

Critics' Forum

Film & Music

Home, Humor and Memory at the Armenian Film Festival

By Tamar Salibian

This year's Armenian Film Festival, held February 17 through 19 at the Delancey Street Theater in San Francisco, presented 24 animation, documentary, experimental and fiction films that told stories with overlapping ideas and themes. As a participant in the festival, I was hesitant to attend at first. But once I began to watch the various films, I became invigorated and was delighted to be a part of such a group of visual storytellers.

The weekend began with Tina Bastajian's "Garden Dwelling," a delicately woven experimental film about four Armenians' trip to Turkey in 2003. "Garden Dwelling" is both a travel diary and a meditation on the small, in-between moments of travel that often go unnoticed. The viewer is immediately drawn into the intricate moments Bastajian's travel companion encounters in transit. At the start of the film, Bastajian's companion speaks amiably and excitedly about a Turkish guard who offers him plums as a gift. At another moment, a group of friends sits in a backyard and enjoys lunch while the camera slowly zooms out to show this group surrounded by old buildings and a staid urban landscape. Bastajian uses these types of lyrical moments to help the viewer see how such a detail as a happy dinner with friends is both independent of and wholly part of the bigger picture for Armenians.

Conversely, Hrayr Anmahouni's "Bruitage" examines how the background landscape of a photograph can become a detail and an environment of its own. Pairing old photographs from his uncles' studio in Lebanon with recorded ambient audio backgrounds, Anmahouni (one of the curators of the festival) presents the blurry details from the photos as a different way of imagining and remembering the home of one's past.

The background against which many of these films tell their stories is the relationship between the past and the present. In "Garden Dwelling," Bastajian presents footage of a man doing a balancing act on a tightrope while we hear audio of a telephone discussion about the diaspora. The conversation indicates that present-day Armenia is concerned with the "now" while, in a sense, Armenians in the diaspora may be too preoccupied with the past and the memory of their ancestors. It is indeed like a tightrope walk to be able to maneuver between the old and the new.

In "My Son Shall Be Armenian," Hagop Goudsouzian accompanies a group of young Montreal Armenians on a trip to Armenia to discover their relationship to their ancestors. Goudsouzian intended for his group to retrace the path of the Armenians' exile into the desert during the Genocide, but the Syrian government denied Visas for the Canadian-Armenian group at the last minute. The group instead traveled in Armenia in search of Genocide survivors. Goudsouzian and his group are mostly individuals integrated into Canadian culture, but they are surprised to be affected by how familiar everyone seems to their own diasporan group. At one point, one woman in the group smiles and says that sitting next to the female Genocide survivor in her bed reminds her of sitting in bed with

her own grandmother. This idea of Armenians as a far-flung global family is a strong one and Goudsouzian presents it with warmth and without an over-sentimentalized tone.

Many films in this year's festival also question identity in fresh and unconventional ways. There is humor even in some of the sadder moments. In "Dad's Dishes," Karnig Gregorian presents a portrait of his father Kevork, who fled to Germany to escape the massacre of his family in Eastern Turkey in 1938. Kevork remembers his past quietly, and we can see the loss that he has experienced in his eyes. But he holds on to his past in a delightful and appealing way by cooking the old cuisine of his youth. Kevork resembles an Armenian Julia Child as he explains the ingredients matter-of-factly and prepares the meals with great zeal. The filmmaker shares these meals with his father and uses these moments at the dinner table to gently make him talk about his past.

Similarly in my own film, "Beautiful Armenians," my father shows me how to hem a pair of pants as he recounts details of his youth in Beirut. Later in the same film, my grandmother Anahit recounts her family's life as immigrants in the Middle East. At one point, my grandmother sings a sad song that her father, Hagop Oshagan, used to sing. But she quickly remembers how he changed the lyrics to make them sound more humorous.

Don Bernier's "In a Nutshell: A Portrait of Elizabeth Tashjian" chronicles the life of the Armenian-American founder of the Nut Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut. A wildly creative and eccentric woman who came to be known as the "Nut Lady," Elizabeth Tashjian appeared on many television programs, such as the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. The daughter of aristocratic Armenian immigrants, Elizabeth Tashjian lived a full life. She was a concert violinist by age 9, an award-winning artist in her twenties and later founded the Nut Museum in Connecticut out of her love for various kinds of nuts. As Armenians, we have an extended community of "family" all over the world, and yet there is an American loneliness even among some of us. Tashjian in her later years is a prime example of this loneliness. She lived much of her life in her own imagination by herself and has now become penniless and homeless. Bernier raises many important questions about the elderly in America and about individuals who are creative but who may be perceived as eccentrics. It is in fact how Tashjian is alienated by her surrounding townspeople and not her own lush imagination that affects her most harshly.

The portrait Tashjian may be an extreme case. But several films screened at this year's Armenian Film Festival deal with the ideas of memory and identity. Certain questions recur: Who are we? Who are we in relation to where we come from? Within our diverse diasporan communities, it seems we all are walking the tightrope between our past, our present and what may be in the future.

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Tamar Salibian is a filmmaker and writer living in Los Angeles. She has written for AIM magazine. Her latest film, "Beautiful Armenians," screened recently at the Armenian Film Festival in San Francisco.

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