

Interview: Producer George Avraam on 'Beloved Days' at Chicago European Union Film Fest

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CHICAGO – How can the innocence of an entire nation be looked upon with nostalgia and tribute? When in 1970, a small village on the island country of Cyprus was the setting for a film company and a major movie star (Raquel Welch)...where four years after, a war started. Writer and producer George Avraam was one of the creators of "Beloved Days," a multi-layered documentary that spotlights the making of the 1970 film "The Beloved," the celebrity involved, and the irony of the impending political changes, in retrospect. "Beloved Days" will be screened at the Chicago European Union Film Festival at the Gene Siskel Film Center on March 9th, 2017. [Click here](#) [19] for details.

"Beloved Days" is an isolated moment in time, over 40 years ago, that brought an international movie star to Karmi, a small village on the isle of Cyprus. Raquel Welch was there to film "The Beloved," directed by George P. Cosmatos (who went on to direct "Tombstone" in 1993). With many of the villagers as extras, writer/producer George Avraam and director Constantinos Patalides go back to Karmi – and around the world – to interview the participants, including producer (and husband to Welch in 1970) Patrick Curtis, and the co-star in the film, Richard Johnson. "The Beloved" never went anywhere in distribution, but the resonance of its point in time becomes very nostalgic, as four years after the filmmakers left the Karmi village, it was in the middle of an invasion force from Turkey.



Raquel Welch and Co-Star Richard Johnson Greet Officials During the Filming of 'Beloved Days'

Photo credit: *Walking Around the World Productions*

The two stories of Cyprus and Karmi are expertly balanced in the documentary, as the story of the filming leads indirectly to what is going on

today in Cyprus. Just last month, negotiations and peace talks broke off, as the island continues to have a “Berlin Wall” between the Greek south end, and the Turkish northern territory – the former child extras in the 1970 film are now adults facing a political dilemma. HollywoodChicago.com talked with George Avraam about the impact and fallout from his film about the film.

HollywoodChicago.com: You wrote, produced and do the on-screen interviews in the documentary. How did you and director Constantinos Patsalides coordinate the look and feel of the film?

George Avraam: “Beloved Days” is a nostalgic documentary, dealing with memories. The documentary’s atmosphere, moving between realism and fiction – through the re-enacted scenes – draws out the color in a world of innocence and carelessness, while at the same time enabling us to delve into the inner world of the characters as they reflect upon their experiences.

HollywoodChicago.com: The film is a parallel nostalgia document, both for the filming of the movie ‘The Beloved’ in 1970 and how the locations for the film was affected by the war in Cyprus in 1974. Since tensions on the island are still problematic, how did you have to tiptoe around the politics to get what you wanted?

Avraam: As artists, we follow the art. For us, it was a big deal that a Hollywood actor and producer were returning to Cyprus after 40 years. We just followed that producer and actor from ‘The Beloved,’ who wanted to revisit the village of Karmi – still under Turkish occupation – and see the places where they worked in 1970. We were careful to prioritize the safety of our characters by focusing on substance, and not on any political confrontation. Our characters were also careful not to send the wrong message, or have their visit exploited in any way by the Turkish army, which controls the occupied part of the country.



Cinematographer Marcello Gatti and Writer/Producer George Avraam in ‘Beloved Days’

Photo credit: Walking Around the World Productions

HollywoodChicago.com: As you mentioned, you did manage to get two key players from the film, actor Richard Johnson and producer Patrick Curtis, but the star of film being memorialized – Raquel Welch – remained elusive. How close did you get to Raquel, and what do you think prevented her from participating?

Avraam: Throughout the journey, both the late director George Cosmatos and Raquel Welch were with us, through the memories and confessions of cinematographer Marcello Gatti, still photographer Emilio Larri and co-star Richard Johnson. Our priority is was to respect all the people who were involved with the film.

As Raquel’s manager told us, she was then busy with the completion of her memoir and her time was very limited. But that contact with her team turned out to be decisive, because it led us to Patrick Curtis, who had a crucial role in our documentary. He was the producer of “The Beloved,” and he gave us the behind-the-scenes and scenic footage from Karmi in 1970, and the rights to use excerpts from the movie itself.

HollywoodChicago.com: What did you learn about stardom in 1970, that is different from celebrity today, in your research and point of view?

Avraam: In our humble opinion, every era has its own rules and people who record that history. I would say – judging by our research and the production itself – that the people of Karmi still have that movie star system in their hearts today, as they had it in 1970. The visit of Raquel Welch is still etched in their memories, through how they vividly recalled and recounted their feelings and excitement regarding that time.

HollywoodChicago.com: If you were to rate the movie result of Hollywood’s visit to Cyprus through ‘The Beloved’ on a 5 point scale, what would you give it?

Avraam: "The Beloved" and its script were far ahead of their time. Just to prove point, in 1970 the mere glimpse of a lady's ankle could still create serious problems and disputes between neighbors in devoutly religious villages like Karmi... let alone imagining someone who would dare flirt with his friend's wife, or indeed have an affair with her, as was depicted in the film. The woman of Cyprus enjoyed respect and were pretty absolute when it came to issues of honor. They certainly didn't tolerate any shady behavior, cheeky comments or inappropriate advances from men.

But in my opinion, the film "The Beloved" is rated 5 out of 5 stars. For various reasons, the film was not as successful as was expected, but for me – and the story in the documentary – the most important thing is that a bit of Hollywood embraced Cyprus, and Cyprus in return embraced the Hollywood that came to them.

HollywoodChicago.com: How do you think that feeling best came out in your finished documentary film?



Avraam: You can see that flavor in "Beloved Days," especially through how all the actors and crew from that 1970 film embraced us, and worked with us through their memories of the film and its process – our research lasted four years, and actual production took another two. For me, their pleasant surprise and their willingness to share personal moments in this nostalgic and bittersweet journey was perhaps the most enriching part of the experience.

HollywoodChicago.com: What, in your opinion and point of view, is the most tragic part of the ongoing divide and warlike territorial domination of the island of Cyprus, and what is the overriding feeling of the natives there?

Avraam: Even though it's been 43 years since the Turkish invasion in Cyprus, 40,000 foreign troops remain. It is an open wound, and the peoples' pain and desire to return to their ancestral homes are perhaps stronger than ever. The overriding opinion in the region is that everyone wants to have the right to move freely and live wherever they want, without any military occupation.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what did you learn about the memories of old men in creating the film, and how important the role of movies are in relating to and connecting the past?

Avraam: Personally, for the creative and production team, it was a great opportunity to get a first-hand understanding of our heritage – and all this through the art of cinema. Our motto was 'the past inspires the future.' That is what inspired us to start this long journey, and then complete the documentary.

Cyprus is a warm and welcoming country, and with its 330 days of sunshine per year it has all the capabilities to sustain and support more film production. Hopefully world cinema will return there soon, and again turn its lights toward this beautiful jewel of an island in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Gene Siskel Film Center of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago presents the 20th Chicago European Union Film Festival, March 3rd to the 30th, 2017. The Siskel Center is located at 164 North State Street, Chicago. For more information about this vital and essential Chicago film culture institution, and to access a schedule for the CEUFF, [click here](#). [20] "Beloved Days" was written and produced by George Avraam, and directed by Constantinos Patsalides.



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