

This film was made possible with the academic contribution of the Zoryan Institute and is based on its Oral History Archive.

A film by Inna Sahakyan

AURORA'S SUNRISE

Based on the true story of AURORA MARDIGANIAN

Armenia's Official Entry
to the 95th
Academy Awards

A survivor's journey from
bloodshed to the red carpet



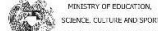
LAISVALAIKIO KLUBAS

BARS MEDIA & GEBRUEDER BEETZ FILMPRODUKTION & ARTBOX LAISVALAIKIO KLUBAS. IN COPRODUCTION WITH ZDF IN COLLABORATION WITH ARTE

PRODUCED BY VARDAN HOVHANNISYAN, CHRISTIAN BEETZ, JUSTE MICHALINAITÉ, KESTUTIS DRAZDAUSKAS, ERIC ESRAÏLIAN, INNA SAHAKYAN

CREATIVE PRODUCER KERSTIN MEYER-BEETZ, SCRIPT BY INNA SAHAKYAN, KERSTIN MEYER-BEETZ, PETER LJAKHOV, DIRECTOR TIGRAN ARAKELYAN

LEAD ILLUSTRATOR GEDIMINAS SKYRIUS, EDITED BY RUBEN GHAZARYAN, MUSIC BY CHRISTINE AUFDERHAAR, ADDITIONAL MUSIC BY ANDRANIK BERBERYAN, GAREGIN ARAKELYAN



AURORA'S SUNRISE

by Inna Sahakyan

BASED ON THE TRUE STORY OF AURORA MARDIGANIAN

A co-production of Armenia, Germany, Lithuania | 96 minutes | 2022

Link to trailer : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wll2_Rsha7Q

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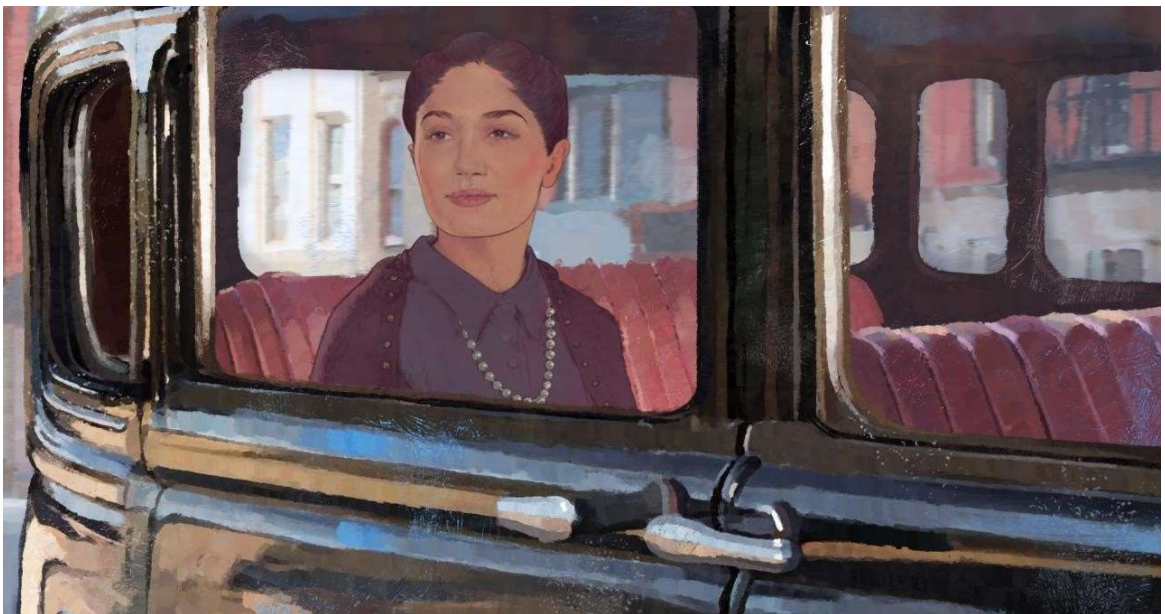


@auroras.sunrise



@auroras_sunrise

#aurorassunrise



**Armenia's Official Selection for the 95th Academy Awards
Best International Feature Film**

"Aurora's Sunrise is a beautifully made film which captures the spirit and extraordinary scale of an unimaginable journey. This is a very powerful story of horror, survival and a most moving act of sharing. The film is made with great artistry and attention to detail. Highly recommended!"

Atom Egoyan, Arsinée Khanjian

Logline

The true story of how a fourteen-year-old girl escaped the slaughter of the Armenian genocide and embarked upon an odyssey that took her to the heights of Hollywood stardom.

Short Synopsis

At only 14 years old, Aurora lost everything during the horror of the Armenian genocide. Two years later, through luck and extraordinary courage, she escaped to New York, where her story became a media sensation. Starring as herself in *Auction of Souls*, an early Hollywood blockbuster, Aurora became the face of one of the largest charity campaigns in American history. With a blend of vivid animation, interviews with Aurora herself, and 18 minutes of surviving footage from her lost silent epic, *Aurora's Sunrise* revives a forgotten story of survival.

Synopsis

Aurora was a teenager when she lost her family to the first genocide of the twentieth century, a nightmare that she herself barely survived. But when asked to not just remember but relive this experience all over again, she said “yes”.

In 1915, as WWI raged on, the Ottoman Empire singled out its entire Armenian population for destruction. Only 14 years old at the time, Aurora's story was tragically relatable. Forced onto a death march towards the Syrian desert, she lost her entire family before being kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery.

But through multiple miraculous twists of fate, Aurora was able to use her wits and courage to escape her captors, and find her way to the shores of the United States. Young, beautiful, and with an extraordinary story to tell — the papers quickly found Aurora, and within a year her story of survival was on every newsstand from coast to coast.

It didn't take long for Hollywood to take notice. With little regard for the toll it would take on the traumatised teenager, they convinced Aurora that by bringing her story to the silver screen she would be able to help other survivors of the genocide.

And so Aurora relived the unbearable, and became the most improbable starlet of the silent era in *Auction of Souls*, a runaway success, breaking box office and fundraising campaign records. After the film's release, one out of every three American families reportedly contributed to the campaign to help the victims of the genocide. With the help of the film, a campaign by the aid group Near East Relief raised \$116 million and saved the lives of over 132,000 orphaned survivors. The number of their descendants are in the millions.

In the late 1920s, expanding US-Turkish relations caused any mention of the Genocide to fade away. All copies of *Auction of Souls* were believed to be lost. Only in 1994, several months after Aurora's death, fragments of *Auction of Souls* were rediscovered.

Utilizing a dynamic blend of different mediums, including archival interviews with Aurora herself, as well the restored surviving footage of Aurora's silent-era blockbuster *Aurora's Sunrise* brings Aurora's incredible story to life for a new generation — the story of how one girl relived her life's greatest pain to save her people.



Director's Statement

The Armenian genocide is the enduring pain of my nation. It is my family's pain, and it is my own pain. Though I always wanted to, I was wary of making a film about it. I was afraid to be overly sentimental, overly emotional. I was afraid of telling stories that only confirmed Armenians as a nation of victims with no historical agency and nothing but tragedy running through our veins.

That is, until I stumbled upon an interview with Aurora Mardiganian while going through archival interviews with Armenian Genocide survivors at the Zoryan Institute.

I was mesmerized the first time I watched it. While painful to hear, the elderly woman appeared to grow more and more youthful as she spoke. Through her words and expressions, an incredible but ordinary heroism shone: this woman survived a genocide but refused to be a victim. She refused to be reduced to an object of history. This is the character I wanted to build in *Aurora's Sunrise*, resilient, powerful and heartwarming all at once.

My mission was to create a film taking audiences beyond the cold facts of the genocide, so I decided on a dynamic combination of mediums: animation, archival interviews with Aurora Mardiganian, and digitally-restored footage from Aurora's 1919 film *Auction of Souls*.

The majority of the film's runtime is animation. Animation is a very powerful medium for portraying something as difficult as trauma. It explicitly portrays the representation of an event and not the event itself, bridges this distance, and allows for the viewer to be deeply engaged with the narrative and thematic core of the story. At the same time, animation is a medium that can communicate not only the colors of the story, but even its smells, tastes, and textures. It becomes the soul of the film, and lets Aurora's now forgotten story become vivid again. It goes further than reproducing the events: it interprets them, like our brain does with memories, and allows symbols and motifs to speak loudly instead of drowning them in the utter realism of hundreds of details.

Of course, the danger of animation is that it may produce a sense of unreality — and this is why it is so crucial that the film also features archival footage of the real Aurora

and that of her film: to let the woman and her work speak for itself and to remind the audience that all this really did happen.

Above all, I believe this film is important because in Aurora Mardiganian's story we see a brave young Armenian woman who, despite enduring genocide, hunger, slavery, and exploitation, refused to be a victim. She refused to be swept away by the tides of history. It's a timeless story of the resilience of the human spirit, the power of hope, and the importance of never giving up. In our evermore uncertain world, this kind of story should be told.



Bringing Aurora's story back to life

Aurora's Sunrise is the first-ever animated feature created by Bars Media, and the first-ever animated documentary film made in Armenia — and making the film was no simple task.

Soviet Armenian animation once thrived, but after the fall of the USSR, the techniques and know-how of its golden era were neglected and forgotten, and no new school of animation really emerged. While there are bright artists and animators in the Armenian field of current animation, in order to bring to life a feature-length animated documentary, the international partnership with Lithuania was crucial. With the Armenian team taking a lead in art direction, cooperation with the Lithuanian team helped create something both new but also deeply Armenian.

Another essential medium for the film is the digitally remastered 18 minutes of surviving original footage of Aurora's Hollywood film Auction of Souls. The film reels that originally carried these minutes of footage have themselves experienced a sort of odyssey, having been brought from Argentina to the USSR after WWII, and then being discovered upon the opening of the Soviet archives after the collapse of the USSR. The fate of the remaining reels remains unknown and they are considered lost.

The archival video interviews with Aurora, filmed by the Zoryan Institute with two additional interviews from the Armenian Film Foundation, comprise the third major medium of Aurora's Sunrise. The majority of the film's narration was built from the stories she told in these interviews.

They also posed a formidable challenge for the filmmakers. Aurora's words were crucial for the film, but once again the quality of the old footage had much to be desired — it had been filmed on VHS — and it was only through significant restoration work that it could be successfully integrated into the film.

To link so many radically different visual mediums, each literally separated by decades, the *Aurora's Sunrise* team turned to music and sound. In no uncertain words, the touching and emotional score composed by Christine Aufderhaar, with additional Armenian music from Andranik Berberyan and Garegin Arakelyan, was the sinew that connected the film into a moving and elegant whole.

Through plague and war

Five years into the making of Aurora's Sunrise production of the film hit a major obstacle. In September 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was in full swing — which had already put production, especially animation into a precarious position — a new conflict erupted over the landlocked region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has been disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the collapse of the USSR.

For Armenia, over forty-four days of fighting, it was nothing less than a state of total war. By the time a ceasefire was signed on 10 November 2020, Armenia, a tiny country of only 3 million, had lost more soldiers per capita than the United States did in WWII.

During the fighting, all of the men on Bars Media's staff were on the front lines, some under direct fire. The strain of the war put the entire project in jeopardy, and the studio itself nearly shut down. But thanks to the perseverance of the German and Lithuanian co-producers the project kept moving forward.



The Filmmaking Team

Inna Sahakyan - DIRECTOR, SCRIPTWRITER

Inna Sahakyan has directed and produced feature-length documentaries, documentary series, and shorts, for over fifteen years. Following her feature-length debut co-directing the award-winning Armenia's *Last Tightrope Dancer* in 2010, she directed *Mel* and *Aurora's Sunrise*, completing both international co-productions in 2022. Inna also enjoys mentoring her native Armenia's next generation of filmmakers.

Vardan Hovhannisyan - PRODUCER

Vardan Hovhannisyan began his film career as a freelance camera operator covering the conflicts triggered by the collapse of the USSR. In 1993 he established Bars Media Documentary Film Studio, one of the first independent film companies in Armenia. His films have won awards around the world including the FIPRESCI prize, and the Best New Documentary Filmmaker Award at Tribeca Film Festival for *A Story of People in War & Peace*.

Gediminas Skyrius - LEAD ILLUSTRATOR

Gediminas Skyrius is an award-winning illustrator and art director, working mainly as a background artist for animation. Having started his professional career in the gaming industry, Gediminas also has created book and music album covers, as well as character and environment concept art and prints. Whether by himself or in a team, Gediminas loves creating new visuals, new styles, and new worlds.

Ruben Ghazaryan - LIVE-ACTION DIRECTOR, EDITOR

Ruben Ghazaryan is a director, editor, and cinematographer based in Yerevan, Armenia. As a member of the Bars Media Documentary Film Studio, Ruben has directed and edited a number of documentary TV shows for Armenia's public broadcaster. He has also worked on a variety of international projects with the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative, that have taken him around the world to countries that include Afghanistan, DR Congo, Rwanda, and Brazil, among others.

Tigran Arakelyan - ART DIRECTOR

Tigran Arakelyan graduated from the Yerevan State University of Theatre and Cinematography in 2013, though his experience in cinema began when he was only 17. He works as both an animator and art director. In 2018, he founded the ONoff Animation studios.

Christine Aufderhaar - COMPOSER

Christine Aufderhaar is a Berlin-based composer, that creates music for both film and television. A graduate of the Lugano Conservatory and the Berklee College of Music, she was also a mentee of Alf Clausen (The Simpsons), Jay Chattaway (Star Trek) and Steve Bramson (J.A.G.). She is a member of the German Film Academy and the Academy of German Music Authors.

Selected credits

Featuring Aurora Mardiganian
(Arshaluys Martikian) as herself
(archival documentary footage)

Featuring Arpi Petrossian as the voice of
Aurora (animation)

Featuring Anzhelika Hakobyan as
Aurora (motion capture)

PRODUCERS

Vardan Hovhannisyan
Christian Beetz
Justė Michailinaitė
Kęstutis Drazdauskas
Eric Esrailian

SCRIPT

Inna Sahakyan,
Kerstin Meyer-Beetz,
Peter Liakhov

ART DIRECTOR

Tigran Arakelyan

ORIGINAL MUSIC

Christine Aufderhaar

EDITOR & LIVE ACTION DIRECTOR

Ruben Ghazaryan

ADDITIONAL MUSIC

Andranik Berberyan, Garegin Arakelyan

Lead Illustrator

Gediminas Skyrius

Animators

Lusine Chergeshtyan
Rimantas Laskauskas
Sigitas Mikūta
Žiedė Matonytė
Richard Derteano

Lead Character Artist

Rimas Valeikis

Artists

Martyna Kašinskaitė
Ieva Batrytė
Gor Yengoyan
Mher Gabrielyan
Juozas Šleikus

Lead Animators

Šarūnas Vyšartas
Tigran Arakelyan
Ruben Ghazaryan

Animation Studios

Meinart Animation Studio, OnOff Studio

Sound Editing and Sound Design

Tigran Kuzikyan

Sound Post-Production Studio

Berberyan Music Production House

FESTIVALS (not complete list)

Annecy International Animation Film Festival 2022, France
Feature Films Contrechamp Competition
World Premiere

Asia Pacific Screen Awards 2022, Australia
Winner Best Animated Film

Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival 2022, Estonia
Award for Best Baltic Producer for Co-production

IDFA 2022, Netherlands
Audience Favorites

Golden Apricot Yerevan International Film Festival 2022, Armenia
Winner Silver Apricot in International Competition

Animation is Film Festival 2022, USA
Winner Audience Award

Asian World Film Festival 2022, USA
Winner Audience Award

Europa! Europa Film Festival 2023, Australia
Winner Audience Award

MiradasDoc 2023, Spain
Best Feature Length Documentary Award

FIFDH- 21st International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights 2023, Switzerland,
Grand Prix de Geneve Winner

Movies that Matter Festival 2023, Netherlands
Audience Award Winner & Special Mention Winner in Camera Justitia award

Hamburg FilmFest 2022, Germany, Kaleidoskop section, in competition

Doclisboa 2022, Portugal, From the Earth to the Moon section

European Film Forum Scanorama 2022, Lithuania, Real Lifesection

Trieste Film Festival 2023, Italy, Off the Beaten... Screen section

Göteborg Film Festival 2023, Sweden, Voyage section

DocPoint – Helsinki Documentary Film Festival, 2023, Finland, International Selection section

Anima Brussels International Animation Film Festival 2023
Feature Films Section

Cartagena de Indias International Film Festival 2023, Columbia, Kaleidoscope section

Columboa Hong Kong International Film Festival 2023, Hong Kong

Thessaloniki Documentary Film, 2023, Greece, Open Horizons section

It's All True International Documentary Film Festival, 2023, Brazil
International Competition of Feature and Medium-Length Documentaries

SELECTED PRESS COVERAGE

[DMovies.org](#)

"A cinematic marvel."

"Armenia's official submission for the Oscars in the Best International Feature category is one of extreme significance, fantastic creativity, and unbelievable star quality. Aurora's Sunrise is a hybrid film in every sense of the word; a documentary in nature but one that is structured with exquisite animation, harrowing silent film footage, and topped off with a detailed interview that features one of the bravest female protagonists in cinema history."

[TheFilmVerdict](#)

"A powerful, accessible blend of animation and archive that bears witness to the Armenian genocide through the eyes of survivor and Hollywood silent star Aurora Mardiganian."

"As much as it is a testament to the extraordinary fortitude of Arshaluys Madrigan, as it bears witness to the sufferings of her people, the film is also a take on early Hollywood stardom from a MeToo-era perspective, which should resonate further with audiences in light of the current industry reckoning."

[Los Angeles Times](#)

"Mardiganian was outspoken about the atrocities her people faced and her story shouldn't be forgotten."

[POVMagazine](#)

"...poetic and deeply moving documentary that recreates Mardiganian's harrowing tale in ways that Hollywood could never imagine."

[Screendaily](#)

"The remarkable life of Armenian genocide survivor Aurora Mardiganian is turned into a gripping animation."

[Animation Worlds Network](#)

"Inna Sahakyan's animated documentary, integrating pieces of Aurora Mardiganian's harrowing account – and lost 1919 film adaptation – of surviving unspeakable horrors as a teenager during the 1915 Armenian Genocide, shares one woman's incredible courage, and how telling, and retelling, such a painful story is the strongest step forward a person can take."

[RogersMovieNation](#)

"One of the best films ever made about the Armenian Genocide tells the story of one of the first survivors to make it to America. It's titled 'Aurora's Sunrise,' and it uses different media, bending film genres to relate one of the great tragedies of the 20th century through one woman's plight."

[EyeForFilm](#)

"Sometimes a film can strike you because it brings an untold story to life - and, in this, Aurora's Sunrise is doubly surprising in that this remarkable tale of survival from the Armenian Genocide was previously passed through the Hollywood machine to great fanfare but then subsequently forgotten."

**This film was made possible with the academic contribution of the
Zoryan Institute and is based on its Oral History Archive ***



The Zoryan Institute

PRODUCED BY
Bars Media, Artbox Laisvalaikio Klubas, Gebrueder Beetz Filmproduktion



In coproduction with ZDF

In collaboration with Arte

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This film was produced after having applied the Republic of Lithuania Tax Incentive for film production

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