

Who Cares?:
The Washington-Sarajevo Talks

A Drama in Two Acts

CHARACTERS

VLADO [*pronounced VLAH-doh*], historian/journalist, mid-30s

RHONDA, writer/playwright, “of a certain age”

SETTING

On the phone and in the mind. After establishing that the phone is the vehicle for this drama, the actors can move about, without however making eye or physical contact until the final scene.

TIME

Specifically, December 1994 to December 1995. Generally, in “a time of cholera” (to quote Gabriel Garcia Marquez).

ACT ONE, “The Siege”

ACT TWO, “‘The Nice Little Syndrome’
or ‘The Inner Sniper Looms’”

*“I only know that if everyone could see each other as you and I do,
throats could not be slit.”—from the play*

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Dedicated to Vlado, my collaborator;
Larry, my husband;
and my goddaughter Amy and godson James Britt.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Premiere production (as docudrama): Victory Gardens Theater, Chicago. Director: Sandy Shinner (Associate Artistic Director). Artistic Director: Dennis Zacek. Development Director: Marcie McVay. Fall 1996.

Vlado..... Raul Esparza
CarlaDeanna Dunagan

Reader's theatre production (as docudrama): SecondStage, Studio Theatre, Washington, D.C. Director: Morey B. Epstein. Artistic Director: Joy Zinoman. Literary Manager: Serge Seiden. Spring 1999.

Vlado..... Stas Wronka
Carla Marcia Churchill

Second production (as universal drama): Festival of Emerging American Theatre, Phoenix Theatre, Indianapolis. Director: Martha Jacobs. Artistic Director: Bryan Fonseca. Playwright-in-Residence: Toni Press-Coffman. Spring 2003.

Vlado..... Bill Simmons
Rhonda..... Sharon McDonald

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

War's suffering, historically conveyed to us secondhand, we now see for ourselves on TV. As televised war, the siege of Sarajevo—1992 to 1996, longest of the 20th century—was a new marker: Its dying was prolonged over four long years while the world watched daily. The question then arises, for both citizen and artist—and it is the question launching this play: *If the human suffering of the world's Sarajevos is literally in the room with us, what is our relationship to it?*

In short, the play asks: Who cares? And why?

This play is based on phone calls between me, living at the time in Washington, D.C., and Vlado Azinović, “living” in Sarajevo during the siege and running Radio Zid, an independent station. The substance of the dialogue in all its aspects actually occurred or, as Vlado said, “hung in the air”; the passage of time has made dramatization and greater universality possible. To achieve perspective I changed my name; all other characters wish to retain their real name; Vedran is fictional; I changed Radio Zid to Radio Zed.

Act One: The Siege

Scene 1: “You have almost no pulse”

Setting: Washington, D.C. and wartime Sarajevo.

At rise: SOUND of SNIPER FIRE.

HALF LIGHTS on VLADO, in Sarajevo, who sits in his office, shivering.

FULL LIGHTS on RHONDA, who nervously goes over notes; hesitates.

Then: SOUND of DIALING international connection.

RHONDA: Sir: I think a great crime is happening against Sarajevo—a great crime. World War Two was about “Never again” and here it is—again. This time we can’t say we don’t know, because: We know. People dying on CNN—almost three years now! I’m haunted: Sarajevo was the Paris of the Balkans—the Paris of the Balkans: theatre, music, cafes—and so open: mosques next to cathedrals, churches, synagogues. And now, snipers in the hills firing away, some specializing in children—God I hate bullies!—“peacekeepers” on the ground, not-firing back. All caught on film and—I am *so* ashamed—no audience response. It’s a new marker, it—really is...

VLADO: Nice speech. But: Do you have some troops with you?

RHONDA: Military intervention *is* the big question for us, the “sole superpower.” While you’re being shot at, my husband and I

have had—debates, many. He's former military and doubts intervention could work, short of saturating your country with troops, while I advocate anything to stop the killing. I can't bear more—(*cut off by*)

VLADO: With all due respect: Are (*shivering*) y-you a do-gooder?

RHONDA: Have you been getting many such calls...?

VLADO is struck silent.

RHONDA: You're cold, aren't you. I hear your teeth chattering.

VLADO: They're chattering because I'm talking. Please: What is the purpose of your call, apart from winning an argument with your husband.

RHONDA: They're debates. I am a playwright—

VLADO: Ah: and you want to get a play off us.

RHONDA: No, I have written a play, which I give you. Since you run a cultural radio station, I thought a drama might interest you—apart from the drama outside.

VLADO: How did you learn of Radio Zed? [*pronounced Rahdio*]

RHONDA: I heard you on National Public Radio yesterday. I so admire what you're doing, under insane conditions. Your story of stealing fuel from U.N. vehicles to run your generators: wonderful.

VLADO: Huh.... So: What is your play about?

RHONDA: How good people find good reasons to let a crime go forward—as the world is doing with Sarajevo. I give it to explain, not excuse, our inaction. I hope it'll—comfort you. It's the only way I can intervene— Good God, out here in TV Land we see the

insanity as it's happening, it's not coming by messenger or packet ship. It's—in the room with us.

VLADO: We're watching too. Just love being the world's sport!

RHONDA: I feel we, the watchers, have a relationship and thus a responsibility to you, the watched. And writers: Writers should take action, not save their humanity for their art—(*stops and rolls her eyes*). I'm sorry; maybe this wasn't a good idea....

VLADO: What *is* your relationship to me...?

RHONDA: I don't know but.... Taking a leap here, this phone is a stethoscope and I have to say: You have almost no pulse.

Beat.

VLADO: Why didn't you say that in the first place?

RHONDA: I've never called into Hell before.

VLADO: Since you *are* the only one who's taken my pulse— Where are you calling from?

RHONDA: Washington.

VLADO: Ah, center of the universe.... Give me your phone number— if I can find a pen.... It's night here—we're six hours ahead of you—and I'm sitting in complete darkness. If those “people in the hills” hadn't cut off our electricity—again—you could fax your play. Our postal service has been destroyed—

RHONDA: So has ours (*laughs nervously*). Sorry; I'm nervous.

VLADO: (*Beat*) All right, go ahead, I've got a piece of paper on my leg.

RHONDA: (*Beat*) Sir: May I call you Vlado?

FULL LIGHTS UP on VLADO: The electricity comes on.

VLADO: Yes, “Vlado” would be nice. “Sir” was nice too. And may I call you “Lucia”? Our lights just came on.

RHONDA: If you want. My name is Rhonda.

VLADO: O.K., Rhonda: Start faxing. I’ll call you with my decision about your play. Oh, and thanks for not asking, “Do you go through Sniper’s Alley?”

RHONDA: I assume you do.

VLADO: Yup. I wish you a “Merry Christmas.”

RHONDA: I’ll wish you peace in the New Year instead. Vlado: Take care. I read that’s what people in Sarajevo say when they part: “Take care.”

Scene 2: “I need to talk”

SOUND of REVOLVER SHOT.

VLADO holds the paper with Rhonda’s phone number.

VLADO: Hi. It’s Vlado. Did you, uh, have a nice Christmas?

RHONDA: *(Beat)* Very. And, uh, you?

VLADO: Pleasant. I spent it with my mother and my girlfriend. I live with Mother. Father died this year. This was our first “holy-day” without him, not that I’m religious anymore.

RHONDA: I question too....

Awkward silence.

VLADO: So, what’re you doing?

RHONDA: Working on a play. It’s about Franz Kafka.

VLADO: *(Laughs hard)* Franz Kafka? Kafka would understand this zoo!

RHONDA: Vlado: What is the purpose of your call...?

Beat.

VLADO: An hour ago—on the station steps—a man—committed suicide. Just blew his brains out. *(“Laughs”)* Guess he’d had enough.

RHONDA reacts silently.

VLADO: Yeah, I witnessed it. *And* cleaned up—what a mess. *(Beat)* Maybe you’d better take my pulse again?

RHONDA: God in Heaven, this siege is an obscenity, an obscenity! *How* did all this happen?

VLADO: I like your anger, I *really* do, though calling on God is futile, as we—discussed.... (*Beat*) Rhonda: I'd like to talk to you. Personally, I really need it.

RHONDA: Vlado, I am—not a psychiatrist.

VLADO: They've abandoned us too. Look, I don't plan to commit suicide. Too many people count on me. I just like talking to you. My girlfriend is—fragile. We're having “debates”: She wants to escape, I don't. My friends—they have their own problems. And, you seem strong.

RHONDA: It's manufactured. As a kid I was so shy I had to ask Mom to ask the waiter for more water.

VLADO: Same with me. And, big thing: You seem normal.

RHONDA: Oh, I have my quirks. I *am* normal. Unfortunately.

VLADO: I can tell you, especially today: Normal is rare. Why apologize?

RHONDA: Because I've been made to. (*Beat*) I need to talk to you too, Vlado. I'm trying to live a worthy life, write about Life and Death, but: I'm at sea here, I'm not nourished by this—culture of helium. Weird exalted over normal, me-me-me, unearned angst. I see the world now as a tale of two tents: one a refugee tent, the other a circus. And since this world is wired, we must ask, What are we wired to? When I ask my friends, many of whom have dialed out to cultivate their own gardens, they say, “Here, have a peach.” But I want to stay involved with the world. So does my husband. We still want to “*Carpe diem*,” seize the day. I contribute to the helium, with my wit. But: I yearn for the ultimate. To rise above.

VLADO: “Rise above”: Sounds good to me.

RHONDA: (*Laughs*) I warn you, my friends say I'm intense, that gardening would improve me—lots.

VLADO: Please: Don't go into the garden. Be intense with me.

RHONDA: (*Beat*) O.K.

VLADO: O.K. *And* we'll broadcast your play. I like a drama about a crime-stopper. I'll be your translator.

RHONDA: Thank you! We like "art" about crime-starters; criminals. (*Beat*) Vlado, do you have enough to eat?

VLADO: Enough. Big problem is no water. Last night I got up to collect the rainwater. Another problem: At night, with no streetlights, you collide with buildings. (*Mimes*) "Pardon...."

RHONDA: You must hate the snipers...?

VLADO: Hate expired—along with all other feeling. Besides, it's useless to hate if there's nothing you can do. (*Beat*) How is it an American cares?

RHONDA: When I was five, six years old, I came across photo books my parents happened to have: of the death camps of World War Two—*how* could human beings do that to other human beings?—and of Negro lynchings, with crowds standing around, including children my age. *How could they laugh?* Those photos gave the "too sensitive" child a hole in the heart. They force perspective: "You think your problems are bad, tell it to Auschwitz or the lynched man." My husband and I have been to Auschwitz. We felt a sanctity there we don't feel here, and we fell silent....

Scene 3: The Context—Chaos

SPOT on VLADO.

VLADO: My new friend asks, with her beautiful anger: “How’d all this happen?” “Why are you being shot at by former neighbors?” “How can one human being pull a knife across the throat of another human being?” How should I know? I’m a recovering historian. In an earlier life I had the answers, which as Professor I declaimed at the University—until history exploded. It’s a historian’s trick, you know: making sense of things. We can’t do that til after—*if* we don’t get buried. My friend says Americans don’t wake up thinking about the American Civil War, and I shot back, “The losers do.” That was rude, so let me construct a response to her many questions.

Please, pull up a rock, be seated. It’s not comfortable, but the lesson’s short. Our University is closed, the National Library’s destroyed, but learning still goes on.

O.K.: Two things your TV image has learned. First, apropos the Cold War, Winston Churchill got it right: “When the war of the giants has ended, the war of the pygmies will begin.” The Cold War ended, let the Games begin! Second, “How can human beings slit throats?” Because: Politicians tell them to. These—pygmies get on their TV, radio, “Revenge your martyred prince, your papa—kill, kill, kill!” And since their tribes consist of peasants—simple people—they obey: “If it’s on the TV, it must be true, where’s my knife?”

That’s why an independent station is vital: At Zed we do *not* tell people to kill. If I had any feeling left, I could hate the manipulators more than the snipers. But, I digress....

A statistic, and no lecture's complete without one of those: In former wars when battle was confined to battlefields, combatants accounted for 90% of the dead, versus 10% for civilians. But now, because pygmies and peasants don't abide by rules of war, that score has flipped: Now it's civilians 90, combatants 10. Truly Total War—which explains all those refugees roaming around, using stairwells as toilets, and why this civilian is so nostalgic for those beautiful rules of war, and not because it was his PhD thesis. Questions? Comments?

LIGHTS UP on RHONDA.

RHONDA: I still want to believe there is still a line.

VLADO: It's so thin, it's meaningless. Lots of Americans have erased it, with their guns.

RHONDA: Uh-huh.... Is this the time to tell you my husband is involved in conflict prevention? He's a national security strategist and conducts games for policy types. It sounds pretentious but it's an attempt to get the big picture, see ahead.

VLADO: The "Answer Man."

RHONDA: You are in the volcano, here an overview's possible—Vlado: Larry is *not* an arms merchant. And I embrace his philosophy: "Don't worry a problem, work it." (*Beat*) Larry's impressed I've made an intervention.

VLADO: (*Beat*) So: What do your husband's "games" reveal?

RHONDA: Escalation—radical. Quote: "Tell Vlado to get the hell out of Hell."

VLADO: I won't abandon Sarajevo, I will *not* abandon Zed, my staff is young, I am "Father."

RHONDA: I also called our State Department.

VLADO: You called for me...?

RHONDA: One calls the desk officer. Who said, “Sarajevo’s moment has passed.” Meaning: no military intervention; in fact I heard lots about “the limits of.” And numbers: Is it 200,000 dead or “merely” 20,000? (*Beat*) Vlado, I hesitate to ask but: What’s your national identity?

VLADO: Not you too. Jesus, I just want to be seen as a human being!

RHONDA: I just want to know, are you minority or majority? Because that’s what this war is about.

VLADO: *Not* for me, or Zed! We’re a mosaic, like Sarajevo used to be. Our mission’s to keep normal life alive, therefore we don’t talk about the war, the siege, the suffering—it’s all around us, why talk about it?

(Continued)