

New Saroyan Film Draws Raves in Boston

Kalinian's documentary reveals poignancy, complexity

by Antranig Kasbarian

Greater Boston Armenians were treated to a refreshing program on Friday, February 7, as the Hamazkain Educational and Cultural Association offered a premiere showing of "William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer," an ambitious new documentary film chronicling the life of the great Armenian-American author, playwright, and humanitarian. The program, held at ALMA's Third Floor Gallery in Watertown, drew a crowd of more than 175 persons.

Produced by Fresno-based photographer Paul Kalinian, the hour-long documentary has been shown in seven east coast communities, drawing widespread praise and enthusiasm. Mr. Kalinian himself has been on hand for all showings.

The Feb. 7 program opened with welcoming remarks by Hamazkain organizing committee member Rouzan Khachatourian. She in turn introduced Mr. Kalinian, who offered his views on the importance of the film and described how the film was produced.

Kalinian began by noting the difficulty of attempting to condense the life of a 72-year-old genius into a one-hour film. Saroyan's life and work, Kalinian recalled, passed through various stages of development, each with its own particular richness, yet Saroyan was also a man who possessed fundamental qualities that remained constant throughout his life. Thus, at the most basic level, the film was a challenge for Kalinian because it required painstaking research in order to reveal a well-rounded view of Saroyan.

Kalinian also briefly reflected on Saroyan's importance to Armenians, dwelling particularly on the courageous role he played in introducing Armenian culture to American audiences at a time when tolerance for ethnic minorities was especially low in this country.

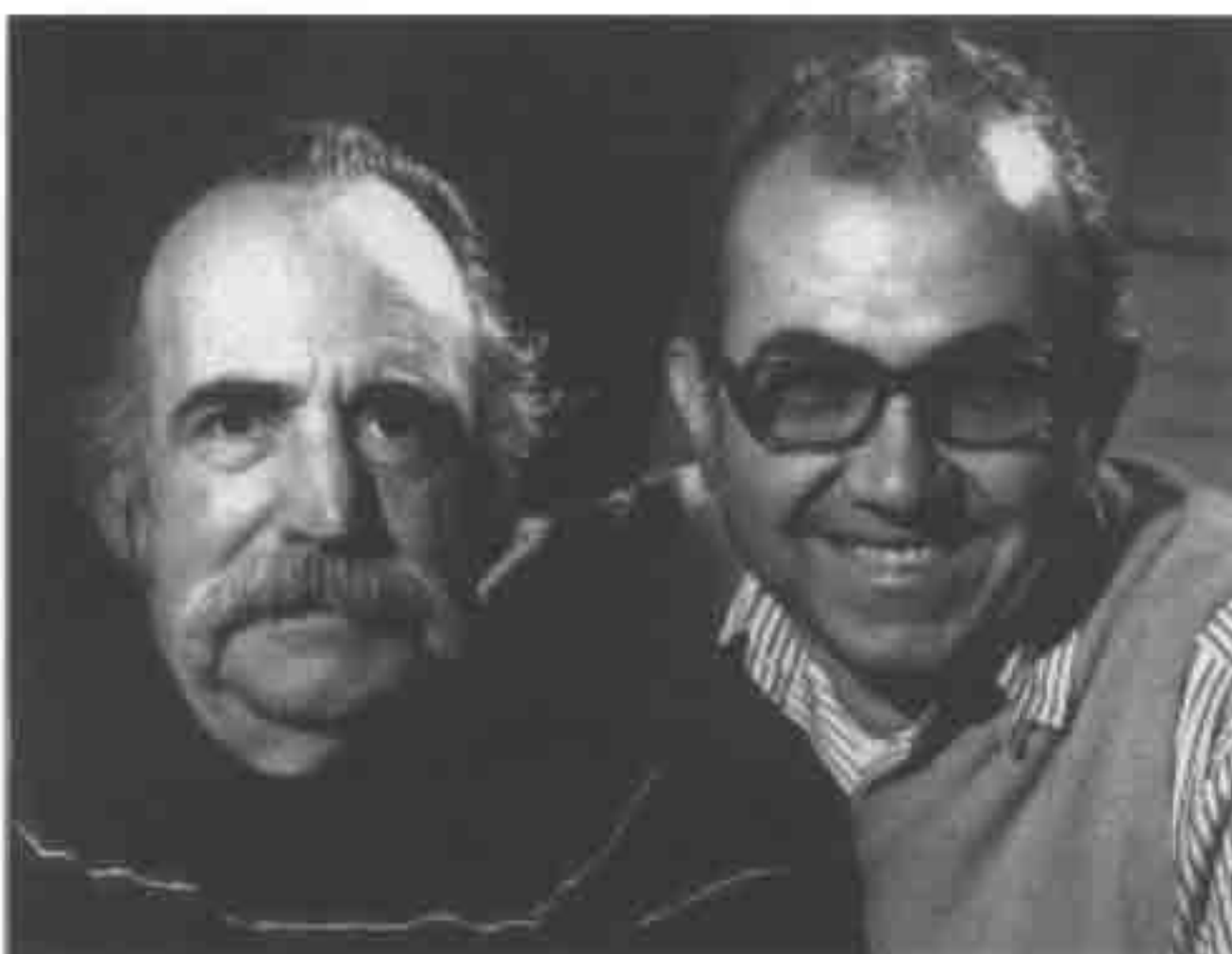
Kalinian then described other challenges he encountered in his quest to produce a high quality film. He explained how it took six years for him to complete the documentary, mainly due to numerous delays resulting from high production costs. These production costs, Kalinian argued, were incurred because of his unwillingness to compromise on quality in any area—sound, narration, visual appeal, editing, etc.

"William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer" is indeed of high quality, as it combines exhaustive documentary research with a variety of sophisticated techniques to produce a view of Saroyan that is multi-dimensional without sacrificing depth of vision.

Following some introductory acknowledgements, the film begins with Saroyan reminiscing about his past, as viewers are introduced to a collage of portraits taken from different stages of his life. After this brief overview, the film proceeds roughly in chronological fashion, depicting the various phases of Saroyan's life, accompanied by an always-clear, understated narration provided by veteran actor Mike Connors.

Beginning with Saroyan's childhood in Fresno, California, the film attempts to present not only Saroyan himself but also the people and the environments that shaped his thoughts, attitudes, lifestyles—and inevitably, his writing. Viewers are given a glimpse, through photos, preserved footage, and re-enactments, of what early 20th century Fresno must have been like—from the insular, old-country family life, to the often-hostile *odar* school and street environments, to the friendly, inviting landscape that gave free rein to young Saroyan's optimistic spirit.

Viewers are then led through the different stages of Saroyan's life—the aspiring writer, the accomplished artist at the pinnacle of critical and popular acclaim, the war years, marriage and family strife, continued pro-



William Saroyan with Paul Kalinian

ductivity and diversity of output as he matured, his consistent attachment to Armenia and Armenians, and the increasingly deep and philosophical writings of Saroyan's later years. Again, these are depicted using a variety of means including old film footage, photographs, interviews with friends and associates, family histories, copies and excerpts of his works, as well as personal memoirs and memorabilia, all woven together smoothly and at an steady pace.

The film reveals a man of tremendous creativity, energy, and earnestness—largely unspoiled by the fame and fortune he had earned—but also a man not without his inner contradictions. A genuine soul who held disdain for materialism, big business, convention, and anything else that might compromise his art, Saroyan was nevertheless notorious for excesses such as heavy drinking, compulsive gambling and the erratic behavior associated with those qualities.

In many ways, Saroyan was also a very strong and committed man. As the film points out repeatedly, his Armenian heritage and worldview were not matters of convenience, but integral parts of his personality which he consciously retained, affirmed, and reaffirmed. Indeed, Saroyan's Armenian-ness rarely strayed very far from the matter at hand—whether in his writing or in his public activities. All the more remarkable is that Saroyan's love and devotion for his people came at a time when Armenians in America had not yet "come out of the closet," i.e. had not yet begun to shed their inferiority complex toward the people and the practices that surrounded them. In bringing out Saroyan's handling of a life with one foot in America and one foot in Armenia, the film also provides a meaningful reminder to Armenian-Americans of the experiences they have faced over the past 75 years.

One small drawback to this film: Although the film offers a three-dimensional portrait of Saroyan *the man*, it focuses much less on Saroyan *the writer*. A more balanced approach—including a more meaty and diverse sampling of his texts—could have offered further clues about his genius and the sources of his inspiration.

Nevertheless, overall, "William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer" deserves our applause. (It certainly received plenty of applause that night.) For Paul Kalinian has produced a fine documentary that provides a meaningful look at Saroyan and, in the process, ties in with the larger Armenian-American experience. Just as importantly, the film's high quality provides fitting contrast to some subpar Armenian film ventures we have witnessed in recent years and offers us hope for better things to come. □