

FILM REVIEW

Marjoram (2013)

by Olga Malea

In Need of a Special Ingredient

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When discussing with Olga Malea, back in 2008,¹ her choice of comedy genre for her films to date, she had indicated that she would like to direct a drama, too, when the time felt right. Indeed this change of direction in Malea's filmmaking came in 2013 with *Matzourana /Marjoram*, a psychological suspense drama, as it has been described in plot synopses for festivals, catalogues, cinema schedules, and reviews.

Marjoram is Olga Malea's sixth feature film to date and the director's first venture into drama, having consistently worked with comedy up to that point. The film was co-produced by Nova, ERT, and Malea Productions, and was eventually distributed by Feelgood Entertainment. In a period of widespread financial crisis, the director had to use her own capital when funding was cut short with Studio ATA, the film's main producer, declaring bankruptcy before the film was completed, and with ERT abruptly closed down by the then government before paying the full agreed amount for the film's production costs.² The troubled economic times and wider social, political, and historical contexts of crisis within which the film was produced explain perhaps why this was deemed the 'right time' for Malea to turn to drama. However, the exploration of crisis is not new for Malea, with the theme examined in all her previous films one way or another: crisis of identity, sexuality, the couple, marriage and parenthood, the individual, the community, and the nation in crisis.³ What has consistently characterised the director's work is her observational mode of instances of contemporary life in Greece, her keen and critical perception of the wider social

¹ Interview with the author, Athens, May 2008.

² For details, see Vivarelli (2013).

³ For a detailed exploration of this, see Kazakopoulou (2014).

context, which she comments upon through her attention to the personal; a trope which is evident in *Marjoram* too.

Despite the sense that Malea has changed course with this film, at least in terms of genre (drama and not comedy) and format (digital technology and not 35mm film), in terms of theme and character *Marjoram* is rather a natural progression from her previous films, where her attention increasingly turned to children. In *Risotto* (2000) children are the characters that bring to the fore the tensions of contemporary marriage caught between dictates of modernity and tradition. Saving a young boy in danger helps the protagonist in *Loukoumades me Meli/Honey and the Pig* (2005) face his own abusive past and reject long-established patriarchal notions of masculinity. And in *Proti Fora Nonos/First Time Godfather* (2007) the desire of a child to earn his father's approval and love by helping him to earn votes critiques clientelist politics in the name of a rather compromised notion of democracy. In each case the young are those most affected by this general ideological and ethical crisis observed in every aspect of life by the director, even before the socio-political breaking point that came with the financial crisis conflagrated in 2010. Childhood, the future, is under threat and already suffering because of the past and present transgressions as represented and practiced by the adult characters in Malea's films. In *Marjoram* this critical view is registered most harshly. The film revolves around the high-achieving eleven-year-old Anna (Maria Riskaki), who is taking part in a young chefs television competition and is the star of the show. Anna's relationship with her demanding mother Mary (Natalia Dragoumi) becomes increasingly difficult as the film progresses. Mary gets exasperated by Anna's self-destructive caprices, as she sees them, and Anna gets increasingly angry at her mother's lack of understanding and ability to help her. The child psychologist of the television show Anna takes part in, Eva (Youlika Skafida), is the only one who observes the young girl's cry for help. Amid tensions between a worried and overprotective mother and an ever more emotionally attached psychologist, Anna's painful secret is revealed. Instead of a resolution, however, this leads to further drama for the family.

Although many synopses of the film, including the one appearing on Malea's own website,⁴ have emphasised the mother-daughter relationship as its central preoccupation, I would suggest that this is a film primarily about the psychological trauma of child (sexual) abuse, a topic which was handled also in *Honey and the Pig*. As was the case in *Honey and the Pig*, the director's criticism expands beyond the personal to a whole (patriarchal) system of abuse and violence perpetrated on individuals, with rape of innocence as the most criminal of acts. In *Honey and the Pig* the protagonist had been abused by his uncle, and another boy is in danger of the same fate by this same trusted authority figure in

⁴ Available at <http://www.olgamalea.com/?p=65>. Accessed 29/07/2015.

the community (Pavlos Haikalis plays the uncle, who is also the mayor in the village where the film is located). In *Marjoram*, it is a close family friend, the neighbour's son, who is the perpetrator. In both films the female characters, the mother and mother-figure/aunt, conceal, fail to protect and understand, and thus help perpetuate a system of and in crisis. I argue that the tense mother-daughter relationship is only one aspect of the plot rather than the main preoccupation of the film. The relationship between Anna and her mother is very intriguing indeed, and it is clear that the two love and are greatly attached to one another, though the tension created between the two is palpable. Part of the intrigue is the way Anna deals with her mother's push for excellence, which Anna seems to embrace some of the time, and completely reject and sabotage herself for a good part of the film. The mother's 'failure' however is not located on her insistence for Anna to be a high achiever, but rather on her inability to see and understand what is really going on, what has gone on, and protect her daughter. In other words, Anna blames her mother for not being as perfect as she demands Anna to be, and Malea records this delicate psychological battle with great care.

As in all her previous films, so in *Marjoram* Malea maintains a critical distance from her (adult) characters. However, whereas in previous films the director used comedy strategically in order to lay bare her characters' contradictions, deal with taboo issues and more widely critique Greek society during the years of pseudo-affluence, in this latest film there is a dramatic, closer, and more pained look at the personal cost of those contradictions. Although we see the family interact with the outside world, there is also a disconnect between the reality as represented by the television show Anna participates in (and Greek television in general perhaps) and the reality as experienced by the characters. This disengagement of the individual or the family unit from society is observed in other contemporary, particularly arthouse, films (for example in *Miss Violence* by Alexandros Avranas released the same year, 2013). This bleak, pained representation is registered in also pained aesthetics in *Marjoram*; I use the term 'pained' advisedly: while the film is rather complex and engaging in terms of theme and scope, registering the painful reality of the characters with sensitivity, at the same time it is at pains to realise its potential in terms of narrative and stylistic cohesion. The use of generic conventions here does not reflect Malea's practice in her previous films, where there was always a critical response and transformative use of the convention and stereotype that effectively and cleverly served the ironic distance established between audience and narrative and/or characters. In *Marjoram*, conventions of the genre, and stylistic and character stereotypes, are not utilised in the same critical and self-conscious way, departing from the director's usual praxis. In addition the film moves from suspense drama to family melodrama to psychological thriller, back and forth a few times over, and each time attempting to tackle a different thread of the plot. The controlled flow of information about Anna and her self-destructive

behaviour create a suspenseful drama; the scene of Anna running alone across a field is effectively repeated to re-introduce this plot line and provide additional narrative details each time. The child psychologist's attempts to understand Anna, and her search for the truth behind the child's conduct utilise psychological thriller tropes, even if not always successfully or convincingly. The father's emphatically violent and destructive outburst when he learns about the abuse Anna has suffered, or the mother's injury as a result of the same revelation, operate within the family melodrama territory. Indeed, this complexity of tropes would be fitting, if it were applied more skilfully in this film, and to the extent that Malea had achieved in her comedies.

The dialogue does not generally help, especially during the more intimate and sensitive scenes, and rather distracts from the emotional truth of the characters and narrative. In the director's previous features, the dialogue not only provided information, but helped establish the ironic detachment operating in the films, as well as critically comment on the action itself. The most successful and evocative scenes in *Marjoram* are the ones where the action and performances unfold uninterrupted by dialogue. The audience then gets the opportunity for a more immersive kind of viewing, required by drama, and allowing for the suspenseful elements to take hold. Having said that, some key lines do provide an insight to character and plot from early on, such as Mary's often repeated phrase "*Mporeis ke kalitera/You can do better!*", which Anna poignantly appropriates in scenes when she is alone; this line becomes even more affecting when it is juxtaposed with Mary's inability to 'do better' herself.

There are other redeeming features, which are very effective in themselves, but which generally fail to come together in a seamless whole. The use of the close-up on the actors' faces throughout is one such instance. The close-up emphasises moments of suspenseful drama and psychological development as played on the characters' faces; for example, the close shots on Anna's and Eva's faces when the young girl is struggling to express what has happened to her and Eva is trying to connect emotionally and gain Anna's trust; or close-ups on Mary's remorseful face for having shouted at her daughter. These shots critically emulate an aesthetic as it is practiced on the television set of the cooking reality show in the film, reflecting on an overused and recognisably intrusive technique in all kinds of television programmes, which aim at sensationalism and heightened drama even where there is none, thus 'emptying' the shot of its meaning. The problem is that this juxtaposition also hollows the moments of true dramatic importance within the narrative.

There are a number of violent incidents in the film, which escalate and effectively allow for the gradual revelation of what is wrong with the eleven-year-old Anna. The recognition of what has happened is delivered earlier to the audience than to the characters, in the scene when Koki, the pet dog, gets raped by Anna. As is the

case in other films by Malea, the animal plays an important role. Here it becomes the vehicle for showing what has happened; itself an innocent, helpless victim, it becomes a surrogate for the abuse Anna has suffered. Like Anna, Koki is outside the system that allows such an abuse to happen, and victims both to the adults' inability to protect and safeguard the young. At first it appears as if Mary shares with the viewer this tragic moment of *anagnorisis*, during the calm and full of remorse collection of the broken plates from around Anna, who is still hiding in shame under the kitchen table. However, in a rather anticlimactic scene soon after we realise the mother's continued obliviousness of her daughter's real cause of anger and pain. The sweeping of the broken glass acts as a metaphor, while also operating on the very pragmatic level of enabling the character to regain her composure.

The psychological make-up of the characters, and particularly young Anna's, is complex and expresses the complicated relationships the adolescent child has with her mother, with excellence, violence, her need for love, attention and acceptance, as well as protection. The young performer delivers these complexities with some skill (despite the sometimes exaggerated facial expressions becoming even more emphasised by the repeated close-ups). Had this been the focus of the film without side-tracking to subplots that offer nothing to the overall narrative, such as the personal history of the psychologist, perhaps the result would have been a more powerful and engaging film. Indeed, the diversion of attention to the psychologist's story, who apparently understands and relates to the child because she herself had been abused in the past is unnecessary; by that point viewers are not interested in learning about Eva, but about Anna. In terms of the script, it is perhaps credible that the young girl would have trusted an outsider more than her demanding mother who does not see past the surface, but this still does not explain what Eva's personal story adds to the film or to our understanding of the other main characters.

The recognition and naming of the crime that has been perpetrated on the child is finally articulated by Anna herself in the psychologist's office among her mother's accusations against Eva. This is a very significant moment politically, for the innocence to cry back. The audience has been waiting to find out not only what is going on with the child (this has been forcefully implied in the scene with Koki the dog), but also how this will be revealed; this is precisely what builds suspense throughout the film. What is disappointing is that the film quickly turns away from the most charged scene towards the mother's reaction. The slow motion of Mary's backward movement, with another close-up on her foot trampling on a toy and her subsequent fall, is (literally) a step too far into melodrama, especially in terms of the stylistic choices involved here. This is now the mother's drama and her pain, physical and emotional, which Anna takes upon herself to fix by returning to her cooking, to 'normality'. This plot turn is

perhaps practical, even if disappointing, in moving the action back to Anna's psychological need for winning. Marjoram is the ingredient that will guarantee this.

The ingredient that gives the film its name only appears in the final sequence, initially as an element of hope that healing has begun. But when it matters the most, when the televised final is about to begin, Anna does not have her secret ingredient. The ending of the film is rather typical of *Malea*: the action simply stops, there is no resolution. The camera in the final shot remains static in the middle of a busy road even after Anna has faded out of the frame in her search for marjoram. Marjoram is transformed into an elusive remedy, the winning ingredient, which would have brought everything together and which, unfortunately, is also missing from the film.

Note: All translations from Greek are by the author.

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