

Spotlight

Filmmaker shares Saroyans life in labor of love

By John Scalzi



Paul Kalinian & Susie Kalinian

It's possible that Paul Kalinian has seen more of William Saroyan than anyone else has during the past 20 years.

Kalinian, a Fresno photographer and friend of the Armenian-American literary star who died in 1981, spent the better part of the past decade piecing together a documentary on Saroyan Life as a tribute and as a way to educate others, particularly Armenians, about the man and his work.

Kalinian's efforts have paid off: Last July, his hourlong documentary, "William Saroyan: The Man, the Writer" was awarded the Leigh Weeper Gold Award for best documentary at the 18th annual Philadelphia International Film Festival.

Other awards have come from the Houston International Film Festival, the Columbus International Film Festival and the Nouveau Festivale Internationale Du Cinema, in Montreal.

Later this year, Kalinian will tour the film throughout the United States and Canada to benefit the Armenian General Benevolent Union. The tour will take him to New York, Chicago and other major cities. And there are plans to take the film to other countries, including Saroyan's and Kalinian's ancestral homeland of Armenia.

As exciting as all of this is to Kalinian, the filmmaker stresses that personal fame or fortune was never his intention.

"I didn't make this film to make money, but to make Saroyan more known to the general public," Kalinian said. "Especially to Armenians, because many Armenians don't know much about William Saroyan. And some of them have a negative feeling about William Saroyan."

Kalinian began working on his film after a presentation on Saroyan at the University of Chicago in 1987. Kalinian was exhibiting his portraits of the writer when he was approached by an audience member named Thomas Kooyumjian. Kooyumjian suggested Kalinian make a film on Saroyan's life, and promised to help finance the project.

Encouraged, Kalinian began writing the documentary script. "I had this vision in my mind," he said. "I knew exactly how it was going to start and how it was going to end. But the longer the film, the more money you need to spend. When I first wrote the script, it was for three hours. So when I put it on the timing, it came out to half a million dollars."

Kalinian pared down the script by concentrating on two major themes: Saroyan's impact on America as a writer, and the importance of Saroyan's Armenian heritage in the writer's development and works. The script was reduced to 36 minutes (the rest of the film consists of Saroyan's own words).

Having dealt with the script, Kalinian asked the William Saroyan Foundation for permission to go through the writer's private collection of photographs. After several months, the foundation gave its approval, and Kalinian headed for Saroyan's archives at Bancroft Library, located at the University of California at Berkeley. For Kalinian, who befriended Saroyan late in the author's life, examining his friend's life in photos had a profound effect.

"Every time I saw his younger photographs, it seemed to me like I was alive at the time and living with him, and sometimes I'd look at the pictures and imagine that time," Kalinian said. "Looking at the pictures was really like going to a movie theater and looking at the finished product. It was like I was standing next to him as a ghost, and watching everything he was doing at the time. I was living that life with him."

Kalinian indeed lived a life with Saroyan. After initially selecting more than a thousand pictures and negatives, Kalinian spent the next three years restoring and preparing the photographs to be shot on film.

An additional challenge came in producing live-action scenes to bridge actual film clips of Saroyan and the still photographs of the writer and the times. These scenes include reenactments of Saroyan's family moving from Sanger to San Francisco at the beginning of the century, and scenes derived from Saroyan's writing.

Because Kalinian was working on a severely constrained budget, producing these scenes required a combination of planning and inventiveness. In one scene, a young boy is shown waving to a man on a train. The footage of the boy was shot more than a year before the footage of the train; the two were later melded seamlessly.

Susie Kalinian, Kalinian's daughter and the film's associate producer, recounted another story of last-minute creativity that involved a scene featuring Saroyan's family and a horse and buggy.

"I had in my mind a family that would be perfect for the family in this scene," she said. "The two girls who played Saroyans sisters, little Saroyan, and the mom are an actual family. And so I wanted that look. The woman's husband also had that look, and I wanted him to be Armenak Saroyan, William's father."

"The only problem was, we had a horse-and-buggy scene, and that man had never ridden a horse. The man who was donating the horse and buggy, Art Powell, said, I am the only one who can control this horse.' The only problem was, this guy was blond. So I said I had no problem. And I dyed [Powell's] hair, gave him a moustache, and he became Armenak Saroyan. And that was done on the spot."

The film was premiered in San Francisco to help fund the William Saroyan chair for Armenian Studies at Berkeley.



William Saroyan



Director Paul Kalinian and producer Susie Kalinian