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Saroyan on film - A photographer's dream come true

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For years Paul Kalinian had plotted the seduction of William Saroyan.

Kalinian wanted that face — more than anything in his life as a professional studio photographer — to put that visage in film as no others had.

"I wanted to show his grandeur," Kalinian said, his accent of native Lebanese sliding into French and out again. "I did not want to take his portrait. I wanted to describe his ability and wisdom."

But it was not to be an easy seduction. Saroyan had simply refused for most of his life to pose for studio pictures. In Fresno and the rest of the world, there were photographers frustrated in their attempts to capture with their lenses the rich Armenian face.

The Fresnoan who succeeded did it with the quiet help of sculptor Varaz Samuelian, with stubborn persistence and with an Armenian song.

Kalinian relives it, from the start, as he sits in a little waiting room off his studio on Olive Avenue:

"I came to the United States from Lebanon 18 years ago. I had always dreamed of coming to the United States and it is beautiful..."

"I knew of this great man in Lebanon. I had read a couple of his books... 'My Name Is Aram' — the simplicity, and so natural..."

"I was fascinated by his (Saroyan's) character — his broad forehead, the moustache. I fantasized about taking his picture.

"I asked several people (in Fresno) where I would find this man. They said he is here and there, all over the world. And he does not want to pose for the camera..."

"But I never changed my mind. I said if I am good enough...if I can attract him..."

"Then several years ago one of his plays was at the Memorial Auditorium. I asked the manager where I could find the writer of this play. He said Saroyan would be there (one evening of the play's run)."

Between raindrops, Kalinian loaded his photo equipment into his Ford Galaxy 500, and set out for the theater. His plan: to set up his equipment backstage, collar Saroyan and ask if he could take some pictures.

The camera gear was in readiness. The curtain rose and fell. Saroyan did not appear.

"He did not come. Everybody was disappointed. They told me, 'That's the way he is.' I packed up all my equipment and went home.

"In the next years I gathered more information about him...I always had the idea I could meet this man and take his picture."

The chance came when Kalinian became acquainted with sculptor Samuelian, a friend of Saroyan's.

"I said to him, 'There is no hope. Can you find a way? I just want to be with him a couple of minutes.'"

"He said, 'I am a close friend of Willie.'"

"I said, 'God has sent you to me.'"

Kalinian is beaming as he brings years-old moments back to life.

The seduction was to be on a late March afternoon in 1976 at Samuelian's studio in southeast Fresno. It was agreed that Kalinian would set up his equipment there in anticipation of a visit by Saroyan.

"I was ready even to be kicked out," Kalinian says. "At least I could communicate two or three words in Armenian and maybe soften him."

Kalinian stands and lifts his legs in exaggerated steps to show how he had to step over boxes in the artist's studio to set up his equipment.

"We waited an hour. Then Mr. Saroyan, on his bike, was coming down the street. I have to say I was very disappointed. I had always thought of this man...the idea he is like God...(But) the clothes he is wearing, and on a bike.

"But then I was looking only at his head. That face..."

"At first he didn't see me. Then I gave my hand and said my name. I said 'if you have just a couple minutes I would like to take your picture.'"

"He said, 'No, get lost, I don't take good pictures. I do not pose.'"

The imitation that rumbled out was gruff.

"I looked at Varaz. I was mostly shocked. But I did not leave.

"He started asking questions about painting, and then he saw the (photography) equipment and lights and asked about them. I told him, 'Don't pose for me. I will just take snapshot pictures.'"

Kalinian recaptures that moment in the re-telling by snapping his fingers to show how he triggered some of the strobe units.

"He said, 'Are you serious. Are you taking my picture?'"

Kalinian replied, "There is no film in the camera. I am just snapping."

"He said, 'I want to see if you have film in the camera.'"

Kalinian had anticipated the demand. He opened the back of the camera to display an empty cartridge.

"I had already decided if he's going to slap on my face and kick me out, OK."

But Saroyan relaxed as he sat at a little table.

"He put his hands on it. He said, 'Where are you from?' He got interested in me and in Lebanon.

"Just that quick, I took the empty film magazine out and put film in it."

Kalinian managed to convince Saroyan how much it meant to him to be able to take a picture, telling him it was a life's dream.

The beaming smile on Kalinian's face is now a glow.

"If he had stayed 100 hours I had that much film. I told him how happy I was....Then I was taking pictures... "He claps his hands as if playing back the amplified sound of a shutter clicking.

"He said, 'You speak very fluent Armenian.' He said, 'Talk, talk, talk.'"

"He said, 'Can you sing in Armenian for me?' He asked me to sing 'Tzangam Desnem Zim Giligia' — I wish I could see my Armenia..."

The 48-year-old photographer is standing. He's singing and snapping his fingers. Click, Click, Click.

"Tzangam Desnem Zim Giligia"...and I'm stepping like this over the boxes...and he's singing with me."

Saroyan remained seated at the table. But he shifted from side to side, turning, leaning forward, back. Nothing was posed. And Kalinian scrambled around the man, among the boxes and strobe lights.

"Now, it is my time to ask questions. Before, I am working for him. Now I say, 'Tell me how you are when you are all by yourself. I want you to feel 100 percent free.' I gave him a pencil and said, 'Varaz, give me a piece of paper.'"

"...Sometimes I looked at his eyes, and he said, 'Why did you stop taking pictures?' And I said, 'I am waiting for the expression of how you are going to look when you write.'"

"He was giving me more feelings...sometimes sad, sometimes happy and angry....I was excited and he was excited, too. 'I like you,' he said."

The picture-taking went on for about three hours.

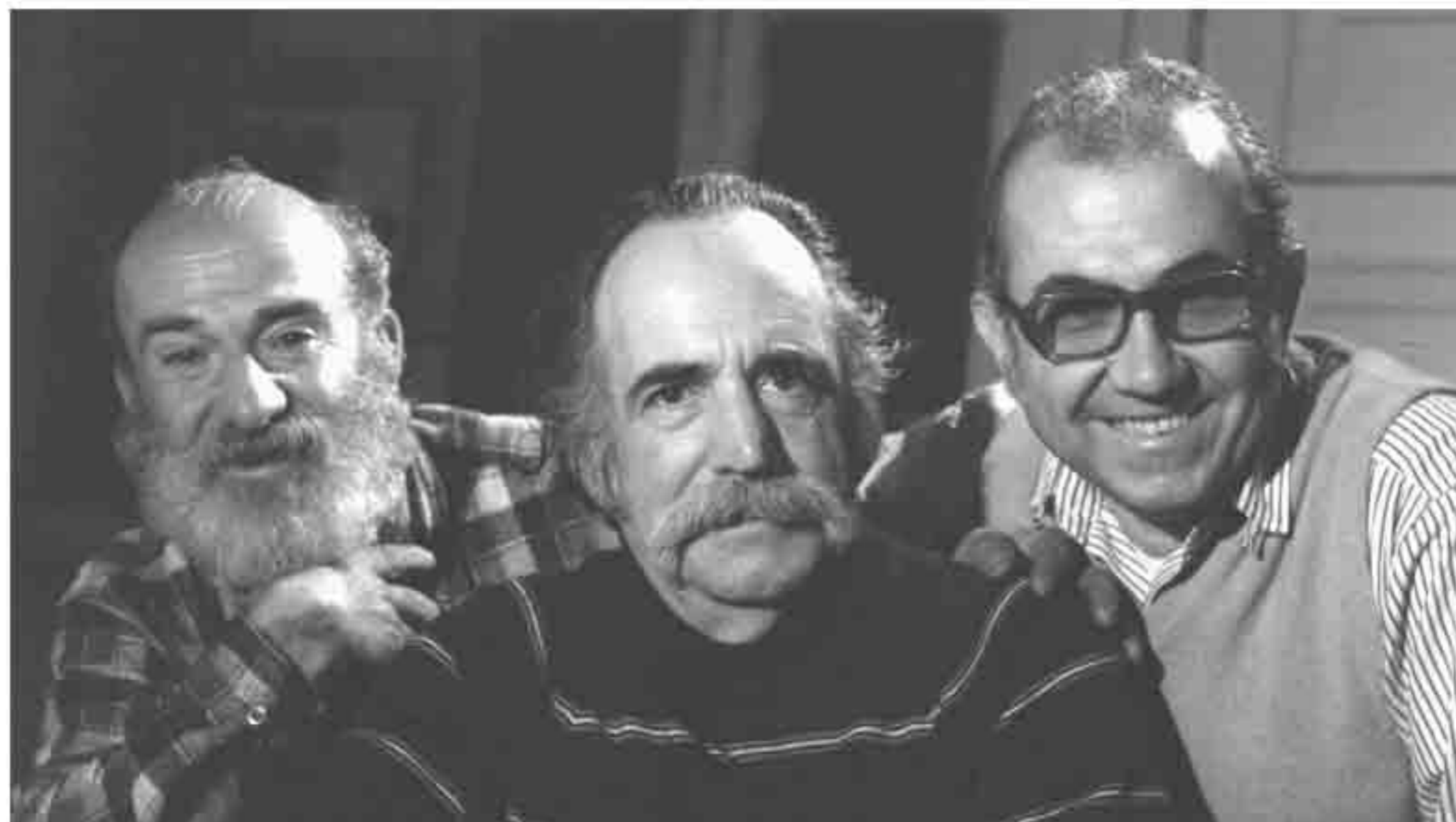
"I gave him his freedom and I was a ghost then...I say to myself, God, I pray for one thing, that the lab doesn't damage my film."

It was a chilly March day, but Kalinian was perspiring, sidestepping the boxes, savoring the face he'd stalked for years.

When it was over, the three men sat down to eat oranges and watermelons.

"You're a very good man," Saroyan said to Kalinian. "Why don't we take a picture together? Varaz, you too."

"...This was the topping on the cake," Kalinian said. "He asked me. I was the happiest man in the world."



William Saroyan is flanked by sculptor Varaz Samuelian, left, and photographer Paul Kalinian. Kalinian's photographs of the author will be displayed at the Fresno Convention Center during the tribute to Saroyan tonight.