HAMO BEKNAZARYAN, PIONEER OF GEORGIAN AND AZERI CINEMAS

Posted on May 10, 2023 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Artsvi Bakhchinyan, Yerevan, 4 May 2023

This year marks the centennial of Armenia's cinema. Thus, the name of its founder--director Hamo Beknazaryan (aka Amo Bek-Nazarov, 1892-1965) -- should be remembered. It is also relevant to remember because he was one of pioneers of the cinemas in Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Starting in 1914, Beknazaryan, who lived in Moscow, pursued a successful career as a film actor, establishing himself as one of the stars of pre-Soviet Russian movies. After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Beknazaryan returned to Armenia. Finding his homeland in political and economic turmoil, he moved to Tiflis (now Tbilisi), the cultural center of Caucasus. Although Beknazaryan's attempts to work in local theaters failed, he continued his activities in film, becoming one of the founders and chief administrator of the Georgian film industry. We should take into account that the first Georgian feature film was shot in 1916 (having eminent Armenian actor Hovhannes Abelyan as one of the leading characters), but until the Soviet era there was no regular film production under state support.

In 1922 Beknazaryan acted for the last time in the Georgian "The Suram Fortress" by Ivan Perestiani. From 1920 to 1926 he was First Supervisor and Artistic Director of the Georgian State Film Studio. Here, in 1923, he shot his first film, "The Patricide" (or "At the Column of Condemnation"); the following year "The Lost Treasures" and later, "Natella" (1925). They were screened in the Soviet Union with huge success. These films were typical of cinematographic orientalism, depicting sentimental and pathetic love stories, injected with exotica of the Orient - harems, bloody scenes, underground prisons, etc. Beknazaryan believed only the so-called exotic films could be loved by his audience. It was a common trend in 1920s, typical also for Russian and Western cinemas. However, in his next film, "Namus" (Honor), made in Armenia in 1924, Beknazaryan refused that approach and presented the oriental reality without its clichés, adornments and presenting in a strict realistic way.



A scene from "The Patricide" by Hamo Beknazaryan (1923)

In Baku

Today it's impossible to imagine that there was a time when film studios of Yerevan and Baku could cooperate... In 1928, after 10 years of the Armenian massacres in Baku, "A Home on a Volcano," a co-production of Yerevan "Armenkino" and Baku "Azgoskino" studios was realized. The protagonist of the film is drill master Petros, who tells the story of the oil workers' strike in pre-Soviet Baku to his adopted son, depicting the relationship between a big oil corporation and working-class people, representatives of various nationalities. The cast also was consisted of different nationalities; particularly, the future star of Armenian cinema, Tatyana Makhmuryan, made her debut in this film. This was Beknazaryan's last silent film in Armenia and first collaboration with Baku.

Just after this film Beknazaryan was approached by Azeri playwright Jaffar Jabbarly, who suggested him to write a script based on his well-known play, "Sevil." In 1929, Beknazaryan shot an eponymous film on this play - an all-Azeri production. The film tells about the Muslim women's desire for emancipation. The heroine, Seville, is an illiterate woman, who finds the courage to leave her

husband and later, in Soviet times, to become active in public life.



The poster of "Sevil" by Hamo Beknazaryan (1929)

Years later, Beknazaryan wrote in his memoires: "I recall my mutual work with Azerbaijan's great writer with deep gratitude. He died in the prime of life and left great literary heritage. He was a *dramaturge* of a big talent and great soul."

When in 1939, Azeri film director Samed Mardanov died at the age of 29, leaving his film, "The

Peasants" unfinished, Beknazaryan was called to realise it. This historical and revolutionary film was included in the "golden fund" of Azerbaijani cinema, yet Beknazaryan's contribution has been totally ignored in that country.

Beknazaryan's last film in Baku was "Sabuhi" ("The Man of Dawn"), made in 1941. The second director was Rza Təhmasibin, but the Azeri sources mention him as co-director. The hero is a 19th century progressive Caucasian Tartar (the previous ethnonym of Azeris) writer and human rights activist Mirza Fatali Akhundov.

Today the Beknazaryan's biography is absent in Azerbaijani Wikipedia. His name (as Bek-Nazarov) is mentioned in Azerbaijani Wiki pages on "Sevil" and "Sabuhi" films, but is totally absent on the page of "A Home on a Volcano" and "The Peasants." The Azeris systematically erase all close and distant Armenian traces from their history, yet Beknazaryan's own memoires and many other sources will always testify the big contribution of this distinguished Armenian filmmaker in development of national cinema of a nation, continuing its genocidal attitude toward the Armenians up to this day…

The article is based on Hamo Beknazaryan's memoirs, that has been first published in Russian, in 1965 ("Notes of an Actor and Film Director").

Comments



Lucine – 2024-01-28 21:21:21

Today, I viewed Hamo Beknazaryan's "A Home on a Volcano" and "Land of Nairi" at NYC's Museum of Modern Art film showcase. These silent films had English, Armenian and Russian subtitles with accompanying music. Unfortunately, there was no Q&A after the films concluded to provide some context to the attendees. These two films were highly reminiscent of the works of Leni Riefenstahl on behalf of Nazi Germany and Sergei Eisenstadt on behalf of the Soviet Union – both in terms of their arrestingly stark, modernist black and white visual artistry as well as their propagandistic values. It would have been impossible for Beknazaryan to have been given the enormous platform from which to produce films (beginning in the 1920s) if he were to have showcased a perspective that laid plain Armenian nationalism, any positive characteristic attributed to capitalism, or the very real anti-Turco/Russo colonialist designs on Armenia. The phenomenon of contorting one's world view was true of any individual who wished to achieve prominence in various fields of endeavor in the Soviet Union. Thus, we have two films that omit any reference to the very real Russo-Turco hostility towards Armenia and Armenians. Likewise the history of Armenians in the Baku oil industry – and what happened there to change the existing dynamic -- is left unexplained. There also is no mention of the roles Russia and Turkey played in fomenting the Armenian Genocide nor their collusion to eliminate Armenia in 1915, 1918 and 1920. The imagery and stories told in both films leave the unsuspecting viewer with the notion that Armenia was a savage backwater before the Soviets came along and civilized them, creating doctors, lawyers and engineers as if Armenians never before entered those professions. Quite the contrary – Armenians were the most accomplished peoples of Asia Minor and the Transcaucasus. "Land of Nairi" even goes so far as to state that the newly independent Republic of Armenia of 1918 had caused widespread typhus, starvation and other tragedies to befall its citizens without mentioning the elephant in the room: these besieged, starved, beaten, exhausted genocided Armenians had just miraculously fought off complete extermination from marauding Turks and complicit Soviets, both who remained antagonistic and aggressive upon the declaration of Armenian independence. This had everything to do with the state of Armenian human health at that time. I am deeply disturbed that the propagandistic nature of these films has not been adequately written about among those who document the works of Beknazaryan.