Shall We Dance?

Reflections on Václav Havel's Plays

MARKETA GOETZ-STANKIEWICZ

It is an author's job not only to organize existence according to his own lights—he must at the same time serve it as a medium. Only if he does that can his work amount to more than its creator and aim further than he himself can see.
– Václav Havel, "My Temptation"

In Temptation *Fistula says: "I don't give concrete advice, and I don't arrange anything for anyone. At most I stimulate here and there." I could claim this statement to be my credo as author.*
– Václav Havel, Disturbing the Peace

At fifty-three the Czech playwright Václav Havel has arrived at a crossroad in his life that he hardly could have foreseen. He has been catapulted by the political events in Central Eastern Europe from his writer's desk in a quiet country house in Northern Bohemia to the president's office in Prague's Hradčany Castle, and his life has undergone a change that could hardly have been more drastic. Today his dramatic oeuvre, written over a period of about twenty-five years, comprises nine full-length and four one-act plays (in addition to some early short pieces for stage, television, and radio). When audiences will be able to see a new play by Havel is an open question.

Now, when his name as an important political figure is appearing almost daily in the international press, seems the right time to take stock of his stature as playwright and determine what he has to tell the waning twentieth century, which has seen the splitting of the atom, the rise of the computer, the mechanization of war, the development of artificial insemination, and the realization of the visions of Orwell and Kafka, on the one hand, and of Bosch and Goya, on the other.

In the postscript to a Czech edition of his plays, Havel provides us, in a typically unpretentious way, with an insight into the first stirrings of playwriting in his life. Equally typically, his statements—never couched in merely informative literal

Václav Havel at the White House, Washington, D.C., holding a portrait of T. G. Masaryk, February 20, 1990. Photograph by Jan Lukas.

prose—also contain a miniature sample of his artistic vision: "In 1956 I was twenty. It was the moment when, for the first time in our part of the world . . . there began that strange dialectic dance of truth and lie, of truth alienated by lie and deceptive manipulation of hopes."[1] Havel feels that this historical moment was felicitous for him as a playwright. Yet despite his claim that he could not have written what he did "without this concrete inspirational background,"[2] he was aware that from the moment he started writing, his plays reached beyond the local situation. As he says in a comment for future directors of *Largo Desolato,* written almost a decade later: "Any attempts to localize the play more obviously into the environment where it was conceived . . . would harm it greatly. *Whatever would make it easier for members of the audience to hope that this play did not concern them, is directly opposed to its meaning* [Havel's italics]."[3] Considering the political situation in Czechoslovakia, it is not surprising that Western theater directors and drama critics have tended not to heed the playwright's plea. With interesting and often impressive results Havel's plays have been searched for "clashes between the individual and society," for the deadening influence of "political artificial language" that no longer reflects reality, for rigid power structures and their victims, and for false values and manipulated attitudes, all giving eloquent testimony to an imaginative critic of a totalitarian political regime who was willing to go to prison for his moral convictions. The changed situation today has an odd air of déjà vu about it. In the past there was the "dissident" and "prisoner" obscuring the stature of the writer; now we have the president appearing center stage, and the playwright is literally disappearing in the wings.

When the writer Marie Winn, who translated Havel's latest plays, *Temptation* (1985) and *Slum Clearance* (1987), for the Public Theater in New York, visited Havel in Prague in the spring of 1987, he repeated to her what he had frequently said before in interviews as well as in print, namely that Czech writers "don't really like the word 'dissident.' It makes it seem like a special profession. I'm simply a playwright and it's irrelevant whether I'm a dissident or not."[4] Today one might ironically paraphrase Havel's words: I'm simply a playwright and it's irrelevant whether I'm a *president* or not.

In order briefly to stake out the area of Havel's writings, I would like to bring some other twentieth-century voices into the argument. They are disparate voices from various intellectual disciplines, but they have certain things in common: they reflect postmodern perceptions of the world, and they provide guideposts for orienting ourselves in Havel's dramatic universe—enjoyable and entertaining, yet on a deeper level surprisingly appropriate to contemporary ideas on humanity and its changing views of itself. The voices are drawn from literary theory, sociology, and physics. In his *Physics and Philosophy* the renowned physicist Werner Heisenberg, author of the principle of indeterminancy, raises two points that relate surprisingly to Havel's work. First, there is his discovery that every act of observing alters the object being observed; second, he notes the difficulty of rendering certain phenomena with ordinary words because "the distinction between 'real' and 'apparent' contradiction . . . has simply disappeared."[5] Physics, like philosophy, is faced with "a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than one of things or facts."[6]

When Eduard Huml, the sociologist in Havel's *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (written in 1968 and, compared with earlier plays, showing a refined perception of the nature of language) dictates to his secretary a treatise about human nature, his statements, though not incorrect, are altered by our observing them in the context in which they are spoken: "Various people have, at various times and in various circumstances, various needs." After pacing about thoughtfully, Huml continues the dictation: "—and thus attach to various things various values—full stop."[7] The fact that these statements, hilariously banal tautologies, are undeniably true does not prevent them from ringing false. Havel has made language transparent and explored its double nature, though in this play the experiment is still somewhat rudimentary, and his language has not yet achieved the opaque yet mirrorlike quality of his later plays—a quality he referred to in his acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Booksellers in October 1989: "Words are a mysterious, ambiguous, ambivalent, and perfidious phenomenon." They can be "rays of light in the realm of darkness" or "lethal arrows. Worst of all, at times they can be the one and the other. And even both at once!"[8]

A cluster of voices pointing in the same direction are concerned with issues of freedom and constraint, of roles and changed identities, of constellations and interdependencies. They belong to the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and the American-Spanish philosopher George Santayana. Both have written about the phenomenon of the carnival. Bakhtin sees in it "liberating energy of a world opposed to all that was ready-made and completed,"[9] whose humor "revives and renews because it is also directed at those who laugh."[10] But carnival can also unleash a sense of terror because it reveals something frightening in that which seemed "habitual and secure."[11] The notion of carnival also implies a dance of sorts, a rhythmic swaying controlled by something other than reason. Santayana's lighter but essentially similar vision of the carnival stresses its salutary aspects, its moment of freedom when the exchange of the fig leaf for the mask brings release from habitual restraint, from "custom [that] assimilates expectations."[12] It is here that we touch upon a key metaphor in Havel's writings—the dance.

Approaching his plays with the theme of the dance in mind, we discover that another pattern or rhythm, partly a light skipping, partly a dark throbbing beat, emerges beneath the tightly structured, sober surface of his texts. Occasionally the playwright lets this mysteriously threatening rhythm burst forth in the final moments of a play (*The Mountain Resort* [1976] and *Temptation* are cases in point) and calls into question the obviously cerebral control of the rest of the play. A quick scan of the metaphor of the dance in Havel's plays is revealing. In his first play, *The Garden Party* (1963), the dance in its literal meaning is present by implication only: a party surely includes some dancing. Yet the play is permeated by another kind of dance. The protagonist, Hugo Pludek, spends most of the play learning the forms of new behavior with regard to language. He observes the strictly prescribed steps of the "official language" minuet with precisely measured steps forward and backward, carefully placed silences, and clocked pauses, according to a choreography Hugo learns to master during the course of the play. Whoever joins this dance becomes an integral part of its modulations and precisely measured movements. The whole would not be the same without him. This dance of linguistic patterns, unrelated to reality (although seemingly adhering to logic), causes the incessant merriment of the audience, who come to recognize something vaguely familiar. It is here that we have the beginnings of what Havel later called the "adventure" of theater.

In his next two plays Havel perfects his choreography of patterns and movements (or dance steps and figures). In *The Memorandum* (1965) the characters' professional rise and fall turns on their ability to learn the artificial language Ptydepe. This results in a linguistic dance of power performed by the characters, punctuated by a pattern of familiar daily movements—the common exit to the cafeteria, the icons of cutlery held high and ready for use during the ritual of consumption. These two types of prescribed movements, one new but learnable (Ptydepe), the other reassuringly familiar (the ritual lunch breaks), performed with mind and body respectively, are choreographed by Havel into one interdependent cluster of motions, a perfect artifact that recharges its own mechanism and creates its own momentum.

Havel's next play, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration,* takes this double dance of mind and body one step further. Its mechanistic nature is brought home to the audience by a dramatic trick: the author jumbles the time sequence. Apologies for attempted seductions precede the attempt at seduction itself; characters who in scene 2 seemed well acquainted with the protagonist introduce themselves to him in scene 5. The comings and goings of a research team collecting "scientific" data to establish a "sample" of human life (Huml's name was chosen at random) alternate with the increasing number of women who, lovingly, are trying to run his life. All this provides a dance of pseudoscientifically and pseudoerotically patterned language that the audience begins to recognize because the patterns reappear at predictable moments. Gradually the audience also realizes that the words remain, but the characters who speak them can be exchanged. In other words, the dance as such remains, but its components, the dancers, change partners and places in the configurations. A kiss on the neck becomes an icon of special devotion; lunch brought in on a tray by wife or woman friend becomes a welcome rest for the hero from the familiar patterns of tearfully extracted declarations of love, linguistic strategies of self-defense, and push-button recall of happy memories.

Before moving on to the most challenging of Havel's plays, his Faust play *Temptation,* I will call on the social scientist among my aiding voices. Since his first major work, the German sociologist Norbert Elias has not only drawn attention to dynamic "figurations" and interdependencies but has also stressed the pervasive tendency to reduce processes conceptually to states. Using the metaphor of the dance, Elias argues against statuary concepts like, say, "the individual" and "society": "One can speak about a dance in general, but no one will imagine a dance as a form outside individuals. . . . Without the plurality of individuals who are . . . dependent on each other, there is no dance."[13] In his well-known essay "The Power of the Powerless" (1978) Havel writes about the greengrocer who puts a political slogan into his shop window not because he wants to express his political opinion but because "everyone does it" and "because these things must be done if one is to get along in life."[14] It is not necessary, Havel argues later in the essay, to believe in these things, but if one behaves as though one did, one has accepted the situation. And "by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, *are* the system."[15] There are numerous other instances where Havel has made a similar point—explicitly in his prose, implicitly and metaphorically in his plays. The dancers *are* the dance.

In *Temptation* the Tempter and the Tempted (although it is not as clear who is who as my naming them implies) hold three razor-sharp dialogues. The former, a smudgy, non metaphysical but obviously astute fellow, makes a puzzling statement. Revealing his own familiarity with the mechanisms of Foustka's reasoning process, his "intellectual rotation," he comments on how Foustka manages to turn his pet ideas "into a sort of little dance floor on which to perform the ritual celebration of his principles."[16] Principles on a dance floor? An intellectual ritual? Is the tight repartee of the two partners to be understood as a pas de deux of ambiguous ethics? But in a pas de deux each partner repeats in variations the steps of the other. Precisely! They dance with their feet, their bodies, their words, following fixed patterns of entrances and exits, appearing and speaking on cue. *Temptation* teems with variations on dance patterns presented as essential ingredients of human relationships. There are two key "dance" scenes: scene 3, the seduction scene, where Foustka, using his freshly discovered powers of linguistic persuasion, explains to Maggie what life is all about, whereupon she swears eternal love to him. The stage instructions for this scene (Havel's carefully planned, metronomically timed patterns of entrances and exits are, as always, of extreme importance) call for a dance at the back of the stage while the seduction dialogue takes place at the front. Partners are changed, and dancers float in and out, interrupting the wooing process. Repeatedly Maggie is being swept off to the dance floor by other partners, and Foustka's own choreographed linguistic mating dance, his "ritual celebration" (Fistula's perceptive words) of what he knows will appeal and achieve his purpose, suffers lamentable interruptions. While waiting for Maggie to return, however, Foustka is approached by another would-be partner, the Director, who, like a strutting peacock, performs another ritual of seduction, though more banal and obvious than Foustka's own, a stock package of I'd-like-to cliches complete with "home-made cherry brandy," a "collection of miniatures," "a good chat," and the possibility to "stay the night."[17]

In the last scene of the play another dance takes place at the institute's office party, a masked ball with a "magical theme" to the evening, including not only pendants and amulets but also "a profuson of devil's tails, hoofs and chains."[18] During the final minutes "a piece of hard rock, wild and throbbing," gets progressively louder while all figures (Foustka excepted) "succumb to the music"; "an orgiastic carnival" ensues, and the stage goes up in flames and smoke.[19] An atavistic, primitive rhythm is unleashed, obliterating the strategic dance steps by which the rest of the play was controlled on every level. The dark and threatening side of the carnival spills onto the stage. There is, however, another variation on the dance in *Temptation*. A character called only the Dancer (literal and iconic meaning in one) appears intermittently at the flat of Foustka's woman friend and brings her flowers, leaving fits of jealousy and possible (but never proven) lies in his wake. At the end of the play he and Vilma execute some complicated tango steps at the moment when Foustka realizes that his own strategic steps of several levels of deceit had been vain and useless.

Thus Havel works with flexible figurations. His characters are parts or particles of certain groups or systems, yet they make up these systems. In the case of *The Memorandum*, Office Director Josef Gross comes full circle in the system to which he belongs. He loses his leading position, is demoted, and ultimately rises again, having learned to live within the constellation of which he is a part. If he watches his step—the English idiom fits the situation perfectly—in the dance of official dos and don'ts, if he says the right words to the right person at the right moment, if he choreographs his language suitably, he might well be able to remain on top of the bureaucratic pyramid he has climbed again at the end of the play.

Havel has remarked repeatedly that he is interested in the composition of "movements of meanings, motivations, . . . arguments, concepts, theses and words" rather than "the actions of the characters or the progression of the plot."[20] This makes him indeed a "political" playwright in the oldest sense of the adjective. At a performance of *The Memorandum* in 1965, when the protagonist at the end defended the ethical collapse of the world in the jargon of "at that time newly discovered Existentialists," a perturbed member of his audience asked Havel whether he was serious about his defense of this collapse or whether he was trying to criticize this new "Western" philosophy that represented the very opposite of what grimly cheerful official Marxism was teaching. The playwright was delighted because "that particular man was disturbed, and I could not have wished for anything better."[21] The juggling of phrases masquerading as true statements had had the desired effect: it had unsettled a set mind. The playwright had illuminated the mechanism of phrases and revealed their rotating dance within a seemingly closed system.

In one of his letters to his wife from prison, which have now appeared as *Letters to Olga*, Havel writes of "the electrifying atmosphere that attracts me to the theatre," that makes the audience share in "an unexpected and surprising 'probe' beneath the surface of phenomena which, at the same time as it gives them new insight into their situation, does it in a way that is comprehensible, credible and convincing on its own terms." These probes "bear witness, in a 'model' way, to man's general situation in the world. . . . Such theatre inspires us to participate in an adventurous journey toward a new deeper questioning, of ourselves and the world."[22]

What is significant about this passage is that Havel makes it quite clear that as playwright he does not seek answers but rather asks questions; he does not set out to tell us things but invites us to an "adventure." In other words, he puts himself in the same boat with the audience. But what are these adventurous quests that he proposes to us?

Another contemporary playwright might help us out here. The connections between Tom Stoppard and Václav Havel have received some (but not enough) critical attention. Stoppard's recent play *Hapgood* (1988) reveals the artistic kinship of these two playwrights in a new way. Harkening back to Heisenberg, Stoppard's espionage thriller is built around a problem that physics and human beings have in common—their dual natures. As Kerner, the physicist, explains to Blair, the spy catcher: "Every time we look to see how we get a wave pattern, we get a particle pattern. The act of observing determines reality." And later: "Somehow light is particle and wave. The experimenter makes the choice. . . . A double agent is more like a trick of light. . . . You get what you interrogate for."[23] Apply these words to Havel's plays and you have an inkling of what they are about. As his dramatic genius has been refining itself—from the vantage point of today, *The Beggar's Opera, Largo Desolato, Temptation,* and *Slum Clearance* represent his mature period—it has become increasingly difficult to pin down what one might call the meaning of the plays. No wonder, for that is what the playwright is aiming at: "I find it a lot of fun to write various rhetorically adorned speeches in which nonsense is being defended with crystal-clear logic; I find it fun to write monologues in which, believably and suggestively, truths are spoken and which are full of lies from beginning to end."[24] Stoppard's Hapgood is perhaps a double agent, perhaps a triple agent; her identity not only remains an open question but also becomes oddly unimportant when we take up the playwright's challenge and realize that she is "like a trick of light," that her nature changes with our question. When Macheath of Havel's *The Beggar's Opera* (1972) claims to join the general whirl of petty crookedness just because he refuses to pose as a lofty hero, this attitude could well be interpreted as being either good or bad (as wave or particle), depending on the interpretation of the director or—if the latter is particularly astute about Havel's work and keeps its mystery intact—on the frame of mind of the audience. Similarly, Foustka's and architect Bergmann's voluble justifications at the end of *Temptation* and *Slum Clearance* shimmer with ambiguities. We cannot but agree to the single statements, yet we feel that the whole thing comes, uncomfortably, to more than the sum of its parts and that it is somehow false or at least suspect.

If we put the ideas gleaned from other thinkers into formulas, we get something like the following: language and reality, order and chaos, individuals as parts

Souvenir heads of Václav Havel, from a potters' market in Prague.
Photograph by Pavel Štoll.

and initiators of systems, movement and change as constants, questions determining answers. These are obviously vast and complex issues that touch—or mold? determine?—the lives of all of us. I do not think I am stretching a point if I propose that this is the stuff that Václav Havel's plays are made of, though at first encounter they may seem to be primarily a good show, exciting theater. But now, under Havel's guidance, we shelve the abstractions that represent precisely those static intellectual clichés that he has been trying to undermine all along, and we follow him, with open eyes and open minds, into what he calls the adventure of theater.

Notes

1. Václav Havel, "Dovětek autora," *Hry 1970–1976* (Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers, 1977), 302.
2. Ibid., 303.
3. Václav Havel, "Z poznámek Václava Havla, psaných pro inscenátory hry *Largo desolato*," (Samizdat, 1984), 94.
4. Marie Winn, "The Czech's Defiant Playwright," *New York Times Magazine*, October 25, 1987, 80.
5. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 175.

6. Ibid., 186.

7. Václav Havel, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, trans. Vera Blackwell (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), 18.

8. Václav Havel, "Words on Words," trans. A. G. Brain, *The New York Review of Books*, January 18, 1990, 6.

9. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11.

10. Ibid., 12.

11. Ibid., 39.

12. George Santayana, "Carnival," in *Soliloquies in England* (New York: Scribner's, 1923), 142.

13. Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), lxviii.

14. Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," trans. Paul Wilson, in *Václav Havel or Living in Truth*, ed. Jan Vladislav (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), 41.

15. Ibid., 45.

16. Václav Havel, *Temptation, Index on Censorship* 10 (1986): 34.

17. Ibid., 29.

18. Ibid., 40.

19. Ibid., 43.

20. In Karel Hvížd'ala, *Dálkový výslech*, first appeared in German as *Václav Havel, Fernverhör—Ein Gespräch mit Karel Hvížd'ala*, trans. Joachim Bruss (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1987), 238.

21. Ibid.

22. Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Knopf, 1988), 252.

23. Tom Stoppard, *Hapgood* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), 12.

24. Havel, *Fernverhör*, 237.