

An unknown early movie by Sergio Leone: interview with **Elena Kleus** about *Frine cortigiana d'Oriente* (1953)

Questions by **Eleonora Cavallini**

Q.: Mrs Kleus, your real name (Virginia Petemezakis) reveals your Greek origin. Were you born in Greece? And when and why did you move to Italy?

A.: Yes, I was born in Piraeus, Greece in 1932. When I was 7, we moved to Thessaloniki and then, at the end of the World War II, when I was 13, we moved back to Piraeus.

I was crowned Miss Greece in 1952, when I was 20. I then went to Italy to represent my country in the Miss World beauty pageant, where I came in second to Miss Turkey.

Q.: As far as I know, in Italy you used to work as a model. How were you introduced to the Cinecittà Studios? And how were you recruited to star in your first movie, “Frine, cortigiana d'Oriente” (1953)?

A.: While I was in the Miss World pageant, Marquese Manca from the Alberto Manca production company approached me to play Phryne in the movie. He saw me and said he thought I was the image of Phryne.

I was asked to do a screen test as were some other actresses, including Eleonora Rossi Drago. My first screen test did not get me the part. After my first screen test, Marquese Manca had my hair dyed blonde and then asked me to test again. It was then that he gave me the role. I did not speak any Italian at that point. I had to learn the part phonetically.

Cinecittà Studios was only the location rented out by the producers for the movie. I don't believe there was any more of a connection to it than that.

Q.: How did you choose the name “Elena Kleus” for your acting career?

A.: My agent and the producers decided on the name for me. They gave me a few options and that's the one I chose. It had no real meaning for me. They, however, believed it sounded more “Greek” than my real name, Virginia Petemizakis.

Q.: What can you tell me about the movie? Was it released in consequence of the extraordinary success of Alessandro Blasetti's “Il Processo di Frine”, with Gina Lollobrigida and Vittorio de Sica?

A.: Yes, I believe that is how the producers got the idea for the movie.

Q.: Mario Bonnard is credited as director of “Frine, cortigiana d'Oriente”. But I saw the movie and noticed that the assistant director, as well as co-screenwriter, is young Sergio Leone, whose father, Vincenzo Leone, was a friend of Bonnard's. Afterwards, Leone became one of the most famous Italian filmmakers. In your opinion, how important was Leone's presence in the making of “Frine”?

Sergio Leone's presence was extremely important. He was responsible for much of the direction of the film, with little involvement from Bonnard. He had more of a direct influence on the actors and he was solely responsible for all of the scenes that involved masses of people. His ideas,

enthusiasm and spirit were vital in creating the final product. Bonnard was from the “old school” of film-making but Leone was modern and innovative. As well, I had never acted before, so Leone took the time to give me acting lessons in order to achieve his vision of the part.

Q.: The studios in Rome were provided with a large stock of costumes that were usually reemployed for any film belonging to the so-called ‘péplum’ genre. But in “Frine” you wear particularly beautiful dresses. Where they made to measure for you?

A.: Yes, they were all made to measure for me.

Q.: Phryne was born in Thespieae, a town in central Greece. So the title “Frine cortigiana d’Oriente” is not very appropriate. Do you have an idea why such title was chosen?

I don’t know for sure, but I would guess that it was simply out of lack of proper knowledge. Because of the geographical proximity of Greece and Turkey, people often believe the countries are somehow related culturally and can therefore be linked. The reference to “Oriente” is, I believe, mistakenly to Turkey, not Greece.

Q.: According to Internet Movie Database, after “Frine cortigiana d’Oriente” you acted in other two movies, “Carovana di canzoni” by Sergio Corbucci (1954), and “Un palco all’opera” by Siro Marcellini (1955). Is this correct?

A.: Yes. Anyway, in Greece, in 1952, prior to moving to Italy, I acted in a movie called “Onira Koritzion” and then, in Italy, in 1953, I also acted in another movie called “La Gioconda” by Giacinto Solito.

Q.: Mrs Kleus, at 24 you moved to Caracas, Venezuela, where you continued to act and to model. Why did you decide to leave Italy?

A.: My contract with the production company ended and I decided that I needed to take a break for a while. The restrictions of acting under a production contract were too oppressive for me so instead of pursuing anything more in Italy, I went home to Greece to see my family. But, when I got there, the paparazzi were so aggressive and intrusive that I felt I had to leave. I decided to go visit my father who had recently moved to Venezuela for business opportunities. I loved Venezuela – it was beautiful, with a wonderful climate, and I ended up staying. After I had settled in there, an agent approached me and asked me if I wanted to model. I worked freelance in Caracas for many years as a model and actress in television and print ads, but I never worked under contract again.

Q.: As your daughter told me, at 30 you got married and definitively left your acting career. Did you ever think to get back to the cinema, at least for a short appearance?

A.: No, I never wanted to go back to the cinema. I really enjoyed doing television. In those days, television was filmed in front of a live audience which was very fun and exciting for me. I found the cinema to be a little tedious in that we had to film take after take in an isolated studio with no one there but the directors and film crew. After I got married, I did act in a few commercials that I had committed to previously, but I didn’t want to pursue acting anymore. I wanted to focus on building a family.

Q.: Thank you very much, Mrs Kleus, and many wishes to you and your family.