

It's still Greek to her

Nia Vardalos doesn't enter a room. She takes possession of it. At a press event last month for her new comedy, My Life in Ruins, which was to be honoured as the closing-night film of the Tribeca Film Festival, Vardalos sashayed into a meeting room at a chic midtown hotel, said cheerily, "Hello How are you? I'm Nia" and then asked the dozen assembled scribes to introduce themselves, including not just where they worked, but where they were born.

“Zimbabwe That's so cool” she exulted to one. “Germany Hi” to another. And with a third, a young woman from Athens, she broke into Greek for about 30 seconds before pausing coyly to report to the group: “I said you're all really good looking. But you” – her right hand floated over a man sitting to her side, and landed gently on his arm – “are my date tonight.” The poor fellow babbled something in a vain attempt to recover his equilibrium, and tried to not blush.

It may seem effortless, but this sort of performance takes barrels of physical and emotional energy; and one reason we haven't seen much of Vardalos in the last five years is that she hasn't had much of either to spare. Yes, there were the usual vagaries of Hollywood. “The truth is, I didn't get offered great scripts, it's not like Scorsese called me,” she says. “The scripts I was offered were a little bit dirty or a little bit cheap. Not good dirty, like *Monster's Ball*. Just, like, cheap dirty, you know?”

But there was something else, a personal crisis the Winnipeg-born Vardalos, now 46, had been hiding like a shame.

By the time she broke out in 2002 with the indie hit *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, she and her husband had been battling infertility for years. The struggle threw the two of them along an emotional roller coaster as they tried every conceivable route to have a child (surrogacy, adoption, a battery of fertility drugs that left her moody and bloated), and continued until about two years ago.

“I didn't feel like being on camera,” she explains. “My friends and my agent understood that I just needed to step out.” *Wedding* had been such a success – taking in over \$240-million (U.S.) at the North American box office, one of the highest-grossing non-studio films ever released – that she had the wherewithal to step out of the spotlight for a while.

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Vardalos is – it must be said, given her past statements that have espoused pride in her full figure – now shockingly petite, the result of a self-designed diet that involved giving up cheese, and of the fact that she is no longer taking

fertility drugs. She sports a pair of gold hoop earrings as big as her ears, and a long, double-strand chain of diamonds (borrowed from a local jeweller) that draws the eye to her plunging neckline.

The rest of the journalists have left now, and as Vardalos finishes huddling with an assistant over her packed schedule for the next few days, she gives a little wave of her hand. “This is just so not my life,” she says, lowering her voice to a whisper, apparently so the studio gals minding the other side of the door don't hear the sacrilege. “I really, you know, mostly hang around in sweats and write and walk to the corner and buy a paper, with bad breath.”

Vardalos admits she is temperamentally unsuited to Los Angeles, where she lives; but it's where she and her husband (actor Ian Gomez) must be for work. “The sun shines all the time,” she nods, “and mood inspires art, so if you wake up in the same mood every day, where are the dark van Goghs going to come from? We're lucky. We have the same friends from Second City Toronto, and Chicago. Our circle has remained the same. Nobody got weird, thank God. So far. We go to Canada a lot, we go to Chicago a lot, and see our friends.

“They define who you are, they shaped you,” she continues. “So what are you gonna do, just because you work in the movies, not talk to your mom any more? Not cool That's why I put my parents in every movie.”

Her parents have been strong influences. “My mom and dad always taught me: You work, you work, you work, you work hard,” she continues. “This unbelievable thing happened to me with the first movie. Do I think I deserve it? No. Do I think I worked hard for it? Yes. Do I think I worked harder than anybody else? Noooo way. I have friends in L.A. who are still handing out flyers for their one-woman shows. So we caught a wave. I got really lucky. Well, then the karmic slap happened: I couldn't beat *Mother Nature*.”

And so she holed up in her Los Angeles home, writing scripts for Tom Hanks, who had become a good friend after he served as a producer on *Wedding*, and developing a film with Jonathan Demme. Then one day a request came through for her to polish a script that was set in Greece. “We've

Seven years after lifting the veil on one of the biggest indie films ever made, Nia Vardalos is back with a tale of love unearthed amid the ruins of Greece



all been offered every Greek movie that has ever been written,” she says of her *Wedding* co-stars, “and I always say: Sometimes it's so clear the movie actually takes place in Turkey but they white it out and make it, you know, *Thessaloniki*.”

My Life in Ruins centres on Georgia, an embittered Athens tour guide frustrated with her lack of a love life and fed up with herding unruly tourists (played by Richard Dreyfuss, Rachel Dratch and others) around the ancient sites. As she went through the script, adding elements to make it more authentically Greek, Vardalos found herself layering in bits of her own story, pumping up the fact that Georgia had lost her “kefi” (a.k.a. mojo).

Vardalos's script polish included the addition of a Canadian tourist couple who, while getting very little screen time, make clear the clichés about Canuck travellers: Their luggage and clothing are adorned with big red maple-leaf insignias, and the wife apologizes to a lamppost she runs into accidentally. “We're nice people” laughs Vardalos. “I'm so often bewildered in L.A. meetings. I like directness, but rudeness just leaves me kind of stunned. I often say to my manager: ‘Why couldn't they just Winnipeg it?’ Like, just be nice. Don't yell at somebody, you're gonna see them at Safeway within an hour”

When she began the rewrite, *Ruins* “was a clean, nice movie, and it had something to say about tourists. But I wanted to say something about a moment in our lives. All of us train to do something, and if we're lucky we can work in our chosen field. But what happens when that chosen field is not as rewarding as you thought it was going to be? That's what happened to me, and that's what happened to Georgia. For me, all the success meant nothing, because I wasn't a parent.”

But something funny happened on the way to the Oracle. In the two years or so that Vardalos was working on the film before it shot, jetting back and forth to Greece, where she leveraged her status as a national hero for permission to shoot at historic sites such as the Acropolis, she began to give up hope of getting a child. She admits that one lawyer promised he could get her to the front of the adoption line if she retained him. “I said: But that's not right, because that means I'm pushing

someone down the list. That's karmically not right” One prospect after another fell through, until eventually, she says, “I just let go. I thought: ‘Well, if it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen.’ And that's so unlike me.”

One night, Vardalos was surfing the Internet when she stumbled upon the website for an agency that arranges adoptions of foster children. She and her husband applied, and within a few weeks after filming wrapped on *Ruins* in the fall of 2007, they heard that a little girl would be coming into their lives.

This is, of course, wonderful news, but let's face it: Few things can be more grating than a new parent exuding love for their child. Yet Vardalos's enthusiasm is infectious. Since adopting their daughter in late 2007, she and her husband have kept the little girl out of the spotlight. Still, she can't help herself. “Here, let me show you a picture,” she says, reaching for her purse. “Nobody knows what she looks like, but I'm going to show you why I'm besotted with this child.”

The photograph shows an adorable little girl, probably four, with the round face, dark complexion, and semi-serious eyes of – yes, of a young Nia Vardalos. “Do you see what I'm saying?” she blurts, giggling.

“Every time she asks a question, I feel this moment where I really have to define myself: ‘What kind of parent do I want to be?’ And I had a long time to think about it, watching my sisters and my brother really be great parents, in explaining things and taking the time, and getting down to her level and explaining something, hearing the magical things that she points out. Like, in the middle of me explaining something, she'll go: ‘Listen, listen’ And the whole time a bird has been chirping. We don't hear it any more, but they do. So I love it, because it's just made me believe in magic, and the cosmic forces that have brought her to me.”

So here's the question: If Vardalos's first script was based on her own comical experiences of her engagement and marriage to a non-Greek man, and if *My Life in Ruins* is rooted in her struggles to rediscover the joy of life, what can we expect from Vardalos in the future?

“What do I want to write about next?” she asks with a broad smile. “Clearly, something about a family.”