

E D I T O R I A L

Promoting Armenian Culture in America

It is often said that Armenian-Americans today are culturally less literate than they were, say, 20 or 40 years ago. And not without reason. For whether viewed from the standpoint of loss of the Armenian language, the woeful level of attendance at most cultural events, or the more general phenomenon of assimilation, most evidence points to an inability—indeed a lack of interest—for cultural enrichment among the vast majority of Armenian-Americans.

But let's also look at the other side of the coin. Perhaps Armenian-Americans do retain a potential for interest in Armenian culture, but have not had their interest activated because our established cultural organizations have not found innovative ways of reaching the people. After all, as we look about us, we find that the standard "cultural programs" still held during gatherings and anniversary celebrations are for the most part presented as they have been for many years now—entirely in the Armenian language and employing renditions of poetry, music, or theater that have been repeated for 50 years or more. Such programs, on the one hand, do not attract our English speakers, and on the other hand, are tiring the Armenian speakers who have heard the same thing dozens of times before. It is no wonder, then, that well-established organizations designed to promote Armenian culture are failing to do so effectively, often reaching only a limited circle of devoted supporters.

Which is why we are so elated over the widespread, enthusiastic response to the recent premiere showings of "William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer," a new documentary film by Paul Kalinian which appeared in seven east coast communities. The showings, sponsored by the Hamazkain Educational and Cultural Association, proved to be a major attraction—claiming close to 2000 viewers over a three-week period. Perhaps what is most important is that most of these viewers were from outside the traditional Hamazkain support base of Armenian-speakers.

There are several reasons for this, most importantly the name-appeal of William Saroyan himself, a man closely identified with the Armenian-American experience. But there is more to it. A professionally made documentary film—produced in English—is an unusual treat among the customary fare of Armenian cultural presentations; it is also a user-friendly means of communicating with Armenian-Americans, many of whom are well-acquainted with the documentary as both an educational and entertaining experience.

Mr. Kalinian and Hamazkain are to be commended for their efforts. They have demonstrated that Armenian culture—when presented not as a museum piece but as a progressive force that relates to people's lives—can indeed claim the attention and the imagination of many who at first glance appear to be beyond reach.