CELEBRATE ALL THINGS ARMENIAN IN MONCTON

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Category: Opinions

Margaret Patricia Eaton, Urban Voice, New Brunswick, 19 November 2009

When Sylvia Kasparian, Professor of Linguistics at Université de Moncton, organized the first Moncton Armenian Festival in 2005, she planned for 30 people, but 85 turned up. So for the second festival in 2007, she planned for 85 and 150 came. Now for the third festival, Nov. 26 to 29, she's hoping to triple that number as she and her committee have planned an ambitious and exciting program to introduce Monctonians to Armenian music, art, dance, film and food.

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If you look at a modern world map, you won't find Armenia, a country with a rich but tormented history, but you will find Armenians living in just about every part of the world, including 200 families in the Maritimes, 12 of them in Moncton, part of the disaspora.
According to tradition, it was in Armenia, on Mount Arafat, that Noah's Ark came to rest after the Great Flood. In recorded history, the country gained independence from Greek and Persian rule in 189 BC, became the first nation to accept Christianity about 300 AD, and was once a mighty kingdom that stretched from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean. Armenia was ruled by the Ottoman Turks after the 1500s, but their history became truly tragic during World War I. While the rest of the world's attention was focused on Europe, the Turks began a campaign of genocide against the Armenians in 1915, slaughtering 1.8 Million of them.

Thousands more managed to escape and found refuge in Lebanon, Syria, Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria and Romania. Then, in 1918, at the end of First World War, the land of Armenia was carved up, with the eastern portion going to Turkey and the western part absorbed into Russia or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as it was known after 1917.

Kasparian is excited about this third festival, as it is an opportunity to celebrate the rich culture of Armenia, as well as the 140th birthday of the composer Komitas, who she describes as "the king of Armenian music."

As a young man he visited the small villages, noting all the details of the traditional music and folk dances, searching for the essence of the music. Later, he went to Berlin where he composed classical music, all of which was influenced by what he had heard in the villages.

"His life was so sad," Kasparian continues. "In 1915 he was arrested, along with 2,500 intellectuals, who were all killed, but his life was spared when the American ambassador intervened and arranged for him to be deported to Paris.

Sadly much of his work was burned by the Turks and this so depressed him that he could no longer speak. He spent the last 20 years of his life as a mute in an asylum."

Now, the festival organized by Kasparian and her committee, will give Komitas back his voice. The grand opening, on Thursday, Nov. 26 at 6 p.m. in the Louise and Reuben Cohen Art Gallery, UdeM campus is entitled Komitas: Homage to a Legend. It will feature art, incorporating Armenian mythological symbols by Edman O Aivazian, a 1988 film on the life of Komitas, Flamenco singer Maral Perk from Halifax, folk dances performed by Lee Saunders and Kasparian and, of course, the music of Komitas. Dariush Zarbafian, UdeM professor of musicology, will play two traditional Iranian stringed instruments, the tar and the 72-brass stringed santoor, while Hampic Djabourian will play the duduk. This Armenian flute is made from the wood of the apricot tree.

Kasparian says, "The sound it produces is very deep, very profound. It touches the whole body and it touches the soul."

The evening will be rounded out with an opportunity to sample some Armenian cuisine, including "basterma" a spicy sausage, grape leaves, and a special pizza with very thin dough, "more like a French crêpe. Armenian cuisine is essentially Mediterranean, with Greek. Persian and Turkish influences," says Kasparian.

The Festival moves to the Capitol Theatre at 8 p.m. on Friday for what promises to be a wonderful tribute concert featuring international soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian.

Kasparian says, "It's taken me two years to get her here. Since her professional career began nine years ago, the Toronto-based soloist has performed at the Metropolitan Opera, the Royal Opera House, La Scala and Opéra National de Paris. She'll be accompanied by the 30-member Amici Chamber Ensemble from Toronto. In addition, two masters of Russian ballet will perform five dances by Komitas."

Since Komitas was a priest in the Armenian Apostolic Faith, having been raised in a monastery after he was orphaned at age 11, he also wrote liturgical music. Some of these songs will be performed in concert on Saturday, at 8 p.m. at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, 90 Park Street, featuring the Arahet Quartet, Montreal; soprano Lisa Roy, Moncton; the Beauséjour Choir and Hampic Djabourian playing the duduk.

For cinema fans, there are two films, Vodka Lemon (2003), a comedy, and Army of Crime (2009), a historical drama. Both films have English sub-titles. Screenings are at 2 p.m. on both Saturday and Sunday at the Jacqueline Bouchard Building, UdeM.

Kasparian and her committee are looking forward to sharing a vibrant Armenian culture with Greater Moncton.

That is has survived against such terrifying odds is a real testament to the human spirit and the power of music which speaks across time and the boundaries of language and politics.

Four days of events look at legendary composer Komitas

By Brent Mazerolle, Times & Transcript Staff, 13 November 2009

The Third Moncton Armenian Festival is set to get under way in the city November 26 to 29, and this year the focus will be on Komitas, Armenia's legendary composer, ethnographer, poet and specialist in folk dance and the study of music.
Four days will be filled with activities and discoveries of the world of Komitas: a big opening show, three exhibitions, two concerts and a mini-film festival.

Dariush Zarbafian plays a santur, an ancestor of the piano

Organizers are promising a feast for the senses leading to understanding, sharing and communicating about Armenia, whose rich but tormented history dates back at least 2,000 years. The festival was initiated by members of the Maritimes Armenian Association, which unites about 200 families in the Maritime provinces.

Each year's festival has been planned to take the public on a different voyage of discovery -- from the origins of the great historical Armenia to the contemporary Republic of Armenia and the grand Armenian diaspora in the world.

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