

STYLE

Testing the Resonance of the American Dream

By LENA WILLIAMS JUNE 23, 1996

What's that I smell in the air? The American dream. Sweet as a new millionaire, The American dream. Live like you haven't a care, The American dream. All yours for 10 percent down, The American dream.

From "The American Dream," in "Miss Saigon."

In the 1950's, owning a house with a white picket fence and a car embodied the American dream. As depicted in film, on television and in books, this Norman Rockwell view of America represented happiness and the fulfillment of the hopes of millions of ordinary people, regardless of race, region or stature in life.

Even now, four decades later, the prospect of owning a freestanding home remains an enduring element in Americans' aspirations. Spiraling economy, downsizing and the ever-changing nuclear family have not deterred the dream. Yet, more and more people seem to feel their dreams are becoming harder to realize.

The term "American dream" was first attributed to the historian James Truslow Adams, who in 1931 wrote a treatise called "The Epic of America." In it he said, "The dream is not of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which every individual shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are capable and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous

8

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For more than a year, Linda Schaffer, a film maker, traveled the country, with camera and microphone in hand, talking with Americans about the so-called dream. The fruit of her labor is "American Dreamers," a 90-minute television special that will have its premiere at 8 tonight on Turner Network Television and will be repeated periodically over the next four weeks.

The program examines what it means to "make it" in America today, using comments from a cross section of celebrities, like Michael Jordan, Mel Brooks, Gloria Steinem and Maya Angelou, and ordinary people. Ms. Schaffer said in an interview that she was surprised to learn that "nobody really feels that they've made it yet." Clips from movies that helped to shape the nation's dream illuminate many of the observations in the program.

Although Ms. Schaffer finds many people who have become disillusioned, there are many more who still see the United States, in spite of its social and economic problems, as the land of opportunity where dreams can come true.

There are, for example, members of the 20-something generation who share their grandparents' vision of the dream -- a house, a family, good health -- and others who speak of being "rich and famous" as the dream comes true.

There are optimists, like Trinh Pham, a high school student in Sacramento, Calif., whose family escaped Vietnam for what he calls "a safe haven" in America and found that and much more.

And there are pessimists, like Alden Naranjo, a Native American whose tribe, the Utes, is based outside Durango, Colo. He says he sees the dream as a kind of "pie in the sky" ideal. "If this is the American dream, then I'm in the wrong place," he tells the film maker.

Ms. Schaffer became intrigued with the notion of the American dream after hearing the term bandied about with seemingly little thought given to its meaning. "What surprised me is that among the young people we talked to, the conventional domestic dream -- a plot of land, a house, a family that's healthy -- is still alive and well," Ms. Schaffer said.

Like life itself, the American dream has changed with each generation. Not satisfied with the house and car, those born in a desegregated America of equal opportunity dreamed of a college education and an income that would meet the monthly payments for the median-price house.

Their children are dreaming large: making it means not one, but two homes; not a station wagon, but a BMW, and vacations in the Caribbean.

Tyrone Belke, 22, a resident of Washington, who described himself as a "young, gifted and out-of-work" architect, said in a recent phone interview, "It's only natural to want to do better than your parents."

Mr. Belke, who is not part of the television program, continued: "I'm not saying I won't get the house and the car and the prom queen. It's just that I didn't think I'd have to work twice as hard as my parents to get it. They always told me that they worked twice as hard to get half as far so I wouldn't have to do the same."

Mario M. Cuomo, the former Governor of New York, who appears in Ms. Schaffer's program, said in an interview that Mr. Belke's ambition is "very much the characteristic of most Americans."

"The more you have, the more you aspire to," Mr. Cuomo said. "For today's generation, economic ascendancy is not assured as it was for us. If you worked hard, you would make it. That is no longer true. It's not as easy to go up."

But Dr. John Roth, a professor of philosophy at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, Calif., who teaches a course on the American dream, believes that the dream is necessary for the future of the country.

"Dreaming of a better life has kept this country together," Dr. Roth said in an interview. "If we reach the point where Americans begin to doubt that, then the potential for unraveling American life increases."