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## William Saroyan Film

### *A Poignant and Revealing Tribute*

**By Florence Avakian**

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NEW YORK, NY – “Get lost,” were the first words William Saroyan uttered to photographer Paul Kalinian who expressed the desire to take his picture. From that less than positive meeting, a strong friendship grew between the legendary writer and the photographer who so deeply admired him that he virtually dedicated five years to photographing Saroyan, and eight more years to researching and making the award-winning film, “Remembering William Saroyan, The Man, The Writer.”

On Friday, March 29, AGBU-Arts presented at New York's Marc Goodson Theater, this film which won the Documentary Gold Award at the 18th Philadelphia International Film Festival in 1995. It also received the Finalist Award at the 27th Annual Worldfest Houston International Film Festival the year before, and was presented at the International Film Festival in Montreal, Canada.

Kalinian, who calls this project “a labor of love,” also had one of his portraits of Saroyan chosen by both the United States and the Soviet Union postal services for their commemorative postal stamps which were issued jointly on May 22, 1991, in Fresno, California, and Yerevan, Armenia. Saroyan has been the only individual so honored by both countries.

Throughout the film which highlights the writer's childhood, family, his writing, the influences on his work, and especially his deep love for his cultural heritage, the inimitable voice of Saroyan is heard, speaking in both English and Armenian. There is also narration by actor Mike Connors, music composed by Paul Nazlikian, and graphic illustrations of Fresno by Sarkis Muradyan.

Born in Fresno in 1908, Saroyan was the fourth child of Bitlistzi immigrants Armenak (preacher and poet), and Takouhi Saroyan. At age three, he and his siblings were put in an orphanage when his father died and his mother could not support them. “I hated it,” he said of his five year stay there.

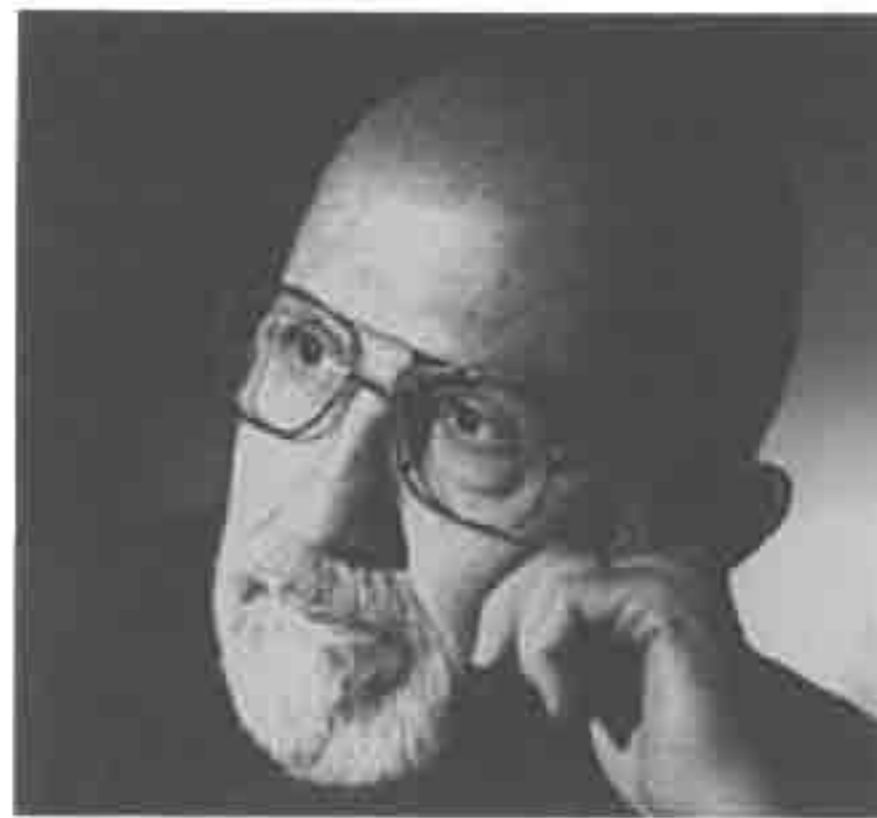
Reunited with his mother, he grew up in a home, speaking only Armenian, and experiencing the prejudice against ethnic minorities in small town USA. “I am an Armenian,” he stated proudly to any bully who came near him. In more gentle moments, he reminisced, “I like rain, orchards and watermelon.” Dropping out of school in the eighth grade to help support the family, he became the most resourceful paper boy in Fresno.

#### Lifelong Affair With Underwood

It was at this time, he and his Underwood manual typewriter became inseparable. His writing first saw the light of day in the Hayrenik newspaper of Boston. But it was with the publication of his first book, “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze” in 1934, that he became the new darling of the literary world.

In 1939, he captured Broadway with “My Heart's in the Highlands.” That same year, he became the first American writer to win both the Drama Critic's Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for his highly successful play, “The Time of Your Life.” Refusing to accept the coveted Pulitzer Prize, he stated one of his life's

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Paul Kalinian

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credos: “Commerce should not patronize art. It (this play) is no more great or good than anything else I have written.”

The strong influence of his Armenian roots was evident in other literary masterpieces, such as “My Name is Aram” which was selected as book of the month in 1940, and “The Human Comedy,” dedicated to his mother. The latter became a successful MGM movie which garnered for him an Academy Award for Best Writing for Original Screen Story.

The major themes of this literary genius always emphasized hope, honesty, and the basic goodness of all people. Materialism, money and success did not matter to Saroyan who throughout his life lived in a modest house, and who even in his last years rode around on a bicycle.

In “The Time of Your Life,” he writes, “Live, so that in that good time there shall be no ugliness or death for yourself or for any life your life touches. Seek goodness everywhere, and when it is found, bring it out of its hiding-place and let it be free and unashamed. Place in matter and in flesh the least of the values, for these are the things that hold death and must pass away... In the time of your life, live - so that in that wondrous time you shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world, but shall smile to the infinite delight and mystery of it.”

The esteemed writer, who also wrote many essays and poems, and dabbled in

art, had over 60 published books, which were translated into more than two dozen languages. His works have been bought in the millions. However, his personal life did not reach that level of satisfaction. Twice married to and divorced from Carol Marcus, Saroyan had two children, Aram and Lucy with whom he had a difficult relationship.

Towards the end of his life, he strengthened his ties with his Armenian roots. Probably the most poignant footage of this memorable film involves his visits to Armenia where he is shown marveling in the ancient architecture, joking with admirers, communing with his



William Saroyan

fellow writers and artists, and singing songs he loved so much. He also visited Bitlis, saw his father's house and walked on his father's land.

Saroyan died of prostate cancer in May 1981, at age 72, about a mile from where he was born. Just before his death, he quipped, “Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case.” Half of his cremated remains were enshrined in the Pantheon of Greats in Yerevan, and the other half remained in Fresno. However, the immortal words of this remarkable writer will always live in the hearts of all who value the things money can't buy - hope, love, optimism, truth, goodness