

FILM REVIEW:

ONE GREEK'S REACTIONS TO *MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING*

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The movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* was released in April of this year. I went to see it the first week it hit the theaters. As a Greek born naturalized American citizen, I was eager to see how Greek Americans were depicted in the movie. I knew that the idea for the movie grew out of a one-woman stage show which I had seen several years ago. That night, the theater had been filled with laughter, followed by deep reflection upon what it means to be Greek in America.

Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson, his wife, who is half-Greek, were inspired to produce the movie after having seen the same show. The script, written by the movie's female protagonist, Nia Vardalos, is an expose of the behavior, belief system, and cultural practices of an extended Greek American family, composed of several sets of immigrant parents who work hard, take pride in their financial successes, and are troubled by the wishes and life choices of their American-born offspring. These Greek immigrant parents try to hold on to what they knew were the social norms for parental responsibilities, and for children's obligations, in the different regions of Greece where they grew up. These social norms are gender-based and define differential parental aspirations for sons and daughters. For the parents, the Greek American community to which they belong meets their needs for socialization and supports and insulates them and their children from "dangerous" non-Greek influences.

Their traditional ways are challenged, however, when one of the American born daughters (Nia Vardalos) expresses

aspirations for education and a life away from the family's restaurant. The father (Michael Constantine) cannot understand this. She must marry, and marry a Greek, to give him Greek grandchildren. Their Greek heritage will make them exceptional because, according to him, everything Greek is superior and exceptional. He objects and is distraught when his wife (Lanie Kazan) tries to mediate the father-daughter conflict. The family is thrown into a state of greater upheaval when the same daughter falls in love with an American man (John Corbett), who, in the family's eyes, is a "stranger, a foreigner." Love, as is usually the case with these kind of conflicts in ethnic families, reigns, and the young couple get married in the Greek church in the Greek fashion. The father's wedding present to the newlyweds is a house, next door to his, in which they are to live happily ever after.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding was a low budget movie with limited marketing costs. The movie industry was skeptical about its success at the box office. It was even suggested that the script be adapted to depict a family of a better known ethnic group, such as Italian or Mexican. Against expectations, it has become a blockbuster.

Since the movie's release, many people have told me how much they enjoyed it, how much it made them think of my family, and how much the Greek behaviors and Greek family dynamics depicted in the movie resemble those of their own ethnic and cultural practices. One wonders: What is in this movie that made it such a success with the general public?

As a naturalized American citizen for many years, I identified with some of the characterizations of the Greek behaviors, found some to be irrelevant to my own experience of acculturation, and felt offended by others. I have engaged in heated debates about the film with fellow Greek immigrants and with their American born offspring. Many enjoyed the entertaining aspects of the movie and others loathed the portrayal of ignorance and the promotion of ethnic stereotypes. Aware of the power of movie messages, they were concerned about "our ethnic image" in the eyes and minds of the American public and of the world community. "Finally a movie about the Greeks in North America and what do we see? We have become laughingstocks. Nia Vardalos and Rita Wilson have disgraced the race."

What truths and myths does this movie really present about Greek American families, parenting styles, gender-based behaviors, values, traditions and belief systems?

It is a fact that Greek lore and Greece's educational system encourage ethnocentrism and exclusivity. The glory of the ancient Greek civilization is used to instill in the youth of Greece a strong sense of superior ancestry and national pride. Greece is tirelessly presented as the cradle of western civilization. It is not surprising, then, that the father in the movie finds a Greek "root" in every word in the English language.

In this same context, one can understand a parent's expectation that their son or daughter will only choose to marry one "of their own." There is fear that a non-Greek son or daughter-in-law will pull the child away from the family of origin, and will alienate the grandchildren from the Greek religion and from an esteemed culture and a language of prestige. The expectation to marry a Greek is not a family expectation only, but a community expectation as well. "So-and-so got engaged," Greeks say, "but not to a Greek." Such an announcement invites an instant reaction of sympathy for the family and

of loss for the ethnic community. Parents grieve, some disinherit their children, yet others dress in black and refuse to attend the child's wedding. (These feelings often dissipate upon the arrival of the first grandchild). In the movie's Portocalos family the daughter's choice to marry a non-Greek creates multiple relational conflicts. The heartbroken patriarch finally succumbs, consents to allowing this marriage to take place, and family, relatives, and community join to celebrate the bicultural young couple's wedding in the Greek American fashion.

In an era of a global technological revolution, Greece has followed a fast pace of modernization in many aspects of life. These changes have altered the earlier gender-based differential treatment and have encouraged Greek women to be more assertive and to become active participants in the family decision-making process.

Greek immigrant families in the United States, however, have, in many cases, held on to familiar, pre-immigration national and regional practices. Often the immigrant parents have not kept pace with the social changes in the motherland. They glorify Greece and exalt all that is Greek. In America, they form associations based on regional origins and are happiest when their child marries a "patriote;" someone from their region of origin. While xenophobia permeates many Greek American families, degrees of acculturation among family members vary as do individual aspirations. Hence, in the movie, the women team up first to "trick" the father into allowing the daughter's "liberation" through school and work away from the family's restaurant business and, later, to consent to her choice of an American husband.

As a member of the Greek-American community, I know that the turmoil that this daughter's choice creates is experienced by many Greek families in America today. Acceptance of the "foreigner" in-law without protest, disappointment and hurt feelings remains an exception rather than a common

practice.

Traditionally, gender-based differential treatment and expectations were pronounced in the life of the Greek family. From the moment a female child was born, particularly in families with limited financial means, the parents' concern was to save enough to secure a good dowry for the daughter, sufficient to make her a desirable future wife to a husband who will be a dependable provider. The custom of dowry is now abolished in Greece. The movie's bride's father, however, upholds the old custom and presents the newlyweds with a house (next door to his, of course), as a wedding gift; the dowry to his daughter.

Greeks usually follow a behavioral protocol that insulates the individual and the family from humiliation in the community. Children are instructed from a young age to always consider what others will say about them and/or the family as a result of what they do. The reputation of the collective depends on each family member's actions. A brother's choices may jeopardize his sister's chances for a good marriage. A female's behavior may bring shame on her entire family. Greeks in America feel compelled to behave in ways that are condoned by other Greeks, but not necessarily by the broader American community. Their sense of humor can be insensitive, insulting and degrading according to American social norms. Thus, in the movie, cousins compete for the most offensive way to tease the new, non-Greek member of the clan. They take pride in inviting laughter at his expense. At the same time, they accept him with genuine warmth.

Children are the central focus of a Greek family. Greek families are child-centered in a paradoxical way. Greek parents are expected to love their children unconditionally for life. No rite of passage and no chronological age of the child frees the parents from responsibility to the welfare of their offspring. At the same time, Greek parents liberally scold, tease, and ridicule their children, both privately and publicly. The cultural belief is

that praise and open acknowledgement of a child's accomplishments "inflates the child's head." Such an inflation may introduce a risk of loss of decorum and of expected modesty. In addition, children are to defer to their parents' choices for them. "Do as I say" is the dictum in situations of disagreements between parent and child, particularly disagreements between father and daughter. This is illustrated abundantly in the movie as we witness numerous such exchanges between parents and children, including adult children. Opportunities for use of creative potential and for a more rewarding life away from the family's restaurant are neither explored nor pursued by the son of the family's patriarch.

Contemporary Greek American women are not "baby machines" (a term the protagonist uses to describe her married sister). Young married couples, however, are expected to produce offspring. Parents, other family members, and community members do not hesitate to express their expectations on the matter. Couples feel the pressure. To remain childless by choice is not acceptable. The extended family in the movie includes members of multiple generations at different levels of acculturation.

These are some of the realities and myths of the Greek American culture from my personal perspective as a woman who was born and raised in Greece, and spent more than half of my life in America. I married a Greek man and we raised two American born daughters. The four of us encountered numerous challenges in our process of acculturation. As parents, we wished to facilitate a process of biculturalism that instilled appreciation for both the American culture and the Greek culture. We wanted our daughters to develop two separate ethnic identities; an American identity and a Greek identity, and to participate in activities in both; the American community and the Greek community. Finding a balance was difficult and, naturally, there were clashes. Over the

years, I have come to realize that our challenges were the challenges of other immigrant families of diverse ethnicities. The intra and inter-family conflicts of the movie's Portocalos family are similar to the conflicts other families experience. The manner in which they attempt to resolve them reflects the ethnic group's struggle in the unavoidable and tumultuous acculturation experience of immigrant families.

The movie evokes many emotions in the Greek American viewer and, judging from the public reaction to it, in the general audience. It both entertains and offends. In the end, it delivers the message that determination, good will, and acceptance have the power to minimize difference and to accentuate common human characteristics. Love and commitment can create happy hybrid families despite multiple differences in the backgrounds of those who start these families.

Editor's Note: In the Spring 2002 issue, Dr. Evelyn Newman Phillips should have been identified as the primary author of the article entitled "Reflecting on the Death of a Colleague and Teacher: Lessons Learned," and not the co-author, Barbara A. Candales.

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