

Remembering William Saroyan

By Haig Meguerditchian

CHICAGO, IL - On May 5, 1996, the AGBU Chicago Chapter presented an award winning documentary produced by Paul Kalinian at the Onnig M. Norehad Center. The film, titled "William Saroyan, The Man, The Writer," was shown to an enthusiastic capacity crowd thanks to the efforts of the programming committee members Robert Kaprelian, Seta Vartivarian, Haig Meguerditchian, and chairman Maro Bedrossian.

The story opens with Saroyan's childhood in Fresno, California during the early 1900's and spans eight decades until the writer's death in 1981. The film is based on a sixty-year writing career, biographies, interviews recordings, newspapers, magazine articles and Kalinian's own personal experience with him.

William Saroyan was an internationally famous Armenian-American writer, playwright and humanitarian, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author for his book, "The Time of Your Life." In addition, he is known for his literary talent for books such as "My Name is Aram" and "The Human Comedy."



Full capacity audience during question and answer session.



Paul Kalinian addressing the audience

As a film school graduate and aspiring film-maker myself, I had the pleasure to sit down with Paul Kalinian and discuss his film.

HM: Welcome, Mr. Kalinian to AGBU Chicago Chapter. What inspired you to dedicate so much time, energy and devotion into a project of this magnitude?

PK: My inspiration, love and passion for William Saroyan began in the early 1960's. I started reading numerous books by him when I was living in Beirut, Lebanon before I came to the United States in 1964. In my mind, I would always dream that someday I would journey to California and photograph this man. I was obsessed with his writing and personality. When I settled in Fresno I was introduced to William Saroyan on March 26, 1976 through a close friend of mine, sculptor Varaz Samuelian. I asked Saroyan if I could take a few pictures of him, and he replied, "Get lost." I continued to charm him well into the night. Later that evening, Saroyan asked me to sing an old Armenian song, "Giligia." As we sang together, our emotions began to swell. This was the birth of our friendship.

HM: The film has an elegant between romanticism and realism captured cleverly with black and white and sepia photography. You were successful in bringing the colorful images to life without suffocating Saroyan's free spirit. Likewise, you allowed Saroyan to blossom into an enchanted man with tremendous character and presence. In regards to your aesthetic vision, where was your passion for art and music found?

PK: I am extremely fond of music and I wanted this element to make an inormous impact on those who watch this film. I insisted on a unique music composition for this particular story in which the notes could be written without ever seeing the picture. I worked very carefully with Paul Nazlikian and he understood exactly what I wanted. When the audience listens to the music they should imagine a combination of different images simultaneously. I expressed my heart through the music and visual effects.

HM: The flow and pacing thrust the viewer into a magnificent illusion without necessarily realizing the music score as key force. As an Armenian, the creativity in the music chills your soul and soothes your heart. Each gentle note expressing a diverse story. Can you touch on the silence when no dialogue or narration is heard?

PK: I did not want this film to sound like music video; therefore, when the narration stops the music speaks for itself. The silence makes the greatest impact in some areas. For instance, when Saroyan journeys to Yerevan. The audience witnesses a series of still shots. Suddenly, one sees him gracefully walking and moving in sync with the music's climax. At this point, no narration is heard, only silence.

HM: A classic film seizes unique dimensions in that different interpretations on the film's themes can be debated or embraced. He or she becomes enlightened on a physical, intellectual and spiritual level. If there is one universal message you crave your audience to feel about Kalinian the filmmaker and Saroyan the writer, what would it be?

PK: When I first decided to make a documentary film on William Saroyan's life, I sat down and asked myself, "What is this film going to be about? What message is it going to convey to Armenians and non-Armenians?" I wanted to penetrate internationally. Therefore, I decided to put a title on this film on a spiritual level. I wanted to introduce William Saroyan as a famous Armenian writer. To give a voice for Armenians, from an Armenian, through William Saroyan. The combination of these fundamental elements celebrate Saroyan not only as a great writer but a true Armenian hero. For example, I included Saroyan's speaking footage because his spirit spoke to me this way. His words may be written in English; however, he is an Armenian writer. A powerful message for Armenians and non-Armenians as well. The film is not only a documentary, it is the life of the Armenian people. In my next project, if the opportunity arises, I will concentrate more in detail on the Armenian nation, again through William Saroyan. When you talk to people about Saroyan, they will listen, because his name is familiar to general public. In the end, I leave the audience with a dynamic and powerful image to establish this precise message.

HM: My most memorable image is of Saroyan in front of an old church in the shadow of an Armenian khachkar. Suddenly, my emotions are mixed with extreme happiness and sadness. The shot evolves into a dramatic voyage engulfed with delicate sensations which I firmly believe keeps the audience united. Can you sum up your personal perspective on the impact of the film on the audience?

PK: Frankly, I am not fully satisfied from the perspective of the Armenian as a viewer. I feel there is a lack of appreciation of William Saroyan as one of the greatest human beings that lived in the twentieth century. Sometimes, I ask myself: why did I create this film if I am not penetrating the spirit of the Armenian people? Even though there has been an enthusiastic response thus far and people speak passionately about the film, I am still expecting the Armenian people, groups and organizations, to give the highest respect and treatment to William Saroyan. I haven't witnessed this so far. Remember, I am presenting a person to the Armenian people in the highest level, on an international level. I didn't make this film for money. I made this documentary to show the world my great people through a great Armenian. The film is a labor of love, inspired by my genuine passion for William Saroyan as one of the brilliant writers of our time. I can only hope this will be appreciated. I am grateful to the AGBU for sponsoring this film.

In April 1994, Paul Kalinian received the Finalist Award for his film in 57 documentary films, from the Houston International Film Festival. In June 1995, the film was presented at the Nouveau Festival International du Cinema, in Writers Profiles division, in Montreal, Canada. In July 1995, Kalinian received the Leigh Whipper Gold Award for Best Documentary Film, among the 12 competing nations, from the Philadelphia International Film Festival. In October 1995, he received two Bronze Plaque Recognition of Excellence Awards in the division of The Arts and The Humanities, and an Honorable Mention Award for Script Writing in 80 documentary films, from the Columbus International Film Festival. In addition, Kalinian is the inspiration of the design for the Commemorative Postal Stamps of William Saroyan issued by the USA and USSR in 1991.

Kalinian plans to take his dreams and visions to Armenia in the fall.