

# Armenian Film Festival Shines in San Francisco

BY TAMAR SALIBIAN

SAN FRANCISCO—The Armenian Film Festival presented its second harvest of films by Armenian filmmakers from February 17 to 20 at the Delancey Street Theater in San Francisco.

This year's festival included 24 short and feature-length films from documentary, experimental, animation and fiction genres. Many of the filmmakers attended the screening's numerous panel discussions.

executive director Peter Ajemian followed by brief comments by curator Anahid Kassabian.

These introductory moments, which were often revisited during the question and answer portion of the programs, promoted oneness among the filmmakers and viewers where all could enjoy the presented works and discuss them freely.

Among the films featured in this year's festival was curator

bald. Farhadian remains emotionless during the entire process, yet her newly shaved head, paired with the video's silence presents her in a younger and newer light—as if she were reborn. Farhadian and Liss said that the message in their piece was very simple, and that it was a conscious choice to not include audio with the piece.

Other films in the festival ranged from the poetic to forthright. In the splendidly colorful *Alchemy*, Anna Condo plays a young woman whose artistic gift to her doctor yields very strange results. Based on a story by Anton Chekhov, Condo plays the lead role of Saskia with luscious and mischievous perfection. The quality of the film with its bright colors and pacing shows a playful film full of lovely surprises. Further, the circles of friends and artists that Condo presents in her film represent an exquisite and often secret group of urban individuals. Similar in tone, Hagop Kaneboughazian's *Ara's Flight* is a magical 3D animated film about a young boy's dream to fly up to heaven to reunite with his parents. Goudsouzian's frank and endearing documentary *My Son Shall Be Armenian* tells the story of a group of young Canadian-Armenians who travel to Armenia.

The group begins their journey in Armenia initially as a starting point to trace the path of the Genocide, but ultimately ends up meeting Genocide survivors and discovering their own layered identities. Goudsouzian's travel companions are individuals who have integrated into Canadian culture, and yet the familiarity they feel with the families they meet in Armenia is at once surprising and relieving to them.

The films also varied in length. Armen Kaniyan's delightful one-minute animated short *I Don't Feel Safe Around You* discusses the media and international politics with a wit and spark that remains with the viewer long after the short film has ended. Nigol Bezjian's 90-minute film *Muron* documents the process of creating the consecrating oils used by the

Armenian Church with maturity and beauty. Some of the films chose to highlight the filmmakers' families. Both Tamar Salibian in *Beautiful Armenians* and Karnig Gregorian in *Dad's Dishes* present candid moments that open pathways to the filmmakers' self-discovery and glimpse into the relationship between the past and present.

Don Bernier's *In a Nutshell: A Portrait of Elizabeth Tashjian* por-

In addition to the screenings, the festival's co-curator Anahid Kassabian hosted a stimulating curators' panel on Sunday evening. Present were Film Arts Foundation's Janis Plotkin, Arab Film Festival's Sonia El-Feki, and Iranian.com's Javid Jahashah. The discussions ranged from film festival successes and flaws, funding efforts and targeting enthusiastic audiences. The panel was particularly useful in outlining the inner



In *Muron*, filmmaker Nigol Bezjian documents the making of the Armenian Church's holy chrism



Thea Farhadian is shorn in *ZeroPointTwo*

Sponsored by Golden Thread Productions, the Armenian Film Festival was co-presented by the Film Arts Foundation, the San Francisco Cinematheque, the Arab Film Festival and the Goethe Institute. Anahid Kassabian, James & Alsop's Chair of Music at the University of Liverpool, England; interdisciplinary artist and composer Thea Farhadian; and filmmaker Hrayr Anmahouni curated the festival.

The mood of the festival was one of openness, with many of the filmmakers and viewers continuing their discussions beyond the question and answer sessions after the screenings. The site of the festival enhanced the intimate atmosphere—the Delancey Street Theater is a small venue, seating 150 audience members. Each screening program began with spirited welcoming remarks from festival ex-

Hrayr Anmahouni's experimental film *Bruitage*, which incorporates details of still images of Lebanon into an abstract piece with found audio. In the discussion following the screening, Anmahouni described how his uncles had a photography studio in Lebanon during his youth. He used their old photographs and highlighted details from within the backgrounds of the still images to create a new atmosphere with his film. The title of the film, *Bruitage* refers to "background" artists in old French films, who would create audio and sound effects. Fellow curator Thea Farhadian presented her video collaboration *ZeroPointTwo* made with Heike Liss. In the short film, Farhadian silently and stoically faces the camera while an unidentified individual slowly cuts off all her hair and eventually shaves her head

trays a wildly creative and eccentric woman who came to be known as the "Nut Lady." Elizabeth Tashjian is a personality who appeared on many television programs, such as the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson and Late Night with David Letterman. A concert violinist by age 9, award-winning artist in her twenties and the founder of the Nut Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut, Tashjian's story has not remained a positive one through the years. Evicted from her home by the state and declared insane by her state-appointed conservators, Tashjian now fights for her identity and her life. Despite the tragic events in her life, Tashjian fights back with a smile. She is a survivor of another sort, and one whose exuberance jumps from the screen into the audience during this film.

workings of smaller independent film festivals, exploring funding possibilities for smaller festivals that do not have major corporate sponsorship and allowing the filmmakers and film buffs alike the opportunity to learn more about film festivals. The general consensus was that while independent filmmaking has drastically changed in the past 10 years, there is an optimism and hope for the continuation and expansion of the Armenian Film Festival beyond its present home in San Francisco.

Tamar Salibian is a filmmaker and writer living in Los Angeles. Her film *Beautiful Armenians* screened in the 2006 Armenian Film Festival. Tamar has previously written for *AIM Magazine*. For her filmmaker's perspective on the 2006 Armenian Film Festival, turn to the Critics' Forum column on page 14.

## Antranig Varjabedian

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

remember how, years ago, during an ARF convention in some city of the Eastern United States—which I can't recall at this time—we shared a hotel room. He was a man of vast interests and a keen mind that sought answers and solutions to perennial problems. As a psychiatrist, he loved asking questions and analyzing the answers until satisfied.

We had been talking all evening about convention issues, forgetting supper and dinner. Then, deep into the night, as one thing led to another, he wondered why the Armenians called their ancient land Mair-Hairenik, meaning Mother-Fatherland. He found the literal translation somewhat strange. Try as we did, all our speculations could not produce a definitive answer.

Tired and drowsy, we finally set on the concept that the land, the earth, while decidedly female with its obvious bounty, became a patrimony, a homeland, only through the sweat and blood of

those who tilled and fought for it—traditionally male endeavors. And we left it at that, promising never to bring up the subject in the presence of the few women delegates participating in the convention, for fear of being accused of male chauvinism at a time when a mild form of feminism had already started making inroads among our Ungeruhis.

There were so many facets to Antranig the man. In all my years as a member of various ARF Regional Central Bodies, I have never seen anyone chair meetings with such clarity of mind, patience, and firmness, at the same time.

He was an authority, not just a figure, and everyone knew it. I believe he commanded respect—and affection—because of his impeccable impartiality and honesty.

I remember one particular Central Committee composed of two physicians, three lawyers, two engineers, an insurance salesman and an art-director, flanked by two erudite editors and an embattled manager of the Hairenik, all of them imbued with definite ideas about the resolution of is-

sues and problems that a region spread from Boston to Los Angeles and from Canada to Cuba could generate in the hottest days of the Cold War.

In command of such a crew, skilled skipper that he was, with his calm, quiet deep baritone voice, Unger Antranig inspired confidence and optimism in the midst of what others would have seen as unmanageable chaos. He always managed to navigate through fog and storms and bring us to safe harbor.

What characterized most this exceptional man, raised and educated in the diaspora, functioning on the highest professional levels that life could offer, this respected healer and teacher, had somehow absorbed the best qualities and virtues of an old world Dashnaksakan—a true, unabashed believer, radiating faith in the cause—with no trace of fanaticism, or self-righteousness to darken its inspiring light.

His love and respect for his father, and the muted, dignified, silent pride of his father for him, was something to behold for those who knew them.

It was no surprise, therefore, that Unger Antranig, served his beloved organization for so long, and on so many levels. From the most humble to the highest positions, with his involvement, became equally important. Early on, in his father's image, he had understood and grasped the noble function of the true, selfless volunteer, dedicated to a lofty Cause—a Cause that had reached his generation through the blood and toil of forebears who were consumed like candles, illuminating the darkness that had engulfed their nation.

Whether it was as a simple *sharkayin*, taking up his place in the ranks, a member of a Gomideh executive, a responsible member and Chairman of a Regional Central Committee, or elected to serve on the highest body of the ARF, the Bureau, Antranig remained the same unger, a true comrade anchored solidly to what constitutes the basic Dashnaksakan—the humble yet lofty dignity of a volunteer soldier, ready and willing to dedicate his life and fortune to his nation.

And so he did. Leaving behind

the rich legacy of long, selfless service to his organization, his nation, his community, and his family. All of us were richer for having him among us.

Now he joins countless others who have left us the priceless legacy of the spirit that led our people to freedom out of the darkness, to the liberation of ancestral lands and the establishment of an independent state.

On this solemn occasion, on behalf of the Bureau of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation—in whose ranks he served with distinction, with true commitment and loyalty to the Cause that, in its larger context, still awaits a just resolution—I extend the expressions of a deep sorrow felt by all ARF ungers, upon the loss of a valued Comrade-in-arms, and their sincere condolences to his bereaved widow, his sons and family members, friends and ungers, alike.

Farewell, *pari janabarh*, Unger Antranig. And to paraphrase the words of the Great Bard—May flocks of angels sing thee to thy rest with the heavenly melodies of the immortal Komitas, that you loved so much.