

Introduction

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I. THE ABSURD SITUATION

This anthology is the first of its kind. It presents examples of the remarkably lively Czech theatre of the 1970s. Yet such are the artistic and political ironies of Central Europe that any generalization about the contemporary Czech theatre becomes, the moment one has said it, a suspect half-truth, distorting the real situation as much as it reflects it. For the fact is that what I have called "the remarkably lively Czech theatre" does not exist in Czechoslovakia itself.

To understand this apparent paradox, one must imagine oneself as a visitor to Prague, where more than thirty theatres play nightly to full houses. The city's stage offerings are so varied and thoroughly international that one might easily (and naively) imagine oneself to be in a major capital of dramatic culture. On any given evening an extremely varied selection of theatre fare is available, including such plays as *The Captain from Köpenick* (Carl Zuckmayer's comedy on Wilhelminian Germany revived some years ago by the renowned Thalia Theatre of Hamburg), the Austrian dramatist Ödön von Horvath's *Tales from the Vienna Woods* (recently made into a West German film), Peter Shaffer's popular *Amadeus*, and many other plays of international significance.

For all this choice, however, the visitor to Prague will look in vain for per-

formances of works by the best contemporary Czech playwrights. Though he might already have seen a Havel play in London or Stockholm, a Kohout play in Brussels or New York, a Klíma play in Vancouver, or heard one of Uhde's dramas on Swiss or Austrian radio, he will not find them in Czech or Slovak theatres. A search for such plays in the libraries or bookstores of Prague (or any other Czech city) will prove equally fruitless. Even the telephone book will reveal no trace of these writers' names. They and their work have become publicly invisible in their own country.

In fact they lead a strange double life. Though absent from libraries and theatres, the same plays are clandestinely circulated throughout Czechoslovakia and read in the form of typescripts, referred to as numbers of underground editions, the most famous of which is *edice petlice* (Padlock Edition). While officially banned in their own country, they can be found a short distance from the Czechoslovakian border—in Munich, say, or Vienna—where they are regularly produced on stage and television, reviewed in the press and discussed on the radio. Within the range of a hundred miles, they are simultaneously secret and famous, condemned and celebrated. There is perhaps no better proof of the absurdity of the Czech theatrical situation than the fact that a simple statement about its remarkable vitality should require so much explanation. Yet this is the kind of ironic stuff of which the plays themselves are made.

II. THE TRAGI-COMIC MASK

The works in this volume thus grow out of—and reflect—the paradoxical state of Czechoslovakia today. In reading them, one is immediately thrust into a situation that is both explosively comic and deeply tragic. It is comic because Czech life today is fundamentally a game—a game everyone knowingly plays yet pretends to regard as reality. As a result, the whole nation is, as it were, performing an inside-out version of "The Emperor's New Clothes." In the fable, the naked Emperor's robes are imaginary, becoming "visible" only in response to an official command. In contemporary Czechoslovakia a large number of outstanding writers and plays have been rendered "invisible" by a comparable order from on high. But as with the Emperor's nudity, everyone knows that they are there. The tragic aspect of this basically ludicrous state of affairs has a private and a public dimension. The private one is the price of pain, isolation and exile many of the writers have paid (and are still paying) in their lives as people and artists. The public tragedy is the conscious denial of reality in the nation's cultural life, along with the abandonment of any search for or expression of truth.

Given the situation in Czechoslovakia today that truth is bound to be dark, however skillfully the writers mask it in smiles and laughter. The recipient of the 1983 Nobel Peace Prize, Manès Sperber, a Jewish writer born in Poland,

who lived in Paris and wrote in German (in short, a true Central European) offers an analysis of what happens to human beings when they live under a government that deprives them of their dignity. Referring to Hitler's Germany, he asks: "What fears, horrors and anxieties were dominating the conscious and unconscious life of a man during those times? What was his image of happiness? How did he conceive his ideal of personality? . . . The theme of happiness is quickly exhausted while fear, anxiety and terror remain inexhaustible themes, no matter whether one thinks of exploring the life of an individual or society." Though Sperber is talking about a system theoretically at the opposite end of the political spectrum from that of contemporary Czechoslovakia, his words apply in a deep sense to all the plays in this anthology. While there are flashes of intense love, laughter and hope in all of them, there are also fear and anxiety appearing in countless variations and shadings.

This is true of course of much modern dramatic writing, perhaps even of the literature of all ages. The dark passages and corners of life are often more interesting to dramatists than the lighter ones. Even the great creators of comedy invariably give their funniest characters dark and often fearful shadows. It is precisely this chiaroscuro of light and darkness which relates the contemporary Czech drama to the great dramatic works of the last century—those of Ibsen, Chekhov, Brecht, and, most of all, Beckett. Ibsen's *Wild Duck* is both funny and tragic (Shaw, for example, tells us how in watching a performance he both shook with laughter and shuddered with horror). Chekhov called three of his major three plays "comedies," yet their pain and pathos are inescapable. And as we laugh our way through a performance of *Waiting for Godot*, we are haunted by an uneasy sense of despair. In the same way several of the plays in this volume could be performed on stage for either comic or tragic effect, depending on the approach of the director and the perceptions of the spectator. In the final analysis, however, all of them are meant to arouse in an audience a mixture of gaiety and seriousness, a sense that laughter, even if not curing all ills, nevertheless helps to keep a sense of proportion as well as a sense of spiritual victory. This feeling is characteristically Czech. Yet another irony of these plays is that the audience most fully capable of understanding and responding to their tragi-comic equivocality is the audience not officially permitted to see or read them: the people of Czechoslovakia.

Though he has generally had a kinder history than his Czech counterpart, the Western reader can still perceive and experience this double effect—he must sharpen his sensibilities and draw on his deepest experiences. Doing so, he will find that as he enjoys the charades played in Klíma's *Games*, for example, he will simultaneously be disturbed by the anxious questions that lie beneath them: Do people recognize a symbol of freedom when they see it? Are false beliefs not more confining and injurious than handcuffs? Or when Kundera's servant Jacques makes his repeated and vain attempts to tell his

master the story of his great love, these attempts, while extremely funny in themselves, will also remind us that the most important and essential stories of our own lives can never be told because reality—shot through with lies and illusion—constantly interrupts them. At the same time an opposite effect is felt when, in Uhde's *A Blue Angel*, the hapless heroine's suffering at being deprived of her meager but rightful inheritance is rendered simultaneously comic by the nature of the objects she covets, and by the catch-as-catch-can character of the plaintiff herself. In Landovský's *The Detour*, to give another example, the potentially tragic fact that the political prisoner Hevrle is unjustly imprisoned is never permitted to cast a shadow over the play's high spirits and slapstick situations. In this way the Czech plays, in fact Czech literature as a whole, are in Milan Kundera's words "a game with fire and demons . . . combining the lightest and the hardest, the most serious with the most light-hearted," an activity whose task begins "where simple truths cease and where the multi-levelled nature of the world and its questions begin."

III. POLITICAL ANGLES

We in the West frequently tend to assume that any drama from the "Eastern Bloc" (as we have come to call it since politics has won over geography as well as culture) is likely to be obviously, perhaps even heavily-handedly, political. But none of these plays is in fact what one would call a "political play." Though the writers live or used to live in a country where life is deeply affected by political factors, the tone of the plays is in no way plaintive or obviously satirical. The scenes of action, for example, are those of ordinary lives and everyday situations: a young couple's basement apartment (*Fire in the Basement*), a middle class living room (*Games*), a writer's study (*Protest*), a compartment on a train (*A Blue Angel*). The plays are political only in the widest, Greek sense of the term. They deal—mostly in a light, even off-hand way—with the basic issues that affect people living together in social groups: their individual rights and liberties; their fears of punishment; their anxieties about themselves; their attempts to understand what they are all about and make sense of what is going on in the world; their hopes to change things for the better. Engagingly and always theatrically, the plays raise questions about the nature of freedom—both freedom *from* and freedom *to*; reflect on the experience and meaning of hope with all its implications; examine how fear and anxiety affect human minds and behavior; ponder whether economic security really changes man's basic desires and aspirations; show how ready-made "strategic" arguments can appropriate a person's thinking and render him a replaceable commodity while the phrases he uses and the fossilized meaning behind them remain the constants. For all these fundamental social and individual concerns, however, the plays are never "political" in the narrow sense. There is hardly a single explicit reference to the violent political

upheavals their small country of origin has undergone during the last four or five decades. Yet, in a concealed and oblique way, each of the plays shows the repercussions of these events, their profound effect on individual lives. Together, they provide a subtle and moving history-from-the-inside of the political period in which they were written.

IV. THE PLAYWRIGHTS

The playwrights included here do not by any means represent the full range of contemporary Czech dramatic writing. Many important names had to be omitted (most regrettably those of Josef Topol and Karol Sidon). The selection of writers and plays has at every stage entailed a disturbing awareness of how much good drama has had to be left out. This is the inevitable price, however, of presenting only a sample of so rich and varied a body of work.

As it happens, the writers in this collection belong more or less to the same generation. The oldest (Kohout) was born in 1928, the youngest (Havel, Landovský and Uhde) in 1936. During the 1960s, all of them were part of the cultural Renaissance of Czechoslovakia, during which an astonishing flood of first-rate writing poured forth, culminating in the famous Prague Spring of 1968 and finally cut short by the Soviet occupation in August of that year. For more than a decade and a half these playwrights and many others have been removed from the public scene by a process of "normalization," a euphemism for the suppression of nearly all writers, artists and intellectuals who did not toe the official line.

Three of the writers represented here are still living in Czechoslovakia (Havel, Klíma and Uhde), the other three either in Paris (Kundera) or in Vienna (Kohout and Landovský). Between them they are the recipients of numerous international literary prizes: in 1981 Havel was awarded the French prize Plaisir du théâtre; both Havel and Kohout received the prestigious Austrian Staatspreis for European Literature (in 1976 and 1978 respectively); Kundera was awarded the French Prix Medicis in 1973 and the Italian Premio Modello in 1976 for two of his novels and the George-Pitoeff Prize in 1982 for *Jacques and His Master*.

Works by all six writers have been translated, published and performed in many Western countries. Václav Havel's plays are especially well-known, having been staged in all major cities of Western Europe, and his three one-act plays *Interview*, *Private View* and *Protest* were seen at the Public Theater in New York during the 1983/84 season. Milan Kundera's prose works have been translated into more than twenty languages, and the American première of his *Jacques and His Master* premiered at Cambridge's American Repertory Theater in January 1985, in a production directed by Susan Sontag. Pavel Kohout's plays have been produced from Finland to Greece and Japan (his *Poor Murderer* was staged in New York in 1981); Ivan Klíma's plays have been

produced in the United States and Canada; Milan Uhde and Pavel Landovský are well known to German and Austrian radio and television audiences.

V. THE PLAYS

The plays span most of the decade of the seventies. It is perhaps typical of the ironies of the Czech cultural situation that the most "literary" of them, Milan Kundera's *Jacques and His Master* which takes up a scintillating game with the eighteenth-century French writer Diderot's famed work *Jacques le fataliste* and plays with matters of fictional form and reality in story telling, is also the earliest. Its first version was written in 1971, when the artistic and intellectual hopes of the Prague Spring were not yet completely crushed and the whole extent of the subsequent "normalization" was not yet being fully realized. On the other hand, the most personal of the plays is the most recent: Milan Uhde's *A Blue Angel*, which probes the costs of the human psyche's surviving the pressures of one totalitarian system after another. The play could be seen as a kind of emotional inventory, recording the scars, callouses and injuries inflicted on the character of an average woman by her ride on the violent roller coaster of political change. We are shown the inevitable toll it has taken on her resilience of spirit, her common sense and her ethical values.

Rather than including the most well-known play by each author (which in the case of Havel would be *The Memorandum* and in the case of Kohout *August, August, August*) this anthology is intended to indicate some of the main qualities of modern Czech theatre in general. Three of these qualities are especially significant. First, this theatre is realistic, in the sense that it reflects the quality of individual life in Czechoslovakia with a vividness which can come only from close and knowing observation. Under a political dictatorship, for example, the most personal of places, the bed, can become the object of government scrutiny, the refuge it traditionally provides can be destroyed at any moment. In Kohout's *Fire in the Basement* a young couple's bedroom becomes the hunting ground for officially sanctioned brutality in the guise of aid in distress. Several interpreters have called the play a satirical allegory on the Soviet occupation of 1968, which intruded on a nation's newly found freedom. But the play has wider and deeper implications as well. The local realism of *Fire in the Basement*—which would be immediately recognizable to a Czech audience—can thus, beyond the borders of Czechoslovakia, emerge either as a statement on social structures in a farcical mode or as an ironic statement on the gullibility of those unexperienced in the ways of the world. In the case of Uhde's talkative train passenger dressed in blue, who insists on imparting to her fellow passenger the story of her life, the hapless woman might as well have been telling the story of a real life spent under the actual historical circumstances. On one level the story could be regarded as a documentary, realistic in every detail. On another level, however, the same story reveals a

timeless pattern of human illusion and hope, joys and disappointments, efforts rewarded and denied, applicable to human life in general. Referring to his one-act plays, Václav Havel provides an explanation of this in-depth realism which permeates the Czech plays: having explored various dramatic methods in his earlier plays, he came to the realization that he, as he put it, "had to lean on what I knew, on my concrete living background, and that, only by means of this authenticity, I could—perhaps—provide a more general testimony of our times."

Second, the Czech theatre is never without humor. Whether it is the breezy good nature of slapstick, the subtle mood of multiple irony, or the grim smile of what we have come to call black humor—some kind or shade of comedy is always present. In Landovský's *Detour*, for example, a military truck gets stuck in a ditch with ludicrous consequences because its occupants have taken a shortcut through the woods on their way to what they hope to be a sexual rendezvous arranged to relieve the boredom of official business. In Kundera's *Jacques and His Master* an eminent classical character vents his anger to the audience that the modern playwright who rewrote Diderot's venerable eighteenth-century text has deprived him of his habitual transportation: "Tell me, where are our horses? . . . A Frenchman traveling through France on foot? Do you know who it is who dared to rewrite our story? . . . You know what I would do with all people who dare rewrite what is written? Burn them at the stake over a slow fire!" In Klíma's *Games*, a group of guests, knowing a murderer is in their midst, find an innocent scapegoat who will die (or will he?—the play is open-ended) for the sake of solidarity with the world's downtrodden and unfree. The audience, who has been roused to laughter in various ways throughout the action, is not permitted to wallow in gloomy, righteous sympathy with the victim: "He acts brilliantly!" comments a philosophic character in the play, raising his eyes from his book. "Finally he has found the part that's right for him." Though the remark may elicit one last laugh from the spectator, any such amusement is likely to be accompanied by an uneasy feeling that one may be laughing at the wrong joke.

Third, playful and funny as the texts may be, they insistently weigh questions of ethics and truthfulness, explore problems of illusion and reality in life and theatre, and deal with moral values in many dimensions. Each play, whatever its particular subject or style, represents an impassioned search for truth in its own terms. The most striking example is Havel's *Protest*. In a brilliant display of specious circular logic, a "normalized" writer, asked by a courageous dissident "colleague" to join in signing a letter of protest, responds with an ingenious, indeed irresistible, string of reasons why he would harm the cause of the dissidents if he did sign it. His arguments tread the tightrope between true and false logic with such agility that the ethical values of the audience themselves are put to a real test. This is Václav Havel at his best. However, the other plays also raise moral and philosophical questions of

a wide range, from the possibly dangerous implications of idealism (Klíma), to the need for fictionalizing our lives (Kundera).

In its realism of character and situation, its varied humor and irony, its intellectual honesty and subtlety, the contemporary Czech theatre is firmly rooted in the finest traditions of Western drama. If this sounds too neat a statement, perhaps it is worth recalling that Prague's most famous twentieth-century writer, Franz Kafka, whose shadow moves through all these plays, has been defined at once as existential philosopher, absurd comedian and religious mystic. Yet in today's Czechoslovakia he can be seen as essentially a Realist.

VI. PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION AND EXILE

It is a strange fate for a good dramatist to be born to a language spoken in only one small nation. Whom is he to address? His few countrymen? But what if his countrymen can never see his plays and are only allowed to read them clandestinely, if at all? To whom can he speak? And what, if for more than fifteen years he has hardly had the opportunity to venture outside the borders of his country, as is the case with Havel, Klíma and Uhde? And what about the writer who lives abroad in involuntary exile, as Kundera, Kohout and Landovský? As he writes, whom does the playwright imagine sitting in the audience? The citizens of Paris? The theatre-goers of Vienna? The vital interaction between playwright and audience, inextricably tied to the language the playwright uses, becomes frustrated and complicated beyond words. It has become a truism that Brecht's development as a dramatist was inhibited by fourteen years of exile from Germany.

The six Czech writers in this volume too are exiled: three beyond the borders of their country, the other three within their own country. All have been cut off from their natural audience. At the same time, they have been deprived of the chance to follow their work through to its completion in stage performance before a Czech-speaking audience. Kohout, for example, has seen his plays in numerous languages—English, German, Swedish, Greek, among others—but he has never seen *Fire in the Basement* in the original Czech. The same is true of Kundera (though he, as the latest best seller lists on the American and French markets show, is primarily a novelist), who has seen *Jac and His Master* only in French, Italian, and English (to date). There are even more absurd examples of this frustrating dilemma: Havel, Klíma and Uhde have never seen on stage the plays with which they are represented in this volume—nor indeed any of the plays they have written since 1968. (A notable exception is Havel's adaptation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, which was staged in 1975 in one single memorable performance by amateur actors in a village near Prague. The performance was a great event for the suppressed writers and artists of the country but it had disastrous consequences for those involved in the production.)

In such circumstances, the playwright becomes more than ever dependent not only on directors, actors and designers—as all dramatists are—but especially upon translators. For these playwrights, yet another collaborator is required before the playwright can speak to his audience.

The three writers in this selection who are still in Czechoslovakia must send their works abroad, launching them like bottles on the sea, never quite knowing which shores they will reach, how they will be received or understood. Despite their isolation, however, they all go on writing. Václav Havel, for example, writes as if his plays could be performed even in Czechoslovakia. As he himself puts it, he addresses "concrete countrymen in their concrete world," because "drama's success in transcending the limits of its age and country depends entirely on how far it succeeds in finding a way to its own place and time . . . If Shakespeare is played all over the world in the twentieth century it is not because in the seventeenth century he wrote plays for the twentieth century and for the whole world but because he wrote plays for seventeenth century England as best he could."

So much for the problems and loyalties of the author, who, though faced with great difficulties and complexities, still can find some kind of purpose and aim for his work. But what about his shadowy collaborator, the translator? In some ways, he has an even more complex set of relationships to deal with. Where should his loyalties lie? With the author? With his new reading or viewing public? Should he make the English-speaking reader aware of the foreignness of the text he is translating, hoping to expand the boundaries of his literary sensibilities? Or should he try to integrate the new work into English language literature, denying it its foreign quality? In each case he loses something, in each case he possibly gains something. But all his compromises are likely to be uneasy ones.

The translators represented in this volume have had these kinds of decisions to face. Will the play be better understood if the living room where Klíma's dangerous games are played is imagined in New York? In London? Or in some nebulous island, untinged by local customs and colloquialisms? Should the army types in Landovský's *Detour* be resettled in some Texas military camp? Wherever he may decide to place them, the translator also has to decide whether to call them "chaps," "fellows" or "guys," and their vehicle a "lorry" or a "truck." Should Kundera's Master speak in measures that echo the rhythms of eighteenth-century prose (after all, he and his servant Jacques replay scenes from Diderot's time-honored work)? Could Uhde's resolute and talkative heroine be travelling from Baltimore to Washington? Or from Norwich to London? No, she is unmistakably travelling to Prague. And the conversation in Havel's *Protest* between the writer who is "in favor" and the writer who is "out of favor" could not possibly take place in a North American city. It can only have its full meaning in a country where dissidence of any sort is a crime with real and serious consequences. The charades about

freedom and violence in Klíma's text are played by characters well aware that to make people feel guilty is a sure way to exercise control over them. Jacques's indestructible spirit dances over the heads of French intellectuals who know their Diderot and must remain suspended in a timeless omnipresent story even if he tells his stories to an Ohio audience. In a fundamental way, the plays, though uniquely Czech on one level, are about the world each one of us lives in.

VII. THE CONCEPT OF CENTRAL EUROPE

It may come as a surprise to someone who has had no previous acquaintance with Czech theatre and who has given no further thought to the area called Central Europe for centuries that these plays from behind the Iron Curtain (even Kohout's and Kundera's plays were written while their authors were still in Czechoslovakia) should deal with issues of immediate interest to an international audience. However, this is not surprising at all. In his essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe" (*New York Review of Books*, April 26, 1984) Milan Kundera eloquently argues how detrimental the "disappearance of the cultural home of Central Europe" is to Western civilization. Kundera shows how the great modern novels of Central Europe (by Broch, Musil, Hašek, Kafka) can be understood as prophetic meditations of enormous relevance to Western culture. As for the plays collected in this volume, it may be a sign of the spiritual resilience of the Central European writer that works written after decades of enforced alienation from the traditions of their culture are, in style and content, in meaning and implication, an integral part of contemporary world theatre. Havel's exploration of moral tightrope-walking by means of linguistic decoys are as close to Tom Stoppard (a Czech by birth) as they are to Beckett. Kohout's fiery farce, beginning in the world of Ayckbourn, becomes more and more Pinteresque in its display of language as an instrument of power by obfuscation. Klíma's combination of theatricality and philosophical speculation parallels Dürrenmatt at his best, while Kundera's elegant exploration of the reality-fiction conundrum lodges him in a strong literary tradition extending from Sterne to Borges. Uhde's low-key investigation of the human psyche under social pressure relates him in different ways to Ionesco, Edward Bond and Neil Simon. Landovský (an eminent Czech actor before he left Prague) has created a Švejkian prank linked to the traditions of both French and American farce.

Living at the pivot point of giant power struggles but powerless to influence them, this small Czech nation has given birth to writers who reflect and interpret modern man's confusion and fear, his resilience and humor, his determination to recognize and speak the truth. And although Kundera's wise Jacques is sceptical of the writer's activity because "everything that's ever happened here below has been rewritten hundreds of times . . . so often people

don't know who they are any more," the characters created by these playwrights, though proving Jacques right in one way, prove him wrong in another because they achieve something important: they speak to the East as well as to the West and thus eradicate a political border.