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The Dynamic 1960s, Part One Significant New Plays

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The 1960s represent the high-water crest of Czech theatre of the twentieth century. The many repressed talents of the postwar generation began to assert themselves as the contra-artistic ideology and practices of the Communist regime entered a slackened phase after the death of Stalin and other hardliners and, later, the official denunciation of the worst excesses of the Stalinist era. As already indicated, notable creative work began to appear in the late 1950s. It spread and grew in vitality in the 1960s and had the promise of a bright future embodied in the 1968 ideal of “socialism with a human face,” the motto of the Prague Spring, the significant liberalizing movement from within the Communist Party which we associate most clearly with the name of Alexander Dubček.¹

This liberalizing creative surge was cut off abruptly and harshly with the August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies under Soviet leadership. Fearful of the infectious spread of democratic ideas and projects throughout its empire, the Soviet leadership felt compelled to stamp out the Czechoslovakia experiment, as it had previously done in East Germany (1953) and Hungary (1956). For Czech theatre, the experience was a trauma similar to those of 1938 and 1948; once again, its organic evolution was, if not aborted, at least deformed.

The Czech theatre’s achievements, which reached world-class status by the mid-1960s, were the products both of playwrights and of those who produced their works: theatre companies, directors, and designers. I believe that this rich period of Czech theatre and drama may best be discussed by focusing first on the new playwrights and then on those who embodied their work in the theatre. This chapter emphasizes the notable plays of this peak era, with only occasional attention to how they were staged.²

As already suggested, many playwrights as well as other theatre people were in favor of the socialist ideals underlying the 1948 change of regime, or at least sympathetic to the lofty moral ideals expressed by the Communist Party. Before long, however, the very humanism that prompted the intellectuals’ and artists’ rejection of a bourgeois capitalistic society with its seemingly inherent disregard for spiritual and cultural welfare led them to become progressively distressed by the realities of the

new socialist order. The phrase that symbolized the liberating surge of 1968 known as the Prague Spring – “socialism with a human face” – implicitly condemned a regime that had lost sight of virtually all human-centered values. The efforts culminating in 1968 in Czechoslovakia were directed at restoring integrity and credibility to socialist ideals that had been increasingly ignored over the previous twenty years.

The year 1956 was decisive in marking the beginning of the reversal of the march of dismal years of forced social engineering. The denunciation of Stalin by Khrushchev at the 1956 Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union sent powerful signals to the Czechoslovakian CP apparatus. In 1956, also, the Second Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union was held in Prague, and for the first time several writers questioned or even spoke against certain policies and practices affecting their profession as well as against certain general social abuses. From then until roughly 1963 additional liberalizing measures alternated with arbitrary acts of repression: what was given with one hand was taken away with the other. Nevertheless, increased opportunities for artistic expression became available, and a degree of questioning of previously near-sacred sociopolitical premises was tolerated.

Coupled with these gradual, tentative improvements was a growing awareness of and interest in existential philosophy: the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus and the plays of Jean Anouilh, Eugene Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett became more available and could be discussed, although rarely performed before the 1960s. On a less intellectual level, increased interest began to be paid to the everyday personal problems of the ordinary individual as distinct from schematic figures derived from ideological formulae. Although some Czech plays began to reflect existential themes, the plays as plays still remained rooted in variations of traditionally realistic forms throughout the 1950s. A few novels at least partly critical of life since 1948 were published, and some Czech plays also reflected the growing spirit of questioning and skepticism, although direct criticism of the regime or Party, or even strong satire, was not yet a feasible option.

The plays of the late 1950s began to emphasize individuals rather than groups, and the individuals are presented in relation to problematic issues within an established socialist context in Czechoslovakia. Indeed, the characters are often identified as members of the Communist Party, and on more than one occasion we are introduced to the world of Party membership – its duties, conflicts of view, and internal stresses. Considerable *indirect* criticism is made of various aspects of life under socialism and Marxist-Leninist principles, but the issues are resolved by attributing faults and shortcomings to weaknesses of individuals rather than to the Party or its ideology. Chekhov’s influence on the style of playwriting is strong, and a considerable portion of the meaning of these plays is to be found in their subtext.

This section focuses on aspects of theme, characterization, and structure in the plays, leaving detailed matters of staging to the next chapter. The Chekhovian mode is especially evident in a 1958 work, *A Sunday in August* (Srpnová neděle), by

¹ The material in this chapter is based on my article “Post-War Drama in Czechoslovakia,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 25:3 (October 1973): 299-317

² For a critical survey of the postwar plays, see Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre*, and Trensky, *Czech Drama since World War II*.

František Hrubín, a major poet and frequent critic of official policies affecting him as a writer. The play evolved in collaboration with the Krejča team at the National Theatre and was successfully produced in theatres not only in Czechoslovakia but elsewhere in Europe. A landmark in the revival of significant drama during the thaw following the official rejection of Stalinism, the play directs our attention to the private and personal lives of the leading characters rather than to ideology or class struggle.

Nevertheless, the play also touches upon larger social realities. The central characters are essentially misfits in the new socialist order, dilettantes who have subsisted on their feelings and their wit. It is a play very much in the Chekhovian manner, taking place by a pond in a small provincial town frequented by summer visitors from Prague. Essentially apolitical, the play has a calm, seemingly listless surface but considerable turbulence and intricacy beneath it. The ambience of a summer pond was captured impressionistically by Josef Svoboda's use of scrim, projections, and reflective surfaces. The main emphasis is on states of mind and spirit, the values and attitudes one lives by. By way of resolution there is perhaps a suggestion that youth and/or ingenuousness is more attractive and enviable than experience or even hard-won wisdom. In the late fifties the play's depiction of vulnerable humanity was like a breath of fresh air in a long-closed room³.

Josef Topol's *Their Day* (Jejich den), still another product of Krejča's collaborative team in the National Theatre, took up many of the issues of *A Sunday in August*. It was first presented in 1959 and was among the most performed and longest-running postwar Czech plays. The central concern is again the conflict between values held by different elements of society. In *Their Day*, however, values become polarized, and the tensions between the old and the new are harshly revealed. Topol creates a relatively complex web of relationships: the plot deals with two families and their offspring. Most of the characters feel alienated in a milieu of altered cultural values in the post-Stalinist era. The elders for the most part represent a bourgeois grasping for security even as their children grope uncertainly for ideals in the midst of disillusionment.

The play's fragmented structure of action and dialogue reflected an impulse to break away from familiar forms of Socialist Realism in playwriting. It was embodied scenically by Svoboda's innovative multiscreen projection system, Polyekran, which could almost instantly provide a cubistic variety of images of a given setting.

³ Less subtle and complex but equally interesting in its focus on personal relationships presented within a contemporary context of social institutions was an earlier play, *That Sort of Love* (Taková láska, 1957) by Pavel Kohout, who had been an enthusiastic supporter of the new Communist order in earlier years. Dealing with the suicide of a young woman and employing several distancing techniques, it is in effect a Brechtian treatment of a thoroughly un-Brechtian scenario: a romantic, at times melodramatic love story with sociopolitical overtones arising from the implication that the society itself may have contributed indirectly to the girl's despair.

Reminiscent of *A Sunday in August*, the dialogue is marked by a fresh contemporary idiom, broken discourse, and considerable subtext. *Their Day* catches the rhythms and currents of its time, a period of uncertainty and tentativeness as the dogmas of the establishment were increasingly questioned and youth was openly rebelling against the hypocrisies of its elders.

Another group of plays of the late fifties and early sixties involved wartime situations, as if to remind audiences of what they had to fight against and what they were fighting for. These plays contain no criticism of the Communist regime, but rather an indictment of human failures to live up to standards of honor and responsibility, failures still evident in all segments of society at the beginning of the 1960s.

Perhaps the most successful and well-known of this group of plays was *The Owners of the Keys* (Majitelé klíčů, 1962) by Milan Kundera (b. 1929), whose later novels were to make him internationally known a decade or so later. Another product of the Krejča National Theatre "workshop," the play was still in the National Theatre repertoire as late as 1965. The action occurs during the wartime occupation of a provincial Czech city. We are presented with a young married couple living with the wife's parents. The focus is on a crucial ethical dilemma: the choice that the young husband must make between a life of relative security and insulation and action that involves the sacrifice of others but serves a larger cause of the resistance movement, of which he was formerly a member. He must choose between protecting his wife and her parents or preserving the safety of his former comrades and their cause. Painfully, he chooses to rejoin the resistance. Contrasting with the positive values of dedication to a larger humanistic cause is the sharp depiction of the pettiness, greed, and instinct for self-survival of his wife, her parents, and their neighbors. Indeed, their very flaws defeat his desperate efforts to save his wife at the climactic moment of the play. The implication for the audience is the need to live according to demanding ideals rather than for creature comforts and the security symbolized by the set of household keys of the title.

Formally, the play is an example of straightforward realism with one striking exception – a series of expressionistic interludes representing the inner state of the hero at the moments when he must make critical decisions. Such moments were staged effectively thanks to Svoboda's use of special lighting effects in conjunction with mirrors to create a dreamlike interruption of reality. Even the realistic actions employed the theatrical device of simultaneous action in the two adjoining rooms of the setting; the rooms were placed on adjacent platforms that could be rolled up or downstage. The play is an effective melodrama with ethical overtones, but its positive values are offset by the schematic and predictable working out of its action and themes and (with the exception of its protagonist) by its pamphletlike characters.

In the mid- and later 1960s, the tendency toward a diversity of themes and subject matter was also evident in plays of ordinary people without direct reference to their political alignments or even to a socialist context.

Josef Topol turned to the one-act form after *Their Day*, writing three short works in addition to one other full-length play. The first short play, *Cat on The Rails* (Kočka na kolejích, 1965), was again directed by Krejča, but after he had left the National Theatre and opened his own Theatre beyond the Gate (Divadlo za branou) in Prague that same year. Two young lovers confront each other at a seemingly ordinary but actually decisive moment in their affair as they linger by a rural railroad stop. Finding no satisfaction in their societal roles, they focus almost exclusively upon each other but sense an ultimate sterility and emptiness even there. While embracing they flirt with the idea of death, and their caresses threaten to become aggressive, destructive. It is an emotional form of Russian roulette, in which each has a finger on the trigger. The play ends with no resolution, but with the distinctly existential suggestion that their lives are in their own hands, from which one might infer that no social system is finally capable of satisfying the complex, often tormented drives posed by the human condition.

Topol's sequel, *Hour of Love* (Hodina lásky, 1968), was also presented by Krejča at the Gate Theatre. A denser, less accessible play, it wrings the last variations from the encounter of two lovers who have reached a dead end in their relationship. Having sought an ideal in love only to have the inevitable sordid realities of life corrupt or frustrate that ideal, they appear to have nothing else to give meaning to their lives. There seems to be no middle ground between absolute fulfillment and bleak existential emptiness. The Anouilh-like theme would have been inconceivable a few years before, in the early period of the new socialist regime.

Topol's slightly earlier one-act play, *Nightingale for Supper* (Slavík k večeři, 1967), was a more abstract and overtly symbolic, absurdist-influenced study of the inability of the ideal to survive amid the materialism and cruelty of the everyday. The play begins with an ordinary incident, a young man's visit to his girlfriend's home for supper. As the visit progresses, however, the visit turns to a chill nightmare of the persecution and eventual destruction of the young man (whose name is Nightingale) at the hands of the girl's family, which comes to represent the forces of brutality and death in the world.

Alena Vostrá's (1938-1992) *When Your Number Comes Up* (Na koho to slovo padne) is similar to *Cat on the Rails* in its existential focus on contemporary youth. It was first presented in 1966 by the Drama Club (Činoherní klub), among the most outstanding of the new theatre ensembles formed in reaction against the relatively inflexible repertory policies of most of the large state or municipal theatres. Vostrá, one of the house playwrights of the group, depicted a rootless, disenchanting cluster of young people who feel cheated by life and so find a perverse satisfaction in playing rather malicious tricks on those less clever or perceptive than they are. Yet they are unable to hide for long their gnawing sense of boredom and insecurity. Significantly, the play does not moralize about the distinctly antisocial behavior of the young people but presents virtually without comment a freshly idiomatic, almost improvisational view of Czech urban youth of the mid-1960s.

This reluctance to render overt judgments marks several other plays produced by the artists of the Drama Club. For example, Ladislav Smoček (b. 1932), another house playwright and the actual initiator of the Drama Club, wrote *Piknik* (1965), an intense psychological study of the antagonisms among a number of American GIs on patrol in a Pacific island jungle during World War II. Far from being a propaganda piece, it is almost studiously apolitical, dealing with the dramatic possibilities of man-to-man confrontations under the stress of fear and battle fatigue⁴. In keeping with the Drama Club's focus on the actors, the performance took place on a virtually bare stage with a half-dozen bentwood chairs.

The Topol one-acts and these plays of the Drama Club focused on the un-heroic, private lives of apolitical people. In Topol's plays metaphysical overtones emanated from concentrated, often elusive exchanges of feelings and attitudes which brought to mind the work of Marguerite Duras. The works of the Drama Club, on the other hand, created on stage a sense of the immediacy of eccentric life. At their weakest the Drama Club plays resembled acting exercises, appropriate enough in a theatre devoted to the policy of emphasizing the contributions of actors; at their richest, the plays provided suggestive, lively reflections of ongoing contemporary life in Czechoslovakia.

A distinct category of plays that emerged with the loosening of restrictions on theme and subject in the 1960s consisted of adaptations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century folk plays with biblical subjects. Realistically textured, wryly humorous, yet revealing genuine faith, such pieces had the charm of primitive paintings and were another example of increased interest in apolitical materials, although many undoubtedly read political significance into the attraction to faith and things of the spirit inherent in these plays. The most popular of these folk revivals were the work of Jan Kopecký (1918-1992), an influential critic, Ministry of Culture official, and university professor in the pre-1968 years: in 1965 *A Play of the Martyrdom and Glorious Resurrection of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (Komédie o umučení a slavném vzkříšení Pana a Spasitele našeho Ježíše Krista) and in 1967 *A Play of the Star* (Komédie o Hvězdě), dealing with the nativity story.

From 1963 to 1968 a growing momentum of broader cultural, artistic activity and increasingly critical reaction to the sociopolitical environment became apparent. The rigged purge trials of the early 1950s were formally exposed in 1963, and other absurdities of the regime revealed themselves, chiefly its use of bureaucracy to control, if not suppress, creativity and critical thinking. Moreover, the regime was exhibiting signs of uncertainty and even confusion. The eroding police state, no longer employing draconian measures, became a challenge to the conscience and social concerns of artists, inadvertently allowing them opportunities to present

⁴ Smoček chose American GIs in the Pacific because of his close and positive contact with the Americans who liberated Pilsen, his home, in April 1945.

oblique, variously camouflaged expressions of their views. Writers' meetings reviewed the recent past and the guilt shared by all for the gross abuses of the Stalinist period. Franz Kafka and Karel Čapek were removed from the index of proscribed writers. Novels critical of life and society since 1948 came out in increasing numbers⁵, and the Czech film renaissance of the mid-1960s – built on the same critical view of the deformities of social and personal life created by the still-ruling establishment – included several thinly veiled indictments of the contemporary scene among its major works⁶.

Increasingly disillusioned by the realization that the dehumanizing flaws and evils formerly identified as fruits of bourgeois capitalism were not only flourishing but acquiring cancerous proportions in their supposedly enlightened state, more and more intellectuals and artists turned away from politics to art in order to express their sense of having been betrayed. The revolt of the writers culminated in the Fourth Congress of the Writers' Union, in 1966⁷. Speech after speech denounced new censorship laws, the culturally crippling isolation of the nation, and the deformations of power which had virtually destroyed traditions of trust, honor, and spiritual health in society. When Ludvík Vaculík (b. 1926), a leading writer and spokesman for liberalization, suggested that “not one human problem has been solved in the last twenty years” and that “our republic has lost its good name⁸,” he was expelled from the Communist Party, as were several others for similar statements, including the playwright Ivan Klíma (b. 1931). Other playwrights, such as Milan Kundera and Pavel Kohout (b. 1928), were formally reprimanded.

The middle and late 1960s also witnessed a return of inventive, frequently harsh and powerful satire as playwrights vented the frustrations and resentments of increasing numbers of the society. Another, less readily definable set of dramas also emerged at this time – more poetic, even visionary, employing a broad canvas for the development of their action, often turning to the past to comment indirectly on contemporary issues.

The outright satires usually employed grotesque, absurd models or parables of social actualities to underline the abuses of post-Stalinist Czechoslovakia, though

⁵ The most pointed of the critical novels were Ludvík Vaculík's *The Axe* (Sekyra) in 1966 and Milan Kundera's *The Joke* (Žert) in 1967.

⁶ Especially notable were Miloš Forman's *Loves of a Blonde* (1965) and *The Firemen's Ball* (1967); Ivan Passer's *Intimate Lighting* (1965); Evald Schorm's *Courage for Every Day* (1964), *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1966), *Pastor's End* (1968); Jan Němec's *The Party and Its Guests* (1966); and Jaromil Jireš's *The Joke* (1968), an adaptation of Milan Kundera's novel.

⁷ The Resolution of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union in 1967 said: “A society for which man is but the object of manipulation, such a society does not need culture. Even a man who has become reconciled to manipulation...does not need culture; in fact he fears it; it becomes uncomfortable to him even to the point of hatefulness” (*Fourth Congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers* [IV. Sjezd Svazu československých spisovatelů] [Prague, 1968], p. 13).

⁸ Quoted in *Winter in Prague*, ed. Robin Alison Remington, p. 7.

their inventiveness and power carry them beyond immediate time and place. The extent to which they pinpointed specific deformations of socialist culture and doctrine varies, as does the critical detachment of their authors.

Václav Havel (b. 1936) became the best-known playwright in this group years before he undertook the overtly political activities that made him Europe's most notable dissident. In at least one broad respect, Havel's plays carried on the heritage of Karel Čapek. Like Čapek, Havel was drawn to clashes between humanistic values and twentieth-century phenomena: advanced technology, bureaucracy, materialistic positivism. His distinctive vision of the world as well as some hallmarks of his style were already evident in *The Garden Party* (*Zahradní slavnost*, 1963), the first of his major works. The play deals with a young man, Hugo, and his career. A seeming nonentity obsessed by chess, he acquires experience as he works his way through a nameless institution, finally reaching the top, but losing his identity in the process. The institution is a grotesque establishment dedicated to inaugurating and liquidating equally nameless projects. In doing so, it rejects logic and practicality in the name of tradition, authority, and empty phrases, its wildly irrelevant thinking represented by cant and shibboleths. There are incidental hits at routine bureaucratic follies and distortions of Marxist thought, but above all *language* here becomes a system in itself, symptomatic of a world that utterly dehumanizes people⁹. Sheer cant becomes a machine that jams, locks, or slips its gears; its infinite variations remain arbitrary signs. The master in this world is one who possesses a cybernetic brain and an absolutely interchangeable, componentlike identity – Hugo. Havel's use of language most nearly resembles that of Ionesco; what is stressed, however, is not the irrational absurdity of experience, but the deadly nature of sclerotic, dehumanized thought and feeling.

In *The Memorandum* (*Vyrozumění*, 1965), Havel once again used an institutional setting never precisely identified. The construction of the play involves a symmetrical arrangement of twelve scenes representing the fall, rise, and neutralization of the central figure, a bureaucrat of moderate status. Language is again a dominant element, but not quite in the same way as in *Garden Party*. The emphasis here is on the machinations of a power struggle within the institution over the introduction of a new “scientific” language (Ptydepe) designed for greater efficiency of operations. The center of Havel's concern, however, is not the power struggle, much less the individuals it involves, but the momentum of the apparatus of the institution itself, of which the new language is a symptom. Designed for

⁹ Of the realities to which Havel's play alludes, a Czech scholar has written: “Bureaucratic politics envelop even simple processes and acts...with a strange politico-economic mysticism while transforming concrete objects and concrete persons into bureaucratic symbols and hieroglyphics...Human qualities are replaced by an ideological and political scheme which is manipulated to maintain the appearance of orderliness” (Jiří Cvekl, quoted in Vladimír V. Kusin, *The Intellectual Origins of the Prague Spring*, p. 41).

maximum clarity of communication, the language is grotesquely unusable. The central figure, a self-proclaimed would-be humanist, proves impotent and ludicrous and is revealed as an unconscious hypocrite and phrasemaker. Once again there is considerable incidental satire of office types and behavior, and once again Havel maintains a cool detachment. Though *The Memorandum* is more farcical than *Garden Party*, the implications of its world are genuinely grim. Obviously, the implications were inspired by life in Czechoslovakia, but they can relate just as clearly to any technocratic society.

Havel's next play, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (Stížená možnost soustředění, 1968), is a relatively more humanly oriented work. The satire is perhaps less sharp, its most evident object being the absurdity of scientific attempts to analyze humans in the name of humanistic goals. Here the central dramatic device is Puzuk, a sensitive, childish machine designed to interview people. Whimsically, the machine seems more delicate and temperamental than the human beings using it. The general theme is frustrated humanism in the context of banal domesticity as well as technology, but Havel also satirizes humanism itself when it is embodied in rhetoric more than in actions. The central character, a writer given to quasi-philosophical speculations about human values and needs, finally stresses somewhat lamely the need to have needs. The ironic embodiment of his abstract speculations is his romantic-sexual involvement with three women: his wife, his mistress, and his secretary. None of the involvements is satisfactory, but each seems essential to his sense of human identity. The play's action approaches conventional comedy more closely than the action in Havel's other two plays. Its structure, however, reveals Havel's signature. He presents the action in cubistic fashion to convey the fragmented consciousness of people. As scene follows scene, we realize that Havel juggles with time to make the scenes with the wife parallel those with the mistress. Although we seem to be progressing normally, we are actually jumping back and forth in time, witnessing deliberately repeated scenes with different characters. The process culminates in a wild, surrealistic, Ionesco-like scene in which all the characters concurrently enter and exit, shouting their lines in overlapping fashion. At the end of the play, with the repetition of the opening lines (as in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*), we have once again arrived at the very beginning. Havel denied that absurdist theatre was part of his theatre's "program," but added, "I have the feeling that, if absurd theatre had not been invented before me, I would have had to invent it."¹⁰

Several satires by other authors warrant mention. *King Vávra* (Král Vávra, 1964) by Milan Uhde (b. 1936) is perhaps most blatant in its use of a central grotesque model of the social scene. A king, who resembles Jarry's Ubu in his inherent coarse stupidity, has the special feature of donkeylike ears that he hides under long hair. National policy decrees that everyone must have long hair and that barbers are taboo.

¹⁰ Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, p. 54.

Gross deceptions and a corresponding ease of switching principles and political allegiances anger the playwright. The play has a more emotive, darker tone than those of Havel and gains immediate impact as a result, but the satire is not as consistent or as effectively controlled. The use of songs and a loose, almost improvised, revue structure is traceable to its director, Evžen Sokolovský of the State Theatre in Brno, who had a strong interest in Brechtian theatre.

At the center of virtually all these satires is power: its intricacies, its terror, and yet its seductiveness; its force of dehumanization, negation, and death. The environment of central Europe – and of Czechoslovakia in particular – has seemed conducive to the practice and study of power and the grotesque relationships to which it gives birth. As one observer noted, "In no other Communist country, not even Hungary or Poland, have so many key personages moved between power and prison and power again, between disgrace and rehabilitation and disgrace anew."¹¹ Many writers and other artists explored the fascination and horror of humans being mastered by brute, irrational power, especially the teasing suggestion that the victims may be responsible for the emergence of that power or for maintaining its viability through their acquiescence. The parallel to the attraction of many leftist artists and intellectuals to Communist totalitarianism is obvious, as Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* so imaginatively demonstrates.

Czech writers were of course familiar with Prague's best-known author, Kafka, and several darkly satiric plays of the 1960s present variations on Kafkaesque motifs on the workings of power. In Ivan Klíma's *The Castle* (Zámek, 1964) the title as well as the name of the central character, Josef Kahn, derive from Kafka. The work is a realistically presented parable of how power crushes anyone who is different or is an individual. The castle is occupied by what seems to be an academy of notable artists and scientists who are utterly sealed off from the general population and progressively reveal various aberrations and eccentricities bordering on madness. One of their numbers has been killed. An outsider, Josef Kahn, arrives and is invited to take the dead man's place. He ultimately becomes a new victim, primarily because he asks questions and does not fit in with the rest. Meanwhile, the previous death is officially investigated and solved. It was a joint murder by the great figures inhabiting the castle, but the cream of the dark, satiric jest is that the investigative process stops right there and no punishment is forthcoming official procedure has been satisfied. Overlapping the completion of the investigation is a repetition of the killing, to which Josef Kahn willingly submits¹². The play is straightforwardly realistic, but much of

¹¹ Tad Szulc, *Czechoslovakia since World War II*, p. 13.

¹² In his address to the Fourth Congress of the Writers' Union in 1967, Ludvík Vaculík said, "The first law of power is that it tries to maintain itself by reproducing itself more and more precisely. Secondly, it becomes more and more homogenous, purging everything foreign to it until each part is a replica of the whole and all parts are mutually interchangeable" (quoted in *Winter in Prague*, p. 5).

the action and motivation is deliberately vague, as if to suggest a controlled dream if not a nightmare.

A starker, more direct satire suggesting humans' complicity in their own destruction by a cryptic power is the one-act *The Maze* (Bludiště) by Ladislav Smoček, of the Drama Club. First presented in 1966, the play deals with a man who, despite ample warnings, virtually talks himself into entering a maze (seemingly with no exit) at a public park. Smoček successfully blends farce and fear, violence and sinister humor, in portraying the victim's fascination with the maze and the gatekeeper's ambiguous indifference to whether the man enters or not – until he virtually forces the man in.

Another satire focusing on the motif of power is Pavel Kohout's *August, August, August* (August is Czech for circus clown), which had its premiere in Prague in 1967. It is a rather long and belabored yet comic parable of a Chaplinesque circus clown who longs for a set of fancy show horses, which he naively assumes will assure his glory. To qualify for the horses, he willingly submits to a series of farcical public humiliations at the hands of a bored, sadistic ringmaster, only to be confronted at the final blackout with a cage of raging beasts instead. The play, which has an improvisational, revue format, is a dramatization of the thoughts Kohout expressed at the 1967 Writers' Congress (after which he was reprimanded by the Party). He feared, he said, that "man in this world, split by the interests of the powerful, is and will remain merely a walk-on who in various costumes of various times will be pushed around the scene in various ways, without most of those in the roles of walk-ons (as any director will confirm) knowing who wrote the piece and what it's about."¹³

As I have mentioned, the plays of the middle and late 1960s also included a number of more indirect, more speculative reflections of their time. Satire, if present at all, is secondary to a broader view of the world which is essentially poetic in nature. The sheer complexity and ambivalence of the issues and values in these plays are more pronounced than in the plays dealt with so far. Moreover, some of these plays raise relatively broader questions regarding the essence and the implications of the socialist revolution itself, as well as the society and culture to which it gave birth. In form, these plays employ what might be called a flexible realism, or impressionistic realism, and they tend to focus on groups of people rather than on individuals. While their structure tends to be more casual than that of most of the plays already discussed, they are not marked by any noteworthy departures from recognizable reality.

Josef Topol's *End of Carnival* (Konec masopustu) was first performed in Olomouc in 1963 as another product of the Krejča-Kraus-Svoboda team; in 1964 they restaged it in the National Theatre as Krejča's last production there. Arguably Topol's greatest

play, it is especially interesting in its employment of myth and ritual elements. On its secular, realistic level, the play deals with the conflict between Frank King, a private landowner proud of his individuality and hard-won achievements with the land, and the new social order that is imposing a policy of collectivism of private property. Dominating the action are the masks and demonlike figures of an annual carnival that represents the end of the old and the beginning of the new, the death that insures revival and growth. A subsidiary theme lies in the groping attempts of several young people, alienated from their community, to find a certain solace and security in love. Still another dimension is added by the local barber who regularly stages the carnival entertainment; this rather cryptic figure suggests the seemingly inadvertent malice, if not evil, of one who derives satisfaction from manipulating the lives of others. All of these forces finally come together and contribute to the disaster crowning the action of the play – the accidental killing of King's retarded son by one of the innocent young lovers who happens to be one of the masquers. The play has no clear-cut meaning; its appeal and power reside in suggestiveness and various metaphoric levels of action involving the earth, death, and ritual enactment.

The second of these less readily classifiable plays is *The Heavenly Ascension of Saška Christ* (Nanebevstoupení Sašky Krista) by František Pavlíček (b. 1923), first performed in 1967. Based on stories by Isaac Babel, it is every bit as tentative, if not as ambivalent, as Topol's *End of Carnival* in its attitudes toward the sociopolitical realities of its time. The action occurs in 1920 in the interior of a Catholic church situated in a part of Russia where Bolshevik troops have been battling Polish troops in seesaw encounters along a constantly shifting front at a time when the Soviet system has not yet eliminated all resistance. At the moment, the church is occupied by the Bolsheviks during Easter week; the action spans Wednesday through Saturday. Nearly two dozen characters and a rapidly evolving, seemingly random series of encounters make us aware of the turbulence of the times, of the violence and cruelty accompanying the revolutionary spirit and its attempts to stabilize the results of the revolution. Concurrently, we are aware of the charity and sacrifices of individuals. As the action swirls on outside and within the church, a sense of incertitude about the ultimate values of the revolution prevails. The decisive additional element in this situation is an eccentric artist who, in the midst of the chaos around him, is painting a series of murals in the church depicting Christ's journey to the cross and His ascension. From his painter's scaffold, which hovers above the action, he observes and comments on what he sees, with his observations ranging from outright skepticism about the value of the Bolshevik movement to a speculation on its potential for the good of humanity: "God's scourge – for good or evil, who can tell?"

This is an unschematic, undidactic, truly ambivalent work with impressive imaginative scope – a genuine *teatro mundi*. The fundamental theme, expressed primarily in the observations of the painter, is the human obsession with raising oneself, an urge that forms the one immortal human element. As the painter says,

¹³ Quoted in *Fourth Congress*, p. 41.

“Onward – one more grave – one truth at the cost of a thousand bitter doubts – the eternal step between despair and hope.”

Ladislav Smoček's *Cosmic Spring* (Kosmické jaro), first performed in March 1968, by the Drama Club, was probably the last notable original Czech work to be performed in Czechoslovakia after the August 1968 invasion, and its theme and perspectives are among the most all-inclusive of the works under consideration. I include it here because it is more representative of the 1960s than the 1950s. In tone and theme it is essentially an extended, open-ended “Essay on Man” in dramatic form, a speculative parable transcending easy categories, including satire. As its central character declares, “Everything that is, lies on the other side of optimism and pessimism.”

A country house is about to be demolished to serve the dubious ends of progress: the countryside is being stripped for ore to feed a new foundry in the area. References to slag heaps and ash-laden smoke are frequent. The dying master of the house is devoting his remaining hours to a concentrated search for a rationale of life as he has perceived it. In the house (and suggesting a ship of fools) are a motley group of eccentric neighbors and random acquaintances who, along with the industrial cancer outside, seem to illustrate the humors, absurdities, and at times horrors of the world that the dying old man would attempt to define. The play is a rambling, overextended, at times confusing mixture of farce (the crowd) and metaphysical, poetic speculation (the dying man's soliloquies). Depth of characterization is distinctly secondary to the creation of a total, complex vision of human beings in relation to each other and to the cosmos. Reminiscent of *The Cherry Orchard* and *Endgame* in its sense of a terminal action, *Cosmic Spring* is also like *Heartbreak House* in suggesting faith in the sheer continuity of life and human efforts to persevere.

The dying man (who in the abstract might remind one of Karel Čapek) reviews human gullibility, greed, cruelties, and ignorance: “We reject God and know nothing, we believe in God and know nothing.” He rejects the concepts of progress and equality, all organized systems of brotherhood, and the human need for a “happy end.” Seemingly alienated from utopian socialism or any other sociopolitical system, he does not settle for an easy nihilism. Rather, an attitude of sustained, uncommitted alertness is conveyed, a view of life with open eyes and mind, no longer credulous but not yet despairing – perhaps the most that might realistically be expected from a citizen of Czechoslovakia in the twentieth century, and perhaps of our world. In the epilogue, as a home movie of the old man is shown, his niece reads his last words, which end the play:

Project the light and shadow as a witness that I actually existed, that I wasn't a phantasm, just as all history has not been a sham, and continue to search out just what sort of creature I was. Perhaps we're rushing toward other worlds and eternity, who can say? Above me is a roof . . . beyond it, beyond clouds and away

from earth in all directions is space. Light reaches all the way here from there. And I have light in me as there is light in a spider crawling over rough plaster, casting a shadow. It's imprisoned in us and doesn't emerge. While my hair grows and so do my nails, the air outside is cold as a mountain stream. Clouds are isolated, and you can see far into space.

Neither unqualified affirmation nor outright ridicule is expressed in this last group of plays. The transition from the unambiguous moral imperatives of the 1950s to the abstract, apolitical, even amoral ending of *Cosmic Spring* is a major one. Although the postwar Czech plays discussed in this chapter almost always communicated an awareness of the specific ideological and materialistic forces shaping the lives of their nation and its people, most of the plays remained humanistic in their broader implications. At an informal meeting of Czech writers several months after the climactic events of August 1968, Václav Havel made a statement that represented the attitude of most of his contemporaries:

What should theatre do, actually? According to my opinion it should awaken in man his authenticity; it should help him to become aware of himself in the full span of his problems, to understand the situation in which he lives, to provoke him to think about himself. Next to this true authenticity there exists, of course, authenticity that is actually obscurity, false, when theatre doesn't try to awaken in man a consciousness of his real problems but on the contrary helps his natural tendency to solve these problems superficially or actually to lie his way out of them or bypass them in the most varied ways. . . . At most, I can only help the spectator to formulate problems, which he must solve himself¹⁴.

¹⁴ Václav Havel, in “Ještě jednou obrození?” (Yet Another [National] Revival?) *Divadlo* 20:1 (January 1969): 32.