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Portrait of a Writer



Documentary filmmakers
Susie and Paul Kalinian

Photo by Richard Howard

Father-daughter
team captures
Saroyan's world
on film

BY JANET WALZER

SAROYAN CAN TAKE YOU MANY places," says Susie Kalinian, D02. "Read his writing, give him your trust and you can experience so much." Kalinian is referring to William Saroyan, the writer, playwright and humanitarian who not only created an impressive catalog of literature, but through his writing, highlighted the land of his parents—Armenia—to readers worldwide.

Kalinian immersed herself in the life and works of Saroyan during the making of a documentary she and her father, Paul Kalin-

ian, produced together. The senior Kalinian, a professional photographer and cinematographer, had dreamed of taking Saroyan's picture for years, and upon his arrival in Fresno, Calif., from Beirut, Lebanon, in 1964, attempted to make it happen. "He was a hard person to get a hold of," recalls the photographer. "I tried for 12 years." But the magical opportunity finally arose in 1976. A bond formed between the two after Saroyan asked Kalinian about the Armenian community in Lebanon, and they ended up tearfully singing an old Armenian song

together. The friendship lasted until Saroyan's death in 1981.

A FAMILY PROJECT

THAT FIRST MEETING RESULTED IN several different portraits of the writer by Kalinian—one of which was picked by the U.S. and USSR postal services for their commemorative postal stamps, issued simultaneously in Fresno and in Yervan, Armenia, in 1991. By this point, the younger Kalinian had already been knee deep in researching Saroyan's life for five years. While attending California State University, she continued her work, going through thousands of photographs and corresponding with lawyers. Her other tasks as co-producer included re-creating scenes, casting, doing public relations and script research. "I had been in theater since I was nine years old and had front-camera experience, so it was easy to do make-up, costumes, etc.," explains Kalinian. "It was especially nice to [work] behind the scenes." The film was truly a family affair: twin brother, Harold, was the technical engineer, and mother, Araxie Kalinian, would cover for her husband at his photography studio.

Kalinian, who is now in a postgraduate pediatric dentistry program at Nova Southeastern University and Miami Children's Hospital in Florida, took her job as co-producer seriously. An eight-year-old boy was needed to re-create a scene from Saroyan's life, and as her father remembers it, his daughter decided "to go to every elementary school in Fresno to find this eight-year-old boy. Susie interviewed hundreds to get the right boy."

This story is not surprising when one reviews just a few of Kalinian's activities at the dental school—whether it was explaining her abstracts at the annual Bates-Andrews Research Day, serving as a volunteer in the department of pediatric dentistry or representing Tufts to the American Dental Education Association—Kalinian brought endless energy and a sharp focus.

Producing the documentary, say daughter and father—who know each other so well they finish each others' sentences—has been a joyful undertaking and one that has

elicited an overwhelming reaction from the one million people who have seen the film. Both Kalinians are often asked by those who have seen the film a second time if they had made additions since the last time, this question demonstrating the multi-layers of the documentary.

A COMPLEX MAN

THERE IS MUCH TO TAKE IN WHEN watching "William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer." Original photographs that have been restored by Paul Kalinian, recordings of Saroyan's voice in both English and Armenian, video and film footage of the writer's trips acquired from Soviet Armenia, the neighborhoods of Fresno and, of

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course, Saroyan's writing and spirit that infuse the documentary, which is subtitled in Armenian. Add a mesmerizing musical score, and it is a powerful experience for the viewer. Saroyan was a complicated person, befitting the stereotype of the creative genius, and the Kalinians artfully illustrate his complexity and contradictions.

Saroyan wrote hundreds of short stories, plays, novels and essays, beginning in the 1930s. One of his best known works, *The Human Comedy*, was made into a motion picture, and Saroyan won an Academy Award for Best Writing for Original Screenplay. Many of his pieces were inspired by Armenian culture, and he spoke out for his homeland, shining a light on a community that was often oppressed and the target of bigotry.

Saroyan was not interested in wealth or public recognition, refusing the Pulitzer Prize for his play, "The Time of Your Life," in 1939. As Paul Kalinian writes in the film's program: "His major themes are aspiration, hope and honesty; materialism and success mean noth-

ing." Asked what his subject might think of the documentary, the senior Kalinian replies, "Saroyan would love [it] because he always said he wished he had a recording of certain artists...and since we portrayed him as who he was, he'd especially like it because Saroyan would say 'I hate liars.'"

Saroyan also would approve of how the Kalinians have shown the film. A world tour has taken them to 57 cities in 22 countries, with the proceeds donated to the sponsoring nonprofit organizations. Recently, Susie Kalinian presented the film at Harvard University, where several Tufts faculty and alumni attended the show, including dean *emeritus* Erling Johansen, D49. She also showed it to the Armenian Dental Society

of Boston. The proceeds of that presentation were given to the society's free children's dental clinic in the war-torn city of Lachin in Karabagh/Armenia. The film has been the recipient of six International Film Festival Awards, including the Gold Award for Best Documentary Film from the Philadelphia International Film Festival. The Kalinians have set up a web site (www.kalinian.com) and eventually will transfer the film to videotape for larger distribution.

Despite the blood, sweat and tears involved in creating the documentary, both Kalinians would like to make another, with the younger Kalinian describing a future subject "as someone with passion who has made contributions and would be fascinating to document."

William Saroyan will be a hard act to follow, as his talent, humanity and humor distinguish him. After all, it was Saroyan who said, "Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case. Now what?" **TO**