

From the Archives

VÁCLAV HAVEL:

A SELECTION OF TEXTS ON THEATRE 1963-1986

heirs c/o DILIA 2021

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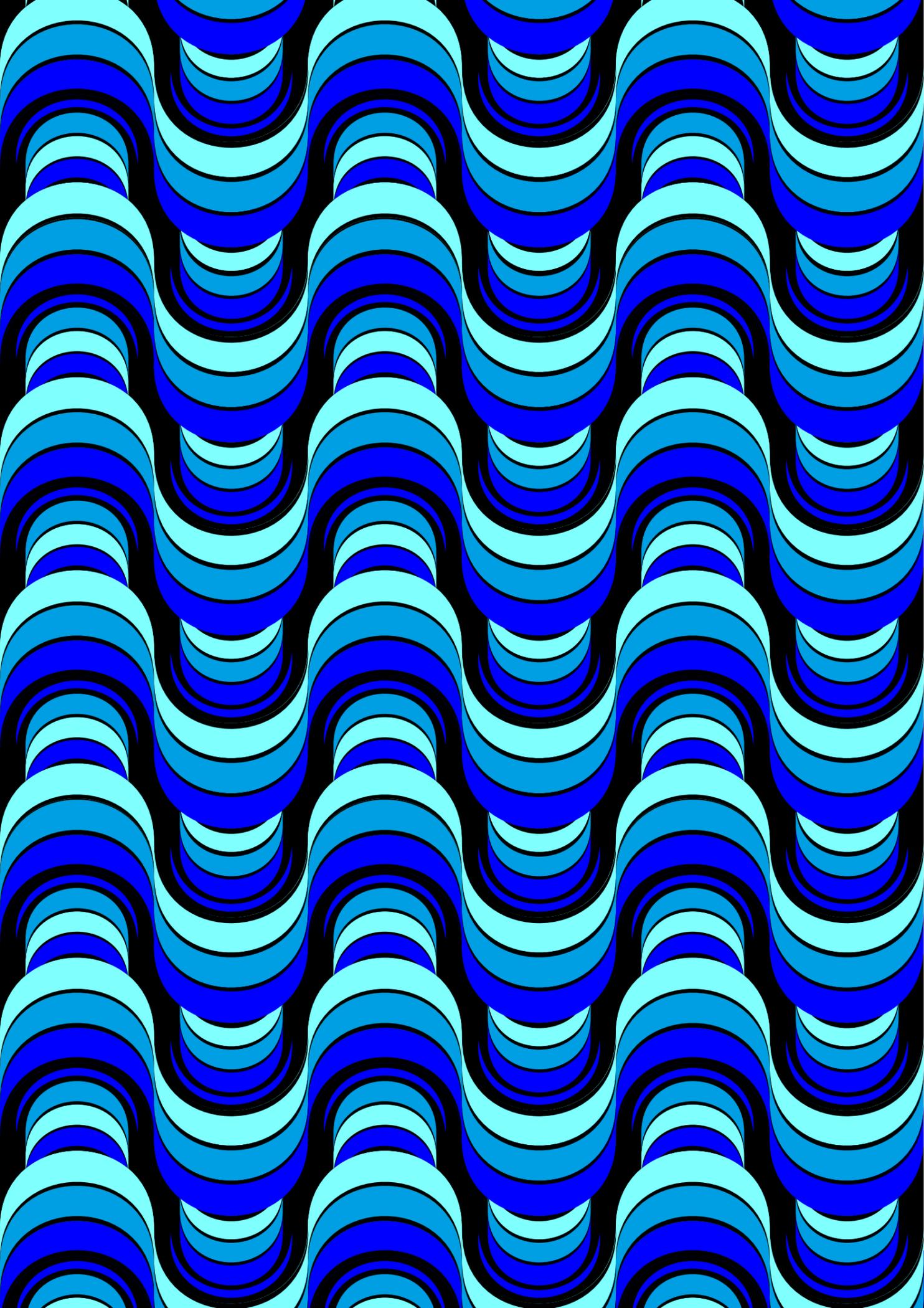
TRANSLATOR

PAUL WILSON



Introduction

MARIANA ORAWCZAK KUNEŠOVÁ



This year is the tenth anniversary of Václav Havel's death and to mark the occasion we are dedicating our *From the Archives* section to this most important of 20th century European dramatists, who combined his work in the theatre with the struggle for democracy and human rights, not just in totalitarian Czechoslovakia, but elsewhere as well.

All six of Havel's texts appear here for the first time in English. Indeed, until relatively recently, three of them were not even readily available in Czech. All of them were included in a volume called *Václav Havel: On Theatre* (2012), published a year after his death by the Václav Havel Library and edited by his long-time collaborator, Anna Freimanová. This is the first book to contain all of Havel's writing on the theatre, comprising letters, detailed studies of his own work, and theoretical and critical articles and reviews.

The texts that follow are linked thematically by Havel's work in and for the theatre. They span a period of twenty-three years, from 1963 to 1986, and capture the playful atmosphere of the 1960s and Havel's early successes in the Theatre on the Balustrade with the director, Jan Grossman (whose work includes a famous production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in 1964, which Havel worked on as dramaturge); the suppression of the Prague Spring when Havel was banned from the theatre and not allowed to publish; and the years of dissent. Havel's reflections on theatre are thus inextricably linked to political and cultural developments in Czechoslovakia as well as to his personal circumstances.

The first text is called *Self-Portrait*. He wrote this text in 1964 at the request of a publication dedicated to theatre news called *Divadelní noviny*. With a degree of self-irony, Havel remarks among other things on how he got his basic education by studying for entrance exams to schools that ended up not accepting him. The reason for this lack of success was his inappropriate 'class' origin: since he was the son of a wealthy Prague developer, the totalitarian regime in the 1950s made it impossible for him to study at any institution of higher learning.

This is followed by three letters (written between 1963 and 1972) to Alfréd Radok, founder of the Magic Lantern Theatre.¹ Radok was a generation older than Havel, and although he was not part of the Theatre on the Balustrade team, Havel had a great deal of respect for him and knew his work well. Havel wrote theatre criticism and had collaborated with Radok on two productions. In the first letter, Havel invites

Radok to guest-direct an adaptation of Kafka's *Trial* at the Theatre on the Balustrade. He spends a considerable portion of the letter laying out the artistic aims of the theatre, which unlike the large theatres in which Radok worked, was a so-called 'small stage'.² Havel also explains his and Grossman's view of the significance of theatrical performances as such here. On the one hand there was the official conception of theatre as a kind of 'industry' that cranks out 'cultural product', and on the other hand, there is what he and Grossman called 'appellative theatre' that appeals to, or addresses, the 'basic situation of modern man in the world', which they believed was absurd.

In the next two letters to Radok, who left the country after August 1968, Havel describes how he was labelled 'the bane of Czech theatre' and how he was accused of having written *The Garden Party* for the sole purpose of undermining communism. He also talked about how being forbidden to work in and for the theatre made his situation almost unbearable, and how people who were only slightly better off than he was turned away from him, a situation he manages to find mildly amusing.

Havel's letters to Radok are followed by a letter to his friend František Janouch, who was living in Sweden and was president of the Charter 77 Foundation, an organization established in exile to help dissidents at home. Havel describes their efforts to establish a *samizdat* journal to be called *On Theatre*, and he asks Janouch for financial support. The journal, he says, will incorporate two revolutionary approaches: it will be 'meticulously edited' to 'emulate a normal, serious magazine

1. The Magic Lantern is known throughout the world as the first multi-media theatre.

It is also an ensemble of the National Theatre in Prague. It was created by Alfréd Radok for the Brussels World Fair in 1958, together with the set designer Josef Svoboda and the film director Miloš Forman. The basic principle of the Magic Lantern is the interplay of film projections with live action (the combination of acting, dance and ballet, pantomime, and black box theatre.) The productions are always written and produced exclusively for the Magic Lantern troupe.

2. 'Small stages' were a typical phenomenon in Czechoslovakia during the 'thaw' that led up to the Prague Spring. Instead of presenting ideologically acceptable work, their aim was to capture the authentic, unvarnished truth about life, in all its levity, poetry, humour, and absurdity. The 'conspiratorial atmosphere' of these theatres, Havel says, made them centres of 'a wider social awakening' (Havel 1990, translated by Paul Wilson).



25th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution: picture of Václav Havel with words 'Havel forever', National Museum building at Wenceslas Square, Prague, 2014
© David Sedlecký

from the time when there were such things', and it will publish contributions from non-dissident authors as well.

The last contribution was written for a festschrift published by the Burgtheater in Vienna to honour the theatre's director and *intendant*, Achim Benning. Here Havel describes how, after the regime made it impossible for him to work in the theatre, publish, or have his plays performed, the Burgtheater (German) — thanks to the fact that Benning staged all the plays Havel wrote during the dissident period — became a kind of second home, though one he was paradoxically separated from by an impenetrable wall.

These texts about Havel's work in the theatre are valuable documents that illustrate the kind of atmosphere Havel created within, what stimulated him, and the themes that were important to him, as well as what creating for the theatre meant to him. Stylistically, the texts reveal Havel's sense of drama, irony, and the absurd, and his gift for calling things by their proper names. In them, Havel displays his skills as a theatre critic and theoretician (especially in the first letter to Radok). As the Czech theatre scholar Vladimír Just observed, Havel used the genre of letter-writing as a place where he could write 'brilliant essays on theatre, (Just 2013). It is also worth noting that Havel's interest in all aspects of the theatre remained strong even in his dissident period, where he continued, as he had done in his years in the theatre, to set the agenda for cultural life, for instance through his work on the aforementioned samizdat journal *On Theatre*.³

³. See also the essay by Lenka Jungmannová, 'Václav Havel vzdálen (i blízek) divadlu' [Václav Havel: Far From (and/Close to) the Theatre], in the book from which these texts have been taken.

→ ⁴. I thank Martin Palouš for this idea.

In conclusion let us add that Havel's work in the theatre strengthened his connection with all the themes and subjects that engaged him so intensely throughout his life — civic activism, politics, philosophy.⁴ As he said in his autobiographical book, *Disturbing the Peace*:

[T]heatre doesn't have to be just a factory for the production of plays. It is not just a mechanical sum of its parts: the plays, directors, actors, ticket-sellers, auditoriums and audiences; it must be something more: a living spiritual and intellectual focal point, a place for social self-awareness, a vanishing point where all the lines of force of the age meet, a seismograph of the times, a space, and area of freedom, an instrument of human liberation. Every performance can be a living and unrepeatable social event, far surpassing what it had first seemed to be. (Havel 1990: 40)

Our warmest thanks to Mrs. Dagmar Havlová for graciously granting us permission to publish the following texts.

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Václav Havel in 1960 © Horst Tappe/ Gettyimages

A Self-Portrait 1964

First appeared in *Divadelní a filmové noviny* 8,
1964-65, No. 1, page 2

If others take a writer more seriously than he does himself, it's the sign of a healthy situation. If, on the contrary, a writer starts taking himself more seriously than others do, it's a sure sign of his impending decline. That is why I have always been terrified of being asked, with a straight face, 'How do you create? Which of your own works is your favorite? What is your relationship with Ionesco?' and I, with a straight face, reply at some length, unaware that the questioner may simply be pulling my leg. In other words, when a writer loses a healthy awareness of his own insignificance and begins to see himself as being worthy of greater attention, it almost always means that he has also ceased to see the world in which he lives in its proper proportions — and that is a very bad thing.

← Caricature of Václav Havel by Adolf Hoffmeister.

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Perhaps this will explain why, when the editors of *Divadelní noviny*¹ asked me to write a brief self-portrait, my first reaction was that they were making fun of me. Upon looking further into the matter, however, they appeared to be quite serious, and so I decided to give them a serious reply. Should it turn out to be no more than a joke after all, it would mean I have a tendency to take myself more seriously than others do, and that my decline is immanent, something I would regret, since I have time enough for such a decline ahead of me.

So here goes: I was born in Prague in 1936; I attended primary school (during the war), then junior high, and in 1951, when I tried to continue my rather average studies in a grammar school, I was sent instead to apprentice as a lab technician. I worked as a lab assistant for four years, while studying for my high-school diploma at night. Then I applied to study chemistry, both because chemistry interested me to some extent, and because as a lab assistant, I had no other options. I was not accepted, however, and a year later I had lost interest in chemistry and sat an entrance exam to study art history. I was not accepted, and so I tried again, this time to study philosophy, and when I was not accepted there as well, I went to study the economics of automotive transportation, the only department that was willing to accept me. Foolishly, I hoped the subject would spark my interest. I stuck it out for two years, then realised I'd made a mistake and tried to transfer to the film faculty in the Academy of Fine Arts. I was not accepted. So I enlisted in the army where, oddly enough, I was accepted immediately. That was in 1957. Two years later, having risen to the rank of private, I was demobilised and applied to the Theatre faculty in the Academy of Fine Arts. I was

not accepted, and so I became a stage hand at the ABC Theatre.² A year later, I moved to the Theatre on the Balustrade³ as a stage hand and I am still there, having worked, successively, as a lighting technician, an administrator, a reader, and dramaturge. In 1961 I applied again to the theatre department at the Faculty of Fine Arts. Again, I was not accepted. I was accepted — for the external study of dramaturgy — in 1962, when I became dramaturge at the Theatre on the Balustrade. Clearly, I got my basic education by studying for entrance exams to different schools. It's a method I can recommend, with the caveat that there is always the danger that one might be accepted somewhere.

As far as my creative work is concerned, from the time I was sixteen, apart from various theoretical essays, I wrote mainly poetry, but I had gotten over it by the time I did my stint in the army. To my great good fortune, the time was not as favorable to poetic debuts as it is today, and so I have no need to feel ashamed — in the presence of second-hand bookstore customers — of my early forays into the depths of my own emotions. I first became interested in the theatre in the army, where participation in amateur theatre productions provided an escape from military exercises. I created the role of Second Lieutenant Škvoránek in a play called *September Nights*. Škvoránek is a negative character who aspires to the rank of company commander and I was so convincing in the role that I was sharply criticised for my portrayal by my company commander, and stripped of my rank of Panzerfaust operator and of

1. *Divadelní noviny* [Theatre Journal] was a newspaper founded in 1957, then banned during the period of 'normalisation' after the Soviet invasion and revived in 1992. Its mission is to cover events and developments in the Czech theatre and place it in the context of world theatre.

2. When Havel worked in the ABC Theatre, it was run by Jan Werich, a legendary actor from the inter-war period, when he helped establish the Liberated Theatre, one of the main centres of the Czech historical avant-garde. It was here that Havel first definitively embraced the theatre. His observation that the theatre is a 'living spiritual and intellectual focal point' in the introduction comes from his experiences at the ABC Theatre.

3. The Theatre on the Balustrade, established in 1958, became the first of the 'small stages' (see the Introduction) in Prague. The period of its greatest importance came with Jan Grossman's directorship, from 1961-1968.

the chairmanship of our Czechoslovak Union of Youth branch.⁴ This rare example of a primal and immediate response to theatre really did happen. Then I played Corporal Trojan (also a negative character: I was beginning to be typecast) in a play set in the military called *Life Is Ahead Of Us*, which I wrote with a friend, K.B., for our troupe, designed to incorporate as many friends from the troupe as possible. Today, the exact intentions of that play are still being discussed, or so I hear, in the appropriate places in the army.

After the army, when I failed to be accepted into theatre school, I began to take a serious interest in theatre, and from then on I have published occasional theoretical and critical pieces in *Divadlo*⁵ magazine. I also began to write plays. Ivan Vyskočil⁶ read something from my work and took me on at the Theater on the Balustrade. I worked with him on the play *Hitchhiking* and, with Miloš Macourek, I wrote a play called *Mrs. Hermanová's Best Years*. I was the sole author of *The Garden Party*. At the moment, I'm working on the final version of *The Memo*. I've also written a collection of typographical poems called *Anticodes*. All my current work belongs to the Theatre on the Balustrade which, in my opinion, and under Jan Grossman's⁷ leadership — has a real chance to do good theatre.

And that's everything. Not long ago, a Czech writer made manifest his affinity with Jan Neruda⁸ by quoting Neruda's declaration: 'All that I have been, I have been gladly'. I cannot say that of myself. I have done many things that, though the experience was valuable, I did not enjoy doing and would rather not have done at all. The important thing is that I love what I'm doing now.

4. A youth organization in Czechoslovakia run by the Communist Party.

5. *Divadlo* [Theatre] was a magazine published from 1960 to 1970, when it was shut down by the regime as part of the 'normalisation' process. It bears comparison with its high-quality counterparts abroad at the time. It published interviews with directors, reviews of books, and of plays both at home and abroad, articles and essays on the theatre arts and the humanities. The complete script of a play, either domestic or foreign, ran in each issue.

6. Ivan Vyskočil (born in 1929) is a Czech writer, playwright, actor, director, and teacher. He was one of the co-founders of the Theatre on the Balustrade and from 1958 to 1962 he was its artistic director. According to Havel, Vyskočil brought to the Theatre on the Balustrade a 'completely original imagination', 'unconventional theatrical and esthetic impulses', 'intellectual humour', 'erudition', and a 'sense of the absurd'. (See Havel, Václav, *Disturbing the Peace*, Chapter 2).

← 7. Jan Grossman (1925-1993) was a Czech dramaturge and director, and a literary and theatre critic. His greatest directorial achievements were connected with the Theatre on the Balustrade, where he was artistic director from 1962-1968. That period is considered one of the greatest eras in the history of Czech theatre. Among others, Grossman directed Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1964) Havel's *The Memo* (1965) and Kafka's *The Trial* (1966). After the crushing of the Prague Spring, Grossman left The Balustrade. He returned in 1989, and in the early 1990s, he staged Havel's *Largo Desolato* and *Temptation*.

8. Jan Neruda (1834-1891) was a Czech poet, essayist, playwright, journalist, and a literary and theatre critic. He was one the best-known Czech writers.



Letter to Alfréd Radok¹

'The Kind of Theatre We Want to Make'

August 4, 1963

Dear Mr. Radok,

Even though we agreed not to correspond over the holidays, I am writing to you anyway, on a matter that for me, and equally for Grossman and for our whole theatre, is of the utmost importance.

Not long ago, Grossman and I laid out some more or less detailed plans for our future work, thinking through both the immediate and long-term ways and means at the disposal of our theatre, and we kept coming back to certain things — some general, some more specific — that seemed to us essential. One of the more specific ideas we had was that, given our work and our aims, it would be immensely valuable if you were to agree to guest direct in our theatre for a season.

1. Alfréd Radok (1914-1976) was one of the most important Czech directors. In the theatre, he directed *Offenbach (Tales of Hoffmann, 1946)*; *Osborne (The Entertainer, 1957)*; *Chekhov (The Swedish Match, 1961)* and *Gogol (Marriage, 1963)*. Václav Havel worked with him on those last two plays. He also directed films: *A Long Journey, 1949*, and *Grandfather Automobile, 1956*. He founded the Magic Lantern Theatre and was its artistic director from 1956-1959. The political situation disrupted his career several times. He was forced out of the Magic Lantern, and had to leave the National Theatre. His films also fell into disfavour. After 1968, he chose to emigrate; he died as he was preparing to stage Havel's one-act plays at the Burgtheater in Vienna.

Both of us have already spoken to you about this many times, and at one point, it almost happened. But there was a rather improvisational air about it, based as it was on our personal relationship. We have yet to have a more substantial conversation about the whole matter. This is what I would like to initiate in this letter.

I'll be frank: I'm well aware that despite the friendship and the shared opinions that connect us, and despite your sympathy for the ambitions we have for the Theatre on the Balustrade, and despite all the arguments in favor of your working with us, you are still wavering. You've never made a secret of your reluctance — and I take seriously your reasons for it (particularly because I understand them; after all, I've worked for you before) and I completely respect them. I know too that your hesitations are not driven by any misgivings about us or our work, and that regardless of how you decide, your decision will be carefully considered and impervious to any efforts on our part to sway you. Any pressure from us would, by its very nature, be absurd, on the one hand because it would have no hope of success, and on the other hand because your working with us would only make sense if you did it entirely of your own free will, and on your own terms.

We all know this very well, and I mention it only to make it absolutely clear that *my aim here is not to persuade you to reconsider*, but rather to explain why we think your participation as guest director in our theatre would be important, and why we are so eager to have you. I merely wish to lay out certain circumstances and possibilities, to give you a basis for your thinking, the outcome of which we can only impatiently, if passively, await.

I'll start from the beginning: even though our company is only one component in a larger theatrical organisation in which there are other groups,² and even though we have an administrative director,

supervising departments etc.³ above us, and even though creative opportunities these days are neither ideal nor unlimited — despite all that, our situation today is a relatively fortunate one. We can do practically anything we want, and no one can essentially tell us what to do; we can put on whatever we like, and we can cast anyone we'd like, etc. In other words, we have the circumstances we need to ensure that our theatre will slowly but surely evolve — according to our best lights — into a genuinely excellent, modern theatre.

Will such propitious circumstances ever be repeated? Not to grasp this opportunity would be a sin, and we intend to work in that spirit, with all the risks that go with it. That is our general situation, our starting point, as it were.

But now the question arises: what kind of theatre do we in fact want to create? What are our specific aims? I shall try to lay this out briefly, but first I will state what our aims are not. We are not interested in theatre that is part of the cultural industry, that is, the conception of theatre on which the majority of Czech theatres (including the Prague Municipal Theatres⁴ are based. These theatres put on various productions — some good (if, for example, they happen to be directed by Radok), some bad (not everyone can be Radok); some serious, some light-hearted;

← 2. In 1963, when Havel wrote this letter, the Theatre on the Balustrade shared the space with the Pantomime of Ladislav Fialka, the internationally recognised mime, and the Black Light Theatre of Jiří Srnec.

3. A reference to the communist government agencies (for instance the office of the censor) to ensure the preservation of 'public order'.

4. Prague Municipal Theatres (MDP in Czech) was established in 1929 as an umbrella organisation for several theatres in the centre of Prague. Its 'golden age' was from 1959 to 1972 under the leadership of Ota Ornest, who created a troupe of actors famous for the quality of their acting. He also directed plays by many world-renowned playwrights, many in his own translation. Radok was working for the MDP when Havel wrote this letter.

some ‘problem plays’ that flay away at shortcomings and expose problems; some are merely escapist (let the people have some fun, and relax); some are original Czech plays, some Western; some classical, some Soviet; some have longer runs, some shorter; and that’s about it. The main thing is to have something on stage, with new productions in the works. Everyone’s happy when they come off well, and everyone’s upset when they don’t. Playwrights write, directors direct, actors act — and the theatre industry prospers.

It is against this conception of theatre that we would like to take a stand. We should be less concerned about whether a play succeeds or not, and more about what it was trying to say, and why what was said was sometimes expressed in a penetrating, arresting way and at other times, in a confused and unconvincing manner. What matters is not whether a play is light-hearted or serious, but — be it comedic or otherwise — whether it speaks to people about their problems, how it speaks to them, what impact it has on them. Our concern should not be whether the play is Czech or Western in origin, but whether it is current, whether it compels us to want to put it on, whether it captivates us with its living truth, which is not so much conveyed to us, but rather awakened and uncovered within us. We do not wish to tie our theatrical program to any given aesthetic — for instance that, starting tomorrow, we will present only comedies, or allegories, or chamber dramas, or musicals, or that our productions are going to embrace this or that directorial style. Our program should be grounded in *intellectual* rather than aesthetic norms. We should only put on plays that meet certain standards of urgency, that are intellectually penetrating, complex, challenging, and powerful.

Grossman calls the kind of theatre we want to make ‘appellative theatre’. What are we to understand by that? In theatres that partake in the ‘cultural industry’, the audiences arrive, buy ice-cream bars, wolf them down, take their seats, and watch the performance. Sometimes

what they see on stage moves them or amuses them; sometimes they enjoy it, sometimes they don’t; then they leave the theatre, either having experienced two hours of suspense, or two hours of boredom, or two hours of fun, or two hours of emotional turmoil, or two hours of ‘biting wit’ (uttering things we all know, but what a fine thing it is that they know it in the theatres as well!). Appellative theatre isn’t primarily concerned with whether people laugh or clap or jeer or are swept away, or otherwise moved. What matters is that the laughter, the tension, the emotional turmoil, the acceptance or rejection, and all the other things that people experience in the theatre, and probably always will, become a *vehicle* for a far deeper impact than one that affects only the tear ducts. Theatre should challenge an individual’s entire being, and impact it by uncovering and analysing hitherto unknown truths; it should provoke their imagination, compel them to think things through, arouse their interest in problems, encourage them to participate, to experience, and to work with others in the audience — but on a deeper level than the fleeting ‘participation’ that happens when people merely laugh. Of course it’s a good thing when people laugh; laughter is one of the most elemental means of communication between the stage and the audience, but it must only be a *means* of communication, not its final purpose. We simply wish to make theatre whose aim is not to produce so-called ‘well-made plays’ — everyone wants to do that, especially in theatres that see themselves as part of the general ‘culture enterprise’ — but rather plays whose aim is to communicate with audiences about things of vital interest to both sides, wherein the measure of a play’s quality should not derive from some general, *a priori* notion of what constitutes ‘good theatre’ (in any case, everyone has different ideas about what that is) but rather the incisiveness, the supremacy, the power and appeal of that communication between the audience and the actors, the power of the truths that are both sought for and found. We do not wish to base our choice of plays on the usual mix of plays domestic and foreign, comedic and serious, and so on, but rather on problems, themes, on intellectual

and creative purpose. Nor do we wish to confine our theatre in the straitjacket of a particular directorial style. A program based entirely on the style of a single director is somewhat like a program in which a fat actor chooses to play only fat characters. A directorial style, after all, is not the aim of theatre, but merely a means: its rigour is, in the end, always directly proportional to the rigour of the intellectual program it serves. It is not, after all, just a collection of skills that enables a director to artfully direct something, but rather a capacity for putting certain themes on stage.

This is all very generally put, but I think it is well to be aware of these things. In the given moment, and also in the context of various discussions that have taken place here and there about our theatre, our concern is for several matters: for instance, we would like, through our work, to demonstrate just how arbitrary is the classification of theatres into the so-called ‘small forms’ (cabaret, etc.) and ‘normal theatre’. People often take us to task for ‘having betrayed small-form theatre and beginning to make normal theatre’ while others praise us for doing precisely that — but none of them understands that we couldn’t care less whether someone considers a particular production to belong to one form of theatre or another. We are concerned neither with ‘small’ forms nor ‘large’ but only with an appellative theatre which, in formal terms, could be cabaret, or merely a ‘normal’ play, or yet again a kind of montage, and another time a form for which no pigeonhole has yet been invented. The specific nature of the theatre we wish to create with lies elsewhere than in form, and especially not a form so mechanistically conceived that it can be measured by physical dimensions (small or large). To make form — whatever it may be — a part of one’s program is always formalism. The important thing, after all, is what a particular form is giving form to. Intellectual emptiness can as easily take the form of a large play as it can of cabaret. But both forms can also be the form of something that is both powerful and of vital current interest.

And now, at last, I come to what this is all about. Certainly, there are many theatres that want you to direct for them. You’re a good director, everyone knows that, and everyone wants to do good theatre — that is, everyone wants you to direct for them, because you are a guarantee of a good production. I needn’t stress at this point that this whole way of thinking is typical for the theatre as cultural enterprise — if we have to put up a production, let it be a good production rather than a bad one: that’s somewhere at the bottom of this kind of thinking. We, too, would like you to guest direct with us, but after all that’s been said, it should be clear that our reasons come from a somewhat different way of thinking: we do not wish you to work with us because you’re a good director and nothing more; our concern is — as we believe — that you are a good director because you are supremely capable of addressing, on the stage, certain burning issues that vitally concern us (you are supremely capable of addressing things that may not be of such vital concern to us — but if you couldn’t do the former, you certainly couldn’t do the latter as well — one is merely a consequence of the other) and because what we wish to address on our stage are precisely the things that vitally concern you as well, we are turning to you. Bluntly put: *we don’t want Radok (that’s just snobbery), we want — for instance — Radok’s The Trial*. If we were only concerned about your name, about the quality you guarantee, about what you can bring to the actors (regardless of what you do), then we wouldn’t have spent all this time trying to decide what you might do in our theatre — because you could do anything at all. That, however, would demonstrate the same lack of principle as the ‘cultural enterprise’.

By this, I mean to say that what drives our desire to work with you is somewhat different from what would move any other theatre to make the same request, and I am not saying this because I want to elevate us above the rest — I don’t think we’re involved in any kind of competition here — but to characterise the nature of the whole enterprise more

precisely. Other theatres may be able to offer you much that we cannot — a larger pool of actors to draw on, more latitude in choosing scripts, more production money, etc. etc. As I know you, however, even though you may, quite rightly, consider such matters to be important — what is far more important to you is what we are attempting to offer you: an opportunity to give full range to your vision, an interest in that vision, and the need for that vision in the context of what we do.

In most of the basics concerning the world and theatre, you see very much eye to eye with Grossman and me — we've talked about this often — but even so, you and Grossman are such unique individuals (I'm leaving myself out of this, not out of false modesty, but because you can only talk about individuality when there has been some expression of it) that there are certainly many things about which you would not see eye to eye. The concept that Grossman gave our theatre may well have in it something you disagree with (I don't mean in the area of programming, but in the area of results), for instance Grossman's faith in the theatricality of material that is not in and of itself theatrical or dramatic (various literary genres), the weight he gives to the intellect, or rather analysis, in his 'appellative theatre', his belief in the theatrical suggestiveness of processes that are purely intellectual, etc. etc. — all of these aspects you clearly view with a certain scepticism. Grossman, on the contrary — and few understand your work better than he does! — would certainly not agree with you in everything. I think, however, that not only are such matters not an impediment to your working with us, but on the contrary, they argue in favour of it: I believe that cooperation could be an interesting adventure for both sides. How else can ideas grow but by confrontation with other ideas?

To sum up: our theatre has a particular program and this program, in very specific ways, *could be most powerfully addressed by you, and could through you, in certain moments, be most clearly enhanced by you* — and

similarly, this program, in connection with the social context, dictates the play though which it might be given a voice, so it dictates the director as well. That, then, is the basic and most important reason why we wish to work with you. The world around us — in our opinion — has created a certain complex of situations and themes, that art today, in its unforgivable indifference, does not see, and which cries out for revelation and expression — and as we know you (and your work) no one can express certain of these themes in the theatre more precisely than you. Our biggest concern is the problem, and the fullest way of expressing it. From our point of view, it would be an everlasting pity and loss if that problem and the person who is best able to capture it were never to come together. I suspect you understand what I mean.

Let's try to explain it from a different angle: all of your recent productions, thanks to the conditions in which you are compelled to work, the scripts made available to you, the troupe you work with, etc. etc. — regardless of what their general level is like (and it has to be said that every one of your productions, from *The Magic Lantern* to *Marriage*⁵ was an event) — seemed merely to come close to something that none of them were allowed to express fully. Beginning with *The Magic Lantern* and ending with *Marriage*, in everything you did — even though you came at it each time from a different angle and to a differing degree — you addressed something about the *basic situation of modern man in the world*. You were never able, however — for a number of reasons — to address it directly and completely. So far, you've been able to do that most completely in *Marriage* — and it's typical that you were given the opportunity to say something *about contemporary man* through a century-old anecdotal drama. Your working in our theatre would have meaning for us (and perhaps for you as well) if you were able to express

5. *The Magic Lantern* — see the first note in the Introduction. *Marriage* — see the first note in this text.

directly what all your productions have been circling around for years. Such a production could well have generally aesthetic values that might be lower than your other productions (our company, after all, is less experienced than a Prague Municipal Theatre company) and it might be possible to take them to task in some things — especially if it were to be measured against the perfectionism of a play like *Marriage* — but that would be a negligible circumstance, especially if your production were to achieve what I’m talking about. To shy away from that would probably mean unwittingly acceding to the criteria of the general cultural enterprise, where they talk, of necessity, about a general theatrical quality because they have no more profound criteria.

Please understand, I’m not making a case here for some kind of amateurism. Our theatre has already had some rather dire experience with that, and if it has any ambitions at all in the realm of craft, then it’s only to achieve maximum professionalism — but a type of professionalism whose measure is the precision, rather than the beauty, with which it communicates. The point is, I believe in the dynamic and dialectical essence of the profession: Václav Voska, with all his actorly skills, is certainly, in the abstract sense, a greater professional than Václav Sloup, for instance.⁶ And yet, measured concretely and informally, I firmly believe that Sloup, as Hugo in *The Garden Party*, will be in a certain sense more professional than Voska in some of the many conversational pieces in which he plays. The strength with which Sloup, in his performances, exposes certain mental processes of modern man, the mechanism of his thinking and behavior, the newness of this exposure and its exactness, all of that, for me, exhibits a far greater professionalism than the comfortable routines of theatrical expression in those

6. Václav Voska (1918-1982) was a star actor with the Prague Municipal Theatres for which Radok worked. Václav Sloup (1936-2014) was a member of the Theatre on the Balustrade from 1962-1977, where he played in several legendary productions: *Ubu Roi* (as Giron), *The Garden Party* (as Hugo), and *Waiting for Godot* (Vladimir).



Václav Havel and actor of Theatre on the Balustrade Václav Sloup (right) at an author reading in the Museum of Czech Literature (1969). Author: unknown

conversational plays. Professionalism does not reside in the degree of professionalism attained (Voska is, in his own way, quite flawless!) as much as it does in a kind of derivative of the work itself — in its potential to go further, upward, in a new direction. From that point of view, the performance I’m speaking about [Kafka’s *Trial*] could in fact be far more professional (even though less brilliant) than many performances in the Prague Municipal Theatres.

[...]

The question arises: what could you direct for us? Regarding original scripts, we have two of my plays, and I don't think I need to emphasise how delighted I would be to have you direct one of them — you must understand that it is neither immodesty nor flattery if I say that you are the only director who completely grasps and can present on stage that fundamental, absurd situation of man in the world that concerns me — but Otomar Krejča is doing *The Garden Party* (and he is really approaching it with enormous commitment, and we are grateful to him, even though there are certain pitfalls that I mentioned to you a minute ago by telephone). We want to do *The Memo* in a future season; I have more work to do on it. Miloš Macourek is also working on a play but so far, I can't tell you anything more definitive about it. And so, looking at what we'd like to achieve from the point of view of your possible participation, our thinking always comes around to Kafka's *Trial*.

No one — and I know this from my own work — who attempts to formulate a deeper understanding of the situation of the individual in today's world — can avoid the world of Franz Kafka. I believe that in everything that penetrates to the heart of things — from the philosophical essays [...] to your production of *Marriage*, there must necessarily be a piece of Kafka. Probably no one has captured our situation in the world — in general terms — more profoundly than Kafka, and nowhere else can Kafka be understood quite as precisely as he can only here. The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that this would be the material capable of making it possible for you to say, directly and completely, everything that shines from all of your productions; I don't think there is anything else in which you could be so completely yourself. I understand your natural fear of such a text, but isn't that fear, which is quite logical, really just a tax payable to this era, which has

→ 7. Because of the strict censorship imposed by the régime, people learned to find ways to express themselves indirectly.

accustomed you to expressing yourself in round-about ways,⁷ to project yourself into things that don't deserve it, and simply to do everything differently from what you would normally do? Isn't it necessary to break free of these restrictions and that treacherous pressure that compels us to transpose ourselves into the realm of the purely aesthetic and aesthetic experiments just so we can say some basic things about the world? [...] And in any case, does not the excessive pressure that *Marriage* has in its dramatic structure, *the pressure of the present day*, tell you that slowly but surely you can no longer be satisfied with anything less than a script that allows you to say certain things about this world. Wouldn't it be wonderful if that script were in fact Grossman's 'dramatisation' of *The Trial*? Nothing would give us more delight than if your most important production in recent years were to take place precisely in our theatre, which would, of course, be to some degree logical: it would fit well with the program I have tried to outline — with a theatrical program that does not depend on acquiring good scripts or good directors, but whose primary concern is to achieve the greatest possible intellectual power and immediacy. I can imagine that your production of *The Trial* would hold a very large mirror up to the times we live in — and it would be good if that could be done via Kafka, the same Kafka who today, thanks to the mad scramble to celebrate his anniversary, is threatened with total incomprehension. If certain people really understood him, they wouldn't talk about him with such enthusiasm.

Quite simply, no matter how I look at it, it becomes clearer and clearer to me that *The Trial* is the only way to go. It wouldn't be just an ordinary guest directorship; it would have to be clear why you, of all people, are doing it: because you're the only one who can.

Grossman's dramatisation of *The Trial* derives from a different principle than every other dramatisation and adaptation so far — because it derives directly from Kafka. Grossman understands, I think, quite

correctly, that Kafka is a natural dramatist. The whole of *The Trial* is written in such a way that you see and feel every situation directly. Nothing more needs to be added. All you need do is *feel* his way of writing, his tragedy, his humour, his absurdity, his reality. It's paradoxical: at first glance it seems to be quite clear and simple: every educated person knows what a Kafkaesque situation is, and yet apart from yourself, I have yet to meet a director who could put that on the stage. I can almost see your *Trial* in front of me now — quite real, and in real circumstances — just as sober, matter-of-fact, focused on the down-to-earth, full of the absurdity that *Marriage* has, hilarious and chilling at the same time.

[...]

One of the main reasons why you are reluctant to work with us is the actors. So before you render your verdict, there is one thing left for me to do: say a few words about our ensemble.

I don't want to pretend that it is better than it is. I think, however, that because of a series of optical illusions and accidents, it's better than you might think.

Today, it consists of ten people and soon it will grow to about twelve — we have an opportunity to expand the troupe and we plan to take it. As in every company, there are good actors and average actors, but I'll bet that the ratio of one to the other is better than in most other theatres. [...] They are all fine people, enthusiastic and committed. The problems that you have with actors in the Prague Municipal Theatres are unthinkable here.⁸

⁸. A reference to problems with actors in the Prague Municipal Theatre circuit while rehearsing a dramatisation of Chekhov's *Swedish Match* (which premiered in 1961). Radok was new to the troupe and the actors were not prepared for the intense, 'laboratory' work he demanded from them.

Personally, I think that with you as director, more of the company's potential would be liberated. You would do them a world of good. Often, as actors, they are still feeling their way and I can clearly see how you would open their eyes [...] I believe that after what I saw at your rehearsals, the way you worked unstintingly with the actors, and I think that nothing of what we want to do in our theatre can be done — as far as working with actors is concerned — in any other way but yours. I seriously think that your direction could free up this company's acting and prepare them and it seems so absurd to me that you have to work with actors who don't understand you and are incapable of taking anything from the work, while in our theatre there is a troupe that is literally waiting for something like this and would get so much out of it. But I'm getting a little ahead of myself. I understand that such matters have no bearing on whether or not you would consider working with us. I offer them more to round out the situation than as arguments.

Quite simply, we'd like you to direct Kafka's *Trial* at our theatre next February and March. We have a thousand reasons why we want this to happen, and why we think it would be vitally important to us, and why it could be meaningful to you as well. I don't know how you will decide; I no longer have any influence on it at this moment, but I firmly believe that it will happen, and I look forward to it.

*Many greetings,
Yours,
Vašek⁹
Prague, August 4, 1963*

⁹. The diminutive of 'Václav'. It indicates the closeness of his relationship with Radok, though he uses the formal 'You' throughout the letter.

Letter to Alfréd Radok

From a hitherto unpublished letter
to Alfred Radok, 1972



Alfréd Radok

The Bane of the Czech Theatre - 1

[...] As far as publishing is concerned, it's completely unthinkable here at the moment (and in any case, even if I were allowed to publish, I don't know what I could, given the state of censorship these days). It's even forbidden to mention my name anywhere other than in a politically derogatory way. Prisoners had to cut a page mentioning me out of the entire print run of *The History of Czech Theatre*. It's funny that at a relatively young age I've managed to get into the textbooks and, at the same time, to get cut out of them. Dilia [the official literary agency] is not allowed to grant performance rights to my plays, and yet they are still collecting performance fees from older contracts and for some time now, have refused to pay me the regular honoraria. By the way, I've sued Dilia — it's de facto theft — so that I'm defendant and plaintiff at the same time. Right is unambiguously on my side, so I'm curious about what means they will use to quash my lawsuit. For now, they don't quite know how to deal with it, being bound by their own declarations that a certain regard for the law ought to be maintained. To be black-listed along with the main counterrevolutionaries is a rather strange situation to be in: it's amusing to see how many people are afraid to have any contact with me — and the better off they are, by which I mean the more they have to lose, the more they fear me. It's another paradox: I have no reason to fear those who serve the regime, but they have reason to fear me. They can't do me much more harm, but I can do a lot of damage to them by compromising them. Obviously, none of this applies to my real friends; present circumstances have instead rid me of people I don't much care for, and has strengthened my ties to those I do. •



Alfréd Radok

Letter to Alfréd Radok

From a Letter to Alfréd Radok,
written in November or December, 1972

The Bane of the Czech Theatre - 2

[...] The constitutional congress of the Union of Czech Theatre Workers has just met. I've read the main paper that was delivered there, and found that it paid more attention to me than anyone else. I was branded as the bane of Czech theatre; *The Garden Party* apparently started the counter-revolution; I deliberately became a well-known playwright for the sole purpose of destroying communism and fighting for the return of my family businesses (so that clearly, after the changes I allegedly tried to provoke, I would have become a restaurant owner¹) etc. etc. The radio has broadcast several unbelievable stories about me; I was interrogated again in relation to something or other; a number of colleagues who are slightly better off than I am are distancing themselves from me in various ways, and so on.

¹. Among other things, Havel's father built the famous Terraces restaurant at Barrandov, Prague, inspired by Cliff House near San Francisco.

To be clear, I'm a long way from being in the throes of self-pity; these matters, in and of themselves, have not upset me and I'm taking them with humour. But there's something else that bothers me about this whole business: a kind of secondary consequence that it has for me, even though I try to resist it: it's making it hard for me to write, because I'm losing the feeling that it makes any sense. It's not just directors (as you've written) who create for 'this moment'; a playwright does too. A play is not finished, has not fully become itself, if it's not put up on the stage. It's not the same as a novel or a poem, which have a kind of inherent life of their own, even when they are still just a manuscript. A play is written — or at least authors of my type write them — for a particular situation, to address a certain social condition, under pressure from a particular social climate and for it; in short, we write for a specific audience. But I think I've already written about this to you in some of my previous letters.

It's true, that while I may have lost my domestic audience, I have not lost — theoretically — my foreign audience, so I can only pin my hopes on them. But that's very hard to do — it's like writing in a vacuum. My experience is that if a play is fortunate enough to connect with the specific and limited audience for which it was written, and if, in that dialogue with the audience, it manages to attain some kind of truth then — oddly enough — it suddenly begins to say something to different people in quite different circumstances, at a different time. Its truth is somehow so concrete that it is comprehensible everywhere. In any case, wasn't that also true of the greatest playwrights, like Shakespeare? On the contrary, however, a play that is written for some kind of abstract viewer, who could be anywhere, that is written for 'the ages', often meets with incomprehension everywhere, and history, in particular, will take no interest in it. Theatre, as you yourself know best, is a very particular, living social organism — and that applies to a great extent to the plays that are written for it as well: without that immediate

contact with an audience, a play becomes dry, abstract, and lifeless — and if it doesn't come alive as theatre, it strangely enough ceases to come alive as literature as well. In short, it seems that even plays need to have a 'home' of their own, and only then can they step outside the confines of their own backyard. Very seldom does a play that is written for the purpose of catching on beyond its own back yard ever catch on beyond that backyard. Perhaps it's hard to generalise, but I myself am beginning to feel that in my own case. Perhaps that's in part because I'm a kind of homebody that is not nimble enough to adapt to something other than what he's used to. But to be concrete about it: if some of my plays are still being performed in various places around the world, they are usually only plays that were first performed here — and so far, not one of my texts that has not been performed here has ever been put on anywhere else. And yet — and this is most curious — that possibility theoretically exists: to this day, as I've already told you, they haven't yet found a legal way to prevent Czech authors who are blacklisted here from enjoying a legitimate presence abroad. I can quite legally sell the foreign rights to plays that I am writing now, or that I have written. The only difference now is that I can't get any money for it — but truly, that's not the main thing. Perhaps all this is just unintentional, merely an interplay of circumstances, and it will change in time, but I can't help feeling that it's not just unintentional.

[...]

And so I'll move on to more concrete matters: I recently saw Ornest's² production of Shakespeare's *Richard II*. By the way, Ornest is no longer director-general of the Prague Municipal Theatres; he was sacked, just like all the other Prague theatre directors have been; nevertheless, he is still allowed to direct in Prague theatres. The play was very beautifully

2. Ota Ornest. See earlier note (text 2).

translated by Zdeněk Urbánek (there is not even a cyclostyled version of the text, so I can't send it to you), and even if the production is not very good (we know Ornest) it had a great impact, mainly because it's an exceptionally interesting play, and very relevant here now (it's a kind of anatomy of humiliation), and also because Václav Voska³ is good in the title role. If you get the chance you should look at the play; maybe through it, you could do Shakespeare justice; it's not very well known here, but you can certainly get hold of a copy in German. After the performance, I had a long conversation with Voska, who sends his greetings, and who told me now much he thought of you while working on this play.

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3. Václav Voska. See earlier note (text 2).



Václav Havel in 1976 © Bettmann/ Gettyimages



Letter to František Janouch

Václav Havel writes to František Janouch about *On Theatre*
4-8 March and 7 July, 1986

[...] Several friends from the theatre [...] and I are getting ready to launch a samizdat revue on theatre, something that is sorely lacking here. It should be thought of as a continuation of that excellent revue *Divadlo*, but it will, naturally, be more modest. Given that the work will be done by older people and not by young enthusiasts, it will need some start-up capital, because although we're not paying our contributors, we will still need to pay something to those who will have to run errands for us, do research, translate and the like.

[...]

Most important of all, I'd like to write at some length about this new theatre periodical. The whole thing is turning into something that's exceeding our greatest expectations. It was my wife's idea, but it caught on. First a few facts: it will be called *On Theatre*, it will be a thick semi-annual, something between a magazine and an anthology. The first issue (July) is already being transcribed, that is, it's in production. It has 200 pages and further issues will be roughly the same length. It will be typed out at first, then it will be Xeroxed. In many respects, it will be something new in the field of samizdat. For instance: it will be meticulously edited, which means we'll accept nothing 'over the transom'. Many contributions have been rejected, others rewritten in conjunction with their authors (people have got used to bad writing; young writers in particular have trouble with diction and style, because no one has taught them how). Every issue will have a theme; there will be regular departments, and a certain architecture and professionalism. In short, it will emulate a normal, serious magazine from a time when there were such things. We've brought in a number of authors from the official 'structures'¹ (they will write under pseudonyms), which is another innovation (this practice already exists, and only partially, among historians) and what is very important here: they'll be given the chance to write freely about what they know, and what the outcasts² don't know, and that will open up new horizons and make the whole enterprise attractive. We expect there to be great interest in the project in the theatres and among the general public, since no official theatrical review has existed for many years now, let alone one that is uncensored.

1. 'Structures' was a term used by the dissidents to describe institutions and organizations, including government, officially sanctioned by the regime (the theatre, universities, research centres, the media, and so on.) Within these 'structures' there existed a so-called 'grey zone' of people who quietly sympathised with the regime.

2. I.e. the dissidents.

As you must have guessed, I'm writing about this in such detail because, among other things, I'd like to get money from the Foundation.³ It turns out that if we are to maintain a professional standard, we can't get along without a generous grant. Concretely, some time ago I requested that you increase support to Kraus and Pavlíček, and that request still stands. Both of them deserve it, particularly Kraus, who has devoted three months of his time exclusively to the first issue. In fact, he did nothing else — the bar was set so high that there was no other way to do it. We gave him 5,000 crowns from the operating fund for the first issue, but we can't keep that up indefinitely. The problem is that, for various reasons, it would be appropriate to pay an honorarium for some of the contributions. Beyond that, there are occasionally extra expenses, for theatre tickets or for trips out of Prague, and so on, but those aren't large sums. In other words, would it be possible to send money, in the form of support for a fictional recipient,⁴ that we could use to create a small separate fund for this magazine? You could send it to my wife's address, who is acting as a kind of bookkeeper. Besides that, I would request a moderately large amount of support money to be sent to Andrej Krob, Italská 9, Prague 2. His wife is acting as an editorial secretary; she runs all the errands, makes arrangements, is Kraus's right hand, and she enjoys doing it (she works in the Theatre division of the National Museum). [...]

3. The Charter 77 Foundation was a fund that was created to support dissidents, mainly Czechoslovakian, in their samizdat and other projects.

4. The financing of dissident projects was often accomplished, for security reasons, by awarding grants to 'fictional' persons. The funds would then be used for a particular project. Havel is open about this, and the details of the new magazine because his letter to Janouch was going to be smuggled out of the country.



Achim Benning

Festschrift to Achim Benning

Contribution to a Festschrift to Achim Benning,
director of the Burgtheater in Vienna, 1984

For the whole of the 1960s — that is, from my beginnings in the theatre around 1960 until 1968 — I worked in the Theatre on the Balustrade in Prague, where I held various functions, from stage-hand and lighting technician, to secretary and dramaturge. But more important for me than those formal positions was the fact that for the whole time, I was part of the artistic organism in this small, ‘specialty’ theatre, side by side with my friend, the theoretician and director Jan Grossman who, as head of the theatre’s drama division, had an immediate influence on its artistic identity. I naturally took part in everything that had to do with our theatre, from building a company of actors, the choice of plays, the hiring of directors, to participation in the day-to-day operations. In other words, the Theatre on the Balustrade, throughout the 1960s, was something that could be called my ‘artistic home’.

It's understandable that, given circumstances that, for me, were so fortunate, I did not become the type of playwright who simply sits at home and writes plays (the way a novelist writes novels or a poet poetry), which he or his agent then offers to theatres. I wrote my plays surrounded by the intellectual atmosphere of a particular theatre, which was always the first to put them on, which in turn meant I had a direct say in how they were presented. The fact that they were then put on by other theatres in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the world is another matter. In other words, not only were these plays written in the specific intellectual atmosphere in Prague at the time, but they were written for particular actors and a particular stage, with regards for the possibilities and limitations they offered, and they were written in the spirit of a certain conception of theatre that Grossman and I were attempting to initiate at The Balustrade. They were not just an expression of my personal dramatic poetics, of my particular authorial tendencies, preoccupations, opinions, and limitations, but they were always a reflection, an expression and, at the same time, a constituent part of a particular theatrical poetics. I got used to following, on an almost daily basis, how they resonated with audiences, and in that process I was able to test and verify many things, and through that daily, practical contact with the theatre as an institution, and with its audience, I gained the first experiences that were so decisive for my future as a writer.

In short, I wrote for a particular theatre, for particular actors, and for a particular audience, all of which I was intimately familiar with.

After 1968, everything changed radically: I not only lost the right to work in the Theatre on the Balustrade, but in any theatre in the country, and as an author, I was banned.

It's clear that thanks to the way in which I was shaped as a dramatic author, and with regard to the conditions and the kind of work that



Pavel Kohout



Pavel Landovský in 2011 © David Sedlecký

I had become accustomed to until that point, those radical changes represented a far greater handicap to my writing than they would have had I been the kind of writer who writes at home and then sends his work somewhere, without being connected in any immediate way with the particular artistic milieu in which his work was to be presented. And that's what happened: I found it very hard to write; I had the feeling that my writing made no sense; I felt myself in a vacuum because I did not know for whom I was actually writing. I think that reflected on my work: the first play written in the new circumstance (*The Conspirators*) gave me more trouble than any of the plays I'd written before, and at the same time, I like it the least. It is somehow 'dry' and contrived, lifeless, with no tension, no humour, and it's clear that it was written in a kind of vacuum.

But why am I writing about this on this occasion? Because a strange thing happened. As time has gone on, I've been able to find a new 'artistic home'. An artistic home away from home.

As far as I know, all my plays have been performed in Vienna (except for the one I've just mentioned, which is no great loss), albeit in various theatres and with varying success. For this and other reasons I've long had an intimate cultural relationship to Vienna. I have felt in the city's intellectual climate (certainly thanks to history, that is, to the long co-existence of our two cities in the same political state) a certain nearness to the intellectual climate of Prague and a better understanding of the things that have been created in Prague. I rather immodestly might paraphrase Mozart's well-known declaration: 'My Praguers understand me' and say: 'My Viennese understand me'. And so if I have long had an intimate relationship with Vienna as a cultural centre, it was only natural that I gradually found my new 'artistic home' there as well.

The Burgtheater under the direction of Mr. Benning has become that home. Not only has everything I've written since 1975 (including the

very strange and exclusive play, *The Mountain Hotel*, that no other theatre, as far as I know, has dared to do), been premiered there, but they also put on one of my older plays (*The Memo*) which had its new Vienna remount almost twenty years after its first presentation in Vienna. I feel close to the Burgtheater for other reasons as well: for example, for engaging and presenting plays by my friends Pavel Kohout and Pavel Landovský;¹ or presenting work by another friend, Tom Stoppard; and not least because the branch of Amnesty International in the theatre kept a watchful eye on me when I was in prison.

I have no doubt that most of the credit for all this goes to Mr. Benning, and most of all, I have him to thank for the fact that, in my current circumstances, I have something like ‘my own theatre’, my mother stage, that I can almost consider myself its house author, and which I can consider my new — albeit distant — ‘home’.

My relationship to this new home of mine is, it is true, very odd. As far as I can remember, I’ve never been in the Burgtheater, and of course I’ve never seen any of my plays performed there; I have never met Mr. Benning in person; I have no direct personal influence on the work of the theatre; and naturally, of course, I haven’t had any influence on how my plays were presented.

So, it’s a genuinely odd kind of home, shrouded from me in a fog of mystery, separated from me by an insurmountable border, so that in a sense, I’m infinitely far away, and at the same time, very close.

1. Pavel Kohout (b. 1928) is a poet, writer, and playwright, and was one of the most outstanding figures in the Prague Spring. Pavel Landovský (1936–2014) was an actor and playwright. Both were dissidents and organisers of the human rights manifesto, Charter 77. Kohout was a co-author of the Charter’s text; Landovský played a role in evading the state secret police and getting copies of the charter in the mail. Both men were forced into exile in Austria in the late 1970s, where they settled down. Kohout continued to write, Landovský acted in the Burgtheater. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, they both returned to Prague.

But we live in a strange time, and that private strangeness of mine — that I have an ‘artistic home’ in which I’ve never been and that I cannot visit — is merely an immediate product of that strange period.

Regardless of how curious this situation is, I must say I’m glad that things are at least as they are, not just because my awareness that a distant, but nevertheless a ‘mother stage’ exists makes it a little easier for me to write, but above all because precisely the strangeness of this situation confirms the hopeful fact that even people who have been so long and so drastically separated by the absurd curtain of today’s ‘theatrum mundi’ still have things to say to each other, can still understand one another, and can even work together in some way.

Mr. Benning is leaving the Burgtheater. Others, more qualified than I, will be able to evaluate that era and his impact on it. I would only ask that when they do evaluate it, they remember that in Prague, there lives a playwright who has every reason to be grateful, because even with the distance between them, Mr. Benning has given back to him something that, in the course of history, was taken away from him, and that without that, he would have found it even more difficult to write than he does.

Prague, August 13, 1984

