



Václav Havel (1936-2011)

- Andrew G. Christensen (Boston University)

Playwright / Dramatist; Politician; Poet.

Active 1954-2011 in Czech Republic; Slovakia

Václav Havel was described as “Arthur Miller and Nelson Mandela rolled into one”.

His plays present tragicomic characters in worlds devoid of meaning, where language has been corrupted and where Kafkaesque bureaucracies loom over the characters’ lives and destroy those who do not conform. In his essays and through his civic actions, on the other hand, he sought meaningful answers to the questions of identity, language, and power with which his plays confront the viewer. The circumstances of Havel’s life provide a perfect foregrounding for an absurdist playwright. From the privileged child of an upper-class democrat family, to stigmatized “bourgeois” class enemy, to soldier, to successful playwright, to dissident, to political prisoner, to revolutionary, to president of his country – the course of his life was unusual by any measure; hence his famous remark: “if absurd theatre had not existed before me, I would have had to invent it”.

Havel traced his “outsider” approach in drama to successive experiences of alienation in his formative years. Havel was born into a prominent and well-connected family in the first democratic Czechoslovak Republic. As a gentleman’s son, he found himself surrounded by servants and laden with privileges which set him apart from the other children in the village school he attended. After the communists came into power, he and his family became “class enemies”, a stigma that turned his life of privilege into one of disadvantage. Unable to go to high school, he was apprenticed to a carpenter and later worked for five years as a lab assistant. During this time, he was able to find a loop-hole into continuing his education and obtaining a diploma by way of a night school established for working-class managers. Despite his bland official prospects, the young Havel led a stimulating intellectual life. He was an avid reader, particularly fond of the works of Karel Čapek, Franz Kafka, and T. G. Masaryk, the philosopher-president and founder of the first Czechoslovak Republic. In his teens, Havel also sought out and came to know several banned and marginalized figures from the pre-War Czech literary scene.

Havel’s entry into the official literary scene was a polemic one. The Czechoslovak Writers’ Union had recently established *Květen* (May), a journal intended as a venue for young writers. The editors of the newly launched journal sought to promote a “poetry of everyday life” — poetry which arose from the experience of life itself rather than the official imagery of life. Havel’s first piece of published writing was a letter to the editors in which he analyzed this goal and their failure in fulfilling it, noting that the journal was still bound to government ideology, voiding any efforts toward change. To his surprise, the editors invited Havel to speak at a writers’ conference, which would provide the precocious twenty-year-old an occasion for the first of many public acts of courage. In his speech, he elaborated on his published views and provided ample controversy for the otherwise

desultory event. It was clear that Havel's criticisms were aimed not only at the journal or the Writers' Union, but at the general repression of artistic freedom and the stifling of alternative views in the country.

After several rejected applications to study literature, drama, and film at university, Havel was accepted at a technical college, where he was to study public transport. Uninterested in his subject and unable to transfer schools, he left his studies and therefore had to go into the army where, ironically, he found a way to pursue his interests. With a friend, he founded a theatre ensemble in his regiment and produced two plays, both of which landed him in trouble with his superiors. The second play was co-written by Havel, who was making the transition from poet to playwright. When he got out of the army, he was hired as a stagehand at the ABC Theatre in Prague. It was here that Havel discovered his calling as a playwright and came to understand the power of the theatre as a social, intellectual, and psychological focal point.

Though only a stagehand at the ABC, he was writing theoretical articles for theatre magazines and working on his own plays. His first solo effort was *An Evening with the Family* (*Rodinný večer* [1959]), a one-act play in the style of Ionesco. It was not performed, but it raised his profile as a budding playwright and earned him a position at the Theatre on the Balustrade (*Divadlo na Zábradlí*), where he began collaborating on plays with others who, like him, were drawn to Theatre of the Absurd, anti-theatre, and other avant-garde trends popular in Europe. The Theatre put on the first productions in Prague of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, and Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna*.

Havel's own literary talents were rapidly developing in this period, seeing the production of three strong plays in the 1960s. His first solo full-length play was *The Garden Party* (*Zahradní slavnost* [1963]). The play follows Hugo Pludek, a young man who seems to be interested only in chess, whose father has arranged for him to meet a friend who, he hopes, will arrange a place for him in a nondescript bureaucratic institution called the Liquidation Office. The plan falls through, but Hugo proves to be a master of conformity and manipulation and therefore makes his own way through the confused structures of bureaucratic power and, in the process, loses his identity to such an extent that he is unrecognizable even to his family when he comes to visit himself at the play's end. Hugo's farcical closing speech on identity and the self also includes a parody of Marxist dialectics:

Me! You mean who I am? Now look here, I don't like this one-sided way of putting questions, I really don't! You think one can ask in this simplified way? ... What a rich thing is man, how complicated, changeable, and multiform – there's no word, no sentence, no book, nothing that could describe and contain him in his whole extent. In man there's nothing permanent, eternal, absolute ... Today the time of static and unchangeable categories is past, the time when A was only A, and B always B is gone; today we all know very well that A may be often B as well as A; that B may just as well be A; that B may be B, but equally it may be A and C; just as C may be not only C, but also A, B, and D; and in certain circumstances even F may become Q, Y, and perhaps also H.

Central to *The Garden Party* is the theme of the corruption of language by political ideology, much in the tradition of George Orwell. Hugo's success is due to his quick mastery of the meaningless language he hears all around himself. The characters in the play do not produce language as much as echo and refract bureaucratic jargon, socialist catchphrases, hollow platitudes, and mangled proverbs, constantly talking but never communicating. Language is also a central theme in Havel's subsequent plays, *The Memorandum* (*Vyrozumění* [1965]) and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (*Ztížená možnost soustředění* [1968]).

In *The Memorandum*, department director Josef Gross receives a memorandum written in a strange language. The new clerical language, Ptydepe, has been introduced in order to streamline official communication and therefore employs a practical morphology in which the more common a word, the shorter it is. Mr. Gross remains caught in a paradox in that he is unable to read his memorandum and cannot have it translated without authorization, yet to get this authorization he has to navigate his way through a new bureaucracy in which it is

necessary to know Ptydepe. As it turns out, Gross's deputy director, Baláš, was instrumental in the introduction of the new language, which he then uses to manipulate Gross out of his position. The action then takes a Havelian twist. Gross finally convinces a secretary to translate his memo, which turns out to be a pardon for a minor infringement which Baláš had used to demote him further and a recommendation that he put an end to the use of Ptydepe, which has proven counterproductive. Gross regains his position but is manipulated into retaining Baláš, who, bringing the action full circle, implements a new synthetic language, Chorukor, which, contrary to Ptydepe, operates on the principle of morphological similarity.

The corruption of language, the inability to communicate, the loss of identity, and the loss of meaning are all common concerns in the Theatre of the Absurd, and Havel's plays indeed show the influence of Ionesco and Beckett particularly. But Havel, unlike many other playwrights associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, faced not only the general metaphysical anxiety of modern life, but life under totalitarian conditions. His plays, therefore, have the added immediacy and anguish of modern man struggling with a meaningless existence made even more absurd by institutions of power which seem intent on robbing him of whatever pleasure he may find and restricting his freedom of expression. He observed a much more concrete, or perhaps systematic, breakdown of communication, for, though his parodies of bureaucratic language and Marxist dialectics are humorous, they are not far from what could actually be heard in communist Czechoslovakia.

For Havel the Theatre of the Absurd was both an expression of humanity's existential crisis in general and a means of coping, through humor, with the particular crisis of an oppressive regime. The kind of humor employed in Havel's plays has a long tradition in Czech culture, built up over centuries of oppression, yet fits nicely in absurdist drama, for, as Ionesco often claimed, black humor is one's best defense against the tragedy of existence. As for form, Havel was conspicuously interested in structure, composing his plays in almost mathematical or, as he said, musical terms. His plots are built not so much on the action and interaction of characters, but rather the interplay of words and ideas, themes and motifs.

A traditional point of difficulty in critical readings of Havel is the apparent conflict between the bleak worlds of his absurdist plays and the author's personal commitment to humanist values and interest in moral philosophy. He does not philosophize or instruct in his plays; he leaves the former to Sartre, he used to say, and the latter to Brecht. But he insisted that his plays were not nihilistic: "They are merely a warning. In a very shocking way, they throw us into the question of meaning by manifesting its absence" (*Disturbing the Peace* 54). Havel confronted the audience with a raw vision of life in the hope that they would make something of the experience themselves.

By the mid 1960s, Havel was being drawn into politics via the Czechoslovak Writers' Union, which he had joined in order to represent a progressive literary magazine, *Tvář* (Face), whose board of editors he had joined. He made another daring speech at a Writers' Union conference in 1965, harshly criticizing the Union as a stale bureaucratic entity which fettered, rather than promoted, literature. The speech seemingly won the approval of the reform communists, but these eventually bowed to pressure from above and banned the magazine, explaining it as a small sacrifice toward a greater good. Havel and the editors began their defense of *Tvář* and their attack on this model of politics, in which "a concrete evil was necessary in the name of an abstract good" (*Disturbing the Peace* 83).

An unexpected turn of events at the Fourth Congress of the Writers' Union led to significant political changes. Reform communists openly criticized Czechoslovak president Antonín Novotný, becoming the first to publicly express the widespread discontent which resulted in a split in the Party, the eventual replacement of Novotný by Alexander Dubček (as first secretary) and Ludvík Svoboda (as president), and the ushering in of the Prague Spring in 1968. Dubček's reform policies, dubbed "communism with a human face", sought to grant the political freedoms that so many in the country had been calling for. Havel took advantage of the political thaw by traveling to Western Europe and the United States, where he attended the New York Shakespeare Festival's

English-language premiere of *The Memorandum*. Not long after his return, the Soviet Union decided they could no longer tolerate the reforms taking place in Czechoslovakia. The Prague Spring came to a definite end with the invasion of the Warsaw Pact countries (with the exception of Romania) during the night of August 20th, 1968. Dubček was forced to sign the Moscow Protocols, repealing many of the recent reforms and increasing the influence of the Soviet Union. Within a year, Dubček was replaced by the hard-line Gustav Husák, who began the process of “normalization”.

The period of “late socialism” in Czechoslovakia began with a series of purges from the government and the media. Havel was among the majority of writers to be dismissed from the Writers’ Union and the many to be banned from publishing their work. In 1974-75, Havel spent a relatively quiet ten months as a worker in a brewery, which would become the setting for his later play, *Audience* (1975). The following years were not to be calm, however, as he became an increasingly public, unrelenting dissident. His first public criticism of “normalization” was in the form of a widely circulated open letter to president Gustav Husák, in which he called on the leader to recognize and take responsibility for the social crisis in Czechoslovakia, where citizens, controlled by fear, had become passive, withdrawn, and antisocial.

In 1976, Havel mounted a public campaign in support of an underground rock group who had been arrested on the false pretense of criminal activity. As more people got involved, the campaign took on an air of general protest against the suppression of political freedoms. Thus was formed Charter 77, which was, in Havel’s words, “a free, informal and open association of people of different convictions, different faiths and different professions, who are linked by the desire, individually or jointly, to insist on the respecting of civil and human rights in our country and throughout the world”. The group released a statement in January of 1977, the basic message of which was that the state of Czechoslovakia, in suppressing basic human rights, was not living up to its international obligations or its own laws. Czechoslovakia had signed the Helsinki Accord in 1975, but had failed to deliver the rights and freedoms which that document entailed. Havel and other Chartists were arrested on January 6, 1977, as they were driving a car loaded with copies of the Charter. The authorities were too late to prevent its release, however, as translations of the Charter and reports of the circumstances surrounding it appeared all over the world the following day. Havel and other Charter members were repeatedly arrested and interrogated. Despite the state’s best efforts to slander and suppress its members, Charter 77 had made an irreversible impact on the social and political life of Czechoslovakia and the entire Soviet bloc.

Although Havel was becoming increasingly concerned and preoccupied with civic matters, his literary career did not slow down in the 1970s, despite an official ban on his works. His first play as a banned writer was *The Conspirators* (*Spiklenci* [1971]), which showed his growing interest in the subject of power and corruption. Similar themes run through *The Beggar’s Opera* (*Žebrácká opera* [1975]), Havel’s adaptation of Jon Gay’s burlesque (1728), set in the world of organized crime in 18th century London, exposes as nonexistent such notions as honor among thieves and the dividing line between cops and criminals. Living amid the deception and scheming of two rival crime bosses and the corrupt chief of police is Filch, an “independent” pick-pocket who becomes disillusioned but refuses to abandon his principles and dies a tragic absurd figure, shouting out “long live the London underground” just before his execution. Nearly everyone else in the play turns out to be not as they seem, and one certainty about the world emerges: that everybody deceives everybody else. The drama of *The Beggar’s Opera* was not confined to the stage, as it had an illegal premiere in November of 1975. The authorities soon got word of the performance, however, and not only dealt out punishment to all participants, audience members, and their families, but imposed new restrictions on all theatres, adding that they had Václav Havel to thank for it.

Havel then wrote a series of one-act plays which, though initially written to entertain his friends, proved to be among his most successful. In these plays, beginning with *Audience* (1975), the author left aside his theoretical approach and drew from his personal experience. *Audience* is a dialogue between Vaněk, a blacklisted author working in a brewery, and his boss Sládek, whom the secret police have asked to submit reports on the dissident

writer. Sládek, however, does not know what he could put into these reports and, after several bottles of beer, asks Vaněk if he could write the reports himself – he is a writer, after all. Havel continued to examine the unsettled life of a dissident and the moral complexities it involved in *The Unveiling* (*Vernisáž* [1975]) and *Protest* (1978). *Protest* is another two-character dialogue, this time between two writers: Vaněk, the dissident, and Staněk, a writer in the good graces of the establishment. Staněk asks Vaněk to take on a particular cause – that of Javůrek, a musician who has been arrested, reportedly for making a joke onstage about a policeman, but evidently because the authorities do not like what he sings about. It turns out that Staněk's daughter is pregnant by Javůrek, hence his sudden humanitarian activity. Vaněk just happens to have a petition for the musician's release on hand. Staněk, however, says he cannot sign the petition personally. He, like so many otherwise well-meaning people, prefers to leave the dirty work of defending human rights to known enemies of the state like Vaněk and his dissident friends.

By this time Havel was also becoming a talented and well known essayist. One of his most important essays from the 1970s is “The Power of the Powerless” (“*Moc bezmocných*”), which John Keane has called “arguably among the most original and compelling pieces of political writing that emerged from central and eastern Europe during the whole of the Communist period” (268). The essay opens on a brilliantly ironic note:

A specter is haunting Europe: the specter of what in the West is called “dissent”. This specter has not appeared out of thin air. It is a natural and inevitable consequence of the present historical phase of the system it is haunting. It was born at a time when this system, for a thousand reasons, can no longer base itself on the unadulterated, brutal, and arbitrary application of power, eliminating all expressions of nonconformity. What is more, the system has become so ossified politically that there is practically no way for such nonconformity to be implemented within its official structures.

The essay's introduction is an obvious play on Marx, but there is a deeper similarity, for, like the Manifesto, it is a call to action, an impassioned yet level-headed appeal to the common citizen to resist oppression. Havel begins with an extended analysis of the nature of Soviet communism and a condemnation of the ubiquitous and venerated role of ideology: “a veil behind which human beings can hide their own fallen existence, their trivialization, and their adaptation to the status quo”. He then spells out his philosophy of power and dissent and elaborates on the spirit of Charter 77. He is not interested in simplistic rebellion, nor does he accept the attitude of victimization. The regime, he says, derives its power from the conformity, passivity, and service of common citizens. If an individual who disagrees with the status quo does not voice or act upon his or her convictions, he or she not only gives silent consent to the system but *is* the system. Rather, citizens must take personal responsibility, make existential choices, and dedicate themselves to what he calls “living in the truth”. Change must come “from below”, which will require a new perspective on power and the realization that good political systems do not create a better life; a better life creates good political systems.

For two years following the launch of Charter 77, Havel was in and out of jail, hounded by the secret police, and often under house arrest. In 1979, he and other members of the Committee to Defend the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS) were arrested. Havel was found guilty of subversion and received a sentence of four and a half years. His philosophical nature kept him mentally active in prison, where his preoccupation with identity and morality led to extensive meditations on existentialism and phenomenology, which he would record in letters to his wife, which were collected and published in samizdat form and abroad after his release as *Letters to Olga* (*Dopisy Olze* [1985]).

Following his release, Havel suffered from depression and anxiety about the various, and sometimes competing, roles he found himself in. His play *Largo Desolato* (1984) came out of this period of despair and from an inner struggle between Havel the artist and Havel the activist. The main character, Leopold Kopřiva, is largely based on Havel himself, though the play is a satire, and Kopřiva too much a caricature, to be purely autobiographical. Kopřiva is a philosopher who has run afoul of the authorities and who is beginning to collapse under the myriad

expectations of him from all sides. As he obsesses about identity and selfhood, he is visited by the police, who offer him immunity from prosecution if he will only renounce his works; by a friend who pressures him to stay true to the dissident cause and reminds him of his “obligations”; by workers who want him to fight for them; by his disappointed lover; and by a female student whom he tries to seduce with rum and philosophy. Like so many Havelian characters, Kopřiva begins to lose his identity, so much that the authorities and police are no longer interested in him.

Less autobiographical, yet no less based on personal experience, was Havel’s next play, *Temptation (Pokoušení* [1985]), which was based on the Faust legend. Havel had read Goethe’s *Faust* while in prison, followed by Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, and had come to identify with the figure, having been tempted himself by the authorities and the many traps they laid for him in the form of offers of exile, early release, or pardon in exchange for compromising his principles. The play features Doctor Henry Foustka, a scientist working in a government institution whose purpose is to be a beacon of truth and stamp out any superstitious or irrational belief from society. Foustka, however, leads a double life, as he carries on a secret interest in the occult. One evening while Foustka is performing an arcane ritual, an unknown visitor arrives – a hobbled, mysterious old man smelling of a matchstick factory. The man introduces himself as Fistula and, after overcoming Foustka’s skepticism and mistrust, offers his services for Foustka’s occult endeavors, which the scientist cautiously accepts. Noticing his new powers of intellect, Foustka tries to stay ahead on both sides of his double life, though his downfall is assured, as Fistula turns out to be an *agent provocateur* sent by the government.

Havel also continued his fight for human rights in the years following his release from prison, resulting in more arrests and several shorter stays in jail. In November 1989, a student demonstration on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the closure of Czech universities by the Nazis was violently blocked by police. The event was a catalyst which led to unprecedented mass protests against the government. Havel, already a leading figure of resistance, assembled the Civic Forum (*Občanské fórum*) from various opposition groups. During a general strike, Havel addressed massive crowds in Prague and, with the Civic Forum, negotiated with the Communist Party and agreed upon the terms of their abdication. This “Velvet Revolution” signaled the downfall of communism in the country, and when free elections were held in late December, Havel was elected president of Czechoslovakia.

In the first few years of independence, the Czechoslovak people considered their playwright-president a hero, but, with the inevitable difficulties involved in such a drastic political and economic transformation, his popularity began to fluctuate at home. President Havel generally abided by his lifelong concept of “nonpolitical politics”, but the transformation was not always smooth, and his insistence that citizens must accept moral responsibility for the past and the future of the country did not prove popular. His popularity abroad, however, grew enormously, which proved an invaluable asset to the country in the years following the revolution. After the division of the country into two independent states (to which he objected), Havel was elected and served two terms as president of the Czech Republic. He was instrumental in his country’s acceptance to NATO in 1999 and also its eventual membership in the European Union.

Since the end of his presidency, Havel remained active in humanitarian causes, working together with a number of world leaders and amassing a long list of honorary doctorates and awards. In a 2005 survey conducted by the British magazine *Prospect* and the US magazine *Foreign Policy*, Havel was ranked among the world’s top five public intellectuals. In the fall of 2006, he accepted a residency at Columbia University, which also corresponded to a theatre festival held in New York to mark the occasion of his seventieth birthday at which eighteen of his plays were performed. During his time in office, his literary activities, apart from essays and speeches, were curtailed, but he wrote a final, autobiographical play, *Leaving (Odcházení* [2006]), and in 2011 made his directorial debut with a film adaptation. Havel died on 18 December, 2011.

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Bibliographical note:

Havel's bibliography presents special, though not unique, problems. As he was officially banned from publishing in Czechoslovakia for a good deal of his literary career, his plays and essays appeared in various samizdat editions from the time of their writing until the fall of communism in 1989. I have listed the first official publication of his major works, with the date of writing, where different, in the entry. In a few cases, German language editions appeared before official Czech versions; I have, however, focused here only on the original Czech texts and their English translations. In many cases, the first Czech versions were published by exiled publishers in Europe and the U.S..

Havel's prose writings are difficult to pinpoint as well, as they are scattered across a large number of books, collections, anthologies, both in Czech and English. I have listed a single collection which contains most of Havel's work, rather than include the various other publications. I have discussed his most important essays in the entry itself.

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