

The penthouse suite at the Athens Hilton comes with a stunning view of the Acropolis. Up here on the 13th floor, the sacred rock looms in the distance, teeming with temples crisscrossed with columns – a wonder of Ancient Greece presiding over a metropolis of skyscrapers and moped traffic.

“Look at that,” says Nia Vardalos, gazing out the window of her room’s large balcony, where a handsome, dark-haired man is leaning on the railings. “Isn’t that something?”

She pauses, beaming behind her designer glasses. For a moment, I’m not sure whether she’s talking about the monuments or the man; both are suitably impressive. Both, anyway, are why Vardalos – who shot to fame with her 2002 hit film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* – is here. The Acropolis is a backdrop to her new movie, *My Life in Ruins*, which sees the multi-skilled actor playing a beleaguered American tour guide trying to find her *kefi* (‘mojo’) in Greece. Alexis Georgoulis, Greece’s answer to George Clooney and the man draped over the balcony, plays the guy who drives her bus.

Given Vardalos’ predilection for comic but troubled romance, it’s easy to guess how the film pans out. There are gags aplenty along the way, as the gawky, loveless Georgia (Vardalos) leads a fractious group of tourists around the country and battles obnoxious colleague Nico (Alistair McGowan) for primacy and parking spots. Georgia’s busload is full of stereotypes, including loud-mouthed Americans, uptight English folk and even strine-spouting Aussies. (“Australians are the nicest people,” Georgia muses, “but you can’t understand half of what they say.”)

Nobody except Georgia cares much for culture. Widowed Yank Irv (Richard Dreyfuss), the group’s token funny guy (the stereotypes are intentional), would rather fondle the nude statues; someone else wonders why the authorities don’t fix up the ruins to make them less unsightly. There are broken toilets, crafty merchants and sleazy hotel owners, but then there are the sights. Delphi, Epidaurus, Ancient Olympia, the Acropolis – each bathed in sunshine, oozing grandeur, selling Greece as a tourist destination and magically helping Georgia and her group (including taciturn bus driver Poupi) get their respective kefis back.

It’s all relentlessly upbeat and as sweet as baklava, a tray of which Vardalos, 46, is waving under my nose right now. “I baked these this morning,” she quips. It’s early evening and a birthday dinner is planned later for her mother, Doreen, who flew in from Canada for last night’s world premiere, where Vardalos was named cultural ambassador for Greece.

“Do you want to lie on my bed with my plaque?” she teases Georgoulis, 35, who’s perching on the end of her couch. His eyes twinkle. “Will your scent be on the pillow?” he wonders in accented English. Then they figure things out in Greek.

“Alexis and I get along so well,” she says as soon as he’s left. “It’s a true mark of a gentleman that he’s exactly the same with me when my husband’s in the room. I’ve been lucky with my co-stars – David Duchovny, John Corbett – I have good instincts.” Does this intuition of the opposite sex extend to her private life? “Yeah, I’d sense if something was wrong with a certain boyfriend and I’d get out.



Hellenic heroine

NIA VARDALOS’ FIRST BIG FAT FILM POKED GENTLE FUN AT HER GREEK HERITAGE. HER NEXT ONE IS ALL ABOUT THE SIGHTS AND STALLIONS

STORY JANE CORNWELL

Then, years afterwards, I’d discover they were indeed cheating on me.”

Vardalos isn’t your average A-list interviewee. There are no minders and no stylists. (Her publicist has left us alone to go shopping.) She’s just a refreshingly normal actor/writer/producer/director (and new mother – more on that later) who wrote a one-woman stage play based on her recollections of her Greek-Canadian family and her wedding to a non-Greek (actor Ian Gomez), and ended up starring in the \$459 million-generating smash indie film, receiving Golden Globe and Oscar nominations in the process.

Vardalos’ fairytale-tinged backstory fuelled *My Big*

Fat Greek Wedding’s word-of-mouth success. Born in Winnipeg, Canada, the second of five children, Antonia Eugenia Vardalos grew up embracing her Greek heritage and her creativity. A drama scholarship to Toronto’s Ryerson University was followed by a job in the box office of the acclaimed Second City improvisational comedy troupe, which she joined after replacing a sick actor 10 minutes before curtain up. Her success there led her to the company’s Chicago chapter, where she met Gomez. The pair married in 1993 and moved to Los Angeles to further their careers.

While Gomez (whose credits include TV series *The Drew Carey Show* and *Felicity*, and films >

including *My Life in Ruins*, in which he plays a hilariously seedy hotelier) found early commercial success, Vardalos struggled. So she wrote a play about her oddball family, which was seen by Greek-American actor Rita Wilson and her husband Tom Hanks, and the rest, as they say, is history.

History is also a major theme of *My Life in Ruins*, which, like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, was produced by Hanks and Wilson (who makes a cameo as Irv's late wife). "Listen to the wind blowing through the columns," sighs Georgia atop the Acropolis. "It's the sound of nature meets human imagination. For me, that's history."

Greece's powerful archaeological council rarely approves film shoots on their delicate ancient sites, but golden girl Vardalos proved to be the exception. "I told them that after showing Greeks in the Diaspora, I wanted to show what I'd experienced growing up: the love we all felt for this country," she says brightly. It probably helped that Vardalos has long been a regular visitor to Greece; family holidays, which include her Sydney-based brother, are still spent in her grandmother's old house in the mountains outside Athens. "I went deeper into what I already knew – the myths, the culture, the people."

In such a fickle industry, some would say she's pigeonholing herself as the Hollywood Greek and

fallen through. So I took a step out of the limelight and grieved. And then I wrote and came back." She pauses. "But I stayed focused on adopting. It's hard in the States – until you figure out how to do it, then it's easy."

Last year, Vardalos and Gomez were matched with a three-year-old girl ("We're trying to keep her name out of it to let her adjust"), who's now a year older and the light of their lives. Still passport-less, their daughter is currently back in Los Angeles with Gomez and the family's labrador (a rescue dog which Gomez tolerates with the help of anti-allergy injections). Vardalos hopes her daughter's passport will come through in time for the family to attend the Australian premiere of *My Life in Ruins*. "I love Australia," she says. "My aunt and brother are there. Half of Greece is there."

It doesn't take long for her thoughts go back to her daughter. "Can I show you some pics?" she asks, jumping up to fetch her mobile phone from another room. "Look, this is her and my husband making funny faces. This is her with a bandage on her arm because she had a nick – I told everyone it was a nicotine patch. This is her with the dog. Aren't they the greatest? Look at the two of them together!"

Vardalos flicks silently through a few more photos. For a few beats, none of this – the world



Vardalos plays a tour guide alongside Greek actor Alexis Georgoulis (left) in *My Life in Ruins*.

"EVERYONE THINKS, OH, SHE WROTE A MOVIE AND TOM HANKS DISCOVERED HER. THEY DON'T PRINT THAT I COULDN'T GET AN ACTING JOB FOR YEARS"

preventing herself from exploring diverse roles.

"I am what I am. It didn't hurt De Niro to do a few Italian things. Anyway, my character's different," she says of Georgia, who becomes distinctly goddess-like once she finds her kefi. "I know I'm an easy target. Everyone thinks, oh, she wrote a movie and Tom Hanks discovered her and the second movie didn't do so well, and I think, oh whatever! Pour yourself a big glass of get-over-it! They don't print the real story that I couldn't get an acting job for years and then I wrote the movie and put all my money into a stage show."

Vardalos followed *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* with a TV sequel, *My Big Fat Greek Life*, which lasted only seven episodes on CBS. Then, in 2004, there was the box-office flop *Connie and Carla*, co-starring Toni Collette and David Duchovny. Then, nothing. "You want to know the reality?" asks Vardalos, eyes softening. "I was hiding a huge secret. I was going through a horrible infertility battle that really knocked me off my feet."

She shifts on the couch. "During the time *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* was taking off, when I was nominated for the Academy Award and everyone was saying, 'Boy, she's so lucky,' I'd lost three friends and several attempts at adopting had

premiere, the penthouse suite, the 2500-year-old ruins – seems to matter. So is she done writing about Greece? "I'll be baptising my daughter soon, I'm sure there's a movie in that," she says. "But my next film, *I Hate Valentine's Day* [in which she again teams up with John Corbett], doesn't have anything Greek in it. It's about a woman who believes in five dates and that's it, over. I directed this one, on the condition I acted in it, too."

Which seems rather ironic considering the battles Vardalos had to weather in order to have the screenplay of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* the way she wanted. Studio executives tried to rework the script, changing the family to Italian and casting a more bankable star in the lead. "Ha! You're right!" she says. "That's funny; I didn't think of that."

Pleased, she stands and walks across to the balcony window. "Oh, look," she says, opening it. "Look at that."

It's sunset and the ruins have turned golden. Orange fingers of light are shooting from the clouds above the Parthenon, the largest temple on the Acropolis. "Zeus is smiling," says Vardalos, flashing a grin. "He's looking down and smiling now." **SM**

My Life in Ruins is in cinemas July 16.

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