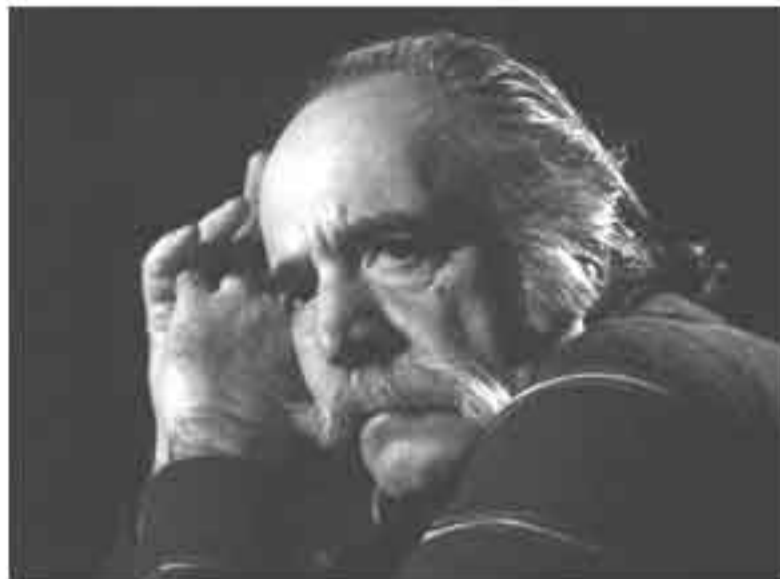


Kalinian brings works and times of Saroyan to Life

By Linet Bedrossian



William Saroyan

Photographed by Paul Kalinian March 26, 1976

It is safe to say that Paul Kalinian was somewhat of an obsessed fan. Arriving in Fresno in 1964, he was a man on a mission. Kalinian, a photographer by profession, wanted to meet and take pictures of his favorite author, William Saroyan. Unlike many, Kalinian fulfilled both of his dreams, and eventually became one of the elite few who could refer to this often times misunderstood, other times revered literary giant as a friend.

Now, twenty years after their initial meeting, Kalinian is spreading his knowledge of Saroyan across the globe. He is the writer, director, and producer of the internationally acclaimed documentary, "William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer," which won the prestigious Leigh Whipper Gold Award last July at the Philadelphia International Film Festival. The film was also awarded honors at the Houston International Film Festival, the Columbus International Film Festival; and the, Nouveau Festivale Internationale Du Cinema, in Montreal. Kalinian has definitely traveled a long road to this forum of recognition, considering Saroyan's first words to him were, "Get lost ... I don't want my picture taken."

Kalinian was first exposed to Saroyan's work while still living in Beirut, Lebanon. He was overwhelmed by! the strong sense of honest and hope that he found in the author's writings describing Saroyan as having a special genius. As an Armenian, Paul was thrilled by the author as well as the subject matter. "I was not only fascinated by his [Saroyan's] style, which was so easy to understand, but also by the fact that this internationally renowned person was an Armenian and was writing about Armenians."

Paul with his wife, Araxie, eventually made their way to the United States, not surprisingly Fresno, Saroyan's hometown. Paul set up a highly successful photography business, shooting people from all walks of life, including celebrities and politicians. However, his quest for the man, the myth, the legend Saroyan was unfruitful, even though the two had a mutual friend in sculptor Varaz Samuelian. Kalinian's day finally came though. On March 26 of 1976, Varaz called Paul to let him know that Saroyan might be paying Varaz a visit.

Although Kalinian set up his camera, Saroyan's flat out refusal to be photographed presented a dilemma. During their initial conversation, Saroyan did so much as to ask Kalinian to open his camera and prove there was no film in it. The sly photographer quickly attached a pre-loaded film holder onto the back of his camera, and began shooting Saroyan.

The author, believing Kalinian to simply be playing around, began to warm up to the photographer, and soon asked him to sing a very old Armenian song "Giligia." As Kalinian sang, Saroyan chimed in and became quite emotional, vainly trying to hold back the tears. This intense moment not only marked the starting point of a beautiful friendship, at the finish of the song Saroyan declared his fondness for Paul, telling him to take all the pictures he wanted, but also the beginning of what would eventually become an hour-long full length biography on the canonized author.

Kalinian's shots of Saroyan won recognition themselves. One in particular was chosen by the USA and the USSR Postal Services for their Commemorative Postal Stamps, issued May 22, 1991 simultaneously in Fresno and Yerevan. The photos were also an integral part of making the film. After Saroyan's death in 1981, some of Kalinian's portraits coupled with stories about the photo sessions were published internationally in newspapers, books and periodicals. Kalinian was faced with inquiries about his friendship with the great author from all over the world.

Paul decided to put together a ten minute audio-visual presentation of his portraits, narrated by himself. calling it "How I Shot Saroyan." Kalinian received positive reaction from audiences every where. However, it was in Chicago, that the applause turned to financial support. Thomas A. Kooyumjian offered to contribute to making the presentation into a complete film. "We never spoke about this," admits Kalinian about Saroyan ever guessing that something like this would come out of photo shoots. "The whole idea was just to take his picture," continues Araxi, but the obsession was not satiated by mere meeting and friendship, it was simply fueled even more.

For six years Kalinian researched the at times mysterious Armenian-American writer, playwright, and humanitarian. Many hours were spent at the Bancroft Library, located at the University of California at Berkeley, where Kalinian found pictures of the late author's childhood. Since the two men had become close friends during the last five years of Saroyan's life, seeing Pictures of William as a child left quite an impression on Paul. "Every time I saw his younger photographs, it seemed to me like I was alive at the time and living with him... It was like I was standing next to him as a ghost. I was living that life with him."

Perhaps the two men did not spend many years together physically, but during the six years Paul researched this project, the two were indeed together spiritually. Kalinian sorted through more than a thousand pictures of the writer, to use in his film. The entire process, including the arduous task of restoring many of the photos took approximately two years. Surprisingly, this task did not prove to be the most challenging.

Receiving permission to do some of the research from the William Saroyan Foundation was a huge obstacle to overcome, taking up to eight months. Saroyan left the foundation much of his belongings, including literature, such as journals, which at the time of his death were unpublished. Kalinian's research also included the difficult task of obtaining, then cleaning footage of Saroyan in Soviet Armenia. This was extremely vital for the film since Kalinian wanted to show Saroyan's deep rooted love for his homeland and people.

The documentary begins in Fresno during the early 1900's and just like Saroyan, ends where it started, in Fresno, 1981. The work is truly a labor of love, showing the vast sides of Saroyan's professional and personal life in a very open and honest way and completely reflects the filmmakers total admiration for his subject. Kalinian goes as far as recreating certain parts of Saroyan's life using live action footage. This part created more difficulties for Paul, but luckily, with the help of his daughter, Susie Kalinian, who co-produced the movie, the father-daughter team managed to work out all the kinks.

Throughout the piece, the sound of Saroyan's own voice, his words, lend a certain autobiographical feeling to the work. Kalinian delves into Saroyan's sometimes tumultuous personal life as well, including parts about the mother of his children Carol Marcus, whom he married and divorced twice.

Actor Mike Connors provides the narration of the documentary, but it is Kalinian's script. "Originally, when I first wrote the script it came out to three hours long." Indeed Paul had a difficult time excluding anything about his idol. However due to the tight budget, Kalinian eventually reduced the script down to thirty-five minutes by focusing on the two most important aspects of Saroyan, his impact on the world of literature, and the impact of Armenia on Saroyan's world. "Saroyan was writing in English, but he was an Armenian writer. It is unfortunate that most Armenians do not know William Saroyan who is the only Armenian writer who has gained an internationally renowned reputation in the past century.

Kalinian is adamant about why he made the documentary. "I didn't make this film to make money or become famous. he points out, "I wanted immortalize his life and works for our generation and the ones to come." Paul hopes the film will ultimately be available in schools and libraries. For now though, Kalinian is looking forward to traveling with his work around the country, and perhaps abroad as well. The Armenian General Benevolent Union is sponsoring his tour, which will come to Los Angeles April 12th. After the documentary received high honors at international film festivals, Kalinian got an invitation to the most unlikely of places. "I received a call from Tokyo, Japan. It seems Saroyan has quite a following there. His works have been translated into Japanese, and they are interested in the movie."

Kalinian hopes to share his knowledge of this great Armenian figure with the entire world, hopefully ending his tour in the land Saroyan referred to as the "cardinal point of my spiritual map" - Armenia.



Director Paul Kalinian with his daughter, producer, Susie Kalinian