



CANNES 1977

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IV.



THE GREAT EXPECTATION of any Cannes festival is to be astonished by at least one film, and during my years of attendance, it has been discerned that placement of the films in competition is quite important, for all-too-often, those works which come early in the festival are overshadowed by later offerings. Memories grow shorter, but this year, the unquestionably great film in competition was Michael Cacoyannis' *Iphigenia*. There were those who argued that this director had already proven his mastery in transposing Greek tragedies to the screen (*Electra*, *The Trojan Women*), but a close examination of Cacoyannis' treatments of Euripides' plays shows that in *Iphigenia*, his personal vision has expanded enormously, and in this film, there is dynamism, a creative excitement and dramatic control not present in the previous films. Here, we had an epic film unlike any other in the history of contemporary cinema, and acted with grandeur and intensity. Cacoyannis has a gift for recreating that ancient time of pagan ritual and human frailty which is locked in one's literary consciousness; the film demands intellectual involvement, and one cringed to hear the yahoos singing out their praises for far less worthy entries when *Iphigenia* stood in the midst of all the wheeling and dealing like the Winged Victory in an aisle of La Samaritaine.

Immediately, the images take control of the spectator: a yellow sky and white sun over the bay of Aulis, where Agamemnon's vast army and thousand ships languish in the stilled air. Their idleness erupts into violence as they storm the green glades where the priests keep their sacred flocks. The soldiers, seen in swift camera images, assuage their hunger by slaughtering the animals, including a sacred deer. All of this is excitingly staged, for Cacoyannis has gathered what seems to be thousands of men for his army, and their responses to the action are thoroughly convincing; whether singing out a song of vengeance against Troy, or raising torches in praise of Agamemnon, one is pulled into the activity with dramatic fervour, becoming a part of this restless mob: the camera creates this kinaesthetic response to the images.

The drama, concerning the decision of Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter to the oracle of Artemis, is revealed with suspenseful delineation of character. The vacillating ambition of Agamemnon (Costa Kazakos) conflicts with his paternal instincts, and his arguments with his brother, Menelaus (Costa Carras) are very strongly played. They are, indeed, warriors entrapped by their own passions and need for power. Menelaus' wounded pride and desire for revenge against Troy seems steadfast, but he, too, feels growing remorse

when the reality of Iphigenia's death becomes imminent. Cacoyannis constantly underlines the *humanity* of the characters, and through dramatic cinema technique and his own imagination, he makes them believable. The sets and costumes by Dionysis Photopoulos are very much a part of this sense of reality; although the action takes place mostly in exteriors, the clothing of the soldiers and their leaders are not stylized with a view toward modernity, and with the appearance of Clytemnestra (Irene Papas) along with the servants and handmaidens of Iphigenia (Tatiana Papamoskou), the threaded gowns and headdresses, the paraphernalia of palaces and comfort are implied by a *selection* of materials and objects rather than a lavishness of props: the De Mille tradition has vanished altogether.

The oracle has promised that upon Iphigenia's death, the winds will rise, and Agamemnon's armies can set sail for Troy. Iphigenia has been summoned on the pretext of being married to Achilles, the famous warrior, and her mother accompanies her, much to Agamemnon's dismay. When he sends a messenger to stop them, in a moment of shame, it is too late, for Ulysses, his other brother, stands broodingly outside the action, determined to see that Agamemnon lives up to his decision.

When Clytemnestra and her daughter speak of the impending marriage and journey toward Aulis in some primitive, decorated carts, we are shown a handsome, nude soldier lying near an airless seashore, blowing the loose sand dust from his face. It evolves later that this is Achilles, who is completely unaware of any marriage plans. One is prepared for Irene Papas to move from

one dramatic point to another; her portrayal of Clytemnestra is an unique one, and it is one of the treasures of Greek cinema that Papas has managed to enact the three pivotal women in Euripides' tragedies (Clytemnestra; her sister, Helen; and her daughter, Electra). Clytemnestra, in this film, is deeply emotional, one who has had to learn to love her husband, and who soon reveals that she has a will of her own. When Agamemnon asks her to return home without seeing Iphigenia married, her suspicions are aroused, and she calmly refuses to go.

The sequence in which Achilles accidentally meets Clytemnestra is marvellously played. Papas is all warmth and receptiveness to her prospective son-in-law, only to be rebuffed in fear and dismay by Achilles (Panos Michalopoulos). As she realizes her humiliation and Agamemnon's plan to sacrifice her daughter, Clytemnestra's outcry is heard by Iphigenia; the girl's handmaidens run about her in confusion, stirring up the dusty earth. Papas' greatness as a classical tragedienne is never more apparent than in her face-to-face denunciation of Agamemnon, and her farewell to Iphigenia, crouched on the ground, cradling the girl in her arms, moaning a threnody of loss and dejection. The child-actress, Papamoskou, is also brilliant as Iphigenia. Her beauty, innocence and wondrous expectancy of marriage are eloquently conveyed with touching simplicity, and when she pleads with Agamemnon to spare her life, crawling toward him with her tiny brother, Orestes, beside her, tragedy strikes the hearts across the centuries: the spirit of Euripides stirs and sits in the theatre beside us.

It is Iphigenia who decides to accept her fate without a struggle; with pride, she accepts the marriage crown from her father, and moves up the jagged stone stairway in the hillside. "Sweet light, goodbye", she murmurs as the mists and winds surround her. Agamemnon, stricken with remorse runs after her but stops in horror as he looks toward the altar.

The soldiers charge jubilantly toward the ships, horses race past, and Clytemnestra, her son, Orestes, and their servants depart. Her face is set in the tragic mask of doom awaiting the house of Atreus, and as the Greek ships sail for Troy, Clytemnestra's hair, wind blown, sweeps across her face . . .

There was tremendous applause and excitement after the showing of *Iphigenia*. In the press conference, Cacoyannis told us that Tatiana Papamoskou was discovered on an airplane, traveling with her mother. She possessed the composure and gracefulness he sought for the role of Iphigenia, and he asked for permission to consider her as a candidate for the role. Several months later, he began working with her and other children but finally decided to cast her in the part. She was twelve years old at the time (now 13), and is, to all appearances, a very quiet, dignified child. Someone asked if she would like to continue with an acting career, and she said yes. Papas volunteered the information that she was astounded by Tatiana's talent and described her as being a mixture of air and marble! This rather stunned the critics, but at least it is better than that fire and ice thing. It turns out that Cacoyannis

put Ulysses and the priest Calchas visibly in the story, they are only referred to in the play, and the prologue, with the army, sets the scene, in order to make Iphigenia's sacrifice valid. The huge contingent of extras playing the army were young men who were doing their military service, and the cameraman, Georges Arvanitis, was the same one who won praise for his work on Angelopoulos' *O Thiassos*. Although I did not ask him, I wondered if Cacoyannis planned to continue from time to time, with classical Greek drama. After all, some of us knew that the goddess Artemis took pity on Iphigenia and on the sacrificial altar, replaced her with a deer. (No wonder Agamemnon looked so surprised!). However, the lonely Iphigenia, living in Tauris as a priestess, ready to sacrifice any Greek male who sets foot on that soil, would be a fascinating role for the grown-up Papamoskou. Ah, but that's another story.

Nikolaï Goubenko's *Podranki*, the Soviet entry, was a colorful and wistfully nostalgic story of a writer's efforts to piece together his childhood which was disrupted by World War II. His parents have died and he searches for brothers and sisters that may have survived as he did. The episodic nature of the film occasionally makes one feel a bit lost, but whenever these moments start to occur, Goubenko jolts the viewer with something vivid; in a very Dickensian sense. *Podranki* is an affectionate look at memories of a childhood past, strangely symbolic at times, but touched with a poignant, grotesque poetry. It is beginning to seem like a festival of new cinematographers this year, because the images in the films are often stronger than the material, and the