"UPROOTED"--THE ONGOING QUEST FOR IDENTITY

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Canadian-Armenian documentary film director Hagop Goudsouzian has taken on a tough assignment: he has made a movie about the Armenians that is intended to appeal to Armenians and to non-Armenians. It's a tough assignment for a variety of reasons. Armenian history, culture, and psyche are familiar to most Armenians. And since independence most Armenians have become familiar with life in their homeland. How does one say something fresh to Armenians about their nation and condition? The challenge to appeal to non-Armenians is different: how much should the film maker assume about the familiarity of non-Armenians with Armenia and Armenians? As well, how to pique their interest in the tiny and ancient country hidden in the mountains of south Caucasus?

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Of course being a pro helps veteran Goudsouzian overcome the challenge with aplomb. A film director and producer of some 250 movies and TV programs, ten Armenian films and three short movies, Goudsouzian interviews in "Uprooted" a wide cross-section of Armenians in Armenia to elicit their feelings and perceptions about the challenge of being Armenian, what it means to be Armenian, the importance of culture for the survival of the nation, Armenian history, Armenian future…

"Uprooted" is the third in the Armenian Trilogy. The first was "Armenian Exile" and the second ("My Son Shall Be Armenian") is "probably most aired Armenian film anuywhere," said Goudsouzian.

In the ongoing quest for the Armenian identity, the director interviews painters, dairy farmers, musicians, academics, young people and seniors, activists and pensioners. Thankfully, he skips usual suspect clergy, politicians and organization leaders.

In passionate yet well-reasoned takes, the interviewees talk about the bad hand history has lent the Armenian nation, how Armenian identity has evolved over the centuries, how Armenians have survived despite almost constant threats, and the crucial role, especially music, has played in the

preservation of the country and the nation.

In a series of frank and often heart-rending conversations, which sometimes sound like overhearing a patient open up to a psychiatrist, people express their surprise that their nation has survived despite 4,000 years of mostly adverse history and even genocide. Several of the "patients" admit that being Armenian can be a burden which sometimes forces them to walk away from their heritage.

In more than ten of frank interviews in various indoor and outdoor settings Armenians pour out their thoughts and feelings about existential issues. They also delve into the subject of what makes an Armenian. Is the deciding attribute race, religion, speaking the language, living in Armenia…? The answers two of the interviewees offer are emphatic. One person (a civil engineer and musician) says if someone says he is Armenian then he is. An academic says a person who participates in Armenian affairs and feels responsible for other Armenians should be considered Armenian.

An academic takes a thoughtful look at a national psyche that burdens itself too much with the past and about achieving imperial glories which it enjoyed only once (King Dikran II) and only for a spell. She deplores and chastises the tradition among Armenians and other nations whereby political greatness—rather than other endeavours such as culture—is considered the paramount measure of success.

Perhaps siding with the above observation, the director has punctuated his documentary with a wealth of live music. No less than three choruses make appearances in the documentary, singing folkloric songs, church hymns, and revolutionary songs. An archaeologist, one of the first people who is interviewed, says: "If you look at the chances history dealt us, we should not exist…" and later in the documentary says Armenian songs are the bridge between the past and the future. Illustrating the importance of music to the Armenian nation one interlocutor says that a number of Armenian songs and hymns are of pagan origin but were transformed into Christian songs by St. Gregory the Illuminator and Catholicos St. Sahag.

To his credit and to the credit of the people interviewed there's little rah-rah jingo in the interviews. Despite the blockade by Turkey and Azerbaijan, despite the difficult economic conditions, and despite the corrupt and oppressive government, the interviewees are objective, cool-headed and above the fray.

If there is a shortcoming in "Uprooted"—The Ongoing Quest for Identity" it's that all the interviews, save one, are with Armenians who reside in Armenia. Thus, the Diaspora input is sorely missed: after all, far more Armenians live away from their homeland rather than in the shadow of Ararat. However, the shortcoming is understandable. To have travelled from Sydney to Jerusalem, from Vancouver to Beirut and many points in between is probably beyond the financial muscle of Goudsouzian who self-finances these essential documentaries.

"Uprooted" was aired in March on CMHT (Albany-Troy, NY) and will air on KCET, Los Angeles on

April 24 at 7 p.m. and various PBS stations in April and May. Visit Films by Hagop Goudsouzian for details.