

January 24, 2009

# The spontaneity of Vera Arutyunyan

A late-blooming painter makes her mark on the art world

by **Shahane Martirosyan**

LOS ANGELES – Vincent Van Gogh was raised as a priest's son whose lackluster work habits didn't promise a great professional career. Yet, deep within, he must've known that he had to give us the *Starry Night*. Van Gogh absolutely, positively, wholeheartedly had to devote his whole life to painting in order to explain himself and the nature around him that had made him the madman that he was. He made magic with every brush stroke, forever changing Impressionism.

During a recent visit to Paris, I found myself staring at *Starry Night* at the d'Orsay for nearly an hour, wondering why I couldn't look away. There was something exuberant about the stars and their movement. I felt emotionally connected to the painting and to myself while being very aware of my surroundings. It's hard to believe the effect that paint on canvas can have on a person. But emotion and energy are exactly what artists bring out in their works.

Late last year, I was assigned to review the Art Knows No Borders exhibition in downtown Los Angeles – a public art, literary, music, and relief event spearheaded by **Crystal Allene Cook**. Art Knows No Borders raises awareness of the effects of war, ethnic conflicts, and genocide. Of the countless paintings donated to the exhibition by over 100 artists, two small pieces caught my eye right away. The name under the paintings read **Vera Arutyunyan**.

## Inner freedom

Arutyunyan walked with me to show the paintings she had donated to the exhibition. I looked at this most endearing woman and I looked at her paintings. I did not see how she was connected to the Abstract Expressionism that was in front of my eyes, especially when she told me she worked as an engineer for Los Angeles County. Yet I saw in her paintings the very same emotions that were roused in me when I was staring at Van Gogh's canvases.

At her next exhibit, titled "Immortality," which ran for two weeks in December at the Infusion Gallery in downtown Los Angeles, there was love in the air – my love of her paintings, that is. Standing in front of *Experiencing Inner Freedom*, a large oil-and-acrylic canvas, I was once again dumbfounded by the abundance of primary colors that were making me look within myself. The energy of her painting was glaring back at me, the red and the yellow stroking me harder and harder the longer I stared.

Arutyunyan reinvents Abstract Expressionism with each brushstroke, even though her work is marked by spontaneity. Pollack once said, "When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing." As I spoke with Arutyunyan during the exhibition in December, her words seemed to echo Pollack's. "I never plan what I'm going to do," she said. "I do everything subconsciously."



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Vera Arutyunyan.

# poetry matters

## Literary wishes for the New Year: Part 3



by Lory  
Bedikian

This column is the third in a four-part series of inquiries regarding the possibility of increasing or creating resources that would be beneficial to contemporary poets and writers of Armenian descent.

The time has come to get inspired, for myself, for all writers, organizers, sponsors and patrons of the arts. In the first "Literary Wishes" I introduced my intentions of presenting ideas for increased resources for English-writing poets and writers of Armenian descent. In the second installment the "wish list" was revealed with the wishes themselves for more grants, awards and contests; for Armenian writers' conferences and workshops; literary journals; anthologies; and much more.

Before I move on to the purpose of this third column – which is to look at a couple of helpful examples of other communities – I want to point out two things.

First, it was quite serendipitous to find out about some of the plans mentioned in **Aram Arkun's** article "Working to improve the state of Armenian literature," (published in the January 10 issue of *The Armenian Reporter*) and to find out that the Armenian Writer's Union is tentatively planning a conference for Armenian authors writing in non-Armenian languages, hopefully to take place in Los Angeles in 2009. Arkun, at the end of his article, mentioned the possibility of publishing anthologies with the various writers out there working today. Although the main points of his article had to do with conferences that took place in Armenia, I thank Arkun – and the *Armenian Reporter* – for letting us know of the possibilities in the future.

The second point I must make before going further is to say that I do realize that Armenian writers must prove themselves in the world at large. Staying only within the Armenian communities cannot be useful for the cultural heritage nor the craft of the writer. When I make these assertions and wishes, I merely am pointing out that now and then writers need some extra support in their literary endeavors. It's a bit like someone trying out a speech in front of family and friends and getting the honest, but

Lory Bedikian received her MFA in Poetry from the University of Oregon. Her collection of poetry has twice been selected as a finalist in the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition and twice in the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award Competition.



supportive, critique of the work before moving to a larger audience. I remember one afternoon, while sitting at a coffee shop on the UCLA campus, an Armenian filmmaker came to me to congratulate me on a poem of mine published in an Armenian newspaper. After some kind words, he simply reminded me that any smaller community is capable of creating a "bubble" effect, that it's easy to be a big fish in a small bowl, and that the true test is the world at large. Until this day, I'm grateful for that advice.

In the meantime, however, I'm all for any support our poets and writers can get, as long as they stick with doing the work, which entails reading, writing, studying, letting the ego go, and putting pen to paper as often as possible. Once the craft improves, once the levels of writing advance, our authors can then decide how far to take their successes in many other communities and before many other audiences.

There are several groups that are doing the good work of providing resources. For example, Cave Canem is an organization that is "committed to the discovery and cultivation of new voices in African-American Poetry." It is a "home for the many voices of African-American poetry and is committed to cultivating the artistic and professional growth of African-American poets." Established by poets **Toi Derricotte** and **Cornelius Eady** in 1996, this organization began by offering workshops and retreats for African-American poets, thus encouraging these writers to work on their craft and congregate. Among the many useful resources they offer their writers are a three-year fellowship that includes an annual writing retreat, a first and second book prize with prestigious presses, annual anthologies, readings and other events nationwide. It's funded through individual donations as well as foundation and government grants. So much of this is a goldmine for writers of any group, ethnicity or cultural heritage. I know a few friends (and I could say the same for myself) who would love the chance to be offered a first or second book prize with a prestigious press.

The National Hispanic Cultural Center in May of this year will be hosting the 7th Annual National Latino Writers Conference. The conference is an opportunity for authors to participate in workshops, attend panel discussions and have "three one-on-one appointments with an agent, author, and editor." Who wouldn't want such opportunities? The Conference promises to bring authors, agents and editors of national reputation. Unlike Cave Canem's focus which is solely on poetry, the National Latino

Writers Conference welcomes Latino writers whose work includes the genres of novel-writing, poetry, biography, playwriting, screenwriting, short fiction and children's literature. Resources such as these open up a world for writers that often may not be offered to them.

What's wonderful about these organizations and their endeavors is that they create possibilities for writers. If these resources were not available then I'm sure I wouldn't know about so many of the poets and writers who have emerged into more of a spotlight due to these conferences and the many other things they offer. I know, for instance, that if a book wins the "first book prize" from Cave Canem, then it will be one that I will be interested in reading and looking to as a contemporary voice in literature. In a culture where sometimes "who you know" is more important than what you do or in a literary canon where often your gender or lineage influences your success, it's good to give more voices an opportunity to emerge and be heard.

In the final installment, we'll receive wisdom from a few of our established poets, writers, and teachers. In the meantime, I'm going to keep writing and then dreaming of a day when I'll either be filling out an application to attend an Armenian Writer's Conference, or will be sending my manuscript to a book contest for writers of Armenian descent, or perhaps will be packing my satchel to give a poetry workshop to a roomful of colleagues, of brethren, as eager to learn from me as I am from them.

connect:  
<http://cavecanempoets.org/>  
<http://www.nhccnm.org/>

## Atom's splitin' for Hollywood but stayin' near his Toronto radius as he makes *Chloe*

The *Vancouver Sun* newspaper is reporting that a decade after his last attempted fusion and consequent meltdown in Hollywood, **Atom Egoyan** is set to direct a big-budget erotic thriller titled *Chloe*. Production on the film, starring **Julianne Moore** and **Liam Neeson**, will apparently start in a few weeks in Toronto, where Egoyan resides.

According to the entertainment industry newspaper *Variety*, *Chloe* is about a doctor, played by Moore, who hires a young prostitute, played by *Mamma Mia!* screen star **Amanda Seyfried**, to seduce Moore's husband, played by Neeson.

The story of testing a husband's fidelity, a young escort's addiction to her john, and his wife's relationship to him, has the makings of an Egoyanesque – a complicated, interwoven, psychologically dense – playing field.

The Atomic director didn't pen the screenplay for *Chloe*. Playwright, screenwriter **Erin Cressida Wilson**

penned the script. Her credits include the 2002 film, *Secretary*.

According to the *Sun*, the French production giant StudioCanal is bankrolling the film, and it's being produced by Hollywood executives **Ivan Reitman** – writer and director of films like *Animal House* and *Ghost Busters* – and former Universal chairperson **Tom Pollock**. Juno director **Jason Reitman** is also an executive producer.

*Chloe* will be Egoyan's 13th feature, and it's expected to be widely distributed.

Egoyan tells the *Sun* that the timing is right and branching out to mainstream audiences will be liberating. Egoyan told the *Vancouver* newspaper that this Hollywood experience "is far more satisfying than his first liaison with *La-la Land* in 1995."

Egoyan tells the *Sun* that he wasted a lot of time in L.A. while trying to make a thriller for Warner Brothers. Now the Academy Award-nominated director is bringing Hollywood and



Atom Egoyan. Photo: Photolure.

two of its Academy Award stars to Toronto to give a greater global audience a taste of what's made him a household name in Canada and in the world of cinemaphiles.

# studio visit



*Be my doctor*, 2006, chromogenic prints, 20" x 64" overall

## Aram Jibilian's paternal parables for a new age

"The boy who fell from the sky"



by Christopher Atamian



*Be my patient (choking, fighting, headlock)*, 2006, chromogenic prints, 20" x 56"

Aram Jibilian's new, six-part series, "The boy who fell from the sky," cleverly transposes the Greek myth of Icarus to the contemporary greenery of the Vermont countryside. In one image we see a nearby pond from behind a window inside a house. Then another image of the pond and one of a woman lying on her back, which recreates the famous picture of Susan Sontag taken by Peter Hujar. In another photograph, we see a boy's legs flailing in the air – he's already fallen to earth and hit the water, so to speak. In a fifth picture, he is almost completely submerged. A sixth and final photograph shows the girl/Sontag from farther back than in the previous Sontag picture.

Jibilian's take on the Icarus myth speaks to the viewer more than the photographs' formalistic or aesthetic properties, although the eerie quietude of the scenery lends an almost Gothic quality to the work. Jibilian associates Icarus – the young man who flew too close to the sun and a symbol of human hubris – with Sontag, the intellectual, a symbol of knowledge. He also associates them both with death: Sontag's death, Icarus' death, and the suicide of his fellow artist James McMackin in 2006.

Jibilian pairs these photographs with another series of pictures, "On Photography and Death and Dying" – shots of himself and friends facing McMackin's drawings, back turned to the viewer. McMackin's paintings (one of which resembles a gory jet of blood sprayed onto the canvas) are partly occulted, as if they are being posthumously protected from outside commentary or intrusion. Jibilian thus creates a memorial to the young departed artist. Both these sets



Above: *Untitled (James and Jesse)*, 2008, chromogenic print, 36" x 24" Right: *Go die, come back, I'll love you*, 2007, chromogenic print, 28" x 24"

of photographs are accompanied by W. H. Auden's famous poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," excerpted below:  
*About suffering they were never wrong,  
 The Old Masters; how well, they understood  
 Its human position...*

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# studio visit



Gorky, a life in 3 acts, 2008, chromogenic prints, 31" x 37" each

## Continued from page C3

In Breughel's *Icarus*, for instance; how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure;  
the sun shone  
As it had to do on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Auden not only captures the pathos of Icarus' death, but also people's sad disregard and lack of caring ("the expensive delicate ship . . . sailed calmly on"): even a boy falling out of the sky doesn't hold our attention.

The association of knowledge, danger, and death is an ancient one that goes back not only to the Greeks but to early Mesopotamian and Hebraic civilizations as well – the apple in the Garden of Eden being the most obvious and well-known example. Sontag, who died of a long illness lovingly documented and photographed by her partner Annie Leibovitz, seems an odd if interesting choice to be aligned with such theories, since she was in fact intimately tied to the world of politics and art, someone who cared deeply about the objects and people that surrounded her. If anyone would have noticed a boy falling out of the sky, it would have been Sontag. But why not? It lends an extra air of Gothic interest to the series.

In two other series, "Autoexaminations" and "Be My Patient," the novel topic of twinning takes center stage in the playfully homoerotic pictures of the photographer with his twin brother Arek and friends. In "Be My Patient," Arek and Aram, both in patient frocks, are seen from behind and from the side in a staged confrontation. In "Autoexaminations," exhibited in 2005 at the 80 Washington Square East Gallery, the photographer, dressed as a doctor, examines different naked men. The photos subtitled *Autoexamination #16 (gland)*, *Autoexamination #34 (lung auscultation)*, and *Autoexamination #32 (spinal deviation)* indicate the particular exam in question.

That both Jibilian's twin and their father alike are doctors is no accident. The series depicts Jibilian with seven different naked men, each one being examined in a different position. Sexuality intersects here with the desire to either understand or oedipally supersede the



Freedom Fighters (Vietnam to Yerevan), 1969–2008, chromogenic print, 20" x 28"

father and perhaps replace him. Jibilian again plays dress-up with his twin brother Arek in a 2008 photograph, *Freedom Fighters Vietnam to Yerevan*, where the two don officers' uniforms. Jibilian then photoshopped a picture of his father – who served as an American physician in Vietnam – onto the hotel bed behind them.

As with Cindy Sherman's more elaborate morphing into different identities, there is an added layer to Jibilian's at-

tempt to take the *pater familias'* place, symbolically killing him in the process. This agonistic and antagonistic struggle with the father, an attempt to understand what came before (and, in the case of his twin, what arrived concurrently) winds itself through Jibilian's *oeuvre*. In a Lacanian sense, Jibilian's twin functions like a mirror image to refract or reflect back an incomplete image, both simultaneously deconstructing and completing the self.

Along with Atom Egoyan, Jibilian has been at the forefront in visually re-interpreting the Arshile Gorky myth. In the 2008 triptych *Gorky, a Life in Three Acts*, Jibilian places a mask of Gorky's face on his brother-in-law and one of Gorky's mother on his sister's and poses them as respectively: Mary with the Christ child; Gorky and his wife Mougouch (or perhaps Christ playfully married to Mary Magdalene); and finally Gorky as Christ ascending, here seen climbing up a telephone pole, which also refers to Gorky's climb upward before he hung himself. The logic of the middle photograph is difficult to understand, and the analogy between Gorky and Christ problematic – every being who suffers is not Christ; every mother who suffers not Mary.

Much more successful to my mind is Jibilian's 2007 *Go Die, Come Back, I'll Love You*, a re-posing of the famous *Artist and His Mother*. Here Jibilian poses with Neery Melkonian. While Jibilian himself wears a mask of Gorky's face, the mother is set free: Melkonian's face, and, more importantly, her hands are entirely visible – those famous hands which Gorky had left unfinished in the original, as if the effort to recreate them would overwhelm and devour him. It

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## Robert Chilingirian's star shines brightly

**The award-winning singer is branching out into world music**

by **Shahen Hagobian**

PASADENA, Calif. – Robert Chilingirian, the popular writer and performer of pop music, is a down-to-earth musician who simply loves to do what he does.

"I work hard and I enjoy it," he says. "As anyone who is in the arts will tell you, if you're an artist of any sort, it's more than pleasure, it's food for our souls. I just can't stop doing it. I get an unbelievable feeling every time I write a new song or album, or make a video. I just want to keep going and going and going."

Indeed, Chilingirian's enthusiasm is contagious. This Lebanese-born guitarist-turned-singer started his career humbly, as a young teen who just wanted to play the guitar, eventually becoming a well-known musician.

### Young heart, big dreams

"I started playing the guitar at first," Chilingirian recalls. "When I was 16 years old, I started taking private lessons and decided that music was what I wanted to pursue. I would practice 10 hours a day and wanted to be a jazz guitarist. At that time I was already playing everything I could by ear, because I didn't know how to read notes yet." His natural talent would lead him into the world of Armenian singers, many of whom would take him on tour all around the world.

"So in the beginning, while I was doing all this, I was playing with all the Armenian singers like Adiss, Paul, and Harout, just to make money on the weekends, but at the same time I was serious about becoming a jazz musician," Chilingirian continues. "So after high school I went to the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music for two years and then to Long Island University. I was completely focused on jazz in those years and I really had no idea that everything would eventually lead to where I am now. The problem with jazz is that there is no money to be made, although there is plenty of room for improvisation and expression."

In the late 1980s Chilingirian's life would take a drastic turn.

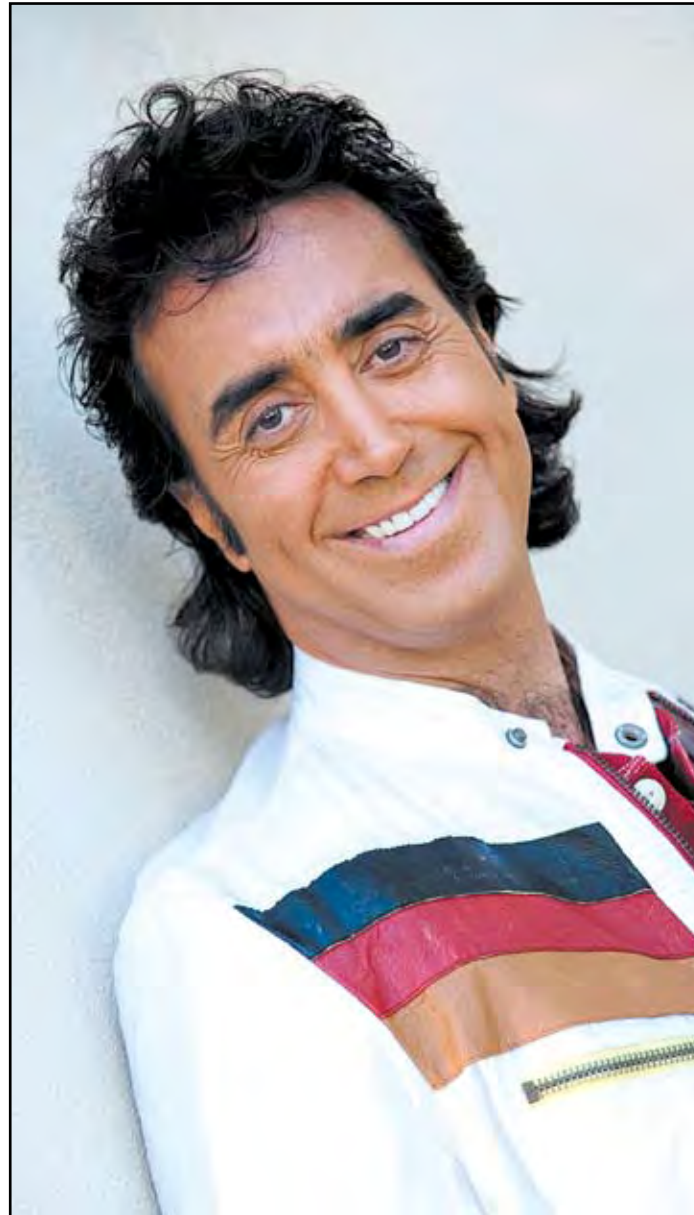
"In 1988 I was observing the music scene when I was touring with the Ar-

menian singers, and I noticed that they would all sing the same songs and do the same traditional stuff for years," Chilingirian says. "I thought to myself, 'I don't want to do this anymore, I want to do my own thing and be original.' So I got myself an eight-track recorder and started experimenting with my own material. I even took a few old Armenian songs and rearranged them and reworked them into something a little more modern and fresh. I also thought about making music videos because none of the Armenian singers of the time had any kind of music videos, and at the same time the youth had MTV and all the other music stations that were around. So when I finally made a video, it became an instant success because the Armenian community was excited about this new thing that they had never seen before."

### Connecting the Old World with the new

"One of the real-life themes I talk about can be heard in my new song, 'Polores Nuyn Hayn Enk' (We are all the same Armenians), where I try to show that we are all the same," Chilingirian says. "I notice that some Armenians from Armenia don't get along with Lebanese-Armenians, and the Lebanese don't get along with the other guys, and the other guys have problems with someone else, and so on, and I hate that. Every time someone comes up to me after a show and asks me where I'm from, I ask them, 'What difference does it make? We're all the same people, and if you're at my show and you like the music and you like me, we can talk and be good friends and it shouldn't matter where you're from. Wherever I'm from isn't going to change who I am, so we should be able to just talk to each other and take it from there.' So the song title is about that because we are all one, we're the same."

Chilingirian has also ventured into Latin music. Being influenced by the music of **Paco De Lucia** and **Carlos Gardel**, he wrote the song "N4R R4N," which won Best Latin Artist at the 2008 Hollywood Music Awards. "I just sent in the song and I ended up getting nominated," Chilingirian says. "I wasn't expecting to win, so I really didn't want to go, but at the last minute I decided to go to the awards ceremony, just to have a drink and mingle. I was standing by the bar, and when the Latin category came up and they announced my



Robert Chilingirian.

name as the winner, I thought to myself, 'This is wrong, there must be a mistake. So as I was walking to the stage, thinking that something was wrong and that they would fix the announcement, they started playing my song, so I knew it was right and that I had won. It completely took me by surprise.'

But Chilingirian isn't stopping there. He's planning to release an album featuring songs in several languages. "I'm doing a world album right now, which will be mostly in Spanish with some songs in English, Italian, Greek, and French," he says. "I want to ride the momentum of this award and get a world album out in early 2009."

### Keeping the energy alive

"I give out CDs like crazy," Chilingirian says. "I don't even sell them anymore. As an artist, you spend months on recording an album, and the bottom line is that the

music needs to be heard. I want people to hear the music and I even offer some songs as free downloads."

In an age when music is easily copied and spread through computers and the Internet, Chilingirian has been quick to adapt to the changing market and the way music is heard and distributed. For him, the important thing is to get his music out to as many listeners as possible, even if the costs come out of his own pocket. It is the joy of the music that drives him to do what he does. "I never want to stop performing," he says. "I get such a high out of being on stage and interacting with audiences. My energy, my juice, my food is my music. Every time I make a new song, I just can't wait to listen to it in my car, like 200 times in one day. That is what gives me satisfaction." ■

<http://www.robertmusic.com>

## Studio visit: Aram Jibilian

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may be useful to recall that Gorky had experienced a terrible loss as a child, watching his mother die of starvation in his arms after a forced retreat from Van in 1915. This loss affected the artist so deeply that he hid his origins for the rest of his life, changing his name from Vosdanik Adoian and taking the Russian writer Maxim Gorky's last name, which also signifies *bitter* in Russian.

The masks also work as an allusion to the invisibility until recently of Armenians as a people almost hunted out of existence by the Young Turks and then hidden away behind the Iron Curtain during Soviet times. Moreover, the masks reflect Armenians' own attempt to assimilate into Western society after the Catastrophe by erasing their identity: Michael Arlen's father changing his last name from Kouyoumdjian; the wiping away by some Armenians

of the "ian" ending from family names; and, finally, in the most unfortunate cases, the occasional nose job and hair dye so as to appear as Anglo-Saxon as possible.

Jibilian is a strong photographer. His most successful work results from either wholly aesthetic triumphs or from hidden meanings which superimpose themselves upon his photographs – a sort of Derridaesque *plus value* or supplemental meaning that appears in

works such as "The boy who fell from the sky" and his 2003 photographs taken in Karabakh, from his ongoing series, "Where I Last Was." In cases where Jibilian fully allies his aesthetic and compositional prowess to content that he already seems to intuit if not always conquer, then we are in the presence of a truly gifted artist. ■

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[aramjibilian.com](http://aramjibilian.com)

# Program Grid 26 January – 1 February



		26 January	27 January	28 January	29 January	30 January	31 January	1 February
		MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
EST	PST							
10:00 PM	1:00 AM	Bernard Show	CLONE (Serial)	CLONE (Serial)	CLONE (Serial)	CLONE (Serial)	CLONE (Serial)	Bernard Show
11:00 PM	2:00 AM		Live From America	Live From America	Live From America	Live From America	Live From America	
12:00 AM	3:00 AM	Fathers & Sons	When Stars are Dancing	When Stars are Dancing	When Stars are Dancing	When Stars are Dancing	When Stars are Dancing	Century
1:00 AM	4:00 AM		Snakes & Lizards (Serial)	Snakes & Lizards (Serial)	Snakes & Lizards (Serial)	Snakes & Lizards (Serial)	Snakes & Lizards (Serial)	Armenia Diaspora
2:00 AM	5:00 AM		Unlucky Happiness (Serial)	Unlucky Happiness (Serial)	Unlucky Happiness (Serial)	Unlucky Happiness (Serial)	Unlucky Happiness (Serial)	Snakes & Lizards (Serial)
2:30 AM	5:30 AM	A Drop of Honey	Neighbours (Serial)	Neighbours (Serial)	Neighbours (Serial)	Neighbours (Serial)	11 (Serial)	A Drop of Honey
3:00 AM	6:00 AM		Tele Kitchen	Tele Kitchen	Tele Kitchen	Tele Kitchen		Discovery
3:30 AM	6:30 AM		Mult	Mult	Mult	Mult		Century
4:00 AM	7:00 AM		Yo Yo	Yo Yo	Yo Yo	Yo Yo		Armenia Diaspora
4:30 AM	7:30 AM		News	News	News	News		Fathers & Sons
5:00 AM	8:00 AM		Bari Luys with Stepan Partamian	Bari Luys with Stepan Partamian	Bari Luys with Stepan Partamian	Bari Luys with Stepan Partamian		
5:30 AM	8:30 AM		Unlucky Happiness (Serial)	Unlucky Happiness (Serial)	Unlucky Happiness (Serial)	Unlucky Happiness (Serial)		News
6:00 AM	9:00 AM		Bari Louys Hayer	Bari Louys Hayer	Bari Louys Hayer	Bari Louys Hayer		Century
7:00 AM	10:00 AM							Armenia Diaspora
8:00 AM	11:00 AM		Bari Aravod	Bari Aravod	Bari Aravod	Bari Aravod		Fathers & Sons
8:30 AM	11:30 AM							Armenian Teletime
9:00 AM	12:00 PM							
9:30 AM	12:30 PM		News					
10:00 AM	01:00 PM		CLONE (Serial)					Armenian Movie
11:00 AM	02:00 PM		News					
12:00 PM	03:00 PM		A Drop of Honey					Yere 1 (ye:re:van)
12:30 PM	03:30 PM							Cool Program
01:00 PM	04:00 PM		Snakes & Lizards Serial					Snakes & Lizards Serial
01:30 PM	04:30 PM		Tele Kitchen					TV Duel
02:00 PM	05:00 PM		Mult					
02:30 PM	05:30 PM		YO YO					Love E Lee
03:00 PM	06:00 PM		Neighbours (Serial)					A Drop Of Honey
04:00 PM	07:00 PM		News					desangoun
05:00 PM	08:00 PM		CLONE (Serial)					Bernard Show
05:30 PM	08:30 PM		Unlucky Happiness (Serial)					
06:00 PM	09:00 PM		Live From America					Blef
06:30 PM	09:30 PM		When Stars are Dancing					Discovery
07:00 PM	10:00 PM		News					Century
07:30 PM	10:30 PM		Gyanki Keene - Serial					Armenia Diaspora
08:00 PM	11:00 PM		Tonight Show					News Editorial
08:30 PM	11:30 PM		With Hovo					Jagadakri kerinere (Serial)
09:00 PM	12:00 AM		11 - Serial					Pakhousd - (Serial)
			News					News Editorial
			Bari Luys with Stepan Partamian					Bari Luys with Stepan Partamian
								CUBE

## Wages of Sin: morality tale fails to go beyond sermonizing



by Gayane Khechoomian

GLENDALE, Calif. – “Park Asdudzo” (Thank God), the assistant director told me over the phone when I asked him how he was doing.

I didn’t catch it then, nor did I suspect it from the movie trailer, but I was in for a spiritual journey the moment I set foot in the Glendale High School Auditorium on January 10.

In *Wages of Sin* (Meghki Vartsk), a story about a man befittingly named Harutyun (Ascension), director **Noro Faraday** depicts a battle between good and evil. With a murky past hovering over him, the protagonist finds redemption by accepting Jesus into his life and changing his “evil” ways. *Wages of Sin*, the second installment of a planned trilogy, leaves the viewer without any resolution to the narrative, reflecting the director’s faith-based approach to movie-making – which implies that patience is a virtue, and the audience must wait for what’s to come next. In fact, a message at the end of the film wishes the audience patience until the final installment of the trilogy.

“I would rather have a lot less people see the movie if [this were to have] a bigger impact,” said assistant director **Albert Akopyan**. “The purpose is to help individuals get through their hardships and live a holy life. We wanted to present righteousness and show people which way to go.”

The problem is not the message,

but the method. From beginning to end, the movie is chock-full of undeveloped, flat characters whose purpose is to embody either good or evil. Harutyun is deemed good because he abandons a life of crime for one in which he speaks about Christianity to his friends and follows the Ten Commandments. At no point does the audience find out about Harutyun’s occupation, interests, age, or any other information relevant to character-building.

Even the film’s bad guys lack substance as they are based on mafia stereotypes with few inner conflicts. The closest we get to a conflicted character is the thief Mushagh, who refuses to kill Harutyun because of his adherence to the commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” Though Mushagh observes the commandment, he is ultimately less than a perfect Christian because he steals. The premise illustrates *Wages of Sin*’s essential flaw of not considering the all-important gray area between good and evil, which prevents the film from ever becoming an intellectually stimulating work. Rather, there is a judgmental ideology in the movie’s depiction of people as either good or bad, a stance that certainly goes against one of the core tenets of Christianity: the acceptance of all. At its inception, Christianity appealed to the masses precisely because of its inclusiveness. Jesus accepted and loved all of God’s children, and judgment was left to God.

Who are we to judge a man who steals to feed his family – or one who steals, period?

Thin on plot, let alone narrative complexity, *Wages of Sin* never explores the socioeconomic backdrop of Yerevan, where the movie is set. It fails to explore the bad guys’ life



### Low production values

With minimal scenography, *Wages of Sin* is staged almost like a play, with the characters exchanging unnatural dialogue and taking awkward stances. The action scenes, too, are unrealistic to the point of being comical, making it hard to take any message seriously. In general, the actors seem to be reading lines rather than engaging in actual acting.

As an additional measure for making certain that the good guys are distinguished from the bad ones, the filmmakers have used disparate variations in language. Thus the righteous speak proper Armenian while the sinners’ lingo is peppered with slang. For instance, in flashbacks of his criminal past, Harutyun speaks the language of the street, whereas his speech is gentrified after he accepts Jesus.

*Wages of Sin*, which was sponsored by the International Christian Family Network, includes a sermon-like speech delivered by Akopyan at the end of the film, when he extols the virtues of persevering through hardships, having patience, and putting one’s faith in God. The filmmakers said they hope to develop Spanish and Russian subtitles for the film and also dub it into English, though the movie already has English subtitles.

*Wages of Sin*’s black-and-white portrayal of religion takes away from the message of the work. Religion is more complex than an instructional video on how to lead a Christian life. The film portrays the most basic principles of a faith without analyzing it. And it does this in a mediocre fashion. This type of production is acceptable so long as one is preaching to the choir, so to speak, but I would not expect any converts coming out of the theater. ☩







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