American History And Cinema: The Green Book

Would it be possible to believe that in the early 60s a taken into custody in a Deep South state African American would be able to wipe the smile of the face of a racist Southern sheriff with a single phone call? When just moments ago he was laughed about claiming his Miranda rights? Yes, that's a very possible story. And an even more possible scenario.

When Mahershala Ali, playing the renowned musician Dr. Donald Shirley in the three times Academy Award winner movie "Green Book", puts that phone down, he would have call not just a lawyer, exercising his Constitutionally guaranteed rights. He would have called a person who represents an entire generation of American politics, a metaphor for sweeping change, overturning the status quo. A person who is remembered by the name of Robert F. Kennedy, brother to President John F. Kennedy and Attorney General of the United States.

It took real courage to be a part of the Kennedy family back then. It took enormous efforts to be part of a vision for a country, for a different country – one that is free, and fair, and accords to every citizen by his the rights, that he is endowed to. The reality was a country that was harshly divided by politics, by race, by rhetoric; one that has just went through its McCarthyism period and who has to face foes both inside and abroad. The Kennedys did something that was beyond imagination. They began the course of enormous social change in the United States; one that will go one with the successor of President John Kennedy in the face of President Lyndon Johnson and one that will eventually become the law of the land. No Presidential administration and no governmental figure, no matter their political beliefs, would dare overturn progress.

Nevertheless it took even more courage to be Dr. Donald Shirley. "The Green Book" represents now only the story of one person who aimed himself at overcoming barriers. It represents the story of entire generation who like Neil Armstrong aimed for the stars. Not to the stars in the sky, but to the stars of achieving their right which is the pursuit of happiness. After generations of oppression the choice was clear. The circumstances had to change and country had to shift forward. And it shifted.

Looking from today we wouldn't be able to tell what did Don Shirley feel when he witnessed the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Or the Voting Rights Act of 1965. History considers them major victories for social progress. So they are. As they are a victory for the entire nation, won by blood, by sacrifice, they project themselves in every single struggle that has been fought. Don Shirley's included.

This victory wasn't easily fought or easily won. When we roll back through the tides of history we can go about a century ago to sum up everything that represents the Civil Rights Movement. In my opinion the Civil Rights Movement started in the Reconstruction Era right after the end of the Civil War. When we talk about the deeds of Martin Luther King, we cannot forget about what Frederick Douglass did. Or Sadie L. Adams. Or Irene Moorman Blackstone. The Civil Rights Movement escalated in the 50s. But it did not escalate with violence. It grow in number and for with nonviolent protests, civil disobedience and court decisions. With the executive, legislative and state powers clashing over civil rights the people went to the one institution which played a

historic role in the process – the Courts. During the Civil Rights Movement between 1955 and 1968 people mobilized across the nation. The thing that lead them forward was inspiration by the example of people like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. Events such as the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–56) in Alabama; 'sit-ins' such as the influential Greensboro sit-ins (1960) in North Carolina and successful Nashville sit-ins in Tennessee; marches, such as the 1963 Birmingham Children's Crusade and 1965 Selma to Montgomery marches (1965) in Alabama and a wide range of other nonviolent activities, lead the country to move in another direction. The Civil Rights Movement was smeared and attacked. People like Martin Luther King and James Meredith were assaulted. But in the struggle they were able to bring the necessary social change. It wasn't far away to the confirmation of Thurgood Marshall – activist for civil rights – to the Supreme Court. It was not long until Congress heard the voice of the people and passed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

What amount of efforts does it take to be the first African American student in a musical conservatory, as he was, sharing that with his driver Tony Lip during a chat over a glass of whiskey in one of the movie scenes of the "Green Book"? In his own way Dr. Donald Shirley is like James Meredith, yet another icon of the Civil Rights movement, who with the assistance of President Kennedy himself, overcome the barrier of segregation and was enrolled in the University of Mississippi.

So what is it that we can call this magnificent generation? Nowadays there is a term that we use to describe the so called millennial generation, calling them Generation X. What if we, by using the alphabet, have a certain letter for a specific generation? And would it be possible for us to coin the phrase "Generation E" with "E" standing for "Equality"? That would be an assumption worth making, considering the enormous steps which were made toward equality. Not just political equality, but equality in all its forms and shapes.

When we compare the movie "Green Book" for example with "Lincoln" starring Daniel Day Lewis as President Lincoln and Tommy Lee Jones as Thaddeus Stevens, we can remember a certain phrase Stevens said before the gathering of the House of Representatives when the anti-Slavery Amendment to the Constitution was being discussed. In order to not sway public opinions against the cause of abolishing slavery, Stevens said that he did not hold with equality with all thing, only with equality before the law. Equality before the law is one thing. It concerns the right to fair trail, the right of private property, the guaranteed equal protection of the law and so on. But was Don Shirley considered equal when he went into this tailor shop to buy a suit? Remembering that because of the color of his skin he wasn't allowed to try it and the owners made this fanciful excuse that he can buy it and they can fit it on him afterwards, we can see that even if equality in some form exists in the written law and since Lincoln it has become the law of the land, it still doesn't exist in the way people treat each other.

Although the Civil War ended more than a century ago, people like Jefferson Davis were mostly forgotten and the country tested its Northern-Southern unity several times during different wars, the legacy of the Confederacy endured in the Deep South. It endured not only politically when people like Strom Thurmond ran like Dixiecrats for President or people like the infamous Governor George Wallace gave speeches behind the Rebel flag and won several Southern states when he ran for President. It endured socially.

Although the country was moving away from the segregated policies in many different ways, like with the decision of the Supreme Court in Brown v. the Board of Education and the example of

the incredible brave Rosa Park, “Whites Only” was a very popular sign in the Deep South. Imagine this. You are a world-renowned classical musician who has played twice in the White House in the past year. You have received praise from musical luminaries like Igor Stravinsky. You are a highly educated person, fluent in many different languages. You have taken your knowledge in musical art deep inside the secrets of Brahms, Beethoven and Chopin. And yet you are refused the possibility to dine in a restaurant which serves White people only based on a self-described tradition.

During the movie “Green Book” Donald Shirley has many times talked about dignity. Personal dignity, to be more specific. Dignity is something that can be related not only to a way an individual is treated, but also to the way he implements specific values and moral codes in his life. Dignity is a category that is inevitable to every human being. „You only win when you maintain your dignity”, say Don Shirley to Tony Lip. This single phrase could be projected to an entire generation-a generation that stood with James Meredith and Rosa Parks and a generation that marched with Martin Luther King in Selma and in Washington for rights, for civil rights. Even when assaulted and against all odds this generation understood how to keep its dignity. And even when down and taken into custody in a smelly cell Don Shirley knew all about how to keep the moral high ground against those who would seek to bring him down. But how did Dr. Donald Shirley managed all that? How did he managed to keep his dignity in a world trying so hard to bring it down? We might say that all this is a matter of choice, of personal choice. Don Shirley made his choice, a choice very well described in a certain scene of the movie.

When Tony Lip asks Oleg, speaking about Don Shirley, how does he smile and shake their hands like that, referring to the people of the Deep South, Oleg replies that it takes courage to win people’s hearts. It really does. History has shown us many battles and wars fought. Empires and nations did collapse and never again brought back to life. But the greatest battle that was ever fought and that is been fought every day it what of winning people’s hearts. People fight to win the heart of the desired ones. Leader fight to win people for their cause and ideas. Ideas are the fabric that is able to shift everything forward. It is also the fabric by which Don Shirley is able not only to inspire people with his music, but to make them see things in a different perspective.

So it goes with Tony who, as we can see at the beginning of the movie, is very racist in his beliefs when it comes to people of African American origin. After his experience with Dr. Shirley the man who used to throw away the glasses from which two African Americans drank lemonade in his home after fixing the pipes, welcomes a person of color into his home in order to celebrate one of the holiest festivals for the Roman Catholics (presumably Tony is Catholic based on his Italian origin) which is Christmas.

It takes real courage to do all that. Not only to let go of the beliefs which you have held for most of your life, but to adopt new ones, taking into consideration that above all you have made a mistake and misjudged something. It took courage to make that move. And it took courage to be Tony Lip.

The „Green Book“movie describes a history of struggle which have shaken the fabric of the American society. It is very symbolic of this period of time – the stand for civil rights across the country. When President Johnson one called Martin Luther King during the marches in Selma he complained about people who were on a tour in the White House who just sat down on the

floor and started singing as a form of protest. As he said – people inside the White House, on a tour, which describes the vastness of the form of civil consciousness which has arisen in the United States in that historical period and the vastness of the form of protest. ?he example of Donald Shirley is not only the example for others on the behalf of his own success. His entire story is an inspiration of how the struggle for civil rights has lifted an entire generation.

So is the entire storyline of the movie “Green Book”. Donald Shirley may not be Martin Luther King or James Meredith, but his entire story shown in the movie is a perspective of the same form of struggle. It’s goal? Probably the pursuit of happiness. The idea that a person, who is equal to all others, no matter his skin color, race or sexual orientation, can fulfil his dreams and reach for the stars by breaking barriers and going against all odds. The idea that so many have fought for during such a long period of time.