

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director

Heather Kitchen, Managing Director

PRESENTS

# WORDS <sup>on</sup> PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

THE STEPPENWOLF THEATRE COMPANY  
PRODUCTION OF

## *The Time of Your Life*

BY WILLIAM SAROYAN  
DIRECTED BY TINA LANDAU  
GEARY THEATER  
MARCH 25–APRIL 25, 2004

PRESENTED BY A.C.T. IN ASSOCIATION WITH  
SEATTLE REPERTORY THEATRE  
PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITH  
FOX THEATRICALS AND MICHAEL LEAVITT

*WORDS ON PLAYS* PREPARED BY

**ELIZABETH BRODERSEN**  
PUBLICATIONS EDITOR

**JESSICA WERNER**  
ASSOCIATE PUBLICATIONS EDITOR

**PAUL WALSH**  
RESIDENT DRAMATURG

**CAROLYN JOY LENSKE**  
LITERARY AND PUBLICATIONS INTERN



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Characters, Cast, and Synopsis of *The Time of Your Life*
8. Preface to *The Time of Your Life*  
*by William Saroyan*
- II. A Valentine to San Francisco  
*by Misha Berson*
14. Be Here Now  
*by Tina Landau*
16. An Interview with Director Tina Landau  
*by Heidi Coleman*
19. William Saroyan (1908–81): The Time of His Life
23. Saroyan, 72, Loses Battle with Cancer  
*Obituary by Peter H. King*
27. William Saroyan's San Francisco Timeline
29. Rulebook for Saroyanesques  
*by Brooks Atkinson*
30. Writer to Writer: Selections from Saroyan's Letters
34. A Grand Liar with Loving Intentions  
*by Andy Sarouhan*
37. A Quarter for His Thoughts: Saroyan Memorabilia  
*by Julie Lew*
39. A *Time of Your Life* Timeline
42. The Great Mural Art of the 1930s: An Inspiration for Tina Landau's Production of *The Time of Your Life*

43. A New Kind of Art for a New Kind of Audience  
by Paul Walsh
47. Bloody Thursday: The Longshoremen's and General Strike of 1934  
*by Royce Brier*
50. Questions to Consider
51. For Further Information . . .

# CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF *THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE*

*The Time of Your Life* opened at the Booth Theater in New York on October 25, 1939.

---

## CHARACTERS AND CAST

Joe, <i>a young loafer with money and a good heart</i>	Jeff Perry
Tom, <i>his admirer, disciple, errand boy, stooge, and friend</i>	Patrick New
Kitty Duval, <i>a young woman with memories</i>	Mariann Mayberry
Nick, <i>the owner of Nick's Pacific Street Saloon, Restaurant, and Entertainment Palace</i>	Yasen Peyankov
The Armenian, <i>an Eastern philosopher and harmonica player</i>	Robert Ernst
Kit Carson, <i>an old Indian fighter</i>	Howard Witt
McCarthy, <i>an intelligent and well-read longshoreman</i>	Andy Murray
Krupp, <i>his boyhood friend, a waterfront cop who hates his job but doesn't know what else to do instead</i>	Guy Van Swearingen
Harry, <i>a natural-born hooper who wants to make people laugh, but can't</i>	Guy Adkins
Wesley, <i>a boy who plays a mean and melancholy boogie-woogie piano</i>	Don Shell
Dudley, <i>a young man in love</i>	Darragh Kennan
Elsie, <i>a nurse, the girl he loves</i>	Kyra Himmelbaum
Lorene, <i>an unattractive woman</i>	Cathleen Riddley
Mary L., <i>an unhappy woman of quality and great beauty</i>	Joan Harris-Gelb
Willie, <i>a marble game (pinball) fanatic</i>	Ramiz Monsef
Blick, <i>a heel</i>	Lawrence MacGowan
Ma, <i>Nick's mother; A Society Lady</i>	Margaret Schenck
A Society Gentleman	Tom Blair
The Drunk	Rod Gnapp
The Newsboy	Darren Barrerre/Gabriel Kenney

**DESCRIPTIONS OF CHARACTERS IN *THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE***

*William Saroyan included detailed, poetic descriptions of several of his characters in the stage directions for The Time of Your Life. These descriptions, excerpted below, reflect Saroyan's rare and uncanny insight into the many facets of human nature.*

**JOE** is "always calm, always quiet, always thinking, always eager, always bored, always superior. His expensive clothes are casually and youthfully worn and give him an almost boyish appearance."

**TOM** is "a great big man of about 30 or so who appears to be much younger because of the childlike expression of his face: handsome, dumb, innocent, troubled, and a little bewildered by everything. He is obviously adult in years, but it seems as if by all rights he should still be a boy. He is defensive as clumsy, self-conscious, overgrown boys are."

**KITTY DUVAL** is "angry with herself, full of hate for the poor world, and full of pity and contempt for its tragic, unbelievable, confounded people. She is a small powerful girl, with that kind of delicate and rugged beauty which no circumstance of evil or ugly reality can destroy. This beauty is that element of the immortal which is in the seed of good and common people, and which is kept alive in some of the female of our kind, no matter how accidentally or pointlessly they may have entered the world. Kitty Duval is somebody. There is an angry purity, and a fierce pride, in her. In her stance and way of walking, there is grace and arrogance. Joe recognizes her as a great person immediately."

**WILLIE** faces the pinball machine: "The marbles fall, roll, and take their place. He pushes the lever, placing one marble in position. Takes a very deep breath, walks in a small circle, excited at the beginning of great drama. Stands straight and pious before the contest. Himself vs. the machine. Willie vs. Destiny. His skill and daring vs. the cunning and trickery of the novelty industry of America, and the whole challenging world. He is the last of the American pioneers, with nothing more to fight but the machine, with no other reward than the lights going on and off, and six nickels for one. Before him is the last champion, the machine. He is the last challenger, the young man with nothing to do in the world."

**DUDLEY R. BOSTWICK** is "a young man of about 24 or 25, ordinary and yet extraordinary. He is smallish, as the saying is, neatly dressed in bargain clothes, overworked and irritated by the routine and dullness and monotony of his life, apparently nobody and nothing, but in reality a great personality. The swindled young man. Educated, but without the least real

understanding. A brave, dumb, salmon-spirit struggling for life in weary, stupefied flesh, dueling ferociously with a banal mind which has been only irritated by what it has been taught. He is a great personality because, against all these handicaps, what he wants is simple and basic: a woman. This urgent and violent need, common yet miraculous enough in itself, considering the unhappy environment of the animal, is the force which elevates him from nothingness to greatness. A ridiculous greatness, but in the nature of things beautiful to behold. All that he has been taught, and everything he believes, is phony, and yet he himself is real, almost super-real, because of this indestructible force in himself. His face is ridiculous. His personal rhythm is tense and jittery. His speech is shrill and violent. His gestures are wild. His ego is disjointed and epileptic. And yet deeply he possesses the same wholeness of spirit, and directness of energy, that is in all species of animals. There is little innate or cultivated spirit in him, but there is no absence of innocent animal force. He is a young man who has been taught that he has a chance, as a person, and believes it. As a matter of fact, he hasn't a chance in the world, and should have been told by somebody, or should not have had his natural and valuable ignorance spoiled by education, ruining an otherwise perfectly good and charming member of the human race."

**HARRY** is "out of place everywhere, embarrassed and encumbered by the contemporary costume, sick at heart, but determined to fit in somewhere. His arrival constitutes a dance. His clothes don't fit. . . . He is a dumb young fellow, but he has ideas. A philosophy, in fact. His philosophy is simple and beautiful. The world is sorrowful. The world needs laughter. Harry is funny. The world needs Harry. Harry will make the world laugh. He has probably had a year or two of high school. He has also listened to the boys at the pool room."

**BLICK** is "the sort of human being you dislike at sight. He is no different from anybody else physically. His face is an ordinary face. There is nothing obviously wrong with him, and yet you know that it is impossible, even by the most generous expansion of understanding, to accept him as a human being. He is the strong man without strength—strong only among the weak—the weakling who uses force on the weaker."

**MCCARTHY** is "a casual man, easy-going in movement, sharp in perception, swift in appreciation of charm or innocence or comedy, and gentle in spirit. His speech is clear and full of warmth. . . . He enjoys the world, in spite of the mess it is, and he is fond of people, in spite of the mess they are."

**KRUPP** "is not quite as tall or broad-shouldered as McCarthy. He is physically encumbered by his uniform, club, pistol, belt, and cap. And he is plainly not at home in the role of police-

man. His movement is stiff and unintentionally pompous. He is a naive man, essentially good. His understanding is less than McCarthy's, but he is honest and he doesn't try to bluff."

### THE PLACE

The play takes place in Nick's Pacific Street Saloon, Restaurant, and Entertainment Palace at the foot of the Embarcadero in San Francisco. Nick's is an American place: a San Francisco waterfront honky-tonk. Also, a suggestion of room 21 at the New York Hotel, upstairs, around the corner.

The atmosphere is now one of warm, natural American ease; every man is innocent and good; each doing what he believes he should do, or what he must do. There is deep American naiveté and faith in the behavior of each person. No one is competing with anyone else. Every man is living and letting live. Each man is following his destiny as he feels it should be followed. . . . There is an unmistakable smiling and humor in the scene.

—stage directions for *The Time of Your Life*

### THE TIME

Afternoon and night of a day in October 1939.

### SYNOPSIS

**A**CT I. It is about 11:30 in the morning, and a group of regular patrons is sitting around Nick's. Nick, the owner, is behind the bar. A newsboy comes in, and Joe buys all his papers. Joe and the Armenian look at the headlines and react with disgust.

Willie, a young man who is addicted to playing the pinball machine in the bar, enters and gets a beer from Nick. Willie wants to resist playing the game just this once but finally gives in. Joe begins angrily calling out for Tom, who is not in the bar.

Tom enters the bar in a rush, and he and Joe begin an exchange indicating that, at one time in the past, Joe saved Tom's life by feeding him when he was starving and very ill. Because of this, Tom is forever indebted to Joe and runs errands for him—however strange or nonsensical. Joe gives Tom money and asks him to buy a couple of dollars' worth of toys.

Kitty Duval walks in and, after expressing some suspicion, accepts Joe's offer of a glass of champagne. Tom is enchanted by her, but Joe sends him on his errand. Kitty claims to have once been a famous actress in a burlesque show, but Nick does not believe her, knowing that she now works as a prostitute. Joe is easier on her.

Dudley R. Bostwick enters the bar and frantically dials the phone, looking for Elsie Mandelspiegel, his girlfriend. Moments later, Harry comes into the bar looking for a job as a comedian, and Wesley, a desperately hungry young black man, enters the bar looking for any kind of work. Joe asks Kitty about her dreams. She reveals that her real name is Katerina Koranovsky, that she is originally from Poland, and that all she really wants is a family and a nice home.

Wesley begins playing the piano. Harry starts to dance, but Nick suggests that he find a job in sales. People in the bar realize that Wesley is a wonderful piano player. Kitty begs Joe to dance with her, but he refuses, saying that he cannot dance. Kitty dances by herself.

Tom returns with the toys, sees Kitty dancing, and begs Joe for some spending money. Tom is obviously smitten with Kitty, and Joe encourages him. Tom expresses his love to Kitty, and she asks him if he has two dollars. Tom does not understand that she is a prostitute, but they leave the bar together.

The atmosphere at the bar is comfortable until Blick, a vice cop and a bully, walks in. He warns Nick that he knows that “street-walkers are working out of this bar” and threatens to close the place. Nick despises Blick and lets him know it; Blick leaves. Nick hires Wesley to play the piano and Harry to dance. Mary L. walks in.

**A**CT 2. An hour later, everyone is still at Nick’s. Joe and Mary L., somewhat drunk, are discussing such things as their names and Joe’s background—he once fell in love with a woman named Mary in Mexico City, and he enjoys drinking. Joe claims that he drinks because, “Out of the twenty-four hours at least twenty three and a half are . . . dull, dead, boring, empty, and murderous.” Mary seems captivated by him and what he is saying. They flirt with each other, and when Mary leaves the bar, Joe becomes depressed.

McCarthy and Krupp enter the bar. They are friends. They enter, having a conversation about the fact that Krupp, a policeman, might be forced to hit McCarthy, a longshoreman, during the imminent strike on the waterfront.

The phone rings, and it is Elsie calling for Dudley. She agrees to meet him at the bar. McCarthy has been watching Harry dance and is impressed, stating that his dance is a “satisfying demonstration of the present state of the American body and soul.” He calls Harry a genius. Harry performs a comedy sketch for McCarthy about current politics, which further impresses McCarthy. McCarthy and Krupp leave the bar.

Tom rushes into the bar, concerned because Kitty is crying in her hotel room and won’t stop. Joe sends Tom to bet on a horse so he can win enough money to marry Kitty. Joe also tells Tom to buy him a large map of Europe, a revolver, and cartridges. He gives Tom the toys he bought earlier and tells him to give them to Kitty to make her stop crying. Tom leaves.



A man who looks like “he might have been Kit Carson at one time” walks into the bar. He claims his name is Murphy, and he begins drinking beers and telling outlandish stories about his travels and adventures.

Tom returns with the revolver and the map and reports that giving Kitty the toys simply made her cry harder. Tom and Joe leave the bar to see Kitty.

**A**CT 3. Kitty is crying in her room at the New York Hotel. Tom and Joe knock and enter, Joe carrying a large toy carousel. Tom tells Kitty that Joe “got up from his chair at Nick’s just to get you a toy and come here.” Tom and Kitty look at each other, and it is apparent that they truly love each other. Voices in the hallway outside Kitty’s room indicate that a young sailor is looking for her to buy her services, but another woman tries to attract him to her bedroom. He insists on Kitty and belligerently enters her room, where he finds Joe and Tom. He is apologetic, assuming that Kitty is with customers, but Tom threatens him and he leaves. Joe says he will return with a car to take them to Half Moon Bay, where the three of them will have a nice meal and Tom and Kitty can dance.

**A**CT 4. A little later at Nick’s, the phone rings. Nick announces that it was a call warning him to keep the prostitutes out of the bar, because Blick will probably show up again that night looking to cause trouble.

Elsie enters the bar and finds Dudley, who is almost in a trance at seeing her. They discuss their relationship. She does not believe that love can exist in such a harsh world as this one, but Dudley argues that their love is possible. Eventually, she agrees; they leave the bar together. Krupp walks in and talks with Nick about how crazy the world is. He is worried about his friend McCarthy, who is organizing a strike.

**A**CT 5. It is late in the evening. Willie is still playing at the pinball machine, while Kit Carson watches, Nick tends the bar, Joe studies his map of Europe, and Tom dreams of Kitty. Tom asks Joe where he gets his money, wondering how Joe always has enough to send Tom on his shopping errands and always seems flush enough to help his friends. In response, Joe delivers a monologue about how corrupting and hurtful earning money can be. He indicates that he has earned money in the past but does not work, because, “There isn’t anything I can do that won’t make me feel embarrassed.”

Joe gives Tom another errand: he wants Tom to give the revolver to anyone on the street. He also asks Tom to get him chewing gum, jelly beans, magazines, and the longest panatela cigar he can find. He asks Tom to give a dollar to any old man he sees and to the Salvation Army band outside the bar, so they will sing a particular hymn.

Joe shows his revolver to Kit Carson, who teaches Joe how to load the gun. Meanwhile, Willie finally wins at the pinball game, which rewards him with a patriotic song and waving flags. He spouts his philosophy that if you try hard enough you will be victorious, and then leaves.

Tom returns with all the things Joe requested. He asks Joe why he paid for Kitty to move into a nice room at the St. Francis Hotel. Joe answers that Kitty is actually a good woman and that she and Tom deserve to be together. Tom is still concerned about earning enough money to marry Kitty, so Joe suggests that he become a truck driver. Joe calls up a trucking company and gets a job for Tom. Tom leaves to start his job.

Harry and Wesley return and report that there has been fighting at the waterfront between the police and striking longshoremen. Nick is worried about what is going on and asks Harry to tend bar while he walks over to the pier. Kitty arrives wearing new clothes, looking very beautiful. She talks with Joe about Tom and says that she has told Tom she will marry him. Joe gets up on his own and leaves to find a book for Kitty, remembering that she once expressed an interest in poetry.

Blick walks in looking for Nick and tells Wesley and Harry to stop playing the piano and dancing. When he sees Kitty, he assumes she is a prostitute and begins treating her like a criminal. Kit Carson tries to protect Kitty, but Blick takes him outside and beats him.

Blick forces Kitty up on the stage and demands that she remove her clothes and dance, as if she were a stripper. Joe walks in with the books and, amazed at the scene, grabs Kitty from the stage. Wesley stands up to Blick, but Blick begins beating him up. Tom walks in and is angry at what he sees. Joe does not want Tom to fight Blick, so he shoves some money into Tom's hands and tells him to take Kitty out to his truck; they leave for San Diego to get married.

Joe pulls out the revolver, points it at Blick, and pulls the trigger, but it does not fire. Nick sees this just as he re-enters his bar and grabs the gun from Joe. Nick shoves Blick out the door, telling Blick that he will murder him with his own hands if he ever comes into his bar again.

Nick runs out but comes back almost immediately with the news that Blick has been shot dead by an unknown assailant. He picks up the gun that Joe tried to use and says, "Joe, you wanted to kill that guy! I'm going to buy you a bottle of champagne." Joe gets up and begins to leave the bar. Kit Carson enters, and he and Joe look at each other "knowingly." Kit starts one of his stories that begins with how he shot a man named "Blick or Glick or something like that." Everyone at the bar except Joe gathers around Kit. Joe hands his gun to Kit and looks at him "with great admiration." Joe leaves, and everyone waves while the pinball machine plays patriotic songs and waves its flags.

## PREFACE TO *THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE*

BY WILLIAM SAROYAN

---

### STATISTICS

The first draft was written in six days, in New York, beginning Monday, May 8, 1939, and ending Saturday, May 13. The first title was *The Light Fantastic*. There were to have been six acts, one for each day of work. It turned out that the number of acts was five instead of six. Five or six, however, the idea was to write the play in six days. In the number of days of any worker's week. Writers are workers.

George Jean Nathan read the play, liked it, and wrote about it in *Newsweek*. Eddie Dowling bought the play.

The writing of the play was, in great part, the consequence of the encouragement of George Jean Nathan and John Mason Brown, who voted for *My Heart's in the Highlands*, my first play, as the play of the 1938–39 season; which, in turn, landed me as a guest at the Drama Critics' Circle dinner at The Algonquin; which, in another turn, enabled me to meet all the critics who are members of the circle, as well as Mr. Dowling, who sat across the table from me, and along about ten o'clock at night said, "Any play you write, I'll buy sight unseen. This is the kind of American talk I respect." I asked Mr. Dowling if he was on the level and he assured me that he was. I asked him why, and he told me he believed in my future as a playwright. I felt fine and pretty sure I would have a good play for him very soon, so I began to brag about myself to John Anderson and Tallulah Bankhead and any other critic or actress or playwright who happened to be nearby and unable to get away swiftly.

I didn't begin to write the play the next morning because at the time I was living a social life. I began not living a social life the next day, and by Monday, May 8th, I was ready to be a writer again. I began to write.

The idea was to find out why a writer can't write in New York. What's to stop him? The answer is, of course, nothing. A writer can write anywhere, under any circumstance or complication of circumstances, and nothing's to stop him. He can write well, and he can do it as swiftly as the work involved needs to be done swiftly. In the case of this play it needed to be done very swiftly. The weather was muggy. My room at The Great Northern Hotel had no view, little ventilation, and as soon as possible I wanted to go to Ireland for a long-delayed visit. I also needed money urgently and knew I couldn't earn any unless I had a play to offer Mr. Dowling.

The play was written on a rented Royal Portable Typewriter, which I later bought for \$30 from Miss Sophe Rabson, manager of Rabson's, which was across the street from the Great Northern on 56th Street, but is now in a new building, on 52nd Street, and where Miss Rabson graciously allowed me to listen to any phonograph record I cared to listen to, without any obligation; and where a young clerk named Bill was always ready to listen to me on the theme of human nature and so on; and where Miss Rabson's brothers, numbering, I believe, seven, were always pleased to let me watch their television sets and inquire two or three times a day about the cost of new and used Capeharts.

The cigarettes smoked were Chesterfields. The cigars were panatelas. I have forgotten the name of the brand, but they were ten cents straight. The food was Automat food, mainly chicken pie, and occasionally a late supper at the Golden Horn, after which I would sleep an hour or so. The liquor was Scotch.

The play was written in a night and day. The work did me good. The social life makes me feel ridiculous after a while. Six days of hard work is all I need to restore me to the pride and dignity of the worker, however.

This work was the first substantial work I had ever done in New York. It was also the longest work I had ever done, anywhere. I felt very good about it. Even if it was a bad play (and I had no reason to believe that it was not a good play), there was nothing lost, nothing to lose, and if the worst came to the worst I was simply broke and would have to borrow money somewhere and go back to San Francisco, instead of visiting Dublin.

Nathan, as I've said, liked the play and Dowling drew up a contract with me and advanced me an enormous sum of money. The title by that time was *The Time of Your Life*. I studied the play every now and then and made certain changes in it. I considered other titles, inasmuch as I wasn't sure people wouldn't imagine the play wasn't some fluffy drawing-room comedy. Mr. Nathan's *Sunset Sonata* didn't seem quite right. Certain things were lifted out of the play. New things were put into it. I went to Dublin.

As I write these notes, the play has been revised four or five times, and is still likely to be revised. Even now, there are certain changes I would like to make in my first play, *My Heart's in the Highlands*. Everything is there of course, as everything is in a child of three, or a man of thirty, or a man of sixty, but there is always room for refinement.

#### THE WORLD OF A PLAY

. . . Unlike the poem, essay, story, or novel, a play is not fully created in itself, as a play. It is not an affair, finally, between one man and one man: the writer and the reader. It becomes fully created only through the deliberate and cultivated functioning of a considerable number of people rehearsed to behave harmoniously and on schedule, so that a

desired meaning and message will be conveyed to each individual beholding the play, a meaning which more or less should be the same to all the individuals in the audience.

*The Time of Your Life* is a play of our time. The people in the play are people you are likely to see any day in almost any part of America, certainly at least in certain kinds of American places. Most of the critics said they didn't understand my first play. After a while a few of them turned around and said they did, but on the whole the critics appeared not to like the play because they didn't know why they liked it. I predict that fewer critics this time will need to imagine that they cannot understand this play. I know a few critics won't like it at all, and that many critics will not like all of it.

I don't want this state of affairs to change. A writer needs criticism almost more than he needs an audience.



**I**n the time of your life, live—so that in that good time there shall be no ugliness or death for yourself or for any life your life touches. Seek goodness everywhere, and when it is found, bring it out of its hiding-place and let it be free and unashamed. Place in matter and in flesh the least of the values, for these are the things that hold death and must pass away. Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption. Encourage virtue in whatever heart it may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow by the shame and terror of the world. Ignore the obvious, for it is unworthy of the clear eye and the kindly heart. Be the inferior of no man, nor of any man be the superior. Remember that every man is a variation of yourself. No man's guilt is not yours, nor is any man's innocence a thing apart. Despise evil and ungodliness, but not men of ungodliness or evil. These, understand. Have no shame in being kindly and gentle, but if the time comes in the time of your life to kill, kill and have no regret. In the time of your life, live—so that in that wondrous time you shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world, but shall smile to the infinite delight and mystery of it.

## A VALENTINE TO SAN FRANCISCO

“In the Time of Your Life, *Live*.”

BY MISHA BERSON

---

**T**he scene: a big-city neighborhood tavern, where denizens drop by to share laughs, laments, and confidences over glasses of brew and shots of the hard stuff.

The time: any time, every time.

The place: countless American playhouses and television screens. And soon, A.C.T., where a quintessential American bar play, *The Time of Your Life*, runs at the Geary Theater March 25–April 25.

Staged by nationally praised director Tina Landau, *The Time of Your Life* is patterned on Landau’s hit 2002 Chicago version of Saroyan’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play, and its 24-member cast features actors from Chicago, Seattle, and San Francisco. Dramas and comedies set in saloons have long been American staples—from the ubiquitous 19th-century temperance melodrama *Ten Nights in a Barroom* to Eugene O’Neill’s harrowing *The Iceman Cometh*, to the long-running barfly TV sitcom, “Cheers.”

Maybe it’s the intrinsically democratic spectacle of a motley cross-section of American archetypes baring their souls in a public yet intimate spot that gives such tavern tales their persistent appeal.

Whatever the pull, *The Time of Your Life* has been pulsating along since its 1939 premiere. Yet modern stagings of Saroyan’s bittersweet panorama of wise guys and dreamers, swells and pariahs, cops and drifters hanging together at Nick’s Pacific Street Saloon can feel like a Great Depression-era relic—still fairly pungent, but musty with wear and stale sentiment. Landau was determined to breathe fresh vitality into the play.

“The first time I read the script, I could barely get through it,” says Landau, a Steppenwolf Theatre Company ensemble member who divides her time between New York and Chicago. “Then I re-read it a couple years later and it was like a totally different text.” What changed her opinion, Landau tells you, was in part an oncoming midlife crisis. “I turned 40, I had a big directing project with Disney fall through. And like many people in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, I was in a period of questioning, asking, ‘What really matters to me now?’”

On second reading, Landau also decided the bittersweet play “was not trying to be a well-made, plot-driven drama—it functions like a piece of music, and has to flow.”

She began to consider it “an amazing tapestry, a kind of postmodern collage. Saroyan once said it’s a circus, an essay, a vaudeville, an opera, a debate about money, a comedy, a

tragedy, a lecture—anything you want it to be. It was way out there, radical and all over the map for its time.”

Those involved in the Broadway debut of *The Time of Your Life* also weren't quite sure what to make of this sprawling piece with nearly 50 characters, plus incidental music and dance. Nick's was based on Saroyan's favorite San Francisco watering hole: a wharfside joint called Izzy's, where Chinese, blacks, and whites mingled with rare ease (and some friction) for the times, and the barkeep often fed hungry people gratis.

In Saroyan's fictional take on the place, the customers at Nick's are brined in merriment and desperation during a time of social turmoil. The one who never seems to leave the place is Joe (played at A.C.T., as in Chicago and Seattle, by Landau's fellow Steppenwolf ensemble member Jeff Perry), a wealthy, enigmatic fellow with a biting wit and an eager go-fer to carry out his fanciful schemes.

Others passing through, as a dockworkers' demonstration heats up outside, include the sweet, sad prostitute Kitty (played by Mariann Mayberry); a starving piano player (Don Shell); a party of snobs out slumming (San Francisco's Tom Blair and Margaret Schenck); and a naive tap dancer (a role originated by the young Gene Kelly and performed here by Guy Adkins).

Chaotic Boston and New Haven tryouts of *The Time of Your Life* flopped. The Broadway debut in 1939, however, generated the greatest theatrical triumph of Saroyan's life. The *New York Times* deemed the play “a prose poem in ragtime.” *Time* magazine called it “a paean to the essential goodness in life and people, a chant of love for the scorned and rejected.” A major hit, it later had several Broadway revivals and became a regional theater standby.

In order to “wake up the space, the play, the audience,” Landau has mounted A.C.T.'s version on an open-sided barroom set designed by G. W. Mercier. It incorporates a '30s-style mural, which will be painted during each show and completed by the run's end.

The show's sound score includes “The Missouri Waltz” and other popular songs from the 1930s. And some spoken monologues will be “cross-cut and overlapping”—shaving a good half-hour off the usual three hours-plus running time of Saroyan's populous script.

Landau's Steppenwolf staging was acclaimed by Chicago critics as “stunning,” “poignant,” and “a formidable ensemble achievement,” which radiated an unexpected time-liness in depicting a divided society on the brink of war. The play's recently completed run at Seattle Repertory Theatre was celebrated as a “vivid vision of the American Dream”—exalting Saroyan's humanistic portrayal of a world of both lucky breaks and hard knocks.

Landau has added her own postmodern accents to her interpretation, but she insists she's loyal to Saroyan's intent.

“The famous quote from the script is, ‘In the time of your life, live.’ I think Saroyan would appreciate the things I’ve done, even the irreverent ones. My whole goal is to make this an event in the theater that is true and alive and powerful every night.”

Landau also appreciates the inbred cultural associations that come along with a play set in a saloon—especially this one.

“You know, I love that idea of a ‘third place,’ that need we have for homes of an alternative type,” she muses. “Nick’s serves as a place for people to meet, to debate, to rest, to make a connection that’s meaningful.” So, one might add, can the theater.

---

Misha Berson is theater critic for the *Seattle Times*. This article is reprinted with permission from the *Seattle Times* (© 2004 The Seattle Times Company).



## BE HERE NOW

BY TINA LANDAU

---

I had no idea when I decided to direct *The Time of Your Life* how much I would learn from William Saroyan—not just the playwright, but also the essayist and philosopher.

He was larger than life, maddening, passionate, uncensored, wise, a man of his time: his father, an Armenian immigrant, died when he was three, leaving William to make his way through an orphanage, selling newspapers on the street as a child, and the Great Depression. In the 1920s and early '30s, three artistic movements inspired the struggling Saroyan, and today resound in *The Time of Your Life*.

**VAUDEVILLE**—its eclecticism, use of music, notions of “turns.” Saroyan described each play of his as “a play, a dream, a poem, a travesty, a fable, a symphony, a parable, a comedy, a tragedy, a farce, a vaudeville, a song and dance, a statement on money, a report on life, an essay on art and religion, a theatrical entertainment, a circus, anything you like, whatever you please.”

**MURALS**—their width and panoramic frame, their depiction of multiple, simultaneous scenes. Muralists of the 1930s broadened their canvas to include previously neglected aspects of society: the life of the streets, the docks, the taverns—the life, not of a person or important people, but the life of “the people.” Like the muralists, Saroyan drew on a dizzying array of real-life characters, creating his art through the arrangement of disparate components.

**JAZZ**—its improvisatory nature, its collision and fusion of voices, its sheer energy and mess, its insistence on group play and spontaneity.

*The Time of Your Life* is a vaudeville, a mural, and a piece of jazz that our ensemble plays each night. I've asked them to jam, to riff, to be in the moment. Because what I'm learning most from Saroyan is not about form (although his experimentation is certainly inspiring and ahead of his time); it's about the values that are implied by the form. What is valued above all is inclusion, the embracing of all people and styles in a non-hierarchical vision.

As much beauty as Saroyan saw in people, so too did he see the ugliness in war. Living through both world wars, Saroyan wrestled with questions of conscience and involvement. In these questions I've found a startling personal relevance. Put very crudely: what do you do when the World Trade Center crashes to the ground? Do you search inside yourself for cause, do you retaliate, do you forgive?

With a heightened awareness that war lay just around the corner and that tragedy could strike at any minute (the death of his parent, the crash of the stock market, the genocide of the Armenian people), Saroyan developed a simple imperative: to live—fully, deeply, aware. To him there were only two choices: to be alive, or to be alive but dead. “In the time of your life, live.” I have meditated on this directive every day since I began this project. What does it mean? How do I do it? “Try to learn to breathe deeply,” Saroyan wrote, “really to taste food when you eat, and when you sleep really to sleep. . . . Try to be alive. You will be dead soon enough.”

If Saroyan were here with us right now, I’m sure he’d ask only one thing from us: to be present in the theater tonight. And then, when you go home, or out for a drink, be present there.

That’s one of the many lessons I’m learning from him. He’s helping reaffirm my belief in the potential of groups—collectives, communities, ensembles, a stage that broadens for 24, a tavern whose sign reads, “Everyone Welcome.” And he’s encouraged me to hold strong to values, to stand unashamed of optimism, to trust size and contradiction. Be messy. Include everything. Work with a wide eye and an open heart. Live fully in this moment, for it will never come again.

What a great challenge for me, and for our theater.

Thank you, William Saroyan, for the inspiration you are giving us in the year 2004.

# AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR TINA LANDAU

BY HEIDI COLEMAN, ORIGINAL PRODUCTION DRAMATURG

---

*It was the summer of 2002 in Chicago. Director Tina Landau and dramaturg Heidi Coleman met one evening to discuss *The Time of Your Life* at Jimmy's, a Hyde Park bar of some renown. They felt the interview should have stage directions—"Sitting in the back of the bar, beneath a wine and beer sign, Heidi lit Tina's cigarette before they began." And in true Saroyanesque fashion, they leapt from topic to topic, with only the passage of time to take them along their way.*

## SCENE ONE: THE DREAM

**HEIDI COLEMAN: WHAT INITIALLY DREW YOU TO *THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE*?**

TINA LANDAU: Martha Lavey suggested the play. She had previously considered it several times and returned to it after the events of September 11. I read it and immediately felt committed to directing it at Steppenwolf. It's a pure ensemble play in which a society of people live, work, and play together, and that's the kind of play Steppenwolf does best.

I also had a very unexpected response to reading the play a second time, which was that it reminded me of the writings of Chuck Mee [author of *Time to Burn* and *The Berlin Circle*]. I had always thought of *The Time of Your Life* as a period piece, somewhat nostalgic, really contained in the late '30s. Chuck Mee is one of the most forward-thinking playwrights I know, explosive in terms of the theatrical form, so I was thrilled to come upon a text that mirrored that structure—more musical and hallucinatory than a linear narrative play. The next thing I thought was, "Oh, and it's a musical." And that's just a personal, idiosyncratic response; I love to do pieces with music. There's a live piano player onstage who plays throughout, and there's a jukebox, and music will drift in and out of the piece. I am a huge fan of the music of the late '30s. Music that came out of the Depression, and before World War II . . .

**HC: WHEN IT BECOMES PROPAGANDA . . .**

TL: Right. Much of the music of the late '30s fluctuates between these two extremes: the nitty, gritty reality of street life—no job, no money, no shoes—and the world of *The Dream*. Joe's first line to Kitty in the play is, "What's the dream?" That line is very mysterious to me. And the more I think about the play and this music, I've realized *The Dream*, with a capital T and a capital D, is a big thing at that time. Saroyan's writing is like that, too. He's looking at a group of people who are the down-and-outers, the disenfranchised,

and at the same time, they're filled with these incredible longings for what is good and beautiful and true. That's what is remarkable in his writing, the mixture of the hardships of reality and the beauty of The Dream.

### **SCENE TWO: THE BAR**

**HC: IN THE SAME WAY THE DREAM IS CAPITALIZED, SO IS THE BAR, AS THIS UTOPIAN PLACE THAT, AS THE SETTING OF THIS PLAY, IS VERY IMPORTANT.**

**TL:** I just bought a book called *The Great, Good Place*, by Ray Oldenburg, which is about the function of bars, cafes, community centers. It has something to do with alcohol, but, more importantly, it has to do with *community*. These places provide an important context for people to be most truly *themselves* with others, particularly in cities. But Saroyan also writes about the impact of alcohol, about how certain kinds of "drunk" can be enlarging to the senses. That, in these states, one starts to risk and dare and perceive at greater levels.

I'd like to go on record that I'm very excited that we'll be using the actual bar from O'Rourke's [the Chicago bar that used to be across the street from the Steppenwolf theater] in the set of this production. O'Rourke's was like a utopian community center for many Steppenwolf actors over the years.

**HC: DREAMING IS AN INDIVIDUAL THING. BUT IN THE BAR, IT'S ALMOST AS IF YOU ENTER A COLLECTIVE DREAM SPACE, THAT YOU'RE ALL PARTICIPATING IN THE DREAM.**

**TL:** Yes, which is also what goes on in the theater, ideally.

### **SCENE THREE: ON THE EDGE**

**TL:** I started thinking about the setting of the play and asked myself, "Why San Francisco?" I mean, besides the fact that Saroyan lived and worked there. I think it's because San Francisco is a city on the edge . . .

**HC: QUITE LITERALLY, IT'S ON THE EDGE OF THE OCEAN AND THE EDGE OF A FAULT LINE. AND I THINK THAT IN 1939, OUR COUNTRY WAS IN A STATE LIKE IT IS NOW, THAT LIFE IS NOT A GIVEN AND SHOULDN'T BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED . . .**

**TL:** If you look at the landscape of San Francisco during the period, there are many parts of the city that were not completely rebuilt from the earthquake of 1906 . . .

**HC: AND THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE HAD JUST BEEN COMPLETED [IN 1937]. . .**

TL: And that's the crux of the matter. That this period was a period of balancing acts, somewhat between the brink of destruction and the brink of the modern age. The Great Depression, the New Deal, the country, the world, everyone was on this fault line. And so you've got San Francisco, which is a city that's all about hills and slopes and lack of balance to begin with . . .

HC: AND IT'S THE LAST FRONTIER. IT'S AS FAR AS YOU CAN GO.

#### SCENE FOUR: JOE'S IN LOVE

HC: SO YOU DO SEE THE CHARACTER OF JOE AS SAROYAN'S SURROGATE IN THE PLAY?

TL: As a chronicler . . .

HC: I SEE JOE AS SAROYAN'S BEST IMAGE OF HIMSELF. IT'S ACTUALLY LIKE JOE'S DREAMING SAROYAN AND SAROYAN'S DREAMING JOE.

TL: Yes, yes!

HC: BECAUSE SAROYAN DRINKS SCOTCH AND JOE WOULD DRINK CHAMPAGNE.

TL: That's right. And why is that?

HC: HE DOESN'T ACT; HE OBSERVES AND CHRONICLES AND HELPS. AND SCOTCH IS A DRINK YOU DRINK WHEN YOU'RE WORKING . . .

TL: And champagne . . .

HC: IS A LUXURY DRINK . . .

TL: That you drink when you're dreaming.

HC: CHAMPAGNE IS THE DRINK FOR LOVERS, RIGHT? IT'S THE DRINK YOU HAVE AT WEDDINGS, TO TOAST THE NEW COUPLE. YOU HAVE CHAMPAGNE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE DREAM OF THEIR FUTURE. I THINK THAT'S APPROPRIATE BECAUSE JOE HAS A LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE WORLD.

TL: I love that image . . . Joe's in love, and he's in love with the world. I will be stealing that.

---

Heidi Coleman was the dramaturg for the original Steppenwolf Theatre Company production of *The Time of Your Life*. This interview is reprinted from Steppenwolf's *Backstage* magazine (Vol. 1, 2002–03).

# WILLIAM SAROYAN (1908–81)

## The Time of His Life

---

The most solid advice is this, I think: Try to learn to breathe deeply, really to taste food when you eat, and when you sleep, really to sleep. Try as much as possible to be wholly alive with all your might, and when you laugh, laugh like hell, and when you get angry, get good and angry. Try to be alive. You will be dead soon enough.

—William Saroyan, in the preface to  
*The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*

Even though William Saroyan was a maverick—beholden to no one and contemptuous of those who disagreed with his highly personal vision of the world and the theater—he was the first writer to win simultaneously both the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize in playwriting for *The Time of Your Life* (in 1940). The story of how Saroyan became the darling of the New York theater scene—and his rapid fall from grace soon thereafter—is bound inextricably to the circumstances in which he grew up.

Saroyan was profoundly influenced by his Armenian heritage. Keenly aware of what it was like to be a “foreigner” in America, he grew up knowing the sting of ethnic intolerance and became a rebel with a cause. He took upon himself the mission of bringing love and hope to the outcasts and working people of the United States at a time when the country was emerging from the Great Depression. He championed the poor and the downtrodden, including other ethnic and racial minorities, yet he could not find peace within his own troubled life. He was never able to merge his personal philosophy of the need for love among all people with his own struggle for growth and development. An avowed humanist, he was not always a compassionate human being. His writing evinces this ongoing tug-of-war between inner strife and the drive to champion working-class men and women while infusing their stories with hope and mutual love and respect.

The world in which Saroyan lived was shadowed by doubt and fear of the future. He experienced World War I in his childhood, lived through the Great Depression during his young adulthood, and wrote his major works, including *The Time of Your Life*, on the eve of and during World War II. The country was restless, its citizens unsure of what each day would bring. Newspapers were saturated with images and accounts of death and poverty, both at home and abroad. Yet, in spite of the upheaval surrounding him, Saroyan wrote

humanely and powerfully, with endless enthusiasm. His writings, largely autobiographical, are a call for hope and honesty, a clarion call for kindness, brotherly love, and faith in a brighter tomorrow.

#### A DARING YOUNG MAN

The son of Armenian immigrants, William Saroyan was born in Fresno, California, on August 31, 1908. When he was two, the family moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. His father, a Presbyterian minister, teacher, and spare-time poet, died of peritonitis a few years after Saroyan's birth. For the next five years, Saroyan, with his younger brother and two older sisters, lived at an orphanage in Oakland, until their mother had saved enough money working as a maid in San Francisco to provide for them again. This wrenching of family ties affected Saroyan deeply. His son, Aram, later wrote, "I believe he put himself emotionally on ice. The lake went hard."

He grew up hearing the wild, boastful, romantic stories of Armenian heroes and heroines. According to Saroyan, the Armenians of Fresno were considered "unattractive foreigners," and his heritage taught him the importance of family as a locus of solace, warmth, and a sense of connectedness to other human beings.

In 1915, Saroyan's mother moved the family back to Fresno, where Saroyan attended public school, which he loathed, and became a prolific writer—even in elementary school, where one teacher chided him for writing a 500-word essay on what was wrong with the people of Fresno, when all she had asked for was 50 words on how he had spent his summer vacation. Saroyan was largely self-educated and decided at an early age, after dropping out of high school, to dedicate himself to a career as a writer. He later boasted that his real education came from his work as a newspaper boy selling papers on the streets of Fresno beginning at the age of seven. There he encountered the colorful characters who would later appear in his plays and fiction. "To be a writer is to be in the streets," said Saroyan.

In 1926 he moved to San Francisco, and two years later he published his first short story in *Overland Monthly*. In 1933, under the pseudonym "Sirak Goryan," he published "The Broken Wheel," which was reprinted in *Best Stories of 1934*. *Story* magazine published "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze" the next year, and Saroyan's career moved into high gear. His first book, *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and Other Stories*, was published in the fall of 1934. Although critics were confused by the lack of form and structure in Saroyan's writing, the book was a popular success; its author had found his way into the hearts of the American public.

## LOVE FOR THE THEATER

Saroyan had been interested in drama from the time he was a young child in Fresno, where his rabid attendance at vaudeville performances and movies is legendary. Vaudeville was Saroyan's favorite form of entertainment; he loved the song-and-dance style and the comedians. He also went to the circus every time it came to town

In 1919 he saw his Uncle Aram act in Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* at Fresno High School; several years later he read *A Doll's House* and *The Lady of the Sea* (and deemed Ibsen a dull playwright). Saroyan also saw *Othello* in Armenian. He went to San Francisco to see traveling Broadway productions, and in 1935 he journeyed to New York, where he saw *Ceiling Zero*. Saroyan—in a trademark boast—commented to Bennett Cerf, his host, that he could certainly write a better play in two days.

Intending to “revolutionize” the American theater, Saroyan finally decided to try his hand at writing plays in 1939, when influential director Harold Clurman—determined to introduce Saroyan to the New York theater audience—asked him to create a play for the Group Theatre. A year later Saroyan sent *My Heart's in the Highlands* to Clurman, who hailed it as fresh and experimental. Saroyan was triumphant, but, believing he had written a work of realism, he was unhappy with the production's treatment of the play as a delicately stylized fable. This was the beginning of a never-ending battle between Saroyan and nearly everyone in the theater who tried to direct, act in, produce, or review his plays. He was tenaciously possessive about his dramatic writing, even though he had no formal theater training.

At the same time that *My Heart's in the Highlands* was produced on Broadway, Saroyan wrote his second full-length—and most celebrated—play, *The Time of Your Life*, set in Izzy's, a San Francisco waterfront dive (across from the firehouse at First and Pacific) frequented by Saroyan and known for its owner's open-handed distribution of steaks and home brew to down-and-out patrons. Saroyan knocked out the script in six days, one for each day of the average worker's week. (“Writers are workers,” asserted Saroyan in his preface to the play.) After completing the script he took it to Clurman, who rejected it. Clurman later admitted he had made a serious error, but by the time he tried to retrieve the rights, Saroyan had sold them to actor/producer/director Eddie Dowling. The play was produced in October 1939 under the auspices of the Theatre Guild, with Dowling playing the role of the enigmatic Joe. The show ran just 22 weeks on Broadway and closed without earning back its production costs. Yet the play was strong enough to win two of the theater's most prestigious awards. In a surprising move, Saroyan declined the Pulitzer and the accompanying \$1,000 payment, saying, “I do not believe in prizes or awards in the realm of art . . . which, I believe, vitiates and embarrasses art at its source.”



The touring production of *The Time of Your Life* premiered at the Curran Theatre on Geary Street, next door to the Geary Theater. Thunderous ovations greeted the cast and crew, but Saroyan was a no-show at the curtain call.

Of his play, Saroyan said: “There’s simplicity, innocence, goodness, and greatness in the American people, particularly the lowest of them. Their worst trouble is defense against the world. If they are left alone and have a chance, they’re good people. There’s good in all people.”

Some critics tried to tag Saroyan as a Marxist because of his concern for the common man and his liberal orientation. But he was not interested in social revolution; he wanted individual enlightenment. He believed that the playwright had to find concrete symbols with which to communicate his feelings and ideas; he saw the theater as a microcosm that reflects the essential reality of the macrocosmic world—a world he believed people could not see clearly because they were too close to it.

Saroyan firmly believed that the theater should be uplifting. His plays evoke laughter, but with either a hard edge or below-the-surface melancholy: the threat of starvation, death, sickness, loss of livelihood, and loneliness lurk just beneath the surface. As the pioneering dramaturg John Gassner said, “Compassion and perception, and laughter and pity, are fused in Saroyan’s plays into one of the richest experiences provided by the American theater.” Saroyan did not attempt to overlook the wretched reality of the Depression years, but he helped audiences gain the courage to laugh and enjoy life again.

#### LATER LIFE

In late 1941 Saroyan agreed to work in Hollywood for Louis B. Mayer. The arrangement resulted in the Academy Award-winning MGM film *The Human Comedy* (1943, starring Mickey Rooney), as well as the popular novelized version of the original screenplay published by Harcourt Brace simultaneously with the movie’s opening. The novel and movie were both overwhelming successes. Yet Saroyan found his entire Hollywood escapade so distasteful that, in 1943, he wrote his bitterest play, *Get Away, Old Man*, the central character of which is a movie mogul whose vicious egotism destroys the happiness of many people.

Drafted into the army in 1942, Saroyan was stationed in New York before being sent to Europe in 1944. While in New York, he married debutante Carol Marcus over the protest of her father, a Bendix Corporation executive. She was two months pregnant at the time. They had two children: Aram, a writer, and Lucy, an actress. The couple divorced in November 1949, remarried in the spring of 1951, and divorced again the following year.

Their stormy relationship was “a kind of sustained agony,” observed a son resentful of his father’s intimidation and constant verbal harassment.

While stationed in England, where he served as a wartime information services writer, Saroyan wrote the controversial antiwar book *The Adventures of Wesley Jackson* and a companion piece, *The Adventures of William Saroyan*. Both books detail his disgust with army life.

During the 1940s the literary world lauded Saroyan, often comparing him to Steinbeck and Hemingway. By the 1950s, however, his reputation had declined; critics claimed that his light, optimistic fiction may have been appropriate for Depression-era audiences in need of romantic stories but was less relevant to more sophisticated post–World War II readers. Through the 1950s he continued to produce plays, short stories, and novels, and in the ’60s turned to personal memoirs, producing in succession *The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills* (1952), *Here Comes, There Goes, You Know Who* (1961), *Not Dying* (1963), and *Obituaries* (1980), which was nominated for the American Book Award. These autobiographical works reflect his aversion to authority and his belief in individual freedom, and they influenced such writers as Jack Kerouac and J. D. Salinger. A final volume of reminiscence, *Births* (1983), was published posthumously.

Saroyan became something of a recluse during his final years in Fresno, where he could be seen riding his bicycle through the streets. He never, however, lost his fascination with the simple fact of human existence. “He marveled that some people die and kill themselves, that so many writers give up,” wrote San Francisco author Herbert Gold, who interviewed Saroyan in 1979. “He was mystified and pained by the suicide of Hemingway and of so many poets. ‘I’m growing old,’ he shouted, ‘I’m falling apart! And IT’S VERY INTERESTING!’”

On May 18, 1981, Saroyan died of cancer in his hometown, at the age of 72. Half of his ashes were interred in Fresno and the other half in Armenia.

## SAROYAN, 72, LOSES BATTLE WITH CANCER

OBITUARY BY PETER H. KING

---

William Saroyan, the prolific, Pulitzer Prize-winning author who wrote with an unabashed sentimentality about the joy of being alive even amid the most depressing of human tragedies, died today in Fresno—his hometown and the setting for many of his best stories. He was 72.

Mr. Saroyan died at 6:45 A.M. of what a spokesman for Veterans' Administration Hospital called "cancer that was in the advanced stages."

Four days before his collapse, Saroyan had called an Associated Press reporter to say he was dying and to make this final statement for publication after his death:

"Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case. Now what?"

A major American literary figure of the mid 20th century, Mr. Saroyan wrote until his death and compiled an impressively voluminous life's work of 49 novels, short story collections, plays and memoirs.

His best known works were *The Human Comedy*, *My Name Is Aram*, *My Heart's in the Highlands*, and the 1940 Pulitzer Prize winner for drama, *The Time of Your Life*.

His most recent major book was published in 1979. It was a memoir entitled *Obituaries*.

Stricken with cancer of the liver, heart, kidneys, and bones, Mr. Saroyan had been in the hospital since he collapsed last April 19 in the kitchen of one of two small neighboring tract houses he owned for years in northwestern Fresno. . . .

Raised in Fresno's now largely dissolved downtown Armenian quarter, Mr. Saroyan was a brash, exotic, and, at times almost eccentric man with competing passions for writing and gambling.

In his later years, Mr. Saroyan divided his time between his hometown and Paris, returning from France each autumn in time for the Fresno District Fair horse races.

He also made occasional trips to San Francisco where, as a young man, he had written many of his most popular works and where, in the 1930s, with his wild antics and fierce walrus-like mustache, became a favorite character of the city's Bohemian set.

Mr. Saroyan was born August 31, 1908. His parents were among thousands of Armenians who fled to the United States in the early 1900s to avoid persecution from the Ottoman Turks.

Many settled in Fresno, where they found a climate similar to their homeland and the San Joaquin Valley town became the cultural center for exiled Armenians.

Mr. Saroyan, known as “Willie” to many members of his family, was one of four children. His father, a minister and poet, died when Mr. Saroyan was three years old, and the boy was placed in an East Bay orphanage. He rejoined his family in Fresno five years later.

He once recalled he “began to live consciously as a writer, as one who observes” at the age of eight, when he began selling newspapers in the then-small town.

He quit school when he was 15 and began working as a telegraph messenger—a job held by the fictional Homer, a central character of Mr. Saroyan’s most successful novel, *The Human Comedy*, the bittersweet story of a boy who delivers wartime telegrams informing families of their sons’ deaths overseas.

At 17, Mr. Saroyan began to send his stories to magazines. Frustrated by his absolute lack of success, the young man vowed to write only for himself until he was 30.

The first short story he sold was “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze.” He was paid \$15. He then began sending the editor a story a day for 30 consecutive days.

Mr. Saroyan described his early, impoverished Fresno childhood most completely in *My Name Is Aram*, a collection of short stories published in 1940. He dedicated the collection “to the ugly little city containing the large comic world, and to the proud and angry Saroyans containing all humanity.”

When awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1940, Mr. Saroyan rejected the \$1,000 award because he said he objected to “patronage of art.” He suggested the money be distributed among “young writers who need it.”

Set in a waterfront bar in San Francisco, *The Time of Your Life* also won the New York Drama Critics’ Award.

Mr. Saroyan’s theme in his early and most widely acclaimed work was, as he put it, that “it is better to be poor and alive than to be rich and dead.”

Much of his work was autobiographical, and in “Not Dying” he explained, “[O]nce a writer has got set to work, it has got to follow that something to say will present itself for there is really only one general order of thing for any writer to say: Us. This is who we are, like it or not, take it or leave it. This is how we live.”

Mr. Saroyan wrote at a fast clip. He knocked out *The Time of Your Life* in six days and once completed three books, including the popular *Tracy’s Tiger*, in 31 days.

He was proud of his talents to the point of being a braggart and in the later years he appeared bothered by criticism of his decreasingly popular new efforts. In *Obituaries* [the 1980 installment of his memoir] he wrote: “It is no fun to start getting hints that your writing isn’t the greatest, the most real, the most useful, the most helpful, the most entertaining, the most death-defying, the most death-delaying writing of this or any other time.”

He had always called himself “The World’s Greatest Writer.”

His personal life was often troubled. He twice married and twice divorced Carol Marcus, debutante daughter of a corporate executive. They had two children: Aram, now himself a writer, and Lucy.

He was plagued by money problems. His large gambling losses were notorious and consumed many chapters of his memoirs.

In 1959, Mr. Saroyan announced he was moving to Yugoslavia to straighten out his finances.

Mr. Saroyan later managed to resolve his debts and began his pattern of rotating his residences, six months in Paris, six months in Fresno.

San Francisco author Herbert Gold visited with Saroyan in Fresno in 1979 and subsequently wrote about [Saroyan’s] transition from the bold young writer from Fresno to the melancholy writer whose last work would be his remembrances of the 100 persons in *Variety*’s year-end obituary list.

Said Gold:

He still wrote about children and old men, about funky Armenians and cheerful babblers, but he also wrote movingly and with great power and even a bit of malevolence about the troubles of American marriage, about the pains of fatherhood, about the astonishment of a young man who looks in a mirror and discovers an old one looking back at him.

This is an undiscovered Saroyan exploring the reality of his life at an age, now early seventies, when most of his contemporaries are either dead or spending their time on teevee talk shows. . . .

While he could sometimes be seen pumping his bicycle about Fresno, Mr. Saroyan was something of a recluse in his final years.

“Why do I write? Why am I writing this book? To save my life, to keep from dying, of course,” Saroyan mused in his last book. “That is why we get up in the morning.”

---

This article originally appeared in the *San Francisco Examiner*, May 18, 1981.

## WILLIAM SAROYAN'S SAN FRANCISCO TIMELINE

---

San Francisco itself is art, above all literary art. Every block is a short story,  
every hill a novel. Every home a poem, every dweller within immortal.  
That is the whole truth.

If you're alive, you can't be bored in San Francisco.  
If you're not alive, San Francisco will bring you to life.

No city invites the heart to come to life as San Francisco does.  
Arrival in San Francisco is an experience in living.

—William Saroyan

### 1930s

Employed at Southern Pacific (at the southwest corner of Third and Townsend streets) as a clerk/typist for eight days.

Employed at Postal Telegraph as a counter clerk on Market Street, adjoining the Palace Hotel (2 New Montgomery Street), where he would later drink whisky in the Palace's Garden Court.

Drinks at establishments along Third Street, including Breen's Rummy Parlor (71 Third Street, corner of Third and Mission).

Moves to the Postal Telegraph office on Brannan Street, near the Southern Pacific Railroad depot, then to the office on the corner of Powell and Market.

Spends Christmas with family in a third-floor flat on Sutter Street in the Western Addition before moving a block away to a flat on Divisadero, where he watches nurses at Mount Zion Hospital (1600 Divisadero Street, between Sutter and Post) from his work-room window.

Works at Cypress Lawn Cemetery Company downtown and at *Macaroni Review*, a trade journal of the pasta industry.

Gambles, playing craps between boxcars on the Embarcadero train tracks.

Peddles copies of his first short-story collection aboard bay ferries.

Family moves to a new flat near Golden Gate Park, at 348 Carl Street, next to Poly High School; becomes a habitual gambler at the Menlo Club at 30 Turk Street.

Writes "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze," which makes him an overnight literary sensation and the toast of San Francisco and New York.

In 1939, writes *The Time of Your Life* about many of the places and people he has known in San Francisco; the play is selected for the 1940 Pulitzer Prize and New York Drama Critics' Award.

## 1940s

From Saroyan's journals:

Frequented Izzy Gomez's speakeasy, which was not far from the Old Montgomery Block, across from the firehouse at First and Pacific. Izzy Gomez's was something else. Unique. Sui generis. It really was as portrayed in *The Time of Your Life*, except that it was also a favorite hangout for hard-boiled, sophisticated newspapermen of the kind that flourished in the good old days when no self-respecting newspaperman, including even the editorial writers, believed a word of the Social Lie, but knew all the real answers. They gave the place a rowdy, slightly underworld character of half-suppressed brawl. Now they're all dead. The last to go was handsome Pat O'Niall, who died, fat and alcoholic, a legend of awe and wonder to his colleagues in what has come to be called "the profession of journalism." Izzy's grappa, the best liquor in town, was 25 cents a shot. He served nothing else but home brew. Bootleg big brewery beer was made only by the Organization and not allowed in San Francisco. For meals, Izzy served thick, luscious steaks, french fries, and salads. He gave a considerable number of meals and liquor out free, not just to starving artists, but to people he liked. I was always a little embarrassed to patronize the place because he would never take any money from me. If I brought guests for dinner I had to give them the money and have them pretend to be hosting me. Even so, Izzy would not usually take the money.

The success of *The Time of Your Life* allows Saroyan to build a house for his mother on 15th Avenue in Golden Gate Heights, where he will live and write on and off for many years. His niece still lives in the family home.

Gambles at horse races at the two Bay Area tracks: Tanforan (1100 Eastshore Highway, Berkeley) and Bay Meadows (2600 South Delaware Street, San Mateo).

Spends long hours in the periodicals room of the San Francisco Public Library (200 Larkin Street).

The touring production of *The Time of Your Life* premieres at the Curran Theatre on Geary Street, next door to the Geary Theater. Thunderous ovations greet the cast and crew, but Saroyan is a no-show at the curtain call.

# RULE BOOK FOR SAROYANESQUES

BY BROOKS ATKINSON (1939)

---

Although the delight that theatergoers are taking in Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life* testifies to the sanity and flexibility of public taste, some grammarians are not convinced. They complain, on the one hand, that it is not a play because it does not have a plot; and, on the other hand, that it is old hat because the characters are familiar in the theater. I know *The Time of Your Life* is a play because I saw it in a theater with actors playing imaginary characters—which is always a hint to the judicious.

As for the characters being old stuff, who isn't? Romeo and Juliet were old stuff long before Shakespeare got around to writing about them. The vital thing about a play is what the author contributes to the characters out of his own insight or enthusiasm. Art is creation; and the creative process consists not merely in imagining a new world, if such a thing is really possible, but in discovering something fresh and exhilarating in material that has been around for years. What impresses Saroyan most about the characters in his waterfront saloon is their purity of heart under a raffish exterior. They echo Saroyan's gayety and enthusiasm. He transmutes them. That is art, and that is why in spite of certain superficial resemblances his character resemble no other characters under the sun. . . .

Full of the common joy, he wants to utter some, and he sits down to his table to write it without tricking it up like a moral lesson. In a cheap dive in San Francisco he finds a rag-tag and bobtail of representative tipplers, all of whom are obsessed with one phase of life or another. The natural hospitality of a saloon loosens their tongues. They go on for hours, chewing on the fringes of philosophy. When the law comes in at the door to sniff for sin, cruelty comes in at the same time and things take on an ugly look for a few moments. But leave these people to themselves, Saroyan says, and they will behave like normal human beings and creatures of decent impulse. Although each one of them has some private grievance that impedes his personal happiness, each one has also a sense of good fellowship and good-will. . . .

These are some of the most flavorsome characters we have had in the theater. Having no concrete theme to argue or issue to win, Saroyan lets them shuffle through a slow bar-room fold-dance, and the result is a bright and joyous pattern in the *comédie humaine*.

---

This article originally appeared in the *New York Times*, November 26, 1939. Copyright © 1939 by The New York Times Co. Reprinted by permission.



## WRITER TO WRITER

### Selections from Saroyan's Letters

---

Short story writer, dramatist, novelist, and memoirist—these are the familiar and famous facets of William Saroyan's achievement. But there are also unknown aspects of his creative life, and among the most interesting of these is Saroyan the writer of letters. He was a prolific and conscientious correspondent, carefully saving incoming mail and often making carbon copies of his own replies. Yet his letters have barely been glimpsed in print. To celebrate the acquisition by Stanford of the literary and personal William Saroyan Collection in 1997, Stanford University Libraries published several letters from Saroyan to other prominent writers during the 1930s and '40s in the commemorative booklet, *The William Saroyan Collection at Stanford*, excerpted below:

#### SAROYAN TO ROBERT E. SHERWOOD

*Saroyan and Sherwood were Broadway rivals. Sherwood, a master of the tightly structured, well-made play that Saroyan despised, won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in both 1939 and 1941. In 1940, the award went to Saroyan for *The Time of Your Life*. During World War II, their rivalry receded. Saroyan was in the army, stationed in London, and Sherwood was with the Roosevelt administration in Washington. Sherwood telegraphed Saroyan from Washington in 1946, urging that he join a protest by American dramatists "against the practice of racial discrimination in legitimate theaters and auditoriums in Washington." To this request Saroyan responded:*

NOVEMBER 14, 1946, MILL NECK, NEW YORK

It is impossible not to recognize that our world is tormented by failure, hate, guilt, and fear. No man appears to be altogether or steadily free of this destructive anxiety; certainly no mass, group, class, religion, race, or nationality is anywhere near something like spiritual health—that is, dignity, grace, honor, and compassionate strength. Nor is any man, let alone any group, separate from the entire body. Our own American failure is to me the most painful of all, for it seemed we had the chance, and then muffed it. I think we muffed it after the so-called First World War, and I think what was left of the chance after the recent chapter of that War is now being muffed. Instead of reaching out to Europe and Asia and bringing them (figuratively or spiritually) to us, we have been almost hopelessly dragged back to them. If this is the fulfillment of the prophecies of the brilliant cynics of England who never believed our idea could endure—if it is inevitable—so much the worse

for us. There is absolutely no evidence now that we are any different from any other nation in the world. We are smart, smug, selfish, arrogant, cynical, worldly, suspicious, superficially wise, but profoundly stupid. Has our especial variety of faith in people been at fault? Did we over-estimate their (our) potentialities? Does the very design of our world prohibit the kind of life we believed we could achieve? In short, as writers, where do we propose to launch our campaign to restore ourselves (that is, the human being which is a human being), to make such restoration for others not impossible? Is it to be in areas which at least by comparison must be regarded as insignificant? And this brings us to the present campaign in which you were so kind as to solicit my support. How can we pretend, with so much wrong, that so fragmentary a campaign is worthy of our energies? If we believe we have enough vigor left to fight what offends us, hadn't we better fight it whole? Does anybody really want to be honest about the whole business? Is anybody capable of being honest? Does anybody want to go all-out? Or do we want to let personal things come first under all circumstances and do just enough to ease our consciences enough to make the fun we have not seem altogether unholy? I'll be damned if I know. I'm not even sure it isn't feeble-minded of us to look forward to anything other than more of the same, or that we do not betray ourselves by "doing business," so to speak, at the old stand. Anyhow, it doesn't seem to take any of us very long to forget anything. As far as I can judge this might just as well be 25 years ago. All I see in films and in the theater, all I hear over the radio, all I reads in books is forgetfulness: with an offensive and pathetic rush of wit and cleverness.

#### SAROYAN TO SEAN O'FAOLAIN

*Saroyan and O'Faolain began corresponding in the summer of 1946, just after the Irish short story writer read Saroyan's newly published novel, The Adventures of Wesley Jackson. O'Faolain wrote to express his admiration, telling Saroyan his book "rejoiced my heart enormously," adding "God has touched you." At the time O'Faolain was personally struggling with the artistic challenge of retaining his Irish identity in an overwhelmingly English cultural world. He saw Saroyan's success in celebrating his Armenian heritage on the American literary scene as a model solution to the problem. The following fall O'Faolain decided to propose to the BBC a program about Saroyan. To gather background information, he wrote asking Saroyan several questions, including the following, which Saroyan answered in this November 21, 1946, letter:*

DO YOU EVER FEEL MORE ARMENIAN THAN AMERICAN?

Tough question to answer, for (as I have written, and most truthfully) I am afraid I have never felt terribly American—only alive. All the same, I saw at a relatively early age the wisdom of looking to my sources: that is, to the Armenians as I knew them in my imme-

diate family and in my home town. Hanging onto one's nationality is something to be looked into: it would appear to be either weakness or vanity, although that isn't the half of it, obviously. One is first I suppose alive; one is an essay in being alive and one's self as fully and as well as one is capable of it; one is next a member of a family, son and brother, and then father, and so on; one is then a member of what I'll poorly call the time-family, one belongs to a time of life, all the life going on while one's life goes on; one is emotionally drawn and sometimes held to one's family—the Saroyans, for instance, and expanding a little the Armenians, and expanding some more human beings in general; and then one expands still more and draws into the circle living things in general, animals and plants and bacteria and electrons and atoms and so on, perhaps even disease; anyhow, it seems to me belonging too dynamically to any people is a rather forced affair, and one wonders why one permits one's self to be forced: has one been hurt? Does one feel inferior and therefore wants to point out that one is not inferior at all, in fact one belongs to people who are superior? And so on. I think the time of peoples, of nations, as such, is drawing to a close. We are all now too close, too much alike, for the fuss of insisting upon being different.

Is there something more to be said here? Is there an inevitable and even a desirable helplessness here, if helplessness can be regarded as desirable? Perhaps. We make allowances for our helplessnesses, but at the same time we recognize them as such and give helplessness its chance too. At this moment in time, for instance, we would all of us seem to be breaking our necks and heads in a commendable effort to stop being divided. A couple of miles from this house, in Flushing Meadows [the first, temporary headquarters of the United Nations], 54 representatives of as many peoples and tribes of the earth are making kindergarten stabs at the job, but the fact that they are trying at all is good enough for the time being. The clutter comes from political and religious (and of course economic and industrial) elements, not from the nature of man himself. To return to helplessness: one is helplessly shaped by and held to one's environment: in my case, the San Joaquin Valley of California in the United States; one is also shaped by and held to one's line, one's family: the Saroyans, and the Armenians; but we know a lot of this shaping is poor shaping; it could certainly have been better; it may certainly be improved. No more spiritually or intellectually barren area of the world, or of life, could be found, I imagine, than the area of Central California when I was growing there: why am I (in the end) incapable of scorn—true scorn—deserved scorn, no doubt—for the area, for the life it shaped? Helpless. And so on.

Now, to try to be specific and to make a more yes-and-no kind of answer to the question (taking into account all that I have said): Do I ever feel more Armenian than American? I certainly do. That's surely the long and the short of it. I certainly feel more

what I truly am than what I truly am not. You can't move out of your heritage but you can move out of your environment.

#### SAROYAN TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

*Saroyan's first encounter with Hemingway occurred in the January 1935 pages of Esquire, where Hemingway attacked Saroyan's self-importance and belittled the younger writer's talents. Hemingway threatened to "push your puss in" and issued a scathing prediction on what lay ahead for the then-hot Saroyan: "We've seen them come and go. Good ones too. Better ones than you, Mr. Saroyan. We've seen them go a long way and we've seen them not come back and nobody even asked where they was gone. They forget quick, Mr. Saroyan." Hemingway had been provoked by irreverent remarks in The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze about his own recent book Death in the Afternoon (1932), but his anger was quickly dispelled when Saroyan replied with a personal letter instead of continuing the quarrel in public. Just a year later, on January 8, 1936, Hemingway wrote to apologize: "I'm sorry I got sore . . . and swung at you that time." He also offered some advice, telling Saroyan to ignore bad reviews because critics "hate all writing." Saroyan responded:*

JANUARY 13, 1936, SAN FRANCISCO, CA

My opinion is this: criticism (these days at any rate) is talk and talk should never be anything but oral, casual, good-humored, accompanied by food and drink, and it should be about something tangible, no matter how insignificant. It isn't even talk; it's gossip. Chattering, and knitting. I'll probably be burned up if they pan me, and be very calm about it, and polite, but how about it when they say you're good, you're great, you're a son of a bitch of a writer? That's worse, because you'll figure you're good all right, you figure maybe you'll be great if you are patient enough and keep in shape, but not the way they put it down, not knitting. And of course a book's got to sell so you can go on and what they say, good or bad, knitting, sells a book, so I guess the answer is, Comrade, thanks. And a big smile.

## A GRAND LIAR WITH LOVING INTENTIONS

BY ANDY SAROUHAN

---

Yes, my last name is Sarouhan. Yes, just like William Saroyan. Same family, actually. No, I couldn't really tell you how we are related. It's a little distant. But my father has his eyes. Yes, I know our last names aren't spelled the same. It was a family fight years ago. A fight about money, I assume. What else can family fights be about? But, yes, it is the same family. Yes, I am a writer too.

A few years back, when I was still an undergraduate, I wrote my first full-length play. It was a creation caught somewhere between Sam Shepard and Sam Beckett—the two natural infatuations of any young male playwriting student. In it was a character named Aram. He was the product of pressure applied on me by a professor who said it was my responsibility to write plays about Armenians.

“You have to write plays about who you are, Andy,” he would say.

“But Jorge, I'm not as Armenian as you think.”

“Of course you are.”

“No. Really. I'm not. I don't know the food that well. And the language . . . I only know the swear words. And the history. I only know the silly facts. Like the thing about Noah's Ark on top of Mount Ararat. And that guy who invented the Chipmunks records.”

“Andy, you come from a strong people who have suffered greatly. You must tell their story. You are a Saroyan! And you are a writer! Who better to do it?”

So I created Aram. His name was a throwback to William Saroyan, but the character was entirely mine. I wrote the kind of Armenian I understood—a young man who knew very little of his own culture and history, and yet one who still felt the pressure to succeed for his people. Aram was charming and sad, and he had a wonderful habit of plucking out his body hair when the pressure of his heritage became too much. He was the kind of Armenian I understood.

The actor who had played Aram later took an extended trip to Israel. One day he found himself in the Armenian quarter of Jerusalem sipping thick coffee with an old Armenian man. Dave conceded to the man that he had recently played an Armenian character named Aram. “Ah,” the man replied, “It was by a writer named Saroyan.” Dave was astounded. Word of that college play must have traveled fast. The old man continued, “It was about boys making mischief.” The man was right again, and I can only assume that Dave later believed with all his heart the fortune that the old man read in his leftover coffee grounds.

Yes, I am related to William Saroyan. Yes, I am a writer. Yes, half of the buildings in Fresno seem to bear our family name. And yes, these are the reasons that A.C.T. had me write this piece. They wanted to know what the pressures were on a young writer living and working in the family shadow of such a monumental figure. My first reaction was that there is no pressure. Other than a shared last name, a deep appreciation for his writings, and a juvenile pride in being related to someone who duked it out with Papa Hemingway, I have no connection with this man. My father has his eyes, but I do not. This was my initial thought, but as writing often will, the writing of this essay has proven otherwise.

My mother and I went to visit the Saroyan collection at Stanford University. There had been a huge article in the newspaper called “Snatching Saroyan.” The article described the questionable tactics Stanford had used to acquire the collection from its previous resting place at UC Berkeley. Not quite as scandalous as Leland Stanford’s business tactics for building the railroads, but still a matter that can only be described as unscrupulous. As self-proclaimed relatives of Saroyan, we were whisked away to the privileged section of the exhibit, where we were offered glimpses of treasures barred from the eyes of *common* people with *common* families. Here were the real masterpieces: rubber-band balls, tinfoil spheres, jars of old pennies, and boxes of used tissues. This truly was the defining moment for some poor undergraduate’s college career—a meticulous cataloguing of Christmas and Easter cards from people and times long forgotten. It was a packrat’s nirvana.

The whole scene inspired an inappropriate laughter that seemed ever-so-appropriate for Saroyan. Here was the human comedy—educated and capable men and women preserving and safeguarding the nail clippings and pocket change of a man’s life. They were bronzing a yard sale. Yet more importantly, they were exposing Saroyan as a human being—the greatest nightmare of any writer. Here in this mother lode of rubble were the human stitches and seams that writers never wish you to see: their compulsive preservation of life, the jumbled loneliness of their minds, and the absolute fear of being forgotten. The exhibit did not show me a Saroyan of great stature and poise, but rather a delicate man who was petrified of fading away. I’d never felt more connected to him.

We write bravely because we are not brave.

Unlike most humans, a writer leaves you a wondrous personal blueprint in his creations. One must be careful to understand that this is not a blueprint of his life, but rather the journey of his being. The two don’t always coincide. Take Saroyan, for example. Here was a writer who openly proclaimed the faith he had in the human race. Here was a writer who described our innate beauty and natural capacity for kindness. Yet here was a man who lived and died lonely; who drank and gambled away his fortune; who was known for his

anger and bitterness. Here was a man who disinherited his own children. How is it possible that the writer and the man come from the same source?

We write bravely because we are not brave.

In the end, a writer is a grand liar with loving intentions. Our unexplainable compulsion to encapsulate and preserve life and thought, to prove we are not a blink in the eye of the universe, negates our potential for day-to-day contentment. It can paralyze our own humanity. We are often sad creatures with the capacity to imagine, but not to practice. We compensate for our lack of courage with bold statements of hope and beauty. We speak with an unfounded authority in hopes that people will perhaps believe us in spite of our lack of credentials. Like Saroyan, many of us wish to be remembered by the intentions of our beings, and not the events of our lives. Here is the irony of saving a man's nail clippings and pocket change.

My father has the same eyes as William Saroyan. They are Armenian eyes, sad and down-turned at the outer edges, seemingly bottomless and crowned with long black lashes. I find Armenian eyes to be absolutely exquisite. I am the first generation in my family not to inherit William Saroyan's eyes. I inherited other things from him: a taste for cheap coffee, a love of San Francisco, an aching obsession with the small things of life, a sad laughter, a packrat's mindset, and a writer's struggle. I don't see our shared lineage as a pressure to succeed, but rather a guide of conduct for myself to find the happy balance between creation and reality. I wish to be brave and happy in both. It may be time for a yard sale.

---

Andy Sarouhan is a Bay Area writer and an active improvisation performer and instructor. He is a graduate of UC San Diego's Department of Theatre and Dance.



I have forgotten more than I can remember, and it is all there, somewhere.

It has meaning and something more than meaning.

Let the good boys and girls of scholarship find out what.

—William Saroyan, "Where The Bones Go"

## QUARTER FOR HIS THOUGHTS

### Saroyan Memorabilia

BY JULIE LEW

---

For most people, finding a quarter on the street means 25 more cents to add to the pocket. But for William Saroyan, a writer who had a mania for collecting, the incident held myriad literary possibilities.

Such a coin was worthy of its own small envelope, marked with the date, time and location of the find, to be tucked away until needed as a germ of an idea for a short story, perhaps. Annotating a quarter was typical of Saroyan's lifelong habit of keeping and documenting virtually everything. The results of this habit grew into what has become one of the largest archives of a modern American writer.

For the last 16 years the William Saroyan Foundation, in accordance with the author's will, has been gathering, cataloguing and seeking a single permanent home for Saroyan's belongings, scattered among Paris, New York, Malibu, Berkeley, and Fresno. [In 1996] the foundation bestowed the fruits of its labor on Stanford University: a collection comprising journals for every year from 1934 until his death from prostate cancer in 1981 at age 72; 20,000 to 30,000 pieces of correspondence; more than 1,200 manuscripts, legal and financial documents; notes of every kind (including grocery lists, ideas for literary works, and phone messages); scrapbooks and address books, clippings, and ephemera.

If all the papers were piled up floor to ceiling, the collection would fill three times its curator's ten-by-twelve-foot office at Stanford.

Several universities were interested in acquiring the collection, including UC Berkeley, which temporarily housed an important chunk at the Bancroft Library. The foundation assumed that Berkeley was not interested in taking on curatorial responsibility for the whole archive and turned elsewhere for a home for the entire collection. . . .

Sure to ignite scholarly interest is the large portion never made public. "The Saroyan archive has as much unpublished material of quality as was published in Saroyan's lifetime," said Professor Dickran Kouymjian, director of the Armenian studies program at California State University at Fresno. The unpublished cache includes hundreds of short stories, about 9 novels and 30 to 40 plays. "This is a major archive of an American writer who was *the* writer from 1939 until 1943," said Professor Kouymjian, the editor of two collections of Saroyan's plays. "He was the most famous writer in the United States in that short period. There is no one close to it." . . .



Saroyan was a workaholic who usually devoted several hours a day to intense writing, said Professor Kouymjian, who befriended Saroyan in 1977 when they both lived in Fresno or Paris. Saroyan typed an average of 40 words a minute, usually pausing only to jot down the time he began at the top of each page and the time he ended at the bottom (a habit he may have picked up when he worked in a telegraph office). Saroyan's technique was akin to that of a Japanese scroll painter working in watercolor. "No mistakes possible," Professor Kouymjian said.

"He had the paper there, spent a few minutes looking at it like a zen doctor, getting his thoughts together, then he takes a brush and he goes, and it's got to be just right."

Saroyan usually sat at the typewriter with just the story and the title in mind and wrote with no revisions or rewriting. Only some of his plays were rewritten and revised, the professor said....

"He's more popular than people give him credit for," said Robert Setrakian, director of the William Saroyan Foundation and the executor of Saroyan's estate. "Since he passed away in 1981 we have executed over 450 contracts for print that include novels, short stories, radio, television and two operas."

Mr. McPherson said: "I never thought of Saroyan in any way until I started looking at the archives. I began to see him as a serious writer, who on the other hand also wanted not to be bracketed as avant-garde and therefore pushed off to a small audience. He wanted to speak more broadly to the American people, and so he fought for artistic integrity. And his attempt to work through large publishers and MGM and the Broadway structure, to achieve that kind of popularity is a very interesting conflict. I think he's interesting for the object lesson of this sort of fate of art in modern and contemporary America."

Professor Kouymjian argues that Saroyan's works have as much relevance today as they did at the height of his popularity. "Anyone who reads Saroyan is immediately charmed by him," he said, "because he can write an English line, an English paragraph so beautifully he can disarm you totally." In this age his philosophical explorations are of interest, the professor said. And "he could also tell a tale like no one else could tell a tale."

The works of Saroyan, who was of Armenian descent, are still in demand in other countries, including France, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Poland, China, and Japan.

There is ample evidence of Saroyan's popularity during his lifetime. "In a way the fan mail is what made me really begin to rethink Saroyan entirely," Mr. McPherson said. "The thousands and thousands of fan letters is a gold mine for scholars because what you see there is an audience brought into being. These are people who were reading the book for the first time, which has moved and touched them in ways they've never been touched before."

## A TIME OF YOUR LIFE TIMELINE

---

1930 The population of the United States is 122.7 million, with an average life expectancy of 61 years. The National Socialist Party takes the majority in German national elections. Adler Planetarium in Chicago opens, the first in the United States. William Faulkner publishes *As I Lay Dying*.

1931 The Empire State Building (the then-tallest building in the world) and George Washington Bridge are completed. President Hoover initiates a one-year moratorium on World War I reparations and war debts. Egypt and Iraq sign a friendship treaty. The George Washington Bridge is completed. The *Dick Tracy* comic strip is published.

1932 Franklin D. Roosevelt is elected president, in a landslide over Herbert Hoover. Monthly wages are 60 percent of 1929. Japanese troops invade China. The Lindbergh baby is kidnapped. Prominent American intellectuals, including Sherwood Anderson, Erskine Caldwell, and John Dos Passos, publicly endorse the platform of the Communist Party in the United States. Congress passes the Norris-LaGuardia Act, which prohibits federal injunction in most labor disputes, and outlaws “yellow dog” contracts.

1933 FDR’s “fireside chats” are broadcast weekly on the radio. The unemployment rate reaches 25 percent. The federal government passes a flurry of innovative social legislation, providing a “New Deal” for all Americans. Prohibition ends in the United States. Hitler is pronounced chancellor of Germany.

1934 There is a dramatic upsurge in labor strikes across the United States; a general strike takes place in San Francisco in support of 1,200 striking dockworkers. A dust storm blows an estimated 350 million tons of soil off the terrain of the western and southwestern United States and deposits it as far east as New York and Boston; the resulting “Dust Bowl” devastates farming in many states.

Upton Sinclair, democratic candidate for governor of California, declares an EPIC movement to “End Poverty in California”: “Our people have reached the saturation point as regards suffering. We are just about to begin the sixth year of the Depression. We have one-and-a-quarter million persons dependent upon public charity, and probably as many more who are able to get only one or two days’ work a week or who are dependent upon relatives and friends. That is too heavy a burden of suffering for any civilized community to carry.”

Mao Tse-Tung leads his army on the famous Long March (6,000 miles). Hitler gives himself the title of *Führer*. Lillian Hellman completes *The Children’s Hour*. *Story* magazine

publishes Saroyan's story "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze." Random House publishes his first book: a collection of 26 short stories titled *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*. Playwright/novelist Luigi Pirandello wins the Nobel Prize.

1935 The Works Progress Administration (WPA) is created. (Its name will be changed in 1939 to the Work Projects Administration.) The program employs more than 8.5 million individuals in 3,000 counties across the nation. These individuals, drawing a salary of only \$41.57 a month, build or improve highways, roads, bridges, and airports. In addition, the WPA puts thousands of artists—writers, painters, theater directors, and sculptors—to work on various projects. The WPA will remain in existence until 1943. The Social Security Act is enacted. Congress passes the National Labor Relations Act, which protects the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively.

George and Ira Gershwin collaborate on *Porgy and Bess*. The Nuremberg laws are issued by Germany's Nazi Party. In England, Penguin press sells the first paperbacks. Bill Wilson founds Alcoholics Anonymous—anonously.

1936 FDR is re-elected. Hitler and Mussolini proclaim the Rome-Berlin Axis. Stalin begins his "great purge" to liquidate his enemies. By 1939, more than eight million will be dead and perhaps ten million imprisoned. The Spanish Civil War begins; hundreds of Americans volunteer for "Lincoln Brigades" to help fight Franco's fascism.

Photographer Dorothea Lange takes her famous photos of harvest workers in the San Joaquin Valley. The images, especially those in the "Migrant Mother Series," vividly illustrate the plight of the workers. The *San Francisco News* runs the photo essay under the headline, "Ragged, Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squallor (sic)."

Eugene O'Neill wins the Nobel Prize. Benny Goodman becomes the first band leader to racially integrate his band. The San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge opens. *Life* magazine is published.

1937 The Golden Gate Bridge is completed. The Hindenburg explodes. Italy withdraws from the League of Nations. Joe Louis wins the heavyweight boxing championship.

1938 Workers at General Motors stage sit-down strikes in the United States and Canada; the strikes turn violent and end when workers win the first United Auto Workers (UAW) contract. Congress passes the Fair Labor Standards Act, which establishes the 40-hour work week and the minimum wage and bans child labor in interstate commerce.

In the radio broadcast "War of the Worlds," Orson Welles panics Americans who believe that Martians are actually invading Earth. Pablo Picasso paints the *Guernica*, showing the horrors of war. Orson Welles broadcasts *Invasion from Mars*. John Steinbeck

publishes *The Grapes of Wrath*. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* wins the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Germany takes part of Czechoslovakia.

1939 Germany invades Poland. Britain and France declare war on Germany. Japan continues undeclared war on China. Albert Einstein writes a letter to Roosevelt regarding the possibility of using uranium to initiate a nuclear chain reaction, the fundamental process behind the atomic bomb.

San Francisco hosts the world fair (Golden Gate International Exposition) on Treasure Island. *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* are released. Saroyan's play *My Heart's in the Highlands* is presented by the Group Theatre, and *The Time of Your Life* opens on Broadway.

1940 FDR is re-elected. The United States does not renew its commercial treaty with Japan. German forces invade Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg.

1941 Japanese forces attack Pearl Harbor, sinking 18 warships, destroying 170 planes, and killing 2,000 Americans (December 7). The next day, the United States declares war on Japan. Germany and Italy declare war on the United States (December 11). The Manhattan Project begins research to develop an atomic bomb.

## THE GREAT MURAL ART OF THE 1930S

An Inspiration for Tina Landau's Production of *The Time of Your Life*

---

As director Tina Landau prepared to direct this production, she found inspiration in some of the great murals of the 1930s, such as those by Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1974). "We attempted to try to create the experience of the panorama and the murals of the period," she said, "the notion that the meaning of the play comes from the juxtaposition of characters as a conglomerate of things American." To accomplish this while depicting the waterfront of San Francisco in 1939, Landau needed a broader canvas than a theater proscenium could provide, so to immerse the audience in the experience the design has broken out of the confines of the stage. Audiences will note that while much of the main interaction of the characters happens in central positions on the stage, there is a constant swirl of motion and activity across the physical world of the play.

In her approach to Saroyan's material, Landau uses the physical space in conjunction with popular music of the day and overlapping dialogue and storylines to create a sweeping world where the ultimate sense of the play is as much impressionistic as realistic. Much like Benton's murals or jazz music of the 1930s, you may not directly take in every element of the piece, but when you let your gaze sweep over the entire canvas, you experience the artist's broader intent.

The spirit of American mural artists such as Benton, Grant Wright Christian (1911- ), and Georgette Seebrook lives on in the staging of Saroyan's ode to the common American. In fact, a mural is painted and completed onstage throughout each run of the production. "When we started working on the design, we approached it very literally as a mural . . . the notion that the meaning of the play comes not from following one person going through a series of whys and actions," says Landau. "The meaning comes from the juxtaposition [of characters] as a conglomerate of things American."

# A NEW KIND OF ART FOR A NEW KIND OF AUDIENCE

BY PAUL WALSH

---

Throughout the 1930s, the idea of a new kind of art for a new kind of audience had been taking root across America, not only in music but in all the arts. Authors like Jack London, John Dos Passos, Erskine Caldwell, and John Steinbeck, playwrights like Clifford Odets, Sidney Howard, and Maxwell Anderson, and artists like Ben Shahn, Ivan Albright, and Edward Hopper each articulated a vision of art as a socially useful activity capable of speaking to the resiliency as well as the anxieties of ordinary people at a time of worldwide economic depression. For these artists, art was a vehicle for exploring not only personal dreams and fears, but also the collective hopes for a future strikingly different from the present.

The Great Depression, precipitated by the stock market crash of 1929, presaged a crisis at the heart of capitalism itself. As the economic machinery of the nation and the world ground to a stop, millions of workers found themselves without work. The growing chasm between rich and poor threatened to erupt into class warfare as across America workers found collective strength in unions and associations that allowed them to stand up to the moneyed interests that they said controlled not only the means of economic production and prosperity but social, political, and even legal power as well. Fueled by the international workers' movement and other forms of political radicalism, as well as a growing sense of shared class interests, workers' collectives sprung up around the country with a view to organizing and educating people about the history, ideals, and possibilities of the working classes.

For a brief moment, politics and art came together. Artists began to think of themselves as workers participating in the reordering of society and to see their audience not as patrons, but as comrades with shared interests and shared ambitions for the future. This freshly articulated radicalism promised new vitality and new purpose to the making of art by not only proposing a new subject matter and a new series of commitments, but by redefining who the proposed public for this art would be. Artists on the Left sought a public among the working people of America rather than among the elitist socialites. Promoting the virtues of an art that was public rather than private and that spoke with immediacy and vitality to a new public of their peers, they called for a shift from corporate to government sponsorship of public art.

The idea that art should, in composer Marc Blitzstein's words, "broaden its scope and reach not only the select few but the masses" found its way into the thinking of Franklin

Delano Roosevelt's "New Deal" administration in Washington. Through programs like the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and its successor, the Treasury Department's "Section of Fine Arts (SFA), created to commission art for federal buildings, the government invested in the belief that art could help restore confidence in a nation and a people suffering from the effects of the Depression. The largest and most impressive, though unfortunately short-lived, of the New Deal cultural programs was the Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP). Created as part of President Roosevelt's agenda "to serve the public good and conserve the skills and the self-esteem of workers throughout the U.S." by creating jobs for people who were out of work, the Federal Art Project, the Federal Theater Project, and the Federal Writers Project put out-of-work painters, sculptor, actors, directors, musicians, and technicians back to work creating a new kind of publicly supported and politically engaged art, theater, and music.

### SAN FRANCISCO'S MURALS

The genre most favored by the visual arts programs of the New Deal was large-scale murals. Since early in the century monumental public murals with historical and political themes had been associated with the ambitions and commitments of the political Left thanks to the politically engaged frescoes of the great Mexican muralists known as "Los Tres Grandes"—Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Siqueiros—who emerged during and following the Mexican revolution. In the 1930s, at a time of heightened class awareness across the United States and political commitment, this same genre was promoted in extensive government-funded projects as a new kind of art for a new age.

San Francisco has inherited a surprisingly rich legacy of New Deal-era murals—which include three by Diego Rivera himself. The most impressive of the San Francisco murals, and certainly among the best examples of New Deal art in the Bay Area, are the 27 frescoes decorating Coit Tower. Inspired by Rivera's murals, the 26 master artists and 19 assistants who painted the Coit Tower images sought to document the life and hopes and resiliency, as well as the social concerns and political ambitions, of Northern Californians during the Depression. Their paintings stand in testimony to the possibility of art to participate directly and meaningfully in the social and political life of the city. The 3,691 square feet of murals celebrate Californians at work, with scenes depicting the bustle of city streets, agricultural and industrial labor, the stock exchange, department stores, a newspaper office, a library, and a lunch counter. Unified by a shared palette and proportional scale, the murals demonstrate the individual voices and visions of the diverse artists who came together to create this tribute to the day-to-day life of Californians in the 1930s.

The Coit Tower murals were not without controversy, however. A worker in Bernard Zakheim's Library reaches for Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*; the newsstand in Victor Arnautoff's *City Life* includes the radical publications *The New Masses* and *The Daily Worker*, but not the Hearst-owned *San Francisco Chronicle*. In John Langley Howard's *California Industrial Scenes*, a seemingly endless mass of unemployed workers stares out at the viewer with hands clenching into fists. And in one particularly controversial detail later chipped off the walls of Coit Tower, Clifford Wight juxtaposed the Soviet hammer and sickle and the slogan "Workers of the World Unite" with a segment of a chain encircling the slogan "In God We Trust."

The federal government, of course, publicly eschewed discussions of the leftist politics associated with mural painting and downplayed the political ambitions of artists on the Left in favor of general statements about supporting art that was "native, human, eager, and alive . . . [and] painted for the people of this country by their own kind." Still, those who ran the New Deal programs regularly offered public commissions to such radicals as Arnautolt, Zakheim, Wight, and Robert Stackpole (each of whom worked on the Coit Tower murals and each of whom had studied with Diego Rivera in Mexico), creating a legacy of socially engaged and politically committed art that sought to remake the face of public art.

While the programs of the New Deal all but disappeared in a wave of controversy a few short years after they were introduced, and political dissent itself disappeared from public art soon after America entered World War II, their legacy lives on in San Francisco in such timeless examples as the murals of Coit Tower, the exquisite frescoes painted by Rivera at the City Club of San Francisco, the San Francisco Art Institute, and City College of San Francisco (Phelan Campus), and the controversial series depicting the history of Northern California created by Anton Refrigier in the 1940s for the Rincon Center Annex Post Office. Each exhibits a faith in art as a medium of productive social change that speaks with freshness and immediacy across the ages to new generations of Americans.



## A BRIEF GUIDE TO NEW DEAL-ERA MURALS IN SAN FRANCISCO

*Allegory of California* (1931), by Diego Rivera. The City Club of San Francisco, 155 Sansome Street, 10th floor. [www.cityclubsf.com/about/art\\_architecture.htm](http://www.cityclubsf.com/about/art_architecture.htm).

*The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City* (1931), by Diego Rivera. San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chestnut Street (between Leavenworth and Jones). [www.sanfranciscoart.edu/dr.htm](http://www.sanfranciscoart.edu/dr.htm).

*The Coit Tower Murals* (1934), by various San Francisco artists. Coit Memorial Tower, 1 Telegraph Hill Boulevard. [www.wpamurals.com/wpabios.html](http://www.wpamurals.com/wpabios.html).

*Atlantis* (1939), by Hilaire Hiler. Aquatic Park Bath House (now the National Maritime Museum). National Maritime Museum at the Hyde Street Pier. [www.nps.gov/safr/local/mus.html](http://www.nps.gov/safr/local/mus.html). [www.cr.nps.gov/history/online\\_books/harrison/harrison29.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/harrison/harrison29.htm)

*St. Francis* (1935), by Victor Arnautoff. Main Post Chapel. Interfaith Center at the Presidio. [www.interfaith-presidio.org/MainPostChapel.htm](http://www.interfaith-presidio.org/MainPostChapel.htm)

*The Story of California Medicine* (1936), by Bernard Zakheim. Toland Hall, University of California San Francisco. [www.ucsf.edu/daybreak/1998/06/01\\_feat.html](http://www.ucsf.edu/daybreak/1998/06/01_feat.html).

*The Beach Chalet Murals* (1936-37), by Lucien Labaudt. 1000 Great Highway (near the Cliff House at the far west end of Golden Gate Park). [www.comtogether.com/beach\\_chalet/1.html](http://www.comtogether.com/beach_chalet/1.html).

*Pan-American Unity* (1940), by Diego Rivera. The City College of San Francisco (Phelan Campus). Diego Rivera Theater, 50 Phelan Avenue. [www.riveramural.com](http://www.riveramural.com).

*History of Northern California* (1946-48), by Anton Refrigier. Rincon Center, 101 Spear Street (at Mission). [www.page-turnbull.com/organization/projects/comm/rincon/rincon3.html](http://www.page-turnbull.com/organization/projects/comm/rincon/rincon3.html). [www.richardhaas.com/zricon.html](http://www.richardhaas.com/zricon.html). [www.wolfsonian.fiu.edu/collections/c8/newdeal9.html](http://www.wolfsonian.fiu.edu/collections/c8/newdeal9.html).

## BLOODY THURSDAY

### The Longshoremen's and General Strike of 1934

---

**O**n May 9, 1934, International Labor Association (ILA) leaders called a strike of all dockworkers on the West Coast, who were joined a few days later by seamen and teamsters, effectively stopping all shipping from San Diego to Seattle. San Francisco would become the scene of the maritime strike's most dramatic and widely known incidents, aptly described in one headline as "War in San Francisco!"

*The strike tumbled out of control when the Industrial Association, made up of employers and business interests who wished to break the strike, and the power of San Francisco unions, began to move goods from the piers to warehouses. The first running battles between unionists and police began Tuesday, July 3. There was a lull during the July 4 holiday, when no freight was moved, but disturbances picked up again Thursday, July 5, 1934—"Bloody Thursday"—which resulted in the death of two strikers at the hands of San Francisco police. Shortly after the riot, Governor Frank Merriam ordered National Guard troops into San Francisco, and U.S. troops were placed on standby at the Presidio. A mass funeral march of tens of thousands of strikers and sympathizers four days later, and the general strike that followed, effectively shut down both San Francisco and Oakland. The original strike was resolved when federal arbitrators granted the ILA most of its demands.*

San Francisco Chronicle reporter Royce Brier's eyewitness account of *Bloody Thursday* gives some sense of the chaos and turmoil of this turbulent period in the history of the San Francisco waterfront where *The Time of Your Life* is set.

Blood ran red in the streets of San Francisco yesterday.

In the darkest day this city has known since April 18, 1906, one thousand embattled police held at bay five thousand longshoremen and their sympathizers in a sweeping front south of Market Street and east of Second Street.

The furies of street warfare raged for hour piled on hour.

Two were dead, one was dying, 32 others shot and more than three score sent to hospitals.

Hundreds were injured or badly gassed. Still the strikers surged up and down the sunlit streets among thousands of foolhardy spectators. Still the clouds of tear gas, the very air darkened with hurtling bricks. Still the revolver battles.

As the middle of the day wore on in indescribable turmoil the savagery of the conflict was in rising crescendo. The milling mobs fought with greater desperation, knowing the troops were coming; the police held to hard-won territory with grim resolution.

It was a Gettysburg in the miniature, with towering warehouses thrown in for good measure. It was one of those days you think of as coming to Budapest.

The purpose of it all was this: The State of California had said it would operate its waterfront railroad. The strikers had defied the State of California to do it. The police had to keep them off. They did.

Take a San Francisco map and draw a line along Second street south from Market to the bay. It passes over Rincon Hill. That is the west boundary, Market is the north of the battlefield. [The area where the rioting took place is now the heart of San Francisco's "Multimedia Gulch."]

Not a street in that big sector but saw its flying lead yesterday, not a street that wasn't tramped by thousands of flying feet as the tide of battle swung high and low, as police drove them back, as they drove police back in momentary victory.

And with a dumbfounding nonchalance, San Franciscans, just plain citizens bent on business, in automobiles and on foot, moved to and fro in the battle area.

Don't think of this as a riot. It was a hundred riots, big and little, first here, now there. Don't think of it as one battle, but as a dozen battles. . . .

Up came the tear gas boys, six or eight carloads of them. They hopped out with their masks on, and the gas guns laid down a barrage on the hillside. The hillside spouted blue gas like the Valley of the Ten Thousand Smokes.

Up the hill came the moppers-up, phalanxes of policemen with drawn revolvers. The strikers backed sullenly away on Harrison street, past Fremont street. Suddenly came half a dozen carloads of men from the Bureau of Inspectors, and right behind them a truck load of shotguns and ammunition.

In double quick they cleared Rincon Hill. Ten police cars stuck their noses over the brow of the hill. . . .

Now it is one o'clock. Rumors of the coming of the soldiery fly across the town. The strikers are massing down at the foot of Mission and Howard streets, where a Belt Line freight train is moving through.

Police are massed there, too; the tear gas squads, the rifle and shotgun men, the mounties. Not a sign of machine guns so far. But the cops have them. There's plenty of talk about the "typewriters."

There they go again into action, the gas boys! They're going up the stubby little streets from the Embarcadero to Steuart street, half blocks up Mission and Howard. Across by the Ferry Building are thousands of spectators.

Boom! go the gas guns, boom, boom, boom!

Around the corners, like sheep pouring through a gate, go the rioters, but they don't go very far. They stop at some distance, say a half block away, wipe their eyes a minute, and in a moment comes a barrage of rocks.

Here's the hottest part of the battle from now on, along Steuart Street from Howard to Market. No mistake about that. It centers near the ILA headquarters.

See the mounties ride up toward that front of strikers. It's massed across the street, a solid front of men. Take a pair of opera glasses and look at their faces. They are challenging the on-coming mounties. The men in front are kneeling, like sprinters at the mark.

Clatter, clatter, clatter come the bricks. Tinkle goes a window. This is war, boys, and this Steuart Street between Howard and Mission is one of the warmest spots American industrial conflict ever saw.

The horses rear. The mounted police dodge bricks.

A police gold braid stands in the middle of the street all alone, and he blows his whistle. Up come the gas men, the shotgun men, the rifle men. The rioters don't give way.

Crack and boom! Sounds just like a gas bomb, but no blue smoke this time. Back scrambles the mob and two men lie on the sidewalk. Their blood trickles in a crimson stream away from their bodies.

Over it spreads an air of unutterable confusion. The only organization seems to lie in little squads of officers hurrying hither and yon in automobiles. Sirens keep up a continual screaming in the streets. You can hear them far away.

Now it was 2 o'clock. The street battle had gone on for half an hour. How many were shot, no one knew.

Now, it was win or die for the strikers in the next few hours. The time from 2 o'clock to 3 o'clock dragged for police, but went on the wings of the wind for the strikers. An hour's rest. They had to have that one hour.

At 3 o'clock they started again, the fighting surging once more about Steuart and Mission streets. Here was a corner the police had, and had to hold. It was the key to the waterfront, and it was in the shadow of the ILA headquarters.

The rocks started filling the air again. They crashed through street cars. The cars stopped and citizens huddled inside.

Panic gripped the east end of Market street. The ferry crowds were being involved. You thought again of Budapest. The troops were coming. Soldiers. SOLDIERS IN SAN FRANCISCO! WAR IN SAN FRANCISCO!

---

This article originally appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 6, 1934. Available online at the Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco Web site, [www.sfmuseum.org/hist/thursday2.html](http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist/thursday2.html).

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

---

1. The “moral” of the play is often summed up in William Saroyan’s injunction, “In the time of your life, live.” What do you think he meant by that statement? How does it apply to each of the characters in the play? How would you apply it to your own life?
2. If you were to update the play’s period to 2004, which features of the play would you change, and which would you keep the same? Would you still set the play in a bar, or would you pick some other place as a typical location for community interaction?
3. What is the attitude expressed toward money and class in the play? How is that attitude reflected in the comments made by each of, and the relationships among, the characters?
4. What is going on in the world outside Nick’s? How are the events taking place in the outside world brought into the world of the play? Consider labor issues, race relations, international politics, the relationship between the sexes, music, visual arts, the economy, etc.
5. Why do you think Joe spends so much time at Nick’s? Why is he so generous? What do you think happens to Joe after the end of the play? What happens to Tom and Kitty?
6. What does the pinball machine represent?
7. Saroyan identified with the working class throughout his life, and considered writers and artists to be workers themselves. Which trades or professions are represented in the play, and what does it say about them? How is society’s attitude toward workers similar or different today?
8. What does the play say about love: between individuals, and for humanity as a whole?
9. Director Tina Landau says she considers this production a kind of theatrical “mosaic,” inspired by the mural art and jazz music of the 1930s. How is this concept expressed in the design and staging of this production? How is watching this production similar to listening to jazz or viewing a mural depicting city life?

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION . . .

---

Balakian, Peter. *Black Dog of Fate: A Memoir*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Balakian, Nona. *The World of William Saroyan*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1998.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Armenian-American Writer: A New Accent in American Fiction*. New York: Armenian General Benevolent Union, 1958.

Bedrosian, Margaret. *Magical Pine Ring: Culture and the Imagination in Armenian-American Literature*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.

Benton, Thomas Hart. *An Artist in America*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1968.

\_\_\_\_\_, *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography*. Wichita, KA: The University Press of Kansas, 1969.

Calonne, David Stephen. *William Saroyan: My Real Work Is Being*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983.

Floan, Howard. *William Saroyan*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966.

Foster, Edward Halsey. *William Saroyan*. Boise: Boise State University, 1984.

Gold, Herbert. "Conversation with William Saroyan." *California Living* (*Los Angeles Herald Examiner*), December 9, 1979, pp. 8, 10, 30.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Fervency of William Saroyan." *San Francisco Focus*, November 1984, pp. 69-74.

\_\_\_\_\_. "It Is Right That You Should Not Die. . ." *Review* (*San Francisco Examiner/Chronicle*), May 24, 1981, p. 9.

Keyishian, Harry, ed. *Critical Essays on William Saroyan*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1995.

Kherdian, David. *A Bibliography of William Saroyan, 1934-1964*. San Francisco: R. Beacham, 1965.

Lee, Lawrence, and Barry Gifford. *Saroyan: A Biography*. New York: Harper Collins, 1984.

Leggett, John. *A Daring Young Man: A Biography of William Saroyan*. New York: Knopf, 2002.

Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. New York: Marlowe & Co., 1999.

- Saroyan, Aram. *William Saroyan*. San Diego. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Last Rites: The Death of William Saroyan*. New York: W. Morrow, 1982.
- Saroyan, William. *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and Other Stories*. Covelo, CA: Yolla Bolly Press, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Time of Your Life*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The William Saroyan Reader*. New York: G. Braziller, 1965.
- Tashjian, James H., ed. *My Name Is Saroyan*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1983.
- Terkel, Studs. *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. New York: New Press, 2000.
- Whitmore, Jon. *William Saroyan: A Research and Production Sourcebook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.

#### WEB SITES OF INTEREST

- The William Saroyan Literary Foundation International*. [www.williamsaroyan.org](http://www.williamsaroyan.org).
- Books and Writers: William Saroyan*. [www.kirjasto.sci.fi/saroyan.htm](http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/saroyan.htm)
- The William Saroyan Society*. [www.williamsaroyansociety.org/index.html](http://www.williamsaroyansociety.org/index.html).
- William Saroyan*. [www2.tcu.edu/depts/prs/amwest/html/wl0472.html](http://www2.tcu.edu/depts/prs/amwest/html/wl0472.html).
- Seattle Repertory Theatre: The Time of Your Life*. [www.seattlerep.org/SeasonPlayso4/ShowTL.html](http://www.seattlerep.org/SeasonPlayso4/ShowTL.html)
- William Saroyan: The Man, the Writer*. [www.kalinian-saroyan.com/content.html](http://www.kalinian-saroyan.com/content.html).

#### OTHER MEDIA

- The Time of Your Life*. vhs. Directed by H. C. Potter. Starring James Cagney and Broderick Crawford. United Artists, 1948.
- William Saroyan: The Man, the Writer*. vhs. Written and directed by Paul Kalinian. 1994.
- William Saroyan: Magnificent Armenia*. vhs. Directed by G. Balasanian and Mikhail Vartanov. 1977.