



Director Thodoros Angelopoulos (with slate), and cameraman George Arvanitis at right

The Filming of "O Megalexandros"

AFTER two years of preproduction and six months of shooting, *O Megalexandros* (Alexander the Great), the new film by Thodoros Angelopoulos, is almost finished. The most ambitious Greek film to date, it has been plagued by problems from the outset and many times was in danger of stopping, of not finishing. Now that Angelopoulos is editing the film, having finished all the shooting, it seems certain that he will finish the film, with the first screening to be at the Venice Film Festival in late August. We can expect to see *O Megalexandros* here in Greece this fall.

Thodoros Angelopoulos is generally considered, both here and in Europe, to be the outstanding Greek director. In Europe, specifically Italy, Germany, France and Britain, he is ranked with the top directors of the world cinema. His four previous films, *Anaparastasi* (The Reconstruction, 1970), *Meres Tou '36* (Days of '36, 1973), *O Thiassos* (The Travelling Players, 1975) and *I Kinigi* (The Hunters, 1977) have all taken awards at various international festivals. By far the most successful was *O Thiassos*, taking the Grand Jury prize at the Cannes Festival in 1975 and enjoying long commercial runs in London, Paris, Rome, Berlin, Tokyo and other cities. This year the Italian Film Critic Association named Angelopoulos the best director of the 1970s and *O Thiassos* the best film of the decade. In spite of this international acclaim (as well as domestic success — every film has taken the top award at the

Thessaloniki Festival and plays regularly here to full houses), Angelopoulos was unable to raise the funds necessary for *O Megalexandros* and started filming with the ridiculously small sum in hand of three million drachmas.

In preproduction, Angelopoulos, production managers, and the financial manager budgeted the film at no less than forty million drachmas (approximately one million dollars), a minimal amount that allowed no leeway for mistakes or unhappy accidents. At the start of the film, the company had, besides the three million in hand, another ten million promised; that is, one-third of the amount that all those involved agreed was the absolute minimum. Of that amount, five million drachmas was given by RAI, the Italian television corporation (one million up front, the remainder upon receipt of the finished film). A similar agreement was made with ZDF, the German state television. In effect, Angelopoulos pre-sold the television and theatrical rights to these countries, meaning that no matter how well the film does in these key markets, he will not see any return.

The rights to Greece brought another two and one-half million drachmas. The Greek Center for the Cinema reneged on its promise of five million (after putting five million into Voulgaris' film *Eleftherios Venizelos* and producing Cacoyiannis' *Iphigenia* to the tune of twenty million). There is politics behind this. The Center is a government agency and the two films mentioned present an image of Greece

that is in line with official desires. Angelopoulos' films are, if not communist, certainly leftist, and ever since the filming of *O Thiassos* Angelopoulos has not had especially good relations with the Greek government. So, although he did not have the necessary funds, Angelopoulos decided to go ahead and start the film. The agreements with RAI and ZDF had time limits and rather than lose that money while searching for the remainder, shooting started in January of this year, a month behind schedule. Many actors and technicians offered their services free or for deferred payment.

O Megalexandros, like the other films of Angelopoulos, is a fictional film with political, historical and even mythological elements. The feeling one gets from this work is that it is realistic, historical, and yet at the same time theatrical. The title character (played by Omero Antonutti, an Italian actor best known for his performance in *Padre Padrone*, the film by the Taviani brothers) is not, as one might expect, Alexander of Macedonia. Rather, he is an amalgam of numerous folk heroes, a kind of Greek Robin Hood. Of mysterious origin, he is the leader of a group of bandits and widely known as a friend of the people. At the beginning of the film (the year is 1900) he and his bandits escape from jail after an internment of several years. On the way back to their village, they take several young English lords and maidens hostage, among them Queen Victoria's nephew Lord Manchester, demanding the return of land belonging to peasants that has been given to the British for development as lignite fields. This is presented as an early case of intervention by foreign interests in Greece, a theme that Angelopoulos has explored before. On the long journey to the village the band meets up with five Italian anarchists who have heard that a socialist society has been set up in Alexandros' village and are on their way to visit it.

Upon arrival at the village the bandits learn that things have changed. There is no longer private property, men and women have the same rights, a common warehouse has been established. The village teacher who brought the ideas and lessons for this communal society from Europe has done away with the power of Alexandros and the bandits and they are understandably alienated. There is pressure from without the village, as well as from the government and army which are concerned about the return of the hostages. The villagers are afraid that



The little Megalexandros

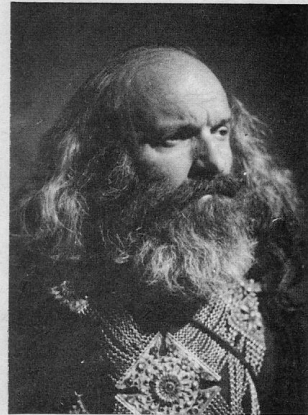
Alexandros' action will destroy the new communal society and the village. Tensions mount. At one point Alexandros seizes power in the village and demands all weapons. Conditions deteriorate. To maintain power Alexandros kills the governing committee, the teacher and the hostages. The villagers in turn kill Alexandros and soldiers overrun the village. The villagers surrender, the only one to escape being the little Alexander the Great, a boy twelve years old.

Shooting started on *O Megalexandros* this year on January 2nd. Ninety percent of the film was shot in northern Greece, mostly in the province of Grevena. The common conception of a Greek winter does not include one meter of snow, sub-zero temperatures, frozen lakes, snow-covered mountains, impassable roads. Anyone who has

been to Grevena in the winter will recognize this picture. Making a film is difficult under the best of circumstances, if only for the logistics of moving up to twenty-five crew members, twenty actors, cameras, sound equipment, lights, generator, set pieces. One must bear in mind that most of the locations were remote, far from main roads. In the case of the sequence shot at the monastery of Sparmou on the slopes of Mount Olympus, there existed no road for the last five kilometers, and the production (with the help of bulldozer, courtesy of the army) opened a road that was previously a path.

The locations, by necessity, were off the beaten path. It is increasingly difficult in the Greece of the 1980s to find places that have not been developed in the last few years, places that have no telephone or electric poles and wires, roads, modern apartment buildings, in short, locations that can 'play' for the year 1900. Angelopoulos has done an exceptionally good job of *reparége* for this film — the locations are superb — but it took a lot of legwork. He spent a year searching all of Greece for these locations, clocking over half a million kilometers. His greatest success, or perhaps stroke of luck, was finding the village of Dotsiko, fifty kilometers from the town of Grevena. The wife of the art director, Mikis Karapiperis, happened to see a news report of a mountain village that was snowed in during the blizzard of 1978-79. She called her husband who telephoned Angelopoulos. A few weeks later, when the road was reopened, a trip was made and Dotsiko was chosen.

One would think that having found



Omero Antonutti

the main location of the film, the village of Alexandros, many problems would have been solved. But they were just beginning. Although Dotsiko is unique among Greek villages — Angelopoulos says he has been to every village on the mainland, and there is no reason to doubt him — a lot of work was required to bring it back to the period needed. Dotsiko does not have electricity and it has only one telephone (the wires of which were taken down for shots where they showed) but houses have been renovated with more or less contemporary materials, corrugated aluminum instead of tiles on some roofs, modern metal gates and railings, and cement abounds. Eight carpenters spent five weeks in November and December doing this 'corrective' work as well as building huts, arches, watchtowers, and two bridges. The entire village (eighty houses) was repainted as the whitewash that is so common now is not historically correct, and more importantly, did not fit in with Angelopoulos' idea for the village. In addition, the entire *plateia* (seven hundred square meters) was laid with *plakes* to cover the cement that had been laid four years earlier.

Work within the village, no matter how extensive, was simple compared to work on the road. The first thirty-five kilometers out of Grevena, though hardly a first-class road, are passable year round and are maintained by the district government. The last eighteen kilometers through the mountains are another matter entirely. Because Dotsiko and Mesolouri (the only other town along this final stretch) are not inhabited in the winter, the *nomarheio* feels no obligation to provide a road that is passable in the winter. These eighteen kilometers are almost unimaginable. In the summer the road is dust,



Five English lords surrendering to Megalexandros (mounted) and his bandits

but when winter comes it is covered with snow which, with the passage of vehicles, becomes ice and then mud. In places the mud was as deep as one meter. Very few vehicles can make it over such a road and even the most capable, a Land Rover or Unimog, both four-wheel drive, eventually got stuck. Given the plans for Dotsiko — in effect, the setting up of a community of two hundred people (actors, technicians, and one hundred and fifty extras) for a duration of six weeks with a constant influx of food, people, fuel, machinery (e.g. the generator, necessary for night and interior scenes) — it was imperative for the road to be fixed. Difficult and time-consuming work in summer, it was even more so in winter. Unfortunately, the *nomarheio* had no plans for building a road and work took much longer than had been promised or hoped for, due in part to a new district governor's taking office before work had gotten underway.

The major move to Dotsiko had to be postponed several times, twice due to the road's not being ready and once to the weather. While a certain amount of snow was desirable for the film, once, when all else was ready — in fact half the crew and their gear had already been transported — a meter of snow fell in five hours, turning the village, in the words of Angelopoulos, into a *kourambie*, a sweet covered with powdered sugar. The crew was evacuated, the program changed, and shooting continued elsewhere.

The company finally arrived in Dotsiko on March 11, three months after the date originally scheduled. In the meantime, much work had been done in the village. The villagers had given keys to fifteen houses as well as to the two schools, which had been abandoned long ago. Some of the houses had fireplaces but as they had not been used in years, except on occasion in late autumn, they were deemed unsafe. The production bought forty heaters and stoves, wood, kerosene and propane, one or more for each room that would be inhabited. One hundred and fifty beds and mattresses, four hundred blankets, cooking utensils, plates and silverware were borrowed from a nearby summer camp.

After a day of settling in, installing the generator, running power lines, working on the decor and repairing what the winter had destroyed, shooting began. Weather caused many difficulties. After a week of shooting the company woke one Sunday morning to find that half a meter of snow had fallen overnight. In order to maintain continuity with scenes that had already been shot, extras, crew, actors were put to work with shovels. The *plateia*, roofs, lanes, mountain slopes were cleared and shooting continued. Later, after rain had melted the snow, spring came suddenly. Grass, buds, leaves, any sign of green now had to be removed. Sunny days put the production even further behind schedule. The 'look' of the film demanded overcast skies, occasionally

rain. On sunny days the company could shoot only in the half-hour before sunrise and after sunset. This drastically cut the amount of work that could be accomplished in a day and did not allow room for mistakes or retakes.

Living conditions were difficult in Dotsiko. In spite of the heaters that were installed, it could not be said that anyone was comfortable. Bathing involved heating water on a stove and sponge baths. Washing clothes was out of the question. There were two full-time cooks and while they were full of good intentions, many meals were less than a success, due to primitive kitchen facilities, shortage of time, and difficulties in bringing food to the village. When the road was reopened three days after the snowstorm, only a few kilos of spaghetti remained. As for creature comforts, Dotsiko was a bad dream but the company took it all in stride.

In spite of weather problems, exhaustion and illness among the crew, outdoor work every day of winter, often from 5:00 a.m. until midnight, even in spite of a shorter stay of four weeks rather than the originally planned six, an extraordinary amount of film was shot in Dotsiko. After the preparatory work, Dotsiko was a filmmaker's dream, a 'real' exterior studio, a community which during that time existed solely for the film. All of the two hundred people, the horses, mules and sheep, were working for the film. The extras, all villagers from the surrounding area with no prior film experience, very quickly became a part of the film, identifying with their roles much more than is usually the case. Their morale was high also, often more so than that of the professionals. After an especially difficult scene well-played, all extras would spontaneously break into applause.

Filming was not made any easier by Angelopoulos' aesthetic and working method. The 'shot' is the basic building block of a film, one piece of film from the moment the camera is turned on until it is turned off. Although the camera can move during a shot, usually it is stationary. Normally, a scene is covered from many angles and in the editing stage all these shots are spliced together. A shot can run from one second to several minutes, the majority being from three to ten seconds. Unlike the vast majority of directors who construct scenes out of many shots, Angelopoulos, whenever possible, films entire scenes with one, often moving the camera along tracks, essentially 'cutting' in the camera, changing the image during the shot rather than cutting to



The execution of Megalexandros' daughter and two members of the Governing Committee



Angelopoulos (left) with Omero Antonutti in the role of Megalexandros

another. Angelopoulos regularly puts shots of up to ten minutes into his films. By comparison, the usual film, one and a half hours long, will have from 750 to 2000 shots whereas *O Thissos* in four hours has only 110 shots. *O Megalexandros*, in its four and one-half hours, has 150 shots.

Obviously this method has an effect on the audience. The film has a different rhythm and sense of time. The viewer perceives the events of the film differently, perhaps paying more attention to details than in a conventional film. The danger is that a scene must be perfect. There is no way to cut out the middle of a scene, insert another shot and save the scene. In complicated scenes with many actors, extras, movement of people or camera, a take can go bad at any point. The chances of getting a complete take with no mistakes and the feeling that is required are slim indeed. Needless to say, the majority of faults come at the end of an otherwise perfect take. The precision, preparation and patience necessary for this kind of filmmaking are formidable. In addition to being frustrating when things are not going well, a great amount of film, by necessity, is wasted.

Luckily for Angelopoulos, takes are rarely ruined due to the fault of the camera or cameraman. George Arvanitis has photographed all the films of Angelopoulos and their relationship is unique. They work together as one mind and with a minimum of communication. Arvanitis knows what Angelopoulos wants perhaps better than the director himself. With his considerable experience he is able to give it to him quickly and with a minimum of fuss. Arvanitis is

certainly the foremost Greek cameraman with over a hundred films to his credit. As the director of photography, he is responsible for the look of the film and all that one sees on the screen. As a lighting cameraman and a composer of frames, Arvanitis is thoroughly competent but his real mastery is in operating the camera and finding solutions to the problems of difficult shots. With Angelopoulos there are no easy shots. Very rarely is a shot or take lost due to Arvanitis and this takes a great load off Angelopoulos, allowing him to concentrate on working with the actors. It is hard to imagine Angelopoulos being able to work with another cameraman than Arvanitis.

It must be said that the production was not well organized and this added problems to the already formidable ones at hand. For a production to operate smoothly and efficiently a certain amount of economic comfort is necessary. In order to save money a production must have money. In the case of *O Megalexandros*, there was so little money that an attempt was made to cut expenses everywhere, often resulting in added costs later. False economy was the rule. Trying to save one hundred drachmas on Monday often cost five thousand by Friday. Even the simplest things in the film were accomplished *me to zori*, with difficulty, and the economic situation played a large part.

In spite of these difficulties and others — two of the Italian actors being seriously burned when a gas canister exploded in their camper, totally gutting the vehicle; one of the horses being killed in an accident returning from a shoot; Angelopoulos and four crew members spending the night in jail on Syros after an argument with port authorities over getting the trucks on the boat to Athens; crew members leaving and having to be replaced — the filming was finally finished. The prime objective of having the film ready for the Cannes Film Festival was not achieved, unfortunately. The film was expected to take one of the top prizes there, insuring a certain commercial success. Luckily, however, this year the festival at Venice will be a big affair and if *O Megalexandros* does well there it will go far to make up for the disappointment of Cannes. In any event, that the film was finished in the face of such odds is a notable achievement, and that it meets Angelopoulos' high standards, even more so.

—WILLIAM MEGALOS

Note: **O Megalexandros** did indeed go on to win the Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival in 1980