

On the set
of *The Other Town*



Mirror, mirror on the wall...

A political scientist who has lived in Greece and Turkey, Hercules Millas talks about historical prejudices and why he got involved in a documentary exploring the misguided national representations on both sides of the fence

By **Despina Pavlaki**

IF HERCULES Millas isn't equipped to dissect Greek-Turkish (or Turkish-Greek) relations, then I don't know who is. A political scientist who has lived in both countries, speaks both languages and whose life has been intricately entwined with both societies, he helped establish the Greek literature department at Ankara University, while also teaching Turkish language and literature at both the universities of the Aegean [Rhodes] and Macedonia [Thessaloniki]. So when he decided to get involved in a documentary about historical prejudices and misguided national representations on both sides of the fence, one couldn't help but wonder: what took him so long?

Athens News: What led you to explore contrasting perceptions in Greek-Turkish relations?

Hercules Millas: I first took an interest in the subject when my children went to elementary school all those years ago and would come home from history class saying things that had neither rhyme nor reason. That's when I first got into schoolbooks and started investigating how each nation perceives the other through perpetuated historical inaccuracies. It's not just a Greek-

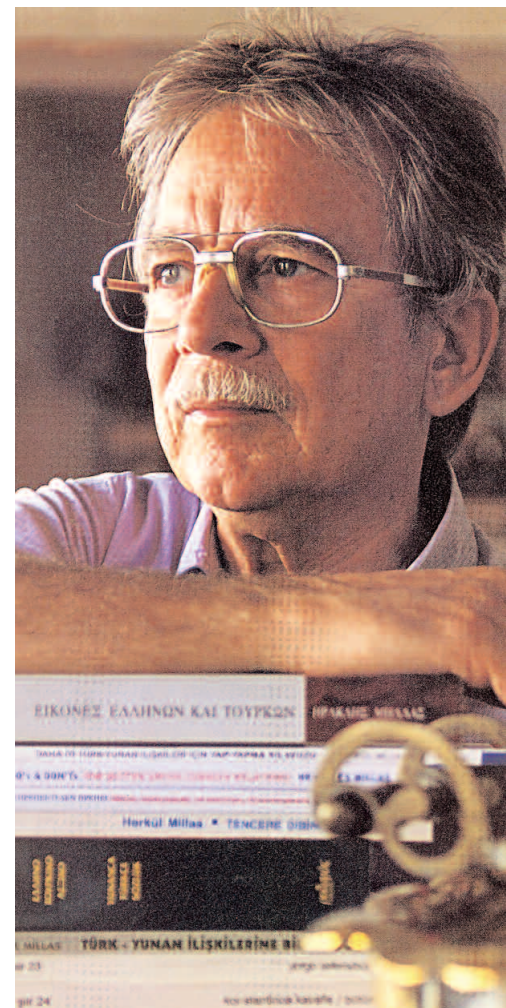


Turkish thing, you know! You'll find similar behavioural patterns all over the world - all the way from China to Brazil. What nation doesn't like to revel in its glory and ignore its weaknesses? I just don't like buying into myths. And as a political scientist who was born in Turkey and now lives in Greece, this has always been my main focal point. I've been exploring how each of the two nations perceives the other and how they perceive themselves, and I must say there are a lot of surviving stereotypes - and the quicker we do away with them, the better.

So how can you tell when something you've read in history books and been taught at school is true or not?

Whenever you come across contradictions and conflicting versions of events, it's always a good idea to investigate further. When one nation says one thing and another tells a completely different story, it's safe to say none of the two are right [*The Other Town*, directed by Nefin Dinc and scripted by Millas, tackles the concepts of the secret school (*krifo scholio*), the janissaries and the conflicting views on the Siege

I've been studying schoolbooks for the past 25 years and I've noticed a radical change. Twenty years ago Turks in Greece were considered no better than barbarians, while Greeks in Turkey were the kind of people who slaughtered babies in their cribs



Hercules Millas is spearheading the effort to overcome historical prejudices

of Tripolitsa (modern-day Tripoli, Peloponnese), among others. Another good way to approach the truth is to seek the opinion of an unrelated third party that has no stakes in the race. The truth always hides in dark corners, so when things are left unsaid you can bet something is not right. So this film was mostly focused on contradictions and suppressed information.

Don't you think that temperaments run hotter and prejudices stronger in provincial towns than they would in a big city? [*The Other Town* was shot in the towns of Dimitsana and Birgi, in Arkadia, Greece, as well as in Izmir province, Turkey, respectively.]

I don't think so. We happened to choose two small towns with a lot of history and local colour - partly for the aesthetics - but national representations are not site-specific. You'll find them in the schoolbooks and hear them in the poems children recite on national holidays. And it's pretty characteristic of how both parties feel that there's no prejudice on their part. That alone shows how partial they are. The attitudes that came up during filming I had already detected in Greek and Turkish literature, folk tales and political parlay - they're everywhere.