

Kalinian's Moving Portrait of Saroyan

by Janet Samuelian

FRESNO - Whatever doubts one may have had about a master portrait photographer being able to transfer his skills to the medium of film were dispelled April 13th premiere at William Saroyan Theatre. Paul Kalinian's one hour documentary "William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer" is a vivid portrait of a genius, an unforgettable and fallible man whose very imperfections made him a whole person and who, overcoming his sorrows, became all the more admirable.

Never boring, the bombastic storyteller's own voice is heard in more than half of the film. Central to Saroyan's character and philosophy were his youth in Fresno and his Armenian heritage. In the author's monologue made at home for Charles Amirkhonian of radio KPFA, "Willie" describes his life and decision to become a writer. His own words are so effective that Kalinian's team had only to add archival photos of Fresno. To fill out missing visuals, scenes reconstructed with actors were smoothly inserted.

Rare film footage shows Saroyan the child in Oakland's Fred Finch Orphanage, which so disrupted his early life after his father died. Still other amateur moves, of his married life and visits to Armenia, take up a good part of the documentary. Because Kalinian had access to the William Saroyan Foundation, he was able to create a poignant montage of the successful, lionized young Saroyan. The large black eyes, long face, dapper suits and jaunty hats, and cigarettes held in hand all combine to "age" him right before our eyes. Myriad scenes from his plays illustrate a prolific career.

To see the same person--forgotten in later years by the general American public--lose himself in Armenia among writers, workers and students, walking, talking and laughing is to really get into his skin, to experience what it must have felt like to be William Saroyan.

Besides Writer/Director/Producer Paul Kalinian, forty people were part of the effort to assemble the documentary including narrator Mike Connors and music composer Paul Nazlikian whose contributions dominate. Too numerous to mention are the sponsors who endowed the research and filmmaking of Kalinian. No doubt Kalinian's unsentimental labor-of-love is the first of probably many future documentaries about the neglected writer-dramatist. It will be left to others to tackle the intellectual, cold-blooded analysis of Saroyan's writing and contributions to American culture. As Kalinian said at the film premiere, "One hour is hardly enough to do justice to a great man like Saroyan. The documentary ended with Saroyan's own speech in Armenian about what the death of Aram Khachaturian meant to him personally. None of the odars in the audience seemed to mind hearing Saroyan speak his native language. It was a deep emotional jolt, however, for Armenian fans, who had grown up with Saroyan's books over the years in American high schools and read him in English.

At the gala reception the writer's nephew Hank Saroyan, now a TV director of high quality children's programs, told several anecdotes about his Uncle Bill. "He found it remarkable that I could survive in Los Angeles. When I once asked if he ever did any bad writing, he answered -- My worst writing is great! And my best writing, they haven't yet found words to describe! If you don't believe you're great, how do you expect to convince anyone else?"

Many in attendance like actor Mike Connors and his family, artist Varaz Samuelian, opera singer Edna Garabedian, county-board supervisor Deran Koligian, district attorney Ed Hunt, Supervisor Doug Vagim, music composer Paul Nazlikian, Graphic Designer Sarkis Muradyan and Ben Amirkhonian festival head, were obviously moved at the successful re-creation of their friend. On hand also were present-Mayor Karen Humphrey, past-mayor Daniel Whitehurst, Kalinian's wife Araxie, daughter and co-producer of the film Susie and son Harold the technical engineer.

The entire event was presented by Fresno Education, Cultural and Historic Projects.



From left, Paul Kalinian, film director and wife Araxie, Sandy, Ani, Jaelyn, and Mathew Gostanian, Bobby Poochigian, Aaron Phanco film actors, Harold Kalinian, film technical engineer and Susie Kalinian, film producer.