

THE PROFESSIONAL

A play¹⁴ by Dusan Kovacevic

English translation and adaptation by Bob Djurdjevic

SECOND EDITION, May 29, 1992

CHARACTERS

SELF: Teodor "Teja" Kraj
 (*Theodore "Teya" Kry -- in English version*)
LUKA LABAN: The Professional
 (*Luke Laban -- in English version*)
MARTA: The Secretary
 (*Martha -- in English version*)
and one, quite normal, LUNATIC.
 (*Lunatic -- in English version, too*)

plus a **NARRATOR**

CAST

World Premiere: January 10, 1990

(at the "ZVEZDARA" theater in Belgrade, Yugoslavia)

Teodor "Teja" Kraj: Bogdan DIKLIC

Luka Laban: Danilo Bata STOJKOVIC

Marta: Neda ARNERIC

Lunatic: Vanja JANKETIC

Narrator: ?

¹⁴ A tragi-comedy according to Luke.

STAGE INSTRUCTIONS' LEGEND:

(Italics in brackets indicate stage instructions which are NOT to be read)

The 12-pitch PRESTIGE font are the lines to be read by the NARRATOR.

NARRATOR: My name is Theodore Kry. My mother called me "Teya." So did my friends... while I had them. My name probably doesn't mean anything to you. I am a writer... I hope I am, anyway... I am 45 years old. Until now, I've had two books published. A book of poems and a book of short stories. Depressingly little! And I look as if I had written 20 novels. Grandiosely badly!

WHERE ARE MY UNWRITTEN BOOKS? The story which follows is incredible, but true. And it will answer this unpleasant question. This manuscript is being written in one breath, straight into the typewriter, just as the story itself unfolded. A meeting with this man had changed my whole former life. Is it possible to change one's former life, you ask? It is! How? It's simple -- with my luck and with my brains, that is.

I was sitting in my office and leafing through one of the newly-arrived manuscripts. The works of poems, the works of short stories, the works of novels, the works of travel diaries, the works of memories... Most of these scribbles have been offered to other publishing houses, too. I knew the contents by heart, because drunken authors used to tell me about them in bars and cafes. From the moment I became the Editor-in-Chief, I have not been able to eat out without consuming with my meal yet another "genius" work of art...

The telephone kept on ringing... I did not bother to answer it, since I knew that it was one of the scripto-maniacs. I thought that, at least today, I would not allow myself to get upset. But, the telephone kept on ringing... And it would have probably continued to ring forever, had I not finally lifted the receiver.

SELF: ...Yes, yes...

NARRATOR: I was right. The call was from a writer whom I deeply despised. A mere thought of his name almost made me puke. I have thought, said, and written terrible things about his writing... But, here, as "Editor-in-Chief" of this publishing house, I am no longer a private person. Here, I am "a Somebody," who had been named by "a Somebody," to take care of "Something," and to stay on top of it. So, despite my indescribable disgust, I tried to speak to calmly... However...

SELF: Yes... It is me... But, please, how can you ask me this again? Your book had been rejected before I ever got this job. I have been here, as you know, not quite two months. And your book was rejected, as you also know, five months ago... What did you say? Why am I using the word "rejected?" You are offended by this word?... All right, then... Your book is not in our publishing plan for the coming year. Does this sound better?... I am rude? I am rude? And what do you think you sound like?! How could I have read a book which had been returned to you five months ago? ... You never got it? And to whom had you sent it originally? ...In that case, please ask HIM about it... He told you I had it?... He is lying! Tell him, he is lying...

NARRATOR: Provoked by this just-pre-cardiac-arrest voice at the other end of the phone, I noticed that I was shouting myself from the top of my lungs. And as I was getting ready to slam my telephone receiver so as to bust this bastard's ear drums, I heard a very noisy song from the adjacent office. A former editor, the one who had been replaced because of catastrophic business results, the one who had threatened me and the whole publishing house that he would get even with us sooner or later...was partying. I walked toward the wall and slammed my fist against it. The singing got a bit quieter. But the lunatic from the other end of my phone continued to scream. Making things worse, my secretary, Martha, walked into my office at that moment. Looking over her shoulders, as if somebody were following her, she whispered:

MARTHA: There's someone here looking for you.

NARRATOR: I nodded and motioned with my hand for her to wait. Then, swallowing a profanity, I ended my telephone confrontation.

SELF: Please go back to the person to whom you had handed in the manuscript in the first place, the person who read it and who rejected it!

NARRATOR: I stressed intentionally the word "rejected," and slammed down the receiver. Martha's face had a worried, caring and concerned expression. I felt badly that she was worrying so much about me. She waited until I calmed down a bit. As I wiped off the sweat from my forehead, she said:

MARTHA: Don't you know how high your blood pressure is?

SELF: I know, Martha... But, how can you carry on a normal conversation with a person who is ...well... rude, obstinate, stupid and primitive! And... and then, just how can one explain to this idiot who is terrorizing us with his noisy singing that...

MARTHA: Please, calm down, won't you...

(She approached me, put her hand gently on my shoulder, looked at me, and smiled.)

MARTHA: You promised that you wouldn't fly off the handle again... At least not today.

SELF: I know... I am sorry. How is your daughter?

MARTHA: So, so...

SELF: Everything will be all alright... I am sure... Do we still have our luncheon date? Please book a table at a good restaurant. Of your choice...

MARTHA: I don't know... I don't really feel like lunch.

SELF: But, you promised...

MARTHA: I know... What should I tell him?

SELF: Whom?

MARTHA: I've already told you. There is someone out there waiting to see you.

SELF: Who?

MARTHA: I don't know who he is. I've never seen him before. He looks a bit weird. I don't think he is a writer.

SELF: He is a writer. I am sure he is a writer, Martha. They are all writing today, and nobody is looking like a writer anymore. The less they look like writers, the more books they have written...

MARTHA: Please don't get excited again.

SELF: OK... Please tell him that I am not in.

MARTHA: I've already told him that. But, he said that he knew you weren't in, but he wanted you to receive him anyway.

NARRATOR: I thought that I misheard what she had said.

SELF: What did he say?

MARTHA: To receive him even though you weren't in... He said he didn't come here on his own own behalf.

SELF: Then, on whose behalf did he come?

MARTHA: I don't know... He has a briefcase and a sizable black suitcase.

SELF: A briefcase and a sizable black suitcase?

MARTHA: Yes.

SELF: Until now, they used to bring in the manuscripts in manila folders.

MARTHA: He looks as if he just got off a train... Maybe he is a relative of yours.

(I looked at her angrily. She obviously didn't realize what she had just said.)

SELF: A relative of mine?

MARTHA: Yes...

SELF: He looks a bit weird, has a briefcase and a sizable black suitcase? And, according to you, that's how a relative of mine should look like?

MARTHA: I'm afraid you misunderstand...

SELF: Oh no, Martha, I did not. You are only saying what everybody else thinks. One could live in a big city for one hundred years, and there would still be some people who'd remind me where I came from. All that's good -- you got here. All that's bad -- you brought along when you first arrived...

MARTHA: I am sorry. I didn't mean that...

SELF: People tend to cover up their thoughts with words. I don't remember who said this first, but from personal experience, I know it is true! Why would some weirdo be a relative of mine?

MARTHA: Well, he asked me: "Is Teya here?" And you'd told me that that's how your mother called you.

SELF: He asked you if Teya were here?

MARTHA: Yes.

SELF: Somebody must have told him that that's how my mother called me... All right. Show him in. But then, after awhile, please come in and say that I'd just been called to an urgent meeting... And... I am sorry about my outburst, Martha... That lunatic really got on my nerves.

(I kissed her hand.)

NARRATOR: She smiled, turned around and, like a ballerina, gracefully glided toward the door. Then, with the door still ajar, she paused. It looked as if she had just thought of something. Her face was radiant when she turned around and looked at me again.

MARTHA: Teya, I had a wonderful time last night. Thank you.

(I shuffled uncomfortably in my chair, and smiled back forcibly. I muttered shyly:)

SELF: So did I.

*(After she had left, I raised my arms to stretch my back and soul... And then, an older man entered the office, still in a pretty good shape, wearing a brown overcoat, with a care
groomed hair, carrying a briefcase in one hand, and a
sizable black suitcase in the other. He paused, looked at
me, and gave me a friendly smile.)* *fully*

MAN: Good afternoon.

SELF: Good afternoon.

NARRATOR: He looked at me as if we were childhood pals, or close relatives who haven't seen each other for a long time. Martha was right. He really looked like a relative who had just gotten off a train. I stood there, trying to remember who he was... I have at least two thousand relatives. Most of them I have not seen for over 20 years.

SELF: Well?

NARRATOR: He looked at me silently. Then he shrugged his shoulders as if he were sorry for being received so coolly. I tried smiling back, but it was too late. He looked hurt already as he asked quietly:

MAN: You don't even know who I am, do you?

SELF: No, I don't...

(His smile had disappeared. I felt sorry for him. I didn't know why, though.)

MAN: You don't know?

SELF: No I don't.. I am really sorry, but...

MAN: May I put down my suitcase?

SELF: Of course. Would you like to sit down?

MAN: No.

NARRATOR: He put down his sizable and obviously heavy suitcase and looked me straight in the eye. At that moment, I realized that he was neither my childhood pal, nor some long forgotten relative.

MAN: I was sure you would have "known" me for the last two years... at least... but, I see...

SELF: You wouldn't be...

MAN: One of your army buddies?

(He laughed as he said that.)

MAN: Do you remember your short-story "My Army Buddy?"

SELF: My short story? "My Army Buddy?"

MAN: Yes. About a man who walked up to you in the middle of a busy street, hugged you, kissed you on the cheek and asked: are you still seeing our buddies? And you stood there, just like now, and asked yourself: which buddies? The man sagged, just like I did, and said: you know -- our army buddies. You were relieved. At least now you had something to go on. To cheer up your despondent pal, you said self-assuredly and magnanimously: our army buddies? Of course, I am still seeing them! Why wouldn't I? The man believed you. He embraced you, slapped you on the shoulder -- he was glad that you had not estranged yourself. He asked you: and whom are you seeing the most? Well... then, just like now, you were struggling to come up with at least one name. That's when you remembered Corporal Mark Kostich. With a great sigh of relief, you said: I see Corporal Mark Kostich quite regularly. And the man just looked at you, his eyes dropping to the ground, as he whispered: I am Corporal Mark Kostich...

NARRATOR: And he laughed again. I laughed, too, although I didn't really feel like it.

SELF: A cute story. But, unfortunately it wasn't mine.

MAN: Oh, yes it was. That's why, please, don't ask me if we are old army buddies... We are not.

SELF: I beg your pardon, but what is your name?

MAN: My name is Luke Laban... Luke Laban... My name, of course, means nothing to you, right?

NARRATOR: I had never heard of it. The man watched me coldly and calmly. I started to lose my nerve, something which is not all that unusual with me.

SELF: Comrade Luke, might you not have made a mistake? There are several other people in this building with a name Theodore...

LUKE: I know. But, there is only one Theodore "Teya" Kry... Don't worry... I won't keep you. I know you have a luncheon appointment with Martha...

SELF: How do you know that?

LUKE: Isn't today your 45th birthday?

SELF: It is.

NARRATOR: I looked at him in amazement. He walked toward my desk, put his leather briefcase down, and one for one, pulled from it four bound books with embossed headlines typical of the work done by cheap store-front printers. The covers were in four colors: black, blue, green and white. He piled them on top of each other and laid his hand on top -- like a man displaying his precious wares, or concluding important business. I felt relieved. At first, all sorts of ideas were crossing my mind. But now, I could see that we were still dealing with a simple case of a scripto-maniac. Only his unusual entry had me mystified for awhile. I relaxed, smiled and returned to my chair. I leaned on it, and asked him routinely, just like a doctor who has already made up his mind about his diagnosis:

SELF: Comrade Luke, these books -- are they manuscripts ready for publication?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: And you had them bound by a store-front printer?

LUKE: No. My son Milosh did the binding. I used Lettraset for the headlines. I didn't dare give it to a printer.

SELF: Sometimes they lose or destroy the manuscripts?

LUKE: Yes, but not only that...

SELF: I've heard that they also sometimes tip off the police if something is... well, sort of touchy.

LUKE: They do. They do.

NARRATOR: With every passing moment, I was becoming more secure and relaxed. It was a classic case of yet another paranoid scripto-maniac.

SELF: Instead of the police serving people, people are serving the police... May I take a look?

LUKE: Of course. That's why they are here.

(I picked up the manuscript bound in a blue cover and read its title out loud.)

SELF: "Speaking Of..." What are the speeches about?

LUKE: About everything.

SELF: I see... All four books are "Speaking Of?"

LUKE: No. The green book is a collection of short stories: the stories about a lost heritage. The third is a collection of city-life stories, and so is its title, too: "Short City-Life Stories." Something like Chekhov's anecdotes...

NARRATOR: I looked at him. He was explaining things about the books calmly and rationally, which is not at all characteristic of such "writers." He picked up the fourth book, and in lieu of an explanation, he read its title out loud:

LUKE: "Meetings and Conversations."

SELF: That's very interesting, Comrade Luke...

LUKE: And in my briefcase, I also have a drama.

SELF: A drama?

LUKE: Yes. Its working title is: "A Tragi-Comedy."

SELF: A "Tragi-Comedy?"

LUKE: Yes. Maybe the title is not the best, but it is certainly befitting. As far as I could make out from Aristotle, a writer true to his trade must not err when it comes to truth.

SELF: You've read Aristotle?

NARRATOR: He and Aristotle! I looked at him as if he were some sort of a vision. A man like that reading Aristotle?! Preposterous! I repeated my question since he never answered it.

SELF: You've read Aristotle?

LUKE: I've read a little bit, but actually, I mostly listened to him.

SELF: You mostly listened to him?

LUKE: Yes... I have to confess...

(Mockingly, I repeated:)

SELF: You've listened to Aristotle?

(Luke looked at me sadly, and whispered:)

LUKE: Please don't make fun of me...

SELF: I am sorry, but...

LUKE: What I meant was that I mostly listened to quotes from Aristotle. In "Speaking Of...", for example, there is a speech about Aristotle.

SELF: Comrade Luke, I hope you won't be offended, but I have to ask you a question. You are not a professional writer, are you?

LUKE: No.

SELF: And you don't support yourself by writing, do you?

LUKE: No.

SELF: And yet you managed to do all this in addition to your regular job?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: Two books of short stories, a book of speeches, a book about meetings and conversations, a play...

LUKE: And at home, I still have a couple hundred pages which need to be edited and organized into books.

SELF: My hat's off to you, Comrade Luke. Until a few months ago, I was also a writer. And do you know what I have written so far? Two books. Only two books! And you, in addition to your regular job, you bring me a collection of written works!?

LUKE: I've worked hard. I tried to be a professional.

SELF: It shows, Comrade Luke. It shows... And in the suitcase, that's where the manuscripts are?

LUKE: No. In the suitcase, there are various things.

SELF: Various things? What things?

LUKE: Umbrellas, gloves, lighters, spectacles, hats...

SELF: Hats?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: Quite a few of them?

LUKE: Well... maybe a dozen... eleven, I think.

SELF: You like hats?

LUKE: No. I never wore one... I collected all these hats.

SELF: You collected them?

LUKE: Yes. The hats, and many other things.

NARRATOR: Where is Martha with her call to an urgent meeting? I started to get angry at myself. It was not this man's fault. He is the way he is. But, it is my passion to poke at people over and above the normal curiosity which borders on sickness. I looked at my watch, slapped my hands as one would who has just concluded a deal, and uttered a sentence with which I usually end all conversations. Had I paid as much attention to normal people in my life as I did to the lunatics, maybe I would have done something smarter.

SELF: Comrade Luke, I am very glad we met. I will read all this. Please drop by in about 10 days. Toward the end of the month perhaps? ...

LUKE: I am sorry, but I won't be able to.

SELF: Why not? Are you leaving town?

LUKE: No, but I am supposed to have an operation.

SELF: An operation?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: I hope it isn't anything serious?

LUKE: Not if I survive it.

SELF: Well... what should I do with all your books?

LUKE: With my books? These are not my books.

SELF: They are not?

LUKE: No.

SELF: Whose books are they?

LUKE: Yours.

SELF: Whose?

LUKE: Yours... Yours!

SELF: Mine?

LUKE: Yes, these are your books.

SELF: How can they be my books, Comrade Luke? What are you talking about?

NARRATOR: I felt sick to my stomach, but I managed to smile anyway.

LUKE: I am not kidding... These are your books!

SELF: My books? Just as I started to think that you were for real, here you go -- you call these "my books." Whose books are they really?

LUKE: Yours... I am Luke Laban, a retired policeman.

SELF: A policeman?

LUKE: Yes. For many years, you had been my case. I was responsible for all your life and work. These are your speeches, your stories, your meetings and conversations. All this is yours.

SELF: Mine?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: All this is mine? How is that possible?

LUKE: Simple. I taped everything, and then transcribed the tapes.

NARRATOR: I stood there leaning on my chair. One moment I looked at the man in the overcoat; the next at "my" books he had piled up on my desk. He just watched me calmly, almost in a friendly way.

LUKE: We've known each other for 18 years. That is, I have known you for 18 years. Sixteen years on business, and two years on my own, because of my son.

SELF: Your son?

LUKE: Yes, because of my Milosh. When they forced me into retirement, two years ago, he asked me to continue to take care of you.

SELF: To take care of me?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: To continue to follow me?

LUKE: Yes... And to collect the things you work on.

SELF: Your son is a policeman, too?

LUKE: No... My Milosh teaches literature at the university. More precisely, he used to teach there before they fired him... All because of you.

SELF: Because of me?

LUKE: Yes, all because of you.

(At that moment, Martha entered the office. She looked suspiciously at the stranger. As we had previously agreed, turning to me, she said:)

MARTHA: I am sorry, but you have just been called to an urgent meeting of the editorial board.

SELF: Please tell them that I'll be a little late...

MARTHA: You're not feeling well?

SELF: If you would, please, bring us two coffees.

MARTHA: You are not well? What's the matter?

SELF: I am OK...

MARTHA: You don't look OK. You are quite pale...

(From the adjacent room, like a wave crashing over the rocks, more noisy singing spilled into my office.)

SELF: Please, Martha, tell this idiot to keep it down a bit. Because, if I go over there...

MARTHA: He is an incredible boor. I've already told him that, but he says they are celebrating your birthday... They brought in the food and drink from the hotel.

SELF: They are celebrating my birthday?

MARTHA: The whole lot of them! All of the ones you had reassigned to work in the printing plant. I tried to argue with them... and they insulted me...

(She shrugged her shoulders helplessly and left. Luke was standing by the window looking at the hotel across the street.)

LUKE: That woman respects you... and loves you. You've heard what happened to her husband?

SELF: Yes, I have.

LUKE: That he died of leukemia?

SELF: Yes...

LUKE: He didn't.

SELF: He didn't?

LUKE: He didn't.

SELF: Well... that's what she told me... what did he die from?

LUKE: From himself.

SELF: From himself?

LUKE: Yes. He hanged himself at the hospital... He got sick of himself, and he cured himself.

SELF: I didn't know that.

LUKE: Ever since that time, her daughter has been seriously ill... Poor woman.

(He turned around and looked at me as if cautioning me.)

SELF: I didn't know.

LUKE: That's why I told you... May I sit down? I have a bad back.

SELF: By all means. Go right ahead.

(I motioned him toward a leather sofa, but he declined explaining with a smile:)

LUKE: I am not supposed to sit on soft seats. When I was able to, I didn't have any. Now that I have them, I can't use them... May I use your chair?

SELF: Yes, of course.

NARRATOR: He walked around my desk, and sat down on my chair, while I walked on to the position in front of it. Suddenly, I realize I am in a place in which I belong -- as a would-be writer.

SELF: Comrade Luke, why was your son fired from his job because of me?

LUKE: It wasn't because of you.

SELF: But, you just said...

LUKE: It was because of your books. More precisely, because of two of your books which he introduced into his curriculum.

SELF: And which ones were these "problem books?"

LUKE: These ones here...

(He picked up the manuscripts with the blue and white covers.)

LUKE: "Speaking Of..." and "Meetings and Conversations."

SELF: He was fired because of them?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: "Speaking Of..." What were these speeches about, Comrade Luke? What were my books about, please?

LUKE: Well... Here they are... Take a look...

NARRATOR: I walked around the desk and leaned over the bound manuscript. He kept flipping the pages, and explaining things, just as a professor would to a problem student.

LUKE: Milosh came up with all the headlines. I do not understand literature, much of it isn't clear to me. But, there were stories which I liked, there were sentences which I remembered, there were even some truths to which I could relate... "Speaking Of...", for example, was a collection of your speeches given in various places, under various circumstances and about miscellaneous subjects. Mostly, the speeches were about the Communists and Communism... I am sorry if I oversimplified it... My Milosh would have been able to talk and write about it just like you... He is a professor. I am just a policeman...

SELF: Please, just go on...

LUKE: Can I speak freely? Your first speech was my first encounter with you. 18 years ago, at the Faculty of Philosophy, in the courtyard under the linden trees, you gave a talk "Speaking Of Freedom." I was among the students. On duty. That's when we started following you as a young and very dangerous man. I secretly taped your talk. Back at the office, I transcribed it, filed two copies, and brought a third one home. I wanted to read it in peace, to get to know you better, because I had been told that I'd be on your case for a long

time. At home, I read it carefully and concluded that you should be killed. That the first time you got drunk, you should be run over like a dog. Like a simple street mutt. It was a piece of cake...

SELF: Run over like a dog?

LUKE: The next day, I suggested this to my boss, but he said: Luke, let's not dirty our streets.

(He looked at me intently as if I were a monster.)

SELF: You wanted to run me over? To kill me?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: You must be joking, Comrade Luke?

LUKE: No. Had he told me "do it," you would have been gone. Nor would you have been the first or the last... We'd had many such "accidents" in those days...

SELF: But, what on Earth for, man?

LUKE: What do you mean "what for?" In those days, I was a Communist to the last drop of my blood! And you started your speech about freedom with these words: "It has taken nature one million years to turn monkey into man. It has taken Communism only half a century to return man to the animal world ..."

SELF: I said that?

LUKE: You shouted that! Here, take a look, it's all here, word for word... I kept this speech at home, in my own folder, not realizing at the time that I was opening a literary dossier, as well as a police file.

SELF: A literary dossier?

LUKE: That's what my Milosh called it. My own title for the whole book would have been: "Public Appearances."

NARRATOR: The phone rang again. I didn't bother to answer it. Luke pulled out a large handkerchief and wiped off his sweaty face. I looked at him, hoping that all this was just a bad joke.

SELF: Why don't you take your coat off?

LUKE: No, thanks.

SELF: You look hot.

LUKE: It doesn't matter. I never take anything off anywhere. A professional habit.

SELF: Why not?

LUKE: Well, if I had to suddenly chase after someone, by the time I put my coat on, the man would be gone...

NARRATOR: Finally, I was forced to pick up the receiver. Because had I not, the phone would have probably continued ringing all night. Once again, I had run out of patience.

SELF: Hello?!... Listen up, you idiot! Don't call me anymore! You hear? Not one more time! ... Who are you threatening?!... I'd like to see that... Go, get lost! You barbarian!

NARRATOR: And I slammed down my receiver. Luke was calmly leafing through my book of speeches, as if my shouting was something quite normal and usual. Then he continued with his review.

LUKE: The book has 14 chapters. Which means 14 speeches. Altogether, 165 pages. The speeches are organized in chronological order...

(I had to interrupt him.)

SELF: Comrade Luke, please, if this is some sort of a joke... if this is some plot that somebody thought up to make me look crazy, I swear to you...

LUKE: On your father's grave?

NARRATOR: Actually, that's exactly what I meant to say: that I would throw him right out if...

LUKE: Don't I look like a policeman?

SELF: You do. But, you don't talk like a man who has spent his entire life in police service.

LUKE: That's because, thanks to you, I have learned an awful lot in my lifetime. And again, thanks to you, I have lost almost everything. I bring you only the part I was able to save from yourself.

NARRATOR: I started sweating, too. I could feel my shirt sticking to my back. I took out my handkerchief and wiped off my forehead. Luke also wiped off his face.

SELF: Please excuse me, but I'd like to take my jacket off.

LUKE: I'll have to do the same.

NARRATOR: And so, as I was taking off my jacket, and Luke his coat, Martha entered the office carrying a coffee tray. She paused as she watched us both undress. To her, we must have looked like the two people about to start a fight. She came to me visibly shaken, and whispered:

MARTHA: What does he want?
SELF: Nothing, Martha. Everything's OK...
MARTHA: Why are you undressing?
SELF: I'll explain later.
MARTHA: You are terribly pale.
SELF: I am OK...
MARTHA: If you'd like, I'll call the police.
SELF: No, no, no...

(She put her tray down.)

MARTHA: Please excuse me if the coffee isn't the best. I've had to make it myself. They just arrested the cook.

SELF: Arrested Angel, the cook?

MARTHA: Yes.

SELF: Why did they arrest her?

MARTHA: She tossed a pot of boiling water into the face of the marketing manager. She blinded him instantly.

SELF: The little Milan? But, what on earth for?

MARTHA: She got pregnant, and he... You can probably guess the rest. He'd told her: "I don't want to see that child." "You won't be able to see it even if you wanted to," she said as she scalded his eyes... That's why my coffee may be a little sweeter than you're used to...

NARRATOR: Martha looked at me as if to say: "I am here if you need me."

(Then, she left, closing the door behind her. I threw my jacket onto the sofa. Luke hung up his coat on the coat hanger by the window.)

LUKE: You asked me an interesting question.

SELF: I am sorry, Comrade Luke, which question was that?

LUKE: Why I don't talk like a common policeman? Do you have any idea, Teya, what sort of a torture it was for me to conquer even the most basic terminology from your literary world? Maybe you won't believe me, but I was convinced that Aristotle, Plato, Hegel, Nitché, Kafka... and the rest of them -- were all foreign secret service agents, whom you were seeing and working for...

SELF: Which is not far from the truth. I do see them and work for them.

LUKE: I know that, now. But, imagine a man who has only completed the police academy, just like your father, who gets "confronted" by all these foreign names. To make things worse, in our police records of foreign embassy employees, I'd also come across similar names... Among them was a Huxley, and a Tolkin, and a Grace. And when, many years ago, you quoted Sir John Percy, I was convinced that you were talking about the French cultural attache. Everything fitted, except the attache was not a poet. So, I added: "and a poet..." What can I say? The only foreign names I had known were Engels, Marx and Lenin.

SELF: That story about killing me, was that a joke? You couldn't have been serious...

LUKE: Deadly serious. Only God saved you. After you, for the first time, openly insulted President Tito at the Writers' Club, where all you dissident hot shots used to hang out, I went to my car determined to run you over. I waited until dawn, but I fell asleep at the wheel... Several times I tried to kill you. But, as you can see, I have not. Instead, I saved your life several times, also as you can see. Had I done the former, you'd be gone; had I not done the latter, you'd be gone.

SELF: Thank you very much, Comrade Luke. At the same time, you've managed to shake me up, and to make me feel happy, too.

LUKE: I don't need your cynicism, please.

SELF: Thanks to you, it seems, I have lived to celebrate my 45th birthday. May I offer you a drink on the occasion?

LUKE: If you think I deserve it.

(I walked over to the glass cabinet and took out a bottle and two glasses. He watched me carefully while I poured the brandy.)

LUKE: Your hand is shaking a bit.

SELF: It is... A little... Here you are...

LUKE: Cheers! And a happy birthday, Teya!

SELF: Cheers, Comrade Luke.

(He emptied his glass in a single motion, frowned and shook a bit, and exhaled loudly like a man extinguishing a candle.)

LUKE: Ivan's?

SELF: I don't understand?

LUKE: Ivan's brandy? Your uncle Ivan's brandy from Sombor?

SELF: Yes...

LUKE: I have never had a better apricot-brandy.

SELF: And when did you get to taste it before?

LUKE: On a train. When we returned from a premiere at the Sombor theater. We were sitting in the same compartment. You and I, and a few of your friends -- the writers. That's when you made your speech about Havel, which Milosh later on included in your "Speaking Of..." book.

(He picked up the "Speaking Of..." book, leafed through it, found the speech about Havel, and read a part of it:)

LUKE: "Vaclav Havel, playing himself in a drama which is still going on. Along the way, while he is not in jail, he writes down a page or two. The main protagonist of the tragedy stars continuously. His dramas begin whenever he chooses, and end when the court orders them to. He plays his role according to Stanislavsky. When he lugs the bags on his back in a brewery, he lugs real bags on a real back. Not the back of a man who plays the role of a brewery bag-man. All of it is real except for his life. Any separation, so modern and so necessary, just isn't there. That occurs later, when we watch his plays. That's where the art begins, and the reality ends. The 'actors' around him are the ultimate professionals. Even the smallest roles, those of real convicts, are divided evenly. The director is not the best, but is the toughest. After Havel's plays, plush curtains don't drop. Instead, the iron cell gates do. He is a Czech writer of world descent!

SELF: They always used to convict him "in the name of 'the People.'" But, the first time they actually asked "the People," they elected him "President!"

LUKE: A trip from a jail to the throne!

(He closed the book and looked at me peacefully.)

LUKE: And you think that's good?

SELF: Of course, that's good.

LUKE: May I have another one?

SELF: Help yourself... You sat with us in that compartment?

LUKE: Yes. Wearing a conductor's uniform. We must have had five liters of this brandy that day. You tried to talk me into hijacking the train, so that for once, writers would have something tangible to write about. You said: "that's how Lenin got started."

SELF: That was... when...

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: When I...

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: It can't be?

LUKE: It can.

SELF: You were there just then?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: Then, please tell me, how did it happen?

LUKE: Very simply. You were dead drunk. I was drunk, too, but not like you...

SELF: You saw when I...

LUKE: No. Had I seen it, I wouldn't have let it happen.

SELF: And who found me? Who saved me?

LUKE: I did.

SELF: You?

LUKE: I.

SELF: But, wait a second... How did you find me if you had not seen anything?

LUKE: A woman told me.

SELF: A woman told you?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: What did she tell you?

LUKE: Your friend just fell out of the train.

SELF: Your friend just fell out of the train?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: She said that?

LUKE: Yes... And then, I noticed that the door next to the toilet was open. You had given this woman money thinking she was a toilet attendant.

SELF: And she just... cool as a cucumber, "a man fell out of the train, ha?"

LUKE: Yep. So I yelled at her: "A man fell out of the train and you are just standing there watching! Why didn't you call the conductor?" And she just snapped back: "A man did not fall out of the train, a drunk did. If only my own would one day, God willing!" I pulled the hand brake and stopped the train. Then I got out and started running along the tracks. A mixture of rain and snow was falling... I found you curled up next to the tracks. You were dying in an icy red puddle.

(I covered my face with my hands. I could no longer stand it.)

LUKE: When I lifted you, you only whispered, "take me to my mother." Yet, your mother had been dead for two years. I carried you in my arms. You were bleeding from your mouth, your nose and your ears. Yet, you just kept repeating: "Take me to my mother, take me to my mother."

NARRATOR: I was breaking out in cold sweat. Luke paused, and wiped his face off with a handkerchief.

SELF: If you don't mind, I'll take off my vest and my tie.

LUKE: I'll take my jacket off, too.

NARRATOR: While he was taking off his jacket, I noticed that he was carrying a gun. I looked at him bewildered and angry. A gun in my office!?! He hung up his jacket, looked at me, and realized what I was upset about. He took his gun out, smiled, and put it into his coat pocket.

LUKE: Sorry... professional habit... The other day, I got a call from a friend of mine, also a retired policeman. He said: "C'mon Luke, let's go out, (to) take our guns for a walk."

NARRATOR: At that moment, Martha walked in, then stopped dead in her tracks. She looked apprehensively first at me then at Luke. As I loosened up my tie and took off my vest, she whispered, her voice sounding agitated:

MARTHA: What does he want? Why are you undressing?

SELF: It's nothing... nothing... I'll explain later.

MARTHA: I'll call the police.

SELF: No, no, please don't... What did you want, Martha?

NARRATOR: I asked the last question loudly, because it was impolite to whisper in front of some one. Luke was looking out the window at something in the street below.

MARTHA: That lunatic is at the reception. He wants to talk to you. He says you insulted him terribly, he has to see you. He is threatening, swearing at everybody... You know that he was one of the candidates for your job. Somebody promised him... somebody crazier than he.

SELF: I know, I know... Please tell him to come tomorrow. I can't see him now.

MARTHA: Tomorrow is Saturday.

SELF: Then Monday.

MARTHA: Monday is a holiday.

SELF: All right, Martha, then let him come on Tuesday.

MARTHA: On Tuesday, you're supposed to be in Frankfurt, at a book fair. Until Friday.

SELF: Well, let him come on Friday, then.

MARTHA: I've already told him that. He says he doesn't want to wait till Friday.

SELF: Then, tell him to go to hell... Tell the security guard not to let him come upstairs. I am not here! Period! What a God-damned son-of-a-bitch...

NARRATOR: Martha nodded, looked at both of us, and headed out of the office. Just before she reached the door, she turned and looked at us over her shoulders once again. Luke rolled up his shirt sleeves, returned to the table and picked up the plastic coffee cup. I threw my vest and the tie onto the sofa. I started wiping my fogged up glasses with my handkerchief.

LUKE: That man is really mean.

SELF: Which man?

LUKE: The one downstairs at the reception.

SELF: You know him?

LUKE: Of course. Four years ago, he wanted to kill you. In Titograd¹⁵.

SELF: You mean Podgorica?

LUKE: Yes, in Podgorica. Of course, in those days, the city was still called Titograd. You could have ended up in jail for saying something like that. And even though Tito had been dead for five years, his pictures were still everywhere.

SELF: I remember. It seemed as if the Big Brother were watching the people even from his grave. Maybe that's why most people still spoke Tito's name in public only in hushed voices, after first looking left and right over their shoulders to make sure people like you weren't eavesdropping. Right?

¹⁵old name. It is now Podgorica once again.

NARRATOR: I was wagging my index finger at him reproachfully, while putting on a mock smile. But, his face was stone cold. I felt his eyes piercing right through me. I straightened up uncomfortably, and tried to change the subject. I remembered the lunatic downstairs. I pressed my hand against my forehead like a person trying to recall something from a distant past.

SELF: He hit me with a soda bottle, didn't he?

LUKE: Who?

SELF: This lunatic downstairs.

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: I had to get nine stitches.

LUKE: That was nothing. It was afterward, that things got really sticky.

SELF: What do you mean, afterward?

LUKE: After they had stitched you up and let you out of the hospital.

SELF: As far as I can remember, nothing happened.

LUKE: You don't remember anything because you were in a coma. You returned to the restaurant, and while ordering dinner, you asked the waiter to take down Tito's picture from the wall. The waiter was puzzled, thinking he had misheard you. He looked at you and asked:

"What do you want me to take down?"

"I want you to take this picture down while I am having dinner. I don't want to get an indigestion."

"Which picture? That of Comrade Tito?"

The waiter then called in the rest of the staff. They decided to take you to the back yard and beat you up to death. Four of them approached you, and one of them asked you:

"Excuse me, what did you want us to take down? That picture? I am afraid that will be impossible, Sir. That picture has been painted on the wall."

"All right then," you said, "if you can't take down the picture, why don't you take down the name of your city?"

SELF: I said that?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: And then they started beating up on me?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: Hard?

LUKE: Very... They would have killed you had I not shown them my police badge and told them that I wanted to arrest you since I also heard you insult our former President.

SELF: God almighty, I don't remember a thing about it!

LUKE: I took you again to the hospital. This time, they kept you because of contusions and a broken jaw... That night, you lost your father's watch.

SELF: I know. That hurt more than the broken bones. I still can't forgive myself for that...

NARRATOR: Luke walked over to the black suitcase, turned it on its side, and opened it carefully. Inside, I saw a myriad of things. This suitcase was packed. From this mass of various articles, he pulled out my father's pocket watch. I could not believe my eyes. I leaned over the suitcase gazing at the silver chain. Luke was smiling. Then he pressed a knob, and the watch cover sprung open. And the familiar three-tone tune sounded: ding-dong- dang...

SELF: My father's watch...

(He read the inscription engraved on the inside cover.)

LUKE: "To my son, Teya, Father."

(He gave me the watch, holding on to its chain. I took my long-lost family treasure and read the inscription myself.)

SELF: "To my son, Teya." He never called me that.

NARRATOR: I turned toward the wall. I didn't want him to see me wiping off my tears.

LUKE: He carved this with his pen knife at the hospital. It was his last night...

SELF: The night when after 20 years we finally made peace.

LUKE: In your book, "Short City-Life Stories," there is a story called "Father's Watch." You first told it at the Writers' Club¹⁶. When you walked into your father's hospital room that night, you saw him carving in the inscription. You went out and waited until he was finished. He had cut his finger, and had hidden the pen knife under the pillow...

SELF: The crude, funny, darling letters...

(I lost my nerve. I covered my face with my hands and cried quietly. Luke poured another glass of brandy, walked over to me, and said.)

LUKE: "C'mon, c'mon, it's all right. The watch is here, and so is the story. Everything is here..."

(I took my glasses off, wiped off my eyes with the inside of my palms, turned around and looked at him.)

¹⁶last two decades.

SELF: Thank you...

(While Luke poured himself another drink, he spoke hurriedly as if afraid he might lose his train of thought.)

LUKE: You know, last year, as he was leaving for America, I also gave my son Milosh a pocket watch. And while he was checking in his bags at the airport, just like your father, I carved with my pen knife: "To my son Milosh, Father." When he went through the customs, he opened the watch, read the inscription, looked at me, waved, turned around and quickly left. He walked briskly and never turned around again... While I was leaving the airport, I was thinking about how we, the fathers, always find plenty of time to talk about things which do NOT matter. Yet, we never do, or are too late, when it comes to talking about important things...

(And again, he made the same motion with his hand. He pressed his palm against the back of his head as if he were having a headache... or a painful memory. Like a statue, he stood there motionless, staring at the floor.)

SELF: Why did he leave?

LUKE: Well, he was without work, and could not stand the Communists any longer... But, as it turns out, he left mostly to hurt me... What do the Communists give a damn whether my son has left or not?

(I nodded, sighed with empathy and raised my glass.)

SELF: Cheers, Comrade Luke.

LUKE: Cheers, Teya.

(We emptied our glasses. I wiped my mouth off.)

SELF: So, what happened with Milosh in America?

LUKE: At first he drove a cab in New York. Imagine -- my son, the professor, driving a taxi! And that's the country you people worshiped?

(He shook his head in disbelief...)

SELF: Is he still driving a taxi?

LUKE: No. He is now driving bargains. For a while, he tried selling real estate in New York. But, that business wasn't so hot, either. So, he moved to California. Now he is at Berkeley, teaching again.

SELF: But you said he was driving bargains?

LUKE: He is. Milosh tells me that he first has to sell a course, then teach it.

(Luke shook his head, looking perplexed, before continuing.)

SELF: Sell a course?

(Now I was starting to look just as perplexed as Luke.)

LUKE: That's right. He says the colleges in America don't have the money to fund the small foreign language courses, like Serbo-Croatian. So, he first has to collect the money from private donors before the university would let him teach. A weird system! Don't you think? Makes the universities seem sort of like pimps -- taking a cut at the gate.

(I smiled instead of responding.)

SELF: So, he is teaching Serbo-Croatian?

LUKE: No. Now he is teaching Russian. When he is not selling it, of course. It pays better, he says. Besides, it is safer.

SELF: Safer?

LUKE: Yeah. You've heard, I am sure, what they think of the Serbs in America these days.

SELF: I have. They think that we are all still Communists.

LUKE: Which means you, too, my friend. You, too... You're in the dog house along with the rest of us, Serbs. Embargoed! Cut off from the rest of the world! Never mind that you've spent your entire adult life fighting the Communists. America doesn't care about such details. Only about its TODAY'S INTERESTS. So tell me, Teya, my son: when you see on television how George Bush rolls out the red carpet for Comrades Gorbachev, Yeltsin and other former Communists, while you have to wait in line for eight hours for your ration of gas, do you ever wonder if it was all worth it? Even Tito suddenly doesn't look not so bad, does he?

NARRATOR: I stared at him angrily for a few seconds. He was starting to cut too close to the bone. My impulse was to lash out at him. I took a deep breath getting ready for a confrontation. But, for once, I managed to control my temper. I exhaled and dismissed his arguments by waving him off with my hand.

SELF: That's nonsense, Comrade Luke. George Bush has nothing against ME. As for your Bush-Tito analogy, that's downright ridiculous. Tito was a ruthless dictator.

NARRATOR: Luke just stood there grinning at me. Suddenly, I had an uneasy feeling that I was about to hear another "Army Buddy"-type story. I reached up to loosen my tie, without realizing I had already taken it off.

SELF: *(Nervously adjusting his collar instead)* What's so funny?

LUKE: Let me show you something.

(Luke strode self-assuredly toward his coat. He reached into the inside pocket and pulled out an airmail envelope. He also took out his glasses.)

LUKE: I just got this. It's from Milosh...

(Luke took the letter out of the envelope. While holding his glasses in one hand, and the letter in the other, he looked at Teya.)

LUKE: Remember what you used to say about Tito -- that he used to put the least competent people in the most responsible positions? That way, he got to make all the important decisions?

SELF: So?

LUKE: Back then, Milosh also thought you were right. But, now ...

SELF: *(Interrupting)* Don't tell me he now admires Tito? Although that would be par for the course, too. Over here people are also kissing up to different icons now.

LUKE: No, I wouldn't say that my Milosh admires Tito or ever will. But, he now sees some similarities between him and George Bush.

SELF: That's preposterous! For example, Comrade Luke, what could President Bush and Tito possibly have in common?

(Reading from the letter...)

LUKE: "Bush thrives on incompetence just like Tito used to," Milosh says. "For example, he has his DOMESTIC campaign manager running FOREIGN policy¹⁷, while tucking away his best diplomat¹⁸ at a post 8,000 miles away from Washington."

SELF: And that makes him the same as Tito?

LUKE: No. That makes him worse. Listen to this...

(Again, reading from the letter...)

LUKE: "More people died in less than two years of the New World Order than in 45 years of the Cold War! Tito was only a small-time operator by comparison."

SELF: And why do you think that Bush is responsible for all the crazy people killing each other?

¹⁷ James Baker, the Secretary of State.

¹⁸ seems to be hoping, he would be a minimal competitive threat to James Baker.

LUKE: I don't think anything, Teya. What do I know about America, let alone the world? I just wanted you to hear what my son, your admirer, thinks. And he feels that Bush's incompetence kills. Just like Tito's. Albeit unintentionally, perhaps.

(Luke folded the letter and put it and the envelope back inside his coat pocket. He also took his glasses off.)

NARRATOR: I gazed at him with a mixture of incredulity and admiration. "I underestimated him," I thought to myself. "But then, what else is new?" I tried to shrug off such a depressing thought about my inability to "read" people by changing the subject. I pointed to the pile of strange things in the suitcase.

SELF: And what's this, Comrade Luke?

LUKE: Your things.

SELF: Mine?

LUKE: Yours, my friend. I have been picking up after you for eighteen years in hotels, restaurants, bars, pubs, even buses and trains... all through Yugoslavia and Europe. From every one of your trips I would return with something -- an umbrella, a hat, a pair of gloves...

SELF: All this is mine?

NARRATOR: Terrified, I stood there looking at the packed suitcase, and started browsing through it. Holy cow, what a mish-mash of things it was.

LUKE: 14 umbrellas, six pairs of gloves, two overcoats, 15 lighters, 11 hats...

(I pulled out an expensive white fur hat. I looked at Luke questioningly. He nodded affirmatively.)

SELF: Olie's¹⁹ fur hat? That of my friend, the poet?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: I can't be!?

LUKE: It is.

SELF: Jesus Christ...

(I crossed myself as I looked at the precious memento.)

LUKE: In your book, "Short City-Life Stories," there is a story "Olie's Fur Hat."

SELF: My story? About the fur hat?

LUKE: Yes. You first told it at the restaurant of the hotel "Metropol." You offered to buy me a drink...

SELF: I offered to buy you a drink?

¹⁹ "Olie" was "Okudjavina" in the original text.

LUKE: Yes. I was selling newspapers, and you asked me if I'd like a drink. Then you told me how you had lost the fur hat, how you had put an ad in the "lost and found" column, how you had offered big money to anybody who would return it, and that about a dozen people responded...

SELF: And I bought four fur hats.

(Once again I drew the fur hat to my chest, as if hugging it, then I put it on... Then I pulled a pair of large black binoculars from the pile of things in the suitcase. I looked them over carefully trying to remember when it was that I owned them.)

LUKE: Do you remember them?

SELF: No.

LUKE: These are Captain Markovic's binoculars.

SELF: Captain Markovic's?

LUKE: Yes. One night, at the old bar of "Atelier 212"²⁰, you traded your leather jacket for them.

SELF: I am sorry, but why did I trade my jacket for them?

LUKE: Because Zoran told you to. As soon as the war breaks out, he said, with a pair of binoculars like that, you could instantly become a major. He said that in war time, people without binoculars get killed first... That night, your story about how to kill the grandpa humanely was also born.

SELF: How to kill the grandpa?

LUKE: Yes... You talked about how various nations deal with the "problem" of their unproductive elderly -- people who only eat and do not contribute anything. In Eastern Serbia, for example, the family bakes a round, flat, loaf of bread, puts it on grandpa's head, and hits the loaf with a big stone. The Eskimos, on the other hand, take their elderly out on the ice, cut a hole in it, and give them a fishing rod. They return next year to see what they had caught. And in the mountainous regions of Japan, with the first snow, the eldest grandson carries the old grandpa on his back to the top of the mountain. That's where he sits the grandpa down, and props him against a rock to await the next Spring... At this point, Radmilovic butted in and said that, where he comes from, they do away with old men the most humanely. They take the grandpa by the arm, take him to a freeway, and let a chicken loose in front of him. Then they tell him: "Grandpa, go get the chicken."

SELF: And you wrote all this down, too?

LUKE: Yes. It is right here, in the green book, the "Stories About The Lost Heritage." And its title is: "Go Get The Chicken, Grandpa."

SELF: Comrade Luke, you've been with us often at the "Atelier?"

LUKE: Yes. Many times...

SELF: So, how is it possible then that I don't remember you?

LUKE: Oh, my dear Teya... You and your friends were always either drunk on booze, or on your own narcissism. Usually both. Only once did Zoran tell me: "Why are you pretending to be a mailman, when you are in fact a policeman?" He accused me of being a policeman even though I wore a mailman's uniform. You rushed to my defense. But, he pointed to a dog which was used in the play "The Dog's Heart," and said, "See. If this guy were a mailman, the dog would have bitten him, as they usually do with mailmen. So, he must be a policeman, since even a dog is afraid of him." My, what a nose that man had...

SELF: Indeed. He was something else...

LUKE: That was also a deciding night for your books. After the performance, my son Milosh joined us at the old bar. All of us stayed there till dawn. You were represented by the complete lineup of the "Atelier 212" team! One tale trailed another. Mikey²¹, of course, talked the most. And the best. My God, how many books did

²⁰1960s and the 1970s.

²¹ "Mikey" = "Mihiz" in the original text.

Mikey leave in that bar... As we walked home, my son said: "Pops, why don't you people in the police form a Department for the Preservation of Serbian Literature?" It is a shame, he said, that so many stories, poems, anecdotes, afforisms, and even whole novels disappear forever in the drink and smoke. "Do you have any idea, Pops, how big a library such a department would have?" And so, step-for-step, word-for-word, we agreed that he would convert your police dossier into books. Actually, that was his condition if the two of us were to remain friends... The following day, I made copies of all of your police documents and turned them over to my son.

NARRATOR: I hung the binoculars around my neck. Kneeling by the suitcase, I crossed my arms. Somehow, his story once again sounded like somebody's foul play. I also had an idea whose it may have been.

SELF: Comrade Luke, I'd like you to please swear by your son's life that everything you've been telling me is true. That's what I'd like you to do, Comrade Luke... if that's your real name, that is?

(Luke looked hurt. From the adjacent office, where they were "celebrating" my birthday, one could hear once again the drunken song.)

SELF: Can you hear them?

LUKE: I can.

SELF: They are celebrating my birthday, singing songs from my region -- to remind me where I came from, and to where I have to go back. Maybe they talked you into coming here...

LUKE: You mean, you think that I am trying to fool you? To deceive you?

SELF: I am not sure, but please...

LUKE: You know how your friend Joe²² would have replied to this? He would have said: "I am not a Communist. I cannot lie."

(He walked toward the suitcase, knelt down, and retrieved a bundle of envelopes tied together with a red band from the pile of things. He handed them to me silently.)

SELF: What's this?

LUKE: Your mother's letters.

SELF: My mother's letters?

(I untied the bow and started to look over the letters.)

LUKE: Your mother wrote them, but since you kept moving around so much, the letters were returned to sender "address unknown."

SELF: Yes, I did move around a lot.

LUKE: Since I've known you, 26 times.

NARRATOR: I opened the first letter and recognized my mother's neat handwriting. And while I read the lines, I could hear her quiet voice:

(This should be read by a female voice, recorded or live:)

My dear son, Teya:

You promised to come in September, for your father's birthday. And here we are, the snow has already fallen, even January has come and gone, and there is still no sign of you. Even my letters are being returned. So it seems as if I am writing them to myself. I don't know, my son, if you're still angry with your father. If you still believe that he, along with his generation, created this unfortunate system. Or if, as I happen to think, this unfortunate system created them, which in turn made them miserable, too. He will die believing that he had fought for a just cause, but with a wrong crowd. How can this be? It can, my son, it can... I have been teaching kids for forty years to hope for better times, and yet all they got was this terrible mess. But, that wasn't my fault, believe me...

Your father has aged overnight. It seems to me as if sometimes people can't wait to get older so as to gain the respect which had escaped them earlier. He talks about you only as a third party, yet he loves you more than anybody will ever know. Of course, he will die without telling you that.

On New Year's Eve, Aunt Yulka died. As you once said, this reminded me of yet another misfortune. At her funeral, I talked to her unfortunate adopted son, Sreten. I asked him if he had seen you and how you were. He said that you were OK now, that things were looking up, and that no longer does a day pass by without you having something to eat.

They brought me the medicine which you sent me. To tell you the truth, my son, I haven't been taking this medicine for a long time. I got sick the morning you left home, and for that disease, doctors haven't found a cure.

²² "Joe" = "Joca" in the original text.

I have asked you for the medicine hoping that you would bring it yourself. I am sending you all these letters, as well as the gloves, via Luke, father's friend from the police academy.

My dear son, lately I have not been seeing well. So, if you write to me, please bring the letter yourself so that you could read it to me.

Love from your mother.

NARRATOR: Luke looked at me reproachfully, still angry that I doubted that he was -- what he said he was. From the suitcase, he picked up the black gloves made from the finest wool. He handed them to me silently. I took the gloves, looked at them, slowly pulled them over my hands, and covered my face with them. As I tucked my head into my knees, I felt his hand on my shoulder.

LUKE: C'mon, Teya... son... pull yourself together...

NARRATOR: I looked at him and wiped off my tears with the palm of my hand... Loud music was still belting out from the adjacent office. My enemies screamed like animals, enjoying their newly-composed song which, when they were sober, they actually resented deeply. Their love of booze will cost them. Luke pulled from the suitcase a black-and-white stuffed dog and, trying to outshout the song, managed to tell me.

LUKE: You bought it for your son's birthday.

SELF: For my Vanya?

LUKE: Yes.

SELF: And how did I lose it?

LUKE: At the Writers' Club! Ten years ago!

SELF: Have you been seeing Vanya?

LUKE: Yes. His stepfather brings him to basketball practices at our sports center. He is a big boy now. Taller than you by at least six inches.

NARRATOR: I picked up the toy dog, and Luke started to pull out of the suitcase various objects. He was explaining to me when it was that they belonged to me, what I had used them for, and when I lost them... But, I was no longer able to hear him. The song and the noise next door overpowered his words. Only by his gesticulation was I able to discern what he was talking about. First, he took out a reddish pipe, then a pair of female dress shoes, then a few books... I was a little surprised when he showed me a bicycle pump. I was confused. But the whole thing came together when he pulled up from the suitcase a framed picture of my son while he was still quite small. I took the picture, pulled it to my chest and curled up again... And then, through the drunken song, I could hear Martha's voice. She was shouting hysterically. The lunatic who was after me because he thought that I had destroyed his manuscript barged into the office. Martha was tugging him by the coat tails, as he was struggling to get free and to hurl himself at me. He has always been crazy, but now he was also drunk. For a moment, he paused, surprised to find me on the floor with my gloves fur hat on, and with my binoculars around my neck. Martha also watched me intently as she tried to restrain him. Luke picked up the bottle, poured himself another drink, and calmly walked toward the window as if nothing was the matter at all. The lunatic lunged at me, his arms outstretched, perhaps trying to strangle me. He howled like an animal.

LUNATIC: I'll kill you! Where is my book? As soon as you got this job, you destroyed my book! I'll kill you!

(I grabbed the pump, ready to hit him squarely over the head. Martha stepped in between, motioning for him to leave the office.)

MARTHA: Out! Get out!

LUNATIC: You are telling me to get out! You'd better take care of your own child!

MARTHA: That's enough! You ought to be ashamed!

LUNATIC: One lunatic wasn't enough for you, ha?! Get lost!

(The music had quieted down, but he has not. He walked toward my desk and started going through the manuscripts.)

LUNATIC: Where is the book? Where is my book? They ordered you to destroy my book... I'll kill you...

(Martha tried to save the manuscripts, but he pushed her away, grabbed "my books," and started throwing them all over the floor. One of them fell at Luke's feet. The old policeman turned around and said quietly.)

LUKE: Don't do it.

LUNATIC: And what's it to you?!

LUKE: Pick up these books.

LUNATIC: Who the hell are you? Why are you interfering? What do you want...

(He took a step or two toward Luke, then stopped dead in his tracks, and said stutteringly.)

LUNATIC: Com... Comrade Luke...

LUKE: Pick up the books and put them back on the desk. Then, get out!

NARRATOR: Obediently, just as he was told, the Lunatic picked up the books, put them back on the desk, and meekly tried to come up with an excuse.

LUNATIC: I am sorry, I thought...

LUKE: Out!

LUNATIC: Let me explain, Comrade Luke. I submitted the manuscript...

LUKE: Out! Get the hell out! I know all about your manuscripts!

NARRATOR: The Lunatic nodded, looked at me, and left the office... Martha looked at me as if she were seeing me for the first time. I smiled at her.

SELF: Martha, please cancel the luncheon and book a table for dinner. If you don't mind...

MARTHA: Cancel the luncheon and book a table for the dinner?

SELF: Yes... please.

NARRATOR: She walked out looking at me as I knelt beside the suitcase surrounded by all sorts of strange objects. I had a feeling that she was scared, but I could not explain to her what this was about.

(Luke took his jacket off the hanger and put it on. He returned to the window and opened it. From the distance one could hear the thunder. Suddenly it got dark. Across the street, the hotel neon sign started to flash on and off. A gentle breeze parted the curtains bringing in the scent of rain and storm.)

LUKE: It's starting to rain... I've had a few, yet I should be driving my taxi.

SELF: Driving your taxi?

LUKE: Yes. It wouldn't hurt to make a buck or two before I check into the hospital. One never knows... I parked my taxi in front of the hotel. I am afraid that my pals from the police may tow it away.

SELF: I am sorry, but you are now a cabbie? You also drive a taxi, like Milosh used to?

LUKE: Yes. Why do you seem so surprised?

SELF: Well, you've worked for a long time and now you are ill.

LUKE: You mean it should be my turn to ride in a taxi rather than to drive one? Do you remember what your uncle often said? "We should remove from our daily vocabulary any greeting where the word 'day' figures. Even in broad daylight, we should use 'good evening' or 'good night.' We should practice this until our political dawn arrives."

(He walked to the desk, poured himself another drink, raised his glass, and looked at me smilingly.)

LUKE: What the hell! For once, maybe you could look after me when I get drunk. Cheers, Teya!

SELF: Cheers.

LUKE: I guess, I won't get much work done today... When they forced me out, they offered me the position of a night watchman in a department store. But, I've had it with darkness and thieves. Besides, I don't want to chase after petty thieves when the ones in government have already stolen the most valuable things.

SELF: How long have you been a cabbie?

(Luke paused. He looked at me silently. Slowly he refilled his glass again.)

NARRATOR: I thought that maybe he had not heard me so I repeated the question.

SELF: How long have you been a cabbie?

LUKE: Since your pals came to power.

SELF: My pals?

LUKE: Yes. You heard me right.

SELF: But, which "my pals," Comrade Luke?

LUKE: The ones that are now in government. The new ones. The smart and the infallible ones. I'd only like to know how they managed to stay so sinless? Maybe they are foreigners?

SELF: And what do they have to do with me?

LUKE: I don't know. I really don't know. I am no longer in service, so my information is not the best.

SELF: How come then, that you give yourself the right to make me one of "them?"

LUKE: How come? You are asking me "how come?"

SELF: Yes, Comrade Luke. I am asking you "how come?"

LUKE: Nobody is giving me anything, Teya. Everybody is just grabbing and taking away. They took my job, my honor, my self-respect, my health, and my son. They took everything I had gained in 30 years of service. It all disappeared overnight.

NARRATOR: I got up, determined to see this debate to the end. If he wanted to insult me, he did so in the worst way possible. I told him that, barely containing my anger.

SELF: If you wanted to insult me, you did so in the worst way possible. You are speaking just like those idiots over there.

(I pointed to the wall of the adjacent office from which the drunken song continued.)

SELF: What makes you think that "my pals" forced you out?

LUKE: Because, my Teya, for 20 years you had been the enemy of this country, and then, again overnight -- because in this country everything happens overnight -- I turned out to be the enemy and you were named to this position. I, the cabby, and you the director. I, to the street, and you to a plush office.

SELF: Comrade Luke, I do not know a single person who is in government today. I have nothing to do with them whatsoever!

LUKE: Maybe you have nothing to do with them, but they have a lot to do with you. You think that you got this job without their knowledge and sponsorship, that you got it because you've earned it? Is that what you think?

SELF: Yes. That's exactly what I think, Comrade Luke. I think that I belong here. Certainly more so than those locksmiths, plumbers, sheet-metal workers and other bolshevik intellectuals who were getting their doctorates after two years of trade school. We make books here, not nails, horse shoes or metal joints!

LUKE: I agree, of course. But, I'd only like to know, Teya, how come you now believe that in Communism deserving people can get the positions to which they are entitled, when only yesterday you were saying that the entire autocratic bolshevik system functions exclusively on the basis of servility, dog-like loyalty, and not on the basis of knowledge or intellect? What makes you think that suddenly you are an exception, when you know very well that they run the whole show, that they control absolutely everything, and that there are no exceptions. No exceptions, Teya, my son!

SELF: That's true, but...

LUKE: There is no "but," my pal! No "but!" After 30 years of working for them, I am telling you there is no "but." Only "either-or!" Either you are one of them, even though you may think you are not, or you really are not -- in which case you are a nobody, or you simply do not exist. You were brought here...

SELF: May I please ask you to refrain from using your police expressions like "brought" and "taken" in this room. This is not a police precinct office. And if you'd really care to know, certain people did ask to come here, to get rid of these jerks, to try to save this publishing house from liquidation. Of course, that's impossible, but I will still try, because we have two hundred employees here...

LUKE: One hundred and fifty six.

SELF: One hundred and fifty six?

LUKE: One hundred and fifty six.

SELF: They told me it was two hundred.

LUKE: One hundred and fifty six.

SELF: All right, one hundred and fifty six workers with as many families which a bunch of sleezebags and thieves has brought to the edge of starvation. Only a madman would have accepted this job, because it is impossible to help anybody without a change in the entire system. I know that all too well from personal experience. The books and words are no match against the army and the police. And if indeed somebody "brought" me here, as you claim, if somebody authorized my coming here, if somebody asked somebody, and that somebody said "don't worry, everything is OK, because this job would finish me anyway, that I would go down with a lot of fanfare, and drag down with me this entire house!" I know all that very well, Comrade Luke, but I am still surprised that you don't know the reason they ran you out...

LUKE: Ran me out "just like peasants run out an old dog, who can no longer run, who doesn't bark or bite anymore." I hope you'll allow me to quote you, as you intellectuals would say.

SELF: I am sorry, but I never told you that. If you think that that's what I thought, then that's your problem.

LUKE: You told me that.

SELF: When did I tell you that?

LUKE: The day my son told me that repeating the words you spoke about your own father.

SELF: That's not true, Comrade Luke! That's not true!

LUKE: Please speak softer so I could hear you.

SELF: The last time I had a fight with my father, I told him that his generation was serving masters who were worse than the servants themselves; that they fought against injustice -- for injustice, against evil -- for an even greater evil, against fictitious enemies -- for real existing enemies!

LUKE: I know that.

SELF: I told him all that, but I never mentioned the "village dog."

LUKE: You described how the peasants would take an old dog to a forest, and how they would kill it there out of kindness, far away from the house which he guarded, and the family and children who learned to walk hanging on to his fur. And in the evening, on the same leash, they would bring in a new dog which would serve them until it was time to go to the same forest again...

(Martha walked into the office. She wanted to tell me something, but I pressed my palms together praying she would spare me. She walked out without a word. Luke walked to the coat hanger, took his coat down and threw it over his shoulder.)

LUKE: In your book "Stories Of A Lost Heritage," there is a story "Changing Of The Guard-dogs." I had forgotten about it, when my Milosh reminded me just before he left. He wanted to order a taxi to the airport, but I said: "Well, I am a cabbie, my son." And he said: "Maybe you are a cabbie to others, but to me you are a father." And while he was putting on his shoes, I asked him: "What was this about, Milosh?" "The 'Changing Of The Guard-dogs,'" he said... and ordered a taxi...

NARRATOR: He was looking out the window, his jaws tightly pressed together, and his forehead wrinkled. Then he wiped off tears from his eyes and pointed to the books, while continuing to look at the neon hotel sign across the street.

LUKE: Here are your books, and here is your drama...

SELF: My drama? What drama, Comrade Luke?

LUKE: Well, your first drama.

SELF: My drama?

LUKE: Yes.

(I smiled uncomfortably. I started to leaf through "my books" looking for "my" unwritten drama.)

SELF: Comrade Luke, I've written poems, stories, essays, but never a drama, please believe me. Never.

LUKE: Yes you have, Teya.

SELF: And when, when did I write it?

LUKE: Now.

(He walked toward the desk, opened his briefcase and pulled out a police tape recorder. The reels were still turning, continuing to record. He gave me the tape recorder, looking at me like a real professional.)

LUKE: I turned it on just before I walked in. It is still recording. When I leave, all you need to do is rewind the tape, put a piece of paper in your typewriter, and transcribe everything.

SELF: Comrade Luke...

LUKE: For once, you will have to be a professional. Just like I was all my life. My Milosh is not here, so you'll have to type it all yourself, and insert those... those... what do you call the descriptions between the dialogue?

SELF: Didascalias.

LUKE: That's right, didascalias. You see, I have been and I remain a professional. And if I were not fired, they would be listening to this tape in the police station just as if it were a radio drama. This way, with these...

SELF: Didascalias.

LUKE: With these didascalias, it could be even played in a theater. You, I, Martha and that Lunatic. Wonderful company, wonderful destinies.

SELF: Comrade Luke...

LUKE: I am sorry, but I want to tell you one more thing. They ran me out of the service because I became too close to the ideas of "problematic people;" because I copied and removed the highly confidential files, and because I, keeping you writers and artists company, also became a drunk. And my emigre son also prints "suspicious" literature. But, what's especially important to me before going to the hospital -- I don't owe anybody anything. I am free of all debts, Teya. I even turned in my leash, so that nobody has to take me to the forest...

SELF: Here you go again, about the dog...

LUKE: No, I wanted to tell you something else. I have done no more harm than I had to. If I don't return from the hospital, if something happens to me, please let my Milosh know... so that he'd know. I wouldn't want my police pals to have his address... He'd be glad to hear from you... Please tell him that we parted as decent people... So much for that...

(He handed me a piece of paper with an address and the telephone number. He looked at me, gave me a firm hug, and without a further greeting, as if running away, he left the office.)

SELF: Luke!

(I followed him.)

SELF: Luke!

NARRATOR: He never turned around. Here I was, standing in the middle of the room, among a pile of scattered memories, holding a tape recorder in my hands. I watched him walk through a long corridor... Martha crept in quietly like a shadow of herself. She had her kerchief tied around her head, wearing a coat and holding an umbrella. She looked at me, wanted to say something, but instead, she just lowered her head, walked to my desk and dropped a bundle of keys. I looked at the keys suspecting that something was wrong.

SELF: You're leaving?

MARTHA: Yes... I am leaving.

SELF: So, we'll see each other tonight?

MARTHA: No...

SELF: No?

MARTHA: I am sorry...

SELF: Well, why are you giving me your keys?

MARTHA: I am not coming back.

SELF: You are not coming back?

MARTHA: No.

SELF: You're quitting your job?

MARTHA: Yes...

SELF: But why? What happened? What's the matter, Martha?

NARRATOR: She watched me silently. Her eyes were dark and scared. And then, tears started to flow as if out of somebody else's eyes. I stood there, like a statue, still holding the tape recorder which recorded everything, wearing my white fur hat, with my white shirt, my black gloves and with my binoculars dangling on my chest. I could not see myself, but I suspected the way I looked. I wanted to tell her what happened to me, that she should not be afraid of what she was seeing. That I wasn't crazy.

SELF: Martha, I know what you are afraid of... I've heard about your husband...

MARTHA: Please don't...

SELF: But, please believe me, this is only... I am not...

MARTHA: I can't stand it anymore... I can't!

(She covered up her face and left the office. I tried to stop her.)

SELF: Martha!

NARRATOR: She ran away along the long, dark corridor. She never gave me a chance to explain.

(From the adjacent office, one could hear a soft, drunken, tired song. I pressed the STOP button on the tape recorder. Then, I hit the REWIND button.)

NARRATOR: Outside, the storm had passed, but a heavy autumn rain continued. The hotel sign shone as if it were the middle of the night. I returned to my desk, put a piece of paper into my typewriter, sat down, and again pressed a button on the tape recorder. As if in a single breath, I started to transcribe the play which has just been played out.

LUKE's VOICE: Good afternoon.

MY VOICE: Good afternoon.

LUKE's VOICE: You don't even know who I am, do you?

MY VOICE: No, I don't...

LUKE's VOICE: You don't know?

MY VOICE: No I don't.. I am really sorry, but...

LUKE's VOICE: May I put down my suitcase?

MY VOICE: Of course. Would you like to sit down?

LUKE's VOICE: No.

LUKE's VOICE: I was sure you would have "known" me for the last two years... at least... but, I see...

MY VOICE: You wouldn't be...

LUKE's VOICE: One of your army buddies?

LUKE's VOICE: Do you remember your short-story "My Army Buddy?"

MY VOICE: My short story? "My Army Buddy?"

LUKE's VOICE: Yes. About a man who walked up to you in the middle of a busy street, hugged you, kissed you on the cheek and asked: are you still seeing our buddies? And you stood there, just like now, and asked yourself: which buddies? The man sagged, just like I did, and said: you know -- our army buddies....

FOOTNOTE: And by the time I transcribe the whole dialogue and write in the didascalias, it will be...
THE END.

--- THE END ---

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I. HOSTAGES BECOME PROFESSIONALS

[An excerpt from a critical review by Miodrag Perisic, editor of "KNJIZEVNE NOVINE" ("LITERARY NEWS"), translated from Serbian by Bob Djurdjevic]

The author of the "Balkan Spy" and the "Claustrophobic Comedy" is forcing us, for the third time now, to face up again to fantastic possibilities of our common socialistic reality, to a strange mix of ideologies which affect our daily lives. His drama is so current, so full of "actuality" and reality, that it makes us constantly shift positions from archaeology to futurism.

In a contemporary sense, the "tragi-comedy" PROFESSIONAL is in the first place a conflict between the two dinosaurs of mankind's socialist era -- that of the intellectual and a policeman. Of course, we are talking about a politicized policeman and a rebellious intellectual. Like every real writer, Kovacevic takes no sides. The metastasis is complete and global, only different patients behave differently.

rather comical. And vice versa, were they not funny, they'd be very frightful. Comic possibilities in the so-called socialist countries are based on a matter of survival: who ever passes through the meat grinder undamaged, will have earned the right to a laugh. Kovacevic understood that to be both, the right to make fun of others, as well as of himself. That is why he has become a widely accepted playwright, with a huge following, which, on the other hand suggests, that finally we have become experts on the subject of our own destiny. In itself, that's a sign of some sort of liberation, a process in which Kovacevic is a catalyst...

hostages of the past. The policeman is a hostage of his own power. The poet is a hostage of his rebellion.

To the policeman, his entire life revolves around an effort to force the intellectuals into submission... But, when the same system pits him against his own son, he sees that as personal injustice. To the poet, his life turns into some sort of anticipation of future freedoms. He is a rebel, but is also vain. He puts off everything until later, especially his verses... And so, these two dinosaurs of the socialist regime meet naked, because in the ruins of the concepts for which they stood, each of them is left with a personal melodrama and a bad conscience. The

writer is here a priest who can understand and forgive. It is not at all certain, however, that other protagonists will be able also to forgive their own sins.

Therein lies the most important aspect of Kovacevic's text, something which is uniquely an invention of the Eastern European socialist, bolshevik era -- the historical psychology. We will have to learn how much we have participated in our own past, so as to be able also to participate in our own future. Nobody else can tell our story for us. We've used up all the alibis... In order to create a new civilization, hostages must become professionals. Assuming that they have been first freed, of course.

Miodrag Perisic
KNJIZEVNE NOVINE

II. WE WERE ORIENTED TOWARD NOTHING

[An excerpt from an article/interview with Kovacevic published on February 18, 1990, by the respected Belgrade weekly -- "NIN"].

There are outstanding writers who produce one great novel, one great collection of short stories, one great drama. The public remembers them by that one pinnacle creation of theirs. And realizes, or doesn't, their subsequent falls, their slide into mediocrity, routine and their lack of fire. Dusan Kovacevic, born in 1948, could have also ended up a writer remembered for his one brilliant drama, because his first one was like that. It was called "Marathon Runners' Honor Lap," and was first staged on February 26, 1973. But, contrary to our tradition of slowing down, he continued to excel as a playwright. This is how he explained it in an interview: "If I were a long distance jumper who had just jumped eight meters (*about 26 feet*), it makes no sense to try for anything shorter. When I say that, I know very well what my potential is, as well as that I may be able to fool myself. With people who make their living by writing, and I have been doing it for 20 years, the biggest danger is fooling oneself. The real master sculptor is the one who keeps his ear close to a block of marble for days before deciding where to start sculpting... Fooling oneself is much more difficult than fooling others."

This autobiographical statement by one of the best playwrights of all times in the history of the Serbian literature, should be viewed as a necessary introduction to a person who is watching the events unfolding on the public and the political stages of Eastern Europe as a pleasantly surprised viewer.

NIN: With the "Professional," you played yourself in a drama which is continuing. And the "Professional," if I am not mistaken, is a collection of memories.

KOVACEVIC: I tried, if one can put it that way, to revive collective memories about the events and the people which mostly no longer exist. I have created a collection of the photos yellowed by age, and one of our bitter-sweet memories. A sort of a calendar of the years past...

to Prague. And I'll meet (*Vaclav*) Havel (*one of Kovacevic's idols*) as President! And here I'll be -- without any official function at all!

NIN: All this sounds like your possible candidacy for a high office?

KOVACEVIC: I am missing some of the necessary qualifications -- the required apprenticeship in jail.

III. THE NIGHT "THE PROFESSIONAL" SHOWED ME MY LIFE I NEVER HAD

[By Bob Djurdjevic, computer industry analyst, columnist and seminar leader]

It was a typical cold January (*10th*) night in Belgrade. At 19:30, Miodrag Perisic, editor of "Literary News," his wife Zhanetta, a teacher of world literature, and I met for a prearranged cab ride from Studentski Trg (*the Students' Square*) to the Zvezdara Theater. Earlier that day, Perisic had given me a message from Dusan Kovacevic, the author and director of the play "PROFESSIONAL." He said he'd get me a ticket to tonight's opening performance "even if he'd have to lift it from the pocket of some high-ranking politician."

At the time, I had no idea who this "Kovacevic" was, what the play was about, or why I -- an American and a Yugoslav emigre who had not been back to his country of birth for nearly 20 years -- should rank higher than a local politician. I agreed to go to the premier basically for two reasons. Because I've always liked theater, and because I felt a sense of allegiance with Perisic, the person who invited me and who, as I had just found out, like myself, faced Tito's Communist police and the army during the 1968 student uprising at the Belgrade University.

"Where is this 'Zvezdara' theater?" I asked the Perisic's. Perisic's wife patiently explained the location to me as the cab driver swerved through the busy Belgrade streets. "That must be close to where I was born," I said in bewilderment. "Yet, I never knew there was a theater there!" "It's fairly new," said Zhanetta, as if trying to console me for my ignorance. When I left Belgrade in 1969, it was at "Atelier 212" that one might have expected to see a play like the "PROFESSIONAL," if at all, the latter being the more probable scenario.

As we approached the theater, I thought of something else I had just witnessed on this trip to Belgrade, which would have been unthinkable under Tito's regime. It was a moving, first-ever televised Serbian Christmas service, broadcast live from Saborna Crkva -- one of Belgrade's best known and the most acoustic churches. It is amazing, I thought, how simple things we take for granted in the West, like attending a Christmas service, can cause goose pimples among the peoples of Eastern Europe. "I bet there wasn't a dry eye in Serbia today," commented a retired Belgrade university professor, as he telephoned me excitedly right after watching the historic service on TV.

Our taxi pulled up alongside a busy sidewalk. We got out. Somehow, somebody (*I think it may have been Milorad Vucelic, one of "NIN" magazine editors*), handed me a ticket for the performance. "You'll be seated right next to some government officials," he said. "Whoopie-do," I thought to myself. "That's nice, thank you," is what I actually said.

The hallway leading into the theater was clogged by the crowd trying to check in their heavy winter garments at the wardrobe. Eventually, I managed to make my way through the crowd, and found my seat, or my row -- to be more accurate. As I recall, there were no preassigned seat numbers, only the rows were identified on the ticket. But, a vivid conversation between the persons to my right and to my left, right across my tie, convinced me that I must have been in the correct section, anyway. I concluded that the person to my right must be a member

of the government from whom the person to my left -- probably a political business appointee -- was evidently seeking some favors. Later on, I was able to confirm both hunches. The person to my right was a member of the Serbian Presidency. The person to my left heads up a large Belgrade company.

The lights dimmed. The crowd hushed itself. On the stage, a blonde actor was seated behind a wooden desk. *"My name is Theodore Kry. My mother called me "Teya." So did my friends... while I had them. My name probably doesn't mean anything to you. I am a writer... I hope I am, anyway... I am 45 years old. Until now, I've had two books published. A book of poems and a book of short stories. Depressingly little! And I look as if I had written 20 novels. Grandiosely badly! Where are my unwritten books?..."*

For the following 75 minutes or so, those in the theater crowd who had lived in Belgrade for the previous 20 years, may have seen, for the first time, their past played out on stage -- openly, freely, "warts and all." But for me, the "PROFESSIONAL" had another meaning. I was watching my future! The future I never had. The future I had traded in for a life in America when I left Belgrade in 1969. Just like Milosh did, years later...

At the reception after the performance, I met Vucelic who looked like an expectant father who'd just had the first glimpse of his baby. "What did you think?" he asked. "I thought it was great," I replied. "Then, why don't you congratulate me?" he suggested smiling cunningly. I felt embarrassed. "Well then, congratulations!" I said. "But what for?" "I am also the director of the 'Zvezdara' theater," he explained. I did not know that. Until then, I had only known him as a "NIN" editor. But, it all made perfect sense. Now I also understood why he was the one to hand me my ticket at the entrance. I gave him a big hug. "It was a great play," I said.

And then, as I started explaining to him why I was particularly moved by the play, how I could have become "a Teya" rather than "a Milosh" -- had I believed Tito (*as thousands others did*) when he acceded to all our (*rebellious students'*) demands in June 1968, tears started welling up in my eyes. "Look," Vucelic said to Perisic who was standing nearby surrounded by a group of people. "Bob's crying!" I felt embarrassed again. It seemed as if everybody was staring at me. And they probably were. But, there was no way I could stop the tears...

Before I left Belgrade last January, I called Perisic and asked him to tell Kovacevic that I would try to translate his play into English. I said I wanted to do it as my personal tribute to a great artist who is already a household name in Belgrade. But, just like I had never heard of him before, few other have outside Yugoslavia. That's because writers are prisoners of their own trade. While a composer or a painter can touch people world-over with his art, a writer can only reach the audience which shares his tongue. I thought that if this Kovacevic theatrical gem were available in English, it could potentially touch a few billion people.

Before I left Belgrade last January, I had also called the Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and the American ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann. I suggested to both of them that they ought to see the "PROFESSIONAL." The former, because he was a part of the play as the leader of the "new" politicians who had installed Teya in his job. The latter, because I thought that he would benefit from seeing an example of the free speech which can now be heard in Belgrade.

As for myself, the freedom which the "PROFESSIONAL" epitomized did more than just provide an entertaining evening. It did more than my two-hour conversation with President Milosevic the day before the premiere, or several meetings with Ambassador Zimmermann which had also preceded it. It showed me the part of my life I never had...

Epilogue

Nearly five months elapsed since that opening night, and I still had not even commenced work on this translation. My computer business work had taken precedence. I felt guilty about it, not just because I wasn't keeping my promise, but because I felt responsible for delaying potential Western readers/viewers access to this piece of art. Finally, on a flight to Yugoslavia in late May, I began the translation.

I did most of the work and finished a rough draft while vacationing for a week on the Montenegrin Adriatic coast. My wife and my 14-year old daughter, who helped proof the original English draft, became the first non-Serbian speaking people to experience the "PROFESSIONAL." On June 23, our last night in Belgrade before returning home, Kovacevic invited me and my family to a reception at the "Zvezdara" theater following the play's 100th performance. The cast, Perisic, his wife, Vucelic -- were all there. I even recognized the politician who sat to my right last January. It felt like a reunion.

As all of us sat around the table in an outdoor cafe next to the theater, my wife told Kovacevic how she particularly enjoyed the dog story. Then Perisic switched to English, "because Kovacevic doesn't speak English, and he'd feel embarrassed if he heard what I am about to say." Perisic, who as editor of the "Literary News" is a respected authority on matters of penmanship, proceeded to explain why he thought that Kovacevic was the best Serbian playwright of all times. As Perisic finished his professional explanation, Kovacevic told him, speaking in Serbian, "by virtue of the fact that I understood 70% of what you'd said, you've already blown your cover."

At that moment, Bata Stojkovic, a famous Serbian actor and the policeman in the play, approached our table. He lifted his glass in a salute to Kovacevic. He downed the wine in one motion and put the empty glass back on the table up side down. "There is symbolism in what he had just done," said Kovacevic, who also directed his own play, and in the process got to know the chief protagonists quite well. "It's been tough, at times," he confessed. Then looking at me he said, "in your business world, you say 'two plus two is four,' and nobody argues with you. But, in a theater, I say 'two plus two is four,' and there'll always be somebody who would say 'no it's not - it's 140.' In the end, I am lucky if I get them to agree that two plus two is 100."

Maybe that's the way things get argued backstage. But, up front, where the hushed audience sits for 75 minutes inhaling the "PROFESSIONAL's" every line as a breath of fresh air, you won't get any arguments when you suggest that Kovacevic scored 100% with this piece of art.

Bob Djurdjevic
Phoenix, Arizona
July 4, 1990

P.S. Neither Milosevic nor Zimmermann had seen the "PROFESSIONAL" as of June 23, 1990...

DUSAN KOVACEVIC

A Biographical Sketch (June 1992)

Born on July 12, 1948 in Mrdjenovac, near Sabac, Serbia. Finished high school in Novi Sad (in 1968). Graduated from the Academy for theater, film, radio and television -- department of drama -- of the Belgrade University (in 1973).

Member of the Writers' Association of Serbia since 1973.

Married, two children.

Lived and worked as a professional writer and director in Belgrade, Serbia. Since December 5, 1991, he has lived in voluntary political exile in Budapest (Hungary), Paris (France), and is currently in Cyprus.

Published Works:

1. DRAMAS

1973: Marathon Runners' Victory Lap; 1973: Radovan III; 1976: A Spring in January; 1976: What Is It In a Human Being That Drives Him to Drink; 1977: Universe's Dragon; 1980: A Village Immunization; 1982: The Balkan Spy; 1982: The Aggregation Center; 1984: St. George Kills the Dragon; 1988: A Claustrophobic Comedy; 1990: The Professional; 1991: A Hilarious Tragedy (*Kovacevic also directed the latter three plays*).

2. BOOKS

The Dramas, The Balkan Spy and Other Dramas (10 editions), and many others...

Awards:

Yugoslav:

All professional theater, film and literary awards in Belgrade (*the "Yugoslav" ones will remain as a rarity*).

International:

1984: Top screenplay awards at the film festivals in Montreal (Canada), Vevey (Switzerland), Valencia (Spain), Marseille (France), Vienna (Austria) and other -- for the film The Balkan Spy.

Translations:

Kovacevic's works have been translated into Slovak, Czech, Russian, Polish, Bulgarian, Hungarian, German, Italian, Greek, Finnish, Swedish, Chinese and English. His plays have been performed in theaters throughout Eastern and Western Europe. In Belgrade alone, over one million people attended the over 2,000 performances of his dramas.