

HAMO BEKNAZARYAN'S *PEPO* IN THE UNITED STATES

Bakhchinyan A. H.
PhD in Philology



Hamo Beknazaryan
(1891-1965)

There were very few miracles in the history of Armenian cinema. One of them was that some films “broke away” from the Soviet iron curtain and had some international exposure.

The premiere of the first Armenian sound film, Hamo Beknazaryan’s *Pepo*¹, on June 15, 1935, marked the beginning of its triumphal march - without hyperbole - through the movie theaters of the Soviet Union, as well of a number of countries. *Pepo* was based on the homonymous play written by Gabriel Sundukyan, a classic name of Armenian playwriting, in 1876.

It was the first Armenian language sound film created in Armenia². “*The film was a great success with the audience and was even acknowledged as the most outstanding work of Soviet cinema in the pre-war decade*”³.

This new Soviet film had a mature directing hand. Besides its Armenian ethnographic features and the social context, it was understandable and acceptable to the international audience; thus, it gained international recognition⁴ and came to represent Armenian culture abroad.

Pepo crossed the ocean almost immediately after its premiere, in the fall of 1935, and was featured in the big cities of the eastern and western coasts of the United States.

Armenian-Americans, understandably, greeted the talking film from the homeland with great enthusiasm. *Pepo* thrilled Rouben Mamoulian, the Armenian genius of Hollywood and Broadway of the era, and became a real discovery for him. His reasons were not purely personal; on the screen, Hamo Beknazaryan had authentically depicted Mamoulian’s birthplace Tiflis and immortalized the Armenian Cathedral of the city, which would be destroyed by order of Soviet leader Lavrenti Beria just



Gabriel Sundukyan
(1825-1912)

¹ For the most current analysis of this film, see Գալստյան Ա., Հայացք մեր կինոյին, Երևան, 2011, էջ 22-29.

² Actually, the first Armenian talking film preceded *Pepo* by several months Armenian Rural Wedding by Jean Lubinac. It was shot in Paris by *Pathé-Nathan* studio in 1935. About this film, see Բախչինյան Ա., Հայերը համաշխարհային կինոյում, Երևան, 2004, էջ 615.

³ Egorova T., Soviet Film Music (Contemporary Music Studies), London, 1997, p. 54.

⁴ For instance, it was screened in Czechoslovakia with the title One Thousand Rubles for a Woman (see Դզնունի Դ., Ուրվագիծ Հայաստանի կինոնատոգրաֆիայի պատմության, Երևան, 1961, էջ 92).

two years later. Mamoulian, rigorous and unbiased in his appreciation of arts, was already familiar with two productions of Armenkino, *Namus* (Honor, 1925) and *Yerkir Nairi* (Land of Nairi, 1930), both directed by Beknazaryan himself. Now he was able to watch a work that had been made on an appropriate level and represented the first significant expression of Armenian feature film cinematography.



Rouben Mamoulian
(1897-1987)

Mamoulian said in particular: *“My ideas on the role of sound film were more strengthened when one day, sitting at a corner of the movie theater; I watched the Armenian talking movie, Pepo. I watched it with astonishment and deep joy. Glory to the miracle of film, because here, in the heart of Hollywood, I was able to see the face of my country and hear its voice... It was incredible to see on the screen the scenes of my hometown Tiflis, to watch live and colorful characters skillfully composed by Sundukyan, and to hear the soft music of the Armenian language. The technical and artistic progress achieved by Pepo in comparison to Armenian films I had watched before surprised me and made me happy”*⁵.

It appears that Beknazaryan's masterpiece did not attract just Armenian-Americans who were thirsty for their language and culture. According to film historian Daniel Dznuni, the success of the film in the United States made it possible to record the songs of the movie in gramophone records, and Hrachia Nersisyan, who performed the role of Pepo, received letters from his New York friends, which described how the American ladies perform songs and dances of *Pepo* in various entertainment places and salons, especially the dance *Mirzayi* by Natel, a female character of the film⁶. Unfortunately, no trace either of those gramophone records or of the letters addressed to Nersisyan has surfaced so far.



A filming location of *Pepo*

The most valuable point in this context is that American film critics of the time left their opinions and references on the first Armenian sound film. For the time being, I have succeeded in finding three responses of the American press: one is positive, another one is not so positive, and the third one is negative. I will start from the latter, a review written by Marguerite Tazelaar, film critic of the *New York Herald Tribune*, and published on October 11, 1935⁷. This name is not unknown to American film criticism;

⁵ «Հայաստանի ծայնը», Մշակ, 24.04.1936:

⁶ See Dznuni, *Urvagits*, pp. 92-93.

⁷ The review was translated and published in the Armenian-American press: see Պեպոն ամերիկացի քննադատի ակնոցով. տաղտալի և անկատար, «Հայրենիք», հոկտեմբեր 15, 1935.

Tazelaar (1894-1970) was the author of many film reviews in the American press from the 1930s to the 1950s:



Pepo (Hrachia Nersisyan) and Kakuli (Davit Malyan)

"Pepo" - Cameo

"Pepo", Soviet Armenian film presented by Amkino, directed by Bek-Nazarov and based on the play by Gabriel Sundukyan.

Although this is an Armenian picture, made in Tiflis, with Armenian dialogues (it has English subtitles), it was produced by Armenkino,

U.S.S.R., this year, and is released here through the usual Soviet channels and so it is surprising to find the work dull and incomplete.

Called a pictorial representation of Armenian customs and social life in Georgia, 1860, it has nothing of the satirical mood of the Soviets, unless you can call the broad, not very pointed caricature of the town's rich man satire, and it has no connected story nor is it interpreted intelligently.

It discusses through long and dreary reels the tragedy of a young woman whose fiancé refuses to marry her when he finds the conventional dowry is not forthcoming because the girl's mother has lost the receipt and the Shylock-merchant who holds the funds which the girl's father had left to his keeping will not part with the gold without the receipt.

Pepo is the girl's brother, who is supposed to represent a workman struggling against great odds in the blind hope that he and his family will not be crushed. The idea never gets across although the tedium does".

Tazelaar's views may be explained not only through her subjective perception and personal taste, but perhaps also through the fact that, as we will see in the next section, the film was not translated in its entirety and she probably felt bored due to her inability to fully understand the narration. Otherwise, the claims that the film lacks a consistent plot and that it does not reveal the idea that Pepo saves his family from collapse are highly debatable.

The second response (the "not-so-positive" one) was published in *Motion Picture Daily* (October-December, 1935). The anonymous author wrote an announcement about a new film screened in American movie theaters, with some assessments. The text is presented below:

"PEPO, a dialogue film in Armenian and Russian; directed by Bek-Nazarof; music by Khatchaturian; produced by Armenkino

Pepo

(Amkino)

Produced by Armenkino and designated as Soviet Armenia's first talking film, this picture, in the Armenian language, offers little or nothing for American audiences. Likely

enough it will be found of interest by those in this country to whom the language of the picture is native, but only to them.

The story of an Armenian worker, who struggles against the hardship imposed by the action of the affected and wealthy merchant, who steals the dowry he had saved for the possible marriage of his sister, it portrays the simple and naive lives of the country folk. Such sequences as the betrothal feast, the market place at Tiflis, Oriental songs and dances and the like, have some small interest in the fashion that a travel subject may have, but that is virtually all the film has to offer.

Occasional subtitle translations of dialogue are rather too occasional for complete understanding of the story. The film was adapted from the Armenian play by Sundukian.

No production code seal. Running time, 80 minutes. 'G.'

Finally, the positive review, which preceded the other two, was published in *The New York Times* on October 10, 1935. The film critic, H.T.S., whose identity is obscure, remains as objective and unprejudiced as possible in his assessments. The Armenian translation of the review was also published in the American-Armenian press at the time⁸:

"Movie Review

Pepo (1935)

At the Cameo Theatre.

H. T. S.

Published: October 10, 1935

The first talking picture turned out by the Armenian language sub-division of the Soviet film industry carries the simple title "Pepo", the name of the honest fisherman living in the Armenian quarter of Tiflis, the picturesque capital of Georgia, who is its central character.

Based on a classic Armenian comedy by Sundukyan, "Pepo", now at the Cameo Theatre, is the commonplace tale of a pretty girl whose mercenary fiancé deserts her when the wicked merchant who has been holding her 1,000-ruble dowry in trust refuses to hand it over because the receipt has been lost. Pepo, her brother, vainly demands payment until the missing paper has been discovered in true Hollywood style. Even then he overreaches himself by demanding justice in court instead of accepting the merchant's offer to pay, with indemnity.

Pepo's denunciation of a bribed judge gets him a jail sentence for contempt of court, but he has become a popular hero by his exposure of the rich crook, and through his cell window, he tells an admiring crowd how he is going to take vengeance when he is free again. The sorrowing sister becomes engaged to a friend of Pepo.

With the exception of the court scene and a couple of other brief episodes the comedy note predominates, even the villains being treated humorously. Dated about sixty-five years ago, the action is strictly in period. The acting of the unnamed principals is generally good, although at times slightly exaggerated, especially in the case of the

⁸ «Պեպո» հայկական ֆիլմը Նյու Յորքի մեջ հոկտեմբերի 9-ից սկսեալ կը ներկայացուի, «Հայրենիք», հոկտ. 12, 1935 թ.:

merchant, who reminds American audiences of the typical flashily dressed serio-comic city slicker of ancient melodrama.

The most interesting part of the picture is composed of fine views of street life and of the markets, reinforced by considerable Near Eastern dancing and music. Superimposed titles in English make clear the development of the story.

***PEPO**, a dialogue film in Armenian and Russian; directed by Bek-Nazarof; music by Khatchaturian; produced by Armenkino”.*

As we can see, in one case the English subtitles did not satisfy the critic, in other case they “make clear the development of the story”. The author of *The New York Times* review pointed to one of the distinctly strong sides of *Pepo*: the active role of massive scenes and the street life, and the director’s finding of turning the environment into a performing character.

These three testimonies from the American press, regardless of their nature, are important as historical facts, which attest to the resonance of the 80-year-old Armenian movie in one of the main centers of international film industry.

... I was personally convinced of the fact that *Pepo*, as any high expression of art, has not lost its influence in the United States even today when in the fall of 2011 I organized the public screening of *Pepo* at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor’s Armenian Studies Program, where I was a guest lecturer of the history of Armenian performing arts⁹. The audience, which also included non-Armenians, not only watched the film without feeling any tedium, but launched a lively discussion after the screening...

⁹ The VHS copy of the movie, by the way, was available at the University of Michigan Library film department.