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# Briefly

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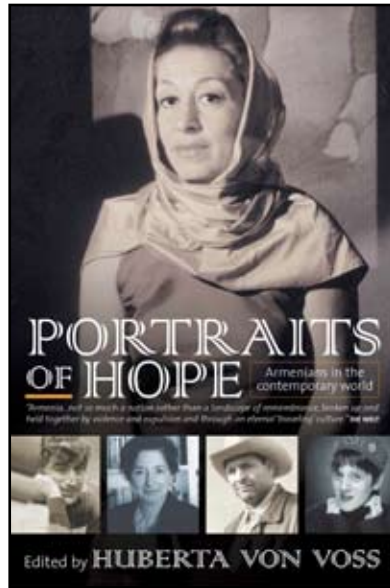
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# A complicated kaleidoscope of a divided people

## German journalist chronicles the Armenians

Who are the Armenians? What makes them who they are? What drives them to make their ethnicity an important part of their identity? What drives them to preserve their culture at great costs? How have they dealt with the trauma of genocide? How has their culture survived and thrived in exile and in the most remote corners of the world? These are some of the questions political journalist Huberta von Voss entertained when she set out to create a book titled "Portraits of Hope: Armenians in the Contemporary World." The book captures Armenians from all walks of life, from renowned artists to ordinary citizens; an excerpt follows this interview which begins with the question about how Ms. von Voss decided whom she would present in her book.

**HvV:** I didn't want to do any kind of "hall of fame" book. To me this wouldn't have been authentic. If you want to mirror the identity and character of a nation you have to choose stories of success and stories of failure, the mainstream and the eccentric aspects, the ruptures and the common ground. This is why I tried to have sort of a balanced mixture of prominent figures and of those who are lesser well known people. I wouldn't call them ordinary by the way – many of them are quite out-standing and particular like the painter Anna Boghiguan from Cairo who is a very unconventional kind of woman or Kevork Hintlian, a per-



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son whom everybody knows in the Old City of Jerusalem. To me it was also important to choose people whose life story would be representative in some way – like the one of Levon Arutunyan, the Karabagh veteran or the one of Rosita Youssefian, the teacher of Armenian from Buenos Aires.

**PC:** Did you conduct first-person interviews, or did you correspond with those you present via postal or electronic mail?

**HvV:** The first contact was often over the Internet. Some of them didn't have a computer like the photographer van Leo in Cairo. So I just rang him up and went to see him while I was in Egypt. Yes, all of the portraits are based on interviews. If you want to portrait a person you have to feel the handshake, look the person into the eyes and note the various feelings they reflect. We also tried to meet the people in their

private homes, which wasn't always possible. Some people came to our house instead, like Professor Dadrian. He was giving a lecture in Cyprus where we were living there for some years. I still remember the first moment when he saw my husband. "Hello, Mr. Ambassador. Let's test your German. Can you tell me all the synonyms for the word 'quick please?'" My husband gave his very best, but failed. Dadrian could still add two or three more words. This is how we became friends.

**PC:** How did you go about photographing the subjects in your book? Did one photographer or several captures the images of those people features?

**HvV:** No, the whole project had no financial funding, although I had originally tried to get some subsidies. The Germans weren't interested yet in the matter and the Armenians turned down my requests as well. That has made my task as editor a bit more demanding and I am indebted to all my contributing authors accepting to work for free. The photos have been kindly given to us by the people portrayed in the book.

**PC:** Among those people featured, whose story stays with you the most? Whose story has made the greatest impression on you and those close to you?

**HvV:** That's very difficult to say and it might depend on the mood: Some portraits are funny, some are sad, some rather factual, some more poetic. For me it was a privilege to meet so many different people over the years and I feel very grateful for the trust so many people have put into



Claude Mutaflan.



Hrant Dink.

the project. Looking back, I have to say that the portrait of Hrant Dink holds a special place in my memory. Hrant became a friend over the years and we used to meet when he came to Berlin. Together with a friend from London we tried to convince him to leave Turkey for a while, but he refused to do so, knowing that he was tak-

ing a high risk. Hrant belonged to his soil like few others in Turkey. Now he's dead and I wonder what will happen with his son who has been charged under the same paragraph 301 for allegedly "denigrating Turkishness".

**PC:** How was the idea of the book born? Whose idea was it, and what did you hope to create when creating Portraits of Hope?

**HvV:** My husband and I spend some years in Beirut before moving on to Cyprus. We met a lot of interesting Armenians in both places. One night, a friend from Beirut passed around an article about the infamous Ambassador Wangenheim. It intrigued me that I knew so little, although I studied history at various universities. Moving on to Cyprus I discovered the wonderful Moufflon bookshop. Ruth Keshishian who runs it became a very close friend and without her hospitality I couldn't have done the book. Her store really became a second home and I could hang out there, browse and read as much as I wanted. This is where I discovered also Nouritza Matossian's amazing book on Arshile Gorky. After I had read "Black Angel" I thought to myself that some book was needed that would reach out to a wider public and explain to non-Armenians why the genocide remains such a

vivid trauma.

**PC:** Let's talk about the essays in the book and the chapters written by writers and scholars. What were the themes and historic storylines you set out to cover, and how did you go about deciding who would contribute to your book?

**HvV:** It was important to give the reader an introduction into the matter as sort of a background for the portraits. I have chosen some of the leading experts in their fields: The German scholar Dr. Tessa Hofmann for the Armenian history until WWI, Professor Vahakn N. Dadrian for the genocide, Professor Taner Akcam for the history of the Turkish denial and the author Wolfgang Gust for the German role in the genocide.

**PC:** Tell us about the places you've captured in this book. Why are these places noteworthy and were there other places that you considered but did not include?

**HvV:** The idea was not so much to tell the history of Armenia, but the history of Armenians as a wandering nation. Many places in the book are important for the understanding of the national history, like Istanbul, Bourj Hamoud in Beirut and Deir-es-Zor in the Syrian desert or Karabagh. Other places are important to explain the meaning of the church, like the island St. Lazzaro and of course Antélias and Etchmiadzin. Some places were important to depict the history of the diaspora, like Pasadena, Los Angeles, Moscow, Paris and Madras in India.

**PC:** If you had another volume, volume two, whom would you include and what other places would you explore? Were there historic themes that you would have liked to address in addition to those included in part one?

**HvV:** I would probably ask the writer Orhan Pamuk or Elif Shafak for an essay about freedom of art and speech in a country that would like to join the European Union. They belong to the many

Turks who would like to come to terms with their national history and who are feeling a strong need for reconciliation.

**PC:** As a German, how did you first learn about Armenians and when did they pique your interest?

**HvV:** I guess I learned first about them by reading Franz Werfel's "Forty days of Musa Dagh" which will hopefully be filmed next year. The German film producer Ottokar Runze has won wonderful – and very prominent – actors for the film and is now trying to secure the additional funding. I hope the Armenians will help him in realising a film that could help tremendously in creating support and empathy.

**PC:** Can you tell us about your career, what have you previously published and what has your career path been like?

**HvV:** I am a political journalist by profession. After my master in history, political science and French philology I started to work as a correspondent for several newspapers in the German capital. Then, I became spokesperson of Rita Suessmuth, the speaker of the German parliament Bundestag and took leave from my job when my husband was appointed to Beirut. I fell in love with the poetry of Nadia Tuéni, a Lebanese surrealist writer and translated her and others into German. These days, I am working for the parliament as an expert for international affairs and I am writing a new book on child poverty in Germany. The only job that I have done continuously over the last 17 years is the one of a mother of three marvelous children.

**PC:** Did you travel to Armenia to research this book or have you travelled to Armenia or places with Armenian populations?

**HvV:** Yes, I did travel to Armenia as well as to Beirut, Syria, Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Italy, New York, England and of course Turkey to do interviews. Many other



Atom Egoyan.

places in the world were covered by my contributing authors.

**PC:** Your first publication was in German. Why German and how did the German-reading public react to this book?

**HvV:** It reacted very well. The head of the Protestant Church, Bishop Wolfgang Huber, has presented the book and it was reviewed by the leading newspapers. The reactions of the readers were positive and I got letters by many young Armenians who said that this book helped them to better understand their parents and grand-parents. When I do lectures or readings many Armenians come and tell me their stories like it happened in Buenos Aires the other day, where I was invited to launch the Spanish version of the book. That is something very moving. Recently I discovered something on a German-Turkish blog in the Internet. A young Turkish girl said that the book has completely changed her view on the Armenians. That made me very happy, since the book is meant as a contribution to dialogue.

**PC:** Thank You.

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Monte Melkonian.



Madame Anahit.

# Title

SHADOWS AND PHANTOMS:  
MICHAEL J. ARLEN, WRITER  
AND MEDIA CRITIC  
(NEW YORK CITY)

Huberta von Voss

A heavy summer shower is falling outside. Thunderclaps drown out the din of horns from the yellow cabs, doing a roaring trade today. Beneath the elegant canopies outside the entrances on Fifth Avenue wait the local inhabitants with their expensive shopping bags or their thoroughbred dogs, until they can rush back into their apartment buildings. There are few outsiders in this area. This is where refined New Yorkers are in their element. Lightning flashes above the lake in Central Park. Michael J. Arlen suddenly gets up from his seat and briefly looks out the window. The storm raging outside is hardly audible in the perfect elegance of the drawing room. His wife felt like going out for a walk in the park across the way. He glides back onto the thick ivorycolored cushions graced with scarlet blossoms. Decorated with exquisite tapestries from India and China, English antiques, and books by Marcel Proust and other great writers, the sand-colored room resembles an oceangoing ship of which those onshore cannot say whether it is approaching or departing.

With his Roman head, Michael J. Arlen's aristocratic origin would be noticeable even downtown at the New Yorker office where he worked for many years. People like him simply move differently: more calmly, more self-consciously, like panthers. Whoever writes regularly for the New Yorker has made it, is part of intellectual New York, and sometimes even makes the rules beyond the Big Apple.

Arlen has shaped attitudes toward the effects of television. His essays on the Vietnam War are still quoted today, each time images of new wars appear on the screen at dinnertime in the living room, when distant men die in salvos of bullets and men at home open another can of Coke. His expression "living room war" has become a regular element in the American vocabulary. Everyone in the U.S.A. who thinks about media esthetics and the violence of war does so with Arlen's collections of essays, *Living Room War* (1967) and *The Camera Age* (1981).

Thus the New Yorker applies to the war in Iraq what he wrote thirty-seven years ago on the Vietnam War:

*The cumulative effect of all these three- and five-minute film clips, with their almost unvarying implicit deference to the importance of purely military solutions ... and with their catering (in part unavoidably) to a popular democracy's insistent desire to view even as unbelievably complicated a war as this one in emotional terms (our guys against their guys), is surely wide of the mark, and is bound to provide these millions of people with an excessively simple, emotional, and military-oriented view of what is, at best, a mighty unsimple situation.*

No man whose judgments are simple writes that way.

Whoever delves into Arlen's biography might feel that his reflections on the reality of images have to do with his childhood and, doubtless, with his parents, the question being whether one is who one pretends to be and how an artificial image affects the viewer's life. *Exiles* is the name of the book in which the author, then forty

years old, took up the quest of his already dead parents. Both raised questions and both provided quiet answers to the question of who they had really been.

His beautiful mother, Atalanta Mercati, was born on a cold February day in 1903, the daughter of a highly decorated Greek baron and an American mother, who abandoned her husband and children for an Austrian aristocrat. Following the king's forced abdication, Atalanta was exiled with her father from their palace in Athens to a small Greek island. She spent her formative years among goats and olive trees, before the tides of time swept them into a new life between Paris and Saint Moritz. Or Cannes, where his grandmother lived, remarried to a wealthy Serbian prince, Alexis Kara-Georgievitch, whose independent country had disappeared from the map and who drowned in a hydroplane accident.

Finally, Michael Arlen senior (1895–1956), one of the first international literary stars, who earned a huge fortune with his novels about English society. He was born of Armenian parents in Rushuk, Bulgaria, in 1895 but grew up in England and expunged his original name when he began to be successful. Dikran Kouyoumyian is an almost ridiculously complicated name, he later told his son, whenever he had to write thank-you letters to his uncles in Manchester and Argentina. A classy father who used to drive with his family in a canary-yellow Rolls Royce along the Côte d'Azur, his chosen place of residence. Who was a friend of Hemingway and Somerset Maugham's and was eternalized as Michael is in his mentor D.H. Lawrence's novel

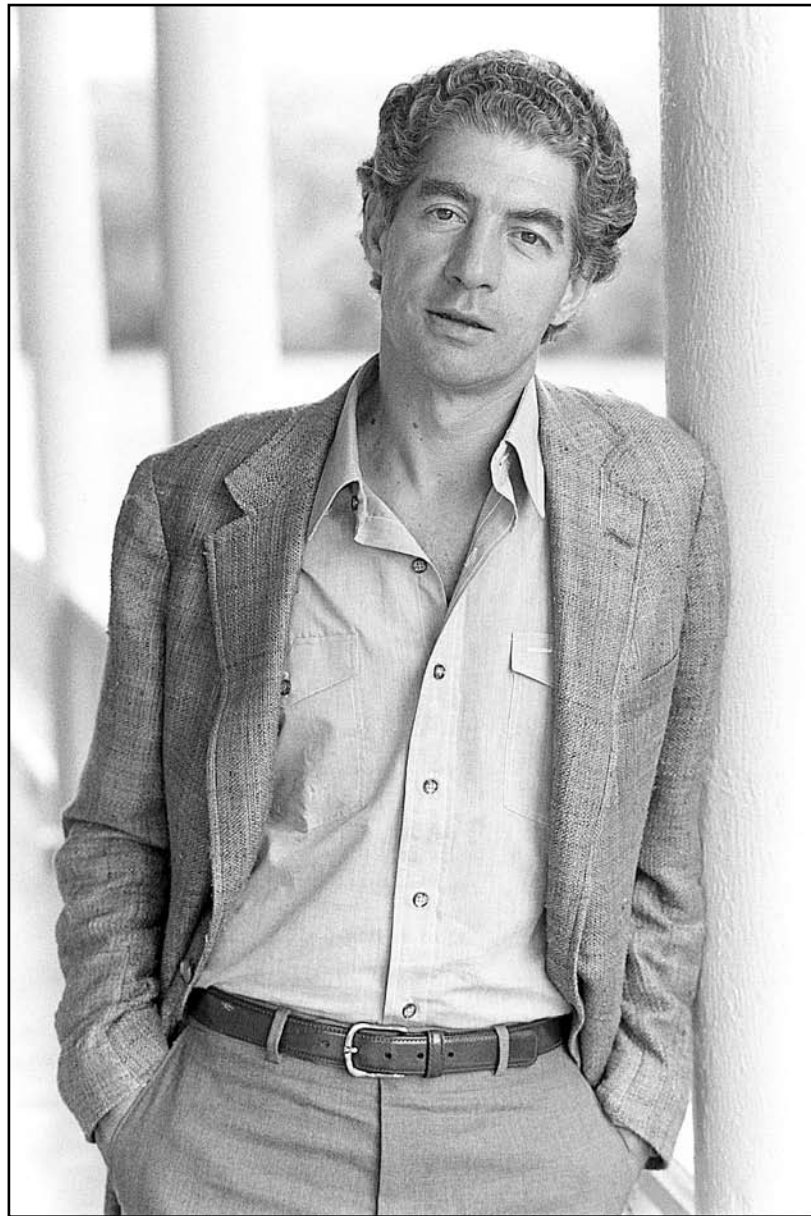
Excerpt

Lady Chatterley's Lover. In London in 1924, when he was just thirty, he wrote *The Green Hat*, the definitive novel of a whole generation that, to the blare of jazz, tried to forget the horrors of World War I and the reality of the world economic crisis. The famous father, whose successful novel of 1929 was filmed as *A Woman of Affairs* with Greta Garbo, the "goddess," the first female Hollywood legend. The distant father, the shadowy figure, who emigrated during World War II to the United States and fell silent in his new residence on renowned Park Avenue in New York.

Who he—Michael J., born in 1930—is in all this tangled sequence of events is a precarious question, like a trunk he has been lugging along behind him but has never opened. When, in 1939, the door to a carefree childhood, brightened by the light of the Mediterranean, shut behind him and, to elude the approaching war, he was sent alone to a boarding school in Canada on the other side of the big puddle, he thought he knew one thing with absolute certainty—that he was English. Until one day, at the table, the headmaster's charming wife mentioned his famous father as an Armenian writer. This was not only embarrassing for the boy but also—and this is something he declares categorically—untrue, because his father was English and his passport proved it.

"Har-meenian?" his little Scots roommate MacGregor asks him in surprise after dinner. "What kind of sports do they play there?" "I don't know," replies Michael. "I've never been there. Probably the same sports as here." "Not cricket," answers MacGregor categorically. "Yes, cricket," says Michael. "Anyway, I'm English." "You can't be English," says MacGregor.

Soon, the question no longer needed to be answered, because the whole family was together once more in New York, and they



Michael Arlen.

became naturalized American citizens. His father traveled to Hollywood as a scriptwriter, where—like the majority of European literary émigrés—he would never feel happy. In a material sense, the boy's youth carried on without hardships and, like other smart upperclass boys, he studies at an expensive New England school. Yet he was missing something irrecoverable that is needed on the threshold of adulthood if one is to weigh anchor and travel to new shores: a harbor, a firm anchorage in childhood. Maybe this is why his writing style seems so intense today, as though he is trying to

sail through straits with all his strength against the wind, with an economy of movement, toward his home.

Some years after his book *Exiles* was nominated for the prestigious National Book Award and raised him to the rank of a writer in the estimation of critics and journalists, he traveled to the land many diaspora Armenians refer to as the "old country," even if their families have lived elsewhere for generations: Armenia, at that time a tiny but vital Soviet republic in the Transcaucasus. Passage to Armenia is the name he gives the book, as it was no simple journey but

rather a sort of transition through a space dividing the New York intellectual from his undiscovered roots. This book was his literary breakthrough: it won the National Book Award.

With heavy luggage, he and his wife flew from Moscow to Yerevan. He had armed himself with all sorts of books documenting the 3,000-year history of the Armenian people. His people, he writes—as though he needed to recognize that what he was experiencing was significant. His origin, as he points out at the beginning of the book, was often a burden to him. “That association of difference, one’s own difference, with something deeply degrading, with sin,” unconsciously prevented him from elaborating everything related to his Armenian provenance. Because his father had kept quiet about everything to do with the family roots, the son’s identity took on a dual basis. “Something always lay between us—something unspoken and (it seemed) unreachable. We were strangers.”

Michael J., the American, with an American wife and four American children, is disconcerted by the Armenian diaspora’s extreme reaction to its past, which he, more by chance than intention, experiences in the U.S.A. He tells the story of the two old people who spend their time recalling the past and so forget to live in the present. “My father had committed no crime,” one of the old men sobs time and again, and remains bound even decades later, bewildered, to his father’s violent death. Nevertheless Arlen also relates the story of two Armenian brothers who succeed in the building trade and are unable to understand how their host (not Arlen) has so many books on the genocide. “What do you read this for? Haven’t you read enough of such things?” asks one of the brothers. “Yes, it’s all ancient history,” says the other. How is he himself to feel, then, in whose veins also flows that blood,

far from the sacred Mount, when he comes in contact with the people of Ararat?

His encounter with the trauma almost produced a great rejection in him. “Those damned massacres, I thought. That chauvinism, such a chauvinism of misfortune,” he writes. Thirty years later, amid the impeccable elegance of his home, he repeats these words, which he originally jotted down amid the walls of Soviet buildings. In Armenia a man called Sarkis guided him around museums and galleries and apparently wanted to convert Arlen into a dyed-in-the-wool Armenian within a few days. One night the New Yorker said, “I hadn’t realized the Armenians were so European.” “We’re not European, we’re Indo-Europeans. That is not the same thing,” said the other with finality. But, replied Arlen, there was interchange, at least, with the Crusaders. “There should have been a kinship, but there was not. For one thing, Armenia was so far away. For another, don’t you know, we were the rug merchants, the traders.” Sarkis laughed in a relaxed manner, while Arlen felt such a sudden rage at these seemingly casual remarks that he could hardly speak.

The memory of old insults, some big, others trifling, welled up in him. “Now don’t get taken in by any of those wily Armenians,” a friend called out laughingly when he left.

*Wily Armenians! Rug merchants! Traders! What in hell did those things matter, I thought, trying to be more rational about it. But something had been let loose inside me: a shame, an anger. And I knew suddenly how it mattered. It mattered because it was supposed to matter. It mattered because I had said that it couldn’t, mustn’t matter. It mattered because my father had said that none of it existed.*

*He was still furious when he visited a museum of Armenian art objects*



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# Jazz

by Betty Panossian-Ter Sargssian

It was what one could call the Cascade experience.

On June 5 there was jazz and more jazz at the Cascade architectural complex in Yerevan. During two hours of exciting jazz performed by Armenia’s own Armenian Jazz Band, literary thousands of passerby listeners and seated audience enjoyed a warm typical summer afternoon at the Cascade stairs, the already traditional venue for the cultural, mainly musical events and concerts organized by the Cafesjian Museum Foundation.

Fourth of the five concerts series scheduled for this summer, the Armenian Jazz Band’s event had its own message to the public. Co-organized by the European Council, it demonstrated a black-white logo “All different, all equal”, in an attempt to fight rac-

# Music





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# hits high at Cascade

ism, xenophobia, and to promote cultural diversity and tolerance. And it is no wonder that jazz puts its notes at the service of this campaign, for jazz itself speaks of tales of cultural discrimination and its path through it.

Love of jazz in Armenia is quite obvious, and Cafesjian Museum Foundation serves that love by offering a diversity of jazz throughout the first half of summer 2007. Armenia is a country where reportedly the culture of jazz was developed in the mid 1930's, and several big jazz bands perform regularly. In fact, The Armenian Jazz Band is the very first of these bands, formed in 1938 by Artemi Ayvazyan.

But, returning to the Cascade jazz event, Armen Martirosyan's Armenian Jazz Band live performed well known jazz tunes by famous performers who have cut cross-cultural boundaries, in accordance to the event's theme. Armed by its deeply reflective



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and professional performance, the band spiced up the concert with plenty of heated improvisation, and towards its end offered welcomed surprises to its audiences. Some Armenian pop singers joined the band on stage alone, paired or in group to perform some well known and well loved hits of popular jazz. 🎷



# Love, criminality, and history at the core of The Lark Farm

The fourth Yerevan International film festival Golden Apricot presented the Armenian screening of the Genocide movie, The Lark Farm by the Italian filmmakers Paolo and Vittorio Taviani.

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by Betty Panossian-Ter Sargssian

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There's something alarming in the opening scene of the The Lark farm, the latest movie of the Italian filmmaker brothers Paolo and Vittorio Taviani. A wealthy household is in a deep sleep, all but one boy, who a grape in one hand distantly makes his way by the sleeping bodies to the room where his grandfather is in his death bed. Soon the subdued nuances of the scene are replaced by a burst of blood from the grape in the dying man's hands. The shocking red forecasts that drama in the air will soon bring about tragedy. The following scenes of mourning, black, and fear set the background for the greater disaster yet to come.

Based on the only novel of the Italian novelist with an Armenian descent Antonia Arslan The Lark Farm is an uncomplicated and straightforward cinematic account of what it really means to experience genocide, in this case the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923 at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. The film brings to the international audience in a very much comprehensible way one of the darkest chapters of the contemporary history. Without lectures, an episode of the Armenian Genocide is unfolded and concluded by the fact that it is still being denied today by its perpetrators.



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Rolling on for two hours, the story unfolds in a single time period, but in various geographical settings. The first is in a small Western Armenian town, where the genteel family of Aram Avakian (Tcheky Karyo) led a life of richness and comfort. Following the death of their patriarch with great enthusiasm they prepare for the arrival of their brother Assadour (Mariano Rigillo) in Venice, where plans to save the lives of the last surviving members of Avakian family will be designed later. The family country estate, called the Lark Farm is renovated, luxurious gifts from Italy are arriving and the family celebrates its blissful life. Beneath the polite and polished relationships of friendship and respect between

the Armenians and the Turks there is a mounting tenseness, to which Aram Avakian and his wife, Armineh (Arsineh Khanjian) turn a deaf ear. The pleasant atmosphere of the celebration is soon contrasted by the very graphic scenes of massacre, as the Lark Farm becomes the setting of the extermination of the whole Armenian town. The nightmarish flashes of blood cover the white walls of the mansion. The shock of her husband's head thrown into her lap puts Armineh in a trance of numbness. Now Nounik (Paz Vega), the sister of Aram Avakian has to take care of the others. As the family together with the death caravan wanders in the wilderness, plans to save them are schemed by those closely related to the

Film



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Avakian family. Having heard the horrible news of the massacres in Anatolia (and here Taviani's give an indirect homage to the pioneer of Armenian Genocide journalistic accounts, Armin Wegner) Assadour makes arrangements to save them, while two of the servants of the Avakian household, the Turk beggar (Mohammad Bekri) and the Greek housemaid (Angela Molina) set on journey and, aided by the brotherhood of the beggars, make their way to the death camp, where the survivors of the desert march are left to perish.

The various characters of the film come out of focus one by one on the road to agony and towards its end the film centers on three; Nounik, the spirited beauty, Nazmi, the beggar, and Ismene, the Greek maid.

Having lost her love to a charismatic Young Turk officer, in a desert blinded moment Nounik gives herself to another young officer accompanying the convoy of women through their march in the deserts of Anatoly in ex-



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change for some black bread for the three surviving children of her family. She is a character who sacrifices herself for those whom she loves. Towards the end of the film when the escape plan is about to be jeopardized, she bravely puts herself at the center of the Turk officers' attention, and makes her lover keep his promise not to let the officers torture her. Beautifully performed by the Spanish ac-

triss Paz Vega, Nounik's character furnishes the film with its most heartbreaking scenes. Paz Vega blends in with Nounik, for she smiles, moves her head, holds the book, walks the desert, and loves and beats the children as though she had emerged from that same period, the background, and the same horrible experiences. The other two main characters, Nazim and Ismene, although noble



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in their intentions, seem to be too theatrical. On the other hand the character of Arsineh Khanjian comes to life in two distinct configurations. The aristocratic lady of the household, she is played by a confident, yet self-conscious Arsineh Khanjian. But after the tragic shock of her husband's murder the character is sunk into the sea of almost unconsciousness, with occasional awakenings.

With this film the brothers Taviani return to their most favorite theme, the relation of the individuals with historical happenings. The closing scene is an indication that contemporary Turks suffer from the past, as do the Armenians. The miserable and ghostly stare in the eyes of the three children making it to the Italian shore, could be seen in the gaze of the Armenians aware to their past.

The dramatic expressions of the film account the impact of the Armenian Genocide in an evenly amounting tone. However, the march into the desert is unconvincing. In spite of the fine acting by the lead characters and the

employment of distressing scenes, it looks excessively contrived. The emptiness of the desert is palpable, but there are some ingredients missing to make it larger than life. It is not just the small scale of number of the deported women and children, but a strange sensation that floats from the screen of it just being a film. And another eye-grabbing improbability is that Nounik's precious earrings that she had put on the ears of her nephew in order to make his disguise as a girl more credible during the massacre at the farm remain on the child until the gates of Aleppo. But the Turk Zaptiehs did not notice that one precious earring.

The most compelling aspect of the film is the self-condemnation of the young officer (played by Moritz Bleibtreu) as the responsible for the genocide, shut down by the patriotic cries of the majority. The fanatic call of the Young Turks to create a "Turkey for Turks" soon turns into a meticulously designed plan to exterminate a whole population by whipping

off the males, irrelevant of their ages, and deporting the surviving females into a death march to the Syrian deserts.

The Lark Farm is the first high-profile production produced internationally (A French-German-Spanish-Bulgarian co-production) and directed by non-Armenians. This fact gives an interesting point of view to the topic it touches. The only other Armenian Genocide film with international high profile, Atom Egoyan's *Ararat* in 2002, suffered a lot due to the fact of his and his wife's, lead actress Arsineh Khanjian's being Armenians. It was much of a history lesson. "The Lark Farm" is a classical film that situates the story in its own time period with a written brief account of the story of denial. It makes the story universal, relevant to all the other genocides, to all the people considered unwanted by others.

Due to its novel-like structure *The Lark Farm* can reach to a wider international public, and the over-sentimentality of the narrative is bound to arouse the sympathy of the international audience. 𐌌

# Ruben Dishdishyan: ‘Nothing can compare to ‘The 40 days of Musa-Dag’ in terms of its

With the collapse of the Soviet Union the film industry crumpled too. ‘Armenfilm’, the Yerevan studio created by Hamo Bek-Nazaryan in 1923, where the Armenian nation developed its cinematograph, stopped functioning forever.

The early 90’s Russia too came close to the halt in film-producing. Cinematograph was no more ‘the most important art for us’, as Vladimir Lenin put it after the October Revolution, thus determining state-sponsored film production primarily for the propaganda of the Soviet ideology.

The most important art in the former Soviet Union became the art of survival and, as a major means towards that end, money-making.

Foreign films flooded into the Russian market. The black market of pirated videos and DVDs conquered the private screen. TV became commercialized and, following the tastes of the audience, went after cheap foreign films, antiquated soap-operas and sitcoms. Movie-houses went bankrupt and the movie-going tradition all-but-disappeared.

Ten years on we see a different picture: Russian movie-making is on a rise. The mass product blockbuster and the art house ends of the market are being quickly filled in by the local production. Local soap-operas are preferred over the foreign ones. Festivals abound. Movie-making has become one of the most vibrant and lucrative industries.



In this change an important role has been played by Ruben Dishdishyan, head of the leading film producing and distribution company, “Central Partnership”.

Ruben Dishdishyan is not a frequent appearance in the media. However, he kindly agreed to talk to the ‘Armenian Reporter’. The interview with the 48-year old, fit and sharp Ruben in his office was aimed at explaining, what does a successful modern Armenian businessman in Russia make to tick?

7 Mr Dishdishyan, thank

you for this opportunity. Please tell our readers about your parents and childhood.

8 My father and mother met in Stalingrad (currently Volgograd) in the second half of 1950’s. They were builders, rebuilding the city after the 2nd WW. My mother is half-Tatar and half-Russian. They might have stayed there, but my grandmother was dying so my father went to Armenia. I was consequently born in Kazan, Tatarstan, the home-town of my mother. We relocated to Armenia

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when I was 1 year old. I lived in Yerevan until I was 30. I went to the Chekhov school and to the Architectural-Building Department of the Politechnic Institute. My parents still live there, in Aigedzor. I visit them 5-6 times a year.

9 How did you come into the cinema business?

10 In 1989 I and some friends opened our own architectural company in Yerevan. Soon we started additional businesses, bringing VCRs to Armenia and even assembling them in Armenia. In 1991 I felt that my relationship with friends is in a crisis. We had misunderstandings on personal and financial issues. I went to Moscow. It was a tough time. I did not have a job for a year.

Then I suddenly learned that the TV series 'Dallas' had been sold to several countries and has had 27 show seasons. So I thought: 'Why don't they show 'Dallas' here in Russia?' I decided to buy the rights of 'Dallas' for the Russian market. I had no idea about movie rights at that time. I did not know any English. I managed to find out the contact details of the guy who had the rights. His name is Bill Pack (sp.?). He was in London. He invited me over for a visit. I with my friend who knew English gathered our last money and went to



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London. Bill was very nice and lectured us for hours about the entire rights business. I was grateful. I was ready to do anything to get the rights for 'Dallas'.

Bill agreed to give them to us for an enormous sum: more than two million USD. He asked for 30% more than the real price. We didn't have any money anyway, for us two million or one million was the same. We signed the contract and went back to Russia. I had told Bill that I was representing several Russian TV channels. Of course this was not true. After I got the contract I went around negotiating with the channels. First I was not successful. Learning our predicament, Bill went on to help me, despite the fact that I had not been truthful to him. He did not have a choice: the contract was signed and I was delaying the payments. Finally I was able to sell the rights to the newly-opened independent 'STS' TV station. I paid a major part of the down payment to Bill, and then the things became easier.

I never earned anything from that first deal and did not even pay the entire sum—we renegotiated it afterwards. But along the way I established major contacts, learned a lot about the movie rights and acquired a unique ex-

perience for the future.

Mr. Dishdishyan goes on telling about his successful film projects. Unexpectedly, first he talks about the TV series rather than cinema projects. According to him, the 12-series 'Doctor Zhivago', that went on TV in 2006, is a major success, and its international sales are growing. The American audience may remember the 1965 Oscar-winning Hollywood version of 'Doctor Zhivago' with Omar Sharif.

After Zhivago Mr. Dishdishyan mentions 'Master and Margarita', a 10-series TV film, broadcasted in late 2005. According to the producer, these are his preferred projects, and they are also commercially successful. They are being sold to several countries.

There have been also controversial projects of 'Central Partnership', such as 'Wolfhound', a fantasy about the imaginative Slavic past. One could find there borrowings from 'Star Wars', 'Harry Potter', 'Lord of the Rings' etc. The wannabe blockbuster still didn't fly. One of the most expensive film projects in Russia, it barely made up its costs. But Ruben is not upset. He mentions the film en pass , saying that it has been

sold to more than 20 countries worldwide and still will make profit.

Recounting his films-in-the-making Dishdishyan becomes passionate. He enumerates the TV series which are either remakes or new takes on the films which once upon a time had been hits in the USSR: 'Liquidation' and 'Apostle'.

'Liquidation's setting is familiar from the 1979 series 'The meeting place cannot be changed' (Mesto vstrechi izmenit' nel'zia), where the poet and bard Vladimir Vysotskiy played a role of a controversial head of the anti-banditism police unit in a post-World War II city ravaged by crime. The film became a cult classic thanks to Vysotskiy's talent. His mere appearance was sufficient for the viewer to forgive all the discrepancies of the series.

'Liquidation' is a story about military commander Georgiy Zhukov, to whom some attribute the victory in the WWII, exiled by Stalin to Odessa in 1946. Stalin was worried that Zhukov's great public charisma could challenge his power. In the film as the commander of the Odessa military district Zhukov has to deal with the organized crime in the area.

There are several advantages in using Odessa as a setting: one can utilize the famous Odessa humour,



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the tasty traditions of the strong Jewish community and the folk songs with a criminal coloring, all of which have a nostalgic significance for the Russian viewer.

The 'Apostle' series, according to Dishdishyan, echo the late 1960's cult war spy series 'Shield and sword'. A German spy under surveillance suddenly dies. In order to bring to the surface the entire spy ring the Soviet intelligence involves in the game the dead spy's twin brother, digging him out of

the Siberian Gulag.

These projects demonstrate that Russia is reevaluating its past movie traditions. Nostalgia for the past films is overwhelming. They have prime time on TV and their quality is highly praised. There are at least three 24-hour cable channels devoted entirely to the Soviet films. Their creative re-makes are bound to be successful in the local market.

Dishdishyan's next example is from a more distant past: the 18-

series 'Taras Bulba' is based on the epic tale by Nikolay Gogol. In the heroic story about the Dniepr Cossacs the father kills his son for treason. The story was studied in the Soviet schools, including the Armenian schools, and is familiar to every inhabitant of the former Soviet Union.

There exists in a way a similar story in the Armenian literature. In Raffi's 'Samvel' the hero kills his parents for treason. In the Soviet 1930s 'Pavlik Morozov' the boy betrays his father to the authorities because his father is a rich peasant hiding bread from the hungry. The Russians today don't like the topic of fathers and sons betraying and punishing each other for politics. But one cannot deny that the cinematic qualities of the Taras Bulba story are extremely promising. It is being shot by the renowned director Vladimir Bortko, the very same who shot 'Master and Margarita'.

Among the big screen project makers Dishdishyan mentions Karen Oganessian, who is debuting as a director of 'I stay', Anna Melikyan, who just finished 'The





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Mermaid’, and Anton Megerdych, who did the sequel to a local blockbuster ‘Fighting the Shadow-2’.

11 There are many Armenian names in your business. Is there any special policy you have vis-a-vis the Armenians?

- Well, cinema is an international art and business, so the nationality does not matter much. What matters is the talent. But if I see an Armenian name on the scenario, of course it catches my attention. The project gets the fast track. As for Karen Oganessian, he has worked for several years as a film cutter. He read the scenario and said he wanted to do it. He even blackmailed me that if he were not given the project he would quit. My alternative director was also a novice, so the risk of giving Karen the opportunity was not that high. It proved to be the right decision: the film is going to be a huge success.

Anna Melikyan’s film has already been shown on ‘Kinotavr’—the main Russian internal film festival, and on the Moscow International Film Festival. Anna Melikyan has

directed and produced a few films and has won awards. According to Ruben, her new film will be a success, but what hinders the Russian new wave movies from conquering the international screen is that they violate some of the key rules, such as the happy ending requirement. Needless to say, it would be strange if the film whose title associates with the famous Danish fairy tale would have a happy end.

- Do you do Armenian projects at all?

12 We did ‘My big Armenian wedding’, which despite its drawbacks is watched well in Russia but disliked in Armenia. It did not find the right way of presenting the Armenian humour and traditions. Also, allowing a view on themselves from beyond is not the strongest point of Armenians, particularly of the women.

This is not my only Armenian project. For several years now I have been looking forward to producing ‘The 40 days of Musa-Dag’. It will be a great international success. Unfortunately, the rights of that oeuvre are in the hands of a person who so far has been refus-

ing to accept our idea. But we do not abandon it and will be trying insistently.

13 If not ‘Musa-Dag’, perhaps there could be some other projects based on the rich Armenian past.

14 None of them compares with ‘Musa-Dag’ in terms of its cinematic qualities. The only other idea I have currently is to make a film about the 1988 earthquake with Karen Oganessian.

15 So how do you feel being part-Armenian and part-Tatar? While on one hand Armenians and Tatars have had a history of friendship, on the other hand, the capital of Tatarstan, Kazan, where you were born, is the very place where the ideology of Pan-Turkism was also born in the beginning of the 20-th century. Do the two parts of your identity fit well together or do they fight?

16 I have never thought about my origins from that angle. I feel totally comfortable with my identity. Of course I am Armenian rather than Tatar. I like the Tatars, I have great friends among them, such as the star actress Chulpan



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Khamatova. But I feel myself Armenian, a Russian Armenian. I am a citizen of Russia of Armenian origins.

17 What would you wish to the readers of the 'Armenian Reporter'?

18 I wish them to follow the events that concern us all. To build networks and alliances. To know about each other. We lack connections, we are too divided. I am not in politics, I am not interested in power games. I love Russia, my country, and Armenians, my nation. I want us Armenians to use the opportunities that present themselves because we all belong to the same nation in different parts of the world.

Why would Ruben Dishdshyan, unusually for the people of his trade, be so fixed on the great classical literary work as a basis for his new projects? One could find a business reason in his approach: the new Russian culture lacks branding, whereas the old classical stories can be easily converted into brands. But the interview demonstrated an-



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other reason: his belief that one can make profit on elite and complex projects. The movie market does not have to be orientated only towards the lowest common denominator. The new Russian cinema has a chance to present to the world an alternative success story—a story where the viewer is educated by the producer, rather than the producer is the slave of the market trends and of the plummeting standards of viewers' tastes. Thus Ruben Dishdshyan brings another meaning to the thoroughly mocked concepts of 'new Russians' and 'new Armenians'.



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16 July

MONDAY		
EST	PST	
10:30	7:30	Good Morning, Armenians!
11:30	8:30	News in Armenian
11:58	8:58	The Clone- Serial
12:44	9:44	Super Duet
13:07	10:07	Big, Fat Armenian Wedding
13:30	10:30	The Making of a Film
14:07	11:07	Armenian Film
15:44	12:44	News in Armenian
16:12	13:12	Cool Program
16:33	13:33	The Week
16:58	13:58	News in English
17:16	14:16	Exclusive
17:38	14:38	The Century
18:02	15:02	When the Stars Dance/Concert, repeat/
19:08	16:08	The Clone- Serial
19:54	16:54	News in Armenian
20:22	17:22	Yo-Yo
20:30	17:30	Women in Love - Serial
21:15	18:15	News in English
21:33	18:33	In Reality
22:09	19:09	Belissima - Serial
22:52	19:52	Express
23:22	20:22	Blitz
23:38	20:38	News in Armenian
00:06	21:06	Cool Program
00:26	21:26	Super Duet
00:49	21:49	Big, Fat Armenian Wedding
01:12	22:12	The Making of a Film
01:35	22:35	Armenian Film
03:26	0:26	Before Sleep
04:00	1:00	News in Armenian
04:25	1:25	The Century
04:44	1:44	Exclusive
05:07	2:07	Armenia-Diaspora
05:30	2:30	The Week
05:55	2:55	Super Duet
06:16	3:16	Cool Program
06:30	3:30	Big, Fat Armenian Wedding
06:52	3:52	When the Stars Dance/Concert, repeat/
07:38	4:38	Blitz
08:00	5:00	Express
08:30	5:30	Belissima - Serial
09:13	6:13	Women in Love - Serial
10:05	7:05	In Reality

17 July

TUESDAY		
EST	PST	
10:30	7:30	Good Morning, Armenians!
11:30	8:30	News in Armenian
11:58	8:58	The Clone- Serial
12:44	9:44	Cool Program
13:00	10:00	Super Duet
13:20	10:20	Big, Fat Armenian Wedding
13:40	10:40	Mosfilm
15:05	12:05	News in Armenian
15:30	12:30	Express
16:00	13:00	Belissima - Serial
16:45	13:45	Blitz
17:02	14:02	News in English
17:20	14:20	The Century
17:40	14:40	Exclusive
18:03	15:03	Armenia-Diaspora
18:25	15:25	Norutuyunner
18:50	15:50	The Capital
19:00	16:00	The Clone- Serial
19:46	16:46	News in Armenian
20:14	17:14	Journalistic Research
20:30	17:30	Women in Love - Serial
21:12	18:12	News in English
21:30	18:30	In Reality
22:00	19:00	Belissima - Serial
22:45	19:45	Express
23:14	20:14	Blitz
23:30	20:30	News in Armenian
23:58	20:58	Cool Program
00:15	21:15	Super Duet
00:35	21:35	Big, Fat Armenian Wedding
00:57	21:57	Exclusive
01:20	22:20	Mosfilm
03:20	0:20	Before Sleep
04:00	1:00	News in Armenian
04:25	1:25	The Century
04:45	1:45	Yo-Yo
05:13	2:13	Armenia-Diaspora
05:35	2:35	Exclusive
05:57	2:57	Super Duet
06:18	3:18	Cool Program
06:30	3:30	Big, Fat Armenian Wedding
06:51	3:51	Norutuyunner
07:16	4:16	Yerevan Time
07:43	4:43	Blitz
08:00	5:00	Express
08:30	5:30	Belissima - Serial
09:15	6:15	Women in Love - Serial
10:00	7:00	In Reality

18 July

WEDNESDAY		
EST	PST	
10:30	7:30	Good Morning, Armenians!
11:30	8:30	News in Armenian
11:58	8:58	The Clone- Serial
12:45	9:45	Cool Program
13:00	10:00	Super Duet
13:20	10:20	Big, Fat Armenian Wedding
13:40	10:40	Discovery
14:04	10:04	Women in Love - Serial
14:50	11:50	Celebrities Uncensored
15:07	12:07	News in Armenian
15:30	12:30	Express
16:05	13:05	Belissima - Serial
16:50	13:50	The Century
17:10	14:10	News in English
17:28	14:28	Journalistic Research
17:46	14:46	Armenia-Diaspora
18:06	15:06	Exclusive
18:29	15:29	Health Program
18:52	15:52	The Capital
19:02	16:02	The Clone- Serial
19:48	16:48	News in Armenian
20:15	17:15	Special Lesson
20:35	17:35	Women in Love - Serial
21:20	18:20	News in English
21:28	18:38	In Reality
22:05	19:05	Belissima - Serial
22:50	19:50	Express
23:13	20:13	Blitz
23:30	20:30	News in Armenian
23:58	20:58	Cool Program
00:15	21:15	Super Duet
00:36	21:36	Big, Fat Armenian Wedding
01:00	22:00	Discovery
01:25	22:25	Exclusive
01:50	22:50	Norutuyunner
02:15	23:15	News in English
02:33	23:33	Before Sleep
02:55	23:55	Celebrities Uncensored
04:00	1:00	News in Armenian
04:25	1:25	The Century
04:44	1:44	Journalistic Research
05:07	2:07	Armenia-Diaspora
05:29	2:29	Exclusive
05:49	2:49	Super Duet
06:10	3:10	Cool Program
06:31	3:31	Big, Fat Armenian Wedding
06:52	3:52	When the Stars Dance/Concert, repeat/
07:41	4:41	Blitz
08:00	5:00	Express
08:30	5:30	Belissima - Serial
09:15	6:15	Women in Love - Serial
10:02	7:02	In Reality

# Satellite Broadcast Program Grid

## 16 - 22 July



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### 19 July

THURSDAY		
EST	PST	
10:30	7:30	Good Morning, Armenians!
11:30	8:30	News in Armenian
11:58	8:58	The Clone- Serial
12:44	9:44	Cool Program
13:00	10:00	When the Stars Dance
13:16	10:16	Match show
13:35	10:35	Pan- Armenian Star
14:00	11:00	Women in Love - Serial
14:45	11:45	Blitz
15:02	12:02	News in Armenian
15:30	12:30	Express
16:00	13:00	Belissima - Serial
16:46	13:46	The Century
17:05	14:05	News in English
17:23	14:23	Exclusive
17:46	14:46	Tempus
18:06	15:06	When the Stars Dance/ Concert, repeat/
19:00	16:00	The Clone- Serial
19:45	16:45	News in Armenian
20:13	17:13	Personal Case
20:35	17:35	Women in Love - Serial
21:20	18:20	News in English
21:38	18:38	In Reality
22:05	19:05	Belissima - Serial
22:50	19:50	Express
23:18	20:18	Blitz
23:35	20:35	News in Armenian
00:03	21:03	Cool Program
00:20	21:20	Exclusive
00:43	21:43	When the Stars Dance
01:00	22:00	Match show
01:20	22:20	Pan- Armenian Star
01:40	22:40	Discovery
02:04	23:04	News in English
02:22	23:22	SuperDuet
02:45	23:45	Before Sleep
03:07	0:07	Norutuyunner
04:00	1:00	News in Armenian
04:25	1:25	The Century
04:44	1:44	Journalistic Research
05:03	2:03	Tempus
05:24	2:24	Exclusive
05:45	2:45	Personal Case
06:07	3:07	When the Stars Dance
06:25	3:25	Cool Program
06:45	3:45	Match show
07:05	4:05	Pan- Armenian Star
07:25	4:25	Special Lesson
07:44	4:44	Blitz
08:00	5:00	Express
08:30	5:30	Belissima - Serial
09:15	6:15	Women in Love - Serial
10:00	7:00	In Reality

### 20 July

FRIDAY		
EST	PST	
10:30	7:30	Good Morning, Armenians!
11:30	8:30	News in Armenian
11:58	8:58	The Clone- Serial
12:44	9:44	Cool Program
13:00	10:00	When the Stars Dance
13:16	10:16	Match show
13:35	10:35	Pan- Armenian Star
13:55	10:55	Mosfilm
15:30	12:30	Express
16:00	13:00	Belissima - Serial
16:45	13:45	Exclusive
17:05	14:05	News in English
17:23	14:23	The Century
17:43	14:43	SuperDuet
18:05	15:05	Yerevan Time
18:30	15:30	Discovery
19:00	16:00	The Clone- Serial
19:46	16:46	News in Armenian
20:14	17:14	Special Lesson
20:35	17:35	Women in Love - Serial
21:20	18:20	News in English
21:38	18:38	In Reality
22:05	19:05	Belissima - Serial
22:50	19:50	Express
23:20	20:20	Blitz
23:36	20:36	News in Armenian
00:04	21:04	Cool Program
00:20	21:20	Exclusive
00:43	21:43	When the Stars Dance
01:00	22:00	Match show
01:20	22:20	Pan- Armenian Star
01:40	22:40	Mosfilm
03:15	0:15	Before Sleep
03:38	0:38	SuperDuet
04:00	1:00	News in Armenian
04:25	1:25	The Century
04:45	1:45	Yerevan Time
05:10	2:10	Norutuyunner
05:32	2:32	Exclusive
05:55	2:55	When the Stars Dance
06:12	3:12	Cool Program
06:35	3:35	Match show
06:55	3:55	Pan- Armenian Star
07:15	4:15	Discovery
07:40	4:40	Blitz
08:00	5:00	Express
08:30	5:30	Belissima - Serial
09:15	6:15	Women in Love - Serial
10:00	7:00	In Reality

### 21 July

SATURDAY		
EST	PST	
10:00	7:30	When the Stars Dance/ Concert, repeat/
11:30	8:30	News in Armenian
11:58	8:58	The Clone- Serial
12:43	9:43	Cool Program
13:00	10:00	When the Stars Dance
13:16	10:16	Match show
13:35	10:35	Pan- Armenian Star
13:55	10:55	The Making of a Film
14:30	11:30	Armenian Film
16:00	13:00	Belissima - Serial
16:45	13:45	Express
17:13	14:13	The Century
17:33	14:33	Exclusive
17:55	14:55	Hot-Line
18:17	15:17	Armenia-Diaspora
18:37	15:37	Yerevan Time
19:02	16:02	The Clone- Serial
19:48	16:48	News in Armenian
20:16	17:16	Our Victory
20:35	17:35	Women in Love - Serial
21:20	18:20	VOA(The Voice of America)
21:40	18:40	In Reality
22:18	19:18	Blitz
22:46	19:46	Express
23:02	20:02	Discovery
23:28	20:28	News in Armenian
23:56	20:56	Cool Program
00:13	21:13	Norutuyunner
00:40	21:40	When the Stars Dance
01:00	22:00	Match show
01:20	22:20	Pan- Armenian Star
01:40	22:40	The Making of a Film
	22:15	Armenian Film
03:45	0:45	Before Sleep
04:07	1:07	Exclusive
04:30	1:30	News in Armenian
04:50	1:50	The Century
05:10	2:10	Our Victory
05:33	2:33	Armenia-Diaspora
05:54	2:54	When the Stars Dance
06:10	3:10	Hot-Line
06:33	3:33	Match show
06:55	3:55	Pan- Armenian Star
07:15	4:15	Yerevan Time
07:40	4:40	When the Stars Dance/ Concert, repeat/
08:34	5:34	Blitz
08:50	5:50	Express
09:15	6:15	Women in Love - Serial
10:00	7:00	In Reality

### 22 July

SUNDAY		
EST	PST	
10:30	7:30	Exclusive
10:46	7:46	Discovery
11:10	8:10	Blitz
11:32	8:32	News in Armenian
12:00	9:00	The Clone- Serial
12:46	9:46	Cool Program
13:05	10:05	When the Stars Dance
14:00	11:00	Women in Love - Serial
14:45	11:45	Celebrities Uncensored
15:05	12:05	News in Armenian
15:33	12:33	Express
16:02	13:02	The Century
16:22	13:22	Our Victory
16:45	13:45	Armenia-Diaspora
17:06	14:06	VOA(The Voice of America)
17:26	14:26	SuperDuet
17:47	14:47	Yerevan Time
18:12	15:12	Hot-Line
18:35	15:35	Norutuyunner
19:00	16:00	The Clone- Serial
19:46	16:46	News in Armenian
20:14	17:14	Yo-Yo
20:36	17:36	Women in Love - Serial
21:20	18:20	Concert
22:51	19:51	Special Lesson
23:14	20:14	Blitz
23:35	20:35	News in Armenian
00:03	21:03	Cool Program
00:20	21:20	Discovery
00:44	21:44	VOA(The Voice of America)
01:05	22:05	When the Stars Dance
02:00	23:00	Exclusive
02:23	23:23	News
02:43	23:43	Before Sleep
03:06	0:06	Celebrities Uncensored
03:26	0:26	The Week
04:00	1:00	News in Armenian
04:25	1:25	The Century
04:45	1:45	Our Victory
05:07	2:07	Armenia-Diaspora
05:28	2:28	Yerevan Time
05:53	2:53	Exclusive
06:16	3:16	Hot-Line
06:38	3:38	Special Lesson
07:00	4:00	Cool Program
07:17	4:17	Yo-Yo
07:40	4:40	Discovery
08:04	5:04	Fathers and Sons
09:00	6:00	Blitz
09:15	6:15	Women in Love - Serial
10:00	7:00	Norutuyunner

# Throw Your Hands in the Air and Wave ‘em Like You Just Don’t Care

## Dance

When one thinks of Armenian dances, one generally revisits the images they may have seen at a wedding or a church bazaar—a line of men and women, pinky fingers clasped with each other, throwing one leg up or two and going with the flow of the leader who may be carrying a scarf of some sort, waving it in the air as he or she prances about. Sometimes, a bold person may enter the center of the circle and show off their moves, tossing up their feet and slapping it with their hands, jumping down onto the floor and rising back up. Nearly all Armenians know the dance well, it’s in their blood, and the pleasure associated with taking part is rarely diminished. However, the tradition of Armenian dance dates back for centuries and for a few hours on a Saturday evening in San Francisco, the community at large had the opportunity to experience these traditions in an auditorium at The Palace of Fine Arts.

Most of the crowd at the Armenian Folkloric Dance Ensemble performance was of Armenian heritage. As one walked through the room, the familiar sound of hushed Armenian voices could be heard, families greeting each other, babies being held, priests making their rounds.

People of all ages had come to see the dancers from Vanoush Khanamirian Dance School and singer Razmik Mansourian. A young man, Minas Bekerejian, who had recently moved from Beirut to San Francisco reflected on how much the performance spoke to his soul, “The klots, the beautiful colors, the traditional music. I feel at home seeing this perfor-

mance. I feel comfortable, I can feel my Grandparents when I see this.” And that sentiment was felt by many in the crowd who clapped along with the dancers and evidently felt their Armenianness.

The performance consisted of nearly 16 individual dances, all quite different from each other but all connected by the same roots. Since the size of Armenia has changed so much in the past, Armenian dance encompasses a handful of regions including what is now Iran and Georgia. The music played that night did not seem strictly Armenian but borrowed form all the caucuses. The costumes were brilliantly crafted. In one performance, the women wore flowing white dresses, gliding across the stage like angels or swans. In another, the dresses were made of green velvet with golden embroidery.

The men seemed less elegant, more masculine and militaristic. They had a strong presence and fit well on stage. They often wore vests and usually one performer carried the ubiquitous red scarf in hand. In one dance, called Ossetian, all the female dancers moved in a circle in unison, as if held perfectly together, sinuous and seamless, moving on an invisible hinge. There was nearly a trompe l’oeil where the dancers seemed like they were flying. Ossetia was a region in the northern Caucasus Mountains in Europe. Most Ossetians live in Georgia therefore it is not a surprise that a dance from Ossetia would find a place at an Armenian Dance Festival since Armenia used to be part of what is now Georgia.

In another dance, Old Tbilisi

Scenes, a woman dressed clearly as westerner was tempting her very eastern courtiers. These were men dressed in traditional klots, doing their best to woo this fair maiden, as they tried to upstage each other with brilliant foot movements. The movements and energy of the men was remarkable, so well choreographed and executed. In fact, this particular dance ensemble came from Los Angeles where a great deal of the Armenian Diaspora resides. These dancers from Vanoush Khanamirian Dance School have performed all over the country. As an onlooker, one would never suspect that this ensemble is from America. So aptly are the dances reproduced, one almost feels like they are moving back in time.

A young woman named Susannah from Uzbekistan was overjoyed at seeing the performance. “The dancing, the music, the costumes! I used to always watch these on ‘you tube’ and now I can see them in person.” Also attending was a woman from Nebraska, Wendy Bantam. Her love for dance led her to this performance. Having never seen Armenian folk dancing, she was curious and ultimately amazed at what she was seeing. “You feel a sense of place, a sense of history when you see these dances. We don’t have that here in America. And even though I cannot understand the words, I know there is a story, a beautiful story within these movements.”

One thing that stood out tremendously in each of the dances was the beautiful use of hands. Women and men used their arms creating a sense of growth, of fantasy, like flowers moving with the

wind.

Along with the dancing, the performance included several solos by the well-known and respected baritone, Razmig Mansourian. Mansourian walked onto the stage with a presence of a substantial singer. He is evidently passionate about singing and it came through in his voice. As he sang of love and loss, of longing and lament, he moved across the stage much like an actor might, changing his movements with the words he belted out from a place beyond his vocal chords. The crowd was fixated, silent, and reverential and Mansourian seemed right at home.

Some of the most fundamental ways to hold onto culture and understand its history is through the arts. In a single movement, in collected moments, countless stories are told and passed on. Art allows for these stories to be accessible and maintained regardless of language or age. Armenians have survived many persecutions, and in spite of that, they relish in celebration. As Hartley Appleton, another guest at the performance, noted, "This performance is a vivacious celebration of life." Armenians know that life is precious and they believe that dancing is a way to celebrate life and embrace the past. That is precisely what happened at The Palace of Fine Arts that Saturday night, a celebration of life was enacted on stage. 