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Telenovelas' drama tells true story of globalization

Armenian community hot for Colombian soap operas

By Naush Boghossian, Staff Writer

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Natalia Gharibians doesn't speak English - much less Spanish - but every evening, the 77-year-old settles in to watch "El Cuerpo del Deseo" and its handsome actor Mario Cimarro.

"Everyone at my day-care watches Salvador, wanting to see what Salvador is doing and what's happening to Salvador," Gharibians said of the lead character played by Cimarro.

"My family asked me to go to dinner, and I had to say no because I wanted to watch it."

In the latest example of globalization, the grandmother of seven is among thousands of Armenians now hooked on the telenovela - produced in Colombia, purchased by Armenia, dubbed into Armenian, and sent back to the United States to air on Armenian-language television for large Armenian populations in Glendale and Burbank.

"It's interesting to me because it's in Armenian," said Gharibians, who invested months

watching the recently ended series and is now eagerly waiting for a new series to start March 31. "We haven't seen anything like this."

The crossover to Armenian culture is the latest move for telenovelas, limited-run TV serial melodramas made famous in Latin America and now a multibillion-dollar industry.

While American soap operas run indefinitely, "novelas" have a pre-determined end and average about 150 episodes.

And for more than eight months, "Salvador" - which is how Armenian fans have come to refer to the officially titled "Second Chances" - has captivated Armenians in Glendale and Burbank on Charter Communications cable Channel 31.

Gharibians' fascination with Salvador is so great that she has been enticed to watch Spanish-language telenovelas on Telemundo to catch a glimpse of Cimarro - even though she doesn't understand what's going on.

"He's a good actor. He's a good person, and you can feel for him," she said.

That universal appeal is increasingly crossing language barriers, with an estimated 2 billion people in more than 100 countries now watching telenovelas. With dubbing and subtitles, telenovelas have grown in popularity everywhere from Russia, France and Italy to the Philippines, Israel and South Korea.

Armenian-Russian Television Network, or ARTN, began running the telenovela about a year ago, supplied by a partner in Armenia that buys the rights and dubs it into Armenian.

The network also streams its programming live on its Web site at www.artn.tv.

Although Charter Communications officials said there's no way to know exactly who's watching and how often, they estimate as many as 30percent of their customers in Glendale and Burbank are Armenian-speaking.

Robert Oglakhchyan, ARTN Corp. CEO and president, said the company gauges demand for a show from advertising - and advertisers are lined up to buy spots during the telenovela.

"It doesn't matter that it's in Spanish, Russian or American - it's about family, it's about normal life, the same as the lives of Armenians," he said. "People watch 'All My Children' and 'Days of Our Lives' even if they don't understand English well, so how entertaining is it to watch a soap opera in Armenian?"

"It's an escape from your worries. You disconnect from your life and forget your problems when you tune in to the novela."

Lida Zadouri's husband has grumbled frequently about when the series will finally end because when the show is on, his wife is totally absorbed.

"It's about life, and since the story wraps up in a couple of months, it's perfect for impatient people," she said.

"My mom would watch the show and would tell me to call later, then my mom's sister and now I'm telling others to call me later."

Like Gharibians, she's even taken to watching Spanish-language telenovelas because she just wants to see the actors.

"I watch it every day because I see beautiful men," the 53-year-old said.

"And the one at 8 p.m. is in Spanish, and I don't know what they're talking about and I'm watching it."

Stepan Partamian, a popular and controversial host of a current-events talk show on an Armenian-language station, joked that the telenovelas appeal to Armenians' love of gossip.

"Armenians are suckers for gossip - this person left that person for another person - and they just want to know in Armenian what's happening," Partamian said.

But telenovelas also are serving to connect two minority cultures, said Jose Luis Benavides, director of the center for ethnic and alternative media at California State University, Northridge.

"A lot of these cultural products really allow people to learn a little bit about other groups

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they otherwise wouldn't be exposed to," Benavides said.

"To learn something that is much more complex about Latin-American culture in general through a soap opera is just fantastic."

And as worldwide demand booms, it has become a boon for the dubbing and subtitle industry, said Deeny Kaplan, executive vice president of The Kitchen, a language-customization company with offices in Studio City, Miami and Caracas, Venezuela.

"We see more sellers of telenovela products and more buyers from other countries," said Kaplan, who notes that the industry exceeds \$100 billion annually.

"Every day we're dealing with countries like Vietnam, Japan, Korea, Israel, South Africa and Russia, around the clock, that want to do a telenovela in another language."

Her company has produced as many as four telenovelas a month, dubbing about 80 episodes into multiple languages.

"The fact that we're doing French dubbing in Miami of Latin soap operas that are going to air in South Africa is crazy," Kaplan said.

"What it says is there is an interest in learning the cultures of the different countries and grabbing parts of those cultures and making them your own."

Still, for some, it's considered a guilty pleasure.

Gharibians' grandson, Eric Sahakian, said his friends hate to admit that their own moms, aunts and grandmothers are hooked on the show.

"It's funny how it's a phenomenon. It's like the MySpace of older women," said Sahakian, 16.

"It's cool that they can take something in Spanish and make it something that's enjoyable to Armenians."

Do Sahakian and his friends watch the show?

"I'd like to say it's stupid, but you keep wanting to watch it five minutes more," he said sheepishly.

"People my age don't say they watch, but I think some of them watch it secretly, undercover."