

Retracing Saroyan's Steps with Paul Kalinian

BY JANET SAMUELIAN

FRESNO — At the unveiling of Varaz' David of Sasoon Monument in 1971 William Saroyan made a witty and graceful speech about Armenians and Fresno. Unforgettable in white linen suit and large white mustaches, he was afterwards a bit difficult to reach verbally and seemed shy and on the verge of withdrawing from admiring eyes and eager questions. Bombastic personality in action, he took shelter in being somewhat deaf. Nevertheless, I treasured the encounter and never forgot it. I can understand the bond that Paul Kalinian feels with Saroyan and how he cannot forget it either. His warm recollection is what drives him to complete the complex film project he has undertaken to immortalize the most famous Armenian in the world.

Paul Kalinian, son of a Kharperetsi father and Marashtsi mother, grew up in Beirut, graduating in 1952 from Armenian High School. Meantime, five teenage years were spent as a photography apprentice at Gulbenk Studio there. He later operated his own photography studio from 1952 until 1963 and also graduated from British Council College with proficiency in foreign languages in 1958. After spending two cold years in Montreal, Canada, working as a color lab technician, he moved to New York City where in 1968 he did film making for the first time and graduated from NY Institute of Photography as Master Photographer. Meanwhile he went west and married. In 1969 Kalinian assisted various cinematographers to further his craft and also did portrait photography in Hollywood. Eventually he settled permanently in Fresno in 1972, opening Paul's Photography Studio at 1543 E. Olive Avenue. He was a parttime photography instructor at Clovis adult school, father of two children, and a busy photographer about the time he began nurturing a great desire to photograph Fresno's most famous son, Willie Saroyan.

"I had tried many times to photograph him and would set up camera equipment fruitlessly at theater productions where he was supposed to show up. But he would avoid the limelight and sit at the back of the hall, if he came at all." The elusive Saroyan was not to be found so finally Kalinian enlisted the help of Varaz Samuelian, sculptor and longtime friend of Saroyan. When one day Saroyan returned from Paris and appeared at Varaz' old studio on San Benito and O Street, Kalinian wasted no time. Greeting Saroyan, he was told, "Get lost — I don't want my picture taken!" But in the nearby painting studio he set up lights and camera. As Saroyan made his way there looking at his friend's latest sculptures, Kalinian tripped the strobe lights. The famous author growled at him, "I told you not to take pictures — Get out!"

Kalinian recounts: "I told him I had no film in the camera, and he looked inside to make sure. Then he smiled and relaxed and sat on a broken box right in front of the camera and started asking me lots of questions about my family history and life in Beirut. I quietly had loaded the camera case and began taking pictures as we talked. He asked me if I knew the song 'Tzangam Desnem Zim Giligia.' Yes, I said, and I began to sing it and soon, he sang it with me too. Finally he said — I like you very much, take all the pictures you want. Mr. Saroyan, I said, I already took them! He laughed and then together we ate watermelon which he loved. And as we all ate, he apologized and explained — So many people have come and knocked on my door in order to make money off of me. He came to my studio six months later and saw the enlarged photo of himself on my wall and said he had never seen color character photos at his age like that, that they were unique for him. I was thrilled and we talked for many hours. People have accused him not being Armenian, but he was the greatest Armenian."

After sending Saroyan the portraits in April 1976, Kalinian was sent a book of his which he inscribed "To Paul, artist photographer." When Saroyan died May 18, 1981, Kalinian was twice visited by editors of the **Fresno Bee** who had heard about the photos.

"They had three pages full of Saroyan photographs in the obituary and, right after that, I got calls from all over requesting copies which I sent free to everyone. Then, Fresno clubs and organizations had me go and lecture to them about Saroyan; so, as an aid, I mounted the best photos on a 4" x 8" plywood board. People were really moved by the presentation which became a labor of love for me. To me, Saroyan's a genius and I love and admire him and will always protect his name."

After repeated requests, in desperation Kalinian made a tape to go along with his slide show so that he could send it around to groups. Although the presentation tape was only a few minutes long, people still kept calling and in six years Kalinian spoke at 55 different events, besides doing his regular photography work. In an effort to improve his work, Kalinian discovered a one-hour audio tape in the Fresno Library consisting of a monologue which Saroyan had made in his own home at the request of KPFA Radio's Charles Amirkhanean. "I studied that tape and found old pictures to go with eleven minutes of it so this was how it all began five years ago and evolved. I even began to see Saroyan in my dreams and felt as if I had his approval. The more I showed, the more new ideas came to me. Question-and-answer sessions gave me more feedback. Two years ago I realized music was missing so I added Hovhannes' St. Vartan, Etchmiadzin and All Men Are Brothers segments which perfectly matched my narration and Saroyan's. So now it was 18 minutes long and even Armenian Teletime used some of it."

At the First Saroyan Festival in Fresno in 1985 Kalinian showed his work for two nights at the Tower Theater to the public and to students and again the following year. "Because I saw people's appreciation and overwhelming approval, I decided finally to get really serious. I was full of energy and ideas so by the end of 1986 I was totally committed." He began to search for what was missing by reviewing his presentation and decided to add a section about Saroyan's body of work. "I had to re-search 60 years of his books and plays. Local librarians gave me a free hand to document everything, take photos, etc. As I wrote a script from my personal feeling, an English major helped me with revisions. While I would mention the new work in progress, I was still showing my old slide version."

Educator Robert Kaprelian who had visited the Saroyan Festival made arrangements for Paul Kalinian to go lecture at Chicago University all expenses paid. "It took me three months to finish what we had so far and last October we held the premiere in Chicago in conjunction with the Armenian Cultural Organization. My complete work — music, audio tape, slides and still pictures — was now 23 minutes long. I was finally satisfied since Saroyan's own work was included. Well, they loved it — about 250



Paul Kalinian

people. After 45 minutes of compliments, questions and answers I asked in all sincerity for criticism. They all laughed at me and stood up to clap instead. I had to review it section by section and finally one brave person said — Why don't you make this available to the public and film it? Then he said — I will take the first step if you will form your own non-profit corporation!"

Inspired, Kalinian returned to Fresno to investigate the legalities of forming a corporation. He soon realized he would have to find an already formed corporation instead, as an umbrella, so as not to become too involved in business concerns. Also, unexpectedly, Armenian corporations in town rejected his idea; so he finally went to Fresno's Media Outreach Inc., an already established non-profit California corporation. Their purpose is to develop understanding between people of differing religions, races and/or natural origins — not far from Saroyan's own purposes. "As a public service they handle and process checks for me and I use their secretary and Tax ID No. This leaves me free to make the film and run my own private business as usual. I realize at the end of all this that the Armenian community has to help me now! If necessary, I would be willing to travel to raise funds by giving my audio-visual presentation to any organization willing to sponsor me and let me introduce myself to prove the value of continuing to the William Saroyan Film Project."

Part One of the film "Growing Up in Fresno" begins in 1900 and is narrated by Saroyan's own voice describing his early life there and, especially, how at age 11 he decided to become a writer. A mid-section briefly describes the Saroyan — Kalinian photography session, and part three covers the 60-year writing career including Saroyan's own 1971 discussions with Fresno students. Also never-before seen films of Saroyan's family life were made available through a chance meeting with Helen Minassian of Palo Alto. Every year in Oakland on the orphanage grounds where Saroyan spent fateful early years, a commemoration is held and lovers of Saroyan literature inevitably show up, curious to see the place so indelibly etched in Saroyan's memory. Last September Kalinian met the woman who had pictures of Saroyan and Archie Minassian together at age 11, a crucial turning point, and home movies of Saroyan with his two children.

Music for the 30-minute film is being composed by Boghos Nazlikian. The educational/documentary will be shown on PBS television with premieres to be held in Fresno, Los Angeles and Yerevan. Because Professor Kouyoumjian of CSF had shown Kalinian's old slide/tape about Saroyan to his class at Yerevan University last year, the Armenian Cul-

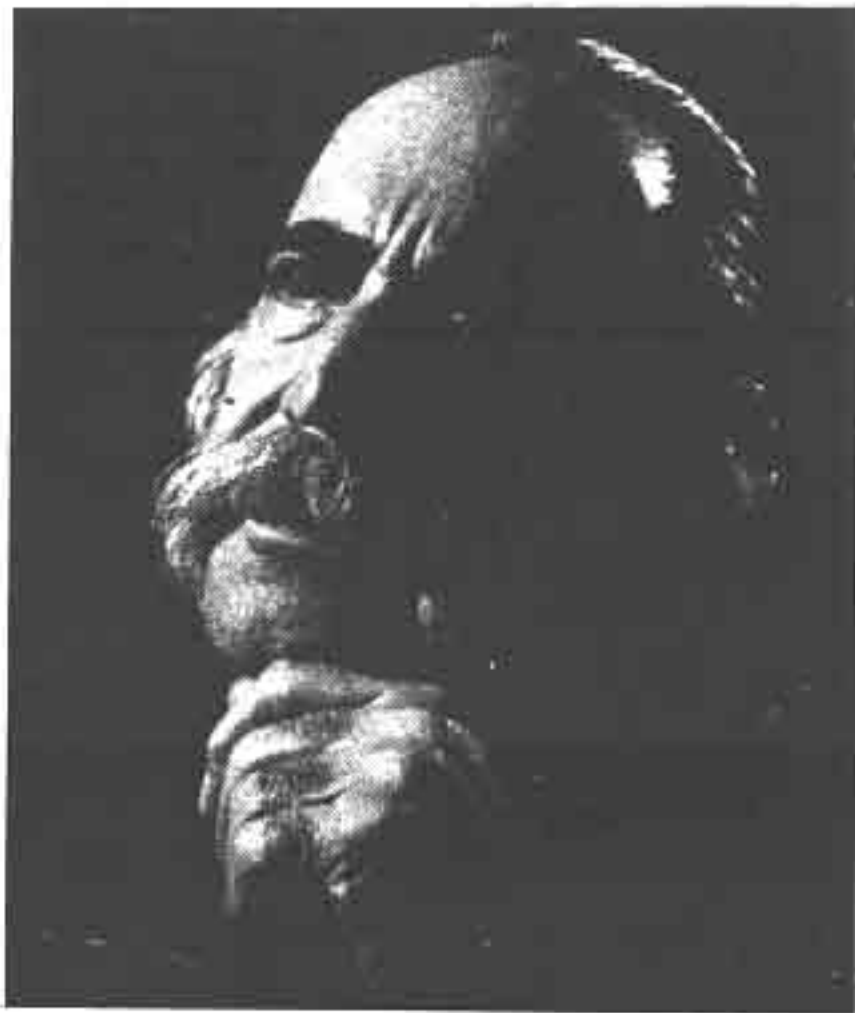
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tural Committee there, and specifically R. Gozmo-
yan, has twice invited Kalinian to show his film there.
This exchange is highly likely because Kalinian is
anxious to locate any possible films made in Ar-
menia on the three occasions that Saroyan went
there, beginning in 1935. Perhaps there exist also
home movies made in Hollywood from the time Saroyan
spent here making "The Human Comedy." A
professional news anchorman was recorded 35 times
by Kalinian to do the film narration and the best
from each version spliced together by the hard-work-
ing perfectionist. Fortunately, his family is also in-
volved 100 percent and united behind his efforts.

Kalinian says, "Each time I view my presentation
I am not Paul Kalinian. Instead I am an odar, a lady,
or a black. I put myself in their eyes because this is
an international film, not just for one audience. The
film is 85% completed now, and in order to make it
available to the public, through schools and libraries
also, expenses of \$30,000 remain. This amount will
cover film duplicating, hiring a camera crew to re-
create Saroyan early years, crews for sound and film
transfer, and completing and disturbing the film."

In the meantime Fresno Channel 18 PBS plans to
do an hour on Paul Kalinian as he works on his pro-
ject and a firm commitment has been made. Given
a tour of downtown Fresno, I saw the bronze wall
plaque at the corner of L and Inyo Streets which is
marked "1988 Saroyan Historic Site where he sold
newspapers" and beside the words is a drawing of
Saroyan the newsboy. A 1988 tall bronze marker
on the civic park lawn shows the city's pride in Sa-
royan too. Wearing bermudas, Kalinian with his
short cropped hair looks boyish. Intensely animated



William Saroyan

Photographed by Paul Kalinian 1981

when Saroyan is the topic, he is acting straight from
the heart, with all work so far coming from his own
funds. To date his fund-raising has garnered him only
\$3,600. Hopefully, his countrymen will further open
their pocketbooks towards realization of this worthy
project — a golden opportunity for Armenians to
let the world know more about their best-applauded
spokesman, William Saroyan.