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Working with Havel

Swans Commentary, 13 February 2012.

In the spring of 2004, I was invited to Prague to direct Vaclav Havel's *Temptation* at the National Theatre in the Czech Republic. I had directed in a number of European cities but there was something of a frisson about going to Prague and working with the ex-president of the Czech Republic, whom I remembered most vividly as the Great Dissenter against Soviet rule in a city I had often visualized but never actually seen.

On the day Vaclav Havel was scheduled to attend the first-act run-through of his play there was a palpable sense of hysteria in the air. The actors, all highly experienced members of a robust and respected permanent company that performed regularly before the upper echelons of Prague society, had never played in a scrappy rehearsal room for an internationally lauded political icon and ex-president of the Czech Republic surrounded by secret service men. Lines were muffed, moves went awry, cues forgotten, and a sense of a 'Royal Command Performance' hung in the air. After an hour or so, the torture was over and the actors sat circled around an appreciative, avuncular, and soft-spoken playwright, being gently massaged with compliments and diverted by anecdotes about his numerous incarcerations, the play's inception, and the thrill of being back in the midst of working actors after an absence of some twenty-five years.

Temptation deals with a diabolical pact between a subversive scientist and an odoriferous necromancer who turns out to be a government informer. It was gestated during various imprisonments and went through a torturous incubation period. While in prison, instead of being given the usual batch of propagandist Communist literature, Havel had been handed Goethe's *Faust*, then Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, and after that a battered copy of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. It was as if inexplicable dark forces were luring him towards the Faustian theme. After several false starts, he wrote the play in ten days – one scene each day – which was highly uncharacteristic as the playwright usually marinated a play for two, sometimes three years.

'Strange things happened to me,' Havel said. 'When I finished, I was so exhausted I almost collapsed. I fell down the stairs and injured my head. I caught flu and my temperature shot up dangerously high; I couldn't get out of bed, I had no medicine, I couldn't call a doctor. . . . There were moments when I felt myself almost physiologically tempted by the devil.' Of all his works, *Temptation* is the only one that unquestionably exudes a strong whiff of fire and brimstone.

The play was banned in the mid-1980s when it was first written and has had a chequered life since then. Although the Czech Republic's most recognizable playwright, Havel had had only one play staged at the National Theatre in Prague – *The Garden Party* in 1990. *Temptation,* which opened on 13 May 2004, was only the second. When I was asked what the play was 'really about' I referred people to the following quotation from Havel:

> All my adult life, I was branded by officials as 'an exponent of the right' who wanted to bring capitalism back to our country. Today – at a ripe old age – I am suspected of being left wing, if not of harbouring out and out socialist tendencies. What, then, is my real position? First and foremost, I have never espoused any ideology, dogma, or doctrine – left wing, right wing, or any other closed, ready-made system of presuppositions about the world. On the contrary, I have tried to think independently, using my own powers of reason, and I have always vigorously resisted attempts to pigeonhole me.

For Havel the enemy was always dogma, whatever its ideological flavour and, along with that, a distrust of rationality that too often is used only to prop up one set of absolutes against another.

On the night of the premiere there was an agitated buzz throughout the auditorium of the National Theatre, as we had all been

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informed that Havel would be in attendance. His friends and well-wishers, who knew how important it was for his status as a playwright to be affirmed, had crowded out the stalls. One hour or so before the start of the show we were told that because of a sudden complication in his health his doctor had forbidden him to attend. There had been three previous occasions when it was announced he would be visiting one particular rehearsal or another, but in all of those instances poor health caused him to cancel out.

Despite the absence of the playwright – or perhaps because of it – the final curtain was greeted with a tumultuous ovation and some twelve curtain calls. We were all somewhat taken aback by the fervour but gradually realized this was not so much an appreciation of the play and the acting company as it was an obstreperous recognition of the fact that, apart from having been president for some fifteen years, Vaclav Havel was also the national playwright and the one whose works during the occupation had kept the image of an oppressed Czech populace before the eyes of the world.

In the hurly-burly that followed the Velvet Revolution in 1989, one sometimes forgets that Havel, the charismatic dissident, was essentially a playwright who came out the absurdist tradition of the 1960s. Ironically, his political achievements engulfed his reputation as a playwright and, because so many of his plays were thinly veiled attacks on the Communist regime, many of them seem to belong to a far distant past. Being too much in the thick of current events sometimes ages writers before their time.

Temptation, although inspired by the Soviet occupation, has the advantage of being a largely symbolic and politically non-specific play in which black magic and necromancy (which originally stood for political dissent) can just as easily substitute for almost any kind of heterodoxy. But trimming down the ex-president's script to accommodate the new dispensation was a little like taking a blue pencil to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Havel, reversing Teddy Roosevelt's dictum about 'speaking softly' and 'carrying a big stick', tends to speak softly and carry no stick whatsoever, but his dialectic is so cogent it often persuades antagonists to alter their positions.

In the West, Havel, like Nelson Mandela with whom he is often compared, was considered an anomaly among politicians: a political leader who was also a writer, an artist, and an intellectual – a combination that rarely occurs in politics. On his home ground he was far less of a sacred cow. His humanitarian rhetoric on the relationship between governance and civil liberty plays strongly in the West, but in Prague he was often seen as a hectoring moralizer who had lost touch with the more mundane problems of the Czech people. It may be that after fifteen years of national ubiquity he had simply outstayed his welcome. By the 1980s his approval rating had slipped to 52 per cent after a high of 82 per cent only two years earlier.

Shortly after the death of his first wife in 1996, he became deathly ill with lung cancer and after the removal of two small tumours from his right lung was not expected to survive. Dagmar Veskrenova, a close friend and popular film and stage actress who devoted herself selflessly to his rehabilitation, nursed him back to health. Barely a year later, after his release from hospital, Dagmar became the second Mrs Havel – a remarriage that ruffled the sensibilities of many who felt there was too great an intellectual disparity between the president and his new bride. This indicates the intimate nature of the relationship between Havel and his fellow Czechs. They felt no compunction about advising him on his love life or telling him to bugger off when he became over-philosophical. But beneath these cavils there was a deeply entrenched bedrock of love and affection for the man who had made horrific sacrifices for his country.

Havel's place in all the cultural and political changes reshaping the Czech Republic was somewhat problematic. At seventy he was simply too young to fade into the woodwork, but too ill and powerless to be an active political force. He was gradually making that subtle transition from politician to

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statesman. (A presidential library, in the tradition of American presidents – Kennedy, Nixon, Reagan – was actually being organized for him.) Among artists and intellectuals, after acknowledging his enormous contributions to the country's liberation from the Soviets, his standing as a playwright tended to be disparaged. But one conveniently forgets that it is the length and breadth of his personal sacrifice that made it possible for new generations of writers to emerge. Although young and innovative artists are always crowding through the open door, somebody had to be there to open that door in the first place.

The real boon of the experience for me was Prague itself, a kind of creation of some thousand years of staggering architectural beauty and inspired musical tradition. One walked those streets in wonder every day. A few years later I was grimly astonished to read that the city had become the sex centre of Europe, with thousands of randy tourists drifting in and out of its highly populated bordellos. Socialism had been firmly rooted out and capitalism was now enshrined. I often wondered what Havel would have thought of the city's lurid metamorphosis.

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Getting Stanislavsky Wrong

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In 1923, all of New York was bowled over by the first visit of the Moscow Art Theatre to America. No one in this country had seen such synchronized ensemble playing or a troupe of individual actors of such power and persuasiveness. When the company returned to Russia after a triumphant national tour, actors such as Maria Ouspenskaya stayed behind and, along with Richard Boleslavsky, an earlier dropout, began instructing American actors in that strange doctrine known as the Stanislavsky System. One of Boleslavsky's most attentive students was Lee Strasberg. He and his close friend Harold Clurman were early converts to Stanislavsky as handed down by Boleslavsky.

The fact is that many of the tenets of the system passed on by Boleslavsky had already been surpassed by Stanislavsky even as the System was being absorbed by the Group Theatre under Strasberg's aegis. After a visit from Stella Adler to Paris, where she received private instruction from Stanislavsky, it became clear that elements such as emotional memory had been virtually abandoned by Stanislavsky and a new, stronger emphasis placed on 'playing actions'. These unexpected developments caused severe upheavals within the Group and there were some, like Robert Lewis, who believed it was this schism that eventually triggered Lee Strasberg's resignation from the company and brought about the disintegration of the Group Theatre itself.

During the next six decades, the precepts derived from the Stanislavsky System became the prevailing mode of tuition for professional actors both in America and Europe and, in many countries, it is still the official doctrine for people pursuing theatre studies.

However, no dogma is so persuasive that it does not eventually create sceptics, apostates, and even iconoclasts, and, in recent years, aspects of the Stanislavsky System have been seriously questioned and, in some instances, abandoned. Theorists like Michael Chekhov (who broke with Stanislavsky in the 1920s) and Bertolt Brecht (who found the System abhorrent) have fostered a whole series of alternative approaches inspired largely by a body of plays less naturalistic than those that stemmed from the repertoire of the Moscow Art Theatre. In some quarters, the very ethos of the Stanislavsky System has been attacked and its efficacy called into question.

The Stanislavskian practice most adhered to among students and professional actors is the formulation of 'actions' – that is, a choice made about the central drive of a particular

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