

Václav Havel's Meanings

His Key Words and Their Legacy

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and Kieran Williams (eds.)

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THEATER: DIVADLO

Barbara Day

Introduction

It was a beautiful September day in Prague, which was just as well, because the President of the Republic was giving an open-air party. It was to be held among the formal flower beds and stately trees of the Royal Garden on the northern side of the Castle, and preceded by a conference—or confrontation—in the renaissance *Mičovna*, the Ball Game Hall.¹²⁴ Václav Havel had invited representatives of global organizations and non-governmental initiatives to find common cause under the banner “Praga—dialogi locus.”¹²⁵

As one of the first to take my seat in the press gallery, I was able to look down on the final preparations. Professional stage manager that he was, Havel himself moved among the rows of chairs, checking sight lines and testing the levels of the microphones. More than anyone, he knew the importance of everyone being able to see and hear on such an occasion. This event—this dialogue—held many of the elements of *divadlo* in which even those who do not speak a word are participants.

Havel’s theater studies were not academic hours spent at his desk or in a library. His training was practical, combining physical work with the honing of an acute sensitivity to the nuances of timing. Havel had demonstrated his ability to stage theater more than ten years earlier, at the time of the Velvet Revolution. This was not a revolution that took place behind closed doors, in private offices and council chambers. It was acted out in the biggest spaces available, first Wenceslas Square (45,000 square meters, plus surrounding windows, balconies,

124 In fact, the original Ball Game Hall burned down at the end of World War II and was rebuilt by the architect Pavel Janák.

125 This took place on September 23, 2000.

and roofs) and then the vast plain of Letná. Havel understood that everyone present was a participant, so they all had to be able to see and hear—sightlines and microphone levels again, set up by theater technicians. Moreover, it was essential for the show to be a comedy (in the Elizabethan sense of a play with a happy ending). He therefore used his experience as a dramaturge to structure the demonstration/performance: it must not be too long (the November temperatures were well below zero); the individual acts must be entertaining as well as brief, having the nature of a variety show (speeches interspersed with songs and interviews); and feature popular personalities (the controversial use of “normalization” stars, such as the singer Karel Gott); emotion must not be allowed to overcome rationality (no histrionics or rabble-rousing); the event should be inclusive (even Communists could join in). Indoor discussions with the current holders of power also had their dramaturgy—the photographer Jaroslav Krejčí¹²⁶ once told me that before the start of any negotiation Havel drafted scenarios of the different routes the discussion might take, and prepared alternative responses.

One of the phenomena most frequently remarked on during those November days was the way in which even the massive crowds behaved with a sense of responsibility, as though participating in a ritual in which they instinctively understood their role. How did Havel know how to do this? Where did his concept of how a revolution should conduct itself originate? How did he come to be equipped with the skills to manage one? Where did he learn not only how to put on a show, but also how to awaken the deep instincts of the public to a belief in themselves?

In this paper I shall trace, chronologically and thematically, the development of Havel’s concept of theater, particularly from 1958

¹²⁶ Krejčí’s studio was on the island of Kampa in the center of Prague, its windows opening directly onto Čertovka. Full of artwork, books, and artefacts, in the 1970s it was the venue for lectures by Jan Patočka. In 2002, the 500-year floodwaters rose to the level of the story above the studio.

to 1968, with reflections on the four theater practitioners who influenced him. An early discovery was the transcendent power of theater; its ability to extend into the spiritual world. However, Havel learned by working backstage that this needed technical discipline behind it; it was not a solo journey but one that involved all those within that space. In its interaction, theater became a common activity, relevant and useful to all. The audience was to be treated with respect, and not dictated to or manipulated. He realized that the stirring up of superficial emotion was inadmissible; emotion was to come from within, as a personal response to the situation. Thus an element of distancing was involved, if the audience was to assess the truth of what was being presented; the creation of an arena of freedom in which the individual, a member of that community, could recognize his or her own responsibilities.

The theater was not Havel's intended profession, nor his chosen environment. It is probable that in less politically troubled times he would have found his fulfillment in the film world. Given his background, connections, and abilities, he could have made a career as a producer, director, or scriptwriter. Creatively, he inclined towards the skills of collage, juxtaposition, and cross-cutting. This, however, was the mid-1950s, and the Czechoslovak film industry, including Václav's uncle, was under suspicion of having collaborated with the Nazis while others were suffering in prisons and concentration camps. The Communist regime intended to keep culture firmly under its control.

In November 1980 Václav Havel wrote to Olga from prison: "If I could have freely chosen my education when I was young, I might well have become a film director instead of a writer; my longing to invent and create and thus to say something about the world and myself might have found a more appropriate outlet in the directing of films."¹²⁷ It is either ironic or appropriate (I tend to the latter)

¹²⁷ Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 56.

that his last project before he died, the film of his final work *Leaving*, was his first direct experience of film-making and his first stab at being a director (even though Czech theater has a tradition of dramaturges who became theater directors—Jan Grossman is an example—there is no evidence that Havel, at least while at the Balustrade Theater, had any such ambition). Perhaps this frustration was partly behind an exceptionally sour diatribe in a letter of November 1981 against “the whole world of so-called professional theater, Czech theater in particular with its obsessive penchant for egghead theorizing and its everlasting personal conflicts and gossip” (though I can hardly imagine that the world of film would have been better in this respect).¹²⁸ He emphasizes in this letter that it was not the theater environment but the work he was doing that held him there, and the people he worked with—Jan Werich, Ivan Vyskočil, and Jan Grossman. With the addition of Alfréd Radok, I suggest that it was these contrasting theater practitioners who shaped Havel’s concept of theater and how it applied in society.

Jan Werich: theater as an arena of freedom

The first influence, Jan Werich (1905–1980) was a legend from the inter-war period, when he and his partner Jiří Voskovec had performed in their accidentally named “Liberated Theater.” The Liberated Theater was an offshoot of the Devětsil (1920–1930), an inter-disciplinary association of young artists, experimental and mainly left-wing. In 1934, however, its former members were hardly able to credit Andrei Zhdanov’s declaration at the Soviet Writers’ Congress that the task of art was to depict reality in its revolutionary development; a concept embodied in artworks that realistically portrayed turning points and heroic moments in the history of Socialism. The Czechs regarded their Soviet colleagues’ commitment

¹²⁸ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 247.

to what came to be known as Socialist Realism as unbelievably reactionary, no more than the readoption of conventional and familiar forms. They themselves were analyzing their experiments in art by means of Structuralism and the technique of defamiliarization.¹²⁹ By this time the Liberated Theatre had become known for its political jazz revues, in which Werich and his partner Voskovec exposed Fascist aggression to ridicule in their partly prepared, partly improvised dialogues in the tradition of variety: “the artistic method really is liberated from any kind of constructive activity, [...] any maintenance of healthy respect and discipline,” protested the German press.¹³⁰ By the time the Nazis reached Prague, Voskovec and Werich were in exile. Although they returned, a similar attitude prevailed in the totalitarian 1950s, when Voskovec went back to America and Werich was barely tolerated by the Communist regime but still admired by the public as a free spirit. When Werich died, Havel wrote:

He had one exceptionally important influence on me: he helped me realize, among other things, that theater can be something incomparably more than just a play, a director, actors, audience and an auditorium; it is a special focus of social and intellectual life, helping to create the ‘spirit of the times’ and embodying and manifesting its fantasy and humor; it is a living instrument of social self-awareness, one that is, in an unrepeatable way, lodged in its own time.¹³¹

In the introduction to Havel’s collected theater writings, *O divadle*, the philosopher and diplomat Martin Palouš writes that it was Jan Werich who stimulated Havel’s interest in the potency of theater “to make people who are not free feel free at least for a moment.”¹³²

¹²⁹ In Czech, *ozvláštnění*, see below.

¹³⁰ Jaromír Pelc, *Zpráva o Osvobozeném divadle* (Prague: Práce, 1982), 171.

¹³¹ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 53.

¹³² Martin Palouš, “S Václavem Havlem o divadle a nejen o něm” in Václav Havel, *O divadle*, ed. Anna Freimanová (Prague: Knihovna Václava Havla, 2012), 8.

Palouš quotes Hannah Arendt on one of the sources of freedom being the human capacity to begin something new. According to Arendt, the Achilles' heel of totalitarianism is youthful defiance and this, writes Palouš, was likewise a natural starting point and major theme for Havel. Havel's employment by Werich came at a time when theater was—more dynamically than the other arts—disassociating itself from the ideology of Socialist Realism, so the concept of theater as an arena of freedom was implanted at the start of Havel's career. It fused with his belief that freedom is a task we carry out, rather than a gift to which we are entitled; that we have to create it by thinking and acting freely.

The interpretation of this became an issue for a discussion in November 1968¹³³ when, in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion, Czechoslovak citizens were flocking to revivals of patriotic plays which gave them the illusion of freedom. In Havel's view this was a surrogate program, pseudo-activity, even fraud. Jan Grossman saw it as a natural reaction in a land where the substitution of theater for political action had been historically significant. He was referring especially to the 19th-century National Awakening, when the response to the failure of the 1848 revolution was the creation of the Committee to Build a Czech National Theater, and when in 1868 the foundation stone of the National Theater was laid with the celebrations that were to have accompanied the coronation of Franz Josef as King of Bohemia (the unrealized Triple Monarchy). Under abnormal circumstances, substitution was bound to happen. To resist it at all had political outcomes, since it meant the pursuit of objective truth. In Grossman's words, "Every true art fights for freedom."¹³⁴

¹³³ "Ještě jednou obrození?" (discussion), *Divadlo* 1969/1 (January 1969), 26-37.

¹³⁴ "Ještě jednou obrození?" (discussion), *Divadlo* 1969/1 (January 1969), 26-37.

Alfréd Radok and the suspension of disbelief

Writing to Olga in December 1981 Havel refers to “the ancient essence of theater as ritual.”¹³⁵ Theater scholars generally concur that performance is rooted in ritual; in the human desire for a relationship with the supernatural. At the time Havel was beginning his theater career, the British director Tyrone Guthrie was comparing theater performance to the Christian church’s Holy Communion: “Action on the stage is a stylized re-enactment of real action, which is then imagined by the audience.”¹³⁶ His colleague Hugh Hunt wrote: “The ritual of the theater is [...] a meeting-place between our imagination and our reason.”¹³⁷ Havel’s colleague Petr Oslzlý (of Theater Goose on a String) wrote in 1992 of ritual as “a religious ceremony, played in what we call the ‘sacred circle’ [...] [T]he shaman or priest [...] led a dialogue with that supernatural being which the community sought, revered and worshipped. The whole community was enclosed in that sacred circle,” affirming that the “great demonstrations of November 1989 were also theatre rituals invoking freedom, transferred now into the city squares, where the whole community could participate. It was reminiscent of the celebrations of the classical theatre, which also involved the whole community.”¹³⁸

It is a “meeting-place” in the sense that the performance of a ritual creates a link between the unknown and our understanding of it and provides the footing for our belief, or faith (the Czech word *víra* can be translated as either) in what we cannot experience directly.

¹³⁵ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 105.

¹³⁶ Tyrone Guthrie, *A Life in the Theatre* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1960), 313.

¹³⁷ Hugh Hunt, *The Live Theatre* (London: OUP, 1962), 5.

¹³⁸ Petr Oslzlý, “Theatre in a Sacred Circle,” trans. Barbara Day, in Petr Oslzlý, *Divadlo za demokracii—Theatre for Democracy* (Brno: Janáčková akademie muzických umění, 2019). This text was originally given as a lecture in Richard Schechner’s Performance Studies seminar at the Tisch School of Arts, New York University, on March 30, 1993.

Theater, like religion, requires belief—or at least the suspension of disbelief, sometimes wrongly interpreted as the abandonment of one's critical faculties. On the contrary, the suspension of disbelief requires the participation of all one's faculties. It is the process described by Arthur Koestler when he writes about the law of infolding.¹³⁹ Koestler explains “infolding” as the artist's sense of the techniques of selection, simplification (economy) and exaggeration (emphasis) to convey the truth of what they are presenting, whether it is a painting, poem, or performance. If the complexity and subtlety of the infolding corresponds to the receptiveness of the audience, then, by making connections (interpolations), following allusions (extrapolation), and interpreting what is seen and/or heard (transformation) they will experience that shiver of recognition, that moment of transcendent “here and now.” This is the moment of understanding, of belief, of faith. It can range from the sublime realization of Christ's sacrifice down to grasping the meaning of a joke or gag.

It is possible, but unlikely, that Havel saw the 1986 production of Comenius's *Abrahamus Patriarcha* by Brno's *Ochotnický kroužek* (Amateur Circle). The script (which owes more to Kierkegaard than Comenius)¹⁴⁰ deals with the question of faith in an age of conformity and calculation, expressed through the story of Abraham, a man at odds with his time. The dramatic structure focuses attention on the “here and now” of theatrical performance—in this case Abraham's preparedness to sacrifice his son Isaac. An event can take place only once in history, but in the theater this “once” can be recreated in the presence of an audience. In Koestler's words, “[a]rt originates in sympathetic magic; in the illusions of stagecraft its origin is directly

¹³⁹ Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Pan Books, 1975). The terms “interpolate,” “extrapolate,” and “transform” are those used by Koestler on pages 84–85 and to which he returns on page 341.

¹⁴⁰ Comenius was a cover; Luboš Malinovský, who created the script and co-directed with J. A. Pitinský, was exploring the ideas of Søren Kierkegaard (the philosopher Petr Osolsobě was also involved), but knew that Kierkegaard's name would not pass the censorship.

reflected.”¹⁴¹ The audience shares in the ritual—the act of (re)creation—initiated by the performers and through that becomes aware of meaning.

Havel had explored the nature of faith (belief) in a letter to Olga in 1981 and concludes that “faith in meaning [*smysl*] transcends all relative utility” and that everything “has its own admittedly obscure meaning in relation to faith.” Without this, he says, the experience of nonsense (*nesmyslnost*)—the absence of meaning (*absence smyslu*)—would be unthinkable: “That is the case with so-called absurd art which, more than anything else—because it is a desperate cry against loss of meaning—contains faith.”¹⁴² Three months later he returns to the theme: “[T]he feeling of absurdity is never—at least not as I see it—the expression of a loss of faith in the meaning of life. Quite the opposite [...].”¹⁴³

The “absurd” (absurdita, absurdnost) was a key theme of the avant-garde of the 1960s. Martin Esslin, author of the classic text *The Theatre of the Absurd* (in which a last-minute sub-section of a chapter is devoted to Václav Havel),¹⁴⁴ observed that although “it appeared as though the Theatre of the Absurd—introspective, oblivious of social problems and their remedies—was the antithesis of the political theatre as preached by Brecht and his followers,” under totalitarian regimes it actually turned into “an extremely vigorous and barbed kind of political theatre.”¹⁴⁵ Havel saw the theater of the absurd as:

[...] the most significant theatrical phenomenon of the twentieth century, because [...] it shows man as having lost his fundamental metaphysical

¹⁴¹ Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, 343.

¹⁴² Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 64.

¹⁴³ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 73.

¹⁴⁴ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968). Havel didn’t quite make it to the contents page, although he can be found on 314–316.

¹⁴⁵ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 306.

certainty, the experience of the absolute, his relationship to eternity, the sensation of meaning [*pocit smyslu*] [...]. This is a man for whom everything is coming apart, whose world is collapsing, who senses that he has irrevocably lost something but is unable to admit this to himself and therefore hides from it. He waits, unable to understand that he is waiting in vain [...] There is no philosophizing in these plays as there is in Sartre, for example. On the contrary, what is expressed tends to be banal. In their meaning, however, they are always philosophical. They cannot be taken literally; they illustrate nothing [...] They are not overblown, highly compassioned, or didactic. They tend, rather, to be decadently joking in tone.¹⁴⁶

He found its authors, he wrote to Olga in 1981, “tremendously close to my own temperament and sensibility, and it was they who stimulated me to try to communicate everything I wanted to say through drama.”¹⁴⁷

In 1959, while working for Werich, Havel published an essay that resulted in an invitation to assist the director Alfréd Radok (1914–1976); an intense personality, half-Jewish, constantly under pressure from the Communist culture barons. Radok’s brutal and hazardous rehearsal methods, intended to crack open the crust of techniques and mannerisms under which an actor sheltered, were a shock for Havel (“the chronic peacemaker” as he describes himself). Radok, wrote Havel, was instinctively aware of the inauthentic gesture and broke the actor down until the living personality was exposed for him to work with.¹⁴⁸ Havel recorded that Radok’s “irrational procedures” included evocation, mood, feeling, and human contact. Rehearsals were not “building with children’s bricks”, but *theatre in*

¹⁴⁶ Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 53–54.

¹⁴⁷ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 102.

¹⁴⁸ Václav Havel, “Několik poznámek ze Švédské zápalky,” in Havel, *O divadle*, 322–349; also in Václav Havel, *Spisy 3* (Prague: Torst, 1999), 416–461.

action, dynamic, existential, pushing ahead, actual, living (Havel's italics).¹⁴⁹ It was through such arduous rehearsal that the theater director finds the moment of creation that unlocks a truth till then held in suspense; but it is a moment that the actor has to (re)create at every performance. With repetition comes the danger of falsification.

Alfréd Radok not only directed in Prague theaters, but was also (with the theater designer Josef Svoboda) the co-creator of the *Laterna magika*, a multi-media phenomenon merging film with live performance. Nowadays it is regarded as little more than a tourist entertainment, but mid-century it seemed to hold out opportunities to convey meaning through the juxtaposition of images. In its early days it employed many of the theater's young talents, including at one point Jan Grossman. Havel's 1959 essay (mentioned above), admired by Radok but at the time unpublished, was about the *Laterna magika* and probably betrays the twenty-three-year-old's ambitions to work in this multi-media genre.¹⁵⁰ After its triumph at the Brussels Expo 58, the *Laterna magika* was under political pressure to shun its origins as a variety show and become a respectable genre. Havel did not think that this necessarily caused a conflict: he regarded variety as a genuine art, an applied art rather than one of fine arts, but still a genre of its own that could also serve an educational purpose. It could however do much more; with its use of film combined with the live performer it had resources capable of reflecting, through contrast and conflict, the complexity of the modern world. At the same time Havel recognizes how easily this can slide into absurdity (he could have mentioned the Communists' disappointment that the show missed an opportunity to feature *Sputnik*), and that

¹⁴⁹ Havel, "Několik poznámek ze Švédské zápalky," 247; also in Havel, *Spisy* 3, 427.

¹⁵⁰ Václav Havel, "O laterně magice," in Havel, *O divadle*, 95–105; also in Havel, *Spisy* 3, 251–268. According to Grossman, he was co-author with Havel of the study (until 1999 unpublished), and borrowed some of its ideas for his article on the *Laterna magika* originally published in *Divadlo* in 1961: see Jan Grossman, "Výtvarné hledisko Laterny magiky a polyekranu," in Jan Grossman, *Mezi literaturou a divadlem II* (Prague: Torst, 2013), 1077 (note 1).

it needed to be anchored in a scenario, and the scenario in a philosophy. This complex (applied) art frees itself from the three classical unities of action, place and time, from slavish attention to external realism, and from ideological values.

As far as I know, Havel never was invited to join the Laterna magika. In May 1960, Radok was fired by the Communist culture mafia for his resistance to the excision of the centerpiece of the new program, Martinů's cantata *The Opening of the Wells*, and came close to a nervous breakdown. Havel venerated Radok above all other directors and continued to correspond with him even after he emigrated to Sweden in 1968. It was a correspondence he shared with Jan Grossman, a three-way discussion with Havel in the middle; although Havel's letters have survived, Radok's sadly are lost. It had always been Havel's ambition that Radok would direct one of his plays, and in 1976 this was about to be fulfilled when Radok flew from Stockholm to Vienna to direct Havel's *Audience* at the Burghtheater. But before rehearsals could start, Radok had a heart attack and died. In 2008 Radok's son, David, who had almost by accident followed his father's profession in exile, directed Havel's last play, *Leaving*, for the Archa Theater in Prague.

Ivan Vyskočil and the psychology of the audience

In the same year (1960) as Radok was fired from the Laterna magika, Ivan Vyskočil (born in 1929) invited Havel to join the recently founded Theater on the Balustrade. Vyskočil, who had studied at the Performing Arts Academy and the Psychology Department of Charles University, was interested primarily in the psychology of the audience. For Vyskočil the art of the theater lay in the relationship between the actor and audience, an encounter in an "empty space" that can be anywhere. Theater¹⁵¹ does not require a formal

¹⁵¹ Vyskočil later termed his genre of theatre *Nedivadlo* or "Non-theater."

building with a raised stage and technical equipment, but can take place in an improvised space which, without physical changes, can represent a palace or a pub, a forest or a city street. He trusted in the insecurity of the moment, a process described by Havel as “the desire to capture theatre in a state of birth.”¹⁵² Vyskočil had tested this with his “text-appeals [*text-apely*]”—a term he had coined in the tradition of Czech word play. The genre was really a form of literary cabaret, an expression he was reluctant to use. The resonances of American “sex appeal” gave the term a youthful, daring kick, but more important was the implication of “appeal,” which expressed a relationship with the audience in which response was an essential element. Vyskočil’s text-appeals were short, open-ended monologues, responding to the reactions of the audience in the informal surroundings of the Reduta jazz club, or after the scheduled performance at the Theater on the Balustrade—for in the 1960s the Balustrade foyer became a venue for late-night discussion of questions provoked by the performances. The writer Josef Škvorecký, at that time involved in fringe theater with his future wife Zdena Salivarová, recalled: “I liked the friendly atmosphere of the Textappeals [*sic*]—they had that atmosphere of conspiracy between the audience and the performers.”¹⁵³ For a while Vyskočil formed a partnership with the multi-talented Jiří Suchý, whose songs interspersed the text-appeals (or vice-versa)—songs about the ordinary everyday things of life, about their usefulness and practicality, but also about their wonderful and inspiring qualities.

Earlier that year Havel, writing “on the fringe of the young Prague stages” (the Balustrade, Semafor and Rokoko), noted the “variety” format of their programs, held together by a loosely conceived theme and by a humor that worked through abbreviation and allusion (Koestler’s interpolation and extrapolation). It makes greater

¹⁵² Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 46.

¹⁵³ Josef Škvorecký, letter to the author, September 30, 1984, author’s archive.

demands on the audience: “[I]nsofar as its principle is concerned, it can be defined as *absurd humor*, which means that, unlike satirical humor growing out of a mere deformation of the real theme, it grows out of somehow turning the real theme on its head, i.e., the reversal of reality into the absurd.”¹⁵⁴

Havel quotes Vyskočil:

Authors want their characters to be true to life [...] They are driven by the logic of ordinary reality. And alongside such plays I would like sometime to see or hear one that is completely different—different in its approach to reality. One that has a real, substantial relationship as the basis of its story. And to elaborate and update this central relationship in new situations, in unexpected reversals and antitheses. For example, taking a particular discussion *ad absurdum* so that through its inconsistency the significance of a particular attitude can be demonstrated and emphasised more clearly.¹⁵⁵

The philosopher Jan Patočka later wrote about Ivan Vyskočil’s performances:

That which has no sense [*smysl*] is not necessarily senseless [*nesmyslný*], absurd; absurdity is not a lack of sense, but rather a special kind of sense, it is the negation of sense, which takes place in the context of meaningful [*smysluplný*] action, of that which has sense and meaning [*význam*] as its aim. Lack of sense is the starting point of the human world, absurdity or nonsense [*nesmysl*] is its constant threat.¹⁵⁶

Patočka’s essay on “The World of Ivan Vyskočil” was published in an issue of the magazine *Divadlo* devoted to the theme of nonsense

¹⁵⁴ Havel, “Na okraji malých pražských scén” in Havel, *O divadle*, 122; also in Havel, *Spisy 3*, 305–306.

¹⁵⁵ Havel, “Na okraji malých pražských scén”, 121; see also Havel, *Spisy 3*, 308–309.

¹⁵⁶ Jan Patočka, “Svět Ivana Vyskočila,” *Divadlo* 1963/10 (December 1963), 72.

and the absurd. Havel's essay on "The Anatomy of the Gag" appeared in the same issue.¹⁵⁷ In this, Havel analyzes gags from silent film, noting that they are created where two conventionally acceptable activities are juxtaposed in a way that disrupts our expectations. In writing about silent film Havel was following the tradition of the Devětsil's interest in the 1920s, and the Prague Structuralists, among them Bogatyrev and Mukařovský, whose essays on Chaplin appeared in the 1930s.¹⁵⁸ Like them, he adopts Viktor Shklovsky's term "defamiliarization" (in Czech, *ozvláštnění*), a concept once current in the avant-garde but now outlawed in favor of Socialist Realism (which worked on the opposite principle of familiarizing, or conventionalizing, the work of art). It is defamiliarizing, says Havel, that drags reality out of automatism: "A gag is neither nonsense [*nesmysl*] nor the absence of logic, but the process of one logic rendering another one nonsensical [*nesmyslnění*]; its surprising quality stems not from the revelation of the unknown, but from the unexpected look at the known. It does not deny reality, but thinks it through; it does not contradict conventions, but rests on them and works with them."¹⁵⁹

Havel concludes his essay on the gag with the rather surprising claim that absurd humor can lead to the state of *catharsis* or cleansing. *Catharsis*, if we remember our Aristotle correctly, occurs when our emotions of pity and fear are purged by "an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude."¹⁶⁰ There is hardly any magnitude to a gag, so what is Havel talking about? Three paragraphs earlier he analyzed "the complexity of our time" and noted that "some natural human need to resist and oppose all of these

¹⁵⁷ Havel, "Anatomie gagu" in Havel, *O divadle*, 170–182; see also Havel, *Spisy* 3, 589–609.

¹⁵⁸ Petr Bogatyrev, "Chaplin, The Fake Count" and Jan Mukařovský, "An Attempt at a Structural Analysis of an Actor's Figure (Chaplin in *City Lights*)" in David Drozd, Tomáš Kačer, Donald Sparling (eds.), *Theatre Theory Reader: Prague School Writings* (Prague: Karolinum, 2016).

¹⁵⁹ Václav Havel, "The Anatomy of the Gag", trans. Michael Schoenberg, *Modern Drama* XXIII:1 (1980), 13–24.

¹⁶⁰ Aristotle's *Poetics*, trans S. H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang 1961).

pressures” led to absurd humor as possibly the only way of cleansing contemporary man “adequate to the world in which he lives.” A similar shock to the system was provided by Vyskočil’s text-appeals; in Jiří Suchý’s words, “Little by little a shiver went down your back, even if every now and then you unexpectedly had to burst out laughing.”¹⁶¹ What else is this but pity and fear? Socialist Realist art could not do this; maybe it could provoke (the wrong kind of) laughter, but hardly a shiver. Whatever the magnitude of its themes, it was incapable of bringing the *catharsis* that Havel claims for the humble gag.

In his early essays Havel is exuberantly aware of being carried on a rising tide of energy and experiment in the arts. His setbacks, such as when Vyskočil rejects his contribution to the supposedly co-authored *Hitchhike*, or Grossman locks him in a hotel room to finish writing his script, are trivial (even absurd) compared with those past and still to come. A photograph from this period shows Havel, dapper in a short haircut and smartly pressed suit, nonchalantly relaxing alongside a distraught Radok.¹⁶² However, although the Theater on the Balustrade became a second home to him, Havel was not a performer or a technician (though he took on these roles when required); and in spite of the daydream of being a film director, he never seems to have considered directing in the theater. Theater was, however, a place where he could write in a particular, creative way. Grossman later noted: “Havel functions as a dramatist not when he is invited or when there are plays to be written, but at the moment he senses the latent dramatic quality of his theme, when he realises that dramatic expression is the *only* and *necessary* expression of his material.”¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Jiří Suchý, typescript memoirs, quoted in Barbara Day, *Trial by Theatre* (Prague: Karolinum, 2019), 125.

¹⁶² Zdeněk Hedbávný, *Alfréd Radok: Zpráva o jednom osudu* (Prague: Národní divadlo / Divadelní ústav, 1994), 290.

¹⁶³ Jan Grossman, “Václav Havel, Protokoly” in Grossman, *Mezi literaturou a divadlem II*, 1159.

Havel writes of the period from 1962–1968 that “what the Theater on the Balustrade was for those few years can neither be represented nor explained [*se nedá ani zpřítomnit ani vysvětlit*]; that whole phenomenon was an integral part of its time and that time is over.”¹⁶⁴ For Havel, each theater had its particular atmosphere depending partly on the physical environment and partly on the “community,” made up of the company and the regular theater-goers. His respect for what he termed “conventions” formed a part of this; his relationship to them, however, was a little ambiguous. Writing at the end of 1981, he emphasizes their importance and complexity before anticipating “the rich world of their potential destruction.”¹⁶⁵ Where the proscenium arch stage is concerned, he remains conventional; neither Havel nor Jan Grossman were in favor of “experimental” staging, with the audience sitting on more than one side of the action or even moving among the performers.¹⁶⁶ In his experience, this violated the suspension of disbelief and prevented the formation of the “collective spirit” that unified the audience. In spite of—or maybe because of—his sense of being an outsider, Havel appreciated the social value of theater:

The first embryonic appearance of genuine socialness happens the moment those participating in the theater ceases to be a mere group of people and become a community. It is that special moment when their mutual presence becomes mutual participation; when their encounter in a single space and time becomes an existential encounter; when their common existence in this world is suddenly enveloped by a very specific and unrepeatable atmosphere, when a shared experience, mutually understood, evokes the wonderful elation that makes all the sacrifices worthwhile.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 102.

¹⁶⁵ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 106.

¹⁶⁶ Although his experience of the work of the Brno Theatre Goose on a String must surely have changed his mind in this respect.

¹⁶⁷ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 103.

Jan Grossman and the power of understatement

It was the pursuance of a writing career that drew Havel to Jan Grossman (1925–1993), a writer and editor who later became his colleague and neighbor on the Vltava quay. They first met in a literary context when Grossman was (briefly) an influential editor and Havel an aspiring young writer. Grossman was Havel's fourth and final mentor in the theater: "He was for me an authority," Havel wrote in the preface to the first collection of Grossman's writings, *Analýzy* (*Analyses*), "I liked his special kind of humor; his sense for irony and self-irony."¹⁶⁸ To the end of Grossman's life they addressed each other as *vy*, the formal second person. I am devoting some space to Grossman in this essay, not only because of his influence on Havel, but because, while researching this paper, I found out that they had worked together even more closely than I realized, not only in shaping the profile of the Theater on the Balustrade, but also by contributing to each other's writing.

Grossman is also an important figure in his own right, as someone for whom intellectual study and theater practice became inseparable; unfortunately, little of his writing has been translated into English.¹⁶⁹ In the 1930s he attended the Prague English Grammar School where he learned a gentle, humorous English that was not as inadequate as he pretended. He was still a schoolboy when he fought in the resistance against the Nazis; after the war he studied aesthetics and comparative literature while working as an editor for *Mladá fronta*. Grossman did not take up an anti-Communist

¹⁶⁸ Vaclav Havel, "Předmluva k sborníku Grossmanových textů *Analýzy*" in Havel, *O divadle*, 400.

¹⁶⁹ As far as I know, the only essays by Jan Grossman translated into English are a shortened version of "Kafkova divadelnost?" in *Theatre Czech and Slovak* (5/93 and 6/93) and "O výkladu jednoho textu" in *Visegrad Drama I Weddings*. Grossman merely shares a short chapter with Miroslav Macháček and Evald Schorm in Jarka M. Burian's *Leading Creators of Twentieth-Century Czech Theatre*, but my *Trial by Theatre* includes some substantial summaries, and David Whitton of Lancaster University provides an analysis of his production of *Don Juan* ("An absurdist *Don Juan* in Prague" in *Molière: Don Juan*, Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

position automatically; it was simply that any kind of ideology was alien to him. He approached literature from the point of view of objective analysis and, unable to compromise in his arguments with basically uneducated Communist critics, was expelled from the university and unable to publish.¹⁷⁰ Instead of taking refuge in an archive and writing for posterity, Grossman realized that there was another career open to those who worked with words—the theater. Nevertheless, it was not until 1954 that he found his way to the theater expression he was searching for—work in progress, rough and immediate, incomplete until confronted by the audience.

Václav Havel had read and admired Grossman's articles in *Listy*¹⁷¹ immediately after the war. When, in the brief thaw of 1956, Grossman was allowed to return to *Československý spisovatel* as editor, they came to know each other personally through discussions in the Café Slavia about Havel's first literary efforts. By 1958 Grossman had been thrown out of the literary world for good, but in 1962 he took over from Ivan Vyskočil as head of the drama company at the Balustrade Theater where, by coincidence, Havel was already working. The next six years were intensely productive on the Czech stage as a whole. However, the Prague Spring of 1968 brought not only outside interest but also internal tensions to the Balustrade Theater. With international success came political accountability. Relationships between management and artists became tense, and by the time of the Soviet invasion in August, Grossman and Havel had already left the company. Invitations to direct abroad initially kept Grossman in work, but after his passport had been confiscated (as a consequence of his presence at the clandestine performance of Havel's *Beggar's Opera*) he could direct only as an occasional guest in provincial Czech theaters. He returned to the Balustrade Theater

¹⁷⁰ One of Grossman's most virulent critics was the drama critic Jiří Hájek, father of Petr Hájek, who wrote *Smrt v sametu* (2012) in which Havel is depicted as the servant of Satan.

¹⁷¹ *Listy* (1946–1948) was a quarterly for art and philosophy edited by Jindřich Chalupecký.

in 1988; his work was as compelling as ever, but his health was broken and he died in 1993.

“We did everything together,” Havel wrote later, “we chose the actors, the plays, the directors, we sorted out the everyday working problems of the theatre.”¹⁷² In an interview in 1968, Grossman maintained that “Václav Havel [...] was not only the main author [of the Theater on the Balustrade], he was the main co-creator of the drama company.”¹⁷³ But it would be wrong to see Grossman and Havel as the perfect working partnership. Havel admits in his preface to *Analýzy* that their time together at the Balustrade Theater was marked by disputes over Grossman’s approach to specific productions, and that for a long time he admired Grossman more as a writer than a man of the theater; later, he said, he came to realize that Grossman was a theater director above all else. Grossman and Havel differed in much, including their attitudes towards their own writing; whereas Havel found satisfaction in the publication in 1999 of the plump green volumes of his collected works, Grossman was always moving on with new ideas, and notorious for extensive rewriting at proof stage.¹⁷⁴ And whereas Havel was to become a figurehead of the opposition movement, spokesman for Charter 77, and President of the Republic, Grossman, according to the theater scholar Jindřich Černý:

[...] never wanted to be either an engineer of human souls or the conscience of the nation. He never demonstrated for anything, he was never spokesman for anything, he always only just worked [...] After all, that was the only thing for whose authenticity [*pravost*] he could vouch

¹⁷² Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 48.

¹⁷³ Jan Grossman, “Proč odešel Jan Grossman?”, interview with Grossman in *Mezi literaturov a divadlem*, 1258.

¹⁷⁴ Although I remember his pleasure in June 1989 when he was presented with the samizdat edition of *Analýzy*. I also remember my surprise that this could be done in the relatively public surroundings of the Balustrade foyer (a sign of the times).

[ručit]; with that Anglo-Saxon understatement [věcnost] of his, which never had aspirations above its station [...].¹⁷⁵

The word *věcnost* is usually translated as “objectivity” or “matter-of-factness.” However, in one of his longest and most complex essays, *Síla věcnosti*,¹⁷⁶ Grossman repeatedly used the English word “understatement” to explain what he meant by *věcnost*; this has led me to translate the title as “The Power of Understatement.” Grossman published the essay in the autumn of 1961, the year he joined the Balustrade Theater as dramaturge. It was prepared as a response to a paper by the critic and dramaturge Jan Kopecký,¹⁷⁷ “A Transformation of Acting?”, itself an attack on Grossman’s “A Transformation of Acting.”¹⁷⁸ Kopecký identifies “understatement” (translating it rather oddly as *pod míru pravdy*) as a resurgence of pre-war Civilism and condemns it as being “in conflict with the basic developmental tendencies of society.” “What the Socialist world needs and requires from theatre,” he affirms, “is for a work of art to transform randomness into order. To illuminate that which is unclear and leaves an impression of chaos; to overcome nature by understanding developmental necessity.”

Grossman begins by referring to Kopecký’s paper and cautions him against generalization. Then he comes to *věcnost*, listing its

¹⁷⁵ Jindřich Černý, “Váňové” in *Jan Grossman: Svědectví současníků*, eds. Marie Boková and Miloslav Klíma (Prague: DU, DAMU, DLA Elekta and Pražská scéna 1996), 91.

¹⁷⁶ Jan Grossman, “Síla věcnosti” in Grossman, *Mezi literaturou a divadlem II*, 913-928.

Anna Freimanová chose the same title (I do not know whether consciously or unconsciously) for a collection of tributes to Olga Havlová shortly after her death. .

¹⁷⁷ Jan Kopecký (1919–1992) had a complex history. After making a considerable contribution to the Bolshevization of the theater in the 1950s, he redeemed himself in the 1960s with adaptations of folk plays. After 1968 he suffered the fate of other reform Communists.

¹⁷⁸ Jan Kopecký, “Proměna herectví?” in Jan Kopecký, *Nedokončené zápasy* (Prague: Československý spisovatel 1961), 158–197 and Jan Grossman, “Proměna herectví” in Grossman, *Mezi literaturou a divadlem II*, 906–912. Both papers were contributions to the 1958 Conference of Drama Critics; see Terezie Pokorná, “Neodpovídat na falešné položené otázky”, *Bubínek Revolveru*, 7. 1. 2019: <http://www.bubinekrevolveru.cz/neodpovidat-na-falesne-polozena-otazky-jan-grossman-na-konferenci-o-cinoherni-kritice-1958>.

positive values, above all its practical and social functions; *věcnost* is the world as we see it around us. He analyzes the changes he observes in a society that (following betrayal, occupation and revolution—my note) has lost faith in man and now believes only in the evidence of what is material, of what can be seen and handled. The essay is essentially a challenge to Grossman's ideologically-minded critics to come out of their splendid isolation and face the reality of everyday life, to leave behind the heroic gestures of Socialist Realism that are inappropriate when the actor is seen in the more intimate context of contemporary theater, illuminated by modern technology. To the modern audience, suppressed emotion is more intense than over-acting and self-control more impressive than histrionics. A terrible event becomes more terrible when the participants are wearing their everyday clothes.

Grossman returned to these ideas two years later at a conference held to discuss the growth of the small stages. In his paper, “The World of Small Theater”,¹⁷⁹ he notes that conventional theater, by modelling its work on the ideology of Socialist Realism, had turned its back on the real world in which each individual's relationship to society is based on a continuous process of confrontation between one's private world and the “whole world.” Now, however, new theater creators—young, energetic, and flexible—were entering the theater without traditional techniques and were finding their own ways of communicating. Their inexperience was, by definition, transitional. Whereas Vyskočil had wanted theater to remain “in a state of birth,” Grossman compared its development to that of young writers who must set themselves tasks, solve problems and understand their limitations (drawing an analogy with Chaplin's development of the gag in film). He defined his dramaturgical principles as the analysis of the problems that lead to today's conflicts and the choice of the

¹⁷⁹ Jan Grossman, “Svět malého divadla”, in Grossman, *Mezi literaturou a divadlem II*, 1095-1113.

material and means to express them. Individuals, involved in a practical way in the increasingly complex pressures of the contemporary world—a world of interpretations, of conventions, illusions, ideas, hopes, and fears—can come to terms with them through theater. Art can help man to disentangle these impressions. It cannot solve problems, but it can expose them. This was, in a sense, Grossman's manifesto for the Balustrade Theater, and certainly Havel must have been involved in its preparation.

In his analysis of his own 1964 production of *Ubu roi*, Grossman wrote:

The exceptional monstrousness, relying on hundreds and thousands of ordinary people, who by their normality in fact legalise and normalize it, and thus de facto rid it of exceptionality—that is essentially absurdity: on the one side a phenomenon we "naturally" consider to be unnatural; on the other side the rational system, custom, and convention which justifies this "unnaturalness" and makes it natural and ordinary.¹⁸⁰

"Absurdity is tragedy in the field of banality," he continues. Although he does not mention Hannah Arendt, in the context the allusion to the camps is clear. It is the *věcnost* of *absurdnost*—the matter-of-factness of absurdity—that exposes the horror in full. It is a reminder of the horror of totalitarianism manifested not only in the Holocaust but in the very recent reign of Stalinist terror, or in any society at any time where this process of distortion is implemented. Nearly two decades later, when Grossman's life and career had been further twisted from his control by malicious bureaucrats, he described:

[...] the inexorable march of an order which is not fatal, but which deforms a person into becoming not only a victim but also an agent in the

¹⁸⁰ Admired by Peter Brook in his book *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 78.

deformation of others, into becoming the upholder of that order. The order consolidates itself not by its victory over the victim but through the victim. The hangman does not turn the condemned man into a corpse but into another hangman. And the living organism, incapable of defending itself against the infection by not accepting or rejecting it, must swallow it as a foreign body, assimilate it, absorb it, and go on living with it and through it. A person fights with pettiness for so long that he himself becomes petty, and he can suppress cruelty only by crude means—which then cease to be the means and become the aim.¹⁸¹

Grossman was writing about the heroine of the 19th-century theater classic *Maryša*. In his interpretation, she becomes a perpetrator of the social system that has abused her. It was an interpretation for the era of “normalization” and a challenge to the audience, accustomed to see *Maryša* as an innocent victim. The recreation onstage of an absurd or bygone world and making it present “here and now” was intended to provoke a response in the audience, and with the response, a sense of responsibility. Grossman termed this effect *apelativnost*, a word he coined with a nod in the direction of Vyskočil’s text-appeal. *Apelativnost* is the quality inherent in a theater production that, instead of “transforming randomness into order,”¹⁸² invites a response from the audience to the questions it has raised. Grossman did believe in man, not as an abstraction but as an individual human being, involved in practical ways in the complex pressures of the contemporary world. Theater can help him/her to disentangle this world of conventions, illusions, ideas, hopes, and fears. It cannot solve problems, but it can expose them: “Theater, like art in general, should not only describe life but

¹⁸¹ Jan Grossman, “Interpreting *Maryša*,” in *Visegrad Drama I Weddings* (Bratislava: The Theatre Institute / Divadelný ústav 2002), 75.

¹⁸² See the earlier discussion of this citation from Jan Kopecký. For a complementary discussion of *apelativnost*, see Danaher in this volume.

help to change it.”¹⁸³ Grossman saw this quality in revolutionary theaters, theaters of action, such as those of Piscator or Meyerhold.

Věcnost and *apelativnost* together form a Möbius strip. The withholding of emotion is met by a response that channels emotion into action. The power of this *věcnost* was demonstrated in a production that Grossman and Havel worked on together for several years, Kafka’s *Trial* (1966); Havel hoped that Radok would direct the production, but for unknown reasons—maybe some instinct in Radok—this did not happen. Havel, when writing about the theater of the absurd, had described its impact on him as being only a little less than that of Kafka. Grossman, in his production notes, wrote:

The first striking feature of a Kafka novel is the inexorable matter-of-factness [*věcnost*], its sobriety and thoroughness of style [...] From the point of view of style the trick is clear. It is founded on provocative tension: the character and exciting event is seen through the eyes of an impersonal, non-participating, disinterested chronicler. It is presented seemingly without any evaluation of any kind; however, for that very fact it is indirectly evaluated as a common and banal fact [...] The chronicler distances himself from the story, but, by doing so, he enters it.¹⁸⁴

Grossman related this “distancing” to the Alienation-effect¹⁸⁵ advocated by the playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956); not Brecht the ideologue, but Brecht the man of the theater, whom Grossman always admired and on whose work he was an authority. Havel, however, always found it difficult to accept Brecht’s status—writing from prison in February 1982, he made one of his rare comments on the Socialist playwright: “I respect Brecht, but

¹⁸³ Grossman, “Svět malého divadla,” 1107.

¹⁸⁴ Jan Grossman, “The Dramatic Quality of Kafka?”, *Theatre Czech and Slovak* 6 (November 1993), 36.

¹⁸⁵ Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* (London: Heinemann Educational Books 1965), 106–129.

it's a cool and polite respect; frankly, I only like his non-Brechtian moments.”¹⁸⁶ (All the same, according to his agent Klaus Juncker, books by Brecht were to be found in Havel’s “den”.)¹⁸⁷ Interviewed by Karel Hvízd’ala, Havel evokes that distancing in his recall of early feelings of being an outsider looking on, and how that influenced him in the writing of his plays: “What else but a profound feeling of being excluded can enable a person better to see the absurdity of the world and his own existence?”¹⁸⁸

In spite of Havel’s deep involvement in the history of his age, he saw himself as an observer. It is appropriate that one of the last projects he worked on with Jan Grossman was the story of a trial—a trial that never reaches the courtroom. One could recall John van Druten’s play *I Am a Camera*,¹⁸⁹ in which the character identified as Christopher Isherwood is “quite passive, not thinking, recording.” This is most evident in the so-called Vaněk plays that Havel wrote when, in the 1970s, he was without a theater or professional actors and relied on friends and relations performing in a garden or living room. Ferdinand Vaněk, like Josef K in *The Trial*, says very little, although the action is seen through his eyes (or rather heard through his ears). As Havel says, Vaněk is not himself, the author, any more than “Isherwood” in *I Am a Camera* is Isherwood. But without Vaněk’s presence, there would be no drama, so he is both the trigger for the behavior of others and the witness of it. He is a dramatic device constructed by Havel, witness of the real world, to enable us to focus on a particular detail of our world. In this respect, Havel’s later play, *Largo Desolato* (1985), is a Vaněk play in multiple, focusing on a sequence of characters rather than on one (or on one couple). In conversation with Hvízd’ala, Havel uses the image of

¹⁸⁶ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 115.

¹⁸⁷ Carol Rocamora, *Acts of Courage* (Hanover, NH: Smith and Kraus, 2004), 55.

¹⁸⁸ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 6.

¹⁸⁹ Adapted from Christopher Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin* and better known as the musical *Cabaret*.

a probe, which leads him to thoughts about the theater as revealing “the hidden logic of things”:

This kind of theater neither instructs us, nor attempts to acquaint us with theories or interpretations of the world, but by ‘probing’ beneath the surface, it somehow inspires us to participate in an adventurous journey toward a deeper understanding, or rather to a new and deeper questioning, of ourselves and the world.¹⁹⁰

Conclusion

Havel set out on this adventurous journey thirty years earlier; we can follow him in his relatively simple and exuberant essays about the contemporary theater in the 1950s and 1960s as he constantly shifts around the concept of *divadlo*, looking at it from different angles, modifying his opinions. In the 1980s, no longer directly involved in the theater (or even keeping up with it, since he knew his attendance at a public performance could cause problems for others), he reflects on what theater has meant to him (first from prison and then again before his fiftieth birthday). In his last two decades he had little time to spend on the theater; for the period after 1989 the published collection of his theater writings can only produce three speeches and a few brief contributions in the form of forewords, memorials, and occasional notes. Even at the end of the 1980s, when he attended performances more often and could write for the samizdat *O divadle*,¹⁹¹ he scarcely used the opportunity. An excerpt from his program note for the Vienna Burgtheater’s production of *Temptation* in the first issue of *O divadle* explains the reason: “A dramatist without a theater is like a bird without a nest; he is deprived of his

¹⁹⁰ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, letter 104.

¹⁹¹ This should not be confused with the 2012 published collection of Havel’s writings with the same title.

very own home, the life-giving ground of that specific social 'here and now' from which and for which he writes."¹⁹²

And yet towards the end of his life, with no specific theater or company in mind, he wrote the play *Leaving*. It is well recorded that the role of Irena was written for his second wife, the actress Dagmar Veškrnová, as it occasioned a scandal when the National Theater refused to cast her and Havel withdrew the play.¹⁹³ We are probably right to presume, since he played the role in the film, that Havel wrote the part of the "Voice" for himself. That, however, does not necessarily mean that it is the author's voice, any more than Irena is Dagmar. (In the Czech script, it is simply *Hlas*, not "The Author's Voice" as in the English translation.) The Voice is a character like Vaněk, whom the audience will, erroneously, tend to identify with Havel. (I think Havel has an "alter ego" in every play: Hugo, Pludek, Mr. Gross. Foustka.) However, just as Havel expects the audience to question the affirmations and intentions of the other characters, so the Voice is also to be questioned—aren't some of the things it says a little trite, a little obvious? Or somewhat overblown? Or, on the other hand, too self-deprecating? Havel is again exercising his theater technique—putting the audience in an objective state of mind. And he is again writing for a case of friends and family—for a "living-room theater."

He himself said he was returning to his beginnings as a playwright, while at the same time: "The play's called *Leaving*, and by that I mean 'leaving' in the most general sense of the word. Time passes, everything that happens never happens again, yet at the same time everything that's happened cannot 'unhappen.' So all these moments pass us by in our lives, things 'leave,' yet at the same time new things 'arrive,' and of course some things 'return.'"¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Václav Havel, "Daleko od divadla", *O divadle I*, (Prague: samizdat edition, July 1986), 132.

¹⁹³ As it turned out, Veškrnová withdrew during rehearsals because of illness.

¹⁹⁴ Quoted by Rob Cameron in "Václav Havel, 'Leaving' but also returning," *Radio Prague*, May 22, 2008. Accessed at <https://www.radio.cz/en/section/arts/vaclav-havel-leaving-but-also-returning>.

For Havel, theater had to belong: to a place, a time, and a people (relevance, topicality). At the same time it had to distance itself. It had to bring people together (community, collective spirit). It had to be useful (an applied art). It had to be properly prepared (intellectually, emotionally, and practically). It had to be truthful (see suspension of disbelief), and it had to be free. Even when on a large scale, it had to be intimate and familiar. It had to be open-ended and interactive, offering questions rather than answers. It had to have meaning, meaning that could be grasped both intellectually and emotionally. Above all, it had to be a positive force for change.

That, however, is not to say that Havel put the concept of theater behind him. As a politician, he was always aware he was on the public stage. He was conscious of the audience, not as a passive Kafkaesque presence, but as a gathering of rational individuals. Havel respected his audience (who could change the world) and never tried to dazzle them by stagecraft.¹⁹⁵ He was concerned about the reception of his appearances because he believed that the performance could only be judged by its outcome—by the action taken by the theater-goers (diváci) who, individually and collectively, were participants as much as he.

I opened this essay with a scene where, unobserved, I watched Havel from the balcony as he set the stage, demonstrating that as President he remained a theater professional. In 1996, receiving an honorary doctorate from the Academy of Performing Arts, he reflects on a critic who claims that a serious matter like politics should have nothing to do with the frivolity of theater.¹⁹⁶ What a misunderstanding of the origin and meaning of theater and drama, he tells

¹⁹⁵ The world-famous stage designer Josef Svoboda created an elaborate mirror staging for the first production of Havel's *The Garden Party*. The story of how Havel and Grossman deliberately destroyed it is alluded to in Rocamora's *Acts of Courage* and told in detail on the DVD *Theatre Svoboda* made by Svoboda's grandson in 2011.

¹⁹⁶ Václav Havel, "Čestný doktorát Akademie múzických umění," in Havel, *O divadle*, 611–617 and Havel, *Spisy* 7, 642–652.

the students, of an art that has its roots in a spirituality fundamental to man's interpretation of the world. As though already preparing for *Leaving*, he muses on how some things come earlier and some later, how they repeat themselves and make connections, following the logic of space and time from exposition through to catharsis. What is politics but taking care of man in the world in which he/she lives? It too is a collective art with beginning, middle, and an end. Theater is a system of signs in time and space; politics too has its signs and symbols, its ceremonials and its diplomatic rituals. They help to address human existence, to connect one to the secret order of the world.

He reminds the students, however, of one important difference between theater as an artistic genre and theater of political dimensions. A crazy performance by a bunch of fanatics is part of the plurality of culture and even contributes to the space of freedom. A crazy performance by a bunch of fanatical politicians can end in disaster for millions.