



WARNER BROS.

# ELENI

A True Story of Love,  
War, Survival and  
Revenge



Six years ago Kate Nelligan had been named Best Actress in the British Theatre for her electrifying portrayal of the willful Susan in *Plenty*, David Hare's rueful examination of post-war England. She had performed Bernard Shaw at the National Theatre, Shakespeare at the Royal Shakespeare, and she had worked for some of the best directors in Europe: John Schlesinger, Maximilian Schell, Trevor Nunn.

"And then I got to Los Angeles," a vivacious and articulate Nelligan recalls, "and the most striking thing was that it didn't matter. None of it mattered.

"And to swallow that," she adds, "was the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life. To look at it and say, that is the truth. And you can either go back to England and continue with that. Or you can deal with this—which meant going to offices where they don't know who you are or what you've done, where they've never heard of the National Theatre. And not get angry and not be offended. To just say, I am *nobody* here.

"And some days I thought I must be out of my mind."

Kate Nelligan has not stopped going out of her mind entirely. After all, just last year she was passed over for the role of Susan Traherne in the film version of *Plenty*. But tenacity—not to mention great talent—have begun to earn the 34-year-old actress success on this side of the Atlantic, not the least of which is her current role in the movie *Eleni*.

The year is 1948, and Eleni, a peasant woman, is trying to survive the civil war which has wracked Greece in the aftermath of the Second World War. When Communist guerrillas take over her remote mountain village, she obediently suffers their oppression. After the lives of her children are threatened, however, Eleni rebels. On the night of June 20th, 1948, she arranges to have her four young kids smuggled past guards to freedom in the Western world.

In point of fact, Eleni's heroic story is only half the story of the movie *Eleni*. The other half takes place 30 years later when Nicholas Gage, one of her four children, returns to Greece as the Athens bureau chief for The New York Times.

Gage—played by John Malkovich, who was last seen as the blind boarder in *Places in the Heart*—has already distinguished himself as an investigative reporter in New York. He now brings that same talent to bear in uncovering the circumstances of his mother's mysterious death shortly after she arranged his escape.

It is a search which, in real life, consumed six years of Gage's life, taking him to half a dozen countries and ending—as it does in the movie—in an

apartment in a Greek suburb, with a tape recorder and a gun.

"I've had a wonderful time doing the stage work I've done," says Nelligan, whose greatest success continues to be in the theatre, most recently in a London-to-Broadway revival of Eugene O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten*.

"But," she adds, "film work is the most exciting thing right now I can do. You have a lot more control on stage and a lot more immediate response, I know all of that. Maybe it's just a fascination with something very difficult because there's a lot of factors in filmmaking that can destroy what you're trying to do.

"But I think the basic reason I continue to try and work in film is that my own loyalty as an audience member is to film. I mean, if I'm offered a theatre ticket or a film ticket, I will take the film ticket. Always. All my heroes as actors are movie actors. The greatest fun I've had as an audience member has been watching movies."

She knew she was a born actress, she recalls, the first time she stepped on stage. She was 17 and she was playing Hamlet's mother in a University of Toronto student production, "and I was in heaven," says the actress who grew up in London, Ontario.

"Clearly I was a closet pretender and all I needed was the stops to be taken off. It was a totally natural thing for me to come into a room with perfect strangers and pretend to be somebody else. Which is deeply weird."