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Author(s): Edward Hagopian.

Source: *Pacific Journal* 9 (2014): 33-40.

Publisher: Fresno Pacific University.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/548>

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# The Story Behind Merry-Go-Round the World

**EDWARD HAGOPIAN**

It seems like yesterday when I think back to Paris, in the merry month of May, 1960. William Saroyan came to our apartment for Sunday brunch. I don't remember what my wife, Jan, had prepared, but it was a mélange of French, American, and Armenian food. Our daughter, Raffi, who was four at the time, helped set the table and assisted carrying croissants to our famous guest. We spent leisure time eating and regaling Bill in conversation. He was fascinated with Raffi, who spoke four languages with ease, conversing in a mixture of English, French, Spanish, and Russian. Three of those were learned from different nannies.

It was early afternoon when Bill suggested that we join him as his guests at Darryl Zanuck's Sunday Open House. Who knows what could happen at such a gathering of intellectuals, artists, actors, writers, and movie people at the home of the head honcho of 20th Century Fox? Zanuck and his guests would be charmed by this vivacious child who spoke four languages. Zanuck might see her as potential child star, another Shirley Temple? Jan dismissed the idea. "It's time for Raffi's afternoon nap. You two go to Zanuck's Open House and enjoy yourselves. Raffi needs her beauty nap."

As we walked down the Avenue des Champs-Élysées toward the Left Bank, Bill was still disturbed that Jan thumbed down his suggestion. He shook his head. "Didn't she realize what could happen, who you might meet at such a gathering? Here was an opening. When opportunity knocks, you open the door, wide. You strike while the iron is white hot. Raffi could nap any time."

"I tried to defend my wife's concern as a parent. What would a four-year-old child do among all those boozing adults?"

"She would have been a sensation—the center of attention. I would have seen to that. She's a precocious child, a child protégé! In the spotlight she would have them eating out of her hand." Bill wondered: "Who knows what might have happened. Maybe with Zanuck's sharp eye for talent he might see

Raffi as his latest discovery. Might groom her into a child star—another Shirley Temple? Who knows! Maybe even an Armenian Judy Garland!"

Bill was aroused, bursting with energy, filled with enthusiasm, filled with optimism, fantasizing with wacky ideas. He was a wild man, a daring not-so-young man on a flying trapeze.

Recently, Zanuck had paid Bill sixty thousand dollars for the film rights for his play, *A Paris Comedy*. Bill needed another forty thousand to pay off an IRS debt to Uncle Sam. We arrived at 46 rue du Bac, entered the court yard of Zanuck's apartment to join the eclectic crowd where booze and blue tobacco smoke wafted through the air of the grand salon. This babble of voices brought to mind what Bill had said to me earlier: "Who knows who you might meet or what could happen during Zanuck's Sunday Open House and Happy Hour?"

Bill's hearty laugh and booming voice finally caught Zanuck's attention, and he broke free from his ring of yes-men. Zanuck was a rather short, slightly built, silver-haired gentleman with a neat mustache who smoked an ever-present Havana cigar.

"Glad you could make it Bill," he said, shaking Bill's hand. "Who's your friend?"

"This is my very good friend, Ed Hagopian. Like me, he's a great Armenian-American writer. Not as well-known, but a damned good writer."

Zanuck's eyes narrowed as he puffed on his cigar. "Two great Armenian writers? Well, come over here," he said, leading us to a quiet corner. "I've got a proposition for you. I need your help. I want to salvage a property, a canard, a real dog. It cost 20th Century Fox a cool half-million dollars, one-hundred-fifty thousand for the movie rights for the novel, another hundred grand for the shooting script, plus a quarter million bucks shooting exteriors when, as the Brits would say, the penny dropped. Do you understand my situation?" We understood, all right.

Since 1956, when film producer Mike Todd made *Around The World in 80 Days* on a budget of six million dollars and had raked in more than \$200 million in profit (in today's money that amounts to two billion dollars) in two

years, producers in Hollywood and around the world were beside themselves searching for another story similar to *80 Days* to make money using actors in cameo roles. Many producers got burned in the process, including Zanuck, who should have known better. He wanted two Armenian writers to “save his bacon” as the saying goes.

“Don’t read the book. Just use the title: De Luxe Tour. Can you writers do it?”

We said that we’d give it a shot.

Walking back to the apartment, Bill wondered if we could come up with something fresh, bold, and unique that would grab Darryl’s imagination. All we needed was a fabulous story. I agreed, but for the moment my mind had suddenly gone south, totally blank like an empty sheet of paper sitting in a typewriter.

“Did you hear what I said?” Bill shouted.

Yes, I had heard him. I snapped my fingers to wake up. “Yup, we’ll have to think about it.” Then I realized that we had nothing in writing. No contract. We would have to work on spec. Bill said we didn’t need anything writing. Darryl’s word was as good as gold.

Two days later, on a Tuesday, I had a germ of an idea which we turned into a gem, an idea that we thought film producers world-wide would give their eyeteeth for: A modern take on *80 Days* with a twist. In a nutshell this was our story: in the early 1960’s, the world was in turmoil. It was an era of youthful revolt. The spark was set off by college students in Mexico City. Students around the world were hell-bent against their elders, the system, corruption, consumerism, and corporate conformity. The world was awakening in both hemispheres and the energy circled through continents around the world.

A youthful band of Cubans lead by Fidel Castro and assisted by an Argentinian doctor, Che Guevara, had overthrown Batista, the dictator of Cuba. Fidel and Che had become international heroes for the poor and the underclass. American-backed military dictators ruled much of South and Central America. Many were trained by the U.S. Army at the School of the Americas at Fort

Benning, Georgia. They were trained in anticommunist counterinsurgency during the Cold War. Assassinations and use of torture were included in the curriculum.

This was our story: Our mythical country in Central America was called San Corridor, a peanut-sized country whose main export was the delectable S.C. peanut. Students, peasants, small shopkeepers, and tin tub-beating housewives demonstrating at Simon Bolivar Square had driven the generalissimo and his gang of incompetent military officers to the nearest frontier without firing a shot. Their hero, Juan de la Cruz, graduate student and leader of the protest, was declared President of the Republic by acclamation, along with his vivacious wife, Juanita, as vice president. They were bright, beautiful, and liberal Republicans.

We had lots of laughs kicking around crazy ideas and inventing absurd situations. We had struck gold. We had found the 80 Days that Zanuck had been chasing, just like our protagonists were being chased around the world on their luxurious yacht with their well-heeled guests. Unfortunately, Zanuck never got to read the manuscript or the two-page synopsis. But that's another story.

### **This is the other story.**

We were finished. By mid-June, we had written a 53-page film treatment of *Merry-Go-Round the World*. We copyrighted the work with the society of authors in Paris before offering it to Zanuck, along with a two-page synopsis. Bill dropped by and personally delivered the manuscript to Zanuck's office. He learned that Zanuck was on location in central France, somewhere between Nimes and Arles, with Juliette Greco. They were shooting *The Big Gamble* with Richard Fleisher, who was directing. Zanuck was determined to make the French starlet into a great international movie star under his tutelage, and with the aid of 20th Century Fox's high-powered publicity department. The head secretary at 20th Century Fox made two weekly trips by train to deliver urgent mail to Zanuck. She volunteered to take the manuscript down and give it to

him personally. Remember, this was before internet, e-mail, and fax machines. Also, there were no electrified bullet trains, just old-fashioned coal-burning steam locomotives. We waited for Zanuck's reply.

One morning in early July, Bill got a call. He immediately recognized the voice. The individual said that Zanuck was too involved with Juliette's performance before the camera (not too happy with the shooting script), and he didn't have time to read the two page synopsis. He had too much on his plate losing millions on the epic, *Cleopatra*, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. It was budgeted for two million dollars, but had ballooned into the most expensive film ever made at forty-four million.

Zanuck had had other people read our script. One of them read the complete manuscript and realized its potential as another blockbuster. He praised it. He was absolutely certain that Zanuck would buy the story. "Absolutely. Believe me, Bill."

There was a long pause on the line. Somehow Bill's suspicions were aroused. It smelled of sleaze. Finally he asked the question: "How can you be so absolutely sure?"

"Villiam, how can you doubt mien vord? I can absolutely guaranty it," was his reply in what we thought was an Eastern European accent. "Of course, dere could be a hitch, as you Americans say, but believe Bill, I vill do mien best fur you." Another long pause, then: "it might cost you a small, ja—ja, a very small piffle."

"How small a piffle is that piffle?" Bill asked.

"How much are you asking for the film rights?"

"In round numbers at least \$100,000."

"That's a pretty good number, Darryl vill go for that."

"And what's your piffle?"

"Not much . . . just ten percent."

Bill was furious, but managed to contain himself with mild protest: "But you contributed zilch to the story. Didn't dot an "i" or cross a "t." And you want ten percent commission?"

“But I got expenses, business expenses, if you know what I mean?”

Bill understood all right. The person on the phone felt that he needed to buy off certain people to cement the sale.

Bill didn’t commit himself to the scheme sometimes known as “payola” in the trade. He had other plans. He wouldn’t pay a thin dime of tribute. He would go around them, get the synopsis to Zanuck by other means. How long could it take him to read two pages?

He used all means imaginable, but none worked. A game of cat and mouse went on for some weeks with Bill gambling at the Aviation Club, appeasing his anger at the baccarat tables and losing thousands of dollars, more than the tribute conveyed earlier. He hadn’t given up, though. He would beat them.

Late one evening toward the end of July, Bill and I were at Fouquets, our favorite sidewalk cafe. I told him that we (my family and I) were leaving Paris for the whole month of August for La Ciotat, a small town about 30 miles east of Marseille. I had rented several rooms at a farm house outside of town. In the summer months, more than 55,000 Hyes (Armenians) from the Paris region congregated in this lovely coastal city. With real sandy beaches, families could relax, enjoy friends and relatives, the small children would run naked and play with pails of sand, and their parents could soak up the sun. Did he want to join us? La Ciotat was like Fresno: full of Armenians.

“No, no,” he said, trembling at the thought. He could stand a few of his countrymen, but being on display among hordes of Hyes was a bit too much. “No, I’ve got other plans. I’m going to the Soviet Union to spend some of my royalties that I can’t bring out. Who knows what I’ll do. Maybe sail down the Volga to the Black Sea. Maybe go to Armenia. Who knows? I should be back in early September; maybe we’ll have heard something from Zanuck.”

Suddenly we heard someone shout: “Bill Saroyan! My God, it’s great to see you. You’re in Paris?” He joined us at our table.

Who was this roly-poly human dynamo who found us sitting at a sidewalk cafe near midnight? This was Irving “Swifty” Lazar, one of Hollywood’s greatest and most dynamic super-agents for authors, movie stars, film directors, and

deal makers. He said he was flying out in the morning on a twin tail TWA prop flight (jets were still three years away). He was going all the way to California, a very long flight, and asked if we had anything for him to read, manuscripts, film scripts, anything he could sell.

Just by coincidence, Bill said we had a wonderful comic adventure story entitled *Merry-Go-Round the World*. While Bill explained how we wrote it for Zanuck, I went home and brought back a carbon copy of the film treatment, (Xerox and photocopy machines were dreams of the future). It was well past midnight when Lazar took the manuscript, shook our hands, smiled, and remarked that it sounded like a winner and he couldn't wait to read it. Bidding us good evening, he disappeared into the night. Bill and I looked at one another and smiled that fate had sent us this human whirlwind.

On July 30, 1960, our Peugeot 403 was packed. Suitcases on the roof rack and the trunk and back seat were stuffed with our belongings, books, and a portable radio. My wife Jan and our four-year-old daughter, Raffi, sat in the back seat, and we set off at five o'clock in the morning to beat the "great Parisian exodus," heading south on N7 route nationale for our month-long holiday on the Mediterranean. When we returned home in early September, Zanuck's office called asking where they could locate Mr. William Saroyan. I said that he was somewhere in the Soviet Union spending his tied up royalty rubles (royalties from Saroyan's books that were sold in the USSR could only be spent in the USSR).

"It's very urgent. He must be found. Irving Swift Lazar must talk to him about a film property Mr. Saroyan gave him last month. He says he has a sensationaly big deal for him. Can you find Mr. Saroyan?"

I said I would go to the Soviet Embassy for help. This I did, only to be rebuffed at the entrance by the sinister-looking security guards that were stereotypical KGB agents. I tried to explain, but all I got in return was a stern "Nyet! Nyet!" I tried two more times with the same result. I could not get into the embassy to ask a simple question: Where is William Saroyan?

An American friend suggested that I listen to the English broadcast from Radio Moscow on the short wave band which all European radios had at the time. Like the Voice of America or the BBC World News, Radio Moscow, as well as other countries, all blazed the ether with propaganda praising their great systems. Around midnight, I managed to find the Radio Moscow wave band. The announcers all spoke perfect American English and toward the end of the broadcast, I was suddenly awakened by a sweet female voice announcing the visit of the famous Armenian-American writer, Mr. William Saroyan, who was visiting the city of Odessa on the Black Sea. Was I dreaming? Was it real? I could hardly believe my ears. Why didn't I think of Intourist? Instead of butting my head at the Russian Embassy, I could have gone to the Intourist Offices in the heart of Paris.

The next morning, I went to their office and asked how I could get in touch with William Saroyan in Odessa. The young lady behind the counter said that it was quite simple. "Go to the French post office and send a telegram to Mr. William Saroyan, c/o Intourist and you will get a reply within twelve hours." Really, was it that simple? I rushed to the nearest post office and dashed off the following: "Bill this is extremely urgent. Call Swifty Lazar immediately. He wants to talk to you about this big deal he has for *Merry-Go-Round the World*. Call him. Today." I paid for the telegram and went home to wait for his reply. I got it in less than twelve hours, a little over seven. I tipped the messenger and ripped open the envelope, took out the printed message not expecting the shocking message I was about to read. Just two simple words: "How big?" Was that all?! How big?! Did Bill call Lazar? He didn't say. Did he send him a telegram with the same two words? He didn't say.

A month later when Saroyan finally returned to the City of Light, the news I heard turned Paris into the City of Night. Darryl Zanuck had never read the synopsis. Instead of accepting the widespread custom of paying "payola" to get ninety percent of something, we got one-hundred percent of nothing. Why Bill never contacted Irving Lazar about the "big deal" was never explained. He later waved it aside with a simple "Forget about it."