

JOHN HOWARD

TRUTHS UP HIS SLEEVE
THE TIMES OF MICHAEL CACOYANNIS



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For Shotaro Yamamoto

There is no true theatre without language and style, nor any dramatic work which does not, like our classical drama and the Greek tragedians, involve human fate in all its simplicity and grandeur. Without claiming to equal them, these are at least the models to set oneself.

Albert Camus

Tell all the truth but tell it slant -

Emily Dickinson

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PROLOGUE

Artists Need No Permits

On a warm evening in 1955, in Athens' hip cafe district Plaka, two plain-clothes policemen approached three dubious characters straight out of central casting: all outsiders, all a bit shifty. One, a quiet German Jew whose rare words suggested impeccable English, stepped away from his large camera and listened. Another, an animated Lebanese man, paced back and forth, while the third, the obvious ringleader, waved his arms and professed their complete and utter innocence in fluent long-winded Greek with the hint of a Cypriot dialect. What had they done? Who was their accuser?

Crowds gathered. The noise made it difficult to be heard or understood. The police demanded a trip to the precinct, where charges would be spelled out. The trio bid farewell to their associates, a stylish assortment of women and men, insisting it was all a mistake, they would be right back. Then long hours passed with no word from them.

"Escorted to the local police station," the suspects confirmed their names and occupations: director Michael, cameraman Walter, and manager Anis. They provided additional personal details and answered a few more questions. So, policemen surmised, the report they received was true. Each and every one of these men was a foreigner,

as sworn in a complaint by an unemployed technician, the disgruntled civil war machine-gunner known as Bac-Bac. Furthermore, as the undercover officers witnessed firsthand, the three men and their associates were at work in the city, outdoors on the streets. Working without papers, the trio thus had contravened immigration restrictions. They were illegal aliens. Officers arrested them.¹

As Walter later explained, “We were stripped of our belongings and taken to the cells, but before the doors were actually slammed on us, we were reprieved. Michael’s lawyer arrived.” Tense protracted negotiations yielded one slight concession. The three men would have to remain in custody until a hearing tomorrow, but as a “compromise,” they could “spend the night on makeshift beds ... instead of in the cells.”²

The next day, the judge was rendered speechless as Michael’s attorney waxed eloquent about the grave injustice his clients suffered. For shame! Yes, it had to be admitted, they looked like a motley crew. But they understandably were disheveled after their night of degradation, tossing and turning on cots. More to the point, their arrest and detention represented a grievous misapplication of the law. True, in general, laborers from beyond Greek shores were expected to follow standard procedures, apply for the right to gainful employment, and accept work assignments only with permission of the authorities, all duly documented. But these were not ordinary workers. Nor were they mere moviemakers. These men were *artists*, he stated with a flourish. *And artists need no permits!* “The ploy seemed to work,” Walter concluded. “We were all able to get on with the film.”³

As this book shows, being artistic—as with being musical or theatrical—often connoted as it paradoxically covered over being queer. In realms of twentieth century cultural production, queerness in its broadest sense referenced

people of outcast races, genders, and sexualities given to promiscuous practices of cosmopolitan mixing and making.⁴

*

Greece's greatest filmmaker was neither reared in Greece nor trained in film. Born and schooled in Cyprus, Michael Cacoyannis moved to London in 1938 at the age of seventeen to study law, on the orders of his father, a knight of the British realm. Duty bound, Michael graduated and became a barrister in what was still the world's leading global city and vaunted imperial metropole. He found work at the BBC Empire Service, running its new Cyprus Section, delivering innovative wartime content to radio audiences across the island colony. At last disregarding his father's commands and indulging his own wildest fantasies, Michael abandoned these respectable professions to train as an actor at the Central School and as a stage director at the Old Vic School, under the long shadow of Laurence Olivier.

Only in 1953, at the age of thirty-two, did Michael migrate to Athens and start making motion pictures, first on tight fixed budgets, then with limited contingent support from Hollywood. Sixteen films later—along with numerous critically acclaimed stage productions from the dramatic and operatic repertoires, both classical and modern, from Spoleto to the Met, on and off Broadway—Cacoyannis would be recognized around the world as one of Europe's most inventive auteur directors. Why then is he not the subject of multiple biographies, as say Hitchcock? Why don't the libraries devote whole shelves if not sections to his work and his interpreters, as with Kubrick? Why doesn't his name trip off the tongue of every eager young cineaste across the globe? To be sure, Hitchcock made three times as many films and much more television, though Kubrick made fewer films and next to no theatre. What other factors were at work in achieving canonical if not auteur status?

Why would Cacoyannis remain so underappreciated over time, even as he elicited stellar performances from the era's best actors? Jane Alexander. Anne Bancroft. Alan Bates. Candice Bergen. Geneviève Bujold. Frances de la Tour. Colleen Dewhurst. Katharine Hepburn. Lila Kedrova. Melina Mercouri. Irene Papas. Anthony Quinn. Charlotte Rampling. Vanessa Redgrave. Sam Wanamaker. Perhaps because they were predominantly women, in powerful roles that challenged patriarchy and militarism? Crucially: Why was the pinnacle of success—three Oscars and global adoration for *Zorba the Greek* in the mid-1960s—followed straightaway by the depths of despair? Why was his fantastic follow-up feature, with a cast of thousands, met with unrelenting vitriolic contempt? Why can that “bomb” be reappraised only now, after his death, as—like Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*—its author's “greatest failure”? Why did Michael's devastating career low, exacerbated by seven years' political exile, seem to foreclose a place among the immortals? (Or did it?)⁵

This book explains why. Tracking the cosmopolitan Cacoyannis, it probes his life and times—interrogating, as he did, the twentieth century's thorniest political, cultural, and ethical dilemmas. Praised as a brilliant modernist, classicist, feminist, and humanist, Cacoyannis suffered debilitating personal setbacks and—as a gay man—massive professional obstacles. Nonetheless he persisted. He relied on his keen intellect and boundless resourcefulness to write, direct, produce, and even costume some of the most enduring, alluring, and incisive motion pictures of all time. Battling his own demons, defying his nastiest critics, Michael did it all with a principled resoluteness, combined with the continuous help of a small circle of tried-and-true colleagues and friends—plus a few fellow travellers whose contributions only now can be revealed.

Published just after the 100th anniversary of his birth, the 10th anniversary of his death, this first critical biography of filmmaker and stage director Michael Cacoyannis (1921-2011) assesses his large body of work with reference to the sociopolitical context of his times. It explores his complex thematic concerns across multiple genres, which also included radio plays, short stories, translations, memoirs, manifestos, and still photography. The study reinterprets significant secondary literatures to argue that an accurately characterized woman-centered modernist oeuvre furthermore incorporated path-breaking queer critique, class analysis, and critical race insights. Historicized understandings of race as tied to place, the book claims, were informed by Cacoyannis' reading and translation of ancient texts, as well as his own upbringing on the eastern Mediterranean island of Cyprus, at the crosscurrents of Africa, Asia, and Europe. Hailed as an astute classicist for his popular adaptations of Aristophanes, Sophocles and especially Euripides, Cacoyannis insisted on ancient Greek drama's continuing relevance and contemporary application to anticolonial, antiwar, and antinuclear struggles. A secular humanist, he believed in a finite set of enduring truths, while helping to usher in the era of postmodern skepticism. A frugal cosmopolitan working across several continents and languages, he welcomed the progressive gains of globalization, this book demonstrates, even as he forcefully denounced its persistent inequities and injustices.

Organized into three parts of three to four chapters each, the book examines Michael Cacoyannis' early years of schooling, training, and employment (1921-1953), his ascendance as both an auteur and popular filmmaker (1953-1967), followed by political exile and later life as a grand man of the stage (1967-2011), with considerable overlap across chapters. It argues that his life's work—sixteen feature films, over thirty dramatic productions, seven opera

presentations, and more—coheres around consistent themes, rich symbolism, provocative topics, and candid treatments, such that several movies and source texts were banned, censored, or attacked. As many of these already have sustained intense scholarly scrutiny, this book emphasizes undervalued works, overlooked innovations, and mistaken intentions.

In particular, *Truths Up His Sleeve* confronts and refutes scholar Vrasidas Karalis' damning indictment from 2012. According to Karalis, Michael Cacoyannis' "conservative politics and his hidden sexuality never allowed him to develop the full potential of the visual language that he constructed [with his first five films] in the 1950s." Based on new evidence from previously untapped archives—along with personal interviews, close readings, site observations, and exhaustive surveys of contemporary criticism—this assertion is thoroughly disproven. As is shown, it misrepresents Cacoyannis' politics, his sexuality, and the ways in which the two are articulated, interwoven, and *made apparent* across his entire output. Michael's sex and gender politics were radical for his times; his worldview and political perspectives more generally would be best characterized as liberal. Moreover, the book shows that Cacoyannis comprehended gender and sexuality in perpetual dialectical relationship to race and class, yielding unique configurations at different times and places, all worthy of sustained artistic engagement across a multifaceted career of sixty plus years.⁶

*

In the late twentieth century, describing the late nineteenth century trials and tribulations of celebrity playwright Oscar Wilde, Neil Bartlett lamented that we gay men "all still grow up as liars." Michael Cacoyannis lied over and over, with purpose, with abandon—even, or especially,

when it came to those two fundamental questions of identity. When were you born? Where are you from? Until he was roughly twenty-eight years old, Michael overstated his age. Thereafter, he understated it, by as much as ten years. As for his place of birth, he repeatedly referred to himself as a native of Greece, despite being born and raised in Limassol, Cyprus. He also bent the truth in funny Hollywood yarns that over time became polished narratives with florid embellishment, similar to cinematographer Walter Lassally's tale of their brush with jail in Athens. In their industry, as in all lives, half-truths, white lies, and harmless ploys made the world go round. They smoothed the way for daily social interaction.⁷

Outright falsehood proves a distinctive impediment for biographers. It is not an insurmountable one. Consistent patterns of deception reveal a great deal to historians of gender and sexuality, who must search for rare evidence of illicit activities that of necessity were covered up. We must glean scant traces of loves and liaisons that often were criminalized and—in Michael's time—ruthlessly penalized. Of course Michael spun out lies to avoid prison, persecution, and censorship. He counseled others to do likewise. Their fabrications and circumlocutions can be deciphered. Queer forebears' cagey habits of dissembling—their defiant practices of selective visibility and partial disclosure—can be construed. After all, these were shared inherited community practices of circumventing patently unjust laws, brutal stigma, and deadly violence around *consensual* adult relations. Indeed, Michael modeled the process of dissembling in his film scripts and on occasion in his interviews with journalists.

In 1967, at a swish New York cocktail party, a roving reporter refused to accept Michael's usual coy comments and obfuscations. Awed by the smash success of *Zorba the Greek*, eager to learn more about Michael's much

anticipated follow-up, she begged the director for a scoop. Where did they shoot? Who were the last additions to the cast? Was it true there were hundreds perhaps thousands on site? Most of all, what was the topic of this film? As it happens, the central theme was deceitfulness of various forms and magnitude. But Michael was not ready to reveal that. Nor did he ever publicly come out as gay. Nor did he need to, because he left behind coded texts that he knew we could decode. Insisting upon secrecy in advance of his new film release, ever cognizant that truth-telling is a tricky proposition, Michael deflected the journalist's most intrusive queries, determined to keep "a couple of truths up my sleeve."⁸

This book does not purport to blow the lid off a treasure chest of queer secrets. Community codes—double entendre, subcultural slang, on-screen workarounds to the U.S. Motion Picture Production Code—have long been known by insiders plus increasing numbers of outsiders. Wikipedia entries now explain the meanings of *Camp (style)*, *Beard (companion)*, *Lavender marriage*, and *He never married*. With all that taken as given, this book argues instead that Michael's queer cohort mastered these inherited codes. Then Michael invented new ones of astounding artistry and complexity. Moreover, the book explains why passing or covering as straight, as Michael did, was a viable necessary strategy in a world of homophobic hatred, transphobic violence, and pervasive anti-LGBTQ persecution fueled by church and state, medicine and media. Individual strategies of passing were adopted, discarded, or modulated depending upon time and place. Never completely closeted, Michael safeguarded an open secret which, over his long life and prolific body of work, emerged as ever more open, less secret. Among the truths up his sleeve were selectively shared stories of the many men with whom he had intimate and sexual relations. All informed his cinematic and

theatrical practices, which consistently foregrounded issues of gender and sexuality as they forwarded liberal reform or radical change.

Radical change threatens established institutions. The Michael Cacoyannis Foundation in Athens resists such interpretations of his oeuvre. They have impeded this study but not stymied it. Aligned with distant relatives' concerns as expressed in interviews, my requests to see my subject's diaries—an essential component of most biographies—went unanswered once, twice, thrice. Next, an official stated that Michael's personal writings were part of a private archive sealed to both general public and scholarly researchers. Finally, another claimed no such diaries exist. Michael anticipated these shenanigans and took steps to mitigate them. Among additional truths up his sleeve were his repeated injunctions to look closely at the films and plays, to discover the ways they both cloak and reveal. They protected project participants, as was appropriate for his era, but more so they divulge, as is necessary for ours. Thereby, Michael insisted, his life and times would be comprehensible—and, as it turns out, empowering. However frustrating, workarounds can enable. Michael's taboo censored subject matter nonetheless found vast international audiences. This modest unauthorized biography has managed to find a readership too.⁹

For everyone who watches “classic” film or consults IMDb, for anyone who supplements contemporary theatre going with immersion in ancient and modern drama, Michael's life and times are instructive. They help us answer any number of ethically charged questions. How could a not-so-ordinary boy born and raised in Cyprus become a national treasure in Greece? How could a pacifist in World War Two London complete his law degree and evade social stigma while never enlisting in the armed forces? How could a wartime then postwar BBC radio producer, moonlighting

as a stage actor-director, break into the film industry? How did this budding screenwriter-director of feminist inclinations build on successes at Cannes and Edinburgh in the 1950s to reach the pinnacle of popularity off Broadway and in Hollywood in the 1960s? During the Cold War lavender and red scares, how could a gay liberal and fellow traveller avoid police persecution and employment discrimination to achieve all this and more? How did he become not only the era's foremost interpreter of ancient Greek drama but also a modernist filmmaker of international renown? How could this admired "women's director," rumored to be gay, avoid jail and job discrimination to keep working? How could a flamboyant auteur with many communist colleagues forestall blacklisting as a leftist sympathizer? How could a wildly creative director of film, drama, and opera—time and again praised, then slayed by vicious homophobic reviews—continue to get out of bed in the morning and make films that found large global audiences? What inspired him? How did an underdog from the back of beyond navigate the corridors of cultural power in London, Los Angeles, New York, and Paris? In the final analysis, how did he stave off his most venomous critics— snooty elites, family members, and his own lacerating self-assessments?

Simply put, Michael persevered. By any reckoning, his long productive life of nine decades is a testament to strength of will, resilience under duress, courage despite hardship, loving friendship amidst animosity. When all hope was lost, he would not be defeated.

*

Part I argues that Michael grew up gay in a violently homophobic world, but he found a measure of freedom and greater outlets for creativity in midcentury London. Chapter 1 shows that on the small, poor, multiethnic island colony of Cyprus, Michael enjoyed many advantages as a child of the aspiring middle-class, even as he suffered brute bullying

and corporal punishment. Cinema, movie magazines, broad reading, and cabaret culture gave him glimpses of lives less ordinary, worldviews more expansive, progressive, and transformative. Chapter 2 demonstrates that in London, Michael obeyed his father's orders to study law, but he became willful then disobedient, turning to work in theatre and cinema, as well as radio and television broadcasting. With London's voice coaches and stage instructors, he honed his abilities to sing, act, and direct, achieving remarkable success, while fending off racist, sexist, and homophobic critics. Chapter 3 makes clear why Michael never again lived in Cyprus. The U.S. lavender scare's well-documented war on gays went global, following the contours of American and British empires, with distinctive viciousness in late colonial Cyprus. While modern medicine classified nonconforming genders and sexualities as diseased, church and state combined to condemn deviants and to punish them in the press and prisons.

Part II charts Cacoyannis' rise as a cosmopolitan filmmaker, creating an increasingly sophisticated body of work noted for its minimalist auteur aesthetics and broad popular appeal. As Chapters 4 and 5 prove, over the twentieth century, successive generations of theatre, film, radio, and TV producers developed crafty codes of queer representation to avoid censorship, job loss, and jail. After sexy silent movies and pre-Code talkies, before the 1990s new queer cinema, midcentury makers faced intransigent structures of oppression. Defiant against these forces, Michael's team inherited and mastered practices of euphemism, double entendre, partial disclosure, and selective visibility. Then Michael invented new codes, adopting thrifty methods from Africa and Asia, adapting them for Europe and America. As Chapters 6 and 7 elucidate, in the high stakes and low moments of multinational corporate cultural production, international

renown could be followed by wholesale condemnation. After Michael's acclaimed adaptation of modern literary masterpiece *Zorba the Greek*, he courageously wrote, costumed, and filmed a futuristic screenplay of his own, with complex intersecting themes, all widely derided. Hollywood's biggest bomb coincided with the colonels' coup in Greece, and Michael went into self-imposed exile in France.

Part III details Michael's return from exile, his ever more assured position as a top international filmmaker, and his renewed commitments to translating and directing stage plays, plus opera, across Europe and America. As with his films, the plays and operas emphasized resistance to political tyranny, religious orthodoxy, sexual conformity, and the gender binary. Chapter 8 demonstrates how the creator of the acclaimed modern Greece quintet of films became equally renowned and celebrated for his Euripides trilogy of ancient antiwar plays, adapted for both stage and screen. Chapter 9 tracks Michael's personalized engagements with high politics and international diplomacy, as first Chile then Cyprus suffered violent military overthrows aided and abetted by the United States. Chapter 10 assesses Michael's late life stage commitments in Athens and Epidaurus, as it further probes his final two films, inspired respectively by the new queer cinema and a master Russian playwright.

Throughout, the book examines Michael's fraught familial relations in tension with his expanding queer network of intimates and colleagues, described by "good friend" Candice Bergen as "writers, composers, artists, lawyers of the left." The book's epilogue shows the surprising steps Michael took near the end of his life in an attempt to protect the legacy of his oeuvre's queer, feminist, and humanist ideals. It further demonstrates how his family of origin yet again tried to thwart him, at his death and long after. In spite of it all, Michael could rest assured and rest in power.

His vast body of work would continue to reach wider audiences who grew ever more skilled in decoding and interpreting his intricate narratives. An artist both attuned to his times and attentive to utopian possibilities, Michael Cacoyannis helped to lay foundations for bold new cultural developments in the third millennium.¹⁰

PART I
WILLFUL COMING OF AGE

CHAPTER 1

Colonial Family Portraits

In April 1928, ten people filed into a professional photographic studio, ready to be visually recorded for posterity. The only man among them took charge, as was customary. He described the special occasion to the photographer, agreed the price, then attempted to stage-manage the entire affair. However, the photographer had ideas all his own. As did the man's mother-in-law. The result was a family portrait of extraordinary complexity. Now, almost a hundred years later—fully two centuries after photography's invention—the image remains captivating, due in part to its unique composition, but foremost for its unabashed star.¹

Among the three generations on hand, mother-in-law Zoe, by far the eldest, had the most experience of portrait sittings. And sit she did. Age 63, she at once spotted the large chair, and her daughters guided her into it. Then the photographer placed the four daughters improbably along the back row standing. At opposite ends of the row, he situated the youngest of them: identical twins in matching outfits, each with long pearl strand knotted at the neck. Between the twins were the two older sisters. One stood out.

By most accounts, Angeliki was a gracious woman of refined tastes and impeccable courtesy. Though she never finished high school—compelled to marry this imposing man

instead—she could converse with the highest officials and the “lowliest” farm folk with equal ease. Apart from her tendency to overspend, she managed her household activities and social gatherings with great care. Indeed, this year she had noted the happy coincidence of two big events in mid-April. Consulting her husband, she decided to take advantage of it, and she booked this appointment with the Armenian photo-entrepreneur.²

Though the family was “not religious,” they nonetheless attended annual Easter services, often in new clothes purchased for the purpose. After all, they considered this spring ritual more of “a social thing.” So the ten relatives had arrived at the studio well dressed in fashionable garments and accessories, led by the aspiring patriarch in three-piece suit and necktie. The four sisters sported trendy roaring-twenties bob haircuts, even as their mother had pinned an heirloom brooch at her neckline and now clutched a purse in her lap. Furthermore, Zoe was layered in black, as expected of all widows. Everyone else wore lighter colors appropriate to the season. Also, because this year Easter Sunday fell during the same week as Angeliki’s birthday, her husband and children had surprised her with a colorful gift corsage.³

Affixed high on her jacket, near her left shoulder, Angeliki’s birthday corsage featured at least three flowers, perhaps four. As Mother’s Day also was observed in spring, the four blooms might have been chosen to signify her four children, now waiting impatiently for their assigned positions. But first, of course, there was the matter of their father. As Zoe had commandeered the chair, the photographer gamely placed a piano bench at a slight angle to it. He coaxed Angeliki’s husband onto it and convinced him to hold their two younger children in his arms. Now the photographer only needed to arrange the two older children

to complete the third generation and fix the tableau—the colonial family that is the subject of this book’s first chapter.

The photographer was meticulous, pride in his art evidenced by the studio props on display. Under the light-hued rectangular rug was yet another: a larger ornate Persian carpet. A tall decorative vase stood in the rear left corner. Paneled walls at right and left, with prominent dark baseboards, yielded diagonal lines creating the illusion of deep space. That illusion was continued on the photographer’s painted backdrop, which included candelabra seemingly fixed to the wall, plus curtains falling behind them and sweeping upward from left to top center. In right and left corners, actual fabrics were draped from ceiling to floor, framing and enhancing the *trompe l’oeil*.

However deep, the studio proper was more than wide enough to accommodate the two remaining children at either end of the front row. In her pleated dress, matching hair ribbon, and elegant lace-up boots, the older girl gravitated to her grandmother Zoe’s side, leaning against the chair, at right. But the older boy proved much more determined than his exasperated father, even more determined than the studio portraitist himself. Refusing to stand at left, Michael insisted on being front and center.

Aggravating the father’s anxieties about his fey son, Michael got down on the rug and reclined on it. Ever the showboat, he supported himself with his right arm, as his left arm rested along the left side of his body, left hand at his bare knees. In shorts and sweater, he stretched out his legs, which extended into long socks and patent leather shoes with ankle straps. Thus did Zoe’s grandson unfurl himself across the foreground of the family portrait.

Across nearly a century, from their time to ours, Michael gave us his best Greta Garbo pose.

British Colony, Cypriot Clan

For any school kid who ever gazed up at a world map and noticed South America and Africa fit together like pieces of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle, plate tectonics are easy to grasp. The earth's landmasses seem to have split at the seams millions of years ago, continents ever-so-slowly drifting apart to their current stations—never mind what priests intone about god's creation a few thousand years back. On a smaller scale, the eastern Mediterranean island of Cyprus formed a snug fit, an obvious earlier component, of Asia Minor, Anatolia, Middle East, or Western Asia. Nevertheless European powers again and again have claimed it, overtaken it, and controlled it, going back to crusading Richard the Lionheart and much earlier. For subsequent generations, aligning a family with a particular colonizing power constituted many a patriarch's civic duty—or difficult decision of defiance.

The sunny coastlines of Cyprus and Turkey are separated by a mere 40 miles of water. By contrast the Cypriot capital of Nicosia is well over 500 miles from Athens, 2000 miles from London. Even so, Greek-and English-language accounts of the Cypriot past inevitably refer to Turks as invaders. Such is the course of empire, and such are the distortions of history written by the winners. Meanwhile, to this day, the United Kingdom owns two impressive chunks of prime beachfront real estate with lovely views to the south, overlaid with vast expanses of concrete—that is, runways, docks, and support structures. These military base areas are known as Akrotiri and Dhekelia, where the Union Jack still is raised and lowered to the strains of “God Save The Queen.” These royal realms are situated, no accident, adjacent to the thriving port cities of Limassol and Larnaca, now international tourist hotspots.⁴

In terms of landmass and population, Cyprus is small, belying the enormous strategic importance of its location, at the intersection of Mediterranean Sea lanes connecting East and West, global North and global South. It has strong prehistoric ties to the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe. From early humans to the present day, Cyprus has experienced a staggering number of colonizations. Beginning around 9000 BCE, hunter-gatherers on the island were joined by farmer-herders from the Fertile Crescent—specifically, today’s Syria—who raised wheat, sheep, and goats. Over time, these early settlers were followed by colonizers from Greece, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, and Rome. Christians reached the island in the first century CE; Jews were expelled in the second; Muslims arrived in the seventh. After twelfth and thirteenth century religious wars staked various claims on “holy” land—killing around two million people—Venice, Turkey, then Great Britain colonized Cyprus. Since Venetians deforested the island to build their naval and commercial fleets, Turkey and Britain shored up agriculture and fisheries, as well as their own military garrisons. Not until 1960 did local leaders declare Cyprus an independent nation-state. However, many considered it an ethnarchy if not theocracy, since the first president was archbishop of the orthodox Church of Cyprus. He ruled—with brief albeit important exceptions—until 1977.⁵

At roughly 3500 square miles, home to about 500,000 people in 1950, Cyprus was comparable to the U.S. state of Delaware, though Cyprus was poor, not yet a tax haven. About half the size of Wales, Cyprus at mid-century had just one-fifth its population. A standard formulation tallied the people as 80% of Greek descent, 20% of Turkish descent, ignoring smaller minorities of Armenian and Lebanese ancestry. Unlike Michael and his family, most Cypriots found it difficult to move beyond their village or district, nigh impossible to leave the island, except as fishers or sailors.

Thus, for many, it felt claustrophobic. The cultural norms were stifling, religious values overpowering—not unlike the Greek islands of Crete and Hydra, where Michael would set and shoot two films. Though foreigners frequently came and went, evidencing the cosmopolitanism of ports like Limassol and Kyrenia, they told tales of worlds inaccessible to ordinary Cypriots.⁶

Before World War II, a steamship from Larnaca to London required five days journey, including rail passages, at an obscene price quoted in pounds. If poor and working-class Cypriots—the vast majority—could not be transported to these far-flung places, they nonetheless could communicate with them nonstop. Letters and telephones, newspapers and books, movies and magazines, then radio and television all provided a sense of connection, especially to Turkey, Greece, and Britain. By the turn of the millennium, with roughly a million people, low-cost air travel enabled the tourism industry to overtake agriculture.⁷

The myth of distinct continents is easily put asunder when we consider that Cypriot's northern neighbor Turkey straddles Asia and Europe and its southern neighbor Egypt overlaps Asia and Africa. More significant still are the individuals and groups who repeatedly cross over these territorial and metaphorical divides. The big construct known as the West, for example, takes in many elite and middle-class persons of the global South or East: The Orient. After all, who brokers these military deals? Who parcels out the properties? Who buys and sells provisions? Who draws up the contracts? Who translates from the local idioms into the colonizers' language? The Queen's English? Who sends their offspring to the metropole or, failing that, its finer imperial outposts for a "proper" education? In the prevailing tongue and accent, customs and manners?⁸

One such family in Limassol was called Cacoyannis. Among an island society given to fine distinctions, Angeliki

Efthymoulos came from a higher status family than her fiancé Panayiotis Cacoyannis, whose forebears were traders, selling horse feed and other supplies to imperial troops and locals. Still, Angeliki's husband-to-be was ambitious. While she learned music at the piano, he took a correspondence course in the 1910s from Chicago's La Salle Extension University, an early large-scale provider of distance education. Though U.S. regulators questioned La Salle's designation as a university, no one doubted the determination of P. Cacoyannis, as his upstart law office styled him. With his La Salle Bachelor of Laws degree, he had begun his professional ascent.⁹

At the outbreak of World War I, the British Empire took Cyprus—already its protectorate—from the Ottoman Turkish Empire. Since Greece would join Britain and its allies in combat against German, Turkish, and other enemies, a wartime marriage between two Greek Cypriots violated no national or racial taboos. Nor was Cacoyannis too old for Angeliki, at just over five years her senior. So the wedding went ahead. A sixteen-year-old bride on 8 November 1915, Angeliki was well above the marrying age for girls in turn-of-the-century United States, for example. Before 1920, the vast majority of state age-of-consent laws permitted adult male sexual intercourse with female children, such that a daughter could be transferred by marriage from a father's to a husband's household at the tender age of ten—seven in Delaware. After her wedding in late 1915, Angeliki bore her first child, a son, just after New Year's 1917. But Louis lived only three months. Overcoming their sorrow, the newlyweds tried again, and Angeliki gave birth to daughter Ellie in December 1918, as the Great War ended. Again, given the correlation between teen pregnancy and infant mortality, Ellie died just after her first birthday.¹⁰

In the 1920s, their odds improved, and the family flourished. Stella was born healthy in 1920, followed in rapid