

ATOM EGOYAN

Ambassador of the silver screen

As a student in international affairs at the University of Toronto in the early 1980s, Atom Egoyan was training for a diplomatic career—until he discovered filmmaking. Before graduation he completed two short films, one of them eventually shown on CBC television. He has gone on to become one of Canada's most innovative and internationally renowned filmmakers, introducing audiences the world over to his unique artistic vision.

Egoyan was born in Cairo, Egypt, in 1960, to parents of Armenian descent. Three years later they settled in Victoria, British Columbia. It was only in university that Atom began to explore his Armenian roots, embarking on a search that finds reflection in his films.

His first full-length feature, *Next of Kin* (1984), portrays a young man claiming to be the son that an Armenian-Canadian family had given up for adoption long before. In *Calendar* (1993), Egoyan himself played a photographer travelling in Armenia; shot on location, the film enabled him to visit his family's homeland for the first time. His latest work, *Ararat* (2002) recalls the themes of *Next of Kin*. This is a contemporary story about the search for personal, sexual and cultural identity.

"I had always contemplated a film about the unique history of the Armenian people," says Egoyan. He calls *Ararat* "a deeply personal piece of work. While there are certain motifs I have explored in my other films, this is the first time I have directly addressed the notion of historical consciousness on such a scale.

"The film within the film revisits the historic events [of 1915] in an

attempt to recreate the past," he explains. "The contemporary story and its present-day characters reconstruct their own histories according to their own needs, memories and imaginations."

Egoyan's partner in both life and art is Arsinée Khanjian, a fellow Armenian who was born in Lebanon and came to Canada at the age of 17. Since they first met, Khanjian has been featured in each of Egoyan's films. "Our relationship is part of the alchemy of the films themselves," says Egoyan.

The director of nearly a dozen feature films, Egoyan won the prestigious International Critics Prize at the Cannes Film Festival for *Exotica* (1994). Along with films such as *Family Viewing* (1987), *Speaking Parts* (1989) and *The Adjuster* (1991), *Exotica* explores two favourite themes of Egoyan: intimacy and displacement. *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) won three prizes at Cannes, and received two Oscar nominations for Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay. *Felicia's Journey* (1999) was nominated for the *Palme d'or* at Cannes and was chosen to open the Toronto International Film Festival.



Arriving for a screening of *Ararat* at the Cannes Festival in May 2002 are Atom Egoyan (far left) and Arsinée Khanjian (beside him). With them are two of the actors who appear in the film: the great French singer/songwriter Charles Aznavour and Montrealer Marie-Josée Croze, who won a Genie Award for her starring role in Denis Villeneuve's *Maelström*.

Most recently, here in Canada *Ararat* won a Genie Award this February for Best Motion Picture, and Arsinée Khanjian was named Best Leading Actress for her role in the film.

Egoyan's films have been promoted by Canada's missions abroad through special events held in conjunction with international film festivals, and through screenings as part of "Canadian film weeks" organized by our embassies and consulates. While the Genie Awards ceremony was taking place this past February, Egoyan was in Cairo for that city's first Canadian film festival, organized by the Canadian Embassy. On the program was a retrospective showing of all the films of Egoyan. To attend this event, the filmmaker received support from the Arts and Cultural Industries Promotion Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT).

Egoyan was also among the artists who accompanied the Governor General and her husband on their state visit to Germany last year (see p. 27).

In the end Egoyan has become an emissary of our country, giving a picture of Canadian culture to the world. 🍁