

THE LAST TWO PLAYS OF WILLIAM SAROYAN *By Dickran Kouymjian*

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In the following essay, Kouymjian characterizes Saroyan's last two plays as his final theatrical statements, noting that although there are differences among them, the two works share a special kinship due to their link with Saroyan's experiences in the last year of his life.]

William Saroyan wrote *Warsaw Visitor* and *Tales from the Vienna Streets* in Paris during June and July of 1980. He had cancer and knew it. He died less than a year later on May 18, 1981 in the Veteran's Hospital in Fresno, the city where he was born on August 31, 1908. Were these then his last plays? I am not sure and have not wanted to investigate too far in order to allow for the surprises always associated with Saroyan. He was an interior man gifted with a dramatic public presence. He did not talk with others about his writing projects. My files record no later works written in Paris before his departure in late August, and no play titles after *Tales from the Vienna Streets*. When we spoke and met in Fresno in September 1980 and after, he always said he was writing. In November he showed me a thick pile of typed sheets which he said was his journal for the month of October. In a letter sent to me in Paris in March 1981, he repeated that he was writing regularly.

For the moment, then, these can be considered his last plays and among his final works. Today, everyone knows what a prolific writer Saroyan was. He left hundreds of unpublished works in every medium and thousands of fascinating letters. This second volume in the Fresno series of his unpublished plays unites two works devoted to themes emblematic of Saroyan's theater from the beginning. The one written first, *Warsaw Visitor*, deals with death, Saroyan's own, but is anchored firmly in the continuity of living. *Tales from the Vienna Streets* portrays

the hilarious and ridiculous world of mortals through the bathos of universally archetypal characters thrown together in a public environment--a cafe--in the international and neutral city of Vienna. These are not the only themes treated in the plays, nor are they to be regarded as the poles of Saroyan's writing. Yet, life and death and their meaning were to occupy the most important place in the writer's reflections on existence in his final years. One need only remember the titles of his last two published memoirs, *Obituaries* and *Births*, the latter published posthumously, but written between June 23 and July 22, 1979, the former published earlier in 1979, but written during the early months of 1977. Already in 1963 he had published a fascinating memoir entitled *Not Dying*, and in the winter and spring of 1980, while in Fresno, he turned out a long manuscript entitled "More Obituaries."

Obituaries has been acclaimed by reviewers as a daring and highly creative autobiographical reminiscence, despite its curious inception and structure. It is a long book based on the names of those theater personalities who died in 1976 as published in the January 1977 issue of *Variety*. Saroyan discusses those he knew and didn't know, but reflects throughout on the human condition, saying exactly what he feels about death without fear of reprobation for his frank pronouncements on matters usually avoided. The structure of the book, rather its lack of editing, was disparaged by several commentators, because Saroyan wrote it off the top of his head, refusing to check dates, names, or facts. He contractually prevented the editors at Creative Arts Books in Berkeley from making any editorial corrections or changes. There are 135 sections, each a single paragraph several pages long, full of those wonderful page-long sentences that Saroyan so perfectly and instantly crafted.

If there were any readers of Saroyan who still believed the assertions of certain establishment critics of the forties and fifties that he was a writer of light and sentimental tales designed to provide escape from the brutal realities of his time, *Obituaries* should have forced them to reassess that

cliche. As I have remarked in the introduction to *An Armenian Trilogy*, Saroyan was a philosopher with a strong attraction to existentialism. His attitude toward being and ceasing to be was always complex and poly-dimensional. During his final summer he chose in *Warsaw Visitor* to chronicle an illness against which he was struggling without medical aid and without much expectation of survival. He did not brood; he had no time to be gloomy or just wait to see what would happen. A month after he finished *Warsaw Visitor*, in that same summer of 1980, he took up the challenge of a commission to sing the glorious and absurd nature of living in the multi-cultural environment of Vienna through the second play in this volume.

Warsaw Visitor: The Circumstances of Creation

Saroyan was much admired in Eastern Europe. During the last four years of his life he visited its various parts four times. His works were very popular, translated and retranslated regularly in Russian, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Slovak, and Croatian, usually in large editions. He never hid his dislike for the Communist governments of these countries, while affirming his fondness for their people and traditions. His insistence that the people would soon change these regimes was prophetic. He was invited along with other American writers by the U.S.I.A. to make a five nation--Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria--tour of the area in the late spring of 1980. He accepted against his doctor's wishes, but only after he had finished "a big book in Fresno." He whimsically alludes to it in Scene 5, Act Two of *Warsaw Visitor*: "When the Government itself ... invited me to visit Warsaw, I replied, Boys and girls, let me just finish this book I am writing, perhaps the most important of my whole career, 'Adios Muchachos,' ... and I shall be glad to consider accepting your kind invitation. So I am here, for I did indeed finish the great book."

In a memorandum of December 1985, Robert Setrakian, President of the William Saroyan Foundation, asked if I had any information about a work he was informed of by the author's nephew Hank Saroyan, his

brother Henry's son. Saroyan told Hank about the "existence of a full length novel ... entitled 'Adios Amigos' (or something very similar). Mr. Saroyan advised his nephew of its completion and that it was his desire to have it edited by a literary editor for publication." Thus far I have heard nothing further about it, but it is the opus whose completion freed Saroyan to travel to Poland.

Since the late 1950s he spent much of each year in Europe. In 1960 he bought a flat in Paris. This afforded him the freedom of coming and going whenever he wanted, and created a permanent link with Europe. Having already given up living on the beach in Malibu in 1958, he returned to Fresno permanently in 1969 where he bought a house, then two, in a new but modest development to the northwest of where he grew up. During his last twenty years he did his writing and living in Fresno and Paris. From there he traveled freely and regularly, restlessly experiencing and seeing as much as he could. He seemed to be at home everywhere, but as he made clear in his play *Bitlis*, nowhere, in fact, was home.

Observing and recording were fundamental to Saroyan's creative process. Wherever he went he took short notes; whomever he met he questioned, at times endlessly, about the details of his or her life. Scraps of paper were quickly filled with names, dates, miscellany. Titles of plays and stories, novels and essays were jotted down incessantly; most of them got written. Usually it was a title that started a new work, and in these latter years nearly every day was a working day for Saroyan and nearly each of these days produced a new work or a chapter of one. Though I have written about Saroyan's writing habits more than once, it seems important each time a new work is published to describe once again just how he created. There were no outlines or synopses, always a single typed draft, which was edited with pen if it was later sent for publication or production. But since the major portion of the writing of his late years was never sent to publishers, it is preserved exactly as it was first typed.

Works varied in size: short, 1,000-2,000 words; medium, 5,000-10,000 words; long, over 20,000 words. Whatever the subject or literary form, all were written at nearly the same pace: between 2,000 and 2,500 words an hour, usually in half-hour sessions on consecutive days until finished. Not uncommonly, several works were written at the same time, that is, serially on the same days. All of this in addition to his journals and correspondence, which were regular and voluminous. Saroyan was a workaholic. When he was not standing at the typewriter composing, he was accumulating through observation the raw material for the same or the next day's writing. The two plays in this volume were written following this formula.

Warsaw Visitor: The Play

One of the major stops of the five country tour was Warsaw. Saroyan was there at least ten days from May 16 to 26, probably arriving a few days earlier. His journal for the month of May is divided into two parts, from the first to the 12th and from the 12th on into summer, suggesting he might have left the U.S. for Poland on or near that date. After the tour he arrived "home" in Paris on Saturday, June 14 from Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Two days later at 11:40 AM he began Warsaw Visitor, which he intended, according to the header on page one, to be a "7-day Play Monday through Sunday June 16 to 22nd," adding at the top of the first page, "Make it Great." But uncharacteristically he continued writing an extra five days. There was no title at first, just two quotations as substitute: "I Have Seen the Future, and It Works, Lincoln Steffens 1929," "I Have Seen Everything. And Nothing Works, William Saroyan 1980." By the second day the title became "Nothing Works." On June 20th it became "California Traveler" in the morning but "Armenian Traveler" in the afternoon session. Three days later the final title, Warsaw Visitor, was settled on. As he got into the play he seemed to be driven by it. The first day involved only a single warm-up session of half an hour, producing the usual one long closely typed 800 word page. On the second day there were morning and afternoon sessions of forty minutes each, then three sessions a day for ten days, except for one more

two-session day (the fourth) and a four-session day, four pages (the sixth day). On the last six days he worked continuously for an hour and twenty minutes. In all he typed thirty-three pages, 27,000 words, in fifteen and a half hours.

Insistence on these details will probably seem tedious to some. But is it not important in such a personal play as this one to know the circumstances of composition? To know that Saroyan poured it out as quickly as he could type? And that its raw state, this first version, would have been little modified--a few words added, a few dropped--had he prepared the script for production? Of course it is important, and we as readers want to know as much as possible. Like Hemingway, Saroyan was obsessed by his craft and very careful about detail. Saroyan could relate immediately what he experienced with style and form. He had the traditional knack of a storyteller, a poet a step away from the living oral tradition of the Near East. As in almost all of his work, he speaks to the reader directly, candidly, with a freshness and honesty that is disarming. If there are contradictions, so what; life is built on paradox and confusion. Some day the actual chronology of the trip can be easily reconstructed from Saroyan's detailed and typed journals which he maintained until he entered the hospital for the last time.

As was common in the later typescripts of his plays, Saroyan made no indication of the division of the work into acts or scenes and left virtually no stage directions. He would provide this information only when it was accepted for publication or if it had been commissioned for performance. More often than not, each working session of one page represented a scene and was so labeled at the top of the page. Thus the number of pages equaled the number of scenes, an arbitrary way of sectioning that seldom corresponded to the natural transitions in the work.

I believe the first page of the typescript was intended as a Prologue, following the usage of the Book of Job and Goethe's Faust, because Saroyan sets the stage here for the events to follow. I have divided the rest of the play into two acts with five and seven scenes. In the Prologue,

Saroyan as Moustache, the writer, tells us plainly his life's plan, starting with his youthful decision to choose art as a way of living, quickly discovering that art and life are the same. From the beginning Saroyan's working method has been unvaried. He has described it numerous times, but perhaps never so succinctly as in this opening: "I went everywhere and saw everybody and everything and came home to myself and this infernal machine ... and put down in simple words what I had seen and heard." He worked feverishly, perhaps even in a second state. One thinks of Franz Kafka who, like Saroyan, wrote his novel *The Castle* in a single sitting, trance-like, and made no changes after. In Saroyan's final article for Paris's *International Herald Tribune* entitled "Tension and Writing and Obits in Variety," published on August 27, 1980, he elaborates on his ecstasy while writing:

It has been my experience from the very beginning of writing, and I mean from the first days of putting words slowly and neatly on lined paper at school, that there is tension in writing. ... And then when I went into the thing with everything I had, the tension increased so much it seemed to efface time, place, and person, myself; the thing to be made, by writing, became pretty much the only thing, the thing lost inside the unknown of the beginning of things, of systems, the universe ... in a straight line forever everywhere, and straight into you, and after your flash of being, straight out of you, leaving you a name in *Variety*.

Reader, sometimes long before I was 20 years old, after I had worked for as little as three hours on a work of art in the form of writing, ... as little as half an hour, obliterating self, time, and place, and I came to, came out of it, what do you think I saw in my own face as I stood and pissed and glanced in the bathroom mirror? I saw somebody else, myself but somebody else, not myself alone, as it had been when I hadn't concentrated on the production of art with so much intensity. It was all of my people, all unknown to me, it was the human race itself.

Autobiography and Theater

From the beginning of his career, Saroyan almost always wrote directly out of his own experience. In his last years he was devoted to an

exploration of the self. *Warsaw Visitor* is a minute examination of how a writer, while dying, continues to live as he had always done. The three major characters of the play--the Devil, Moustache and Saroyan--represent different aspects of Saroyan's own reality. Moustache is the American-Armenian writer traveling to Warsaw for the U.S.I.A., interacting with officials, other writers, and the Poles. The Devil is supposed to represent the dark side of his personality, but is almost likeable and certainly not satanic. In the play he speaks only with Moustache, who recognizes him as his alter-ego: "You are myself, and if I am not thyself, ... it comes to the same thing (Act One, Scene 5)." The Devil is also used to point out all of Saroyan's defects, the ones he was most accused of: ill-mannered, over-talkative, demanding center stage and all the attention, childish and foolish. Finally, there is Saroyan the writer in Paris, typing the play about his own visit a month earlier, offering occasional comments, explanations, and analyses to the audience about his characters and the meaning of their actions.

There is no wager made, at least not openly, between Moustache and the Devil, except that at the end of the Prologue, the travel-weary writer, to get rid of his over-talkative counterpart, says, "Just let me sleep. ... Is it a deal, Sir?" To which the Devil replies: "You know perfectly well the only deal I make, for it is in all of the legends, poems, stories, plays, operas, and ballets of life." Saroyan refers quite openly to Goethe and to the Faust legend, with its noble and ancient theme and its implications of the writer-intellectual's confrontation with living and dying. On the other hand there is some confusion about the opera, for Moustache talks about Mozart, who did not choose it for a subject, and ignores Gounod, whose Faust is the most popular. I have suggested elsewhere that Haratch, the play he wrote a year earlier in the summer of 1979, like *Warsaw Visitor*, consciously chose the form and theme of another classic, Plato's Symposium.

The Themes

The major theme of the play is death, yet the play is neither tragic nor morbid. There are several minor themes: the bankruptcy of the

Communist system, and its cruel aggression against personal creation, about which Saroyan is uncompromising. This position was a bold one for a writer so loved, praised and solicited in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, especially ten years ago, before anyone ever heard of Gorby or perestroika. But his satire is not only directed against openly totalitarian regimes. There is also much ridicule of his fellow American writers on the trip and the officials who run various U.S. agencies abroad. As usual Saroyan is a merciless social critic who gets in his digs against organized institutions including his own government. He was always thoroughly anti-establishment. That the world is hardly a just or benevolent place is self evident for him, but the responsibility for this state of affairs rests squarely on everyone; each individual is guilty of the collective crimes of humanity. Early in the play in a long dream sequence he also directs his anger toward wife and children. Another motif is the constant interference of one's past with the present. This is part of his persistent exercise of remembering in order to understand how what is came to be.

Saroyan and the Jews

A final important theme in the play is the fate of the Jews. Individual scenes are devoted to visits to the Jewish Theatre of Warsaw, the Jewish Cemetery and the Jewish Museum of the city. Saroyan's eloquent defense of recent Jewish history and his devotion to the courageous survival of the Jews should bury forever the baseless and injurious accusations made against him in the biographies by his son Aram, William Saroyan (1983) and Lawrence Lee and Barry Gifford, Saroyan, A Biography (1984). Collectively, the long sections on the Jews of Poland and the value to humankind of the diaspora rank among the most compassionate and sensitive on the subject in modern literature. As an Armenian who strongly identified with the suffering of his own people, Saroyan underlines the natural empathy he feels for the Jews. This attitude serves as the major thrust for such a statement as, "the Jewish people are the people who have always been nearest to the human soul," uttered during the visit to the Jewish Museum in Act Two, Scene 6. Or

further in the same sequence commenting on Auschwitz and Buchenwald: "... the Jewish dead are different from all of the other dead murdered by the rest of us--oh yes, we did it, ... it was not just the Germans, it was not just Hitler and his big fat skinny sick brilliant stupid clever dirty partners who always always only followed orders, as they kept saying at the Nuremberg trials--it was us, old boy, us, us, and I mean us."

Sickness and Death

The dead and death are central to this play, which Saroyan himself calls a dramatic memoir. When the Devil in Act Two, Scene 5 asks him if he is "thinking Death," Moustache replies, "Yes, I am thinking Death, but I have always thought of Death. How could I possibly not have done so? It is there at the center of us." Moustache is dying, physically; the Devil says it first early in the play: "He's dying, he knows it, he doesn't believe it (Act One, Scene 3)." Then in the same scene the writer repeats it to the Devil-turned-doctor, whose prognostication was cancer of the prostate. "I don't like the diagnosis which already is established ... and has already killed me. ... Doc, my reply is this: in your language, yes, I have cancer, in my language, it is myself that I have, another variation of myself." "Never mind the cancer part," he says in Act Two, Scene 3, "everybody has got to have something and there is cancer in the Saroyan family. ... A tribe will have cancer in its chemistry for centuries and it will do the job of allowing passage out." By such language Saroyan shows us how he has come to terms with his imminent end, not hesitating to describe from time to time the sensation of the cancer's growth and the resultant discomfort. But Saroyan's grace saves us as witnesses to his dying, as his acceptance of the illness and its integration into his personal history saves him. There is neither life nor death for Saroyan, only various forms of being.

In a remarkable speech in the penultimate scene of *Warsaw Visitor* Saroyan describes his actual existence at the moment of writing: ... death has come to me. Oh, I'm still alive and still kicking, which means I am still fighting out each day's demands on me to survive and to

make the most of every moment in Budapest, then in Bucharest, then in Belgrade, and finally back in my own flat in Paris ... in all of those places and among all of the activities in which I figured I was dying, I was indeed dead or as good as dead but still wandering around, and this is the part that keeps itself aloof from us--I have always been precisely what I have been and what I am at this very moment: who I am and what I am and how and all the rest of it has always been like this. I am here, I am myself, I am nobody else, I have my own as each of us has his own: body, heritage, sleep, meaning, style, character, truth, and if you like complications, untruth, unreality, unbeing and so on, simultaneously with the opposites of them--and there has not been, ever, any full deliverance from death, not the possibility of it, but the living reality of it in the very midst of the living reality of its opposite, everything I have just mentioned, and that is precisely how it is this instant, in Paris, on Thursday, the 26th of June, 1980, as I sip tea and stand at the typewriter and write these words which now either an actor is speaking or a reader, yourself, is reading.

William Saroyan was not known for complaining about physical discomforts. He was deaf in one ear and let everyone know that was why he usually spoke so loud. Several times he has written that he was usually a bit ill, which he considered a normal condition of life. He suffered from an ulcer, and family and friends believed it to be the source of his discomfort in the last years. Even his close cousin, San Francisco writer and painter Archie Minasian, did not know he had cancer until Saroyan collapsed in his Fresno home Sunday night or Monday morning April 20, 1980, the day cousin Ruben Saroyan found him and had him rushed to the hospital. In the previous fall, in September and October, he told me he was sick, but never mentioned cancer. He led me to believe that it was an internal problem, ulcers or digestion, which was the reason for his making elaborate plans for his estate and the William Saroyan Foundation he had established years before. It was because of an ominous premonition, I thought, that he asked me to help arrange the meeting with California State University,

Fresno officials in October 1980 to sign a new will to which I was a witness-signatory.

Who knew about the cancer? Almost no one. Even his older brother Henry said during an interview recorded in Lee and Gifford's biography (p. 308), "I talked to him during the initial stages, but I did not know that he had cancer of the prostate. He went to the University of California [in San Francisco], to a mutual friend of ours, and I was never told what the diagnosis was." Doctors and nurses, essentially those in contact with Saroyan during the discovery and early treatment of his illness, knew. His Fresno physician was Artin Jibilian, who in the play appears as another facet of the Devil in Act One, Scene 3: "... the shy silent intelligent Armenian born in Alexandria, oh I suppose 40 years or so ago." Saroyan was right about age and other details. Dr. Jibilian is a urologist. He was born and educated in Cairo of Armenian parents. He finished medical school at Cairo University, a faculty where instruction was in English. Internship and residencies were done in Detroit after immigration to the U.S. in 1967. Upon finishing service in the U.S. Army and enjoying a fellowship in urology at the Mayo Clinic, he set up private practice in Fresno in 1975. One of his children is named Aram; this pleased Saroyan a lot.

I have on several occasions spoken to Artin Jibilian about Saroyan's illness and the good doctor sent me the following account in a personal letter dated July 10, 1990.

My first encounter with Saroyan was in the latter part of October 1979 when he was in urinary retention. After taking care of the immediate problem I explained that he needed surgery. As you know, he had a keen interest in details, therefore, the operation was described and scheduled as soon as possible which was not soon enough for Saroyan. The operation was done on October 27, 1979. The cancer was not diagnosed with the operation, but his prostate felt suspicious. I was almost certain but I wanted to confirm. At this point he refused any further tests, biopsy or scan. He did not want to know, stating that it did not matter because even if he had cancer he would not go along with any treatment for it.

He gave a distinct impression that he would accept cancer and that if it would cause his death that is his destiny and [he] would not prolong or change the course by an artificial means.

Asked about the advice and medication he gave Saroyan before his trip to Eastern Europe, Dr. Jibilian replied, "He was very particular about details, even in his last days he would inquire about the name of the medication from the nurse and turn around and ask [his cousin] Ruben [Saroyan] to write it down for him. I think the medication I gave Saroyan in the summer of 1980 was Darvon or Darvacet." Gail Sarkisian, a nurse at the Veteran's Hospital and a friend of Saroyan's, who was among those attending him during his final illness, reported to me just after his death that in the summer of 1980 she had a phone conversation with him while he was still in Paris in which the writer complained of stomach pains and asked what to do. She also added that on February 22, 1980, nearly three months before a strenuous one month tour of five East European countries, Saroyan found out that he did have cancer.

Those close to Saroyan have often asked why he chose to struggle with willfulness as his only weapon against cancer of the prostate rather than undergo what has been described as a common operation with a very high rate of success if caught in the early stages. The late Archie Minasian, in conversations about this question while he was a guest on our campus during the October 1981 Saroyan Memorial Festival at Fresno State, said that it was a form of suicide, "Bill committed suicide." This seems very uncharacteristic of Saroyan and nowhere in the published or unpublished material that I have so far been able to read is there any concrete evidence of a deliberate letting go.

But Saroyan's life was harder than most people imagine. It was focused entirely upon work. Every day was a working day except when he was traveling from one "office" (Fresno) to the other (Paris). Visits to other countries were to acquire more experiential material, to meticulously

observe and record names of people and places in order to turn the new experience immediately into literature. When at home, he felt compelled to work at the typewriter and seemed to have little leisure except breaks on his bicycle in Fresno or walking the streets in Paris in between or after long and intense writing sessions. He was literally addicted to writing; he needed it to live and breathe. And there was no way he could escape from its tyranny and the demands writing made on him except by escaping from living. Surely he was conscious of this, and many have thought about it more than once in analyzing his last two years. Perhaps his journals will provide a clearer answer to the why that we all ask.

One must also not forget that Saroyan seemed at peace in the last months of his life, as the various acts of putting his affairs in order demonstrate. He had come to terms with his cancer and his imminent death, otherwise how could he have described his dying in *Warsaw Visitor* without a trace of anger or bitterness? Saroyan's acceptance of the inevitability of dying is further demonstrated in the essay for the IHT quoted earlier, written at the end of August just before his return to Fresno:

All right, it starts and it stops [the struggle of living], and when it stops if you have had some connection with the world in which William Shakespeare was a kind of star, your name is listed in the annual year-end issue of *Variety* ... and there you are. Dead. And famous. And clearly a damned fool. (For dying, of course, for not finding a way to go on fighting, for losing the fight, for giving up the body and spirit's use of muscle in tension and opposition.) Or you are an object of pity--you died too soon, you died in a stupid accident, you were shot in the head by a jealous husband, or a jealous wife, ... son, ... daughter, ... stranger. ... Or if you are not an object of pity, you are something worse that courtesy almost compels a writer not to mention--indifference: You are an objective of indifference: You have died, your name is in *Variety's* list, and nobody gives a shit.

At the end of *Warsaw Visitor*, Saroyan typically parades all the characters on the stage for a funny series of non sequiturs, one flowing

into the next so naturally. Even the Devil enters into the exchange, now apparently visible and audible not just to the writer, but to everybody. The last words of Moustache's final long speech are, "It is the end of this memoir of my visit to Warsaw and my death there, if you like, or anybody's death there, or anywhere else. That is what it comes to, and I feel it is enough, although it is really so little as to be really nothing, man, nothing at all, so you went to Warsaw in your 72nd year and with you went your disease and your pal Old Red Tail and your life, your entire life so far, going on and on but scheduled to stop."

There is a nobility in this unusual literary exercise of writing while dying and analyzing the process without rancor, regret or sorrow. It is a tour de force because, as a spectator or reader, though surprised by what Saroyan is telling us, wishing like him that it was not true, we are never frightened nor allowed to feel any apprehension as we go on reading. Nearly the opposite occurs: for we experience the transcendental magic, almost redemption, that we have each felt when reading Saroyan's first story, "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze," at the end of which the young writer dies of hunger in our own time, in our own world callously indifferent to the sacrifice of creation. Yet the writer is saved, and of that we are convinced through Saroyan's art, just as Saroyan saves himself the same way in *Warsaw Visitor*. That is the creative magic Saroyan understood so early and reiterated to the end: salvation comes through art which immortalizes being. ...

Tales from the Vienna Streets

Between the writing of his last two plays Saroyan went to Vienna for the world premiere of his *Play Things* at Vienna's English Theatre scheduled for June 29. It was a fast trip. From an inscription on a book he bought in Vienna, we know he arrived in the Austrian capital on June 28 after completing *Warsaw Visitor* the afternoon before, and was back in Paris on the morning of July 1.

Play Things and Vienna's English Theatre

A fortnight earlier, on the 16th of June, the same day Saroyan began to write *Warsaw Visitor*, he made some additions to *Play Things*, originally entitled "One Thing and Another." When in 1978 he was invited by the Director of Vienna's English Theatre, Franz Schafranek, to join the famous list of Americans--Edgar Lee Masters, Dorothy Parker, Tennessee Williams, Thornton Wilder, Neil Simon--whose works had been performed at the Theatre, Saroyan obliged with *Play Things*, subtitled for the production, "A Theatrical Lark."

Produced by Schafranek, the play was directed by Swedish actress, film director, and writer Mai Zetterling with sets by the pop artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987). In a series of scenes with titles like "Lion's Head and Bear Skin" and "Cup and Saucer," inanimate objects familiar to everybody take on life to argue and discuss a variety of problems and paradoxes. In a letter to Schafranek, quoted in the program, Saroyan offered suggestions for mounting the play: "... bright lights, color, earnestness, absurdity, childishness, health, amusement, intelligence." The play remains unpublished, but will appear in a later volume in this series.

Vienna's English Theatre was founded in 1963 by Ruth Brinkmann, an American actress, with her Austrian actor-director husband Franz Schafranek. For years it has had the distinction of being the only full time, fully professional English language theater in continental Europe. It has been housed since 1975 in a splendid neo-Baroque theater built in 1905-6 in Vienna's Josefsgasse. In addition to Saroyan's *Play Things* it has also mounted world premieres of works by Tennessee Williams and more recently Edward Albee, and offered a wide repertory of twentieth century British and American classics.

It was not Saroyan's first Vienna premiere. On February 17, 1960, his *The Dogs*, or *The Paris Comedy*, a play written in Paris in August 1959, while his children Aram and Lucy were living with him in a rented flat had its first performance and then went on to West Germany. It was published ten years later in New York in a volume entitled *The Dogs, or The Paris Comedy and Two Other Plays: Chris Sick, or Happy New Year Anyway, Making Money and 19 Other Very Short Plays*. 1959, the

year after he left forever his home on the beach at Malibu was a busy time for Saroyan, for on March 12 his most surrealist play, *Jim Dandy*, *Fat Man in a Famine*, written before the World War, but published and first performed in 1947, had its Philadelphia premiere. Early in *Warsaw Visitor* Moustache offers proof to Ms. Rye of his fluency in German by relating that he once said to film director George Stevens, "Nein, nein, Jim Dandy ist Jim Dandy," and by pronouncing Jim Dandy, "Shim Tdanty."

During the Vienna trips, Saroyan, as was his custom, explored the city, interested in everybody and everything. Daily he went to the *Griechenbeisl*, one of Vienna's best known and oldest traditional restaurants, already famous in the fifteenth century. Retired California Superior Court Judge Spurgeon Avakian reported in a letter of July 31, 1987 to Ben Amirkhanian, Director of Fresno's annual Saroyan Festival, how he and his wife sat at a table in the restaurant with Saroyan's picture on the wall above it. "The waiter told us that ... Saroyan went there daily, for coffee and conversation ... whenever he was in Vienna." After the premiere of *Play Things*, the production and direction of which Saroyan liked very much, Schafranek asked Saroyan to write a play especially for his theater. Saroyan agreed and asked that Mai Zetterling also direct it, since he was so pleased by her approach to *Play Things*. Two weeks after his last trip, on Thursday afternoon July 17, 1980, he began *Tales from the Vienna Streets*, "a play, ballet, opera, etcetera etcetera," as he indicated on page one. He later crossed out all but "a play." Exactly a week later on Wednesday the 23rd he had finished it, though the next day he added an addendum with clarifications and some additional stage directions. Again he began with his usual habit of completing one 800 word page on the first day, on the second he wrote two, and for the next five days, three pages each in continuous sessions. His speed in composing had declined: an average of thirty-eight minutes per page for the eighteen pages of the play as compared to the more characteristic twenty-eight minutes per page for the thirty-three pages of *Warsaw Visitor*, of which eighteen pages were written in less than half

an hour. Only one page of Tales was written in less than thirty minutes, and three pages demanded more than fifty minutes, an extremely slow pace for Saroyan. Why? Was he fatigued or suffering from his cancer? Was he not sure of where the play was going? Did he allow interruptions--answering the telephone for example?

Franz Schafranek kept in contact with Saroyan about the new play and its logical premiere in Vienna's English Theatre. A short time after completing the play, Saroyan carefully edited it with pen on the original typescript, as was his custom, had several photocopies made, and mailed one to Schafranek on July 29, 1980. According to the latter, he visited Saroyan in Paris in August "to finish collaboration" on the production of the play, but the work was "still incomplete when Saroyan left for Fresno." Schafranek contacted him once in Fresno, "but the work remained incomplete when Saroyan died." This information was reported to me orally by Schafranek himself on July 31 of this year (1990), yet nine years earlier to the day, six weeks after Saroyan's death, Thomas Quinn Curtiss, the veteran theater critic of the International Herald Tribune, published a piece in the IHT (July 31, 1981) entitled: "Saroyan's 'Tales' Due for Vienna Premiere."

In this preview Curtiss discussed aspects of the play in such detail that he most certainly had access to the typescript. He was precise about the production, "... the play, not yet published, is scheduled for its premiere next season [that is 1981-82] at Vienna's English Theatre." Saroyan, in the fall of 1980, never talked about a future production of this play with me, but the copy of the typescript I was given can be considered a completed one, as finished as any of the dozens of plays in manuscript that I have examined, and among them the only one with such detailed stage directions. There can be no doubt that Saroyan thought of a Vienna production from the first moment of the play's composition, otherwise no character descriptions or staging indications would have made their way into the original writing.

Most of the plays of his last twenty years--there are more than one

hundred--were written by Saroyan with no thought of their immediate production. He talks about this over and over again in letters and published memoirs. "In 1943 I turned my back on Broadway, but I did not stop writing plays. I simply stopped offering my plays to the machine that was huffing and puffing in the business of getting plays on the boards in front of New Yorkers and people from out of town who had money to spend on tickets. I wrote new plays every year, I have the plays, and they do constitute my theatre, and they are part of the real American theatre, and of the real world theatre, even though they have not been produced, performed, and witnessed." (Here Comes There Goes You Know Who, p. 224.) The same theme but with more elaboration is frolicked with in "How to Write a Great Play," published by TV Guide, March 6, 1976:

The way to write a great play is the same as the way to write a poor play. What you do is get the materials and objects needed for any kind of writing: paper, typewriter, pen or pencil. And you use these materials and objects in the writing of whatever it is that you want to write. ... Traditionally, plays gets performed, but only if the playwright insists on it, as most of the famous American playwrights do, and only if the playwrights are willing to put up with the hocus-pocus of the theater, and for years I haven't been willing. But that doesn't mean that I don't write plays. I write new plays every year, because writing is my work and I prefer work to idleness. ... It is too much bother of a boring nature to fight with the money, and the real estate, and the national art councils, and the foundations, to get a play on the boards--never mind the unions and the Mafiosi of success and failure of the Great White Way. ... I write plays out of the madness that has come into my life from early bookreading and continuous involvement with the anonymous but immortal human race in Fresno, San Francisco, New York, Paris and the cities and towns of the rest of the world that I knew.

He concludes by answering the original question, "The way to write a great play is to be great, isn't it? The way to write a poor play is to be thinking of getting rich."

Not only was Vienna's English Theatre ready to produce *Tales from the Vienna Streets* in the 1981-82 season, but Mai Zetterling and Andy Warhol were ready to collaborate on it. Dr. Schafranek, in the same personal conversation already referred to, said, "When I told Andy Warhol about the possibility of doing *Tales*, he was excited and said 'sensational, I'll be happy to do it. Send me word when it is ready.'" Schafranek even contacted the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington about a co-production. "They were very excited and even wanted to mount an exhibition on Saroyan to coincide with the opening." Furthermore, Schafranek continued, "I contacted Elia Kazan, Saroyan's contemporary in age, to direct the play, but he said he had stopped directing, adding that he liked Saroyan a lot and was flattered by the offer."

The play, however, was never produced in that season, nor after. Schafranek maintains the collaboration was not completed, yet the play was scheduled for a coming production and so publicized months after Saroyan's death. Was it a question of permission? Was it an overly ambitious project? For the moment I do not know the answer. ... In the previous pages these plays have been discussed in terms of their origins, their mode of construction, and Saroyan's particular situation while he was creating them. In conclusion I should like to assess them as works of art.

Warsaw Visitor and Tales from the Vienna Streets: Two Parts of a Whole

Always when the ancients went in search of God they traveled East. By fate, fortune, or foreknowledge, Saroyan's voyage to the East, the very cradle of those ancients, was the source and motivation of his last two plays. Written swiftly and almost simultaneously and inspired by the two key waystops on his journey, their interrelationship seems inevitable. To begin with, they share an uncommon dramatic feature: the use of an "outside" narrator, a kind of off-stage commentator who apprises the audience of goings on. In *Warsaw Visitor* he is Saroyan himself,

stepping forward to introduce characters, to describe the course of his illness, and to dazzle us with art as paradox. In *Tales from the Vienna Streets* he is Van, standing aloof from the action and describing it objectively until almost the end of the play, when shortly after Alfie dies Ho tells us: "Van has accepted a part in the play." Key phrases too recur in both the plays, the most notable being "Sir, I say Sir," almost a refrain in *Warsaw Visitor* and popping up unexpectedly in *Tales from the Vienna Streets* as though to point a finger at its counterpart.

The meaning of the two plays actually underlines their relationship. I mentioned earlier how in *Warsaw Visitor* Saroyan delves deep into the meaning of life and death and how the characters in *Tales from the Vienna Streets* are archetypal. The themes of both plays are therefore vast, perhaps the broadest in scope of any of Saroyan's works. And the timeless central motif of each is established by the character of the city in which the play is set. "Warsaw means Jews." Saroyan as Moustache tells us near the end of *Warsaw Visitor*, having made it clear earlier in the play that by Jews he also means Armenians, Africans, and Asians--minorities set apart, in isolation. Warsaw, pulling back from Russia and alien to Western Europe, is also set apart, in isolation. And Saroyan, a writer traveling with, but set apart from, his fellows, and further isolated by the immanence of death, becomes the individual embodiment of Warsaw. Moreover his self, his alter ego, and his shadow side (the Devil) face his own death march with the courage of persecuted minorities everywhere; the drama of their living and dying parallels his own. "We are fragile and can go, can be taken at any moment," he tells us, "but as long as we are not taken we are without doubt one of the most enduring orders of substances and actions that may exist or might be imagined as existing in the world, on earth, in the universe."

If Warsaw is unique unto itself, Vienna has "settled dead center in the heart of all of the great cities of the world: Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Rome, Madrid, London, New York, San Francisco." If Warsaw is isolation, Vienna is the world. In *Warsaw Visitor* minorities are a race apart. In *Tales from the Vienna Streets*, they are the "keepers of secrets: ... gypsies, Jews, farmers, bankers, garbage-collectors, lawyers,

accountants, floor-walkers, doctors, and Armenians." We are all of us minorities, minorities of one, each sharing with our private devil the guilt and innocence of humanity.

In *Tales* Saroyan moves from the individual to the collective through clearly archetypal characters. His language is replete with biblical allusions: the birth of a child, three wise men, and over and over the mention of a savior. The Haydakor Coffee House is also archetypal. It is the locus of idyllic tranquillity, the original Garden of Paradise, as so many references and situations in the play make clear. It may be that behind Saroyan's character the Guarden Offizier is not a lapsus for the German Gardeoffizier, Officer of the Guards, but rather for Gartenoffizier, Officer of the Garden.

In this archetypal Garden the most timeless drama of them all takes place. Alfie, husband and wife, father and mother, man and woman alike, "a male child from about 30 years ago went berserk in the soul and dropped dead." In this culminating moment of the play we have the Fall of Man, of humankind, in Haydakor, Saroyan's Garden of Eden. Yet in *Tales* as in *Warsaw Visitor* death is not the end. Alfie died while striving to create, striving to perpetuate the human race. In recognition of this, Van accepts the part of "Father" (capital letter, Saroyan's) in the play. Our Father enters the Garden and restores it to life while Hovakim, St. Joachim, father of Mary prepares the Cafe-Garden "for tomorrow." Then "very slowly the lights go out and something like a dazzling sky full of childhood's galaxies of stars seems to be where the scene had been." In *Warsaw Visitor* the individual prevails in the face of death, the Dying Old Man on the Flying Trapeze leaps off into the unknown one final time, open-eyed and unafraid. In *Tales from the Vienna Streets* all humankind, creative and striving, dies and yet lives on to create and strive again, open-eyed and unafraid. "The play goes on," Saroyan tells us, for him, and them, and all of us.

Source: Dickran Kouymjian, Introduction to *Warsaw Visitor and Tales from the Vienna Streets: The Last Two Plays of William Saroyan*, edited by Dickran Kouymjian, pp. 1-37. Fresno: California State University

Press, 1991.