IN APPRECIATION OF MANUEL, TRAIL-BLAZING ENTERTAINER

Posted on December 23, 2009 by Keghart



Category: Opinions



By Vicken Gulvartian, Los Angeles, 20 December 2009

His name is Manuel, Manuel Menenkichian, and I've been eager to write about him for a very long time. Singer, performer, crooner and entertainer, Manuel is the very embodiment of the young Armenian who, for a generation, lived with the urge to make it out of (Beirut's Armenian enclave) Bourj Hammoud with hopes and aspirations, and talent too- to spread hye yerk, to be free, to succeed, and to make sure that the rest who stayed behind knew that, "He made it". Well he did. He also made their dreams come true, as he became the first Armenian entertainer to appear in an international song contest, to headline in Las Vegas, and to make movies- three of them, to be exact- while kissing lots of pretty women on screen in the process.

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As a youngster, I remember Manuel as the unreachable "man of the stage" that I knew I was never going to meet. But we did meet a year ago, accidentally in Glendale. At the Phoenicia restaurant, Manuel was sitting at the head of a table of ten, and dominating it. How can he not? He is, after all, the very embodiment of a person the French best describe as *un jeune homme tres sympathique!* Myself, I was there that evening with childhood friends and classmates, two tables over, to have a good time. Manuel didn't seem to have changed- The big hair was gray but still there, so was the trademark unibrow. He was not a pound overweight.
I had a story to take up with him, and I was not about to wait for his next visit to Los Angeles. The last time I had a chance to meet him was at the Armenian Music Awards at the Alex Theatre. He was hosting the event that ran too long into the early morning hours, and I had no chance to catch up with him backstage afterwards.
I excused myself from my friends and left for Manuel's table. Before I even got there, my entire tablemates were around me, including my wife Lucy, my high school classmates and their spouses- Bedig, Vruyr, Lena, Kegham and others. We were all of the generation that grew up with Manuel's music, and knew of his concerts, and of course the delicious movies- musicals about loves lost,

lovers betrayed, suicidal tendencies, sexy *odar* girls saying things like "Give me one small *bachig*", freedom-fighting Sassoontzis, sadistic Turks, infidel husbands, monologues on the virtues of Armenian women, gold-diggin' socialites, out of wedlock pregnancies, and finally tears and happiness (or is it "Tears of Happiness"?). Not to forget the occasional buxom belly-dancer featured for… well, I really don't know why! The characters that he played- Raffi, Jirair, and Varouj - are the embodiment of the young Armenian male of solid stock, doing all the wrong things, until he finally get it right because he is better than the rest of them- sensitive, daring, romantic, brave , proud and *azkaser*. Yes, he does get the girl (Silva, Anahid, and Hasmig) in the end, while crushing the brute Levon, the nagging biker Garbis, and the despicable Turk, *shishgo* along the way. The movies have a formulaic gusto element to them, and I watch them with amusement to this day, always with the same three MT&Ts (**M**anuelagans, **T**rue and **T**rue)- We compete with each other to remember the punch line in the next scene, the names of Jirair's three one-night stands (Georgette, Yvette, and Jeanette), the name of the most obnoxious *nouveau riche* in the village (Jean Levon, yuck!), and what Anahid tells Steven (" Istiveen" of "Firizno") as to why she can't marry him- "Because every time I will go to bed with you, I will remember Jirair". Here's another one, right out of the daring freedom-fighter Varouj's mouth, "Hey *shishgo* (fatso), are you going to talk, or do I make you sing with holes in your pot-belly?" But our favorite is from "Promise of Love"- it's what the penniless aspiring-artist Raffi tells Silva, while holding her in his arms and staring at a greenery where he says he will build their dream home after they marry, "Silva, this forest reminds me of you- beautiful… hot… and wild". Ya ya ya, *mamma mia* Manuel, what were you thinking? We don't want to know… or maybe, I do!

All the movies are laced with songs- Sarky Mouradian's compositions- which at the time turned into hits on the pop charts and part of our teen jingo: "*Silva inchoo katseer*, *Silva veratartseer, nayeer tsakooge goola*…" very catchy, and it happened to work just as well, or better, after we dropped the name Silva for another one of our choice. But in my mind, "*Moratsar zis dou moratsar*" is the best of them all, and Manuel's deserved claim to fame as a smooth balladeer.

In "Promise of Love" Jirair's story is one of rags to riches. At one stage in the story he is devastated by incessant drinking and smoking, and on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He is confined to a sanatorium with "almost severely damaged lungs". There, he rests and sleeps late, goes hunting, and sits on a veranda gazing at the vast open valley ahead, while (listen to this) smoking like a chimney, and washing down more whiskey. To confirm his legitimacy as a manly lover in agony, I presume.

Back in Glendale, I finally reached Manuel's table and greeted him. I could tell he was a natural with people by the way he greeted me back: jovial and very friendly. I finally told him about the incident that my grandmother, who lived in Beirut's Nor Hajin district, always reminded me of whenever I visited her, or when she saw Manuel's picture in the newspapers. So I asked, "Manuel, do you remember the day you got into big trouble when, as a wild teen, your car barely missed running over a young boy of maybe 6 crossing the street in Hajin *tagh?*" He answered "Yes!" emphatically,

without hesitation. When he heard me say "Well, that was me" we looked into each other's eyes for a few seconds, shook hands and hugged saying "*yalla mortzeer, yalla motrzank*" (Let's forget, I already forgot in *Beirutahye* slang). "I was told afterwards" explained Manuel, "That *asdvadz yeresit nayetsav*. The boy is the son of a great *Hajintzi,* and a prominent man of the community by the name of g-u-l vartian". We hugged again.

When my wife arrived, I turned to Manuel again, "You probably don't remember her, but you sure know her father well, Sarkissian Sarkis" He was ecstatic, "*Inch lav pakhd* (such good fortune), of course I remember, we travelled to Armenia together." (Sarkissian had chartered a plane to take his guests to Etchmiadzin for the christening of his son, at a time when Armenia was Soviet). By this time Manuel clearly had tears in his eyes, he was truly moved, overwhelmed by the memories of Beirut, his youth, our childhood. The hugging continued with others from my group, who turned out to have their own personal memories of Manuel- all sweet and nice.

That night in Glendale Manuel took over the microphone, the stage and the band, and delivered an hour-long medley of his songs, skilfully mixed with anecdotes, in honor of new-found friendships, as a courtesy to two great *hyes* Asadour Gulvartian and Sarkis Sarkissian, men of cherished memories. I will never forget the evening.

There is no shortage of Armenian singers on stage these days. There is, however, a very short supply of entertainers. Manuel led the way, starting in the late sixties, as one of many rising performers who burst onto the pop scene to- by a stroke- eradicate Turkish music from the homes of the "displaced generation", and give their children exactly what they had been praying for- the sound of Armenian songs.

There really is no place for quiet grace in Armenian pop culture and artists today- lots of wannabes. That's our loss. Except for the favor he gave us that night in Glendale, Manuel is retired from the stage these days, living in Miami. He has paid his dues. He will not come back again even though we need him. For now, until another *sympathique* replaces him, the stage will remain dark.

Last month I got hold of a rare Manuel memento- a bottle of "Manuel Bordeaux", the wine that hit the markets a couple of years ago, and sold out immediately. It was the three of us again- Alenoush, Ashod and I - who got together, popped a DVD of "Promise of Love" (our favorite), poured the wine, and drank to good health and loved ones, lip-synced to the movie songs, simulated Jirair's facial expressions from the last scene of the movie right before he smooches his face into baby Anoush's plum cheeks… and toasted to Manuel. It was pure joy!

Happy New Year, everybody!