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PAUL KALINIAN'S FILM STIRS MUCH EXCITEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

By Siran Sarian

Paul Kalinian could very well have rested on his laurels as a certified motion picture producer and expert photographer with practically forty years of experience in that field. However, seized with the desire to make tangible his love and admiration for William Saroyan, the Armenian-American writer who became known the whole world over through his works, Kalinian went ahead and made a documentary film about him, entitled "William Saroyan, The Man The Writer." The result turned out to be so successful in terms of its photographs, various forms of presentation, music and meticulous artistry that it has won six awards in international documentary film festivals: five for the author, and one for the music.

It won the Finalist Award among the 57 documentary films submitted to the 27th Worldfest Houston International Film Festival held in April 1994. In June 1995, the film was presented at the Nouveau Festival International du Cinema in Montreal, Canada. The next month, from among the films representing 12 different nations, it received the Leigh Whipper Gold Award for Best Documentary Film at the 18th Annual Philadelphia International Film Festival. In October of the same year, out of 80 documentary films competing in the 43rd Annual Columbus International Film Festival, it won three awards: the first two were Bronze Plaque Recognition of Excellence Awards in The Arts and The Humanities divisions; the third, an Honorable Mention Award for Script Writing. At the 19th Annual Philadelphia International Film Festival in July 1996, composer Paul Nazlikian won an Honorable Mention Award for Music Score in The Music division among 22 documentary films.

It did not take long for the Armenian General Benevolent Union to recognize the value of Kalinian's documentary on Saroyan as an educational tool to familiarize the Armenian people more closely with the life and works of Saroyan. Thus, through the sponsorship of all its chapters around the world, the AGBU organized a world tour for the film to be shown internationally. Kalinian, together with his wife Araxie, have decided to donate the proceeds of the film's screenings back to the AGBU in appreciation of the organization's efforts.

The series of tours, which began in December 1995, is still ongoing. To date, the Kalinians have been present at the screenings of their film in 13 cities in three countries -- U.S.A., Canada, and Australia; Europe, South America, the Middle East and Armenia are next on their itinerary.

Wherever this film has been presented, it has created excitement and interest about the person of William Saroyan and his work, not only among Armenian viewers but non-Armenians as well. This is especially true among the younger generation who were present at the screenings and became filled with a new patriotic Armenian spirit, one that was both constructive and infectious.

Recently, the Kalinians spent a month in Australia, visiting various cities and appearing at the screenings of their film organized by the local AGBU chapters. They returned to their home in Fresno, California, with a deep feeling of satisfaction and a host of unforgettable memories. On this occasion, we conducted an interview with them in order to learn about the film's production, its various screenings and the reactions it produced in various Armenian communities regarding its subject matter, the person that Saroyan was, and various aspects of the preservation of the Armenian identity.

Q: When did you depart for Australia and what kind of reception were you given by the local AGBU chapters?

A: By invitation of the AGBU chapters in Sydney and Melbourne, my wife Araxie and I left for Australia on June 6, 1996 in order to present my documentary film "William Saroyan: The Man The Writer" in Sydney on June 9th and in Melbourne on June 16th. After a pleasant flight lasting approximately 14 1/2 hours, we arrived in Sydney. We were warmly welcomed at the airport with bouquets of flowers and baskets of fruit by Mr. Vahe Artinian, the chairman of the Sydney AGBU chapter's Executive Committee, along with its membership, as well as by the Kahramanian family, who had been neighbors of ours when we lived in Beirut. We were then taken to our hotel.

A week later we were given an equally warm reception in Melbourne by Mrs. Diana Tchakerian, chairlady of the local AGBU chapter, and Mrs. Maral Chorbajian.

For two weeks, we were the guests of the AGBU. For the remaining days, we were the guests of Mrs. Marie Kahramanian. Unfortunately, one month passed very quickly, such that we were not able to accept all the invitations extended to us. Thus, we returned to Fresno, in the hope of again meeting with our compatriots in Australia.



A partial view of audience in Sydney



Paul Kalinian addressing the audience after the film

Q: Were you satisfied with the screenings? How did you spend your free time and what are your overall impressions of Australia and the people you met?

A: The screenings went very well. I must say that both chapters were extremely well organized. Both Mr. Artinian and Mrs. Tchakerian deserve much appreciation for having done all that was required to ensure the success of the programs. In both cities, the theaters used were not only comfortable but equipped as well with the best projectors and sound system for film screening. Numerous expressions of appreciation were heard regarding the film and the audiences departed satisfied and favorably impressed.

The first thing about Australia that grabbed our attention was the cleanliness of the country. As for the cities of Sydney, Melbourne, and Canberra, each has its unique beauty. Worthy of mention are Sydney's world-famous opera house and 305-meter-high tower, in whose revolving restaurant we spent a very enjoyable evening with AGBU couples, with a panoramic view of the city before our eyes.

There were numerous get-togethers and tours. On a daily basis for an entire month we enjoyed the hospitality and company of the Artinians, Tchakerians, Kouyoumjians, Iskenderians, Derderians, Chorbajians, Shahinians, Very Rev. Totonjian, Chakmaks, Isguzars, Gulbenkians, Hagopians, Dikranians, Karagelinians, Mavlians, Duzians, as well as the Kahramanian clan.

This trip afforded us the opportunity to make our acquaintance with visiting clergy: His Beatitude Archbishop Karekin Kazanjian, Patriarch of Constantinople, and His Eminence Archbishop Shahan Svajian, during a party hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Varouj and Silvia Iskenderian in their posh residence. We also made our acquaintance with His Eminence Archbishop Aghan Baliozian, Primate of the Armenian Church of Australia.

My wife Araxie and I enjoyed the warm ambiance of the AGBU Alexander School in Sydney; in particular the program of welcome presented by the talented pupils in our honor and dedicated to Saroyan's memory greatly impressed us. I saw the spirit of Saroyan in each and every student. If Saroyan could have seen what I saw that day, he would have felt very, very proud indeed.

Mrs. Tchakerian, the chairlady of the Melbourne AGBU chapter, presented us with a lovely watercolor with a typical Armenian theme after the film presentation in Melbourne on June 16th; additionally, Mr. Artinian, the chairman of the Sydney AGBU chapter, presented us with a tastefully etched symbolic plaque during our farewell party at the AGBU hall. Indeed, we brought back with us unforgettable and sweet memories from each and every person we met.



Children at AGBU Alexander School in Sydney during film presentation,

Q: According to the information we received, your film has met with success, having created much excitement and, in particular, aroused the interest of the younger generation of Australian Armenians. Could you perhaps provide us your explanation regarding this?

A: I must admit that the reaction to my film was more positive than I had expected. Of course, the main reason for the interest created was William Saroyan himself, as he emerged through his words and the film in general, while those who created the excitement were the chairmen of the AGBU chapters and the members of the organizing committees. Still weeks before our departure from Fresno, they had already begun to talk about Saroyan there and create interest in him. Prior to leaving Fresno, I had given an interview over the phone with Mrs. Evanian and Miss Iskenderian to be broadcasted by the radio stations in Sydney. Following my arrival in Sydney I had six interviews: two with Miss Elizabeth Taric of SBS - World View; one with Mrs. Sorenson of ABC, Arts Today; and one each with Mrs. Evanian, Mr. Manoogian and Very Rev. Totonjian for their radio programs; and one with Sardarabad radio station. Worthy of mention and encouragement too, was the professional quality Armenian radio program of 15-year-old Arto Artinian. The film was shown four times instead of twice. Government dignitaries and non-Armenians were also present at the screenings. However, the development that delighted me the most was the interest shown by the younger generation toward Saroyan. I spoke about Saroyan to Armenian schoolchildren, ranging in age from 5 to 19, in four schools. Although many of them hadn't initially recognized his name, nevertheless, when they heard about him, they began to become interested in him and feel proud of belonging to the same nationality as Saroyan. Worthwhile articles were published in this connection in Armenia, Garoon, and the local Australian papers; particularly noteworthy is the article by Miss Lisa Iskenderian. Moreover, I had an interview with the well-known historian Dr. Avedis Yapoujian for the AGBU monthly magazine, Mioutune.

I hadn't expected that the Armenians of Australia would show such great respect for, and interest in, our world-famous writer. That was the reason, perhaps, that my wife Araxie and I felt so close to our distant compatriots. Many others certainly would have welcomed the opportunity to get to know and become more familiar with the great Armenian writer but, owing to scheduling difficulties, we were not able to accommodate everybody.



A partial view of audience in Melbourne, Aus. for, "William Saroyan: The Man The Writer"

Q: I have attended the screening of your masterpiece documentary film twice already yet I wish to see it again. To with, as one who is familiar with the film, I take the liberty of recommending that every Armenian see the film at least once and feel pride in the great son of our nation. I wonder, have you made any plans for videos of the film to be made and sold in the near future or at any time?

A: I'm asked that question wherever I go and everyone is interested in obtaining a copy of the film. It is my hope that one day the film will be recorded on video cassette and available to the general public; and more importantly for copies to be sent to all the schools, libraries and other educational repositories throughout the world. However, there are difficulties with a project of this sort; two important issues must be taken into consideration:

First -- let me say up front that I'm not a businessman. There is a great demand and market for this film across the world. Whoever buys the film must not only be knowledgeable about the intricacies of the market, but must be qualified to handle a project of this caliber.

Second -- who will buy it? This question greatly concerns me. I must act very cautiously. I wish to assign responsibility only to reliable persons or organizations whom I know I can trust, so that the film may serve its purpose--which is to immortalize the life and works of William Saroyan for the study and enjoyment of the generations to come. Some people tell me, "Sell [the film], take your money and enjoy life; let the buyer do whatever he wishes." Maybe I would do so if I had made this film to make a profit.

Q: I'm certain that the making of such documentary films requires a lot of time and money. How were you able to accomplish this great work? Considering that you are the first Armenian-American documentary feature film producer to win six international film festival awards for the same work, are you encouraged sufficiently by all this success to entertain notions of a second project? Generally speaking, what are your thoughts about the art of film?

A: I have projects in mind and new ones can also be created. However, before embarking on such a project, funds are traditionally first secured. I did just the opposite. The reason is that if I had waited for the funds to materialize, I would still be waiting today and the film would never have been finished. I used my own personal resources to pay for all the expenses of making and producing the film, and that's why it took eight years to complete the work. By means of this film, regardless of the cost, I wanted to express my admiration and respect to the memory of William Saroyan.

I believe that it is far easier and more practical to familiarize non-Armenians with the Armenian people, through the medium of film. All Armenian organizations, without exception, must give thought to forming a committee whose aim will be to familiarize the world about our nation and its culture through films. This is a proven vehicle and medium routinely used by non-Armenians.

The art of film is a marvelous creation which we can utilize, by means of motion pictures, to teach our present and future generations of Armenians the history of the Armenian nation, the life stories of Armenian heroes, and Armenian culture. The stress in this century is on the visual. The most enjoyable thing, particularly for a child, is to watch a film. Why not create the opportunity and means whereby our younger generation can learn Armenian history in an interesting manner, without drudgery, and thereby grow up imbued with an Armenian spirit?

Q: As it is, your film is self-explanatory for those who have seen it. Would you care to briefly explain its content and aim for those who haven't seen it?

A: Gladly. First, I should mention that the film was written, directed and produced by me; it was co-produced by my daughter, Susie; my son, Harold, and my wife, Araxie, worked as my assistants. The narrator (in English) is Mike Connors. The music score belongs to Paul Nazlikian while the graphical illustrations are those of Sarkis Muradyan. The film is one hour long, shot with 16 millimeter film in three tones--sepia, black & white, and color.

The story begins in the early 1900's with a presentation of the principal phases of Saroyan's life, in which the viewer finds memories of his childhood, his birthplace, his love for literature, his achieving fame, his 60-year literary activity, his feelings concerning his adopted country and Armenia, and his message to the Armenian people and mankind in general. While Saroyan mostly tells his life story in English, he speaks about the composer Aram Khachaturian in Armenian and explains the circumstances in which he learned to speak Armenian. The film not only presents Saroyan's life but the history of the Armenian nation as well. The film aspires to familiarize our people and all the peoples of the world more closely with Saroyan and, through him, with our nation and its culture.

I conclude from the excitement expressed by the audiences during the film's showings that it makes a deep impact on them and earns high approval from them. Through the film, they come to know and become more familiar with William Saroyan. I hope that the news media and the Armenian press, in turn, both in the Armenian and English languages, will reflect frequently and extensively on the life and works of this great Armenian. It is indeed worth mentioning that, since Saroyan's death in 1981, 15 volumes have been published about him by non-Armenians.

Q: William Saroyan is famous the world over for his literary works and, as such, is simultaneously the most recognized Armenian among foreigners. Nevertheless, many Armenians don't know anything about him, perhaps because Saroyan wrote in English, a language which is inaccessible to a significant percentage of our people, and/or they simply haven't shown any interest in Saroyan. Can you present Saroyan to us in a few words?

A: Saroyan was born on August 31, 1908 in the city of Fresno, California. He was the fourth child born to Armenak and Takouhi Saroyan, immigrants from Bitlis. His father died before he even reached the age of three. His mother placed her four children in an orphanage for five years and then brought them home to Fresno. Saroyan attended the local Emerson grammar school and, at the same time, when he was 9 years old, sold newspapers in the streets of Fresno, in order to help support his family. At the age of 14, he left school and decided to become a self-made writer.

Saroyan's talent was first projected to the world through the medium of an Armenian-English newspaper, Hairenik of Boston. In 1934, at the age of 26, with the publication of his first book, *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*, William Saroyan became an overnight literary sensation. His first successful Broadway play was *My Heart's in the Highlands* in 1939, and in the same year, Saroyan was the first American writer to win both the Drama Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for his play, *The Time of Your Life*. He refused to accept the Pulitzer Prize and money on the grounds that, "Commerce should not patronize art..." and he added, "it is no more great or good than anything else I have written." Saroyan is unique among writers. He acknowledged the Armenian culture as an important source of literary inspiration, especially notable in the Book-Of-The-Month choice, *My Name Is Aram*, in 1940. In 1943, another Book-Of-The-Month choice, *The Human Comedy*, was dedicated to his mother and made into an MGM movie which won him an Oscar for Best Writing Original Screen Story. Saroyan said, "Although I write in English, I am nonetheless an Armenian writer."

In 1943, Saroyan married actress Carol Marcus. They were blessed with two children: Aram and Lucy. After marrying the same woman twice, their marriage ended in divorce for a final time. He never married again.

Saroyan published more than 60 books, which contain thousands of short stories, dramatic works, poems, and memoirs. Along with more than a thousand drawings, he also composed most of the incidental music for some his works of drama. He skillfully presented the Armenian nation and Armenian culture through his writings. His unpublished works number thrice that of his published ones.

During the course of his life, Saroyan visited Armenia, his beloved country, four times. He died of cancer on May 18, 1981 in Fresno at the age of 72. He loved America, but he did not forget Armenia. Saroyan wanted his heart in the Armenian highlands. A year after his death, according to his will, half of his cremated remains were permanently enshrined in the Pantheon Of Greats in Yerevan, Armenia, while the other half remains in the Chapel Of The Light, in Fresno, California.

During his lifetime, Saroyan always refused to accept the prizes, awards, decorations and panegyrics given to him, as well as numerous other titles, gifts and invitations to testimonial banquets and the like. Such individuals are rare.

Contrary to his wish, the huge theater at the Fresno Convention Center was named after him posthumously. An elementary school bears his name and a section of the Fresno Metropolitan Museum has been dedicated to his memory. Saroyan's bust and monument stand in the center of town. Plaques have also been placed on the homes where Saroyan lived, the corner he sold newspapers, his elementary school, and the place where he was born.

Annually in May, Saroyan's memory is evoked through literary competitions, popular concerts and a tour of the areas of town where he lived. Furthermore a William Saroyan Chair for Armenian Studies, the first of its kind, has recently been established at the University of California at Berkeley, for which a portion of the funds were raised through the showing of my film at the AGBU San Francisco chapter. Additionally, Saroyan's works are currently studied and analyzed in literature courses taught at various universities and schools throughout the United States and numerous countries around the world.

Saroyan felt strengthened by his roots; more accurately, he derived his strength and literary inspiration from his roots and then wrote about them. His works have sold millions and have been translated into more than 24 languages.

For us Armenians, Saroyan is a source of pride owing to his 60-year literary activity, particularly since, through his works, he acquainted non-Armenians with the Armenian nation and culture at a time when even in America the Armenians were persecuted, looked askance upon and hated. Through the roots of his soul, he always remained connected to each individual of the Armenian race, and his greatest wish was to see the Armenian people united and strengthened.

Indirectly, through his literature, Saroyan individually did more for his people than an entire nation could accomplish. Now, I think it is our debt of gratitude and obligation to pay our respect to him.

Q: You are also the photographer of the famous William Saroyan portrait taken on March 26, 1976, for which the Saroyan postage stamps were based upon. Saroyan was the first and only individual to be jointly honored by the USA and the USSR Postal Services on their Commemorative Postal Stamps. Ten years after his death, on May 22, 1991, First-Day-Issue ceremonies took place simultaneously in Fresno, California and in Yerevan, Armenia. I was present at the ceremony in Fresno, which took place in front of the entrance to the William Saroyan Theater in splendid fashion and in the presence of a huge crowd. That day was a singular and historic day for the Armenian people yet, despite the fact that the Armenian community of Fresno numbers in excess of 40,000, the number of Armenians present barely amounted to a handful.

My next-to-the-last question is connected to that ceremony which has left dark spots in my mind. Until today it remains a puzzle for me as to why you weren't seated next to the 14 individuals on stage, one of whom was the graphic designer of the Saroyan stamp? Why weren't you, the original creator of the photograph, there?

A: That's still an enigma to me too. Let me simply state that I wasn't invited. It's not necessary to emphasize too much about this incident, but since you asked, that was an embarrassing situation not only for me, but for others as well who noticed my absence. My name was accidentally mentioned when one of those present told the master of ceremonies that the author of the photograph was sitting in the back rows. After the event was over, the master of ceremonies seated me among those who were autographing the program. The photograph on the program cover, incidentally, was my work too. The following day, the local American daily newspaper, the Fresno Bee, also commented on this unfortunate incident. The sole explanation offered by those in charge of the program was that a mistake must have been made.

Ironically back in 1986, when the US Postal Service administration in Washington, DC, first selected my work for the stamp, from numerous Saroyan photographs, they requested me to keep it a secret until the first day of issue; for which I did.

Sometimes I encounter my works copied by others, which are sold without my permission, despite the fact that I have maintained my copyright to them. Saroyan hated such people. Perhaps that was the reason why he initially told me to get lost the first time I approached him in the hope of taking his photograph.

Q: I congratulate you for this marvelous work which brings credit to our nation and thank the members of your family who have supported you with their effort and patience so that you could immortalize Saroyan through his life and works. To conclude our interview, could you tell us how the tours are going and where the next programs will take place?

A: I thank you for the esteem you hold for my work and for this interview. I confess that I feel a great spiritual satisfaction when I speak about Saroyan.

On behalf of myself and my family, I express deep thanks to the President of the AGBU, Mrs. Louise Manoogian Simone, who furnished the opportunity, and to all the chapters of the AGBU which have sponsored, and will sponsor, the screenings of my film "William Saroyan, The Man The Writer." Also deserving appreciation is Mrs. Anita Anserian, the Director of Chapter Programs at the AGBU headquarters in New York, who meticulously plans our tours with optimum conditions.

The efforts of the AGBU are ongoing. The most current tour is scheduled to take place in Europe beginning in the Spring of 1997 and will span the major cities of England, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, and France.

At present we have received numerous requests to show the film from various organizations, which we hope to satisfy--God willing. Those organizations wishing to reserve a future date to show my film "William Saroyan, The Man The Writer," are kindly requested to contact me in writing at least six months in advance, at the following address: Paul Kalinian, 5178 E. Huntington Ave., Fresno, California 93727-3920 U.S.A.