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Author(s)	Dennis Harvey Dennis Harvey
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Traveling Players

A scene from Theo Angelopoulos' *The Traveling Players*

Greek Revival

BY DENNIS HARVEY

When the 1988 *Landscape in the Mist* played at last year's S.F. International Film Festival, capacity audiences and critical consensus decreed it one of the best items on an already well-above average schedule. It seemed inconceivable that Theo Angelopoulos' stunningly beautiful film wouldn't receive at least a standard U.S. release, and with its definitive air of lyrical humanism (those Academy members like suffering peasants caught in perfect compositions—not to deride the movie), a Best Foreign Film Oscar would not have been surprising.

But weird are the ways of the marketplace, and the cinema world in general. A 20-year veteran long considered the greatest Greek director, Angelopoulos has won plaudits everywhere but here, and virtually none of his features have been distributed in the United States. This circumstance is understandable in some ways—his style isn't exactly one to court, as *Variety* would say "boffo b.o."—but rather tragic for U.S. audiences.

Thankfully, the Pacific Film Archive is hosting a traveling retrospective this month of eight Angelopoulos features. And while Greece may not exactly be the first country that comes to mind when one thinks of great filmmaking, all indications are that this mini-festival is an opportunity not to be missed.

Pre-screened for the press was the director's 1974-5 acknowledged masterpiece *The Traveling Players*, which plays at the Pacific Film Archive Sunday, June 9, and Wednesday, June 13. (It also plays at SF's Roxie Cinema June 17-19.) At a solid four hours, *The Traveling Players* invites some comparison to other epic works—to Bertolucci's 1990 in its sheer scope and portrait of a nation betrayed by forces both foreign and internal; to the Hungarian Miklos Jansco in its extraordinarily poetic technique of minimal dialogue and endless (but mesmerizing) tracking or held shots that encompass long stretches of action.

Yet it's quite unlike anything you've ever seen before. The film's rhythm takes some getting used to—while there's no wasted or simply decorative movement, the pace and narrative tone is quite outside the normal parameters of both commercial and experimental cinema.

Unlike Bertolucci, Angelopoulos isn't interested in using flamboyantly drawn characters to melodramatize historical turmoil. Nor is he interested in using humans as symbols in an allegorical ritual à la Jansco. The *Traveling Players* is instead a fairly straightforward (if stylized) tapestry of many years' recorded turmoil, in which the camera's distance from its characters is both literal (we get close-ups only on the few occasions when they address us directly) and figurative. The lack of typical audience-identification background and bravura acting opportunities is at first disconcerting; like an opera with no leads, only a chorus. But once you've settled into its terms, the

movie is absolutely enthralling.

Angelopoulos' goal is to capture more than a quarter-century of Greek history on film, from the prewar Metaxas dictatorship through the horrors of WWII on to the new covertly colonial post-war regime. (The lengthy filmmaking process itself went on through two much later Greek ruling regimes, both of which dogged the director with censorial disapproval.) It telescopes this effort into the travails of a group of traveling actors who put on traditional plays (or just one, apparently) in country villages, dragging their personal belongings and stage accoutrements along with them from town to town. As events roil along, members are caught up in and increasingly fall victim to the myriad forces that tear the country's fragile balance apart—Allied and Axis soldiers, fascists and monarchists, socialist rebels.

The Traveling Players is a huge film, with masses of extras and extraordinarily complicated set-pieces. Yet it has a curious, powerful intimacy—one less rooted in individual characters than in capturing a sense of the people and landscape as a single embattled entity. It's a "difficult" movie, demanding enormous initial concentration (and those who can't muster that concentration may simply find the whole thing interminably dull). But the achievement is, by the second half, staggering. Difficult to describe because it's so unlike any other film that comes to mind, it rewards patience to emerge as one of the best films of the 1970s—or perhaps any other era.

A similar sense of inner stillness, melancholy and remarkable architectural beauty is immediately apparent in the later *Landscape in the Mist* (playing the PFA twice on Saturday, June 30 only). But this is also a much more easily accessible film, with a smaller human scale despite its epic feel. A

sort of haunting road movie, it combines a bit of postwar neo-realism (à la *The Bicycle Thief* or *Paisan*) with strong elements of magic-realism.

There's another group of traveling players here, but they weave in and out like a sort of Felliniesque spectre around the adventures of an 11 year-old girl and her 5 year-old brother who boldly leave an unhappy home in search of their missing father, whom they believe to be in Germany. There are harsh, sometimes wrenching intrusions on the part of a cruel "real world" that has no respect for a child's vulnerable welfare. Yet the tone is often one of mystical wonder, gorgeously captured in Giorgi Arvanitis' cinematography. The children's principal benefactor (though sometimes an unreliable one) is a mysteriously beautiful motorcycle-riding young man who travels with the theater troupe. But he too has an ambiguous side, expressed in a discotheque gay encounter or a surprising sexual overture to the little girl. At last year's SFIF screening I was a bit puzzled by the intent of *Landscape's* leisurely twists and turns, but there's nothing to doubt in the film's masterful emotional pull or its unindulgently pristine aesthetics.

Other films in the series include a costume epic about Alexander the Great, *O Magalexandros* (6/16 and 6/22) and *The Beekeeper*, an autumnal meditation starring Marcello Mastroianni (6/23 and 6/29). Check the PFA schedule for full playdate info.

"The Films of Theo Angelopoulos" play June 6 through June 30 at the Pacific Film Archive, 2625 Durant Ave. in Berkeley; call 642-1412 for program info. *The Traveling Players* also plays June 17-19 at the Roxie Cinema, 2117 16th St. in SF; call 431-3611.