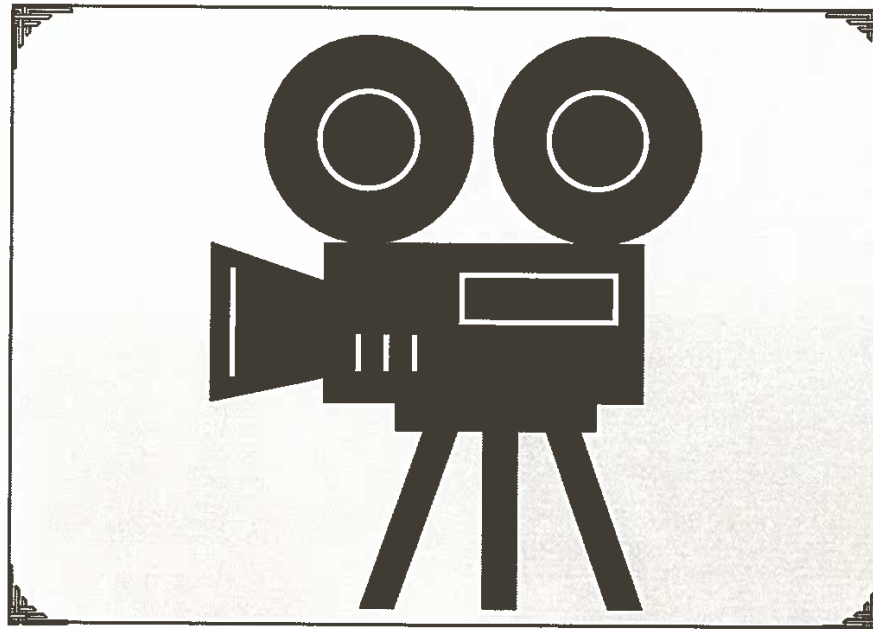
Greeks of the Silver Screen

By Steve Frangos

The role of Greek immigrants as successful promoters, who were very often involved in the initial formation of any number of popular entertainment forms, is an undisputed fact of American history. Greeks were among the very first owners of vaudeville theaters, nickelodeon arcades, movie palaces, off-Broadway theaters, Catskill Mountains resorts, and major dinner theaters. What is less well-known, however, is the role of Greeks in the history of early American film. Since the very establishment of the American film industry, Greeks and persons of Greek descent have appeared in front of and behind the camera.

At the turn of the century, when the American film industry was first forming, the early cinematographers drew heavily upon the staged dramas, musicals and comedies of the day. And as one would expect, the actors of these theatrical productions were also among the first performers in film. Surprisingly quite a number of Greeks appear in these early American films. And not so surprisingly, little is known of the majority of these individuals, besides their names, nationality and the films in which they performed.

Yet, as in all things Greek in North America, two groups of actors eventually emerged: those that worked regularly over the years as supporting actors and those who achieved some considerable notoriety being recognized by critics and peers alike as a cut above



The Silent Players

Lou Tellegen, born Lou Tellegathos Mouranos in Athens, first appeared in French silent films before settling in Hollywood, where he played in numerous films as the ultra-sophisticated leading man. A noted stage and screen actor, Tellegen's life has already seen some recent discussion (see *The Greek American*, September 13, 1997).

It is difficult to understand why more information is not readily available on George

We can see the high regard for these strains of American film narratives in the homage (some would say parodies) of the films by George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. As a case in point, in *Mr. Moto Takes a Chance* George Regas portrays Bokor the Inca High Priest. The Mr. Moto movies were the first Hollywood series where an Oriental sleuth, in this case Peter Lorre playing a Japanese secret agent, stops international crime. All the hallmarks for this characterization are in place with Mr. Moto: the keen log-

Lost Thespian

John St. Polis's (Kallipolis) career was so familiar that when Theodore Gianakoulis (1886-1964) bothered to mention him in his June 15, 1938 WPA report on Greek arts in New York City he simply describes St. Polis as a "well-known Greek American [actor] in the American theater." The underlying assumption was that everyone knew St. Polis, so just the act of mentioning him offered his readers, presumably Americans as well as Greeks, all they needed to know about a widely recognized performer.

Part of the problem here is an American one as well as a Greek one. The early history of American films as it relates to the lives and careers of stage actors in New York City has not been widely reviewed. True, extensive studies of the most notable actors do make mention of their individual careers, including work on the stage, but nothing that attempts a full sweep of the whole range of professional actors. Coupled with this, no systematic historical study of Greek Americans and the performing arts exists.

We know that St. Polis appeared in at least four silent films and then 41 "talkies" between 1928 and 1942. St. Polis's silent films were: *The Return of Peter Grimm* (1926); *The Unknown* (1927); *Grain of Dust* (1928) and *The Gun Runner* (1928). Lest one think that these were merely random films of no consequence, we need only point out that *The Unknown* featured none other than Lon Chaney, in one of his most noted and macabre roles. In point of fact, all of St. Polis's silent films featured noted stars of the

some considerable notoriety being recognized by critics and peers alike as a cut above the rest. Given that all these individuals were working professionals, they would frequently move from the New York stage to the Hollywood film set and back again. For our purposes here we will focus, almost exclusively, upon the film work of these actors.

With that said, it must be stressed that these same actors had careers outside Hollywood, performing not only in theatrical dramas but also in a wide variety of musical reviews, comedies, radio, and other forms of popular entertainment. What follows is an extremely broad survey of these performers from the early 1900s into the mid-1970s.

Photoplays

As far as available documentation can now report, the first Greek actors to appear in American films, or photoplays, as they were first called, were born into the diaspora. Four actors for whom considerable documentation exists, Lou Tellegen (1881-1934), George Regas (1890-1940), George Coulouris (1903-1989) and George Metaxas (1899-1950), illustrate this point. Substantial biographical information on other known Greek film actors, such as John St. Polis (Kallipolis) or Helen Vlakis, may one day challenge this observation. For the moment what we can be sure of is that the principle work of Tellegen, as well as the beginnings for Regas and St. Polis, were in silent films.

It is difficult to understand why more information is not readily available on George Regas's career. For well over 20 years, Regas appeared in one stage play or film after another. It must have seemed like a dream, when the young Greek so impressed Mary Pickford (1893-1979) that she saw to it that he appeared in her play, *Love Night*.

We know that Regas performed in at least five silent films: *The Love Light*, *The Dangerous Moment* (1921); *The Rip-Tide* (1923); *That Royle Girl* (1925); and *The Rescue* (1929). Readily available documentation reports Regas made well over 30 films from 1929 until 1939. A selected number of these films are: *Acquitted*, *Sea Fury*, *Wolf Song* (1929); *The Lonesome Trail* (1930); *Beau Ideal* (1931); *Riders of the North* (1931); *The Golden West* (1932); *Destination Unknown* (1933); *The Way to Love* (1933); *Viva Villa*, *Bulldog Drummond Strikes Back*, *Border-town*, *Lives of the Bengal Lancers* (1934), *Waikiki Wedding* (1937); *Mr. Moto Takes a Chance* (1938); *Arrest Bulldog Drummond*, *The Oklahoma Kid* (1939), and his last film, *The Mark of Zorro* (1940).

Far from playing a character lost in the crowd, Regas was often the second lead and even the principal villain. To understand the roles Regas played, we must recognize that the 1930s was an era when Hollywood established many of movie genres and their standardized formulas. The Westerns, comedies, crime stories and serials Regas appeared in are now the stuff of Hollywood's film heritage.

All the hallmarks for this characterization are in place with Mr. Moto: the keen logic of the trained investigator, his ever-cool impeccable response to all events, his mastery of disguises, and a variety of dialects.

In *...Takes a Chance* we find Mr. Moto pretending to be an archaeologist somewhere in Indochina looking for -- yes that's right -- hidden treasures in forgotten temples. In this quest Mr. Moto contends with Nazi agents, a Hindu mystic rival and even an Incan High-Priest. How an Incan priest got to Indochina is too complicated to even begin to explain. Surprising as it may sound from this description, the film, as with all the Mr. Moto films, was very well received. George Regas was singled out for his role as a "delightfully villainous high-priest who seems to have got into his Inca costume by mistake; he is oddly, even rather endearingly, amusing (*The New York Times*, June 13, 1938).

For the moment all we know of George Regas's final days is that he died in Los Angeles on December 13, 1940.

In point of fact, all of St. Polis's silent films featured noted stars of the day, such as Ricardo Cortez (1899-1977) and Janet Gaynor (1906-1984).

All we need do to emphasize St. Polis's sustained involvement as a diligently working professional actor is to list a representative sample of his films: *Marriage By Contract* (1928); *Fast Life* (1929); *A Devil with Women, Guilty?*; *In The Next Room, Kismet*, *Melody Man*, *Party Girl* (1930); *Criminal Code*, *Doctor's Wives*, *Heartbreak* (1931), *Rocky Mountain Rangers* (1940); *Crossroads* (1942) and many others.

Actors such as Lou Tellegen, George Regas, John St. Polis, as well as many others who we will investigate in this series, were as well-known in their era as Olympia Dukakis, Alexander Scourby, Telly Savalas and John Cassavetes are today. Learning about them and their careers can serve to help us understand the true complexity of the Greek experience in North America.

Next Week: Part II

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