

## MES FANTÔMES ARMÉNIENS

### My Armenian Phantoms

Director Tamara Stepanyan

France, Armenia, Qatar | 2025

75 min. | Armenian, Russian with English subtitles

Screenplay Tamara Stepanyan, Jean-Christophe Ferrari.

Editing Olivier Ferrari. Music Cynthia Zaven. Sound

Design Jocelyn Robert. Producers Céline Loiseau, Alice Baldo, Tamara Stepanyan. Executive Producers Céline Loiseau, Karina Simonyan. Production companies TS Productions (Paris, France), Visan (Yerevan, Armenia). With Vigen Stepanyan.

World sales Cinephil

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### Synopsis

As a child, Tamara Stepanyan came across Armenian cinema on television in the living room with the whole family. Her mother was a virtuoso cellist, her father a famous actor from the 1970s onwards: Vigen Stepanyan often acted in the films that Tamara watched on TV. Taking this first astonishing discovery as its starting point, the film describes growing up in an artistic, critical family in the years in which the Soviet Union was disintegrating. The family emigrates to Lebanon, gains distance, suffers and yearns; Tamara studies directing.

With selected film excerpts from Armenia's cinematic legacy ranging from Sergei Parajanov to Artavazd Peleshyan and far beyond, she approaches both her own path as a woman as well as to film. She allows her account to transcend the personal and shows the patterns and idiosyncrasies of the largely unknown (Soviet) Armenian cinema by linking together family videos and film historical footage. Her fourth feature-length work begins as an *invitation au voyage* for the audience and ultimately becomes a tender, intimate dialogue with her father, who died in 2020. "Do you remember, Dad?" The cardiogram of a utopia. A séance. (Gary Vanisian, Barbara Wurm)

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**Tamara Stepanyan**, born in 1982 in Yerevan. She and her parents moved to Lebanon in the early 1990s and she continued her studies at the National Film School of Denmark. She now lives in France and is considered one of the new voices of contemporary Armenian cinema. Her long-feature debut, *EMBERS* (2012), premiered at the Busan International Film Festival. *THOSE FROM THE SHORE* (2016) and *VILLAGE OF WOMEN* (2019) participated in and were awarded at numerous international festivals. She is currently in post-production on her first fiction film, *SAVE THE DEAD*, shot in Armenia.

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**Films:** 2010: *Petites pierres / Little Stones* (short film). 2011: *19 février / 19<sup>th</sup> of February*. 2012: *Embers*. 2016: *Ceux du rivage / Those From the Shore*. 2019: *Village des femmes / Village of Women*. 2025: *Mes fantômes arméniens / My Armenian Phantoms*.

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### Director's Statement

#### Dialogue With My Father's Ghost

A personal cinematic journey through the history of Armenian cinema

On January 19, 2020, I lost my father, Vigen Stepanyan, suddenly and brutally.

My father was an actor, both in theatre and film.

The pain caused by the death of a father is unthinkable and impossible to describe. So, I won't attempt it. What I do know, and what I can tell, is that the grief caused by his death was all the more intense because I imagined that we still had plenty of time to talk. Now our dialogue is broken forever.

**MY ARMENIAN PHANTOMS** was born of this interrupted dialogue. My father's disappear-ance opened the doors of the past wide for me. The Armenian past. And the past of cinema. The two intimately linked.

As I began to enter a dialogue with his ghost, as I began to search for and collect traces of his past career, as I began to revisit the films in which he starred, I came across other ghosts from the history of Armenian cinema. It was as if my father's ghost had taken me by the hand and led me into a circle of ghosts linked, in one way or another, to the world of cinema. Hence the desire to tell the story of this cinema, little known abroad, in a film. To offer a personal cinematic journey through the history of Armenian cinema.

A cinema organically linked to a political, social and cultural universe that has now disappeared: the Soviet Union. Indeed, Armenian cinema is closely linked to the history of the Soviet empire. It began in 1925 with *NAMOUS (HONOR)*, dir. Hamo Bek-Nazarov, and was interrupted for over ten years after the filming of *KAROT (NOSTALGIA)*, dir. Frunze Dovlatian, 1990, when the USSR was dismantled and Armenia, after 70 years, once again became an independent nation. An independent nation, to be sure... but one that was nostalgic for its Soviet past. To the point of having difficulty writing its history in the present.

Born in 1982, I myself am a child of the Soviet Union. At school, I was taught Russian and Communist values. In the scouts, I passionately aspired to be a "pioneer" (according to the Soviet terminology that structured and hierarchized scout clans) and, when the USSR was dismantled, I felt an intense frustration when I realized that I would never be... "a pioneer"! Like many children in Eastern Europe and Eurasia who experienced both the Soviet Union and its aftermath, I harbored ambivalent feelings towards the Communist system: a mixture of rejection and hidden, almost shameful admiration.

When the USSR collapsed and Armenia became independent, my parents left the country. They returned to live there. I did not. I've lived abroad all my life since then.

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Tamara Stepanyan

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## Interview

### “I knew from the beginning that I wanted the personal story to be linked to the bigger story”

**Tamara Stepanyan speaks with Gary Vanisian and Barbara Wurm about exploring and passing on the heritage of Armenian cinema**

*Barbara Wurm: Tamara, thank you for MES FANTÔMES ARMÉNIENS, your tender dialogue with your dead father as well as with the film history of Soviet Armenia.*

*Gary Vanisian: I thought about the last time an Armenian film had been invited to the Berlinale. In 2021, there was the film BLACK BACH ARTSAKH in Forum Expanded, but technically it's not an Armenian film. Neither are Atom Egoyan's films, except CALENDAR, which was in Forum in 1994. From then on, his films were not Armenian productions.*

**Tamara Stepanyan:** We were looking into it and I think the last time that an Armenian film was at the Berlinale was the film by Mikhail 'Mika' Dovlatyan, it was in 1995. He made a quite experimental and interesting film called LABYRINTH. It was in Forum in 1995. It's been 30 years, and now we are back with two Armenian films, both directed by women: AFTER DREAMING by Christine Haroutounian and mine. This is historical.

**BW:** *When did you begin conceiving MES FANTÔMES ARMÉNIENS?*

**TS:** Four years ago, when I lost my father. I think the trigger was this loss and this kind of re-establishment of a dialogue with a person who is not there anymore and with whom I was not only father and daughter, but also colleagues. He was a scriptwriter, too. He would consult me about his writing, I would consult him with mine. Then, the artistic dialogue and the father/daughter dialogue was cut. I said to myself: 'It's not possible, I need to re-establish something.' This was when I started looking into his films, his videos, personal home movies. I said to myself that I must make something out of it. It was four years ago, and I started to dig into the material. I knew from the beginning that I wanted the personal story to be linked to the bigger story. I didn't want it to become just the father/daughter dialogue. I wanted this dialogue to open into a much more collective story because I love how the personal and the collective are intertwined. Getting into the collective story, I started looking into all these amazing Armenian films. I asked around in Armenia how I could have access to all these films. I was told that there's a YouTube channel where you can watch many Armenian films for free, without subtitles though. It was my database. I went on looking, film by film, taking notes and noting down time codes. For the films I could not find on the channel, I contacted the National Cinema Center of Armenia, and that is when the former director, Shushanik Mirzakhanyan, said: 'Come and watch whatever you want.' Everyone there was very excited that I was making a film about this part of Armenian cinema. They gave me access to all I wanted. It took quite some time to watch all the many films, including short films, documentaries, chronicles. My friend Vigen Galstyan became my consultant at this point, which was very helpful and gave me a lot of inside stories and expertise. The project started four years ago, but it took time to grow in me because something so personal is very difficult to let out. I started intertwining the personal, the historical, the political. I think it's a very political film about Soviet rule, about the era of Stalin, the repressions, censorship and how Armenian cinema started to exist amidst the censorship.

**BW:** *If you think back to the conversations and dialogues with your parents, how important was the topic of Soviet Armenian cinema in your family's memory?*

**TS:** It was very important. My grandparents worked in the cinema and everybody was so implicated. I remember my grandfather, my mother's father, dubbed films: Armenian films in Russian, Russian films in Armenian. He was the dubbing director for Hamo Bek-Nazarian's later historical films, and an assistant director on them. This old Armenian cinema encompassed your whole life. There is a building in my film, which is very phantomatic when I enter its corridors. It was so full of life, like a second home to them, a city within a city. They spent much more time there than at home. All the intimate jokes, the inside stories, funny, tragic, love stories – everybody was living this life like a parallel life. Within my family it was very important because my grandparents on my mother's side worked a lot in our apartment and my mother and father talked a lot, sharing thoughts and ideas. Watching these films is like dealing with my heritage. What I think I try to do unconsciously with this film is to transmit this heritage to the younger generation, to my children. I felt it was so important to watch these films as a child, to discuss them, to know all the songs and sometimes the dialogue by heart. But today's young generation knows very little about this cinema. If you ask young Armenians today, they'll say it's shitty cinema because it's full of Soviet ideology. But then my idea is to look at what is behind all this, to push further.

**GV:** *Was it also a habit in your home to watch the films starring your father?*

**TS:** I was very proud of him as a child, my mother was very proud, whereas my father was always joking about it: 'Oh, it's nothing, you know, it's a small film.' But I think he was also proud. And since my father acted mostly in comedies, we used to laugh a lot, even more since these were films accessible to children. For example, he acted in a film, which I didn't use in this movie, a children's film, a musical comedy, in which he plays a cat. It's so funny, he's the only cat and he has a lot of mice around him, which are girls, of course. As a child, it was one of my favourite films. When I showed it to my children, they said: 'That's grandfather? It's not possible!' It was one of his first films. Furthermore, my father was quite a figure: When he was walking in the street, people would often stop him and ask if they could take a picture or get an autograph. Growing up with this kind of father, you highly appreciate it. But he was modest, he was not a show-off.

**GV:** *Did this reception of Armenian cinema, of Soviet Armenian cinema continue when you moved to Beirut?*

**TS:** In Beirut, we didn't have access to this kind of film. The Internet didn't yet exist, and we only had Lebanese TV in Arabic which we didn't even understand, thus we didn't use it at all. When we arrived in Beirut, it was 1994, shortly after the end of the Lebanese Civil War, and it were very difficult times in Armenia. We were in a precarious economic state. We had a very simple life, let's put it that way. We always watched these films a little bit when we'd go in the summer to Armenia, but there was a kind of distance. Though, when you are distanced to something and later go back to it, it hits you even stronger. It was when I had started film school in Lebanon at 18 that I discovered Artavazd Pelechian and Sergej Parajanov. I was very impressed, but at the same time a bit angry with my parents. I said: 'But why did you never show me Parajanov and Pelechian?' To which my parents said that I was not mature enough for that kind of cinema. As an adult, I discovered Frunze Dovlatyan and others. Indeed, his film BAREV, YES EM (Hello, That's Me, 1966) wasn't a film you'd watch at home with your kids. Henrik Malyan, on the other hand, was a very popular filmmaker. I watched his films as a child. All the films you see in my movie are the films I watched as a kid and to which I came back when I was adult. This gap makes a difference. As a child, you perceive in a totally different way than as an adult. And then again, I revisited the films again four years ago when I was 38. Imagine you know something, and you go back to it three times! The first time as an emotional child. The second time as a film school student: You want to watch

everything, you want to understand. And then the third time you approach it intellectually. It's interesting how these three times intertwine and cross each other. I have this memory: 'Ah yes, when I watch this movie, this is how I understood it then, and then today I understand it differently.' I analyse differently, but the emotion is still the one of the child.

*BW: I think it's a strong quality of your film that you don't deny this intertwining of the times, memory and sentiment. It's sensitive and delicate in combining the private or intimate with a bigger picture. You describe it with the words 'ghostly' or 'imaginary', but in watching your film, I also had the feeling that at some point it's even close to a kind of self-analysis. It seems to be a therapeutic film, or at least a film that amongst other things explains how your becoming a filmmaker is connected with this revision of your life.*

TS: It's so interesting what you say. It was very difficult to go into myself very deep, to dig it out, to bring it out, to put it there. I think it's my most personal film. I still remember, as a young woman, when I came to tell my parents that I want to make films, and they both looked at me: 'Are you sure you really want to enter into this world of men?' When I was about to study in the early 2000s, in Armenia there were no women directors at all. I think only a few of us dared to say: 'Yes, I want to do this.' EMBERS (2013) was my first film, and I had difficulties making it. I had zero money, it was a fight to do what I wanted. It was against all odds. And I'm more than thankful to my parents for supporting me, even if they were surprised in the beginning. Others supported me, too. Maria Saakyan for instance. She died young and made three fiction films, above all the beautiful film MAYAK (Lighthouse, 2006). Masha was two years older than me. She gave me so much faith. I remember once we had breakfast together at a film festival where I presented my short fiction film. She said: 'Don't be afraid! There are lots of closed doors. You must break them. You must cross paths. This is what I'm doing. And you must come and help me. We're going to do it together!' We became friends, and then, when she passed away, I realised that this girl had fought so hard. Now, when I look around and see all these young Armenian filmmakers, I feel happy. I feel that maybe I had a little part in helping them to open these closed doors. And it makes me happy that I came this far and now am featured at the Berlinale where before, as we said, all the Armenian films were made by men. I feel happy, emotional and, in a way, proud, because it seems that this fight was not in vain.

*GV: What were the first steps in the making of this film? Did you start writing the narration or instead assembling the clips you wanted to include?*

TS: First, I started writing and taking notes. I watched films. And every time I watched a film, I tried to understand the themes that were inspiring me. Normally, you do research first and then you go and watch the films. I did the reverse. I let the films inspire me. Then I went into research, studying archives, talking to Vigen. Only then did I write the treatment. For my previous film, VILLAGE DES FEMMES (Village of Women, 2019), I shot half of the film and then I wrote the treatment. But this time, I asked my husband Jean-Christophe Ferrari, who is my collaborator and co-writer. We started to write and structure everything I had done before.

*BW: When you chose the clips for rebuilding your own cinematic canon, by what principles did you choose them?*

TS: I followed my instincts a lot. I do this often. This is what helped me to then intellectualise and put it on paper. For example, I knew that I wanted to talk about women. I knew that I wanted to talk about repression, Stalin's hand on the studio. I knew that I wanted to talk about my family history and the link it had with cinema. I knew I wanted to talk about the cinema being a men's world. I had the big themes in my head already and put

them down on paper. Every time I'd go watch these films and I felt strongly about a scene, I'd say: 'This scene has to be in the film, and it's part of this or that theme.' But there was a lot of instinct and emotion that was in dialogue with my intellect. In the beginning, I was also thinking about making a chapter-based film, several short films in a big film. We even started the editing that way: a chapter on women, a chapter on repression, etc. But quite soon, I understood that this would become very boring and repetitive. Eventually, we broke this structure and we started the intertwining.

*GV: I had the impression that there are fewer clips of films with your father than of other films made in Armenia. Did you at some point have more footage from your father's films?*

TS: My father started his acting career in the 1980s and he acted a lot in TV films, to which we didn't have access, and in his cinema career, he did not make so many films since it ended with the fall of the Soviet Union. My favourite films are the films that were done way before he became an actor, films from the 1960s and 1970s, and all these actors that you see in my film worked with my father – just not in cinema, but in theatre. I knew them all, they were like the big brothers of my father. They came to our house and our parties. My father started to act in films around the time when I was born, in 1982, when he was 30. One of the most beautiful films he ever acted in is a film by David Safarian, 28:94 LOCAL TIME (2015). Safarian made it over ten years. He shot it on 35mm. It was a German co-production. He is a very good director, and for me, it's one of the films that speaks the most to my heart. This is when I realised that I wanted to create a dialogue with my father, but not when he was younger. For me, this film is one of the most important films made after Armenian independence.

*GV: Your father passed away in 2020, which was also the year when the horrible, gruesome Azeri attack on Artsakh happened. And then in 2023, when the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh occurred, did this perilous situation impact your film?*

TS: My fiction film, which I'm editing now and that I shot this past summer, will be precisely about Artsakh. My father died just two months after the end of the 2020 war. My father's parents were from Artsakh, from Shushi. It was a horrible war in which 7,000 young men between the ages of 18 and 21 lost their lives. Every day, my father would call and say: 'I can't believe that all these children died, that we lost so much land and here I am unable to do anything.' He would even say: 'I don't care about the land. I care about these kids that died, this whole generation.' It was his obsession in the end. He was not into theatre or anything anymore, but into politics. He went on the streets, took part in protests, and tried to raise the question about what was happening. I think my father died because we lost the war and youth lost their lives. He just fell asleep... forever. A lot of people died from this war. And I think an unconscious influence to start this dialogue was to understand: When such a big death comes, do we want to go back? Do we want to understand the past? I think it's important to understand it after this war. The Artsakh war has a direct impact on all of Armenians. I think unconsciously it fuelled my desire to go back to the past, to keep the heritage alive, to keep what we have, and to talk about what we are afraid to lose.

*GV: Now, after so many years of pondering and reflecting on Armenian films, what if anything do you think is special about Armenian Soviet cinema? Is there a certain element or feature which you think makes Armenian cinema stand from other cinemas?*

TS: What is unique for me is the way it treats nostalgia. The way it treats this longing for return and the way it treats loss. There's always the motive of a return despite loss and sadness. Surely, it's for historical reasons, because of the genocide in the Ottoman Empire, because of the later wars, that Armenians

have this talent to film nostalgia, to film desire, this state of living in the past. I also think that there's an Armenian quality to create, to make films despite state control, despite censorship, amid all these difficulties. It takes a lot of intelligence and talent to insert these drops of resistance in a film. But I think the nostalgia and the depiction of the motive of return are its greatest virtues.