GOODBYE, RICHARD

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By Jirair Tutunjian, 23 August 2016

The Spring 2016 issue of **Nostalgia Digest** had an article titled "Necrology for 2015" which listed actors who died last year… Judy Carne, Anita Ekberg, Lesley Gore, Christopher Lee, Robert Loggia, Patrick McNee, Leonard Nimoy, Omar Sharif, Rod Taylor… and Richard Bakalyan.

Richard Bakalyan? Long before Armenians began to boast that American actors Mike Connors, Cher, Andrea Martin, and Eric Bogosian are Armenian, there was Richard Bakalyan, along with Ross Bagdasarian and David Hedison. Born and raised in the "Little Armenia" of Watertown, Massachusetts, Bakalyan retained his Armenian name despite Hollywood marquee pressures to Anglicize it.

Most moviegoers and Armenians haven't heard of the veteran actor whose career spanned a half-a-century, starting in the mid-'50s. And when he died, no Armenian-American media that I can recall published his obituary. A character actor, he was typically profiled in "Names You Never Remember, With Faces You Never Forget" by Justin Humphreys.

As teenagers growing up in the '50s and far away from America, we were proud of Bakalyan, especially since he played tough guys. We didn't mind that he was not handsome and never got the girl. He was Armenian and had retained his name. We also forgave him the juvenile delinquent switch-blade wielding roles he played well into his late '20s. Apparently, he had some experience in the 'heavy' category having served a year's probation at age 15. His chiseled face and broken nose added to the threat. Although not tall by Hollywood standards, he exuded menace and could threaten the standard-issue 6 ft. hero. In an interview, he said: "My mother back East, said 'Can't you play a nice guy? What are the neighbors gonna say?"

Despite appearing in major movies ("Chinatown", "Von Ryan's Expressway", "Robin and the 7 Hoods", "The Delicate Delinquent", "None But the Brave", "Up Periscope", and "The Greatest Story Ever Told") with Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, Jerry Lewis (thrice), Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Max von Sydow, and James Garner, Bakalyan remained one of those journeyman actors whose face was familiar but no one could remember the movies he had appeared in.

In mid-career Bakalyan was forced to switch from juvenile delinquent roles to playing comic heavies, then straight roles. He then began narrating animation movies (mostly for Disney) and appeared on TV shows as guest star.

Bakalyan was a long-time friend of Frank and Nancy Sinatra. In the '50s, Frank Sinatra took him to Monaco to dine with Grace Kelly and her husband Prince Rainier on the royal yacht. He was also a life-long friend of singer and teen heartthrob Bobby Darrin ("Mack the Knife"). They had become friends when co-starring in "Pressure Point" at the height of Darrin's career. When years later Darrin hosted a TV show, Bakalyan was a regular on the program. He was also one of the last people to see

Darrin before the actor died of heart ailment.

Bakalyan was born in 1931 to Nishan and Elaine Bakalyan of Boston. After serving in the U.S. Air Force in the Korean War, Bakalyan headed to California where he was discovered by Anthony Quinn. He was earning a living parking cars at the time but had ambitions to become an actor. Quinn liked the young man's spirit and invited him to acting classes which he headed. Quinn's trust paid off in spades. Soon Bakalyan was appearing as tough juveniles in low-budget "teenpix" at a time when the James Dean rebel craze was in full swing.

In 1958, while shooting "The Cool and the Crazy" in Kansas City, Bakalyan was arrested for "vagrancy". Standing on the sidewalk between takes, in full juvenile delinquent "regalia", he was nabbed by police who thought he was a teen gang member. The arrest didn't hurt his career: it made the tough-guy typecasting more credible. It says something about his acting ability that in his late twenties he was still in demand for juvenile delinquent roles. But once he got his feet in the door playing juvenile delinquents, he graduated to straight roles, comedy and as a middle-aged villain ("Chinatown").

When his movie career slowed down, he became a regular on TV appearing in "Batman", "Charley's Angels", Matlock" and other popular TV shows.

That he didn't become a leading man didn't bother Bakalyan. He was a realist who said: "Some of the bigger films, in order to get the money to make them, they need certain stars that people will stand in line to watch. They're not going to stand around for me. However, they're going to enjoy what I do because I'm going to fit into the puzzle."

A voracious reader, Bakalyan wrote poetry and was a Shakespeare aficionado. He died of cerebral hemorrhage in Elmira, N.Y. in Feb. 27, 2015—the same day that his co-star of "Luke and the Tenderfoot" (1955) Leonard Nimoy died.