

Impressions of Paul Kalinian's Moving Documentary "William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer"

By Aris G. Sevag

Having previously translated two interviews conducted with the author of the subject documentary by Siran Sarian, "Paul Kalinian's Film Stirs Much Excitement in Australia" and "European Viewers Greatly Inspired by Saroyan Documentary," which were published in the November 16, 1996 and October 18, 1997 issues of TAR Int'l respectively, this writer finally had the opportunity to see the film on October 24 at the St. Leon Armenian Church Community Center in Fair Lawn, NJ, presented by the Armenian General Benevolent Union and St. Leon Armenian Church

The validity of the maxim, "Greatness is achieved by the individual," has once again been certified by the end result of Fresno photographer Paul Kalinian's five--year relationship with world-famous Armenian-American writer William Saroyan and his subsequent 13-year herculean effort to write, produce and direct a documentary film worthy of its subject: William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer.

While Saroyan pursued the mission of championing aspiration, hope and honesty as the most desirable and enduring qualities of mankind, in his voluminous writings spanning a 60-year period, Kalinian, in his own right, can likewise be regarded as a man with a mission. Not only did he realize a dream which he had harbored for years--to find and photograph William Saroyan--but he also took it a few steps further, first by preparing a ten-minute audio-visual presentation of his portraits of Saroyan with narration, entitled How I Shot Saroyan, and then by fleshing it out and making the one-hour 16mm documentary, which he completed in 1994.

The documentary's story line begins in Fresno, California, in the early 1900's and spans 8 decades until Saroyan's death in 1981. It is based on biographies, interviews, recordings, newspapers, magazine articles, Saroyan's works, and Kalinian's personal experience with him. Included are the city of Fresno--past and present, on-location reenactment scenes, home movies, rare footage, photographs, memorabilia, and Saroyan's last visits to his ancestral homeland. The film is in color, sepia tone, and black and white.

The true beneficiaries of this "collaboration" between the driven writer and the equally driven photographer-filmmaker are the viewers, thousands of whom have already seen the film in the United States, Eastern Canada, Europe, and Australia. Thousands more in Western Canada, the Middle East, South America, and Armenia will hopefully have the opportunity to see it by the end of 1998.

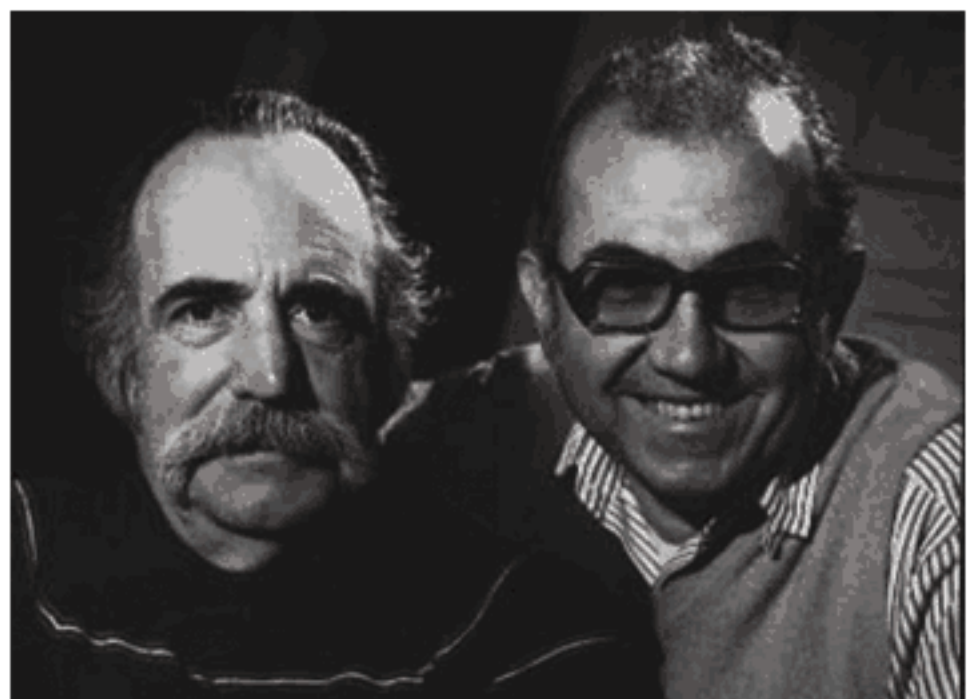
William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer is a work of love and care which commands the viewer's attention from the opening scene to the final fading image of Saroyan. Although Kalinian's love for, and admiration for, Saroyan clearly comes across in the film, he has carefully--and thankfully--steered clear of superlatives which would have detracted from the professionalism and objectivity that characterize his documentary. Kalinian has masterfully interwoven Saroyan's own words about his life and works with his complementary script to create a richly condensed and smooth-running story, which is as comprehensive as a film of this length can be, with no superfluous elements.

Kalinian's skill as a writer is matched by his talent as director and producer. Unquestionably, the documentary quality of his film has been enhanced by the graphic illustrations of Sarkis Muradyan, the award-winning original musical score of Paul Nazlikian, the flawless narration of actor Mike Connors, and the scenes depicting segments of Saroyan's life and excerpts from his works, created by Kalinian himself. The assistance given by Kalinian's wife Araxie, his son Harold as technical engineer, and daughter Susie as the film's project coordinator and co-producer, has also contributed to the high quality of this unique documentary.

In the space of one fleeting hour, William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer acquaints the viewer with "Saroyan's personal life, his essence, character and philosophy, his works, his message to the world, and the undying love and passion he felt for both his native country as an American, and for the country of his forefathers, as an Armenian." In addition, the viewer learns about Saroyan's "cultural heritage and its importance and influence on his becoming a writer." (Incidentally, Aram Ghanalanian has written an excellent article on this topic, entitled "Viliam Saroyani Steghtsagortsutian Azgayin-Banahiusakan Armatnere" [The National-Poetic Roots of William Saroyan's Creative Output], published in Hai Grakanutiune yev Banahiusutiune [Armenian Literature and Poetry], (Yerevan: Sovetakan Grogh, 1986, pp. 280-302)

According to Kalinian, "the purpose of this documentary film is to preserve and present the legacy, the works, and the dual cultural heritage of William Saroyan for the study and enjoyment of our generation and the generations to come, and to create the spirit of brotherhood and understanding among all nations. "No doubt Paul Kalinian has achieved his stated purpose and more: As much as, if not more than, any other medium, William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer will serve the noble cause of keeping Saroyan's memory and identity alive, and that is no small achievement.

Finally, it was exciting to learn from Mr. Kalinian that he has much more material at his disposal (as it is, the script of this film was cut down from its original three-hour length), which he hopes to render into a series of additional films, each delving into greater detail as regards Saroyan's life and works. I'm sure that the thousands of viewers of William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer to date will agree wholeheartedly to the imperative that the necessary funds be forthcoming to continue this all-important work for the benefit of not only the Armenian nation but peoples all over the world.



William Saroyan & Paul Kalinian
March 26, 1976