

# Saroyan Revisited

*Paul Kalinian's film paints new vistas of the author's life, sometimes with creative re-creation*

BY ARRAS. AVAKIAN

William Saroyan lives again. The occasion for that miracle was at a recent screening of Paul Kalinian's documentary film, "William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer."

It had been reported that shortly before his death Saroyan had said, "Everybody has got to die, but I have always thought that an exception would be made in my case." Was Saroyan being prophetic? With Kalinian's feature-length, award-winning documentary film, Saroyan lives again.

That is not to say that Saroyan's afterlife is not made more apparent by a theater and a school named after him in his native Fresno, California, as well as the concurrent issues of commemorative stamps by the United States Postal Service and by that of the former Soviet Union. And what was the design on those two stamps? Nothing than more or less a photograph of Saroyan taken by photographer Kalinian. But more on this later.

But the film!

As I sit with my eyes glued to the screen I am mesmerized by the unfolding story of the life and times of that man—William Saroyan—who with the output of his manual typewriter captured the essence of man's relationship to man, and in the process captured the readership of peoples around the world.

Where in the world, my fine friend Paul Kalinian, did you get all that marvelous footage, those film clips that took us back to 1918, for example? What treasures they are! Sure, I know that with the magic of a zoom lens you, as a skilled photographer, can give some of the animism of motion pictures to still photographs. But then, there were long segments of real motion. Paul, you sly fox, how did you get the sequence of a 1918 farm wagon, with its skinny, wood-spoked wheels with a sort of tired-looking horse hitched to it?

And there they were, the Saroyan family (the parents, of course) moving with their house-



Tom Vartabedian  
William Saroyan, subject of a new film by Fresno photographer Paul Kalinian

hold goods from one town near Fresno to another. For a minute or two we follow that farm wagon along tree-lined dirt roads, and with old, broken-down fences alongside. Who would have made such a detailed motion picture record of an obscure family moving in 1918? And with such smooth movie action!

Then the light dawns on me. Paul, you are a sly fox. You set that all up! You wrote a script. You cast actors. You got all the props—no small task in itself. And you filmed it, following the wagon as it clip-clopped along different roads. You had to make sure that no 1995 automobile came into view, or we could catch a glimpse of a modern house with a TV antenna rising above its roofline. You had to make sure none of the actors was wearing a wristwatch. You had to do all those things they do in the big movie-production companies.

Then came the train! By that time I was already in the know—you set up that sequence yourself. That called for some doing. You put together a 1918 steam locomotive (with its steam whistle coming through on the sound track). Behind the locomotive was a train of a few cars, a flat car, a freight car, and a gondola.

A little boy, hearing the train's whistle, runs to the crossing to see and wave at the train as it goes by. He waves at the engineer in the locomotive cab. The engineer pays no attention, and ignores the boy's wave. On the flat car are a dozen or so men, farm workers presumably. They are simply relaxed and do not even notice the boy's innocent waving. In the gondola is a lone man wearing a cap. He is an African-American—no, a black man—no, a negro. It was all right and altogether proper then to say negro, though the "N" word was taboo. But what is that all about? The negro doffs his hat and waves back to the happy boy. The narrator, Mike Connors, points out that the negro is the only one to wave back at the white kid. And that comes right out of Saroyan's pen—the manual Underwood typewriter.

I see all of that train incident from several camera angles. Cameraman Paul does all the shooting, from the several points of view. In one scene, he is obviously riding one of the cars of the train, perilously hanging out the side, for that necessary shot. Lucky you didn't fall off, Paul. Riding like

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that is a no-no. Moreover, shooting those several scenes meant that the train needed to back up several times and then run forward again for all those shot opportunities. For heaven's sake, Paul, how did you get that segment of track and dirt road crossing blocked off for your use? That must have taken hours! Moreover, in all that time you needed to make sure there were no 'anachronistic' things coming into view. All that says nothing about renting a locomotive and some cars, as well as getting uninterrupted use of the right of way. You didn't buy the locomotive, did you, Paul?

Ten years and four days after Saroyan died (May 18, 1981), the United States Postal Service and the then Soviet Union issued commemorative stamps. The design was based on one of a series of photographs Kalinian took after winning Saroyan's full confidence—not an easy thing to do. The first-day-of-issue celebrations took place concurrently on May 22, 1991, in Fresno and in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, then a constituent republic of the USSR. Our Postmaster General attended as an honored guest in Yerevan. Armenia's Minister of communication was guest of honor at the Fresno celebration.

Paul, I know very well how you got those photos of Saroyan, who was usually leery of photographers. You have told it very well in your story "How I Shot Saroyan." Through the intercession of the late Varaz Samuelian, Fresno sculptor-painter and intimate friend of Saroyan's. Varaz wrote about it in his book "Willie and Varaz." Though you had your camera with you, Paul, you later ingratiated yourself with Saroyan. In the end he had said, "Take all the pictures you'd like. One of those shots hangs in the lobby of Fresno's William Saroyan Theatre.

This fine documentary film was written, filmed, and produced by Fresno photographer Paul Kalinian. It was co-produced by his daughter Susie Kalinian. Technical management was provided by his son Harold. The finished film, screened far and wide, has won numerous significant awards at foreign and international film festivals. Notable among them is the Gold Award from the Philadelphia Film Festival.

The story begins in Fresno in the early 1900's and spans eight decades. It tells extensively of the tremendous volume of material Saroyan wrote, both the published and the manuscripts remaining unpublished. The documentary is bilingual. Mike Connors' and virtually all of Saroyan's words are in English with subtitles in Armenian. Fascinatingly, there is one long segment in which Saroyan talks in Armenian (the subtitles there are in English). What does Saroyan say then? He extols the Armenian people for their industriousness and their ability to endure the endless centuries of oppression from hostile powers.

The rewarding experience of viewing this remarkable documentary film was as the feature presentation at the recently held 81<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Banquet of the Fresno "Yeprad" Lodge of the Knights of Vartan. Photographer-Documentarian Paul Kalinian, also a member of that brotherhood, was there in person to tell about the film.

You were superb, Paul.

Fresno, CA