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Pavel Kohout

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INTERVIEWER What is more important for your life, politics or the theatre?

KOHOOUT Politics, because I defend the theatre with politics.

INTERVIEWER What do you need more for living, love or the theatre?

KOHOOUT Love, because I write for the theatre out of love.

PAVEL KOHOOUT in a fictitious interview

Pavel Kohout was given to our theatre so that there would not be any peace and quiet.¹ With these words a well-known Czech critic begins his essay on Kohout in the course of which he commiserates with an imaginary scholar whom he casts in the role of a critic writing a book on contemporary Czechoslovak theatre. Faced with this enfant terrible of the Czech stage, who has evoked more praise and more abuse than any other contemporary Czechoslovak writer, the hapless imaginary scholar would apparently feel himself 'sliding down a curving ramp' which would permit neither foothold nor sense of direction. Appreciative of this unsolicited a priori description of the problematic nature of the task at hand, I will merely try to suggest some areas of interest and value in Kohout's colourful body of work which developed within two decades from crude ideological lyrics about the social accomplishments of the Stalinist era (the author himself read or declaimed them at political youth group meetings during the early fifties) to the complex, sardonic comedies of the seventies.

To date Pavel Kohout is the author of two volumes of poetry, some nineteen plays and adaptations for the stage, ten filmscripts, and two prose works, in addition to numerous essays and commentaries – an impressive output for a man who has just turned fifty. The body of criticism which has built up around Kohout's work covers the whole spectrum from enthusiastic praise to barbed attacks.

Generally speaking, we might distinguish three critical camps whose claims, though all justified in one way or another, are completely contradictory. First, there is a body of well-disposed critics who, delighted by such colourful theatricality coming from Eastern Europe, write about Kohout's sharp sense for topicality and his ability to express what is in the air. This view, emanating mostly from outside Czechoslovakia, where Kohout has become one of the most colourful figures of

resistance against a politically repressive regime, was in fact also shared by some Czech critics when they were still free to write dispassionately about Kohout as a literary figure, and found that he had the peculiar ability to put into words a mood that 'is already there but is still missing.'² Second, there is a group of critics – East and West – who see Kohout as merely wanting to please at any cost, having a nose for what will sell and writing just for the box office. And third, there are those Czech literary men who have seen Kohout change colour too many times. They witnessed his career as a young performer celebrating the new British ambassador to Czechoslovakia a year or so after the war; a few years later they watched him give readings of fervent Stalinist poetry to youth groups, and at the age of barely twenty-four, rise to the heights of theatrical success with his first play, *The Good Song*, as crude ideologically as it was dramatically. It should be mentioned that as late as 1960 he wrote plays according to the Soviet recipe of Socialist Realism, the last one being *The Third Sister*, hardly surpassed in meticulous adherence to this particularly anti-creative literary genre. No wonder that his acrobatics on the see-saw of political developments have been watched with some resentment.³

It must be left to future scholars to explore and analyse the exceedingly complex cultural and literary climate of those years between the end of the Second World War and the events of August 1968. Such work will doubtless throw new light on the equally complex figure of the man himself. In this context, however, it must suffice to say simply that, from the vantage point of a discussion of Czech theatre in the sixties and seventies, Kohout is an exciting writer. The very ease and nonchalance with which he manages to turn out one work after another – extremely varied in nature, each seeming to bear the imprint of a different type of creative genius – makes his work a cornucopia of surprises.

During the autumn of 1967 Kohout, already known to theatre-goers in Germany from recent productions of his Švejk play and *War with the Neutts*, became the object of more general interest. The German weekly *Die Zeit* published a number of open letters exchanged between Kohout and Günter Grass.⁴ Sparked off by a momentous occasion (the publication of an article, allegedly a 'Manifesto of Czechoslovak Writers' published on 3 September 1967 in the *Sunday Times*), the topic of the letters quickly expanded to basic politico-philosophical questions. The occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops – which followed less than a year after the first letter was published, suddenly turned the correspondence into a fascinating document of one of the great political changes of those years.

² Alena Urbanová, Introduction to Kohout *Taková Láska* (Prague 1967) 25

³ It should be added here that these observers, too, have realized that since the Soviet occupation Kohout has endured various forms of persecution and harassment with a steadfast courage and no sign of bending to pressure. Tom Stoppard's recent *Caboot's Macbeth* is a tribute to the courage of Kohout and his friends (see ch. 2 n. 3, and illustration).

⁴ Also published in book form: Günter Grass/Pavel Kohout *Briefe über die Grenze. Versuch eines Ost-West-Dialogs* (Hamburg 1968)

¹ Jan Císar 'Složité případ' Afterword to Pavel Kohout *August August, august* (Prague 1968)

Space does not allow for consideration of all of Kohout's plays, nor of his entertaining and provocative prose writings, some of which have appeared in German in large editions.⁵ By discussing the most important of his plays and adaptations, this chapter is meant only to provide some insight into his dramatic work and the way in which he blends the social and human problems of his time with showy, sparkling theatricality.

Such a Love had its premiere at the Realistic Theatre in Prague in October 1957. It was an immediate success. In Czechoslovakia alone it became the most frequently performed play – 770 performances within four years of its appearance. For over two years it also held the same position in East Germany where it ran for 574 performances in thirty theatres. Further afield it was widely performed in the Soviet Union, throughout Eastern Europe, but also in the rest of Europe from Finland to Greece; even in Turkey, Israel, and South America.⁶ This tremendous success is all the more surprising if we remind ourselves of the almost banal theme of the play: a two men/one woman situation that ends in the suicide of the girl.

The main reason for the impact of this well-worn story is that Kohout had told it in a special form. Not that this form was particularly new. Among others Brecht had used it, and Pirandello before him. But Kohout seems to have found a particularly happy way of building the play around a court room scene and gradually illuminating the motivations of the characters involved. 'You may smoke,' are the opening words spoken by an unnamed character identified only as 'The Man in a Legal Robe' who throughout the play acts as a sort of judge-confessor, conducts cross-examinations, and makes the characters re-enact scenes of the past. After having thus established his authority the Man in the Legal Robe pronounces the accusation: 'I herewith open the proceedings concerning the case of L. Matysová and Co. The public prosecution considers you all guilty of a number of antisocial actions which have resulted in various injuries but particularly in murder.'⁷

Then the judge begins to question the four main characters – Lída Matysová herself, her rejected fiancé Stibor, her lover Petr and his wife. At the end of each examination the accused is asked whether he feels guilty. The answers vary from a definite 'yes' to a definite 'no.' Now the actual story begins to unfold, as the

⁵ *Weissbuch in Sachen Adam Juraček, Professor für Leibeserziehung und Zeichnen an der Pädagogischen Lehranstalt in K. kontra Sir Isaac Newton, Professor für Physik an der Universität Cambridge, nach zeitgenössischen Unterlagen rekonstruiert und mit höchst interessanten Dokumenten ergänzt von Pavel Kohout* tr Gerhard and Alexandra Baumrucker (Frankfurt/Main 1973); Kohout *Aus dem Tagebuch eines Konterrevolutionärs* tr Gustav Solar and Felix R. Bossonet (München 1969)

⁶ 'Erstes Intermezzo' 5 in Kohout *3 Theaterstücke: So eine Liebe, Reise um die Erde in 80 Tagen; August August, August; mit Prolog, Epilog und Intermezzi*; the plays tr Lucie Taubová; the Prologue, Epilogue, and Intermezzi tr Magda Štitná and Felix R. Bossonet 2nd ed (Lucerne and Frankfurt/Main 1971)

⁷ *Taková láska* 34

characters re-enact past events the way they happened. In the end Lída Matysová, caught between her fiancé's desperate pleading not to leave him, the knowledge that her lover preferred to return to his wife, and her own inner certainty that she could not live without his love, jumps out of a moving train. As the past events of this seemingly simple story are brought to light, definite concepts of 'guilt' and 'innocence' fade and it becomes less and less possible to use these absolute terms with regard to the characters' actions.

It is here perhaps that we find the essential reason for the great success of a work which, despite its virtues, is unquestionably no more exciting as drama than, say, James Saunders' *A Scent of Flowers* (1964), which deals with a related topic. For the first time since the hiatus of the Second World War an Eastern European writer had written a play about an insoluble problem. The basic questions raised by the play – who is guilty of the tragedy? who is to judge where the borderline between guilt and innocence lies? – were new and provocative in a society where an unquestionable system has been providing unshakeable truths.

With this acute sense for the 'hot topic' – a quality that has been called his glory as well as his downfall⁸ – Kohout had written a play that responded to people's increasing need to give thought to those regions of life where relationships are multi-levelled, where the smooth road of predictable development turns out to be a delusion. The *raisonneur* in the play, the Man in the Legal Robe, reaches no verdict over those who have driven the girl to her death, not with evil intention, but by acting according to their weaknesses, petty vanities, fears, and jealousies. 'Do you know a law according to which you could be punished?' he asks. No one does. The pronouncement of the final verdict is shifted to the audience. Before slowly and thoughtfully leaving the stage, the Man in the Legal Robe points to each of the characters and then to the whole audience, asking them to judge – if they can!

One other point should be made. By staging Kohout's play, the Realistic Theatre in Prague had broken with realism of detail and stressed inherent theatrically – an area in which Czechoslovak theatre was to excel a few years later. The production used only the most indispensable stage props. With the help of sound effects and visual projections it created that true theatricality which is the very opposite of the earlier realism.⁹

⁸ Cf Kohout 'Erstes Intermezzo' 24

⁹ In his comments to a German edition of his selected plays the playwright himself gives us a description of the stage set. 'On either side of the stage there were five chairs from where the actors were called either front stage to be cross-examined or onto a pyramid consisting of seven steps in order to reconstruct scenes from the past. Above were two dozen of various lights, living-room lamps, white round balls of light suggesting university lecture halls, street lights and gas lanterns. My friend and steady stage set designer, Zbyněk Kolář, used the barest means to create a stage that would provide precise orientation for the audience in addition to having a suggestive impact on its imagination. By means of lights and sounds people were led to imagine furnished apartments, noisy street-corners, fields at night,

Like Bertolt Brecht, Pavel Kohout has been chided for his willingness to use and adapt other writers' material. The fictitious interview we mentioned earlier also contains a forthright section on this potentially delicate topic. 'Don't you have the feeling that you are wearing someone else's laurels?' enquires the interviewer during a discussion of Kohout's adaptation of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*. 'Apart from a few of your own bits of humour, it was M. Verne who filled those two hours! You have taken over his story, his intrigue, his characters, even whole passages of his text, without showing the slightest sign of embarrassment! Isn't that a kind of rearranging rather than creative work?' Kohout's answer, typically crowded with images, shows none of the embarrassment his interviewer seems to expect. 'I admit, I have more fun with adaptations for the stage than with my own plays. Writing is like a game of solitaire; the author plays against himself. An adaptation, on the other hand, is like a duel. You must force the picture to leave its frame and become alive. You must breathe life even into a collection of newspaper clippings.'¹⁰ Without digressing into the question of the precision and fairness of this opinion we can see that Kohout thinks the main task of the playwright-adapter is to add 'a third dimension' to a two-dimensional work of art.

The possibility of adapting *Around the World in Eighty Days* occurred to Kohout suddenly on a summer evening in 1961. During a discussion with a friend¹¹ on the subject of favourite books, it turned out that both had recently re-read Jules Verne's classic as a result of the Russian astronaut Yury Gagarin's first flight around the earth. Immediately the playwright began to plan how to stage a work that would require about a hundred actors, a sophisticated revolving stage, and at least one elephant. The solution was provided by a collage-illustration on the dust jacket. 'I imagined on stage old M. Verne who has just decided to write the book, and next to him a contemporary of mine who knows it by heart. While the former goes through the tremendous effort of inventing the action, the latter impatiently betrays the outcome of the action ... In this way both are given the opportunity at any moment of stepping out of the action and criticizing it, moving it ahead by a stage and then, like conductors, getting on board again.'¹² This technique solved the problem of the frequent change of scene.

The problem of the numerous roles to be filled was dealt with by having the same actors play different parts. Seven male actors handled all the secondary roles (including that of the madam of a bordello), with just enough time to change their costumes. This constant time pressure backstage, this playwright argues, had an additional beneficial effect on the vitality of the play: the audience, 'witnesses of a

crammed lecture halls, nervous railway stations and even a roaring train' (Kohout 'Erstes Intermezzo' 9-10).

¹⁰ Kohout 'Zweites Intermezzo' 3

¹¹ Kohout 'Erstes Intermezzo' 12. (The friend was Václav Lohniský, the director of the Vinohrady Theatre.)

¹² Ibid 13

fictitious battle of Mr. Fogg against the stage-time of his journey around the world, are at the same time witnesses of the real race of the actors against the real time of the stage performance.'¹³ Even the actors' bows were integrated into the sparkling theatricality of this dramatic tour de force. Stepping singly outside the closed curtain, the seven supporting actors took their bows, then changed costume backstage and took another bow in the next role. This continued until each of them had taken ten bows in ten different costumes, so that they took the applause for seventy different roles in one uninterrupted procession. The audience, the author tells us, roared with delight.

With great skill the playwright also managed to integrate a double time shift. There is Jules Verne himself, constantly criticizing his novel, yet playing its main part as the Englishman, Mr Phileas Fogg, who in his London club makes the famous bet to travel around the world in exactly eighty days. The other time shift, introducing a much more radically anachronistic element into the play, is created by the guest from the twentieth century, who reveals his true identity – during the 'journey' he has acted the role of Passe-partout – only in the last line of the play.

The well-known adventures whirl past the audience with breathtaking speed: an Indian widow is whisked from her husband's funeral pyre; a roaring typhoon sweeps over the scene; an attack by American Indians alternates with an encounter with Mormon missionaries. The time pressure increases and it seems that Mr Fogg will lose his bet. But the international dateline as modern *deus ex machina* provides an unexpected extra day and a happy ending.

An age in which a journey around the world not in eighty days but in eighty minutes has become an accepted matter puts on a show of its own greenhorn past. It regards it partly with knowing superiority but also displays the wistful awareness that 'progress' is short-lived and the great achievement of today is reduced to a fumbling attempt by tomorrow. 'Don't worry, M. Verne,' says the Young Man from the twentieth century during the final moments of the play: 'You have written about your time, you have sketched pictures of strong, active people. Your books will still be read when the journey around the earth will last no more than eighty minutes.' And when the older man expresses his uncertainty about things and admits that 'this evening I often had the impression that people were laughing about me,' the Young Man answers: 'That was no derision, that was the eternal smile of youth. And those who travel around the world in eighty minutes will in turn smile at that youth. And in this smile there will always be emotion and admiration.' Asked about his name, the Young Man shrugs: 'It wouldn't mean anything to you, M. Verne. Yury Neil Gagarin-Armstrong.'¹⁴ Then the curtain falls.

¹³ Ibid 14

¹⁴ The reference here is to the German translation of the play, *3 Theaterstücke: Reise um die Erde in 80 Tagen* 96. The Czech version, *Cesta kolem světa za 80 dní* in *Divadlo* (Feb. 1962) enclosure 25, shows a slight variation in the last sentence. Rather than introducing himself with the combined astronauts' names, the young man says only: 'It wouldn't mean anything

For about ten years Pavel Kohout had been toying with the idea of adapting Karel Čapek's prophetic novel *Válka s mloky* (*War with the Newts*) for the stage. This complex piece of writing, which is considered Čapek's greatest work in the utopian mode, is a collage of a wide collection of material fictitious newspaper articles, scholarly commentaries, memoirs, and numerous other documents.

The author pretends to be a historian who reconstructs the story of the Newts from documents. Once man has discovered the species of the Newts, living in the warm and shallow lagoons of Pacific islands, he begins to use them as slaves, teaches them to speak and work, and sells them, initially as cheap labour, and later on as soldiers. In the end the Newts, having gradually become aware of the powers they have been unwittingly given, unite and begin a terrible war in order to gain more living space. Čapek's author-historian does not foretell whether man will survive the battle with this monster which he bred himself. The novel ends with a sort of inner dialogue during which the author envisages the day when a 'world war of Newts against Newts'¹⁵ might erupt, in which they would exterminate each other and people would gradually emerge from their hiding places as after the biblical deluge, telling tales of mythical countries like England or France that had existed before the great war and the great flood.

It is obvious that the broad epic dimensions of Čapek's prose work seemed the very antipode of dramatic form. Why try to put it on the stage? When the artistic director of the Vinohrady Theatre in Prague asked Kohout to write a play for the 1962/63 season, the playwright gave him a list of ten literary works which he had thought of adapting for the theatre at one time or another. The result was the 'Musical mystery' *War with the Newts*, conceived – and here again lies Kohout's sure dramatic intuition and flexibility – as a 'live television coverage of the destruction of the world, with documentary photographs about the cause and the development of the apocalypse, relayed by the last yet unsubmerged television tower.'¹⁶

The whole stage was conceived as one giant television screen. A chorus-like group of reporters propelled the action. Individually they would step out of the group in order to re-enact the most important incidents of Čapek's novel. Then they would merge again with the unified chorus which recited in hexameters the terrible story of the rise of the Newts, thus giving the events the timeless awe-inspiring character of Greek tragedy.

to you, Sir,' and is about to walk off stage as three young men crossing the stage greet him with the refrain of a 1961 hit song: 'Good morning, Major Gagarin ... !' The older man, obviously puzzled, shakes his head. By the time the German translation appeared eight years later, the astronaut-profession had expanded and the playwright – once again seizing a good opportunity – changed the ending and achieved two things: the play was not only updated but also gained political respectability.

¹⁵ Karel Čapek *Válka s Mloky* (Prague 1972) 213

¹⁶ Kohout 'Zweites Intermezzo' 4

Čapek's work had been expanded into Kohout's 'third dimension,' and had become something like a lightweight Gesamtkunstwerk, combining the explosive spectacle of a contemporary war film with the stark serenity of Greek tragedy.

The play was a huge success. Open to a variety of interpretations, Čapek's masterpiece of a utopian allegory about creatures initiated in methods of destructiveness by man himself, when placed on stage, radiated a variety of meanings that was electrifying to an audience which was anxious to hear the opposite of a single-minded ideological message. But how about censorship? Kohout's play took that hurdle too for several reasons. Čapek's work could clearly be described as anti-fascist. The satirical thrusts which are scattered throughout the novel had been variously interpreted as directed against Nazism. Moreover, in Eastern Europe Čapek's novel had been read as a satirical attack on capitalism, and as such was a prime example of good socialist writing. In addition, Čapek's *War with the Newts* appeared in a Russian translation in the late thirties and became a favourite with Russian state authorities who officially assessed the value of literary works. The author had indeed been praised for exposing the evils of capitalist society, its ruthless use of technology, and its materialistic policies.¹⁷ So much for the novel's earlier political career.

However, after 1948, when Čapek was about to fall into political disfavour again, an ironic incident,¹⁸ which demonstrates another one of the truly absurd touches in which recent Czech cultural life is so rich, saved him for Czech literature and thus provided Kohout's play with a respectable background. In this way, most ironically, Čapek's work found itself with just the right credentials to pass the censorship despite the fact that it consistently attacks non-democratic systems in any form as the prime enemies of all human culture and intellectual freedom.¹⁹

The Czechoslovak audience of course understood. And Kohout knew them well; he speaks as one of them when he writes: 'I wanted neither to correct nor to draw to a conclusion Čapek's *War with the Newts*. There was no need for that with this

¹⁷ Součková *A Literary Satellite* 48

¹⁸ After the Communist take-over in 1948 Čapek had been declared a bourgeois writer whose only (and ideologically minor) claim to acceptance was that he was an anti-fascist. His literary image was saved by an enthusiastic dissertation of a young Russian student of literature. Since his dissertation was Russian, it was, of course, auctoritas, and Čapek's reputation was re-established.

¹⁹ For a fuller discussion of the political aspects of Čapek's novel, see William E. Harkins *Karel Čapek* (New York and London 1962) ch. 10. An additional insight into the see-saw of literary censorship is that various parts of the original text of *War with the Newts* were omitted in the post-1948 editions of the novel: most notably the 'Molokoff Manifesto,' a spoof on the grandiloquent statements of Soviet statesmen, containing a pun on the name of the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs V. Molotov, a name which is etymologically close to the Czech word 'Mlok,' meaning a newt. (I owe this inside story to Josef Škvorecký who at the time worked in the publishing house which brought out the 'censored' version of Čapek's novel.)

play – this disturbing fairy tale for adults, this parable which was given a new meaning by our restless times. I did not want to do more than read it with the intellect and the feeling of a man who has lived to see those times ... I merely added twenty-five years and a third dimension.²⁰ During the final moments of the play one of the characters asks the same agonized question which is found on the last page of Čapek's work: "And what about people?" But instead of the latter's quiet withdrawal into philosophic silence – 'I don't know what will happen then,' is Čapek's last sentence – Kohout launches an appeal, the vagueness of which does not mitigate its emotional urgency. As the waters begin to rise on stage as a sign that the flood of the Newts is upon us, all of the actors come rushing to the front of the stage and call into the audience:

People! Let us not be poor in spirit!
Let us not stand on the volcano five minutes
before it erupts!
Only cattle go to the slaughterhouse!
People never do!
They put up a fight to the last
People! He who hesitates will perish!
Let us fight, people, the war with the Newts ...!²¹

Then the lights go down on stage. When they go on again after a while, the stage is empty but for a large portrait of Karel Čapek.

A year after having completed his adaptation of Čapek's novel Kohout began to work on Jaroslav Hašek's *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka* (The Good Soldier Švejk).²² This was a difficult task, as the playwright well knew. About thirty dramatists had tried their hands on Hašek's great comic epic, including Bertolt Brecht whose fascination with the talkative dogcatcher in uniform went back to the late twenties when he had worked on a dramatic version with Erwin Piscator.²³ Kohout was well acquainted with Brecht's version of Švejk. He also knew why the German playwright's adaptation would not particularly please a Czech audience: not only

²⁰ Kohout 'Comment' dated Sept. 1962 to Karel Čapek/Pavel Kohout *Válka s Mloky* in *Divadlo* (Feb. 1963)

²¹ Ibid 26

²² Jaroslav Hašek's *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* was written between 1921 and the author's death in 1923, at which time he had completed only four of the planned six volumes. This discussion will keep the Czech spelling of Švejk's name, since there seems no reason to use the generally accepted German spelling 'Schweik.'

²³ Erwin Piscator staged the work in his proletarian theatre in Berlin where it ran in 1929, with the great actor Max Pallenberg in the title (and only) role. The other roles were filled with puppets and film strips conceived by Georg Grosz.

would it be impossible for them to recognize in Brecht's figure the Josef Švejk whose favourite expressions they all knew by heart, but they would also resent Brecht's total misconception of the atmosphere of occupied Czechoslovakia, not to speak of the glaring mistake of envisaging him as a Czech soldier in the German army. Other dramatic adaptations of Hašek's novel, many of which were by local Czech authors, were, for different reasons, not much more satisfactory.

In his version Pavel Kohout 'wanted to discover a technique that would leave to Hašek what was Hašek's and give the adapter the opportunity to make his own contributions.'²⁴ First of all, the playwright concentrated only on the first of the novel's four books which is the most colourful one from the point of view of characterization and which also most clearly reflects the basic conflict – that of the individual against power. Hašek himself regarded it as 'a sort of condensed course in unarmed self defense.' Second, Kohout again used the approach that had proved so successful in *Around the World in Eighty Days*. The protagonists were given their parts and the remaining twenty-four parts were distributed among a type of chorus, 'a sextet of actors.' Kohout's third aim was to quote as much as possible. His very subtitle reflects this: *Josef Švejk, or 'They've knocked off our Ferdinand' and other quotes*. Many speeches from the first part of the novel were transferred to the stage verbatim or with only minimal deletions. Kohout, who regarded the finished dramatic product as something like a musical theme on which the pianist improvises, claimed that he adapted Švejk because he wanted to stage the play himself. He envisaged it from the start as team-work and felt that the staging was 'an example of happy collaboration that eliminated the borderlines between the text and the performance: both grew simultaneously.'²⁵

The performance was conceived on three levels. The first one was that of the protagonist and several main characters directly involved in Švejk's adventures. The second level, in strong contrast to the realistic encounters of the main characters, consisted of a colourful running commentary on contemporary problems provided by the 'sextet of actors' who danced and sang their way through the performance, appearing in turn as officers, prisoners, judges, policemen, spies, and others. In this way the production succeeded in separating contemporary implications and jibes against present circumstances, which would catch the audience's imagination, from Hašek's actual text so well-known to the Czech audience. A third level developed from the combined effect of the stage set, the music, and the choreographed movements of the actors.

On a screen backstage the titles of the various scenes were projected on the portal of a movie theatre. Then the screen was lifted and the historical events were acted out by a group of dancers who moved with the cramped and jerky speed of characters in old films to the sound of typical silent-film music. Kohout himself gives us a vivid description of the most successful of these scenes: '... the wonderful

²⁴ Kohout 'Zweites Intermezzo' 5

²⁵ Ibid 7-8

scene of the soldiers' mass on the drill-ground at Motol near Prague, a mass which is being read for the regiment going to the firing line by military curate Katz who is quite drunk, with godless Švejk as altar boy. Both are given the order that the mass must be "carried out rapidly and skillfully, because in a modern war the movements of the armies must be carried out equally rapidly and skillfully." The actual reason for the hurry is that the officers wish to get to the casino as soon as possible. It is a scene of world-proportions, both *crazy* and full of horror [Kohout actually uses these words in English] at the same time. As background music Jan F. Fischer used the waltz from the *Blue Danube*. Played at a slow and ceremonious pace at the outset, its speed was doubled whenever it was repeated. Švejk's altarboy bell took over the function of the triangle. Jiří Němeček [the choreographer] constantly increased the speed of Katz's movements at the altar as well as those of the soldiers "on the screen" who kept kneeling down and getting up more and more quickly, so that the mass turned into a sort of monstrous sports event. All in all the scene lasted one minute and fifteen seconds; and the audience reacted according to its striking brevity.²⁶

When Kohout and his team took their *Švejk* production to Hamburg in 1967, commentators, remembering Piscator and Brecht, tended to speculate critically on the tameness of the songs that 'had no bite,' and on the non-aggressive treatment of the power theme.²⁷ However, the Hamburg Schauspielhaus was sold out every time *Švejk* appeared on the program.

Kohout's three dramatic adaptations discussed here have proved to be among the most highly demanded items of Czechoslovak literary export. Part of the appeal is caused by the very choice of material; in each case he has adapted a well-known work of literature for the stage. Further, the playwright-adapter has managed to preserve the particular genius and quality of the original work and at the same time to suggest in a highly imaginative way its meaning for the contemporary world. In addition, Kohout and his team (the good work of which he mentions at every opportunity) have created in each case excellent theatrical entertainment which, after all, has been the key to the best writing for the theatre ever since the ancient Greeks.

When Kohout was asked to write a play for the Vinohrady theatre in Prague in 1962, he said he preferred to do an adaptation because it would be easier to have it accepted by the censors. Four years later, in 1966, the Vinohrady theatre was still struggling under the pressure of censorship and had just been forced to take three plays off its playbill. Since he was closely affiliated with the theatre Kohout shared its problems – a feeling which he put in his typically histrionic way: "For quite some time I have felt like a clown who waits behind the curtain to be called into the

circus-ring, gets slapped in the face by the manager, takes a bow, and disappears in order to wait some more!"²⁸

The enthusiastic reaction of his colleagues to this remark resulted in the creation of another 'team' and Kohout's new play, *August August, august*, which opened on 12 May 1967. The action consists of a circus performance with trapeze artists, an elegant top-hatted Circus Manager using flowery language, a band which plays resolute marches and slow waltzes, and sounds fanfares according to the varying nature of the circus acts – and, of course, the inevitable clown who comes racing into the ring, asks awkward questions, believes anything anyone says, gets his face slapped, and delights the audience.

The figure of the clown had always fascinated Kohout as belonging 'neither to a nation nor a race; his mask purposely hides all distinguishing features, so that he is more than, say, a Czech or a Jew.'²⁹ The playwright was of course also aware of the theatrical possibilities inherent in the clown's relationship to his fellow men, expressed most succinctly by St Chrysostom who described the clown as 'he who gets slapped.'³⁰ By being the laughing-stock, the clown caters to the feelings of superiority of the audience, and the half comic, half painful punishment, administered on his forever grinning face, provides a type of crude amusement which has lost less of its appeal in the course of time than one might expect.

Kohout makes plentiful use of these slappings. No sooner has August spent a minute or so in the circus ring on stage than he gets slapped by the Circus Manager for lack of respect. He undergoes a test administered by the Circus Superintendent who – jovially making the audience his accomplice – promises August ten crowns if he can stand getting ten slaps in the face. August happily agrees. The Superintendent gives him nine slaps and then walks off.

There is another, subtler quality about the ancient figure of the clown, however, and it is this quality which primarily seems to have stirred Kohout's artistic imagination. No matter how often he gets beaten up, the clown is none the worse for it. He is never allowed to become a victim for more than a moment. His naive joy of life is not tempered by the blows he receives, his dream is never crushed. An instant after having been slapped, August can leap with delight at the thought of beautiful white horses. Like a cork he bounces back on the crest of the wave, regardless of how often he has been submerged. Kohout's August is never shaken in his belief that his own great dream – to train eight white Lippizaner horses for an exquisite dressage performance – is shared by the entire audience:

AUGUST ... *running excitedly along the outside of the ring calls into the audience* That's beeeeeeeautiful! That's ... that's ... that's ... beeeeeeeautiful!
SUPERINTENDENT What is beautiful, August?

²⁶ Ibid 7

²⁷ Klaus Watner 'Hamburger Revuen' *Theater heute* (Nov. 2968) 31

²⁸ Cf Kohout 'Zweites Intermezzo' 11

²⁹ Ibid 12-13

³⁰ Enid Welsford *The Fool* (Garden City, NY 1961) 318

AUGUST To polish eight white Lippizan horsies!
 SUPERINTENDENT And you would like to train them too, August?
 AUGUST That would be super!
 SUPERINTENDENT So why don't you try it.
 AUGUST That'll be super! *Racing delightedly to the curtain backstage* Horsies – horsies – chickee – chickee – chickee³¹

As the Prince in a fairy tale is prepared to face horrible monsters and dangers to rescue the beautiful Princess from the clutches of whatever monster may hold her in his power, August is ready to accept any 'condition' put to him to achieve his dream object, the horses. Perhaps we remember Samuel Beckett's clowns who also have to deal with a condition – that of waiting. We may feel Kohout is overstating the case when he claims that 'those conditions which my August is given by the Manager, become the basic condition of human life.' However, we cannot fail to realize that the rising and ebbing waters of joy and disappointment, of hope and despair in the play are conceived on a much deeper level than a clown's bouts of laughter and tears. Kohout, as always writing not *for* the stage but *with* the stage, knew that heavy-handed symbolism was the enemy of the theatre. He had to avoid 'letting the circus roof be crushed by the weight of the allegory, and turning the circus ring into a mere symbol.' What was needed were all the trimmings of a real circus performance with its roars of laughter, its breathless tension, its gaudy colours and screeching sounds.

August August, august is a work that has to be approached like a Russian doll which contains another doll, which contains another doll. The play contains an idea within an idea within an idea. The first idea is that August, the circus-clown, will never learn to handle life's situations and will always be beaten up. Holding on tenaciously to his wish-dream – those eight magnificent Lippizaner horses at his gentle command – August will never learn about the impossibility of realizing his dream: his personal inadequacy (he is totally ignorant of horses and calls them as one would call chickens); his inadequate position in society (the Manager would never entrust his clown with a dressage act); and the overall impossibility of such a situation ever occurring (the modest circus has no chance of ever owning such priceless animals).

There is nothing new about the literary figure of the dreamer. He has a long line of ancestry from Don Quixote onward. But there is a ring to Kohout's play which had a definite meaning for the Czechoslovak audience. The top brass of the circus never deny the possibility of August's dream coming true, in fact they keep referring to it in a friendly manner. However, the dream material is carefully measured out and when August overdoes his dreaming he gets a lesson that causes a rude awakening. At a certain point a man's dream becomes punishable: one

should be careful not to overstep the limit. The analogy needs no further elucidation.

There is another way of looking at the dream-theme in the play which is more fruitful for literary analysis. Like a true clown August is completely naive. None of his actions are 'sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought.' He takes everything literally because, in Santayana's words, 'he sees the surface only, with the lucid innocence of a child ... He is not at all amused intellectually; he is not rendered wiser or more tender by knowing the predicaments into which people inwardly fall; he is merely excited, flushed and challenged by an absurd spectacle.'³² August's logic is completely literal. Among the many instances of humorous effects produced by the clown's literal-mindedness we might mention the conversation with the Superintendent who reads a letter allegedly addressed to August in which an unknown lady expresses her infatuation for the clown.

SUPERINTENDENT *reading* 'Dear Sir' ... *to August* What are you looking for?
 AUGUST I am looking for that Sir.
 SUPERINTENDENT But that's you, don't you see?
 AUGUST Me? That's super!
 SUPERINTENDENT 'Dear Sir. From the moment you appeared in our town I have been lost! Where are you racing off to?
 AUGUST To look for her.
 SUPERINTENDENT Stop! That was only a turn of phrase.
 AUGUST Where did it turn?
 SUPERINTENDENT Nowhere. She's gone overboard about you.
 AUGUST Did she drown?
 SUPERINTENDENT No. She wasn't even near the water.
 AUGUST So where does she write me from?
 SUPERINTENDENT Silly fool. She is simply all beside herself.
 AUGUST So why doesn't she get back into herself?
 SUPERINTENDENT Oh, forget it. What I meant to say was that she isn't herself.
 AUGUST So who is she then?

And a little later, as August answers a question put in the letter:

SUPERINTENDENT She is asking you that question.
 AUGUST I know. That's why I'm answering her.
 SUPERINTENDENT She can't hear you.
 AUGUST *sobbing* Huhuhuhu!
 SUPERINTENDENT What's the matter?
 AUGUST So she's deaf!³³

³¹ *August August, august* 13

³² Santayana 'The Comic Mask' 135-6

³³ *August* 16

The deadlock in communication, illustrated by a number of contemporary playwrights, has here become something entirely different. The Superintendent's inability to communicate with August is based on the mechanical use of habitual images and the effect is a refreshing revival of the sense of language rather than the sense of stultification we get, say, from Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*.

However, despite brilliantly entertaining moments, one cannot escape the feeling that in this play Kohout has given us rather too much of a good thing. The first act is much the better of the two and the repetition does not yet jar on us. August and his identical clown-wife Lulu – a large doll come to life – produce a child despite the fact that they have not been able to find a stork. Stuck between the generations – his own clown-son, August junior, who wants to imitate him, and Bumbul, his clown-father-in-law, who wants to prevent him from realizing his dream – August tries but fails to kill Bumbul with a sledge-hammer because a fly was sitting on Bumbul's skull and August, as we all know, cannot harm a fly.

After the intermission however, when the audience have been sold sausages, sandwiches, and beer by attendants walking through the aisles as in a circus, events on stage begin to multiply and we get the feeling that the playwright's teeming inventive imagination got the better of his dramatic sense. Although he finally comes back to the central issue of the play – the dream – the dramatic tension has been lessened too much to be recovered. When August, with Lulu and his child as spectators, is given tails, a top hat, and a whip, and is asked to perform his great dream-number, the horse dressage, we sense something sinister brewing. During the preparations a huge cage is set up, bestly roars are heard from outside, and Lulu, who is asked to take a seat in the cage, expresses increasing anxiety.

The Manager's last warning is ominous: 'A dream should remain a dream, August. Otherwise you kill it. Do you understand that?'³⁴ August's affirmative answer is, of course, meaningless. The only thing he understands about a dream is that 'a dream is a dream if it is dreamt,'³⁵ and the only thing he wants is to perform his dressage with eight white Lippizaner horses. August is incapable of understanding that his great wish is only a dream and that it will be destroyed once it becomes reality. Instead of the white dream-horses the audience catches a fleeting glimpse of the first ravenous tiger rushing toward August as the lights go out and a deafening drum-whirl fills the air. When, a few seconds later, the lights go on again, the performers take their bows from an empty circus ring. With flowery solemnity the Manager speaks the final words to the audience, wishing them 'the

³⁴ Ibid 72. This is a reference to the poem *Balada o snu* (Ballad on Dreams) by the Czech poet Jiří Wolker (1900-24) whom the Manager is paraphrasing. The reference becomes even more ironic if we remind ourselves that Jiří Wolker was an idealistic socialist poet.

³⁵ Ibid 77-8

very best for your way homeward and for our further common way into the future –.'³⁶

The playwright tells us that these final moments of the play were a great problem for the director and himself. This, however, was not for the reason we might think. The fact that the clown-figure had to disappear caused a technical problem due to the curtain calls. To our hypothetical question: why not simply leave the clowns backstage and so stress the whole point of the play?, Kohout replies: 'The bow is an indispensable part of the production. It can be its crowning glory or ... it can erase the impression of the performance. In *August* it was particularly important. For over two hours we were balancing on the narrow path between circus and allegory. If the clowns did not reappear at the end, the play would become distinctly allegorical. If, on the other hand, they took a normal bow, their deaths would appear as a cheap circus trick.'

Playwright, director, and main actor solved the problem as follows: 'When the performance was ended, all other performers took their bows to the tune of hearty march music. During the ninety seconds that elapsed since their last scene in the cage the four clowns had taken off their make-up and put on civilian clothes. When they came into the ring, the applause stopped for a moment. It was as if they had taken the audience's breath away. Then the applause redoubled. Four pale, tired actors' faces formed just as striking a contrast to the motley circus than had the four clown masks previously. There was indeed not a trace of the clowns left but at the same time they had risen. The circus and the allegory were united again.'³⁷

On 15 February 1974 a double bill with two one-act plays on it by Pavel Kohout opened at the City Theatre in Ingolstadt, Bavaria. The program contained a letter by the author to the director which comments on the nature of both plays, *Bad Luck under the Roof* ('un petit grandguignol' 1972) and *Fire in the Basement* ('a fiery farce' – 1973). Together with the slightly older *War on the Third Floor* ('a military play' – 1970) which had been performed earlier, they form 'a trilogy of one-act plays under the overall title *Life in a Quiet House ...*'³⁸

The three plays are variations on a theme that could be defined as a humorous version of a Kafka nightmare. State authorities of undefinable but obviously vast powers penetrate into the peaceful habitat of average couples and destroy their lives within the dramatic time at their disposal. In each case the powers' interference occurs in the same, seemingly inexplicable way. Servants of the state suddenly

³⁶ Ibid 72

³⁷ Ibid 'Epilog' 4

³⁸ Kohout, a letter of 30 Jan. 1974, reprinted in the program of the double bill performance of *Pech unterm Dach* and *Brand im Souterrain* at the Stadttheater Ingolstadt in the spring of 1974, 2. The program contained the entire text of both plays in German translation by Gerhard and Alexandra Baumrucker. The original Czech titles are *Pech pod strechou* and *Požár v suterénu*.

appear in the guise of postmen who have passkeys, fire-fighters sliding down a pole, masked guards emerging out of closets. Within a matter of seconds they have changed the quiet rooms – bedrooms in each case – into a hectic scene of an uncannily military nature. They shout orders, telephone secret higher authorities, conduct cross-examinations of the stunned tenants and thwart their questions with incomprehensible ‘official’ language.

In each case the victims are a couple – similarly surprised, harassed, and driven to unforeseen extremes. Each time they are in bed – either in reality or in wishful thought. In *War on the Third Floor*, a peaceful middle-aged couple is awakened from their post-midnight sleep; in *Fire in the Basement* a young couple, married three days before, are caught frolicking happily in their new marital bed; in *Bad Luck under the Roof* a shy young woman visits for the first time a shy young man in his apartment, and, although the official intruder finds them still sitting up, the idea of a bed and what goes with it is not far from their minds. In all three plays the privacy of a bed, with all its connotations of the joys of intimacy, peace, and safety from the world outside, is put in glaring contrast to the uniformed officiousness, punctilious legality, and omnipotence of superior powers which, by the end of the play, have taken full possession of the scene.

Of the three plays, the first one, *War on the Third Floor*, is, in its parabolic simplicity, the best and strongest of the pieces. An obscure citizen, Emil Bláha, is fetched out of his marital bed and told that he has been chosen to engage in a fight with a representative from another nation because, as one of the officials readily explains, society has finally ‘succeeded in eliminating wars which formerly used to extinguish whole nations. However, responsible politicians have expressed the fear – a fully justified fear – that warring is part of those atavistic tendencies which cannot be eliminated by a mere signature ... Therefore on the top level the secret decision was made that in future wars should take place in a quasiprivate way.’ History, the official continues, has once again inspired this new political idea; we know from the ancients that ‘when the armies were exhausted, for example at the gates of Troy, each side simply chose a man who fought representing them all.’³⁹ And so Emil Bláha has been chosen with complete scientific objectivity by a computer. His opponent, a wine merchant from Saarbrücken, chosen by similar means, is just arriving fully armed on the train and is expected within a few minutes.

Bláha’s protestations, his attempts to call the police or his lawyer become progressively weaker. Finally even his wife, giving in to the mounting pressure, begins to egg him on, at first inspired by fear: ‘Emil, for God’s sake, start shooting, or else he’ll kill us!’ Later on, as grenades explode and shots riddle the windows and furniture, his wife begins to repeat hysterically the battle-cries of the observing officers: ‘Emil! Move forward into the hall! Throw the grenades ... Pump him full of lead! Make mincemeat of him!’⁴⁰ In the end both ‘representative warriors’ have

been killed and the generals, standing over the corpses and discussing the unfortunate deadlock, play with the tentative idea that it might be better after all to return to the old, tried methods of waging wars.

Two years after this bitterly funny and theatrically powerful play was performed in German in Oberhausen in 1971, the director and manager of the City Theatre in Ingolstadt asked Kohout to write another play expressly for this theatre. The result is the two short plays, *Bad Luck under the Roof*, and *Fire in the Basement*, which the playwright considers as sequels to the older play, forming the trilogy *Life in a Quiet House*. The theme and dramatic structure of these two later plays closely follow their forerunner. In *Bad Luck under the Roof* a timid painter, who has been working on a portrait of his beloved for four years (alone with her for the first time he may find the courage to confess his passion), is suddenly confronted by a man stepping out of his own clothes closet and accusing him of being a murderer. Shedding a false belly and beard, the man explains jovially that he is only a link in a chain of command, that he only fulfills the order of his bosses ‘who know exactly what they are doing,’⁴¹ and if the painter wanted to use the time before the Examination Officer arrived and jump into bed with the lady – after all, it was only natural – he, the Man, would gladly retreat to the kitchen for a while. As the girl becomes increasingly suspicious and finally believes the painter to be really a murderer, the latter, driven into a frenzy, shoots the intruder as well as a number of policemen who break down the door at the end of the play.

The author tells us that the play explores the way in which ‘a constantly repeated lie or absurd claim, supported by all the means a modern power has at its disposal, becomes a reality.’⁴² We are reminded not only of Goebbels’ notorious dictum but also of well-known plays as different as Bertolt Brecht’s *Mann ist Mann* (*A Man is a Man*, 1926) and Max Frisch’s *Andorra* (1961), both of which explore the way a system can change an individual. In Brecht’s play, the hero takes on his new identity because he is threatened and brainwashed. In Frisch’s parabolic model the pressure of a constantly repeated idea – the image society has of the hero – results in his being imperceptibly moulded to fit this image. Kohout’s farcical version falls somewhere between the two, steering equally clear of Brecht’s activist lesson and Frisch’s depth psychology. Kohout has telescoped the hero’s development and lightened the burden of the central idea by letting farce and high-spirited theatricality take over the action.

The third part of the trilogy, *Fire in the Basement*, is theatrically superior to *Bad Luck under the Roof*. The horseplay of the two naked newly-weds, made stageworthy by a shaking bed, tangled legs hanging over the bedside, and heads popping up and down, reflects Kohout’s reputed sense for theatricality. Equally appealing is the idea of having the fire-fighters constantly sliding down and creeping up their pole, in full fighter’s uniform, weighed down with all kinds of complicated equipment, the

³⁹ *Krieg im dritten Stock/Evol* (Lucerne and Frankfurt/Main 1970) 22

⁴⁰ *Ibid* 31, 32

⁴¹ *Pech unterm Dach* 9

⁴² Kohout, letter of 30 Jan. 1974

essential or non-essential nature of which they constantly discuss with clipped professionalism. The difference between these heavily clad, officious, self-possessed intruders and the naked, dazed young couple provides an irresistible effect.

The fire-fighter's claim that the kitchen is on fire turns out to have been a lie, and the smoke issuing from the kitchen door whenever a fire-fighter heroically enters it, turns out to come from a smoke bomb. But by the time the young couple discover this, they have signed an expensive insurance policy and are left with no way in which to prove that they have been deceived. Their wedding clothes, the only property to have been salvaged – their small savings disappeared with the efficient fire-brigade – look sadly wilted on their sagging figures. Moreover the pleasure of taking them off again at the end of the play and returning to love-making is marred by an intense question in their minds. Have they been manipulated by ordinary thieves, or by a power the workings of which they do not comprehend? As the young man again begins to undress his wife, he suddenly freezes: 'And what if they weren't any thieves after all?' She (anxiously): 'What if it's only sort of by the way that they ...'⁴³ Both (in unison): ... steal?'

Kohout tells us that *Fire in the Basement* deals with the features of a power that is beyond public control. 'The more totalitarian it becomes, the more extensive areas of an individual's life become the private hunting grounds for all those who are permitted or dare to act in the name of this power. Such mini-powers are more dangerous than the maxi-power because they act violently in the private sphere of the individual, without ideological explanations and with undisguised cynicism.'⁴⁴ As usual, Kohout's theoretical comment is catchingly formulated but contains a mixture of ideas, some of which are fuzzy. However, this does little harm to the theatricality of his play.

There is another play, *Poor Murderer*⁴⁵ – a bold experiment, it seems – that ought to receive some attention here, not only because it was actually staged on Broadway in the autumn of 1976, but also because it reflects Kohout's theatrical genius in all its aspects. It is another adaptation, but this time the playwright has gone far beyond the original work which he has used merely as a touchstone rather than a model.

⁴³ *Brand in Souterrains* 33

⁴⁴ Kohout, letter of 30 Jan. 1974

⁴⁵ In October 1976 *Poor Murderer* (translated, from the Czech original and the German version of Gerhard and Alexandra Baumrucker, by Herbert Berghof and Laurence Luckinbill) was staged at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York with Laurence Luckinbill and Maria Schell in the main parts. The author himself was denied permission by the Czechoslovak authorities to attend the première of his play. In a letter of 30 September 1976, which was reprinted in the playbill, we find the moving lines: 'You're about to see a play created five years ago. Since then it has appeared on tens of stages, in hundreds of performances, and has been seen by thousands of people. I don't know who all the people are who have seen it but I know one person who never saw it: me.'

The theatrical possibilities of creating a character who acts 'abnormally' are vast. Uncertainty as to whether the character is acting abnormally because he is a madman or because he is merely pretending to be insane increases the tension on stage. The audience are left with an open question which creates the intrinsic tension that is the basic ingredient of good theatre: is the character's behaviour a game played in order to achieve a certain purpose, or is it total lack of reason that prompts his actions? Playwrights have known the magic of this tension all along. *Hamlet*, of course, comes readily to mind but there are also Büchner's *Woyzeck*, Pirandello's *Henry IV* and, more recently, Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* which explores the borderline between sanity and madness from a vast and constantly shifting variety of angles. It is not surprising that Kohout's sense of theatre led him to attempt an experiment of this sort, creating a stage where, in Pirandello's words, 'everything is in the making.'

Kohout found the material in the Russian writer Leonid Andreyev's story, *Mysl* (1902) – the title could be rendered as 'Thought' as well as 'Mind' – which analyses a man's psychic condition. The story consists of the hero's confession addressed to a board of psychiatrists trying to determine whether he is sane or insane. The hero, Kerzhentsev, a physician by profession, is to be tried for murder, and he records his state of mind down to the most minute detail, as he reconstructs the history of the murder from the moment when he first conceived the idea of killing to the moment of his arrest. Andreyev's story analyses the murderer's mental state with such precision and insight that it stirred discussions not only among the general public, but also among contemporary psychiatrists.⁴⁶ In order to evade legal punishment, Kerzhentsev pretends to be insane for some time before he commits the deed which, he reasons, will then be ascribed to his abnormal psyche rather than to criminal intentions. His downfall comes after the murder when his assurance that he had been deceiving others suddenly turns into the shattering realization that he may have been deceiving himself.

Kohout's dramatized version, *Ubohý vrab*, was written between June 1970 and July 1971, and is built around these two basic tensions: sheer intellect pitched against intuition and emotion; madness against sanity. However – and here lies Kohout's originality which he would call the 'third dimension' – the borderlines between the two opposites constantly merge and switch sides, so that the problem remains fluid. The playwright achieves this effect by making the main character not a physician, as in Andreyev's story, but a famous actor. The official examination which is to determine his sanity or insanity, is conducted as an experiment, a sort of shock treatment through 'reconstruction of his imagined crime [which] would bring order to his shattered mind.'⁴⁷

⁴⁶ The Academy of Medicine in St Petersburg devoted an entire meeting to an analysis of Kerzhentsev's character; as a result a paper was published, dealing with the psychiatric analysis of Andreyev's story. Cf James B. Woodward *Leonid Andreyev* (London 1969) 77-8.

⁴⁷ Kohout *Poor Murderer* (New York 1977) 98

Kerzhentsev is to act a part in a play performed on an improvised stage in an asylum where he is an inmate. The chief psychiatrist, the 'Professor,' has devised the experiment and plays the part of the audience during the 'play.' Actors – former colleagues of Kerzhentsev – play the other parts; Kerzhentsev plays himself. Interrupted by discussions about props, the Professor's occasional interventions, actor's asides, and the protagonist's marginal explanations, the 'performance' rambles along, operating on several levels at the same time. We witness scenes from Kerzhentsev's childhood and adolescence; his revenge on his hated father; his fanatical belief in the supremacy of reason; his declaration of love to beautiful Tatyana and her refusal because she thinks he is just playing another role; the moment of decision to murder the hated rival. Under medical supervision the murder itself is re-enacted, as a sort of therapy for the actor. Kerzhentsev does indeed commit the murder but he 'kills' in his 'role' as an actor. In the role of Hamlet killing Polonius – snatches of *Hamlet* are recited throughout the restaged 'performance' in the asylum – he commits his planned murder while in full view of the audience during the bedroom scene with his mother, the Queen.

At the very end of the 'performance' comes the final twist of the intermingling of reality and fiction, truth and pretense. After Kerzhentsev has completed his part and, as Hamlet, 'killed' his victim as Polonius, the Professor asks another actor to play the same scene again, the way it really happened in Kerzhentsev's earlier performance. The new Hamlet, instead of thrusting the weapon through the curtain behind the Queen's bed, suddenly falls to his knees and begins to howl like a wounded dog. This, the Professor explains, was what Kerzhentsev really did during that fateful performance. Now Kerzhentsev has been shown the real truth. The murder had been the fiction of his imagination; in reality he had failed at the crucial moment.

His mind had tricked him and he is left with the terrible question 'Have you pretended to be insane, to be able to kill – or have you killed because you are insane?' And it answers itself: 'You believed you were pretending but you are really mad. You are just the stupid, decadent little actor Kerzhentsev ... the mad actor Kerzhentsev.'⁴⁸ It is now that the professor declares that his experiment has failed. The great actor's mind was to remain permanently clouded.

But just as his friend and intended 'victim,' Tatyana's husband, expresses his regret about the failure, Tatyana herself, who has been watching the whole 'performance,' declares that she is now sure she had wronged Kerzhentsev whose declaration of love she had dismissed as being merely another 'role' he was playing. She calmly expresses her decision to leave her husband and attempt to nurse Kerzhentsev back to sanity. As she leaves the stage, her husband opens once more the curtain on the improvised stage with the words: 'Kerzhentsev ... You really did

kill me!⁴⁹ Kerzhentsev is still sitting there as before, flanked by two attendants of the asylum. There is a smile on his face.

There is no question that the play is a brilliant piece of sheer theatre. Like Pirandello's *Henry IV*, it manages to erase the borderline of reality and imagination by opposing the ordering, formalizing quality of the human mind with the deceptive and incalculable quality of life itself. Like Peter Weiss, Kohout is able to stack levels of reality and imagination within each other like boxes with interchangeable lids: Weiss's own comment on *Marat/Sade* could apply to Kohout's play: 'it is theatre, we act out a reality for you, and in this reality we act out a play within a play.'⁵⁰ The play within the play here lacks the philosophical depth of Weiss' drama, and it also lacks the formal perfection of Pirandello's experiments. Nevertheless, by sustaining with great dramatic skill the tension between the destruction of fiction by reality and of reality by fiction, Kohout has given a form to a problem that has preoccupied man ever since he became conscious of the powers of his imagination.

August 1975 saw another premiere of a Kohout play, this time in Lucerne, Switzerland. *Roulettes*⁵¹ was written in 1974/75 and, is also based on a short story by Leonid Andreyev. In *Mind*, Andreyev explored the psychological recesses of the tension between sanity and madness, whereas the story *Darkness* is more philosophical in that it deals with the complex, multilevelled, and perennial theme of human idealism versus materialism.

Andreyev's tale has a semi-political history which throws light on the dynamic nature of its theme. Among the many stories told to him by Maxim Gorky (who supported Andreyev greatly in the early stages of his literary career), there was one relating to the socialist revolutionary terrorist Rutenberg whom Andreyev actually met in Capri in 1907 while the former was in hiding. Andreyev recalled the story later as follows: 'The episode was very simple. The girl in the brothel, sensing in her guest a revolutionary hunted by sleuths and forced to come to her, conducted herself towards him with the tender solicitude of a mother and the tact of a woman who was fully capable of feeling respect for a hero. But the hero, a tactless, bookish man, answered the impulses of the woman's heart with a sermon on morality, reminding her of that which she wished to forget at that time. Insulted she struck him on the cheek – a thoroughly deserved slap in my opinion. Then, understanding the whole coarseness of his error, he apologized to her and kissed her hand ... That is all.'⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid 100

⁵⁰ Dieter Stér 'Gespräch mit Peter Weiss, Frühjahr 1964' in Karlheinz Braun ed *Materialien zu Peter Weiss' 'Marat/Sade'* (Frankfurt/Main 1967) 95

⁵¹ Kohout *Roulette* tr Gerhard and Alexandra Baumrucker (Lucerne 1975)

⁵² James B. Woodward *Leonid Andreyev* i78; see also t77-84 for a lucid discussion of *Darkness* and its background.

When *Darkness*, obviously based on this incident, appeared late in 1907, Gorky felt that it was a distortion of the truth, and that what he had hoped to be an inspiring tale had been perverted. He was never able to forgive Andreyev for having changed the ending. Almost seventy years later, when the Revolution had gone through many stages, Kohout in turn provided a new change to the ending. We will never know how Andreyev would have reacted to this different outlook, but it seems fair to say that the displeasure Gorky showed is not likely to have repeated itself.

Andreyev's hero is also a revolutionary during the Tsarist regime who seeks refuge in a brothel in order to escape the police. His encounter with the prostitute Ljuba reveals his detachment from life, his isolation in some moral zone outside real experience. When Ljuba asks him what right he has to be good and virtuous when she, forced by circumstances, is unable to be either, he begins to realize that he has hitherto led a false life. Ljuba demands that he give up his past completely – his ideas, his comrades, his books, and paradoxically he feels strengthened by this loss. With the transformation of his hero, Andreyev presents a profound paradox: the vulgar, greed-ridden existence of the brothel purifies the idealist's life, frees him from his arid egoism and makes him genuinely capable of a truly human deed. Ljuba in her turn is ennobled by the immensity of his moral sacrifice.

Kohout's revolutionary Alexej, the hero of *Roulette*, who is about to commit a political murder the next morning, pretends to be an English officer when he enters the brothel to get a few hours of sleep before carrying out his dangerous mission. The scene during which he is invited by an eager madam to survey and choose, is a typical Kohout scene in its sparkling theatricality. Western critics who worry that his work is suffering from his enforced isolation from the theatre should feel reassured that he has lost none of his histrionic sense.

In Alexej's scenes with Ljuba, Kohout follows Andreyev's basic idea. Her unpretentious reactions to his idealistic political pretensions begin to confuse the puritan activist. When he tells her about 'the real enemies of Russia ... its rulers,' and about himself, whose 'fate it is to awaken the people,' she is none too pleased because she has enough trouble as it is and doesn't want to ask for more. When, puzzled by his behaviour, she enquires whether he perhaps prefers boys, he silences her angrily. 'I have no time for such things ... I have dedicated my life to an idea.' When he preaches to her that 'Happiness comes from sacrificing yourself for others,' she makes a face: 'Is that so?! Then I'd practically be swimming in happiness!' When he asks her why she does not look for 'a decent job' because, after all, she is '*still* (my italics) a good human being,' she laughs bitterly: 'I'm an ordinary whore, darling.'⁵³

The quiet dialogues in Ljuba's room are interrupted twice by lively group scenes in the reception-room downstairs. At first Alexej, trying to leave the brothel

because the restful hours he has looked for have not worked out, is stopped by a group of Tsarist officers who question him about the attributes of English women while constantly refilling his glass with champagne (he is totally unused to alcohol). As the laughter becomes louder and tempers hotter, Alexej gives a performance of Russian roulette. He presses the trigger of a loaded revolver three times as he holds the weapon to his temple. Luck is on his side. Had the Tsarist officer, to whom Alexej hands the gun, then had the courage to match Alexej's bravado, he would have blown out his brains, but when he pulls the trigger he points at the mirror and only Madam cries with grief at her shattered property.

The second time Alexej comes down from Ljuba's room he has begun to change. Wanting to experience what he had denied himself and despised all his life, he orders champagne and music, and calls for the girls, who have to be wakened at his command. As Ljuba, who is also undergoing a process of change, watches with mounting anxiety, he indulges in fun with the girls until Ljuba breaks up the party and takes Alexej upstairs again. However, the old servant, whom Madam fired in a moment of anger, had seen Alexej move in a way that raised his suspicions and made him feel he might get himself some money. As the two finally fall into each others' arms in the room upstairs, he scuttles out of the house and returns with the officers who break open the door to Ljuba's room before she has managed to get Alexej out by the window. In a final scene of dramatic tension, Ljuba shoots Alexej in order to prevent his being tortured by his captors. The commissar's astonished 'Why?', spoken to the rhythm of a well-known popular song, is the final word of the play.

In the course of the action the two main characters, the whore and the soldier, the unconscious victim of circumstances and the conscious activist who intended to change them, moved, as it were, toward each other. He tasted the life of the senses, she reached awareness of a region beyond the one she had known. But the two miss each other on the way; the world in which they live does not permit a rapprochement beyond a moment's embrace. In the end they have lost each other forever. The saviour has not carried out what he thought to be his act of salvation; the victim has not been saved.

In fact the roles have been strangely reversed. It is here that Kohout brings in the twist of his new ending. The lesson of real life has taught the idealist the senselessness of individual action: Alexej stands there apathetically as the officers arrest them. He has failed to affect reality by means of a violent action, but he has affected it in a way he never expected to: he opened a victim's mind to a new awareness. In the end it is Ljuba who commits the active deed, although with the intention of saving only a single man from suffering. The deed of salvation which hovers above the whole action has been reduced to an embrace on the one hand and a fraternal gesture on the other.

The German critic discussing the play's Lucerne premiere may have been right in criticizing Kohout for not having worked out fully the credibility of the

⁵³ *Poor Murderer* 20, 21, 23

psychological change the main characters undergo;⁵⁴ nevertheless, apart from being an extremely lively and fast-moving piece of theatre, the play is political in the basic sense of the word. On the one hand we might say that it is merely another version of an old literary war-horse, the spiritual struggle of the revolutionary intellectual who must act in a way that transcends the average individual's conscience, who cannot afford to live by the laws of average mortality.

From Dostoevsky's Raskolnikoff to Sartre's Hoebiger of *Dirty Hands*, to Peter Weiss's Robespierre of *Marat/Sade*, to Camus's Kaliayev of *Les Justes*, the problem of the moral dilemma of the man who undertakes violent action for – at least in his own eyes – valid political grounds, has haunted many modern writers. Kohout's play does not offer anything new in that respect. But this does not seem to have been his intention. He wanted to take Andreyev's story, anchored so closely in actual, and moreover recent, political reality, an important step further. The Russian writer's 'pre-Revolutionary' view of common people as the salt of the earth, no matter how politically unaware they were, is taken up by the Czech writer, three 'Revolutionary' generations later.

Kohout still presents them as incapable of political understanding but he shows them as capable of acting, once their personal sympathies have been engaged. These personal sympathies arise from a disinterested sense of loyalty, an instinct to prevent suffering, a sudden burst of inexplicable courage in the face of brutality. Even if Ljuba's desperate shot solves nothing, it is fired from an awareness of a certain value, the birth of which is the second main point of the play, the first being the death of abstract idealism. Of the shots fired in the roulette-game of life, most go off triggered by the wrong idea; the shot Alexej had in his revolver that was to be used the next morning was such a shot. It would have been morally unacceptable. Ljuba's shot was different. Unhampered by a structure of moral justification, it was an instinctive act of salvation.

But we must not overburden Kohout's writings with interpretative ballast. Despite the fact that his work has moved markedly closer to psychological and philosophical areas in the years when he has been isolated from the actual stage (contrary to his talent, his former habits, and his needs), he remains a writer whose imagination is largely histrionic. To fill the last half-hour of a play with events during which a callous prostitute is spiritually ennobled and a purpose-ridden revolutionary not only gets swept away in a passionate embrace but also gives up the idea of firing *his* 'political' shot –; makes an irresistible ending for a dramatist whose world is the stage. If, as in this case, a thinker's insight goes together with a flash of histrionics, so much the better.

Throughout Kohout's work we have witnessed his particular characteristic – which is also a characteristic of Czech theatre – the fierce awareness that the actual

⁵⁴ Hans Peter Riese 'Kohout's *Roulett* in Luzern - Ein Revolutionär und ein Mädchen' *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 22 August 1975 26

text is only part of the whole structure of the play; that the word is only one of the many ways of reaching an audience. Moreover, these other ways have a distinct advantage over the spoken word, for they belong solely to the stage and have therefore a more immediate impact. Brecht was equally aware of this and discussed on numerous occasions the importance on stage of 'Gestus' (a Latin word conveying the idea of the whole range of acting motions and techniques). It is here that we may find the hidden root of the strong bond between the social topicality and the circus-like quality of Kohout's work. We are reminded of the *Volkstheater* of nineteenth-century Vienna, which nightly played a variety of farces, musicals, and fairy-tale shows to sold-out houses.

In the tradition of this *Volkstheater* and indeed even in the tradition of Punch and Judy shows and travelling players of country fairs (though on a more sophisticated level), Kohout's theatre seems to have developed apart from general theatre repertory, as a response to the general public's need to be offered topical entertainment drawing its subject matter from their familiar contemporary scene. In 1974 Kohout entered into a surprising cooperative literary venture when, with Klíma, he adapted Kafka's *America* for the stage.⁵⁵ This seems to open yet another vista on his writings and offers yet further proof of his seemingly limitless versatility.

Kohout's prolific and uneven literary output has laid him open to all kinds of more or less justified criticism;⁵⁶ his stature as a Czech playwright may for a time be overshadowed by the realization that his path of development as a writer was for a long time full of twists and bends. Yet his moral consistency of the last decade has been remarkable. In an interview given to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in the winter of 1976, Kohout comments on the way his work has moved from critical topicality to a more philosophical preoccupation with the general theme of the human being as such. Surely it was this development that accounted for his involvement with the work of Franz Kafka, a writer who might, at first sight, seem completely alien to Kohout's artistic intellect.

Kohout himself explains this new philosophical component in his work by referring to the deep shock over the political events of 1968, a shock which each Czech or Slovak writer had to cope with in his own way. 'It is, after all, no negligible thing to analyze the reasons for a catastrophe at a time of almost completely interrupted communication ... It seemed to me as if I were writing my plays on water and I am grateful to all those who have put them on land somewhere with all the risks involved in performing actions of saving.'⁵⁷ The attitude expressed here is surprisingly close to that of Václav Havel, a writer of such

⁵⁵ Pavel Kohout and Ivan Klíma *Amerika (nach Franz Kafka)* typescript (1974); see also ch. 4.

⁵⁶ For example, Jan Císar 'Složité případ' 79

⁵⁷ 'Zu Hause bleiben, nicht nachgeben – ein Interview mit dem Prager Dramatiker Pavel Kohout' *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 1 Jan. 1976 10

a different nature. Whatever we may feel about Pavel Kohout's work as a whole, one thing is certain: he uses every aspect of the stage with unfailing intuition and to the delight of any theatre audience. He has delighted people in Hamburg, Graz, Athens, and New York, as much as those in Prague. He is, one might say – entirely without irony – truly a playwright of the people.

In: Goetz-Stankiewicz, Marketa: *The Silence Theatre*. Toronto – Buffalo – London, 1979.