

ely
film
society

nov
2016

the
notes

**FORTHCOMING FILMS AT KINGS
LYNN COMMUNITY CINEMA CLUB**

Thursday 8th December

— THE SMALLEST SHOW ON EARTH

2017

Thursday 12th January — WIENER-DOG tbc

Tuesday 17th January — LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

Sunday 29th January 3pm — ROMAN HOLIDAY

Thursday 9th February — MAGGIE'S PLAN

Thursday 9th March — JULIETA tbc

Thursday 13th April

— HELL OR HIGH WATER tbc

Thursday 27th April — ADULT LIFE SKILLS tbc

All details at <http://www.klccc.uk/films>

Ararat

Atom Egoyan, Canada 2002

Script by Atom Egoyan

Simon Abkarian Arshile Gorky
Charles Aznavour ... Edward Saroyan
Christopher Plummer David
Arsinée Khanjian Ani
Setta Keshishian ...

Dinner Guest / Wailing Mother

David Alpay Raffi
Marie-Josée Croze Celia
Elias Koteas Ali / Jevdet Bay
Brent Carver Philip
Max Morrow Tony
Christie MacFadyen Janet
Dawn Roach Customs Officer
Garen Boyajian Young Gorky
Lousnak Abdalian ... Gorky's Mother
Raoul Bhaneja ... Photographer, Levon
Haig Sarkissian Sevan
Eric Bogosian Rouben
Bruce Greenwood ...

Clarence Ussher / Martin

Atom Egoyan's films are usually quiet chamber pieces, set in Canada (his adopted country, where he moved from Egypt aged two) but not redolent of any particular place. Their tension comes from the bland vast liberalism of modern Canada surrounding small tense narratives of exiles and cultural refuseniks trying to make

sense of expectations and past losses. Egoyan's parents were of Armenian cultural extraction, many of his actors (including his wife and longtime muse/collaborator Arsinée Khanjian) are from the Armenian diaspora, and *Ararat* is nothing if not about the train of events that led them to be where and who they now are.

Western countries have an obsessive narrative of their own about what happened in the First World War, and

Anglophone countries in particular are attuned to certain versions. For Britain, Canada and India it is the trench slaughter of the Western Front; for Australia and New Zealand it is the mess that was the Gallipoli campaign; the USA has parlayed its own late involvement in its own way, with F Scott Fitzgerald writing in *The Great Gatsby* of "the world standing to moral attention for ever" for its events.

But in 1915 a new word was coined



to describe what became a twentieth century phenomenon of mass warfare: *genocide*. Ottoman Turkey, which sided with Germany against the Triple Alliance, used the threat of Russian forces on its northern border to forcibly deport its despised ethnic minority Armenian population from their ancient homelands on grounds of their being Christian and therefore unreliable to the Muslim interest, as well as for prejudicial reasons that echo the historic treatment of Jews. Up to a million people died cruelly in village clearances and an epic forced march escorted by Turkish troops. The figures are disputed, but in Turkey to this day, the event did not happen. To Armenian fury, it is undiscussed. Armenia spent many years as a constituent of the Soviet Union following the defeat of Turkey in 1917, and the Turkish republic formed by Ataturk in 1920 has an official history that repudiates unwanted versions: Turkish law makes it a libel to allege that genocide occurred, a position bolstered by worldwide diplomatic sensitivities about Turkey's geopolitical importance and (periodically) internal stability.

Ararat is a mocking title: Noah's ark landed on it in the great Biblical tale of redemption and reformation of mankind. The film's characters that try to make sense of their confusion are anything but content in God's love. The narratives are like the layers of an onion, each peeling off to reveal a more eye-watering level of despair at history and human nature.

In Toronto, film director Saroyan (Aznavour at his most affably inscrutable) is making a historical film called *Ararat*, ostensibly about an American medical mission in Van that tries to resist the Turkish encroachment. Egoyan wrongfoots us throughout about what this film is supposed to be saying: its American foreground suggests abasement to US money men but a different set of more troubling narratives emerges: perhaps only on a film-set within a film can such deceit look plausible. Across town Ani (Khanjian) an art historian, delivers earnest lectures about the exile painter Arshile Gorky while fighting her own battles of truth with her naïve son and manipulative step-daughter. Across town again,

David, a timeserving customs officer at the airport on his last day before retirement (Plummer, playing the quiet but deep older man that is a hallmark of Egoyan's other films such as *The Adjuster* [1991]) hits paydirt with a consignment of dodgy film cans that Ani's son Raffi brings in from Turkey. David's son Philip is a gallery attendant who watches over Gorky's most famous painting *Mother And Son*, and also the lover of Ali (Elias Koteas, best known as the psychotic Vaughan in David Cronenberg's *Crash* [1996]), an actor on Saroyan's film who has his own agenda in life and on the film set.

Ararat is all about appearances varying depending on your standpoint. Ani is anguished in her determination to sacralise Armenian suffering: "In this painting, Gorky had saved his mother from oblivion, snatching her from a pile of corpses to place her on a pedestal of life". (Gorky committed suicide in the US in 1948, having survived the eviction from his village aged 11). Yet the stinging core of the onion is revealed when Ali, cast as the brutal Turkish commander Jevdet Bey in Saroyan's film (someone has to provide villainy), leans in to Raffi in a quiet hallway and grates: "I was born here. So were you. This is a new country. So just drop the fucking history. No-one's going to wreck your home. No-one's going to destroy your family".

Saroyan sees his film premiered, inscrutable to the end as others resolve their battles. Egoyan's film had its own coda. The Italian release of *Ararat* was intended to for 24 April 2003. However, its showing was unexpectedly banned by Italian authorities a day before the planned release, with the authorities explaining that the film's distributor had failed to submit in time the application to obtain the required censorship certificate. The film's distributor BIM Dizibuzione stated that they had never encountered such a problem before. There was media speculation that the film had actually been banned at the request of Turkey. Even if the present regional situation were not an eerie rerun of events of a century ago, it is a solid bet that *Ararat* will not be shown in Turkey any time soon, no matter what layers of ornate fiction are adduced in its favour.

ATOM EGOYAN

Born Atom Yeghoyan,
July 19 1960, Cairo, Egypt



“ [...] People have odd journeys through movies. And that's what makes it fascinating, that we're in this weird dream state as we watch. There are differences in the ways people react: some are completely drawn into the melodrama of these families, and others find it too "thick." ”

That complexity of effect is repeated in all your films, and responses to them take many forms: emotional, formal, political, spiritual, intellectual, combinations of all of the above.

Yeah, and I think with this film, there's an expectation that the film is going to finally tell the truth of what happened. And actually, that's not what it's about. It's about what the cumulative effect of what happened is, today. So, I think there is a viewer who during the first half hour, without even seeing any historical footage, will feel a little lost.

Maybe you need to make more explicit transitions, dissolves to indicate "flashbacks."

And that would be so painful, right? I think very often, people think they want things clearer and more streamlined, but they don't, really. When people say they want to see more of the film within the film, they probably don't really. If you saw more of that movie, you'd find it sort of unwatchable. ”

Cynthia Fuchs interviewing
Atom Egoyan on popmatters.com

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
BENDA BILILI (Renaud Barret/Florent de la Tullaye, Republic of Congo 2010)
Wednesday 21 December
(note changed weekday)

**MONDAY SHOWINGS WILL RESUME
WITH THE JANUARY FILM**

www.elyfilmsociety.com

www.meetup.com/ely-film/

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