

Jan Grossman

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Jan Grossman was born in 1925, and attended the English grammar school in Prague. During the war he belonged to the illegal *Hnutí za svobodu* and in 1943 published the first of many articles. When the universities reopened he studied literature and aesthetics at Charles University and at the same time edited the newspaper *Mladá fronta*. After 1948, forbidden to publish by the communists, he took a post as lector at the National Theatre where he came under the influence of Alfréd Radok, whom he regarded as having been his most important teacher. The following year he arrived in Brno as dramaturge at the State Theatre, and it was in Brno that he directed his first productions. In 1953 Grossman returned to Prague to work with E. F. Burian, during the period when Burian was doing his best to conform to Communist Party ideology. Grossman remembered Burian as a dynamic character with great extremes of feeling, who worked largely through improvisation and who “*tried to fulfil his duties and that was the Socialist Realism which was inwardly very alien to him, he couldn’t do it, but he did it . . .*”¹

In November 1954 Grossman directed *Hagenbeck* by Fráňa Šrámek in Burian’s theatre, the first production on which he really felt he was working in his own way. *Hagenbeck* (1920) is from Šrámek’s early period, when he was an anarchist full of revolutionary fervour. It is a political play, capturing the turbulent atmosphere of the last days of the Habsburg monarchy. Grossman admired the aggressiveness of the play, the roughness of its writing and the sharpness of its satire. For Grossman it was a play which represented work in progress. He believed that it was the nature of such a play that its drama could only be completed when the “work in progress” was confronted by an audience.

In 1956 Grossman was allowed to publish again and for three years he worked as an editor with *Československý spisovatel*, but after three years rejoined Alfréd Radok at the Laterna magika. In 1962 he was appointed director of the drama company at Na zábradlí, in succession to Ivan Vyskočil.

In *Literární noviny*, Jan Grossman had written of the contemporary theatre: . . . *the playgoer was by his very nature a man of his time . . . whilst the theatre, taking the dogmatic ideologico-political planning approach, was orientated toward the abstract playgoer. This abstraction certainly seemed a lot more elevated and historically worthy than the mere concrete playgoer. There was only one thing wrong with the abstract playgoer: he didn’t fill the theatre.*² In September 1963, following the Conference of Small Theatres in Karlovy Vary, the theatre magazine

Divadlo had published some of the papers given at the conference.³ Grossman introduced his paper, *Svět malého divadla*, with an analysis of the term “small theatre” and whether it was defined by physical space, the size of the company, or the choice of the material of the actual performance. He believed that the audience sensed more intuitively than the critics what it meant – the quality of “small theatre” was not so much in its form as in its function. Small theatre came into being in a given artistic and historical situation, in order to perform a task in which conventional theatre had failed. Taking a retrospective look at the development of the Czech theatre over the previous fifteen years and analysing what had happened during the period of Socialist Realism, Grossman concluded that in practice the theatre broke with what it was at the same time extolling, that is a close relationship with contemporary life. In modelling its work on a previously conceived ideological framework, the theatre had simplified the experience of a limited group of people, whereas each individual’s relationship toward society is based on a continuous process of confrontation between his private world and the “world as a whole”. Therefore the more single-minded the ideological approach, the more abstract the effect of the presentation on the spectator, however realistic in form the theatrical presentation.

The present theatre, more concerned with portraying static results than the processes which led to those results, had ignored the specific problems of its audience and failed to tap the personal involvement which leads to understanding. Theatre had lost the adventure of discovering the unknown reality, for its task was to show only what was already known.

With the relaxation at the end of the fifties of the insistence on Socialist Realism, the theatre had expanded the range of theatrical possibilities, but still without gaining that relationship with contemporary concerns. The stigma of “cosmopolitanism” was invoked, because a long period of isolation provoked uncritical adoption of Western forms and repertoire. The superficial enthusiasm over Dürrenmatt and Brecht was combined with a “rediscovery” of the pre-war avant-garde – which for the most part meant using the means rather than turning to the principles. So that although the second period had appeared to be the antithesis of the first, they shared a common feature: an inability to break with convention and to relate to the time.

Grossman continued by analysing those features which enabled the small theatre movement to break with tradition. First: the small theatres were not part of those institutions which were forced to find existence in response to a need to communicate. And because they were small, their structure could be flexible, and they could dispense with administrative machinery. Thirdly, the material in the small form theatres did not have to be as politically committed as a full-scale play; it could often be slipped through uncensored, expressing only the personal view of the author. Fourthly, these were theatres in a state of growth. They used a variety of material, not to prove that it could be used, but as a source of energy. The large theatres, on the

¹ Private interview with Jan Grossman, 9. 12. 82.

² *Literární noviny*. 37/3

³ *Divadlo*, 1963/7

other hand, were using unconventional techniques (flexible time, metaphoric foreshortening, symbolism, alternation of narrative with drama, the actor stepping into the audience and other tricks of breaking illusion) but were using them for the sake of experiment, rather than an organic part of the content. Finally, Grossman considered the founders themselves of the small theatres, few if any of them originating in the professional theatre. Entering the theatre without the inheritance of traditional knowledge and techniques, but anxious to communicate, they had to work their way towards a new professionalism, based on practice and experience.

The question of professionalism in the small theatres was at that time hotly debated. The combination of youthfulness, aesthetic naivety, improvisation and bohemian negligence and liberality gave the impression of a workshop where the spectator's participation was welcome and necessary. What took place in the small theatres was not a definitive performance, but work in progress. Mistakes seemed unimportant in this atmosphere of "incompleteness" which almost gave the impression that the participants were "playing at theatre". Grossman believed that this could not be a permanent stage, and that this "amateurism" should be the starting-point for a new kind of theatre. He compared the development of a young theatre to that of a young writer who, after an early success must work on his talent, set himself tasks, solve problems and understand his limitations. But for a theatre this was a more complex process; this was where companies came into crisis, either disintegrating or finding an inner creative strength.

At the divadlo Na zábradlí the process of professionalisation had begun at an early stage, and the drama company had oscillated between different tendencies: *One aim got in the way of another, elaborately developed details obscured rather than supported the whole, the intended idea did not always find the most suitable and communicative means of realisation.*⁴ Grossman's method of resolving these problems was to distinguish between the Theatre's overall purpose and the means used to fulfil it. He did not believe that the theatre would lose its character if it stopped devising its own plays and chose from the "normal" repertoire. He was interested in the essential dramaturgical principles, which he defined as the effort to analyse the problems which led to contemporary conflicts, and then to choose the material and method to express them in the theatre.

To explain this, Grossman coined the word *apelativnost*. It is the quality possessed by a theatre production which does not try to answer the questions it raises, but rather demonstrates them to the audience and invites their response. He had recognised this quality in *Autostop* and wanted to continue such an analytic form of theatre. "The concrete playgoer" is a man involved in a world not of bare facts, but of interpretations of those facts, a world of conventions, illusions, ideas, hopes and fears. Art plays a role in helping man to disentangle these impressions. It cannot solve problems, but it can expose them.

⁴ *Divadlo*, 1963/7 p. 18

At this point in his paper, Grossman returned to the question of the small forms (songs, sketches, monologues) from which the work of the small theatres originated. He saw them as by their nature being peripheral, but also as material from which an artist such as Chekhov, Hašek, Kafka or Chaplin can develop an integrated work of art. This "integration" was beginning to happen in the small theatres, but it could only be worked out in practice, not by a pre-determined plan. This did not invalidate theoretical analysis, which was essential in identifying those moments in the small form theatre which are capable of development.

Grossman quoted from Milan Lukeš's paper at the Karlovy Vary conference, in which Lukeš put the small theatre movement into the context of a world-wide trend in theatre towards dialogue between stage and auditorium. Grossman described it as a trend which roots the theatre in the contemporary social situation. In a world which superficially offers greater opportunities, we are increasingly limited by bureaucracy – not simply by paperwork, but by fixed systems and structures which determine our actions and define our roles, and above all are self-propagating. It is a world which creates and validates its own "reality", a "completed" world which excludes the unexpected and individual.

Human nature, especially in youth, looks for space for its own experiences and creativity, for adventure. Jazz and the small theatres were criticised by the authorities for offering escapism: *but escapism is not always the fault of the one who is escaping.*⁵ Jazz, with its natural rhythms, irregularities, improvisation and incompleteness, was a human response to a world of bureaucratic conformity. The popular forms of the small theatres were capable of unleashing a creative energy essential to the development of contemporary society.

Jan Grossman's first task at Na zábradlí was to revive the reputation of a dispirited theatre which had had no premiere for 18 months. The actors themselves were bored, and of those in *Autostop*, only one or two were interested in remaining in the company. It was "make or break"; either Grossman took risks or let the whole venture fold. Grossman eventually put together a company led by Ljuba Hermanová, then appearing with Fialka's pantomime company in *Devět kobouků na Prahu*. With actors substantially inexperienced compared with those performing in the official theatres, Grossman set out to demonstrate what he meant by a theatre which could "professionalise within its own means" and achieve productions which were more relevant, interesting and exciting than those put on by the National Theatre with its superior resources. His first action was to commission Miloš Macourek and Václav Havel to write a play which would star Hermanová. The result was *Nejlepší rockový paní Hermanové* 1. 11. 62). It was a play with songs which went back to the simplicity of Na zábradlí's beginnings; back to making use of the talents of its performers as a technique to hold the audience, whilst at the same time expressing ideas which could not yet be integrated into a unified dramatic structure. It was a production made up of

⁵ *Ib.*

*chanson, abbreviation, sketch, idea, joke, gag, music, a small stage and a few actors.*⁶ The critics admired Hermanová whilst recognising the satirical intention of the production. Macourek and Havel mocked not only the vulgarisation of such theatre forms as the *Laterna magika* had become, but also, in the character of Hermanová's dramaturge, the sort of person who lived in a world of slogans, formulas, memoranda and resolutions. It was an absurd world made concrete by the meaningless procedures of its inhabitants; who were not necessarily living a double life, but were convinced of the rightness of the actions and unaware of life's ambiguities and contradictions.

Nejlepší rockový paní Hermanové was followed at Na zábradlí by *Vyšňutá brdlička* (8. 2. 63), which began life as a compilation of poetry by a student from Brno, Radim Vašínska. The poems, by František Halas, Josef Kainar and Miroslav Holub collectively contributed to the central theme of freedom of thought and action being linked to freedom of expression. Grossman linked certain sections by the staging: for example, in one sequence an actress was identified with the image of a goldfinch. She remained centre stage as though trapped by surrounding dogmas and banalities, dominated by the "master". The actors did not identify with the voices, but demonstrated or commented on certain types of people in certain situations, sometimes through contrast: *Advice to follow a wise and cautious life is given by a lout, a fable about egotism is spoken in the wise and prudent tones usually reserved for the liveliest fairy tales, the story of a sordid love affair is made to sound warm and tender.*⁷ Grossman called his staging of Vašínska's montage a "grenoble", an invented word mocking the current desire to identify genre classifications. He punctuated the compilation with three speeches by Václav Havel, which used the worn-out phraseology of drama theory to give three contrasting "critical" opinions on the "state of the grenoble".

Václav Havel had been working at Na zábradlí since 1961, when he had joined Ivan Vyskočil's company ostensibly as a lighting technician. It was Vyskočil who, after his work on *Autostop*, had set him to write *Zabradní slavnost*, and Grossman who had seen the writing through to completion. Grossman asked Otomar Krejča to direct it – Krejča had already directed the production which followed *Vyšňutá brdlička*, *Die Stunde der Antigone* – and the production opened in December 1963. The central character of *Zabradní slavnost*, the featureless Hugo Pludek, progresses from the clichés of his conventional home background through the bureaucratic jargon used by the secretaries who run the garden party and the liberalised phraseology of a more advanced functionary until he challenges the Director of the Inauguration Office, a master of dialectics. In the final act the previously monosyllabic youth proves that through the manipulation of language one can gain control of the whole system.

The subject of *Zabradní slavnost* is language, or rather, the abuse of language. Havel identified the differences between language laboriously worked out of personal experience, and the easily-adopted platitudes adopted to improve a person's self-esteem; *For truth is not only what is said, it depends on who says it and why.* The characters in

the play control and manipulate each other by the mechanical use of a language which is both grotesque and terrifying; terrifying because to the Prague audiences of 1963 it was instantly familiar. They realised that the puppet-like characters on stage mirrored behaviour in the outside world, and that as part of a similar mechanism, they themselves could be controlled and manipulated in the same way.

Havel has been described as "a playwright of the Absurd", and was influenced by reading Adamov, Beckett and Ionesco. But Jan Grossman doubted whether Havel's plays belonged to "the so-called art of the absurd". It has become almost a truism that situations which appear illogical and absurd to citizens of a western democracy were familiar occurrences to those living under a totalitarian regime. Havel's treatment of such situations was a natural progression from the satire of the small-form theatres.

Some critics judged that Havel lacked theatrical qualities: *He is not in fact a dramatic author. He is an author able to see very clearly the philosophical problems in life... He dissects such problems like a physician . . .*⁸ Jan Grossman considered this to be a misunderstanding of Havel's work. He pointed out that although Havel's material was not traditionally theatrical, it had a direct appeal to the audience which rendered it dramatic and linked it to earlier work in the small theatres. Karel Kraus observed that although in structure *Zabradní slavnost* is a three-act play, in content it more closely resembles the one-act play which *leads primarily to an analysis of the situation, ascertains, mirrors (maybe distorts) a social or psychological action or a character. It does not draw the spectator into the play but provokes him, does not suggest a solution, but counts rather on his intellectual revolt.*⁹ *Zabradní slavnost* extended the limits of the genre by moving from an attack by a variety of forms on a multitude of targets, to focussing, in a varied but integrated way, on a single subject (ie the abuse of language).

The dramaturgical context of Grossman's Divadlo Na zábradlí is important to an understanding of Havel's three major plays. *Zabradní slavnost* was followed in less than six months by Grossman's production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi* (16. 5. 64). This adaptation by Grossman and Miloš Macourek included episodes from Jarry's sequel *Ubu enchainé* – which fascinated them *by its merciless unmasking of the bureaucratisation of freedom – freedom which becomes strictly controlled order*¹⁰ – and parts of *Faustroll* and *Ubu sur la butte*. It was presented as a travesty of a Shakespeare history play, where the wheel of fortune rose and fell, not in a world of majesty, but on a dunghill. In a society created out of the rubbish of contemporary society the clumsy, brutish Ubu becomes the personification of totalitarian government.

Peter Brook wrote about Grossman's production in his book *The Empty Space*:

This version ignored every one of Jarry's images and indications. It invented an up-to-the-minute pop-art style of its own, made out of dustbins, garbage, and ancient iron bedsteads. M. Ubu was no masked Humpty Dumpty, but a recognisable and shifty slob; Mme. Ubu was a sleazy, attractive

⁶ Machonin, Sergej:

⁷ *Rudé právo*, 13. 2. 1963

⁸ Machonin, Sergej, in Howey, Nicholas: *Who's Afraid of Franz Kafka?* (1970)

⁹ Kraus, Karel in: *Divadlo*, 1963/7, p. 41

¹⁰ "Kráľ Ubu" (*Rozbor inscenace*, published Divadelní ústav 1966) p. 6

whore; the social context was clear. From the first short of M. Ubu stumbling in his underpants out of bed while a nagging voice from the pillows asked why he wasn't King of Poland, the audience's belief was caught and it could follow the surrealist developments of the story because it accepted the primitive situation and characters on their own terms.¹¹

Jan Grossman had been preparing the production since 1962, when there had been a possibility that Jan Werich (who had played Ubu at the Liberated Theatre in 1928) might play the leading role. In 1964 it was taken by Jan Libíček "a tun of a man with the face of a dissatisfied Gouda cheese".¹² The roles were cast as images of identifiable types, and the costumes extended the image; sometimes obviously, as in the tight skirts and high heels worn by Marie Malková as Mere Ubu, or more subtly, in the case of the King (Zdeněk Procházka) who took the military salute wearing shabby but neatly pressed civilian suit. Similarly, props and stage furniture were employed for economy of meaning. Like children playing on waste land, the actors made use of the discarded utensils of everyday life provided by the designer Libor Fára. Everything was interchangeable, and the objects took their meaning from how they were handled: bed, saluting, dais, staircase, wardrobe, larder. For example, in the chapel scene, two stage hands entered and, as they shifted the props, perfunctorily bowed before the "altar" (an old bedstead) and crossed themselves with holy water from the "stoup" (a cracked bowl).

The music was composed by Zdeněk Šikola, who used a combination of dodecaphonic music, traditional Czech wind music and *musique concrete* recorded by a seven-piece orchestra. As the leading motif he chose the melody of a running brook, incongruously fresh and clean in the context of such foul, sweating visual images. Some passages were accompanied by romantic interludes of programme music: banal images of birdsong, brooks, mills and meadows contrasting with the ugliness onstage.

As the audience entered the theatre foyer and auditorium, they were faced with models of Alfred Jarry's pataphysical machines. These were presented as images of materialism, of those processes in life which society tends so carefully that they work to perfection, but only to their own advantage. In his published analysis of the production, Grossman drew a parallel between these innocuous machines and the most absurd machine of them all, the Nazi machine for genocide. The production, for all its robust comedy, carried a dark contemporary relevance, whose roots Grossman acknowledged to be in Kafka as much as in Jarry.

In the spring of 1964 Grossman invited Václav Hudeček, director of *Autostop* to rehearse Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot* and, to be presented concurrently, a double bill of Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna* and *The Lesson*. Hudeček, a director with the Městské divadlo, had introduced Prague audiences with productions of Dürrenmatt's *Romulus velký*, Ionesco's *The Chairs* and Genet's *The Balcony*. He had also run a series of Sunday afternoon readings of authors such as Edward Albee.

¹¹ Brook, Peter: *The Empty Space*, p. 78

¹² *The Observer*, 28. 4. 1968

The first reaction of the public was one of curiosity towards these plays, "classics of the theatre of the absurd", now over ten years old. Comparisons were made between Hudeček's productions and those in western theatres. Critics then began to assess their relevance in the dramaturgical context. In *Divadlo* (October 1965) Zdeněk Hořínek tentatively suggested that the production could be a parable of contemporary society: *Don't we ourselves have our own little Godots, onto which we project our illusions that something will turn up which will save us from 'all this', which will give meaning to our life?*¹³

Grossman chose the plays not only because they were important plays that had not yet been seen in Prague, but for their place in the dramaturgy of the theatre. In *The Bald Prima Donna* (17. 12. 64) the use of language as a manipulative weapon, the wastage of man's life in futile activity, the reduction of personality to the point where one individual is interchangeable with another; these themes were linked with the earlier plays in the repertoire. The implications of *The Lesson* were more sensitive, both in the play's presentation of cultural dominance and in its exposure of the nature of political authority.

The issues in *Waiting for Godot* (18. 12. 64) are more ambiguous than Ionesco's specific targets. The production provoked less certain reactions. Grossman felt it to be, of all the plays at Na zábradlí, the most open-ended and perhaps the most demanding in its appeal to the audience.

The Beckett and Ionesco programme was followed by Havel's second play *Vyrozumění* (26. 8. 65). The overt theme is again the mechanised deformation of language. Gross, Managing Director of a firm whose business we never learn, discovers that it has adopted a new bureaucratic language, Ptydepe, which he does not understand. In four spiralling perambulations from his office through the Ptydepe classrooms to the translation department, he passes from ignorance through bewilderment and humiliation to a self-justifying involvement in what he knows to be an unjust society. Certain passages are allusions to the political brainwashing which had taken place during the fifties. Sergej Machonin wrote how those passages reminded him of the way people had conformed both as a whole and in their personal lives, and of the still fresh history of the loss of feeling, reason and character.

The emphasis on inflexible structures is reflected in the construction of the play, whose precise divisions contain constant and mechanical repetitions of routine actions. (Grossman underlined the repetitiveness by setting onstage a bucket into which a drop of water fell at regular intervals throughout the performance.) The self-perpetuating activity of the Office resembles one of Alfred Jarry's pataphysical machines, providing a dramaturgical link with *Ubu roi*.

The characters in *Vyrozumění*, with their continuous emphasis on physical activity seem literally more "flesh and blood" than those in *Zabradní slavnost*. But this is only a realistic skin given to a collection of animated attitudes, apparently human, but in fact mechanise creations. The imperfectly adapted secretary (played, as in *Zabradní slavnost*

¹³ *Divadlo*, 1965/8, p. 12

by Marie Malková) is sacrificed through her human feelings to the expedience of others. Gross himself, though fully understood by Czech audiences, caused confusion among western critics. His range of language is more complex than that of the other characters, encompassing contemporary liberalism and pre-war humanism along with the clichés of socialism. But his humanism is only superficial. His values are equally as banal and he fights only for his own position. Apparently in the role of the victim, he is actually a more dangerous conformist than the others. With Gross in charge, the process of depersonalisation can continue unchallenged. He resembles Josef K from Kafka's *Proces*, who also acquiesces in a system he recognises as hostile and deformed.

Grossman's filled the small stage of Na zábradlí with heavy office furniture, which during the scene changes, was pushed and pulled to and fro behind a sheet backlit by a red floodlight. As the actors jostled each other in the crowded space, grotesque silhouettes appeared on the sheet; and yet the curtain went up on a completely "normal" world, the secretary at her desk, the deputy neatly attentive. It was Grossman's ironic comment on a world where "normality" masked gross deformity.

Grossman's adaptation of Kafka's *Proces* opened on 26 May 1966. In 1963 a conference on Kafka had taken place at Liblice, which was important in that it not only reinstated a great author, but also allowed subjects to be debated in public which till then had only been discussed in private. The issue at stake was whether a work of art could be interpreted in its own terms or whether it must be approached from a predetermined standpoint, ie that of the Zhdanov doctrine. Kafka's works remained largely unpublished in the 70s and 80s mainly because the Husák regime considered that the Kafka conference had been used to mask counter-revolutionary activities.

In November 1964 Grossman published "Kafkova Divadelnost?"¹⁴; an article which he acknowledged to be preparatory notes for his production of *Proces*. (Grossman prepared every production in great detail in advance, noting moves and gestures in his director's book, often preparing two or three versions. In rehearsals, for a lot of the time he worked with the actors on the stage rather than from the director's table, for he found it easier to show them what he wanted rather than explain it in words. His method of direction was very physical; rather than sitting silently in rehearsal he was filled with energy, creating the sound effects himself, interjecting a word or exclamation to urge the actors forward.) In his preliminary notes for *Proces* Grossman wrote that he recognised Kafka's "theatricality" in the very factual reporting form units like those in *Waiting for Godot*; it is their juxtaposition that creates the cumulative effect. There are no psychological explanations for the characters' frequently ambiguous actions. Nor are the characters symbolic; they are significant simply by being what they are.

Grossman set the production amidst scaffolding assembled on a shaky revolving stage and set against a cyclorama of baroque frescoes, where shadowy figures suggested the existence of a higher reality. (The image had come to him during a visit

to St Nicholas in the Malá Strana, when it was full of scaffolding for restoration.) The revolve worked in the simplest way; at the point where it disappeared behind a curtain, stagehand moved it by hand. The black-clad figures glided or strode through the maze of scaffolding, swung on and ducked under the bars, sprang from the rostra, briefly caught by shafts of light. Massive organ blasts shook the smothering darkness of the theatre. Two actors alternated in the role of K, whom Grossman wanted to present, not as an anonymous representative of humanity, but as a free individual who at one and the same time conforms to what he is denouncing.

The images of *Proces* – the cage, the labyrinth, the rituals of life and death – made a strong impression on theatre observers from the West, who in the summer of 1966 were beginning to arrive in Prague, among them Kenneth Tynan, Peter Daubeny and Michael Kustow. Czech theatre companies, especially the Theatre on the Balustrade, were touring more and more widely abroad. The avant-garde theatre, in conjunction with the new wave of Czechoslovak film, showed Europe that there was a revived spirit in the arts in the eastern block.

By spring 1968, the changes in Czechoslovakia were evident to the world; whatever the reality of the political issue, a change of atmosphere was manifest throughout society. The news was not always good; but what was important was that it could be heard and read. In such an atmosphere, the theatre, till then in the forefront of expression, became less rather than more significant. At Na zábradlí, Miloš Macourek's *Hra na Zuzanku* (20.12.67) which tried to show the passage of one whole life in the course of two hours, disappointed audiences who felt that it lacked contemporary relevance. Jan Čiřař wrote in May 1968 that three or four years previously it would have excited people by its expression of their own unspoken thoughts about the mechanisms to which they submitted. Now, however, people were asking themselves other questions: about their responsibilities within the developing situation, about the shedding of conventions, and about the limits of personal freedom.

Václav Havel approached some of these questions in *Ztížená možnost soustředění* (1. 4. 68), directed at Na zábradlí by Václav Hudeček (Hudeček was also invited to direct Havel's plays in other European countries. However, it should be noted that even in the 60s, there were very few productions of Havel's plays in other Czech and Slovak theatres.) The central character of *Ztížená možnost soustředění*, Dr Eduard Huml, is an "expert" in the science of human relationships, although he has himself lost his human identity. He wears a mask of polite indifference and adopts the gestures and phraseology of conventional communication. The play is set in his home, the place where a man should be most free to "be himself". The action consists of Huml's encounters in the course of one day, juxtaposed in non-chronological order. The structure is an image of Huml's life, which lacks continuity and purpose.

This third play by Havel was part of the movement which began publicly with the text-appeals at the end of the 50s – a movement which publicly aimed to expose the consequences which arose when approved forms of language and ideas were

¹⁴ *Divadlo*, 1964/9

mechanically adopted, and to provoke audiences into thinking about the truth of their own experience. It was written at a time when the rehabilitation was taking place of political offenders condemned in the early 50s, and the evidence given in their trials reassessed. Two novels widely read at this time were Ludvík Vaculík's *Sekyra* and Milan Kundera's *Žert*, in which both authors fictionalise their personal experiences in the historical context.

Milan Kundera worked with Jan Grossman on what became his second play, *Ptákovina*, which was produced in January 1969 in Liberec and in May at Na zábradlí, directed by Václav Hudeček. Like Kundera's novel, the play opens with a practical joke played by the leading character, in this case the Headmaster (Miloš Kopecký), who draws on the blackboard the graffiti symbol for the female sex organ, and comments: . . . *apart from this thing it means much else, for example our taste for it. And in no time this cold geometric austerity begins to show up the vanity of that taste and consequently our distaste. Obviously it doesn't only apply to the thing itself but to women in general. And because women are our life it follows that it applies to our whole life, it represents human existence. . .*¹⁵ In the prurient world of the school, the joke has far-reaching consequences when one of the pupils confesses to it and the Headmaster is forced to cut off the boy's ears. At the end: . . . *(the man) is dominated by the action. The joke is on him. It is no longer a joke but reality.*¹⁶

The action is set in a world of corrupt banality, where sexual mechanics and ritual humiliation substitute for valid human relationships. The schoolteachers insist on being disciplined by the Headmaster, and on corporal punishments for their deviations from conformism. The Headmaster confesses to his mistress that he has two faces, one the rigorous authoritarian which everyone expects, the other a childish prankster. The schoolboy, asked why he confessed to something he had not done, replies: *What is truth?*

. . . *Headmaster, you must understand. If I hold to it that I hadn't done it, no one would believe me, they would say I was lying and punish me all the more. Like this I am no doubt guilty of having done it, but everyone must recognise that I'm telling the truth and that is for me a great moral advantage.*¹⁷

The theme of the play, moral degradation in a society which has lost its values, has close dramaturgical links with *Ztížená možnost soustředění*. Both plays create a world which is bizarre, cruel, and yet at the same time recognisable. Both plays are concerned with truth. The audience is confronted with the wasteful and soul-destroying conventions and activities which are imposed, or which we impose on our lives.

Milan Kundera lost his post as professor at the Film Academy later that year and was expelled from the Communist Party in 1970. He had written another play for Na zábradlí, *Jakub a pán*, also known as *Jakub Fatalista*, based on Diderot. In 1974 this was produced by the Činoherní studio of Ústí nad Labem, under the name of Evald

Schorm. The following year he accepted a university post in France. In January 1969, Václav Havel sent a telegram to President Svoboda, protesting against threats of censorship made by Gustav Husák. From that date onwards DILIA, the sole literary agency in Czechoslovakia, refused to handle his work. In 1973 the stage manager of Na zábradlí, Andrej Krob, staged Havel's version of *Žebrácká Opera* with his amateur group Divadlo na tahu – a single performance had led to harassment of the performers and even the audience.

Jan Grossman, Václav Havel and a number of actors had left Na zábradlí in the summer of 1968, nor for political reasons, but because of an internal dispute. There was still considerable interest in Grossman's work among international theatre circles and in the following years he undertook a number of productions abroad, particularly in Holland. However, the Czechoslovak authorities made this arrangement increasingly difficult, and his last production abroad was in 1974. For the next few years he was engaged by the West Bohemian Theatre in Cheb, and from 1980 to 1982 by the Klicpera Theatre in Hradec Králové. He also directed at least one production for the Činoherní studio in Ústí nad Labem. Although he twice signed contracts to direct in Prague he was not allowed to work there until 1982 when, after two years of effort the Divadlo S. K. Neumann obtained permission for him to direct *Uncle Vanya*. Following this he was able to direct more productions at the S. K. Neumann, including *The Duchess of Malji* and *Oedipus Rex*. During this time the break with Na zábradlí was also mended and in 1988 he was invited to direct Molière's *Don Juan*, one of the plays he had previously directed in Hradec Králové, and about which he used to say that the only really essential part of the text was the speech on hypocrisy – the part which as often as not was cut by the censor. By this time, the late 80s, there was a major change in cultural policy – for example, the plays of Josef Topol were again being staged – and Grossman found that he was becoming an official figure, with all the problems which that involved. After 1989 he was made director of the drama company at Na zábradlí, with the Karel Steigerwald as his dramaturge; one of the first plays he directed in this new period was Steigerwald's *Hoře, hoře, strach, oprátka a jáma*.

The quantity and quality of Grossman's work both in criticism and on stage is remarkable. It is only since his death in 1993 that people have begun to evaluate it and to realise that he was an outstanding figure of not only Czech but also European culture. There is still much to be written and recorded; the publication of the talks given at the symposium held at the Divadelní ústav in the middle of October 1995 will help towards it.

Barbara Day
20th November 1995

¹⁵ *Divadlo*, 1969/1

¹⁶ Kundera, Milan, in Howey, Nicholas: *Who's Afraid of Franz Kafka?* (1970), p. 159

¹⁷ *Divadlo*, 1969/1