

May 3, 2008

The dynamic duo



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**Vrej Agajanian on
"ABC TV Live"**

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Hover

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**Shmavon
Shmavonian's art**



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Speaking of Mothers' Day



by Armen D. Bacon

The phone call had come out of nowhere and, to be perfectly honest, caught me totally by surprise. It was the Armenian Church calling to invite me to be keynote speaker for the 50th Annual Mothers' Day Luncheon. Let me say here that I have spoken before dozens of groups throughout the years, but there was something about this particular invitation that left me at a complete loss for words. I hesitated momentarily and then told the friendly voice on the other end of the phone that I would need to check my calendar and get back to her.

Later that evening, I found myself bombarded with a flood of childhood memories, all centered around Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church. Holy "T," as we often called it, had taken me from childhood to puberty, adolescence to adulthood. It had also been a breeding ground for countless relationships – ranging from the ordinary mortal type all the way up to God. From Sunday school to Kef Times, from the Divine Liturgy to the Hayr Mer, this red brick church had made a lasting and permanent impact on every square inch of my life. It was the place where I had acquired my faith, friends, and an unwavering passion for life. Add to this mix a vision of church elders, including my own grandmother, whose quiet whispers in the church pews became a weekly reminder of the Turkish massacre that had taken their loved ones, leaving them only with haunting memories and an instinct for survival. Their resilience would serve me well as I stepped into adulthood and began to navigate the unique course of my own life's journey.

Somehow I knew that if I agreed to do this speaking engagement, I would need to find just the right words to express the church's influence on me – describing how the billowing incense and sermons, the choir voices singing in Armenian, the *mas* (consecrated bread) that was handed out as we left the church each Sunday, how each of these things had made me a better person, friend, daughter, sister, wife, and mother. Moreover, I would undoubtedly find myself sharing some intimate life confessions with the predominantly Hye audience. I realized, of course, that this might be risky – perhaps even requiring me to come clean about my personal relationship with God. As if that were not enough, I also knew that I was petrified at the prospect of not delivering a poignant and special message about the joys of motherhood.



Armen Bacon and her mother, Virginia Derian.

The audience would naturally include my own mother and many of her friends – each of whom is precious (and very opinionated), true caricatures of strong, vivacious, ethnic women, and each of them a self-declared "auntie." Armenians are known to use this term loosely, but, let me assure you, it is used as a term of endearment. The particular lot I am referring to has known me my entire life. The group includes Suzie and Helen Mardigian, the two Marys – Mary Noroian and Mary Hokokian – Gladys Jamgotchian, Dorothy Shamshoian, and Queenie Agopian. At some point in time, they were my Sunday school teachers, babysitters, one of them gave me my first job, and even now, as I attend the church functions and watch them dish out the pilaf in the food line, I marvel at their indomitable spirit and love for me. Dare I admit that I want to be just like them when I grow up?

She is my role model, confidante, best friend, personal chef, sage, and the woman who has taught me how to live and love.

So what in the world might I possibly say to these faith-filled women, who have kept our church afloat for decades, despite personal hardships and their own fair share of turbulent conversations with God through the years? Many of them are widowed now, some battling catastrophic illness, others enduring the aches and pains of senior life, but all of them, including my mother, remain full-fledged devotees of the church. They are guild members, cooks (who can roll thousands of yalanches at one sitting), bakers (of the coveted bazaar delicacies), event organizers, and, of course, parishioners. It's difficult to imagine what

will become of the church when these women rise to heaven. After all, they are the ones who work tirelessly behind the scenes at weddings, funerals, baptisms, and church picnics. When the church calls, they arrive, at a moment's notice and with servants' hearts.

My remarks may require some editing – I cannot decide right now but I may have to omit talking about the periods of my life when my own faith has teetered. It may, on the other hand, be necessary to include these excerpts – since it was often amidst these darkest hours that I would cling to my spiritual foundation to rescue me from the depths of despair. I'll never forget losing my father, my Aunt Rose, Aunt Lil, and even our family's favorite aunt, Auntie Mary. It's hard to let go of loved ones. Four years ago, I was faced with another unexpected and unimaginable loss – my 22-year old son, Alex. As you might guess, I began to question everything, myself and God included. How would I not share this part of my own life story? It was at the center of my heart and a quintessential part of my motherhood. This topic would require further thought; if shared, I would need to find just the right words to convey these emotionally charged sentiments.

I would want to conclude my remarks on a high note, one that could be laced with hope and joyfulness. After all, the conception of life, the miracle of birth, and then just being a mother to someone who needs you and loves you unconditionally are the most beautiful gifts in the world. I would dedicate this portion of the speech to my daughter, Danielle, who would be seated in the audience. She is an amazing young woman and an even more magnificent mother of two *anoushig* daughters. I would want to elaborate on this incredible circle of life that happens so quickly – one moment, there you are giving birth to your own

children and then, in the blink of an eye, they are giving them right back to you, only now life has fast-forwarded and it is 30 years later and you are shocked and thrilled to be referenced as a grandparent. The joy of that moment is near impossible to describe.

And finally, on this day I know I would especially want to wrap my arms around my own mother, who at 83 is still, in my opinion, the world's best mother. She is my role model, confidante, best friend, personal chef, sage, and the woman who has taught me how to live and love. She has accomplished all of these things exquisitely at all ages and stages of her life. She has also graced me with the "value-added" skills required to be a true Armenian mother – you know, the kind of mother who loves far too much, cares too deeply, and worries endlessly. The church hall would most certainly be filled with these types of mothers on Mothers' Day.

I smiled to myself and then imagined taking my place at the podium, finding the "aunties" who would be scattered throughout the room, making direct eye contact with my mother and daughter, and then being overcome with gratitude for the opportunity to honor and address the mothers in the room. Keeping that in mind, I went to my phone, dialed the number, and confirmed my speaking engagement scheduled for Mothers' Day. ☘



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Joanne Julian on art and identity

A conversation

by Adriana and Hovig Tchalian

Joanne Julian is a Los Angeles-based artist whose work was recently showcased in a retrospective at California State University, Northridge. Titled *Joanne Julian: Counterpoints* (January 22 - February 23), the exhibit received great acclaim by critics and attendees alike.

Julian has had a distinguished career as an educator as well as an artist. She has taught at numerous colleges and universities, mounted many exhibitions, and worked on several corporate commissions to create site-specific art. Her work has been featured in publications such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *ARTS Magazine*, *Artweek*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Images and Issues*, among others. Yet despite her accomplishments, she is relatively unknown in the Armenian community.

Julian, a second-generation Armenian, describes herself as an artist who “happens to be Armenian.” And at first glance, there is nothing ostensibly Armenian about Julian’s drawings, which are often done in ink, graphic, Prisma-color (a brand of materials that includes color markers and pencils), or acrylic on handmade paper.

In fact, Julian’s art seems often to defy categorization. Her drawings are somewhat reminiscent of the simple diagonal lines employed by Barnett Newman, a mid twentieth-century Modernist whose aesthetic, like Julian’s, exhibits minimalist qualities. Many of Julian’s compositions, such as *Red Circle with Narrow Veil* (2003, acrylic, graphite, ink on Arches paper), thus have an affinity with Newman’s. Critic Robert McDonald cites Julian’s regard for Agnes Martin, another minimalist painter whose elegant, albeit stark, compositions couple perfectly with Julian’s unfussy drawings. Compare, for instance, Julian’s *Orange Ginkgos* (2006, acrylic, ink on Arches paper) or *Two Anthurium* (1989, monoprint on Arches paper) with Martin’s elemental compositions (Joanne Julian, Louise Lewis, and Robert McDonald. “Joanne Julian: Counterpoints II,” *Joanne Julian: Counterpoints*, 2007: 35).

These spontaneous bursts of expression can also be likened to another school that valued simplicity in form and stroke, twentieth-century Abstract Expressionism. Robert McDonald compares Julian’s work explicitly to that of Franz Kline, an important figure in the Expressionist school. In *Black Water Collage* (2005,

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Joanne Julian



Zen Circle with Dot, 2007, Ink on Arches paper, 41 and half x 29 and half.

acrylic, collage, ink on Arches paper), for instance, Julian places a perfect Zen circle against a white backdrop, much like Kline’s bold strokes of black against a pristine white surface. Others, such as Louise Lewis (Director, California State University Northridge Art Galleries), liken these dark brush strokes to Japanese *Ensō* (meaning “circle”), a word traditionally used in Japanese calligraphy (*Counterpoints*, 2007: 8).

Many of Julian’s motifs, in fact, are directly inspired by Asian art. Julian’s love of Eastern art and culture began at an early age. She started collecting Japanese prints as a teenager, being attracted to its serene, minimalist palates. Since then Julian has traveled and studied extensively in Asia.

The drawings themselves serve to reinforce, one might say re-enact, this multiplicity of source and purpose. Some of the images playfully disrupt the viewer’s expectations, appearing as two-dimensional depictions in one canvas – all heavy brush strokes and bold lines – only to be transformed in another canvas into seemingly three-dimensional objects, rings or links in a chain, connected by those same bold lines, twisted into braids or knots, grown more tactile by virtue of their new context.



Untitled with Ribbon, 2002, Acrylic, graphite on Arches paper, 132 x 43

The canvases themselves, often large and free-flowing, many replete with natural elements, seem to overwhelm the strict and “unnatural” confines of their context.

But as Julian explains, although the “products” of her artistic efforts may not be Armenian, the “process” she uses to create them, which she describes as a “craft,” certainly is. She remembers her Armenian grandparents on both sides of the family as craftsmen (and women) – primarily tailors and lace makers. She also remembers the painstaking detail of their labor, whether directed at creating art or material objects. She never took her shoes to anyone but her father-in-law, she says, a master shoemaker who could make anything look new, often tearing a shoe apart and rebuilding it to look better than it ever did.

That same level of craftsmanship can be found in Julian’s own drawings. Her meticulous attention to detail has been well-documented. Robert McDonald explains that Julian is “thoroughly acquainted with the qualities of the materials she uses and the characteristics of her tools. With respect to paper, usually Arches or Stonehenge, she determines their weights, textures/finishes and absorbencies with inks and pigments. With inks, colors are only the beginning; there are infinitudes of transparencies and opacities.

That approach to the detailed, delicate demands of craft has stayed with Julian, both as influence and occasional



Scroll Number 4, 1998, Acrylic, graphite on Arches, paper, 50 x 18

obstacle. The Asian influence in her art, for example, she attributes both to her fascination with the delicate craft of Armenian lace making, much akin to the intricacy of Asian art forms, but also to its opposite – a desire to find solace in the simpler, more minimalist aesthetic that grounds so much traditional Asian, particularly Japanese, art.

Julian considers her own identity as artist likewise fluid, more a matter of artistic style and personal lifestyle than one of subject matter, theme or artistic preoccupation. (Like her canvasses, her last name is also “cropped,” an abridged version of “Julukian,” a change made by her grandparents in 1918 after escaping the Genocide and arriving in the US.) But digging a bit deeper, the assiduous viewer discovers other parallels. The braids glimpsed in one or two of the Zen Circles canvases suddenly seem familiar, faintly reminiscent of the traditional braids worn under Armenia women dancers’ headdresses, or perhaps the braided dough of Armenian and Middle Eastern cakes.

Julian avers that she has intentionally tried to defy categorization when it comes to herself and her art. Although proud of her heritage as well as her sex, she still signs her works “J. Julian,” a way of eliding both her ethnic as well as her gender identity. As such, she prefers to be known as an artist in the mainstream, rather than, say, an “Armenian artist” or a “woman artist.” She associates herself most closely, she insists, with her identity as “outsider.” That may be the most potent suggestion yet of Julian’s identity, paradoxically, as an Armenian woman artist in the truest sense, both because of and despite herself. ■

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Death march and the power of survival

Vahram Dadrian's eyewitness account of the Genocide was long overlooked – but no longer, thanks to a new translation



by **Anoush Ter Taulian**

To the Desert: Pages from My Diary, by Vahram Dadrian, tells a fascinating story about an Armenian's incredible willpower to survive racism and Turkish brutality during the 1915 Armenian Genocide. Sensing something terrible was going to happen to the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 15-year-old Vahram from the village of Chorum started recording a diary on May 24, 1915, describing the jihad declared against nonmuslims that resulted in the planned extermination of nearly two-thirds of the indigenous Armenian people.

Besides documenting survivors accounts of the murders of Armenians in Moush, Kharpert, Der Zor, and elsewhere, Dadrian details what his family went through over a four-year period, from the forced deportation marches, to exile in an anti-Armenian town in the Arabian desert, to being mistreated by British liberation forces. When he finally returns in 1919 to Turkey, a boatman “welcomes” him with the words: “Come giavours [non-believers], so we can slaughter you again.”

This book exposes how Turks tried to destroy the Armenian nation physically and psychologically. Dadrian vividly describes the anti-Armenian hysteria behind the arrest of an elderly Armenian man accused of owning “enemy” books. A Turkish policeman holding up a geography book says to an enraged crowd: “You don’t know how to read, so you don’t know how dangerous this book is. This book gives the locations of all the cities in Turkey.” To which the mob replies: “Clobber him! Kill him! [Kill] the traitor!”

Through Vahram’s writings we see how his normal life is stripped away. His Armenian school is closed down because the Turkish government has empowered bandits to beat up Christians. His family is forced to leave their home to march to the desert, where their caravan is showered with rocks and boulders and they face robbers and killers. They are not allowed to drink water from springs, and go unwashed. The Turkish soldiers make them camp in a field of lice where they scratch until they bleed. Diseases ravage their weakened bodies; they hear horror stories of Turkish soldiers giving cooked meat to a crowd of starving Armenians -- who later find out they have eaten the corpses of other Armenians.

Because Vahram’s father was (once) influential and rich, the family is able to

persevere by bribing policemen. Through such means, they are sent in the direction of Damascus instead of to the death traps in the desert of Der Zor, and settle in a village called Jeresh. But there, policemen change the ages listed on the registration papers of young Armenian boys -- thus making them eligible for compulsory military service, the prospect of which is a perpetual fear for the boys. Vahram has a bout of malaria, during which his hand is too weak to hold a pencil; but he survives and continues to write about the oppressive living conditions endured by the Armenians.

The prejudice and discrimination dogging their every move leaves the Armenians in a state of constant fear and anxiety. Vahram records that when a Circassian lost his basket and then found nearby a label bearing the name “Hovannes,” “he started catching all the Hovannes’s in the village, and beat them up one by one, to make them to confess their supposed crime.” Vahram himself is not allowed to exist in peace as an Armenian; a few uttered words of his mother tongue earn him a slap from a policeman’s hand. Even the peace of the grave is forbidden them. When Vahram’s father dies of typhoid, the son is still worried that his father’s grave will be disturbed by robbers searching for clothes or gold teeth.

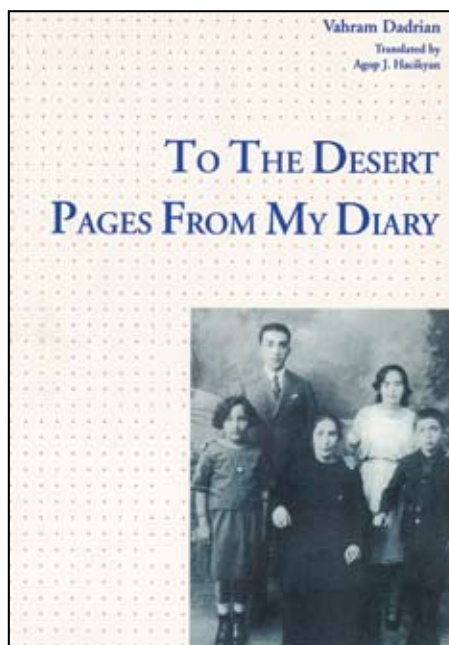
Ingenuity, and “gratitude”

At the same time, Vahram’s diary entries also give an insight into the ingenuity and accomplishment of the Armenians. “Despite the fact that water runs through the village, the locals had never come up with the idea of making a garden or a mill,” he writes. However, “[i]mmmediately after their arrival, Armenians built eight mills along the river and planted 50 vegetable gardens.” The locals, who could only cultivate peas and beans before, now had Armenian-grown tomatoes, cucumber, eggplants, and carrots.

But instead of appreciating these improvements, the local people rob the Armenian gardens. They hate the Armenians, holding them responsible for the rising prices, utterly ignorant that the high prices are the result of the war. Armenian skilled workers open up shops, but the locals often refuse to pay the Armenian craftsmen. The locals pick up their newly mended shoes, but falsely insist that the Armenian cobbler has already been paid.

Through Vahram’s eyes, we see the horrors of the Genocide, as one Armenian village after another is laid waste. In the process, Vahram documents the stories of the survivors he meets. Sarkis from Mush tells how he saw young Armenian girls with their breasts cut off, and “[h]ere and there women’s heads hung from the trees by their hair. These women must have offered resistance, leading assassins to cut off their heads to make examples of them for the rest.”

Mrs. Gadarine from the village of Yozgat describes how Turkish policemen killed their men and sold their caravan to a Kurdish chieftain, who sent the healthy survivors to the provinces to be sold as pack animals, and put the sickly to the sword -- but only after shaving off their hair, which could be profitably used to make rugs and coverings.



Cover of *To the Desert: Pages from My Diary*.

A disguise for extermination

In its broad strokes, *To the Desert* shows how the program of relocating Armenians was merely a disguise for extermination. Two years into the Genocide, Armenians are dying of hunger and disease every day. Vahram observes that out of the 20,000 Armenians that came to Jeresh in 1915, only about 450 were left by the time they were taken to Jerusalem by the British in 1919. “Even the streets are full of half-naked hallucinating Armenian women and brave Armenian youth who have fallen on their faces and are vomiting blood,” he writes.

Throughout their three years in Jeresh, the Armenians dream of being liberated by the British. But they are shocked when the British finally arrive in November 1918; a British officer refuses to save an Armenian girl locked in a room by an Arab shopkeeper, and British soldiers whip Armenian women and elderly people when they are transporting them to Jerusalem.

On December 9, 1918, the Armenians have a procession in Jerusalem. Vahram records how he watched the energetic young men grasping the Armenian flag tightly in their fists, their heads held high with visible pride. “It was unbelievable to watch a crowd of Armenians with no soldiers, no whips, no daggers or hatchets,” he writes.

To his credit Vahram also has the courage to document corruption in the Armenian monastery: “One is a thief ... another gets a refugee pregnant for a piece of bread ... and another has not set foot in church for a year and just drinks. What have they done with the donations made by the pilgrims?” He also registers his disappointment with another Armenian institution, writing: “My father held fundraising drives for the AGBU, but now instead of opening its coffers to provide medicine and other needs it is using only the interest on the money.”

“Isn’t the most important thing to save a nation?” he wonders. To be sure, such passages, though compelling, need to be taken in the context of other stories, from other survivors, recounting the acts of beneficence and sacrifice on the part of the Jerusalem Patriarchate and AGBU during the Genocide period.

In May 1919, the British take the Armenians to Haifa, to a refugee tent camp

filled with lice, where potable water is a half hour’s journey.

In the Armenian refugee camp, Vahram listens to many daring rescue stories, such as the one from Karekin of Trebizond, who after being arrested on a train for being Armenian, escaped by jumping in a well with a subterranean stream. After wandering in the desert he met some Druzes (adherents to an independent monotheistic religious sect) and traveled with them until they were killed by Turks. He took their clothes and weapons, disguised himself as a Bedouin, and returning home rescued his sister by shooting the Turkish captain she had been forced to marry.

Vahram also records stories of Armenians rebelling against their oppressors. In one such account, 10 Armenian soldiers from Sis, under surveillance by two Turkish soldiers, decide to revolt even though they know some of them will be shot. Indeed, four of the Armenians are killed, but six escape. When asked, “Don’t you think the Turks will take revenge on those Armenians left behind in the camp?” the survivors reply pragmatically: “Our people got themselves into this mess by always thinking of ‘those who remain behind.’ Just 10 policemen led hundreds of thousands of young men to the valleys and slaughtered them like sheep. They could have easily killed their executioners, but they were thinking of their left behind families. In the end they all died.”

After all the accounts of death and destruction, it’s left to a Turkish officer to ask: “Who would have thought the world still contains Armenians?” But the very fact that there were Armenian survivors shows something uncanny about this forsaken people. The thought presses itself upon Vahram after he survives another bout with malaria. “It’s strange,” he reflects: “the desire to live increases from one day to the next. As if there were a mysterious force hidden deep in our soul. It keeps repeating in our unconscious: ‘You mustn’t die ... Live! There’s still a lot to see!’”

In June 1919, when they leave Haifa for Alexandretta, a Turkish woman says, “You are coming back, but these aren’t your lands anymore.” But Vahram’s remaining family still has hope when they finally land in Constantinople.

To the Desert: Pages from My Dairy was edited by Ara Sarafian, director of the Gomidas Institute, which has many publications on modern Armenian history and recently had Dadrian’s works translated into English by Agop J. Hacikyan. This book, which was originally published in Armenian by Gotchnag Press, is a valuable historical testimony about the tribulations of an Armenian family whose members were among the 100,000 Armenians deported south in the direction of Damascus and not massacred outright during the 1915 Genocide. Since being forced from their homes in 1915, the Dadrians lost 23 members of their extended family of 42. Through this book we get to personally know the Armenians he met, and feel their pain and triumphs.

To order this book, contact books@gomidas.org.

Café Poetry night spells inspiration



by Adrineh Gregorian

PASADENA, Calif. – On April 19, 8th-grade students of St. Gregory’s Hovsepien School celebrated National Poetry Month with the school’s Third Annual “Café Poetry.”

The program was not about typical Tekeyan poetry one’s used to hearing at school recitations. Rather, it was an exceptional evening of inspiration and talent, with students and poets joining onstage to create literary magic.

Principal and poet Shahe Mankерian began this tradition three years ago, in an effort to expose young students and their audiences to an underrated art form, contemporary poetry.

This year “Café Poetry” featured students reciting works by contemporary Armenian poets and poets reciting poetry written by the students.

As you walked into the assembly hall, you couldn’t help but notice the walls covered with artwork interpreting poetry – a display of boundless imagination reminiscent of the youthful essence captured in Basquiat’s paintings.

The room was overflowing with audience members of all ages sitting around small candle-lit tables, transforming the hall into a temporary lounge.

Like the Beat poets of the 1950s and 60s, 13- and 14-year-old students, completely dressed in black, performed contemporary poetry onstage, alongside the poets who had written the pieces.

Each student performance breathed new life into poems by Mankерian, Sona Ovasapyan, Tina Demirdjian, William Michaelian, Aram Saroyan, Alec Ekme-kji, Yeva Adalyan, Lory Bedikian, Gregory Djanikian, Armine Iknadossian, and Alene Terzian.

The poets in turn read student poems that echoed the original pieces. What Mankерian, as a teacher, was able to bring out in his students was a pool of talent that stands on par with the poets they study.

Fostering creative expression

Echoing is a huge component of Mankерian’s 8th-grade poetry class. He challenges students to come up with their own response to a given poem. In doing so, he is teaching students the art of expression and writing.

“Very early on it’s difficult to get them to write,” Mankерian says. “You encourage them and teach them, but they still don’t realize that they can create poetry.”

The debut performers dealt with themes ranging from love and death to relationships, lacing their readings with humor and sparking both laughter and tears among audience members. As classmates cheered each other on, the sense of pride and excitement was contagious.

The poets were equally excited to participate. “For the poets it’s amazing to



Chris Hanayan with poet Alec Ekme-kji. Photos: Yvette K. Mankерian.



Sako Garabedian reciting Shahe Mankерian’s “Starting a Trail”



Natalie Majaryan reciting “Looking Up at the Blue Sky”



Arman Seuylemezian, Chris Hanayan and poet Armine Iknadossian.



Kristina Kehyeyan and Sona Ovasapyan.

hear their poems being read by students,” Mankерian says. For the students, “poets appear only on a page,” he adds, referring to students’ usual impression of poets as unapproachable older figures or dead. “They never can see a face; now they can,” Mankерian says.

Mankерian acknowledges the courage it takes to perform poetry alongside the writers. He credits his mother for teaching him to appreciate the art of poetry – an appreciation his students can now take with them for life.

“If the future cares, then that’s all that matters,” says poet Lory Bedikian.

The students also performed a collection of Aram Saroyan poems from his volume *Complete Minimal Poems*, which recently won the William Carlos Williams Award. Students stood along the periphery of the room and recited one-word poems in sequence.

As they poured their passion into the pieces, they created a confusing and amusing performance, achieving an effect which Saroyan perhaps intended.

Out of the box

In the past, Mankерian has shared his students with classrooms at California State University, Los Angeles, as living proof that young students can learn about the

art of poetry and produce it on their own.

His students spend time studying classical as well as contemporary Armenian poets. The majority of the students gravitate towards the contemporary writers because “the voice sounds like their own,” Mankерian says.

He believes that literature should not be taught exclusively in terms of technique, because the simple message of a piece can be lost – a message that can resonate with teenage students who are going through the same emotions as the characters in a book, for example.

For some students, sharing poetry in class can be their first experience emotionally “breaking down” in front of others. These occasions are “the perfect teaching moment to show the power of poetry,” Mankерian says.

“There is poetry in art and art in poetry,” says 13-year-old Natalie Majaryan, who spends every day after school at the Hill Avenue Library in Pasadena, where her mother works. She likes to re-read the pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as she sits outside in the library garden.

She is following a practice which Mankерian instills in his class, whereby students are also required to draw posters that interpret the poems they study.

“I’m coming up with a poem by just

looking at that painting,” Majaryan says as she points to a painting depicting historic Armenian intellectual figures on Mankерian’s office wall.

Exposure to literature has allowed Majaryan’s imagination to unfold exponentially. It has allowed her to not only be in tune with her feelings, but learn how to put them into words, she says.

The potential for more students like Majaryan is infinite. She’s convinced that years from now the few boys in the class who have the least interest in poetry will have the most interest in the arts.

Arman Seuylemezian, 13, saw last year’s “Café Poetry” performance and was excited that this year the poets would be participants as well. Mankерian’s poetry class has allowed him to find poetic expression for the first time. “I took the poet’s idea and just made it my own,” Seuylemezian says, referring to his poem, “House Keeping,” which echoed William Michaelian’s “Home Service.”

“The class has taught me how to think out of the box,” Seuylemezian says in his own words.

One great mind that thinks out of the box is Aram Saroyan, whose minimalist style is a favorite among Mankерian’s students and triggers a vast array of responses. “You can look at the words and not limit yourself,” Seuylemezian says.

The Saroyan poem he related to the most was the blank white page. “You can make it whatever you want it to be,” Seuylemezian explains. “I can change it every day.”

“Kids are a reflection of their parents,” Majaryan says. In her case, she’s fortunate to have a mother who has encouraged her to discover books from a young age. For everyone else, Mankерian is sewing the seeds for a future generation of Armenians who will continue to keep Armenian culture alive through the arts. For these poems, paintings, and songs will continue to exist long past the lifespan of the artists who are responsible for their creation. ❧

On the destinies of Istanbul

Nouritza Matossian shares her experiences of an extraordinary conference

Nouritza Matossian is a writer, actor, broadcaster, and human rights activist.

In November 2007, she was one of the featured speakers at “The Destinies of Istanbul,” an international conference that aimed “to create a forum for debate to question the stereotypes of the past and to analyze the challenges of the contemporary city.” The fifth in a series of international conferences dedicated to major world cities, the event was held in Barcelona, Spain.

Matossian is the author of *Xenakis*, the first-ever biography of renowned Greek composer and architect Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001). She later adapted the book into a 50-minute documentary, *Something Rich and Strange*, for BBC2.

Matossian also wrote the extensively researched *Black Angel: A Life of Arshile Gorky*. Atom Egoyan’s film *Ararat* was partly inspired by the book. Given her knowledge of Gorky’s life and work, Matossian went on to function as a consultant to Egoyan, who modeled *Ararat*’s lead character on her.

Matossian also wrote and performs a solo show on Gorky’s life from the viewpoint of his four beloved women, with images and music. The show has been produced worldwide. In Armenia, Matossian performed it in both English and Armenian.

The following interview was conducted by **Tamar Haytayan Armen** of Hye-Eli, an Internet radio program (also streamed via YerevanNights.com).

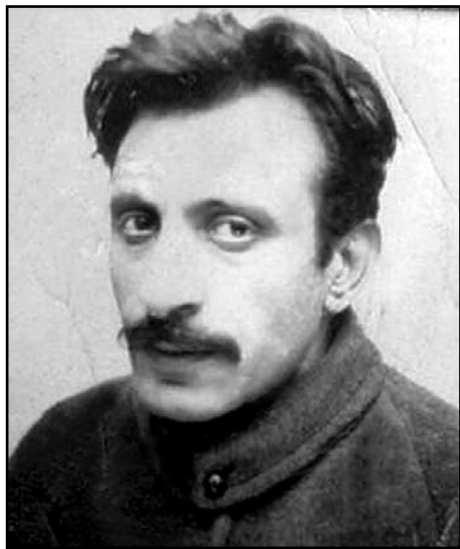
Matossian spoke from her home in London, England.

Tamar Haytayan Armen: What were your impressions of “The Destinies of Istanbul” conference, and what was the topic of your presentation?

Nouritza Matossian: This was the last of a series of conferences on the destiny of cosmopolitan cities. It was organized by Professor Fred Halliday, a professor of politics at the London School of Economics. The event featured a number of Turkish academics, two of whom were still being escorted by police for their safety back in Istanbul. So they were very relieved to be in Barcelona, because I think they have been suffering the pressures of death threats and having these policemen around them all the time.

I was given freedom to speak on anything I liked at the conference. Since the other speakers were going to discuss Istanbul in the context of Turkish culture and history, I decided to talk about the contribution of Armenians to the city. The background to this is that many Armenians don’t consider themselves a minority in Istanbul because they have been there since the 3rd century. My presentation was the last one in the conference and I was the only one who spoke about the Armenians.

TH: What have the Armenians contributed to Istanbul?



Arshile Gorky.

NM: One of the first things my research revealed was that the Armenians had become the most important traders and merchants in Istanbul’s grand bazaar. In the main, however, the Armenians have contributed so much in terms of technology, medicine, music, arts, and architecture. The Balian and the Armenians before them practically built Istanbul – numerous palaces, mosques, churches. They put their stamp on the city. The Armenians were also the sharpest edge, if you like, of the Westernizing influence in the city and throughout Turkey. For instance, the Armenians were the first photographers in Istanbul; as a result, in Turkey the camera was once known as the “Armenian gadget.” Istanbul Armenians produced Turkey’s first opera, staged the first play. So my conclusion is that if the Armenians were allowed to continue to live in Istanbul, if the wealth tax hadn’t decimated them and thousands hadn’t left, I am sure that Turkey would have been part of the European Union by now. The removal of the Armenians was a step backward for Turkish culture, for the Western influence that the Armenians brought to the country.

TH: How was your presentation received by the audience at the conference?

NM: Extremely well. I spoke in Spanish. The Spanish people don’t know much about the Armenians. I also presented a 24-minute film containing my various interviews with Hrant Dink. I had made the film for a memorial evening 40 days after his death. He was a close friend and I admired him enormously. When I showed the film at the conference, the hall was packed and there were also quite a few young Armenian students. There were many questions at the end. People were very curious; they had heard of Hrant Dink but didn’t know much about him. I found this conference and the response of the people very encouraging, because I think we need to get across different areas of our history. I feel we concentrate on the Genocide as a kind of obsession, which is understandable. But the background of Armenian history and culture is hardly known, and if you can back up the Genocide argument with a really good survey of Armenian history in the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere, I think it would carry far more weight.

TH: As a woman of many accomplishments, you exude sheer strength. Where does it come from? Nature or nurture?

NM: A bit of both. All my life I have tried not to accept limitations. This partly has to do with the fact that my parents came from Aintab on my father’s side and Kesaria on my mother’s side; they were very traditional. When I was 16, it took a year for my teachers and others to convince my father to send me to boarding school in England. He wanted me to stay in Cyprus and he would have chosen a wonderful husband for me. At home, everybody told me “Don’t speak, you’re a girl, it’s not your turn to speak; there are men in the room and they’re talking.” But this applied only to social situations. On the other hand, my father and I would sit down and talk very seriously about politics – until, that is, there were visitors in the sitting room and suddenly I had to be voiceless, fetching glasses of water or cups of coffee. I found that very unacceptable.

TH: So such experiences have shaped you...

NM: I also have a very strong sense of what my grandmother and mother

have passed on to me. I appreciated the strength of these women, the extraordinary resilience they had, the energy. They were never lazy. They never sat around and talked and twiddled their thumbs. They were always doing something, making beautiful lace or cooking extraordinary meals. It always had to be the best. My grandmother went through a horrifically difficult journey to escape from Kesaria all the way down the coast, to find her husband and save her children; she lost her little girl on the way. What she went through is a saga, an epic. Of course I want to pay tribute and I feel that everything I write and do is a continuation of that in a different period. The conditions have changed, the targets have changed, the social world has changed, but it’s thanks to them and their energy and spirit that we survived and carry on as we do today. ☞

connect:

arshile-gorky.com

hye-eli.com

YerevanNights.com



Pianist Vardan Ovsepiyan, who along with violinist Biliana Voutchkova will improvise contemporary Armenian, Bulgarian, and original compositions at ALMA on May 17.



Violinist Biliana Voutchkova.

Improvised music in performance at ALMA

WATERTOWN, Mass. – Pianist Vardan Ovsepiyan and violinist Biliana Voutchkova will perform improvised contemporary music at the Armenian Library and Museum of America (ALMA) on Saturday, May 17, at 8:00 p.m.

The duo’s program will include renditions of Armenian, Bulgarian and original compositions.

Vardan Ovsepiyan is an Armenian pianist/composer who has studied at Yerevan State Conservatory, Estonian Music Academy, Helsinki Jazz Conservatory, and Berklee College of Music. As Bill Beuttler of *The Boston Globe* said: “Vardan Ovsepiyan is among the most promising young talents on the local jazz scene.... [He brings] European classical and other outside influences to jazz improvisation to create music both elegant and uniquely his own.”

Ovsepiyan performs solo as well as with artists, including Mick Goodrick, Jerry Bergonzi, George Garzone and Hal Crook. He has released four CDs with the Barcelona-based recording

label Fresh Sound-New Talent and has also independently released albums.

Bulgarian violinist **Biliana Voutchkova** approaches contemporary music with the inspiration and freedom that has become a staple of her forceful improvisations. She has performed at the Weill Recital Hall at New York City’s Carnegie Hall, Jordan Hall in Boston, Suntory and Casals Halls in Tokyo, and Manuel de Falla Auditorium in Granada.

She is a dedicated chamber musician and a strong believer and interpreter of modern music. Voutchkova is currently a member of NotaRiotous and Fluxsongs ensembles, concertmaster of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project and co-founder of *Duokaya*.

Tickets for the May 17 event are \$10 each. Reservations may be made by calling (617) 926-2562, or by e-mailing info@almainc.org. ALMA is located at 65 Main Street, in Watertown, and appears on the web at www.almainc.org. ☞

sacred music

The might of wind in a choir



by Betty
Panossian-Ter
Sarkissian

YEREVAN – Since its founding by artistic director and conductor **Sona Hovhannisyan**, the Hover Chamber Choir of Armenia has conquered the respect of Armenian and international audiences, and been decorated with the highest merits of international choir contests.

The passion of a woman

Conducting choirs has always been something Hovhannisyan loved to do, even before becoming a professional choir conductor. As a high-school student, she had formed and conducted her school choir. Later on, she was to study conducting at the Romanos Melikyan Music College in Yerevan and continue her advanced studies in conducting at the Komitas State Conservatory.

As a young teacher at the Romanos Melikyan Music College, Hovhannisyan brought together young, talented conductors, vocal singers, and music specialists. They all shared a passion for performing choral music that ultimately led to the formation of an amateur choir in 1992. “We were very much fascinated by the outlook of having this music live with us,” Hovhannisyan says.

Thus Hover Chamber Choir was born. It is yet another ensemble that came to light in the “dark and cold” years of newly independent Armenia and garnered high praise from international audiences. Initially the choir did not have a name. It took long for its conductor and members to hit upon a name that well defined their choir. Finally, the melodious word hover (winds), with its ethereal denotation, was agreed upon because it embodied the Komitasian spirit the choir was so fond of. Hover also assonated with the choir’s ambition to compose new airs and create fresh traditions in Armenian choral performance.

Starting with 26 members, Hover initially performed a selection of choral songs from the impressionists, mainly Debussy and Ravel, which were seldom heard in Armenia’s concert halls. Since then, the choir’s repertoire has evolved, rhyming with its own desire to perform new genres of choral music and by the demand of its audiences. Hover Chamber Choir now performs a rich repertoire ranging from baroque, classical, and contemporary to folk, sacred, and pop music.

In a matter of years, Hover Chamber Choir became a recognizable name in the international choral music arena, while performing on tours in France, the United Kingdom, Russia, Germany, Austria, Italy, and the United States. In 1997, the choir won diplomas at the International Polyphonic Music Festival in Arezzo, Italy, as well as the gold medal at the International Choir Olympiad in Linz, Austria, in 2000. In 2004, Hover



Hover Chamber Choir of Armenia. Photos: Zaven Khachikyan.



Conductor Sona Hovhannisyan.

Chamber Choir was awarded at the Armenian Music Awards in Los Angeles.

Similar personalities

Hovhannisyan says that the choir members are bonded with the similar stories and courses of their lives, as well as by their temperaments.

The choir members “have unique artistic personalities developed throughout years and due to the musical legacy that passes through each of us,” Hovhannisyan says. “What we perform develops into our parallel biographies and shapes our spiritual worlds.”

Although all Hover members have a solid background in music, not all are trained as vocal performers. They are mostly pianists, violinists, conductors, and music theorists, in addition to a few singers.

Fresh waves in Armenian choral performance

Hovhannisyan is among those who believe that, in most cases, the choral approach to performing music has long worn itself out. She echoes the great masters of choral music in believing that “professional choral performance is compelling new methods of performance, a different and a

more intimate atmosphere and recourse.”

Beside performing choral music in the most traditional way, Hover seeks out new paths of creating a bond between choir and audience. Comfort and maximum linkage for the sake of performing freely and in a more interesting and engaging manner are what Hover aims at. “In a way, the concert hall and the stage create unnecessary tensions, both for the choir and the audience,” Hovhannisyan explains. “Hover experiments mainly in transforming the performance from concert to conversation.”

At first, this conversation did not have an easy flow. When, a few years back, the choir staged small choral/theatrical performances of Komitasian folk songs, the audience needed some time before becoming part of it. However, audiences became increasingly receptive with each subsequent concert. In 2003, Hover staged the six fables of Armenian fabulist Vardan Aigektsi, with music composed by Stepan Babatorosyan. The work was staged by theater director, choir member, and soloist Arthur Manukyan. Following the release of Hover’s *Six Fables*, an album produced by Pomegranate Music, Boston, in 2003, the choir released the self-produced DVD of the same choral work, titled *Fables* (2004).

Hover’s next major project is yet another choral performance with the working title *Voyage*. Based on the music of Anna Azizyan and Antoine de Saint Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*, this performance, too, will be staged by Arthur Manukyan. *Voyage* will feature in a single musical environment many characters from Armenian and world literature, including the Blue Bird, Alice of *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Odyssey*, and many more.

“We perform solemn academic repertoires and with an even greater pleasure

we perform less serious works,” Hovhannisyan says. “At first glance, the latter may seem less important, but they are extremely fun to do.”

Always on the go

Hover is set to carry out a string of projects throughout this year. In June, it will perform a cantata titled “Pictured Angel” by the Russian composer Rodion Schedrin, on the occasion of the latter’s visit to Armenia. In September, the choir will host the German choir Collegium Vocal, which had hosted Hover in Germany last year. Both choirs will perform concerts of Armenian and European sacred music in Yerevan and the regions of Armenia, and will jointly hold a conference. In addition, there are tours on the Hover schedule later this year.

The choir will also release two new albums, both commissioned by the Armenian government. One is to feature the best of contemporary Armenian composers; the second will comprise renditions of the Lord’s Prayer of various churches from around the globe.

Hover’s previous albums include *Komitas: Folk Songs* (2007), *Komitas: Armenian Divine Liturgy* (2006, featuring the male singers of the choir), and *The Way: Armenian Sacred Music* (2005). Hover’s music is also featured on the soundtracks of the films *Ararat* and *The Skylark Farm*.

This year the choir will be featured in yet another film on Komitas. The Komitasian theme will continue in 2009, when Hover will realize another major project, producing several video clips of Komitasian choral songs. “What we aspire is to make this genre live on television and embrace a larger audience,” Hovhannisyan says. ■

connect:
hoverchoir.org

The healing powers of Shmavonian's art



by Lory
Tatoulian

LOS ANGELES – With his broad brush strokes, jagged landscapes, and quixotic images, Shmavon Shmavonian creates a world on canvas that conjures feelings of peace, health, and tranquility. For the past 40 years, he has been using his art as a healing tool to help those who are afflicted with disease. This past March he donated one of his paintings to the Hope Providence Holy Cross Medical Center to be placed in the critical care unit, in an effort to bring a semblance of happiness to an environment often ridden with anxiety.

“I want to bring happiness to people through my art,” Shmavonian said. “There is so much pain and stress in the world, especially people suffering from ill health. I want my paintings to bring some sort of beauty into their lives. I want them to look at the painting and have a moment of peace.”

The gift was not the first that the Yerevan-born artist has donated to hospitals. In 2000 he created a painting titled Hope for the Glendale Memorial Comprehensive Cancer Center. Placed in the main lobby of the hospital, the painting reveals an ethereal angel shrouded in sweeping colors of gold and ochre. The colors cascade into each other, flowing with undulating movements, as if the angel herself is hovering above the spectator.

The presentation of the painting was a symbolic gesture on Shmavonian's part, in gratitude to the hospital's continued efforts to educate and train key Armenian hospital administrators and physicians. Officials from Glendale Memorial have reached out to the health minister of Armenia as well as other governmental and healthcare representatives to help improve the republic's healthcare system.

“We placed the painting in the new cancer care unit because I wanted the angel to be like a guardian who looks over all those that are sick,” Shmavonian said.

Not only does the artist want to help alleviate the pain of the sick, but wishes to support those who are grieving the loss of loved ones. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, he responded to the tragedy with a new work titled Eternity. The painting was donated to Glendale City Hall, where it now hangs in the main foyer. Shmavonian said he felt inspired to create the painting in honor of the police officers and firefighters who were killed in the attacks.

The American connection

Shmavonian's connection to the US began in 1997, when Steve Fellows, the former chief officer of Glendale Memo-



Top: The Songs of Soloman, 2006. Above: Birthday, 2007. Left: My House, 2003. Right: Elements, 1996. Below: Wild Flowers, 2007.

rial, came across the artist's work in Armenia. Fellows was visiting the republic to build a stronger bridge between the medical communities in Los Angeles and Yerevan. As Fellows became more familiar with Shmavonian's work, he invited him to come to Los Angeles and participate in an art exhibit organized to raise funds for Glendale Memorial's new cancer research center.

As a result of Shmavonian's artistry and altruism, the City of Glendale, along with the State of California, officially recognized his work and rewarded him with several resolutions and certificates. With a stack of such accolades from Assembly members Dario Frommer and Carol Lui and California State Senator Jack Scott, Shmavonian feels validated that he is using the power of art not only to help heal but as a gateway for sharing Armenian culture with the larger California public.

The first time Shmavonian picked up a paintbrush was when he was seven years old, living in a village near the city of



Artashat. Gravitating towards bright and bold colors, the precocious child began experimenting with paints and tried to capture the aesthetics of his environment and family. His initial explorations with rough texture and fluid forms led him to develop his signature style.



Shmavonian attended Yerevan's Terlemezian School of Art beginning in 1971. Eight years later, he sold his first painting to the Armenian Cultural Ministry for the National Museum in Yerevan. His career began to blossom in the early 1980s, with a succession of exhibits in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Istanbul, Paris, and Beirut. In 1999 he had his first exhibition in the United States, at the AGBU Center in Pasadena. The following year, when he came back to Los Angeles, his paintings fetched \$15,000 for the expansion of the Glendale Memorial Comprehensive Cancer Center.

“Art has no borders. It is a reflection of the spiritual world,” Shmavonian said. “I want to give the feeling of peace and beauty a face. I want people who look at my paintings to feel the energy emanating from them. They're not just there just to be looked at, but to have the potential to transform.”

connect:
shmavon.com

The dynamic duo leaps forward



by **Adriana Dermenjian**



The Dynamic Duo. Photos: Ruzz Photography.



Allen Ash.

At the youthful age of seven and five, when most children are preoccupied with trivial pursuits, siblings Mary and Allen Ash (Ashrafyan) began their voyage into the world of dance. Beginning their journey at the Hayrenik Dance Ensemble (an Armenian folk-dance group in Glendale), the Ashrafyans soon moved on to ballroom dance at the prestigious Arthur Murray Dance Studio. By ages ten and eight, the duo had already begun to dance in international ballroom and Latin dance competitions. "I knew I wanted to be in ballroom when I saw one of my first shows," Mary says. "I was ten but I looked up at the woman performing and I could see myself being her."

Despite these great ambitions at such a young age, Mary and Allen managed to sustain their own childhood experiences. They were both students at the Glendale Unified School District and graduates of Bellarmine-Jefferson Private High School. Attributing their success to an immeasurable amount of support from their parents and close-knit community, both brother and sister are still baffled at the accumulating rate of their accomplishments. "I didn't think it would be so soon," Mary says. "But with our family's help and support, anything is possible."

Now, with nearly 15 years of dance experience as well as international acclaim, Mary, 21, and Allen, 18, continue to play a significant role in the ballroom community. "With ballroom, there's always something to learn," Mary says. "We've been doing this for several years now and we're still learning new things. It's not just dancing, it's also a sport. The competition that comes with ballroom dancing is what drives us." The dynamic duo's achievements include a first-place trophy in Junior Division dancing in 2004, a gold medal at the World Olympics of Performing Arts, and the notable title as "Dancers of the World."

Their extreme dedication and indubitable skill have also led them to appear on the third season of the hit television show "So You Think You Can Dance?" "My brother and I were watching the show one day and we just looked at each other and said, 'We can do this. Let's do this,'" Mary recalls. "We got through several finals, were a part of the top 100 dancers, and got all the way to the third round. It was definitely an experience". As far as trying out again, Allen fully intends to give the show another whirl next year, but sister Mary will sit that one out.

Sharing their talents

Mary and Allen's most recent achievement is the opening of their own studio in Glendale, the Dynamic Duo Dance Studio, where they offer both private and

group lessons for ages four and older. The studio's launch, in early 2006, was inspired by a desire to make the duo's unique talents accessible to aspiring Armenian dancers. "Before our studio, there was no real outlet for ballroom dancing," Mary says. "We thought it would be a great idea to share our talents and provide a place for the Armenian community to learn the art of ballroom dance."

Today the studio has over 150 students and offers lessons in tango, salsa, samba, quickstep, and many other dance forms. "It's mind-boggling to know that these kids look up to me at my young age," Mary says. "But it instills in me a desire to do better and excel. It helps us both." In addition to providing their own talents to the Glendale community, the duo claims that they have developed a great

love for teaching and consider it a blessing to have such an opportunity. When asked what she enjoys more, teaching or dancing, Mary replies, "They're very different but balance is required. You can have a great dancer who can't teach and you can have a great teacher who's not that great of a dancer."

Mary and Allen's own success in both teaching and dancing proves itself through multiple facets. The most obvious is their recent production at the Hilton Hotel in Glendale, a two-hour performance consisting of group and solo ballroom routines presented by 60 of their students as well as the duo's own performance toward the end of the show. The March 9 event, titled the "Versatility Dance Show," was put together by the dancing duo themselves along with help and support from several parents. Though preparations for the show were long and grueling - rehearsals had begun a full year before the event - everyone involved was ecstatic with the outcome. "It shows that we did something," one of the participating students recalls. "It made us feel confident about our ability to dance and entertain," another chimes in. Both Mary and Allen have confidence in the potential of these students, claiming that they, too, have the ability to become professionals one day.

Though teaching ballroom and putting together recitals is a major priority for the duo, they still manage to make room for their own competitions and shows - and even some down time. When time allows, Allen DJs and Mary spends time horseback riding. Both also enjoy



Mary Ash.

traveling and fell lucky that their career demands it. Their travels for shows are mostly within the United States, ranging from places like Florida and Las Vegas to Massachusetts and New Jersey, and their performances vary from appearances at weddings to more serious competitions like the California Star Ball.

Despite the growing variety of their appearances, both agree that their favorite performance was last year at Glendale High School, where the duo performed an amalgamation of the paso doble and traditional Armenian dance to the music of Ara Gevorkyan's Artsakh. The show, in remembrance of the Armenian Genocide, "evoked such deep emotions," Mary says. "Because we were able to express our feelings through our dance, I think it was our best performance."

Immersed in the art

All of these achievements, of course, do not come without intense practice and tremendous motivation. Both brother and sister practice about eight hours a day with little time off. They also travel to San Diego two to three days a week for sessions with their coach, taking the bus from downtown or often driving themselves. The rewards for such dedication come in the form of more shows and bigger competitions. In May, the duo will travel to England for their biggest competition yet. As for future accomplishments, both are working hard to start a competition of their own some day. "It takes a tremendous amount of financial support and a great name in the dance world, but we're very serious about it," Mary says.

No matter where else their career takes them, Mary and Allen are grateful that they can work together, doing what they love. "I've gotten so much closer with my brother throughout the years," Mary says. "I'm more technical and strict and Allen's much more fun and goofy, so we create a great balance. We make a great team." The magnificent team continues to work diligently at their art, dancing their hearts out. "Each second is different," Mary explains. "Each dance evokes a different feeling and each movement an individual energy." Their energy and moves continue to make a lasting impact on the dancing world and the greater community. ■

connect:
dynamicduodancestudio.com

Vrej Agajanian emphasizes education and information on “ABC TV Live”



by Tenny
Issakhanian
Avanesian

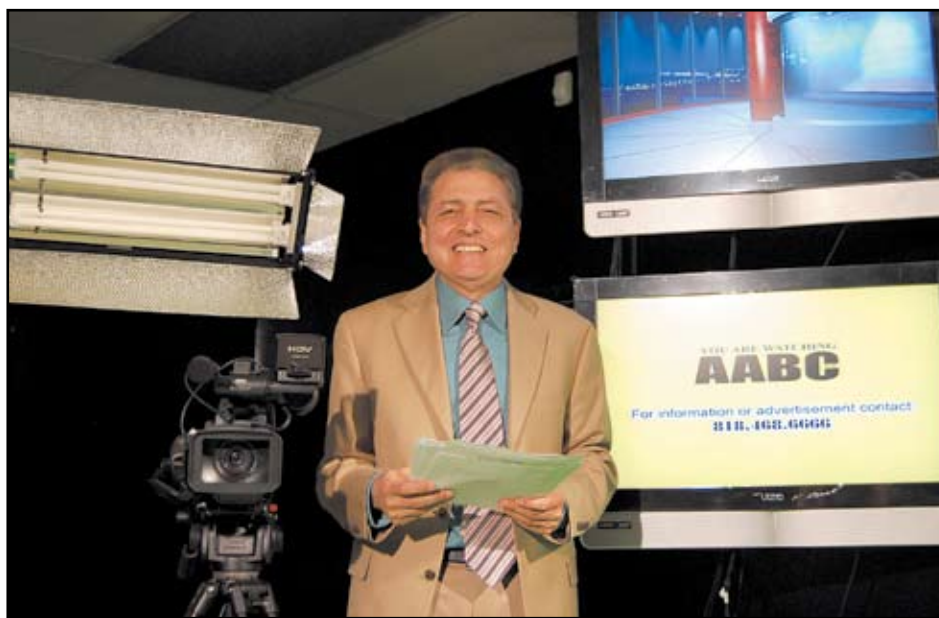
Vrej Agajanian couldn't believe his eyes. It was 1960 and the Nixon-Kennedy presidential debate had just taken place. There was disagreement on the outcome, but not along party lines, as was expected. Rather, newspapers reported that those who listened to the debate on the radio deemed Nixon the winner while those who watched it on TV witnessed a young and energetic Kennedy opposite a poorly-shaven, tired Nixon still recovering from knee surgery. Never mind the candidates' platforms or delivery thereof. In the viewers' eyes, Kennedy had clearly taken this one home. “I was surprised at how that swayed people's opinion so drastically,” Agajanian, a Democrat, recalls, “even though Nixon, with all his knowledge, should have won.” And so Agajanian discovered the power of television.

The host of “ABC TV Live” for nearly nine years and now the owner of his own TV channel, AABC (Armenian-American Broadcasting Corporation), Agajanian has always had a passion for politics and media. “That was my hobby,” he says. “When other kids played basketball or football, my interest was only politics,” taking a particular interest in the United States and Soviet Union. But the idea of building a career on this interest was foreign. So he followed the standard track of other gifted students in Tehran, Iran. He became an engineer and continued to practice his profession even after his move to the United States in 1980. But everything changed in 1999, when he was given an opportunity to turn his hobby into a living.

A star is born

When Agajanian was invited to be a guest on a cable talk show nine years ago, his appearance grabbed the attention of station manager Vartkes Narguizian. Narguizian was impressed by his knowledge and expertise in political issues of the United States and offered Agajanian his own talk show. “ABC TV Live” has been on the air ever since. Distinguishing itself from other talk shows which cover general current affairs, his show concentrates exclusively on politics and social issues, providing a nightly civics lesson to upwards of 7,000 households – some speculate the number of viewers is as high as 15,000.

It's numbers like these, perhaps, that earned him the *Glendale News Press* title of second most influential person in Glendale in 2003. That was the last year the publication released such a list, leaving him undefeated until today and ahead of such key figures as United States Rep. Adam Schiff and the entire Glendale City Council.



Vrej Agajanian has been hosting the successful talk show “ABC TV Live” since 1999.

At first, “ABC TV Live” aired only in the Glendale, La Crescenta, and parts of Burbank. For the past five years, it has also been broadcast in ten other cities northwest of Glendale, including Montrose, La Canada, Tujunga, Sunland, Sylmar, Sun Valley, and Simi Valley. Agajanian has hopes to expand his live broadcast to all of Southern California in the near future, stream his show online, and eventually reach out to the world via satellite.

Such growing pains led Agajanian to amicably part ways with Charter Communications Channel 26 in March 2008. “I thought it is the natural next step in my career, the natural evolution,” he explains, referring to the new television channel he began earlier this month, called AABC (Charter Communications Channel 284). “ABC TV Live” continues to air on this new channel and retains its loyal viewership.

A sense of civic duty

Agajanian carries the burden of educating the Armenian community on American history and politics in hopes that by understanding the system, Armenians will overcome their intimidation by it and become involved. “The core of the [‘ABC TV Live’] program is education and information,” he explains. “That's the point I am emphasizing because that's what our people need. And I'm working toward that goal.”

Back in 1999, right before “ABC TV Live” premiered, only 2-4,000 Armenians were voting in elections. Today, there are approximately 10,000 active voters. “I don't attribute that all to me. I don't want to give you the wrong impression,” Agajanian quickly clarifies. Still, one cannot help but recognize that he has been a key contributing factor to these growing numbers. “In our culture, regardless of where we are coming from – Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Syria – we were not familiar with the culture of elections. They meant nothing there because they were all staged and meaningless.”

Over the years, Agajanian has been working tirelessly on a nightly basis to renew his viewers' faith in the power of elections and civic involvement, intro-

duce them to the democratic principles of this nation, and how, if used properly and consistently, it can improve the Armenian-American community. According to Agajanian, the very first thing a current or prospective member of Congress or the State Assembly studies is the number of citizens in a particular demographic who are registered and voting. This is public information that can be purchased and examined.

As such, if a bloc of Armenians are registered to vote and do so, candidates will be more likely to come to that community to hear the concerns of their prospective constituents. “That's what I try to convey. It doesn't matter for whom you are going to vote because the public records don't show if you voted for every single issue on the ballot or if you voted for a particular candidate,” Agajanian explains. “But they will know how many are registered and voting. And that's when a candidate pays attention to a particular community.”

Reaching out

Agajanian's efforts continue to pay off. His viewers are not limited to older immigrants who came to the United States as adults and were not necessarily taught in the American educational system. “Even young people come to me and say, ‘We are college students and we did not learn as much in college about U.S. politics or how it works,’” he recalls. “That is very gratifying. People of all ages are now better informed.”

Moreover, Agajanian makes himself readily available to his viewers. He carries two cell phones to handle all of his phone calls. I learned that, only hours after a single episode of his show, he had 123 phone messages from viewers on just one of his phones.

Raising awareness

One of Agajanian's proudest moments came in 2003, when he went head to head with the Glendale City Council; it wasn't the first time and will certainly not be the last. When the city sought to uproot the Armenian Society of Los Angeles (Iranahye Miyutyun) by proposing to demolish its facilities in order to make way for the

incoming Americana development, it offered the society \$1.2 million. As chairman of the Armenian Society of Los Angeles at the time, Agajanian persevered and ultimately got more than four times that, \$5 million, to move the society to new headquarters twice as large and with a 300-car parking facility. “They estimate the new property to be valued at \$11 million,” he says. This achievement contributed to his 2003 *Glendale News Press* title.

To go up against the government and the big developers, “they say you have to know the law and engineering,” Agajanian states. “I had the chance of putting together the power of media, engineering, and the law to succeed and get that for the Armenian Society of Los Angeles. The society is a nonprofit and they deserve to have it.”

This philosophy is what Agajanian brings to his show each and every night. “If we get more knowledge about the issues, the law of the land, we can accomplish more,” he says. “We can have political power to raise the issues related to Armenians.” He supplements this philosophy with the no-nonsense logic and science of an engineer. “Education and information, not emotion,” he notes. “We Armenians are an emotional people, but we can't base everything on emotion. We have to be more rational and base things on facts and evidence.”

Public service

The talk-show host has twice run for Glendale City Council, as both an Independent (2005) and a Democrat (2007). Although he was unsuccessful both times, it has not deterred him from continuing to help effect political and social change.

Nor has he ruled out another run in 2009. “I can't say at this second. But there is some desire in me,” Agajanian ponders. “I may run,” he says to the chagrin of Dina, his wife of 14 years. “I'd rather he didn't,” she says. Still, she agrees with her husband that the council is currently occupied by career politicians who allow their city to be run by big developers, spend their terms in office positioning themselves for re-election, and ultimately fail to work toward the betterment of the community.

Whether or not he holds political office in the future, Agajanian remains a public servant at heart. As Dina suggests, “Through media, he is able to educate and raise awareness, which is his purpose. So through TV, he achieves that goal.”

Reflecting on his past, Agajanian realizes that through his television career, he has truly come full circle. “When I was a child, people younger than me, older than me, were coming to sit and listen to me talk about Armenian or American or Soviet history,” he says. “Somehow my life evolved such that I'm doing the same thing now. I'm sitting – well, now I'm standing – and talking about history, social issues, and politics.” It's good to know that some things never change. ☞

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Satellite Broadcast Program Grid

5 - 11 May



5 May		6 May		7 May		8 May		9 May		10 May		11 May	
MONDAY		TUESDAY		WEDNESDAY		THURSDAY		FRIDAY		SATURDAY		SUNDAY	
EST	PST	EST	PST	EST	PST	EST	PST	EST	PST	EST	PST	EST	PST
4:30	7:30	4:30	7:30	4:30	7:30	4:30	7:30	4:30	7:30	4:30	7:30	4:30	7:30
4:50	7:50	4:50	7:50	4:50	7:50	4:50	7:50	4:50	7:50	4:55	7:55	6:00	9:00
6:25	9:25	6:00	9:00	6:00	9:00	6:00	9:00	6:25	9:25	6:25	9:25	6:25	9:25
7:05	10:05	7:05	10:05	7:05	10:05	7:05	10:05	7:05	10:05	7:05	10:05	7:05	10:05
7:30	10:30	7:30	10:30	7:30	10:30	7:30	10:30	7:30	10:30	7:30	10:30	7:30	10:30
8:30	11:30	8:30	11:30	8:30	11:30	8:30	11:30	8:30	11:30	8:40	11:40	8:05	11:05
9:00	12:00	9:00	12:00	9:00	12:00	9:00	12:00	9:25	12:25	9:00	12:00	9:05	12:05
9:25	12:25	9:25	12:25	9:25	12:25	9:25	12:25	10:10	13:10	9:25	12:25	9:25	12:25
9:45	12:45	10:10	13:10	10:10	13:10	10:10	13:10	10:30	13:30	10:10	13:10	10:10	13:10
10:30	13:30	10:30	13:30	10:30	13:30	10:30	13:30	11:15	14:15	10:30	13:30	10:30	13:30
10:55	13:55	11:15	14:15	11:15	14:15	11:15	14:15	12:00	15:00	11:15	14:15	11:15	14:15
11:15	14:15	12:00	15:00	12:00	15:00	12:00	15:00	12:25	15:25	12:00	15:00	12:00	15:00
12:00	15:00	12:25	15:25	12:45	15:45	13:05	16:05	13:50	16:50	13:20	16:20	13:50	16:50
13:05	16:05	13:05	16:05	13:50	16:50	14:10	17:10	14:10	17:10	14:10	17:10	14:10	17:10
13:50	16:50	14:10	17:10	15:00	18:00	15:25	18:25	15:25	18:25	15:20	18:20	15:20	18:20
14:10	17:10	15:00	18:00	16:05	19:05	16:50	19:50	16:50	19:50	16:05	19:05	16:50	19:50
15:00	18:00	16:05	19:05	17:15	20:15	18:00	21:00	17:15	20:15	17:15	20:15	17:15	20:15
15:25	18:25	17:15	20:15	18:00	21:00	18:25	21:25	18:25	21:25	17:00	20:00	17:25	20:25
16:05	19:05	18:00	21:00	19:10	22:10	19:40	22:40	19:40	22:40	18:00	21:00	18:00	21:00
16:50	19:50	18:25	21:25	19:40	22:40	20:40	23:40	20:40	23:40	18:50	21:50	19:00	22:00
17:15	20:15	19:10	22:10	20:40	23:40	21:00	0:00	21:00	0:00	19:10	22:10	21:00	0:00
17:15	20:15	19:40	22:40	21:00	0:00	21:10	0:10	21:10	0:10	19:40	22:40	21:30	0:30
18:00	21:00	20:40	23:40	22:00	0:00	22:20	1:20	22:20	1:20	20:40	23:40	22:20	1:20
18:00	21:00	22:30	1:30	22:30	1:30	23:00	2:00	23:05	2:05	22:30	1:30	22:30	1:30
18:25	21:25	23:15	2:15	23:30	2:30	23:30	2:30	23:25	2:25	23:50	2:50	23:50	2:50
18:25	21:25	0:30	3:30	0:30	3:30	0:55	3:55	0:55	3:55	0:30	3:30	0:30	3:30
19:10	22:10	1:20	4:20	1:40	4:40	2:00	5:00	2:00	5:00	1:20	4:20	1:20	4:20
19:10	22:10	1:40	4:40	2:00	5:00	2:50	5:50	2:50	5:50	1:40	4:40	2:00	5:00
19:40	22:40	2:00	5:00	2:50	5:50	3:20	6:20	3:20	6:20	2:00	5:00	2:20	5:20
20:40	23:40	3:20	6:20	3:45	6:45	3:20	6:20	3:45	6:45	3:10	6:10	3:05	6:05
21:00	0:00	3:45	6:45	3:45	6:45	3:45	6:45	3:45	6:45	3:30	6:30	3:30	6:30



Dandeegeen dispenses her wisdom

Got a problem?
Write Dandeegeen for help: advice@reporter.am.
Photo: Angelo DiBilio.

Levity

Dear Dandeegeen,

My son got married 6 months ago and he and his wife just had a baby. Last I remember, it took about nine months for a baby to be born. So, if you do the math, my new daughter-in-law got pregnant 3 months before the wedding. My son is saying that the baby is premature, but my new granddaughter weighed 11 pounds when she was born. It just doesn't make sense. I am trying to explain myself to all of my friends that my daughter-in-law would never do anything like this, but the Armenian community is talking behind my back. How can I make my friends believe me?

Sincerely,
Kohar

Dear Kohar,

What century are you living in? Let me break the news to you here in our community newspaper. Your daughter-in-law got pregnant before she officially married your son. I know, I know, you can't believe it

because your son would never marry a *poghotsayin shoon* [stray dog] like that. But let me tell you, this is not Haleb [Aleppo] where the women were "bathed" before they were married off. *Akh*, the women in my generation were like the olive oil I use in my *tabouleh*: Pure and Extra Virgin. *Harses* [brides] just don't come the way they used to. So I say completely deny to your friends that your new daughter-in-law would do something like this. To cope with the matter, just start a new rumor about someone else in the community so it overshadows your predicament.

Sirov
Dandeegeen

Dear Dandeegeen,

I have been dating this Armenian girl for 2 years, and I don't really feel like she is the one for me. Actually, she is quite annoying and clingy, and all she talks about is marriage. I want to break up with her, but our families are already

intertwined, and her mother during Easter dinner kept bringing up "khosk gab" [engagement]. I keep mentioning to her that our relationship is not going to work, but she doesn't quite get it. I need to break free. Can you help me?

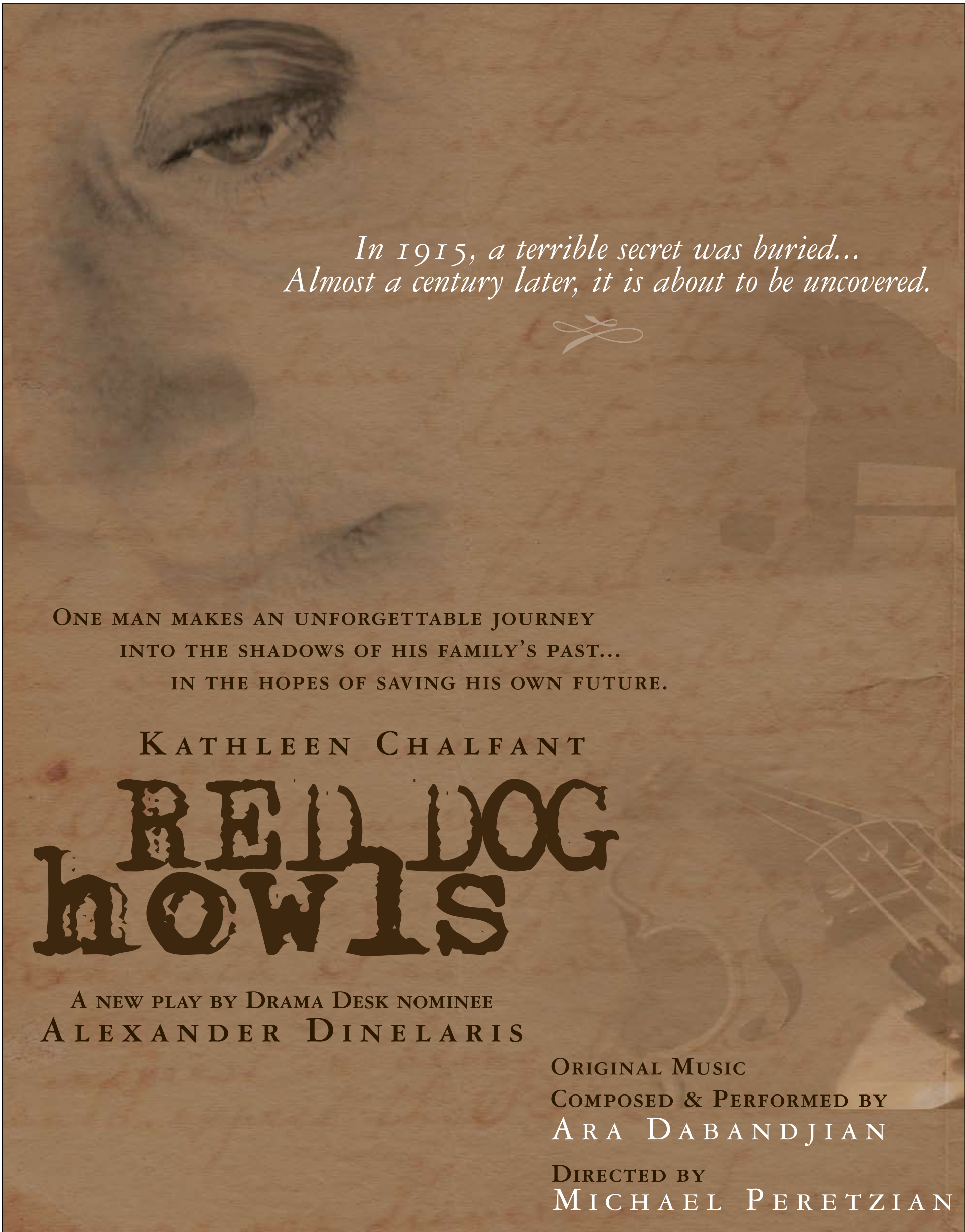

Sincerely,
Bedros

Dear Bedros,

I am so glad you asked this question, because I am always getting letters from boys asking how they can propose to a girl, but you are asking the opposite. I know, once Armenian families are involved, it's hard to get out. It's like having an ingrown hair that has been buried under the skin for two years, and it feels comfortable there, and it will hurt to take it out, but eventually you know that it has to come out. You my dear are like that ingrown hair. *Ooremn* [therefore] I suggest when you break up with her, blame yourself. *Keedem* [I know] it is very hard for an Armenian man to ad-

mit he is wrong, but in this circumstance, it will work for your benefit. What you need to do is make yourself sound real *unattractive* to her so that she will dump you and then you are home free. Tell her that you are really not a doctor; instead you are in the "medical business," where you "import/export medical supplies" and there was a mix-up with the FBI and you need to move to Uruguay for a while. Or tell her that you don't really own your Mercedes; you have been renting it from Hovig the salesman at Enterprise Car Rental on Brand Boulevard in exchange for her social security number. Or better yet, tell her that when you get married you want your mother to take the master bedroom in the house. And if she still doesn't get it, tell her that you think her cousin Hagop is really cute and you wish it was you who was going to dance the "naz bar" at the wedding. She'll get the idea.

Sirov,
Dandeegeen



*In 1915, a terrible secret was buried...
Almost a century later, it is about to be uncovered.*

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