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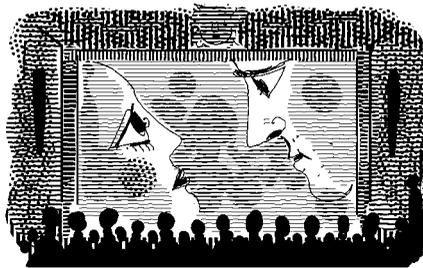
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SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



The Americans—A Fan's Notes

PHILIP AND ELIZABETH JENNINGS ARE a lovely couple living in a leafy northern Virginia suburb in the 1980s. Like most Americans, they keep busy with work (running a successful travel agency in D.C.) and family (raising two teenagers). But unlike most Americans, they also find time to engage in espionage for the “evil empire,” as President Reagan called the Soviet Union in 1983. Indeed, the couple has been groomed for this job since the 1960s, when the KGB first recruited two young Russians—Mischa from Tobolsk and Nadezhda from Smolensk—to become “illegals,” or deep-cover spies, in the United States.

The Americans has been renewed for a fifth and sixth season, a welcome prospect for admiring fans like me, but a daunting one for its creator, Joe Weisberg, and his team. I say this because Season 4 ended in a way that went beyond the usual cliffhanger to portend a drastic change in the story's basic premise. With their cover blown and the FBI closing in, Philip and Elizabeth were last seen grabbing their children and preparing to flee.

Where will they go? More important, where will *The Americans* go, if it is in fact abandoning the setting that has served it so well? The Jennings family on the lam would be very different from the Jennings family living their bizarre double life across the street from neighbor Stan Beeman, who also happens to work for the FBI Counterintelligence Division. What will happen to daughter Paige, who in Season 3 discovers her parents' terrible secret and, unable to bear it alone, shares it with the pastor of her church? Will son Henry, whose horizons

barely extend beyond the latest videogame, have to learn the truth, too?

Maybe Weisberg and company decided it was time to shake things up. Season 4 saw the death or departure of several major characters, and to that extent, the slate has been wiped clean. Maybe there's a plan to sustain *The Americans*'s best qualities while carrying it through the end of the Cold War. But in case there isn't, here are some suggestions from a fan.

Discussed in this essay:

The Americans, created by Joe Weisberg.
DreamWorks Television

Keep the Moral Compass

ONE OF THE LEAST ATTRACTIVE CLICHÉS of today's popular culture is an unseemly relish for scenes that in real life would be shocking, horrifying, or cruel. There is such a scene in the second episode of Season 3: a young woman whom Philip (Matthew Rhys) has been developing as an asset is strangled in a hotel room, and the only way to dispose of her body is to carry it out in a suitcase. Elizabeth (Keri Russell) arrives with a suitcase large enough to contain the body if it were folded into a fetal position. But instead of doing that, Philip and Elizabeth place the nude corpse on a plastic sheet and proceed to break all four of its limbs—slowly, deliberately, and (worse) audibly.

For many viewers and (especially) critics, the approved response to such gruesome-

ness is a mirthless laugh, like that of a nervous adolescent going along with a bully. To its credit, *The Americans* almost never invites this response. On the contrary, it typically portrays the evil deeds committed by Philip and Elizabeth as just that: evil. And over time, the show has made the victims of those deeds—an African-American housekeeper and her son, a Korean-American couple who befriend Elizabeth, a nerdy FBI techie—ever more sympathetic.

Indeed, the most appealing thing about *The Americans* is its steady moral compass. Early in Season 1, Stan (Noah Emmerich) blackmails Nina (Annet Mahendru), a beautiful young Soviet embassy attaché, into spying for him. Nina says, “You Americans think everything is white and black. With us it's all gray.” She is right about the American tendency to see every conflict as a morality play between virtuous white hats and vicious black hats. But *The Americans* doesn't go to the other extreme of wallowing in 50 shades of gray. On the contrary, it reckons seriously with each character's particular struggle to do what is right and to bear the guilt of doing wrong.

Keep Weaving Those Webs of Deception

DECEPTION IS THE GREAT THEME OF all spy fiction, but the genius of *The Americans* is to blend it with another great theme: marital fidelity. We see this in the very first episode, which begins with Elizabeth posing as a hooker to extract information from an FBI agent. Not only are she and Philip in a marriage arranged by the KGB, they are also expected to use sex as part of



their work. This causes a strain, as does Philip's thoughts of defecting, which Elizabeth vehemently rejects.

As Season 1 unfolds, however, the couple grows closer. One factor, shown in flashback, is that during their training Elizabeth was raped by a brutal instructor. That same man is now trying to defect to the United States, and the Jenningses are ordered to stop him. In the course of holding him captive in their garage, Elizabeth tells Philip about the rape, and he summarily kills the offender. Husband and wife also admit to past affairs, and by the end of Season 1 they are deceiving each other less—and everyone else more.

"Everyone else" starts with their children, Paige (Holly Taylor) and Henry (Keidrich Sellati), and extends to neighbors (especially Stan), employees, colleagues, and friends. But the only ones who grow suspicious are Paige and Stan. Curious about her parents' odd hours, Paige starts asking questions and learns their secret. As for Stan, three years undercover with a white supremacist group have given him sensitive antennae. But when he suggests to his wife, Sandra (Susan Misner), that Philip seems "a little off," she tells him to relax and enjoy living in a "boring suburb" full of "boring people."

There's a rich vein of humor in these layers of deception. For example, Philip and Elizabeth have just returned from a dangerous job when they hear a voice at the door: "FBI, open up!" They are terrified until they realize it's Stan with a pizza. On another occasion, Elizabeth is startled to see Paige wearing a red bra, and Paige says, "Mom, things are different from when you grew up! People are freer!" And when Matthew, Stan's son, tells Paige about his father's FBI job, she comments sarcastically on her parents' "exciting" work as travel agents.

Such is the standard complaint of adolescence: one's parents are hopelessly uncool, unsexy, and unhip. Hearing this complaint lodged against Philip and Elizabeth brings a pleasant *frisson* of hope to the parents and other adults watching—that one day the younger generation will understand that we old folks are way cooler, sexier, and hipper than they ever imagined.

As it happens, the actual spy ring that inspired *The Americans* was not very cool, sexy, or hip. To begin with, it was formed in the post-Soviet era (about which more below). It was also somewhat laughable. Of the dozen or so agents arrested in 2010 and 2015, Russia expert Kimberly Marten observes: "What is interesting...is how little these accused Russian spies are accomplishing. Either the FBI is just getting the low-hanging fruit, or the Rus-

sian foreign intelligence agency isn't doing its job very well."

Keep the Russians Real

"I WAS DELIGHTED THAT *THE AMERICANS* opted to fill their Russian roles with natives," writes journalist Olga Khazan. Not just in flashbacks but in numerous scenes inside the Soviet embassy, the Russian characters speak real Russian, not English with fake Russian accents. Americans don't like to read subtitles, but without the language and rounded humanity of these characters, the show would lose much of its grit and authenticity.

Equally authentic, however, is the way Elizabeth justifies her "cause." *The Americans* is set in the early 1980s, when liberal opinion in the West tended to equate the imperfections of the United States with those of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin encouraged this "myth of moral equivalence," as Jeane Kirkpatrick called it in a 1984 essay.

As Kirkpatrick wrote, the propaganda of Nazi Germany "forthrightly, frankly, embraced principles of leadership, obedience and hierarchy as alternatives to the hated basic values of democracy," while Soviet propaganda took a subtler approach. Rather than "attack our basic values forthrightly," the Soviets mounted "a radical critique of our societies and institutions by expropriating our language, our values."

This describes Elizabeth to a T. When she sniffs disapproval at Philip's new Camaro, he says, "Don't you enjoy *any* of this?" Her reply, that "five miles from here people are poor," could have come from any American concerned about inequality. As for the presumed virtues of the Soviet system, they were long forgotten by the 1980s. So concerning the actual nature of her "cause," Elizabeth waxes vague and euphemistic. For example, in Season 2 she consoles Jared (Owen Campbell), the son of another spy couple who have been brutally murdered (along with Jared's sister), by saying, "Your parents believed in something better than themselves...to make the world a better place."

Because these sentiments sound so earnestly American, the viewer might wonder about bias. Is *The Americans* pushing moral equivalence with the Soviet Union? No, it is trying to do something harder: show the humanity of both sides without losing track of the essential difference.

Forgive the spoiler, but at the end of Season 2 we learn that Jared himself killed his family, at the urging of his KGB handler Kate. In a bitter echo of Elizabeth's euphemisms, the dying Jared justifies his horrific crime by

saying, "What we do, it's for something greater than ourselves. Kate always said, the work, the cause, it's for something greater."

Keep the Americans Real

TO REPEAT, THE EUPHEMISMS USED BY the Soviets in the 1980s resonate all too well with a certain naïve American idealism. Trying to reconcile herself to Paige's membership in a liberal activist church, Elizabeth tells Philip, "Paige is like me. She wants to make a difference. She's just doing it in the wrong place."

This same naïveté takes a satirical turn when Stan's wife, Sandra, ropes him into joining EST (a "human potential movement" popular in the 1970s and '80s), so he can learn to be more "honest and open." Of course, when Stan tells Sandra he likes EST, she accuses him of not being honest and open. So he mans up and says, "It's total bullshit"—at which point she slams the door in his face.

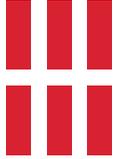
Not surprisingly, Philip is as drawn to EST as Elizabeth is repelled by it. But as it turns out, a Soviet spy can only get so much out of EST. In Season 3 Sandra runs into Philip at a training session and eagerly explains to him that EST is about "really knowing other people and letting them know you." But when she suggests that the two of them "tell each other everything," Philip demurs—no doubt because he has just killed Gene, the nerdy techie in Stan's office.

With its shallow slogans about "taking total responsibility for your life," EST serves as a comic foil to the deep moral quandaries facing the major characters. It also reveals the gulf between the optimistic, trusting ways of the Americans and the pessimistic, suspicious ways of the Russians.

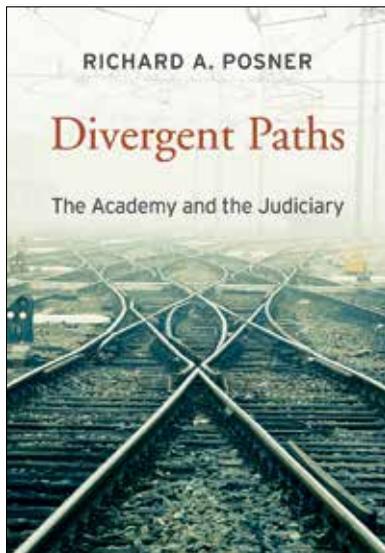
But this does not mean the Americans are portrayed as fools. On the contrary, as both the Russians and Americans struggle to redeem themselves, there are hints that the Americans have the advantage, precisely because they are more trusting and less cynical than the Russians. This is not driven home in any ideological way; as in any good fiction, it emerges from the characters themselves. But it also seems to matter what sort of ideological air they breathe.

This advantage shows up in a powerful sequence in Season 3. Philip and Elizabeth have broken into a factory to plant a bug in the FBI's "mail robot," and because it is late at night, they don't expect to find anyone there. But in the office Elizabeth comes across Betty, the elderly widow of the factory owner, doing accounts.

In a moving performance by veteran actress Lois Smith, Betty takes Elizabeth for



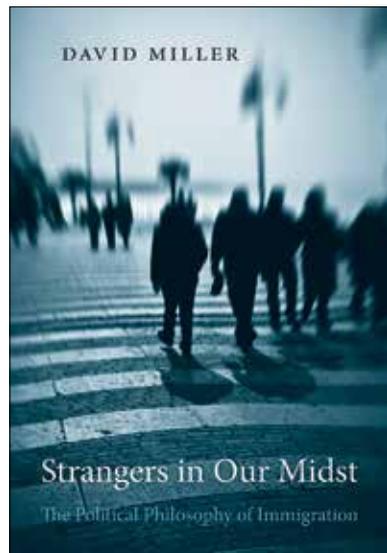
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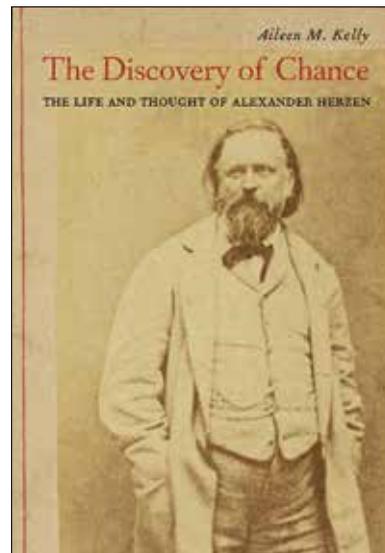
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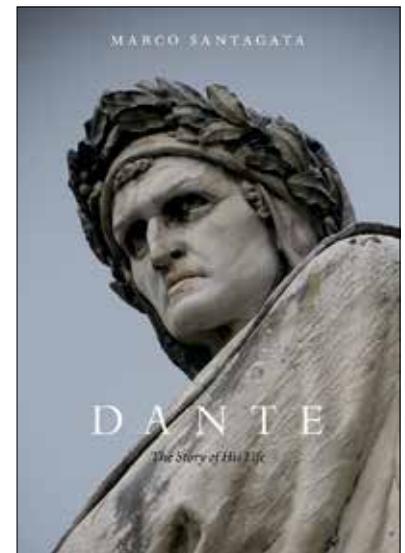
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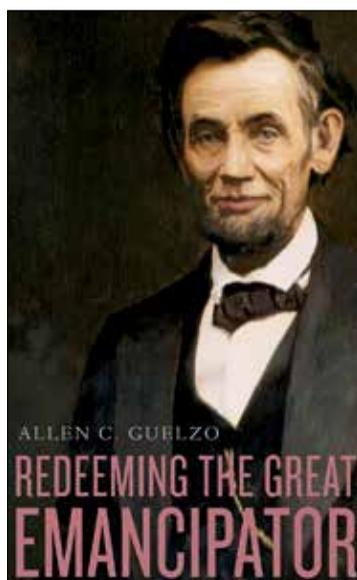
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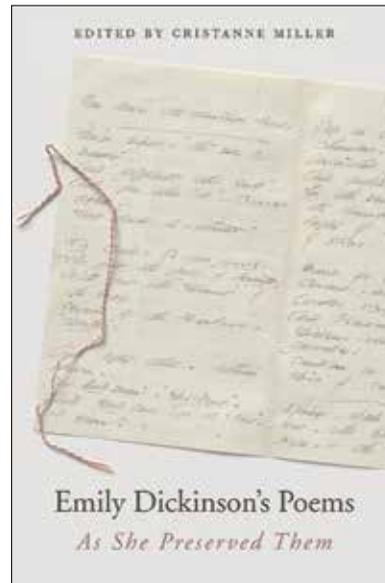
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a burglar and tries to save herself by engaging her in conversation. Betty's ploy works to the extent that her life story gets under Elizabeth's skin. But eventually Betty realizes that Elizabeth is not a burglar but something much worse. Rather than kill Betty outright, Elizabeth forces her to overdose on her heart medicine, and while she is taking the pills, there's a moment of truth between them:

Betty: "Are you doing this by yourself?"

Elizabeth: "No, with my husband."

Betty: "Why?"

Elizabeth: "To make the world a better place."

Betty: "You think doing this to me will make the world a better place?"

Elizabeth: "Sorry, but I do."

Betty: "That's what evil people tell themselves when they're doing evil."

Watching Betty die is almost the only time we see Elizabeth in tears.

Keep the Difference Between Truth and Lies

THE WORLD IS FULL OF CYNICS, POST-modernists, and tyrants who will tell you there is no such thing as truth, only "narratives" constructed by the powerful to perpetuate their power. This is not the perspective of *The Americans*. Indeed, every one of its major characters, including those most entangled in lies, is shown at some point to hunger for the truth. There are many examples, but perhaps the most compelling is Martha (Alison Wright), secretary to Frank Gaad (Richard Thomas), the special agent in charge of the FBI Counterintelligence Division.

Martha is a lonely woman approaching her forties, whose only real attachment is to her parents living in another state. This makes her an easy mark for Philip, who, disguised as a kindly geek named Clark, pretends to be conducting an internal investigation of the Bureau. By stages "Clark" extracts more and more information from Martha, first by wooing her and then by marrying her.

For most of her time onscreen, Martha comes off as too emotionally needy for her own good. But she is also warm-hearted and totally undeserving of the fate Philip has set for her. It is fascinating to watch this storyline develop from mild satire to Greek tragedy.

The turning point comes in Season 2, when Philip overcomes Martha's ethical qualms about stealing a top secret file by making her listen to a tape that has been doctored to sound as though Gaad, Stan, and other men in the office were making fun of her appearance. When she bursts into tears, Philip comforts her by saying, "The world is an ugly place, full of nasty brutish people." She accepts his comfort and professes her love for him, at which point he abruptly takes his leave, clearly mortified by the realization that *he* is one of those nasty brutish people.

In Season 3 Martha's fate begins its inexorable approach. First Gaad discovers the bug she has planted in his office. This leads to an internal investigation by someone who is obviously not Clark/Philip. Suddenly doubting her husband's bona fides, Martha tells him that she met the investigator. "*Who are you?*" she asks Philip.

He responds with more lies, different ones tailored to this new situation. That works for a while, but as Martha's suspicions grow, he switches to what she contemptuously calls "a version of the truth that's not very true." Then he removes his Clark disguise and asks her to trust him even though he cannot tell her the whole truth. Eventually, he confesses to having killed the techie Gene.

As the FBI close in, Philip takes Martha to a shabby KGB safe house to await exfiltration to the Soviet Union. At this stage the question of truth is front and center, because Martha is languishing for lack of it. Meeting her in the safe house is the Jennings' handler, a senior KGB officer named Gabriel (Frank Langella). A grizzled veteran with a kindly manner, Gabriel now deploys that kindly manner to take Martha prisoner while reassuring her that she is not being taken prisoner.

Then Elizabeth shows up, doling out the same phony reassurance. Martha is having none of it. She tries to escape but then, fearing the FBI more, allows herself to be brought back to the safe house. At this point Martha feels like the last human being on earth after the bodysnatchers have taken over. And though Philip is the one most responsible for her plight, she is desperate to see him because she believes he is still human.

And so he is. Martha asks him his real name, and he tells her: Mischa. She asks him will she have to spend the rest of her life in Russia, and he says yes. Finally she asks him if he will be joining her in Russia, and against the express orders of Gabriel and the KGB, he says no. They will never see each other again.

This is an extraordinary moment, because Martha's reaction is not what you'd expect af-



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ter so many hyper-emotional scenes with her beloved “Clark.” She throws her head back, smiling through her tears, and her whole body straightens as though suffused with sudden strength. There’s no great mystery about the source of this strength. When Elizabeth and Gabriel criticize Philip for removing his Clark disguise, he shoots back, “She needed—” The line is left hanging, but the meaning is clear: she needed the truth.

Keep the Story Relevant to Today

THE AMERICANS DOESN’T MAKE A BIG deal of it, but one reason Martha behaves nobly at the end is because she is an American. Elizabeth calls Martha “simple” because she is so trusting. But as Philip corrects her, Martha “was actually very complicated. People underestimated her.”

The same could be said of Americans in general. Despite everything, America is still a place where it is not crazy to trust other people. This is a rare and wonderful thing, as I learned from friends who were Soviet émigrés in the 1970s. As they explained, the USSR was an incubator of close friendship, because you could not trust anyone outside the circle of light on your kitchen table.

This is not yet the case in America, but we are suffering an erosion of trust in our institutions—and even more crucially, in each other. At least, this is what the survey data suggest. According to one major study conducted in 2010-12 and published in the journal *Psychological Science*, only 33% of Americans reported that they trusted other people, down from 46% in 1972-74. This is still higher than many other countries, but if the data reflect reality, the shift does not bode well.

In this respect it may be worth noting, again, that the Russian spy ring that inspired *The Americans* was rounded up in 2010. Why did Weisberg take a story from the post-Cold War era and place it back in the Reagan years? “A modern day [setting] didn’t seem like a good idea,” he has said. “People were both shocked and simultaneously shrugged at the [2010] scandal because it didn’t seem like we were really enemies with Russia anymore.”

What would Weisberg say today, with the Russian government doing its best to influence the American presidential election? At the time of this writing, some Republicans are shrugging at the WikiLeaks posting of emails showing the leadership of the Democratic National Committee trying to wrest

the nomination away from Bernie Sanders and give it to Hillary Clinton. But no American should shrug at the danger posed by this Russian meddling. According to Shawn Henry, a 20-year veteran of the FBI’s cybersecurity division, Russia’s recent efforts to penetrate American politics are marked by “a high degree of capability and some very, very sophisticated technology.”

Does this danger include trying to undermine the election? For an answer, we need only glance at what the Putin regime has been doing to undermine democracy in Europe. And the danger looks less like old-fashioned espionage than like postmodern mischief: not just cyber-attacks but also major efforts to use media, think tanks, political parties, and other organs of opinion in Europe to disinform, disorient, and disrupt.

Americans don’t need Russians to undermine our democracy right now; we are quite capable of doing that ourselves. But given Vladimir Putin’s current ideology of virulent anti-Americanism and our own unsettled state, it would be foolish of Russia not to try, at least, to exacerbate our problems. Let us hope that, along with being hugely entertaining, *The Americans* keeps reminding us that we still have the strength to push back.

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