

**WAR AND DEMOCRACY -
THE BETRAYAL OF AN INDIVIDUAL IN TESICH'S PLAYS**

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Abstract. *Steve Tesich appears as just one of many contemporary authors (Wenders, Rich, Rabe) who explore cultural practices that make violence, war and cruelty inevitable. The purpose of this essay is to explore the consequences of such cultural practice within Western culture (especially in America) in which the crippling of human potentials goes on and on unchecked and to examine if it is possible for Western culture to return to the teaching of Socrates and Pelagius – the teaching based on complete self-knowledge and the belief in and affirmation of the goodness of man. The question posed by all the authors I examine is whether it is possible for one to realize his or her American Dream and, at the same time, remain loyal to one's inner self.*

"Nowhere else the eyes so busy,
so used to working overtime.
Nowhere else is vision harnessed like this,
to the service of seduction.
Nowhere else, therefore, so many longings and needs
because nowhere else has vision become so addicted.

....
The camera set-ups are predetermined
so that millions will take the pictures
which will confirm
the picture that already exists."

Wim Wenders, *The American Dream*

"Because to be young, gifted, and dead is to be finally embraced by your culture and your country. You can come home again. Just don't forget to be dead. You know how your father gets when you come home alive. The 'look' is dead. But deliciously, delightfully dead. Dead in a life-affirming way."

Steve Tesich, *Arts and Leisure*

Lately, we, the people of Serbia, have been listening to many speeches about democracy, that, among other things, it is supposed to denote an equal treatment and tolerance of the minorities – not only racial and religious ones, but also all those people who in a way differ from the majority group. This long-awaited democracy was imposed on the people of Serbia in the form of cluster bombs and tomahawks in the spring of 1999. After a period of tyranny and repression, we can finally 'breathe freely', 'speak and walk down the streets without fear', so the venture called "The Angel of Mercy" paid off extremely. Everything was done for our own good, to borrow Alice Miller's phrase, although then we were not aware of it.

Now, a couple of years after this 'glorious' event in our history, we are on a fair way to succeed. Tolerance is preached in schools and on the media. It is also very popular to say that we live in a period of integrations and that the day will come when Europe (and a new, "tolerant" Serbia in it) will be without state boundaries and people will travel without passports anywhere they like. In order to enter this world of democracy we have to sacrifice some rather marginal things and all our energy should be concentrated on reforms. In other words, RES NON VERBA. Hyperactivity is the key word. Time is money, and in order to obtain it, we have to play by their (democratic) rules. Welcome the brave new democracy in which children will not be taught to be honest and loyal to their genuine selves, to state their opinions openly and stick to them, but to appreciate only material values (money, profit). You deserve everything, the inscription on the billboard says. So, instead of exploring and developing their individuality and creativity, children play with the Simpsons' toy money, the play-substitute for the real thing. Out of such games, in the long run, the army of obedient soldiers, of who-gives-more paid killers will appear.

Robert Brustein, the author of *Dumbocracy in America: Studies in the Theatre of Guilt*, detected the same process in the American society and expressed it in his speech *Dreams and Hard-back Chairs* whose occasion was the inauguration of a new 'culture centre' near Boston. He noticed that something in American schooling remains indifferent to the arts. So, the question that he was interested in finding an answer to was "why American education, at its best, is capable of refining the intellect and training the body but remains completely indifferent to developing the imagination."¹ He noticed that children are being encouraged in the competitive instinct by learning how to excel in courses and win at sports, but not in any explorations or exercises of the imagination.

Moreover, according to Brustein, the Western educational system destroys imagination and aims at creating servile, obedient people, who lack the capacity to imagine the way their lives should be led:

" But just as those hard-backed seats discourage the mind from wandering, so our schools make no provision for day dreaming, which is the stimulus of the non-competitive imagination. They suppress the individual's capacity for fantasy, they inhibit the faculty of invention, they suggest that discomfort is intimately associated with achievements. Once these boys have entered the fast track at Harvard, they will major in social policy and economics, in preparation for careers as statesmen, legislators, stockbrokers, and corporate executives. But any vestigial passion they might harbour for music, theatre, poetry, or painting will be segregated to the patronizing category of extracurricular activity."²

¹ Robert Brustein, *Dreams and Hard-back Chairs*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991), p. 249

² *ibid*, p.249

The same process was detected by William Golding, who, in his essay *On the Crest of the Wave*, says that education lost its primary function of enabling people to make value judgments and became a sort of training, conditioning similar to the one Pavlov used to train dogs. He says: " Education still points to the glorious dawn, officially at any rate, but has been brought to see, in a down-to-earth manner, that what we really want is technicians and servants and soldiers and airmen and that only she can supply them. She still calls what she is doing 'education' because it is a proper, dignified word – but she should call it 'training', as with dogs."³

Unfortunately, the humanistic concept of education that both Brustein and Golding plead for, has remained an unrealized venture and there is a strong probability that it will remain unrealized in the contemporary Serbia as well, since the new 'packet' of laws, resembling the Western model, is going to be introduced soon. This is what we are to expect in the future, if we follow this example.

Repressive social conventions and genuine spontaneity are in constant collision in modern society and sometimes this clash is so great that it breaks out in criminal behaviour or neurosis. Adrienne Rich spotted these symptoms in the American society and described them in her collection of essays *What is Found There*:

"Time to say that in this tenuous, still unbirthed democracy, my country, low-grade depressiveness is pandemic and is reversing into violence at an accelerating rate. Families massacred by fathers who then turn the gun on themselves; the deliberate wounding and killing of a schoolyardful of Asian-American children in a small California town; mass or serial murders of university students in Berkeley and Florida. Violence against women of every color and class, young dark-skinned men, perceived lesbians and gay men. More and more violence committed by children – against themselves, each other, adults: suicides, gang warfare, patricide and matricide. And the violences, violations obscured because they happen in places and to people that are out of sight, out of mind. Much violence that doesn't make the evening news, committed against the people in prison, or prostitutes, or American Indians, or undocumented immigrants, or in nursing homes and state hospitals, or just part of Saturday night after a few drinks."⁴

According to a recent sociological study, an average American boy sees approximately ten thousands murders on television by his tenth birthday – no wonder one fifth of the entire population of the "world's greatest democracy" is in prison. The hypocritical split between the predominantly Puritan society in theory and a shallow, pornographic society that worships television and hamburgers as the highest possible values in practice is rather disgraceful.

What is terrifying in the whole story is the fact that violence is seen as something completely normal, or even natural. Wim Wenders was appalled at the sight of children in the cinema looking forward to and enjoying bloody scenes:

" I went to a cinema in New York recently
to see one of the new breed of horror films.
The horror was not the film
But the audience,

³ William Golding, "On the Crest of the Wave", *Hot Gates*, Faber and Faber, 1974, p.128

⁴ Adrienne Rich, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, (London: Virago Press, 1993), p. 15

Young people, still children most of them,
 Applauding and yelling
 With enthusiasm at each new murder,
 The more bloody and cannibalistic the better."⁵

We pretend not to see the other side of living in modern society— its violence, corruption, cruelty, crime. However, those are the symptoms of despair that comes from the dissatisfaction with the way our lives are led. Modern people suffer from a self-imposed amnesia and self-exoneration, a spontaneous flare-up of mass denial and as a result of our inability to see the reality as it is, 'deniability' was established as a desirable political goal regarding governmental actions. David Rabe talked about this syndrome in his essay *Vietnam Shadows* and noticed that not only could Americans admit that the war in Vietnam was a mere watershed but also that it became a part of their history to which they closed their eyes. He says:

"In its flash and violence it was a probe into the depths, an x-ray knifing open the darkness with an obscene illumination against whose eloquence we closed our eyes."

At the end of the twentieth century, war, according to Adrienne Rich, represents the absolute failure of imagination, scientific and political. "War is bestowed like electroshock on the depressive nation: thousands of volts jolting the system, an artificial galvanizing, one effect of which is loss of memory."⁶ These words refer to the Gulf war that took place in January 1991; this war was represented in the media in such a way as to help people feel good about themselves and their country. The mere statement that a war can make people feel good about themselves is, according to Rich, the measure of the failure of imagination.

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In light of what Wenders, Rich and Rabe have observed from their different perspectives, Steve Tesich appears as just one of many contemporary authors who explore cultural practices that make violence, war and cruelty inevitable. The purpose of this essay is to explore the consequences of such cultural practice within Western culture (especially in America) in which the crippling of human potentials goes on unchecked and on and to examine if it is possible for Western culture to return to the teaching of Socrates and Pelagius – the teaching based on complete self-knowledge and the belief in and affirmation of the goodness of man. The question posed by all the authors I examine is whether it is possible for one to realize his or her American Dream and, at the same time, remain loyal to one's inner self.

In order to give an answer to this question, it seems to me that we should go back to certain aspects of the American cultural heritage and see how the previous generation of writers (and I am especially interested in O'Neill and Miller) dealt with these issues.

In his play *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill attempts to modernize the old or to find the roots of the new Greek tragedies by setting the themes and plot of *Oresteia* by Aeschylus in 19th century New England of the Civil War period. His Agamemnon is a brigadier general in Grant's army, Ezra Mannon, and the play begins on the day of Lee's surrender. The modern Electra, Lavinia, is fated always to be her mother's rival in love and always to be defeated; she adores the father, is devoted to her brother, and hates her

⁵ Wim Wenders, *The American Dream*, (Faber, 1989), p. 122

⁶ Adrienne Rich, *What is Found There*, (London: Virago Press, 1993), p. 16

mother. Her father returns from the Civil war to his unfaithful wife Christine (Clytemnestra), she poisons her husband because she wants to marry her lover, Adam Brant (Aegisthus), and Lavinia and Orin (Orestes) murder Adam in revenge; Christine commits suicide and Orin, guilt-ridden by her death and by his incestuous involvement with Lavinia, follows her example.

An interesting question implied here is why O'Neill wanted to recreate the horror of Greek tragedies on the American background. I do not claim that I can find satisfactory answers, but it seems to me that O'Neill wanted us to look at the Mannon family as a metaphor for the American society in which there is a constant interplay and struggle between the male principle (destruction, war), embodied in the father, Ezra Mannon, and the female principle (creativity, life), embodied in the mother, Christine, and to emphasize that women (Lavinia) can betray their original functions and accept the roles imposed on them by 'the fathers'. Lavinia, an obedient daughter, becomes gradually aware that she has to suffer in order to expiate her sins, and, therefore, both invokes death and tries to escape from it. The play ends with Lavinia's words:

" I'm not going the way Mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. And there's no one left to punish me. I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! Living alone with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison...I'll never go out to see anyone! I'll have the shutters nailed closed so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die. I know they'll see to it that I live for a long time! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born!"⁷

Like O'Neill, Miller, too, felt the need to juxtapose two different periods in American history – the witch hunt in Salem and the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era – in order to show how fundamentally destructive social practices remain. In his *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill examines the fall of the house of Mannon; Miller, in his play *After The Fall*, on the other hand, gives us an insight into what has happened after this fall. The title of Arthur Miller's play invites speculation. Some say it refers to the Biblical fall from innocence; others, to the suicide of Marilyn Monroe; some contend that it has to do with the breakup of the American Communist Party (of which Miller was a member) in the decades of the Second World War, or, as Miller himself noted in his autobiography *Timebends*, to the bomb dropped on Hiroshima which inaugurated nuclear warfare.

Quentin, the main character in the play, a lawyer, had been a member of the American Communist Party, but makes it clear that he did not want to be labeled as 'Red' lawyer. One line from the play is as significant now as during the anti-communist witch-hunts: " We must be careful not to adapt a new behavior just because there's hysteria in the country."

Quentin responds: " Not to see one's evil, there's evil. We don't say no to evil, we say 'yes' to everything."⁸

Today in the United States many are saying 'yes' to new laws drafted by the Bush administration that will effectively divest people of many civil liberties, and 'yes' to increases in military spending to the detriment of domestic issues. Miller wanted to reveal the hypocrisies behind the façade of the American society, being the one indicted for

⁷ Eugene O'Neill, *Complete Plays 1920 – 1931*, (New York: Literary Classics Inc, 1988), p. 1053

⁸ Arthur Miller, *After the Fall*, (New York: 1964), p. 210

contempt for refusing to give or confirm the names of writers he had met at meetings of communist writers.

In December 2001, Arthur Miller, now 85, gave an exclusive interview to the BBC World Service, during which he voiced his concern about the United States Government's emergency measures, and spoke against the Government's military actions, describing them as a part of a 'war against humanity'. He also expressed his views on non-citizens (allegedly those who are helping the country's terrorist enemies) being tried outside the normal courts by a military tribunal. He said he feared for our civil rights and that the U.S. government could be seen as 'taking advantage of the situation and increasing its power over the individual.'

If we see *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *After the Fall* as reflections on the state of American society, we can detect that the pattern behind the U.S. government's policy concerning wars has not changed throughout its history - the Civil War, the Second World War, the war in Vietnam (as we will see in Tesich's and Rabe's plays), the Gulf war in 1991, the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, the war in Iraq 2003... So, is there a possibility for a person not to be engulfed by the system and to remain loyal to one's inner self? The main characters in the plays of these authors inevitably fall; however, 'after the fall' they are given an insight into what had befallen them – both Lavinia and Quentin rise by falling: by accepting their own mistakes, they redeem themselves afterwards.

....

In his play *The Speed of Darkness* Tesich explores American society's habitual glorification of its own mistakes. The war in Vietnam is referred to as one of the most glorious events in their history and the government will never declare that it was a terrible mistake. The only mistake (which will not be stated in public) is that they did not win. When you change the names, when instead of Vietnam you put Yugoslavia, you will be able to detect the same process repeated over and over again: the targets change, but the hostility towards those who offer resistance remains.

The questions that should be raised here are actually the existential questions that Shakespeare raised in *Hamlet* five centuries ago: do people who will not allow lies to be passed on still exist? Is everyone blind to the truth?

"A mind is a terrible thing to have after midnight",⁹ says Joe, a decorated Vietnam hero, who deserved his medal for saving the life of his war-buddy Lou. He is chosen for "The Man of the Year" award for this courageous act, obviously because there is a policy on the part of the Government that one's sacrifice for the country should be rewarded and glorified. In other words, the Government never forgets the service of its loyal subjects. However, the true story of the event that led to his decoration is the following – the Americans bombed the area with radioactive substances where their own people were situated. After that, their soldiers had to be detoxicated and during that process they were sterilized. The whole situation reflects the state of confusion and moral disorientation that, not only Tesich, but Rabe as well, being two years in Vietnam, experienced and described in his plays.

Being aware of the fact that he himself participated in the system that turned against him, Joe realizes that the only way for him to expiate his sins is to become a father, that is, to acknowledge someone else's child. He does not want to miss the chance that is offered to him. After all the things he had experienced, Joe is a man who appreciates life

⁹ Steve Tesich, *The Speed of Darkness*, (New York: Samuel French Inc, 1991), p. 7

and knows, in the style of William Blake, that everything that lives is holy. The relationship between him and his daughter is very tender. When he approaches his daughter, he says:

"You're a hero. See. You didn't just make me happy when you were born. You saved my life. I was dying, Marsee, and you saved me just by being born."¹⁰

However, even the concept of parenthood seems to be perverted in modern society. It can easily be seen through the example of Mary, Joe's daughter, who volunteered for the task of being a parent, that is, taking a sack of earth with her always, pretending to be a real mother. The point of this project was to teach children that they should be responsible for their actions. If we compare the way the Government treated people after their return from Vietnam and the ordeal they had to undergo in their own country with the new, democratic trends of caring about one's own and teaching children to become 'responsible' like adults, the difference between what they preach and what they actually do strikes us as being highly hypocritical and disgraceful. What is consoling in this situation is Mary's caring attitude towards the 'baby'; so, there is a hope that this earth will give life again.

A paradox is implied in Joe's life after the war in Vietnam. By acknowledging someone else's child he seems to know that life should be appreciated at any cost. It seems that these two people, crippled in different ways by their culture/system found each other in order to help each other to change their lives and to finally discover the purpose of their lives. Anne comments on this:

"It was the first time for both of us, that kind of love. I don't think we even know how wrong everything had been until something went right. We were so happy to learn that broken parts could mend that we really didn't care how they mended. I think in our rush to love, and be loved, we mended crooked. Around a lie."¹¹

The lie that Anne mentions is the fact that they concealed the truth from Mary. This lie that their life is based on is indicative of other lies and mysteries in Joe's life.

After the war, Joe and Lou, (an ex-soldier and now a bum who follows the Vietnam memorial all around the country), were garbage collectors. Lou has remained unassimilated and is discarded by his country and his people. He is a symbol of everything that threatens America – the real truth about the war and, after all, about themselves. What the system sees in Lou, who is incapable of creating a 'meaningful' life after Vietnam, is what it does not want to acknowledge because it is contrary to the vision they have about themselves. The first sign of acceptance that Lou is given is by Mary, when she gives his name to her 'baby'. Although there is hope that the new generation of Americans will not commit the mistakes of their fathers, the whole situation in the play is indicative of the perverted values present in the American society. These people cannot be reformed into a new life without the understanding and purification of their old selves. They are meant to discard trash and filth, that is, to be 'dumb waiters' of the system and not to ask too many questions. And Joe is aware of that. Therefore, these are his words of gratitude when he receives the Man of the Year Award:

"Before I got to be in the construction business, I was in the garbage business. Which brings me to gratitude. I'd like to thank all of you now because it was your trash and filth

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 34

¹¹ *ibid*, p.49

and waste that you wanted taken somewhere, anywhere, and buried out of sight that gave me my fresh start in life."¹²

After the war, Joe and Lou wanted to get even with the country that had crippled them, wanted to pay it back in kind. They reacted to what had been done to them in the manner of Shakespeare's Shylock. They dumped the barrels of nuclear waste in the mesa, where now new settlements are to be built:

"It was like dumping death by the barrel. We knew there was death inside of them, but it felt good to do it. We were getting even. It was war again, only this time we were dumping stuff on our own. And just like it felt good to love by day, Annie, just like that, it felt good to get drunk and hate by night and dump that death into the holes...Mother Earth, Lou called the mesa. I called it Mother Country. Here you go, Mom. Have another one of us. Night after night, week after week, for over five months, we did that, but no matter how much we tried to hate, it still wasn't enough. We wanted to hate more. There was more venom in us than in all those oil drums put together. The kind of hate that desecrates life. Some eternal hate is what we wanted. To get even for everything. And on our last night up there, we found a way to hate. We stood on top of these empty oil drums. We were grinning at each other, as we dropped our pants down around our knees. We grabbed ourselves and we cursed while we did what we did. Here you go, mom. Here you go! And we shot our dead seed into those dark holes, full of death already. Here you go, Mom! Let's see the children that are born from this. Here's your next generation, Mom. Let's see how you like these sons and daughters. I wished all that. I wished that horror with all my heart. But I don't want it no more. I wanna take it back and I don't know how. I can't bear it. My heart is..."¹³

Joe becomes aware of the fact that he was misused and crippled by the system; moreover, he becomes aware that by acting as a 'dumb waiter' of the culture he himself was turned into a monster. Like Shakespeare's Shylock who needed to be loved and respected by the Christian community, but, being denied that, turns into a monster, Joe was also in need of love and respect for his sacrifice in Vietnam. What he finds in his country after he gets back from the war is people's wall of silence, their turning a blind eye to the reality of the unjust war, e.g. of the unjust politics based on the sacrifice of the young. So, he is faced with Hamlet's moral dilemma: how to take action in a corrupt world without being contaminated? For a moment, he accepts the methods of his Government, craves for revenge, but very soon he repents, being aware of the fact that only innocent people will suffer, and that is what he cannot allow to happen. He is on a quest – in order to reach his genuine self he has to forgive and has to be forgiven. However, people did not want to be reminded of the fact that they should be forgiven. Moreover, they did not want to have this family in their neighbourhood, so Joe, Anne and Mary had to move. Out of sight, out of mind. In other words, the majority would rather keep the appearance of stability, peace and security than admit that after all, their American dream was not realized. This 'denial syndrome' (based on the denial of the committed atrocities) is seen by Tesich and Rabe as an accepted and deeply traditional western practice that must be discontinued.

¹² *ibid*, p. 39

¹³ *ibid*, p. 83

David Rabe explored the same theme in his plays that constitute the Vietnam trilogy (*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*(1971), *Sticks and Bones*(1971), *Streamers*(1976)). Like Tesich, Rabe does not only present the horror of the Vietnam war, but also the society whose social rules do nothing to explain the world in which its citizens find themselves functioning. In *Sticks and Bones* Rabe aims at the basic unit of society – the family and shows how people have settled for a bland contentment which they take for happiness. They have become a kind of soap opera family and indeed the characters are based on post-war situation comedies *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, that expressed a sentimental celebration of American values. In this idyllic American Dream, Dave, the blinded Vietnam soldier is an intruder. His blindness is here to be understood as the insight he gained into the true nature of things (especially the war). However, his problems (blindness and fragile mental state) are ignored by his family, because in the myth of the American Dream there is no place for such disruptions, or if you like 'Vietnam Shadows'. So, although the family respond to him with all the clichés appropriate to the return of a son and brother from the war, he is in fact a threat which they attempt first to ignore and finally to eliminate. They force their son to commit suicide. It is very important for them that their self-image is preserved (the way it was with the people who couldn't bear to be forgiven by Joe in *The Speed of Darkness*). However, David does not return alone. He brings with him the memory of the girl he loved – Zung. It is his attitude to her that disturbs their sense of themselves, since she is not regarded as an object of contempt by their son. For his father, Zung is a 'yellow fucking whore'; for David, Zung's color is the color of the earth, mother earth, the real mother, since his American mother betrayed her role.

David and Lou, Rabe's and Tesich's Vietnam veterans, return to a country that wished to know nothing about the war. David notices that they cannot share the vision of reality anymore; what they can share is coffee and nothing else. In other words, what was expected from the veterans was to become invisible and not to disturb the myth of the American Dream. They are, to borrow the title of another play by Rabe, streamers. There is a reference here to a parachute that fails to open and one falls to earth as a result. This fall represents, at the same time, a reawakening, because, after the return from Vietnam, they are able to see the truth about their country for the first time. What these veterans start to realize is that war is not taking place only in Vietnam, but that it is present in everyday life as well. War expresses a total contempt for human creativity since it encourages a kind of existence in which role-playing is substituted for being and in which appearance becomes more important than reality, to borrow Ted Hughes' phrase.¹⁴

At this point, it is very interesting to examine the role of women in these war plays. In all war plays mentioned so far we can detect a struggle between what is usually referred to as the male and female principle. Women should embody life and creativity, men are connected with war and destruction. Therefore, a role that is traditionally assigned to women is that of being in the service of life's creativity; in other words, woman is the soul of the world. And there are the characters that confirm this thesis: Holga (*After the Fall*), Zung (*Sticks and Bones*), Mary (*The Speed of Darkness*). These women cannot forget the past of wars and destruction; the knowledge and the understanding of the past is

¹⁴ appearance vs. reality – the set of binary opposites Ted Hughes notices when analyzing Shakespeare's works in his *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* in order to point to the hypocrisy in society - the difference between what is preached and what is practiced

the necessity for the life to come. When Quentin and Holga visit the Nazi camp, Holga reacts in this way:

"Quentin: Was there anybody you knew died here?

Holga: Oh, no. I feel people ought to see it, that is all. No one comes here any more.

Quentin: But why do you come back? It seems to tear you apart.

Holga: I suppose...one doesn't want to lose the past, even it's dreadful."¹⁵

Although the past is dreadful, it is a part of ourselves and we must not either deny or forget it. However, there is another group of women, both in these plays and in life, that are not in the service of life, but, quite opposite, in the service of the system. These women have betrayed their genuine roles and are blind to the reality that surrounds them: Lavinia (*Mourning Becomes Electra*), Quentin's mother (*After the Fall*), David's mother (*Sticks and Bones*) and finally, America, or the mother country, in Tesich's plays. These are the women who discard the past and live lulled to sleep by the seeming realities of life they have created for themselves. Lavinia tries to replace her mother, but painfully realizes that she has to expiate her sin of siding with the father; Quentin's mother cannot cope up with modern trends and lives in her own Ivory Tower thus betraying her son; David's mother pretends that nothing has changed in her life after David's comeback from Vietnam; America betrayed its sons who needed a new guideline in life – these women failed to remain loyal to their inner-selves and had to suffer in the end because of it.

...

Although Tesich wrote his play *On the Open Road*, a sort of post-apocalyptic *Waiting for Godot*, in response to Vietnam, his purpose was to look for the origin of all wars and examine the nature of America in general. Tesich's characters Al and Angel, like Beckett's Lucky and Pozzo, are on the road hoping to reach a 'superior' civilization – "The Land of the Free". Tesich introduces his characters in the following way: Angel, who used to be a prize fighter before the war broke out, stands on an overturned trash bin with a rope around his neck. Al, an intellectual, comes along, pulling a cart full of art objects. He saves Angel only because he needs an ox to pull his cart. The Civil War in question is unspecified because the author wants to point out that the pattern of all wars is the same. Al and Angel, the teacher and his disciple, are offered a chance to rise by falling. In other words, they are given the chance to enter "The Land of the Free" only if they kill Jesus, that is, if they destroy in themselves the best of what makes them human. What they are going to realize at the end of this pilgrimage is that human beings are characterized and defined by their ability to love without a motive. Since they refused to murder Jesus, they refused to betray that intuitive knowledge and also found out that they were no longer lost, although they continued to be out of reach of salvation.

In the second scene of the play Angel remembers the first time he entered the museum. It was the Scum of the Earth Day, so the 'real' scum was allowed to enter the museum for free. The paintings that were exhibited there were actually the paintings of depression and suffering. What Angel noticed was that ten blocks away there were real people suffering with no one to be interested in them, while in the museum, the images of people suffering were considered to be masterpieces. The people in chic lightweight summersuits and dresses with brochures in their hands, as Angel calls them, preferred to

¹⁵ Arthur Miller, *After the Fall*, (New York: 1964), p. 138

see the framed picture of reality than to look at the original thing. Angel describes how the 'real scum of the earth' was irritated by people who do not bother to see the reality as it is, but are much moved by seeing images of suffering in art:

"They are seriously moved by what they see in the exhibit. They are telling each other how beautiful it all is, this exhibit of human suffering...Not that far from the museum, twenty blocks or so uptown where I lived, there was the same kind of exhibit. Same kind of suffering. Only it wasn't beautiful there...What was fucking scum-of-the-earth outside the museum was a fucking masterpiece inside. And then this thing starts crawling through my brain. This really painful idea that maybe there was something in me worth seeing, that nobody would ever see so long as these artworks were there. I know what I'm thinking, but I'm trying not to think it, 'cause it's no good thinking such thoughts. But then I hear it. It's like I hear the other scum-of-the-earth thinking the same thing. And suddenly it's a much bigger thought. It's like ants. I read in this nature magazine once that ants don't have brains and that ants don't talk unless there's enough of them that get together. Two ants got nothing to say to each other. They don't know what to do. But if a few hundred of them get together, a brain is born. Suddenly, we started trashing it all. Breaking up statues and tearing the paintings to shreds. There were these armed guards there and they shot a bunch of us, but we didn't care. Ants don't really care if a bunch gets killed. We set fire to the museum and ran out into the street."¹⁶

The primary function of art – to enable us to see and understand life better, to lead us to an insight, among others, that war (destruction) is caused by our attitude to creativity (by people for whom art is the production of valuable and beautiful goods only!)— is betrayed according to Angel. For example, Al collects works of art only in order to ensure a free ticket for the "Land of the Free." His opinion is that people who control the entrance can appreciate art (the money value ascribed to art). So his method in teaching (civilizing) is based on facts and data about works of art and their authors, which does not make him better than the people that Al was talking about. They care for people in pictures, but not for the people suffering around them.

Tesich was interested in the same theme in his play *Arts and Leisure*. Alex, a syndicated drama critic, is actually a man who can be grouped together with those people in chic light summersuits with brochures in their hands against whom Angel rebelled. Although deeply immersed in art (art being his profession), it turns out that he is one of those shallow intellectuals, hollow men as T.S.Eliot called them, who could not appreciate art and apply its insights to their own lives. As a result, these people were turned into creatures without souls, and are harmful for everyone near them – in Alex's case, for his mother, wife, daughter. These people prosper in new democracies, in the world, as William Golding would say "where it is better to be envied than ignored, better to be well-paid than happy, better to be successful than good – better to be vile, than vile-esteemed."¹⁷ Alex sees his whole life as a quest –as being on a train; he would like to jump off this train, but is not courageous enough:

¹⁶ Steve Tesich, *On the Open Road*, (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1992), p. 18

¹⁷ William Golding, "On the Crest of the Wave", *Hot Gates*, Faber and Faber, 1974, p.130

"In short the train has everything I might ever want but somehow almost nothing I need. We roll on various landscapes. We observe wars and famines. We see survivors of massacres pleading for help. We are moved by their suffering. We are scandalized that nobody gets off the train to lend a hand... Off and on and on and off, in between stunning sunsets and spectacular sunrises, in between river crossings and seasons changing we observe more and more tragedies. We see figures made half inhuman by their suffering pressing their hands together as if praying us to save them. And we are moved by them all. We could not be more moved as the train moves on. Somewhere along the way I feel a need to get off this train where I have almost everything I could ever want but almost nothing I need. I feel like getting off not for any altruistic reasons. Not necessarily to lend a hand to those unfortunate souls but out of a growing awareness that my own life is out there and that I should get off the train and live it. I must jump off this train. I must start living my life. But then I think: I should have jumped off a long time ago... Alex Chaney, I think, as if I were composing a review of my life, was one of those men who was absolutely certain every day of his life that he would start living his life the next day. And then, suddenly, as if a black hood were pulled over my head the train plunges into the tunnel and everything goes black. The drama is over."¹⁸

In the world where art is seen as a mere commodity, a product of the 'more jam tomorrow' policy as Leavis termed it, we are not to be surprised with the quality of people that are considering themselves artists. Furthermore, art has become an excuse for which man separates himself from lived, authentic, engaged experience: instead of seeing truths through art, we are implicated into lies. This play represents an intentional reaction to the devastating consequences of America's consumer-oriented appreciation of art. Art, as Tesich understood it, and I completely agree with him, is not something that should exist in a self-created void – in the Ivory Tower detached from the present, the concrete, the individual. Too strong a striving towards the 'eternal' and 'universal' very often leads to abstractions devoid of all life and energy, reduced to a formula whose limitations and strictness are the very antitheses of anything worth calling art. Adrienne Rich also talks about this process, difficult to be detected and even more difficult for a creative artist not to succumb to.

In *Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts* (1997) Rich explains why she refused to accept the award from President Clinton (The White House) by saying "the very meaning of art as I understand it, is incompatible with the cynical politics of this administration."¹⁹ A poet who, like Tesich, believes in art's social presence – as the voice for those whose voices are disregarded, as a breaker of official silences, and, after all, as a human birthright, and who had witnessed the increasingly brutal impact of racial and economic injustice in her country could not participate in this hypocritical ritual. Instead, she openly criticizes the practices of the American government and raises questions that reveal their 'latest' democratic trends:

"I had recently been listening and writing about the growing fragmentation of the social compact, of whatever it was this country had ever meant when it called itself a democracy: the shredding of the vision of government of the people, by the people, for the people... And I had for years been feeling both personal and public grief, fear, hunger and

¹⁸ Steve Tesich, *Arts and Leisure*, (New York: Samuel French Inc, 1997), p.63

¹⁹ Adrienne Rich, *Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts*, *Los Angeles Times*, August, 1997

the need to render this, my time, in the language of my art... There is no political leadership in the White House or the Congress that has spoken to and for the people who, in a very real sense, have felt abandoned by their Government."²⁰

In modern America, according to Rich, Marxism is still alive and pulsing, because the questions it raised: "What is social wealth? How do the conditions of human labor infiltrate other social relationships? What would it require for people to live and work together in conditions of radical equality?" are of primary importance. The Government will remain silent, because the all-embracing enterprise of American history has been the slave trade that along with the genocide of the native population and the seizure of their lands, represents the foundation of national prosperity and power. So, all these questions lead to this: how much inequality will be tolerated in the world's richest and most powerful nation?

By refusing to legislate her art by the system's approval, Adrienne Rich emphasizes the primary function of art: to make one aware that art is a deeply instinctual and yet self-expressive language, a regenerative process that helps one recall the original desire and in that way saves your life:

"Art is our human birthright, our most powerful means of access to our own and another's experience and imaginative life. In continually rediscovering and recovering the humanity of human beings, art is crucial to the democratic vision. A government tending further and further away from the search for democracy will see less and less uses in encouraging artists, will see art as obscenity or hoax."²¹

The role of an artist, therefore, is, according to Adrienne Rich, to establish a relationship with other people who are beleaguered, suffering, disenfranchised and to connect them with the art they are nonetheless making or seeking. There is something in those people worth seeing as Angel says in *On the Open Road* and the role of an artist is to explore what it is and to help them. In that way, art cannot be separated from acute social crisis and " in the long run, it needs to grow organically out of a social compost nourishing to everyone, a literate citizenry, a free, universal, public education complex with art as an integral element, a society without throwaway people, honoring both human individuality and the search for a decent, sustainable, common life. In such conditions art would still be a voice of hunger, desire, discontent, passion, reminding us that the democratic process is never-ending."²²

In the world where art (life) has lost its meaning, the only thing that can possibly make people return to the teaching of Socrates and Pelagius (the teaching of innate goodness in every man) is to show affection towards other people. Al (an intellectual skeptic like Kurtz from *The Heart of Darkness*) seems to be incapable of that, although Angel is craving for any kind of affection. Moreover, Angel is the one who shows sympathy towards a Little Girl they find, and saves her life. Angel, an embodiment of a primitive savage, sees himself as inferior in comparison with Al who rationally (logically) orders him to leave the girl, because she would only be a burden and an obstacle to their goal – to reach "The Land of the Free":

²⁰ ibid

²¹ ibid

²² ibid

"Al: Saved her life? Does she look saved? You think that's all it takes. One shot salvation. There, I've done it. Now on to the next one. Do you have any idea the kind of love it takes to love somebody? Especially these little ones. She'll need to be saved every hour of every day over and over again for years and years. Are you willing to do that? Are you?"

Angel:...I don't know. I don't think so.

Al: Then drop her before she opens her eyes and starts hoping. DROP HER!"²³

The ultimate test that they have to pass in order to be accepted as new citizens of "The Land of the Free" is to kill Jesus. Quid pro Quo. In this play, Jesus Christ is seen as a musician who plays the cello, and is deaf and mute at the same time. This description of Christ implies a criticism of patriarchal civilization and its logos – symbolically, Jesus is mute, because he does not want to use the language of civilization, but to turn to our genuine (original) nature; he is deaf to the false voice of patriarchal authority and quite symbolically, he is a musician. Socrates, too, like Tesich's Christ, practiced music before he died. The tune that Jesus plays is always the same. A monk orders Al and Angel to murder Christ and is shown to have been reduced to a bureaucrat, formalist and in this violent world, as he calls it, he acts as a practical reasoner. When Al and Angel arrive in the monastery he tells them that smoking is forbidden there. He does not mention that killing is forbidden, though. In the Bible, he claims, there is nothing about killing God. It is stated that thou shall not kill. These words refer to men, not to God, says the monk. Jesus should be killed because, the Monk claims, he made men at war with their own mind:

"We need a motive not free will to love and we have found none, and you have given us none, and I suspect none is forthcoming. It torments us, this thing we cannot accomplish. This personal vision of yours we cannot realize. We cannot expunge it from our minds and we cannot realize it so it just eats at us. You have made man at war with his own mind...He shares that war with others. As he rages against the task You set for him that he can never accomplish he communicates that rage to others. There can be no peace on earth so long as man is at war with himself. Do you see what I mean? Love thy neighbor as you love yourself. We do. That's the nightmare of our times. We do. Exactly as we love ourselves."²⁴

Since they could not murder Jesus (that is, destroy the human in themselves), Al and Angel are punished. They are crucified as Christ was. This punishment was necessary for Al to understand and to admit that our rational faculties (the mind) represent a trap, because we can see and analyze everything with them, but not emotionally comprehend. Al finally realizes that love without a cause is what defines human beings; so, this pilgrimage was necessary for him to return to his original nature. Therefore, he does not see himself crucified, but as a man with his arms open, ready to embrace the world. Finally, he is free and sees himself as a masterpiece. Freedom as a concept was repudiated and condemned before as an enemy by Al:

"There are only two kinds of freedom. Freedom from something. And freedom for something. A slave in chains has a profound vision of the latter, the why for and the what for of freedom, but to realize his vision, he first needs to be freed from something, his chains. As soon as he is, he loses the vision of free for what. If he wants to re-experience

²³ Steve Tesich, *On the Open Road*, (New York: Applause Theatre Book publishers, 1992), p. 43

²⁴ *ibid*, p.73

the beauty of his vision and the full meaning it had for him, he has to contrive to enslave himself again... Freedom's the problem. Free for what? Freedom's the enemy now."²⁵

Al finally understands the real meaning of freedom, that is, the free for what of freedom – to love without a motive, that defines a human being.

Tesich noticed that somehow people have taken a wrong route and betrayed their original selves, and are suffering the consequences now. In his play *Square One* he retraces this history of the wrong choice (Adam putting his creativity at the disposal of the state – his God) through the story of Adam and Diane, and attempts to point out to the steps that might lead to the possibility of a new history (Diane returns to the park – her garden of Eden). In Adam's world, organized very much like Orwell's 1984, Diane feels betrayed. She cannot bear to sacrifice her own child (and children in general) for the sake of progress; she cannot be a part of the world where artists are graded in classes, in a word, in which art intimidates life. Therefore, she exclaims that she does not want to be a part of the system in which crippling and sacrifice of the youngest go on and on:

"I want a divorce from a way of life in which constant processions of tragedies and sacrifices of innocents are required just so that we can grow as human beings. It might become addictive."²⁶

....

In an interview for *New York Times* (1991), as profoundly disappointed with the practice of the American Government as Adrienne Rich, Steve Tesich admitted that his illusions about America have dispersed.

"I didn't love America," he says. "I was in love with America. I honestly believed that it was going to be one of those nations that would take care of everybody, that would try to make its rewards available to all. And now I feel there is absolutely no agenda for helping those on the bottom in this country. Nobody is really interested in them. And I don't know what the country stands for."²⁷

Is there anything to be done in order to offer help to those who are in need of it? According to Wim Wenders Americans are helpless about it:

"Americans themselves can't do it.
They are confused.
They don't know what's happening to them.
First their dream is stolen from them,
And it's sold back to them day by day."²⁸

The failure of imagination and the ensuing despair are discernible on every level of American life. What Wim Wenders calls the American dream, Eliot the desire for what is most attainable, Adrienne Rich, in her collection of essays *What is Found There*, sees as our genuine desire that is taken from us, processed and labeled, and sold back to us before we had a chance to name it for ourselves.

Like many others from his generation who experienced that their ideals were unrealized, because they were altered and falsified by those who appropriated and reinterpreted them for the masses, Tesich focuses himself on the consequences of America's retreat from its past promise. Deeply concerned with 'dysfunctional families' and individuals,

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 90

²⁶ Steve Tesich, *Square One*, (New York: Samuel French Inc, 1990), p. 73

²⁷ Steve Tesich, *Morality's the Thing for This Playwright*, *New York Times*, March, 1991

²⁸ Wim Wenders, *The American Dream*, (Faber, 1989), p. 142

Tesich presents a gallery of characters ranging from homicidal to alienated and in that way satirizes the American dream, e.g. its distance from the teaching of innate goodness present in everyman according to Socrates and Pelagius and the role-playing and crippling that it demands of its loyal subjects. However, the hope remains as long as one's own system of beliefs remains intact and unshaken, and one is mentally free in spite of physical confinement. Once you lose the true knowledge about yourself, you become an easy prey to indoctrination and ideology and are 'free to do whatever your government tells you to do'.

Tesich (and all those other artists, like Rabe and Rich, who share his concerns) have helped me to 'cleansed my doors of perception' and to detect the processes that take place nowadays in Serbia, its trends being to adjust the myth of the American Dream here and to create the Serbian Dream based on the before mentioned role-model. One of the main characteristics of the Western civilization is labeling as unwanted those who try to oppose its harsh rules and discriminatory standards. We should stand up to Westerners' dangerous habit to divide things into proper and improper, acceptable and unacceptable. We can do this by preserving our national identity, personal integrity and dignity. Unless we do it, all the differences in cultures and customs will be destroyed and as Jimmy Porter says in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*: "Perhaps all our children will be Americans!" God forbid!

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RAT I DEMOKRATIJA – IZDAJA POJEDINCA U KOMADIMA STIVA TEŠIĆA

Milena Kostić

Stiv Tešić je samo jedan od savremenih književnika (pored Vendersa, Edrijen Rič, Rejba) koji je istraživao kako kultura čini nasilje, rat i surovost neizbežnim. Svrha ovog rada jeste da se ispituju posledice takve prakse u okviru zapadne kulture (naročito u Americi), gde dolazi do uništavanja ljudskog potencijala i da se vidi da li je moguće da se zapadna kultura vrati učenju Sokrata i Pelagija - učenju koje se zasniva na potpunoj samospoznaji, afirmaciji i veri u dobrotu čoveka. Pitanje koje postavljaju svi autori pomenuti u radu je da li je moguće da dođe do ostvarenja Američkog sna i da se, pritom, ne izdaju osnovni principi ljudskosti.