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Josef Topol

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VÉNA What are you afraid of?

ÉVI Nothing. Especially of nothing.

Josef Topol *Cat on the Rails*

Josef Topol has been called the greatest poetic talent in the Czech theatre since the Second World War. His genius was recognized when he was still very young and he had the invaluable attention and co-operation of outstanding men like Otomar Krejča and Karel Kraus. It is impossible to predict his further development but it can be said that his work, as it stands now, occupies a place in Czech literature similar to that of Samuel Beckett in English and French literature: the poet-philosopher struggling with life's timeless questions and the craftsman re-creating the language of people around him with inimitable precision.

In 1964, when Topol's *The End of the Carnival* was produced at the National Theatre in Prague, the path seemed clear for a Czech version of Beckett to make its entrance. However, Topol's spiritual kinship to the great Western poet of futility is by no means immediately apparent. It emerges gradually. In fact everything about Topol seems to happen gradually. His particular way of disclosing the basic problem of each play slowly, even hesitatingly, as if he were avoiding facing it openly, can also be applied to his whole development as a dramatist. The plays which overtly explore the absurd aspects of human life were written only after he had completed three full-length plays which cover the spectrum from historical romanticism to contemporary realism.

Wind at Midnight – his first play, produced when he was in his early twenties – is a poetic drama on a theme from Czech history modelled on Shakespeare's history plays. It was immediately hailed as the work of an outstanding poet. Much was expected from this writer's future. It was felt that if Topol would fully recognize the nature of his own talent, *Wind at Midnight* would turn out to be 'only a modest prologue to the rest of his dramas.'¹ Indeed, Topol worked out his responsibility to his particular type of genius step by step until the moment when he, too, had to fall silent.

His second play, *Their Day* (1959), was about life in a small Czech town. Although there are definite signs of Topol's later 'absurd' style, *Their Day* is still contained within realistically conceived family life. In this play the urgent questions about life's

meaning are still embedded in a conflict between youth and age which masks their existential nature. The play could be said to be about 'the generation gap' but in reality it is much more complex. The intricate pattern of relationships involves a whole network of tensions between those grasping for security, believing in making the effort to gain 'firm ground under your feet,' and those who 'are always looking for something and never finish looking.' The climactic scene, a discussion between father and son, crystallizes these tensions into an opposition between imaginative man who believes that a human being is more than a bundle of bone tissue and biochemical reflexes and realistic man who believes in science with its 'logic, law and order' and who considers symbolist painting and literature 'charlatanism and irresponsible game-playing.'² It is a problem that is as old as it is new: Hamlet's questioning spirit will always clash with closed mentalities whose rigid beliefs are based not on knowledge but on ignorance slumbering behind a wall of clichéd thoughts and half truths for popular consumption.

In Topol's third play, *The End of the Carnival* (1963), this type of conflict has become the central concern; but it has also become increasingly difficult to define. The complexity arises from the intricate use of a dramatic device Topol had already touched upon in *Their Day* – the play within the play, the mask pretending to express reality and the face under the mask.

A Czech critic reviewing the première of one of Topol's plays introduced his remarks with a quotation from a poem by Vladimír Holan:

Because she had glued on freckles and a wig
she testified how much more real a tree is in artificial light
Because we are not nature.
That is where our fear comes from,
fear of death ...³

If Holan had intended to write a poem about the 'stuff' Topol's plays 'are made on,' he could not have done any better. From *The End of the Carnival* on the playwright's work pivots on questions involving the nature of illusion, the nature of death, and the reality of ideas as opposed to the reality of matter. All this, however, does not mean that Topol's work is weighed down by philosophical abstractions. In fact, it is most important that his plays be seen on stage and not only read. Otomar Krejča, aware of how the author had prepared the theatrical possibilities of his plays and how he had counted on the dynamic tension between his written dialogue and the bodies and voices of the actors, used his talent to magnify this tension. He did it by 'obstructing the words with theatre';⁴ by counterpointing the characters' groping search for meaning with a gracefully assured choreography of their bodies.

² *Jejich den* 57, 60, 62

³ Jindřich Černý 'Krejča: Schnitzler, Topol' *Divadelní noviny* roč. 12 č. II 12 Jan. 1969 3

⁴ *Ibid*

¹ Otakar Blanda 'The Revolt of Youth' Afterword to Josef Topol *Jejich den* (Prague 1962) 97

Once Topol had arrived at the theatrical economy of his three one-act plays, *Cat on the Rails*, *Nightingale for Dinner*, and *An Hour of Love* (written between 1964 and 1968) he had moved into the radius of Beckett's and Pinter's absurd worlds. *The End of the Carnival* (1963) seemed afar cry from Beckett's tramps. *Cat on the Rails* (1965) and *Waiting for Godot*, however, have much in common. *Nightingale for Dinner* (1965), with its ritualistic inevitability, again reminds us of Pinter. As in the latter's *The Birthday Party*, for example, we have the feeling that we witness a kind of timeless ritual – but a ritual without belief. This is not to be taken in the sense that these playwrights regurgitate Nietzsche's badly maltreated aphorism of God being dead, but rather in the sense that, as they unfold one question after another, the possibility of finding any kind of truth gradually seems to fade.

When Topol's producer Karel Kraus, himself an outstanding literary critic, distinguished the playwright's work from the dramatists of the Absurd, he made one particularly important observation: The Theatre of the Absurd, Kraus argued, does not really demonstrate the fundamental situation of man – the incoherent, senseless nature of the world – but rather establishes it as a given entity. It is therefore 'the author himself who fixes the rules of the game.'⁵ This attitude of inequality in relation to the audience remains alien to Topol who, like Beckett, entices – or inspires – the spectator to follow the author to increasingly deeper, more rare field, yet at the same time more universal levels of meaning.

At the end of the mysterious *Two Nights with a Girl* (1969), for example, the characters suddenly stop in their high-spirited chase around the table, and each stands frozen in another place staring in a different direction. Then one of them slowly asks: 'What are we laughing at, we fools?'⁶ The audience, having joined the characters in their uncalled-for merriment for some time, are likely to stop laughing with a start. What indeed have they been laughing at? A kaleidoscoped performance of a man's confusions, disappointments, hopes and fears?

Because of Topol's highly developed sense of the theatre, his plays will vary greatly with the intellect and perceptions of a particular director. For our purpose they are best regarded as magnificent works of dramatic poetry – a parallel to W. B. Yeats comes to mind – which refuse to yield their full meaning no matter how often they are read or seen.

Like Harold Pinter, Josef Topol has an acute sensitivity for spoken language with all its repetitions, unfinished thoughts, non sequiturs, pauses, and awkward formulations. Like Václav Havel and Peter Handke he is, on the one hand, aware of the increasing alienation of words from their original meaning, and on the other, of

⁵ Karel Kraus "Fin du carnaval" de Josef Topol, Etude précédée d'un aperçu de la dramaturgie tchèque depuis 1945' in Jean Jacquot ed *Le Théâtre Moderne 11: Depuis la deuxième guerre mondiale* (Paris 1967) 305-6

⁶ Topol *Zwei Nächte mit einem Mädchen* tr Lydia Tschakert (Universal Edition Schauspiel, mimeographed, Vienna 1972) 227; (original Czech title: *Dvě noci s dívkou*)

the concealed power of language to mould and change man's intellect and his perceptions. Havel attacks clichés bureaucratic, emotional, and conceptual. His target is clear and we can take an intellectual delight in the precision of his attack. Topol is more complex than Havel, and like Handke – but nonprogrammatically and without the latter's intellectual aggressiveness – he takes on the whole area of language and communication as such. The interesting thing is that this is at first hardly noticeable.

Topol's concern with language is part of his general quest for the meaning of life or the nature of truth. It seems to be just one of the natural results of his explorations of the human psyche. If we think of Handke as arriving at his definition of man through studying his language, we might say that Topol, more like Pinter, arrives at his definition of language through studying man. His characters communicate in a defective, rambling, interrupted way which demonstrates how fine an ear the author has for the average person's language.

Yet, despite its deceptively realistic cadence, the language of Topol's characters is not a mere copy of the language spoken in, say, a Bohemian village or the streets of Prague. Without losing its colloquial immediacy it constantly reaches down into the subconscious of the character and reveals his struggle to understand himself and others. In *Cat on the Rails*, for example, we get the following exchange:

ÉVI (*Reproaching her lover for not wanting to marry and let her raise a family.*) You are afraid of your duty, that's it. You just don't want to face up to it.

VÉNA I'm not good enough for it.

ÉVI If everybody thought like that! What about actors?

VÉNA Oh, they just play it.

ÉVI Don't you see the way things are organized? Some things you do for yourself. Others are – well – written out for you.

VÉNA Who wrote them out?

ÉVI God. City Hall. How do I know?

VÉNA Nobody knows. They just pretend they know. Everybody pretends to everyone else. And nobody knows a damn thing.⁷

We may notice that in the course of the conversation there suddenly comes a point when the words seem to become transparent and we realize that the author is talking about something quite different from what he seemed to be talking about. It is as if another dimension has appeared behind the situation at hand and allowed us to look through the texture of the language, beyond the place and hour at which the action takes place. Past and future open up and the next thing we know, in the middle of a conversation on a rather banal issue, we are made to think about life's unanswerable questions, about the nature of time and the certainty of death, about the ambiguity of love and the imperfection of man's understanding of his fate. It is as

⁷ Topol *Kočka na kolejičkách* in *Divadlo* (Feb. 1965) 93

if Topol put to our eyes a pair of strong binoculars: every detail becomes magnified, almost touchable in its clarity and closeness; then all of a sudden the playwright imperceptibly reverses the binoculars and we see the same situation removed, merging with its context so that its details become blurred and only the basic, abstracted outline remains. This change of focus, this mingling of realistic detail with a mystical search for the nature of life, is the main key to Topol's work.

To achieve this is, of course, not an easy task for a dramatist. Topol knew it: 'Modern science and technology have given power into man's hands,' he remarked. 'Man can change the world into heaven or hell. There are only these two possibilities. Everyone bears his responsibility. In such a precarious situation man truly becomes the key: also ignorance and passive indifference can commit great evil. And what should the poet do?'⁸ When Topol said this he was still very young.

It was during the painstaking rehearsals of *Their Day* at the National Theatre⁹ during the 1959-60 season that the young playwright had the invaluable opportunity of working with two outstanding men of the theatre, Otomar Krejča, who directed, and Karel Kraus, who produced the play. As a closely working team the three men kept polishing the play's language and perfecting it to the smallest detail, continuing their work even after the play had begun to run. It takes a great deal of mental discipline and artistic assurance for a young author to stand such a test. But Topol stood it. We are told that he changed some of the dialogue even after the eighty-fifth performance of the play.¹⁰ It was during those months of intense work, supported by his own experience as an actor, that the playwright developed the unique dramatic style we find in his later plays from *The End of the Carnival* (1963) through *Two Nights with a Girl* (1969).

On the face of it *The End of the Carnival* (1963) is a realistic play about a village which is celebrating the end of winter with a traditional masquerade. During the festivities an old problem is revived – the tension between those villagers who have adopted commune farming and the old farmer Král who has persistently refused to join the commune. In their high-spirited mood of celebration and fun the masked villagers play a trick on Král by talking his feeble-minded son Jindřich into playing the 'corpse of winter'¹¹ in their procession and letting them carry him around in an open coffin. His father, appalled when he finds this out, punishes his son in the presence of the assembled villagers. This humiliation awakens feelings of revenge in the child-like youth and ultimately leads to his death. It is Raphael – a young man from town courting Král's daughter Marie – who accidentally kills Jindřich. At the end Raphael

faces justice (something he has been avoiding all his life) but also wins Marie who publicly confesses her love for him.

Taken like this, the play sounds like a work straight out of nineteenth-century German Poetic Realism; or else, if we stress the subtle individualization of the characters, it might pass as a Naturalistic dramatic reproduction of a locality; or else, if we read the entry on Topol in Crowell's *Handbook of Contemporary Drama* and find that the play is described as dealing with 'the life of the younger generation in the new conditions of cooperative-farm villages,'¹² we are bound to think that the play is a latecomer to Socialist Realism and we may doubt that Topol could find a place on the roster of international playwrights. What kind of a play is it then? Why then has it been produced most successfully in Germany as well as in France? Why – and this is even more surprising – did its Prague producer Karel Kraus write a lengthy essay¹³ in which he spent several pages distinguishing Topol's work from the Theatre of the Absurd? Surely he would not need to do this if Topol had merely written a study of Czech village life.

As we will see, in Topol's work following *The End of the Carnival*, knowledge of the story tells very little indeed about the work itself. Consisting of a complex field of relationships and tensions, his plays contain a symbolic pattern that counteracts the realistic elements of the plot. In this way we get highly dramatic and realistic incidents combined with an overall effect that is symbolic and lyrical. It is as if throughout *The End of the Carnival* the audience were made to witness how the raw stuff of life is transformed into a poet's work of art under their very eyes. Both the realistic and the poetic levels of the play have their focal point in Jindřich, Král's child-like son, who provides the tangible reason for the clash and at the end becomes its victim.

At one point Jindřich, surrounded by the masked villagers whose leader is dressed up in a Hussar's colourful coat, playfully borrows the Hussar's sword and begins to draw an image of himself in the sand. Studying his drawing, he comments thoughtfully: 'It is as if I was alive but something was missing':

MASK dressed as a Hussar *seizing the sword and pushing it with a thrust into the drawn figure.*
This!

JINDŘICH *catching his hand.* What are you doing!

HUSSAR You are dead.

JINDŘICH Oh no, I have a wrinkle on my forehead.

two masks are bringing in the coffin without a lid

HUSSAR It's time, your majesty.

JINDŘICH Ah yes. *steps into the coffin*¹⁴

⁸ Otomar Krejča 'Director's Note' *Jejich den* 4

⁹ Topol was the youngest Czech author ever to have a play performed at the National Theatre in Prague (see Krejča 'Note' I).

¹⁰ Ibid 5

¹¹ Topol *Konec masopustu in Divadlo* (May 1963) 14

¹² Michael Anderson et al *Crowell's Handbook of Contemporary Drama* (New York 1971) 105

¹³ Kraus "Fin du carnaval" 297-314

¹⁴ *Konec masopustu* 14

The relationship between the named, identified villagers and the anonymous, unpredictable throng of masks indicates another aspect of the tensions between the realistic and the poetic level of the play. The three young people, for example, whose fate is at the centre of the action – Marie, her brother Jindřich, and her lover Raphael – become for a brief spell members of the masked crowd and merge with it beyond recognition. Indeed, the fact that one of them cannot be recognized for who he really is turns out to be the cause of a tragic death. It is in the mask of the Hussar that Raphael accidentally kills Jindřich. Earlier Jindřich's image in the sand had been 'killed' by the Hussar; later the living Jindřich is killed by the image of the Hussar with Raphael hidden beneath.

Each of the three young people joins the masks for the wrong reason: Marie in order to escape the man to whom she will vow loyalty at the end of the play; Raphael in order to hide the identity which he must fully confess in the final scene; Jindřich because he has the literal mind of a child and does not grasp the difference between symbol and reality (he also takes the coffin balanced on four shoulders for a horse) – a tragic confusion that brings about his early death.

To regard the play therefore as a Hegelian drama of social tensions where the old order (Král's belief in individual property) finally succumbs to the values of a changing world (the new cooperative order) is about the same as interpreting *Hamlet* (as Brecht once did – playfully though) as a work about the replacement of a rotten monarchy by a new progressive government. Czech critics themselves are quite aware of the relatively small importance of the play's sociological aspect. Even in the program notes to the production at the National Theatre Karel Kraus stresses the broad meaning of the play. 'Where the social tensions between the members of the organization and its structure as a whole have been solved, the existential tension between the complex and never completely organizable world of the individual and the world as a whole emerges with increasing urgency.'¹⁵ This, on the one hand, leads back to classical tragedy but on the other is directly related to Ionesco's plea that 'if anything ought to be demystified, it is ideologies that offer ready-made solutions ... Everything ought to be constantly re-examined in the light of our anguishes and our dreams ...'¹⁶

This is precisely what Topol does in his next play, *Cat on the Rails*. He examines life through the consciousness of two people's anguishes and dreams and does not tell us whether a solution can be found.

The first of Topol's short plays, *Cat on the Rails*, was written in 1964 and produced in November 1965 at the Theatre Behind the Gate under Otomar Krejča's direction. The play is essentially a dialogue between two people who, though young, are not as young as they used to be (both are nearing thirty). Nor is their relationship – limited

¹⁵ Karel Kraus, Program Note to the opening performance of *The End of the Carnival* on 14 Nov. 1964 at the National Theatre in Prague, reprinted in *Svědectví* 7 No. 25 (1965) 127

¹⁶ Ionesco *Notes* 143

to week-ends, when they go into the country with rucksacks – as exciting as it was seven years ago when it began. Things have gone a little stale all around. The action takes place late one Sunday evening when, after one of their habitual weekends, the couple wait at a railway-stop for the train that is to take them back to their lives in the city – her to her work as a waitress, him to his work as furniture mover and his life at home under the daily influence of his nagging mother.

Their conversation as they wait is the play. Surrounded by the darkness of night they talk and fall silent, play and attack, caress and tear at each other, reach out and push back, tell lies and speak the truth – gradually unmasking themselves and each other until they sit exhausted on the rails that lead back where they do not want to go. At the end of the play the roar of the approaching train deafens the audience's ears as the stage falls into darkness. The question of whether the couple die on the rails or take the train back to town should not have worried critics as much as it did. A prominent Czech critic, for example, feels that the end is absurd and not worthy of the play because it contradicts not only its general meaning but also the character of Evi, the girl.¹⁷ A German critic, on the other hand, regrets that this brilliant piece of writing ends with facile tragedy like a cheap novel.¹⁸ Others, again, believe that the author intended an open ending.¹⁹

Whatever the intention of the author, the ending is simply not that important. Whether the two die there and then or go back to their deadly lives in town where 'nothing is of any consequence anyway',²⁰ does not change the fact that the whole play has been a show-down with what life and death really mean. During their inimitable discussion – held (according to stage instructions) while they sit, run, creep on the roof of the shack, balance on the railway track, try to light cigarettes without matches, lie in each other's lap or play games – they cover the spectrum of human life. Take their exchange on the sources of joy:

ÉVI You could play tennis.

VÉNA Tennis!

ÉVI White trousers, racquet under your arm –

VÉNA Knock myself silly chasing that ball? And run after that white phantom until you go nuts –

ÉVI Oh well, if that's all you see in it ... what is one to do with you? Your rob yourself of so much beauty – and you don't even know how.

VÉNA I got you – just enough for me.

ÉVI I'm cold.²¹

¹⁷ Sergej Machonin 'Kočka na kolejích' *Literární noviny* roč. 14 č. 50 II Dec. 1965 6

¹⁸ Rolf Michaelis 'Einsame Masken' *Theatre heute* Jg. 7 Nr. 7 (1966) 18-19

¹⁹ See Burian 'Drama in Czechoslovakia' 307; Tynan 'Theatre abroad' 112.

²⁰ *Kočka* 91

²¹ *Ibid* 87

A little later Věna admits his ambiguous attitude to emotional commitment and the nature of responsibility: 'I would tell you that I love you, cross my heart, if I could be sure I wouldn't live till tomorrow.' Or take the couple's two-line aphorisms on loneliness:

VĚNA *complaining that Evi is talking too much* One should be alone.
ÉVI One is alone, anyway.

And then there is the act of waiting itself, that long wait for everything in life which does not necessarily come:

VĚNA The train isn't coming – I've got to do something.
ÉVI Does something have to happen all the time? Can't we just be ... just like that?
VĚNA You can't even wait just like that ... mouth keeps going.
ÉVI The way we used to go off to the country ... just take off – It was marvellous. It was quite enough for us. It was beautiful.
VĚNA You know, you can lead a horse to water but one day the river's dry.
ÉVI Oh, forget it.
VĚNA Well, stop needling me.
ÉVI As if I could needle you. Me!
VĚNA You sure can.
ÉVI I know, time seems too long when you're with me now.
VĚNA God, how I love it – that long time growing longer ...
ÉVI Ah, pipe down!²²

Composed like a work of music, with the same themes coming up in different keys in the three parts (the author calls them 'situations'), the dialogue gains in depth and urgency as both partners become increasingly honest and bring to the surface the innermost traits of their characters, their mutual relationship, and their lives as a whole. Three times the outside world intrudes and distracts their attention from each other, only to bring them back with a redoubled intensity. At the beginning of each 'situation' we get a snatch of the story of Ivan, a boy from a neighbouring village who had been dancing at a barn dance with someone else's girl, and was now being pursued by the jilted lover together with the girl's brother. At the beginning of the play Ivan and later his two pursuers come rushing on stage, and the audience is informed about the incident at the same time as Evi and Věna. Again, as in the case of *The End of the Carnival*, there is an additional audience on stage. The difference, however, is that Ivan's story turns out to be on the periphery of the play and of no great interest to either audience.

²² Ibid 89, 92, 96

As things proceed, the fortunes of those other lovers from the village dance become increasingly incidental, even disturbing in relation to the main concern of the play. The author is well aware of this: step by step he reduces the importance of these intrusions – both in dramatic intensity and in the time period they occupy. When Ivan first comes rushing in order to hide in the station shack, he literally steps on the couple in the dark and the play actually begins with a shriek of physical pain from Věna, quite unrelated to the pain of living he will reveal in the time to come. The pursuers, irate avengers in the first part, return in the second part with their tempers considerably cooler. Showing unmistakable signs of the wear and tear of their unsuccessful pursuit, they are anxious to get home irrespective of whether their mission is completed.

In the third part only the boy returns once again, very quietly this time the stage instruction calls for a whisper – and very briefly. The representatives of the world outside have rapidly diminished. Furthermore, while in the first part Evi and Věna discussed the village event for some time after the pursuers had gone, the last appearance of the boy only triggers a bitter exchange about their own relationship. The more acute the tension between the lovers, the less interested the audience (and they themselves) become in the peripheral plot of the other lovers. However – and here Topol is at his theatrical best – as our indifference to the village lovers grows, we begin to regard the interruptions more and more as a kind of relief from the emotionally draining exchange of the main characters. And as the dialogue becomes increasingly a question of life and death, we need these moments of relief as much as the main characters need them.

One of the strangely magic qualities of this little play is that everything in it at the same time is and is not. What seemed to be a plot turned out to be an inconsequential murmur from the world outside; what seemed to be an indifferent wait for a weekend train revealed itself as a time of reckoning with life. This same ambiguity applies also to the main characters: they are a couple and yet not a couple; they live together but only on weekends; they sleep together but never in a bed; they cannot face the thought of the future with each other because, as Věna puts it, 'We are each other's past. We remind each other of each other.'²³

Nightingale for Dinner was written in 1965. The English title does not convey the ambiguity inherent in the original Czech title, *Slavík k večeři*. In English we might think of an exotic dinner party where song birds are served stuffed with delicacies; the Czech connotation is quite different. Besides meaning nightingale, 'Slavík' is a fairly common Czech name, and to have Mr Slavík to dinner is as likely an occurrence as entertaining a Mr Brown or Mr Smith in an English-speaking country. The fact that Slavík, the song bird, can be had as a dinner guest or a dinner bird gives the Czech title a semi-sinister ring.

²³ Ibid 94

This one-act play has again a very simple plot: Mr Slavik has come to have dinner with a family consisting of Father, Mother, Son and Daughter. In the course of the evening he gradually realizes that his hosts intend to kill him and bury him in their garden among the graves of their many previous dinner guests. At the end of the play, Father and son perform the killing job upstairs while Mother and Daughter, regretfully but calmly, wait below.

The theme of the unsuspecting stranger who is murdered has been used before. We may remember George Lillo's *The Fatal Curiosity* (1736), in which a long absent son is taken by his parents for a rich traveller and killed; or Zacharias Werner's German melodramatic tragedy *The Twenty-Fourth of February* (1810), a variation on the same theme. With *The Misunderstanding* (1944), Albert Camus attempted – not very successfully perhaps – a twentieth-century 'existentialist' version of the same theme. Another variation is the German writer Tankred Dorst's play *The Curve* (1966) where two mechanics make a living from repairing cars wrecked on a dangerous curve on a mountain highway; the drivers are buried with pomp and circumstance in their rock-garden cemetery.

In all these versions, however, the author provides some way of explaining the motivation for the murders. Usually it is economic: in the case of Dorst's work an additional psychological element of destructiveness is present. Not so in Topol's play. Like Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, it does not provide motivations and reasons for behaviour. An audience which looks for a rationally explicable story will fail to be satisfied by either Topol's or Pinter's play.

Beginning with what seems to be a concrete picture of average life – a family dinner with a welcome guest – *Nightingale for Dinner* (1965) is neither about a dinner nor about a murder. In fact the dinner and the murder merely frame the action: one ushers it in, the other concludes it. The play provides a poetic model of man's awareness of being and dying; his uncertainty about what is real and what is a dream; his experiences in getting used to the fact that he will never know why he was born and why he must die; his surprise at being able to experience the joy of life in the very moment of realizing the inevitability of his death – his slavery to but also his victory over time. This sounds, of course, very much like Beckett. But it also harkens back to the works of great writers of the past giving expression to the timeless tension between man's dreams of freedom and the fetters of reality: we may remember Calderón's *La vida es sueño*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Shakespeare's sonnets and *The Tempest*, or Kleist's *Der Prinz von Homburg*.

When the curtain opens, dinner is almost over (though the dishes and glasses remain on the table throughout the play) and the play begins with one of the miniature 'audience on stage' scenes in which Topol excels. The family is watching while Mother is dancing with the dinner guest to the music of a shaky record player. A moment later the needle gets stuck and the same notes are repeated over and over again, forcing the couple to go through the same steps. Nightingale offers to stop the record but his partner won't let him because, after all, he is 'the guest.' There is a

shouted conversation but no one makes a move to stop the unbearable repetition until the dancers, accidentally knocking into the table while passing, cause the needle to take a jump and the tune continues. The period of relief, when things again move on in their old order after the suspension of time is over, is punctuated by three remarks made by the 'audience' – the non-dancing members of the family. Father says: 'Well, there was such a lot of screaming and now, you see, it's all done.' The Son who had been beating out the repeated bars on his thigh, begins to yawn and asks: 'What now?' The Daughter gets up with the words: 'The comedy is finished.'²⁴ These same words, although later they are spoken in Italian, are part of her very last verbal comment in the play. After that she only hums a quiet tune.

In this way the play is introduced by a miniature grotesque – or, if you like, absurd – version of its own theme: the eternally moving pattern of growth and decay has been arrested; time has come to a stop. How has this happened? The dinner guest who bears the name of the exquisite song-bird – perhaps, though we are never explicitly told, he is a poet – has come to bring the gift of never-fading beauty. His hosts, however, fail to make an important distinction: that between the real timelessness of a dream of beauty and the deceptive timelessness of repetition. The moment of timelessness created by the repetitive sound of a mass-produced gadget is referred to at the end of the play with the same words as the actual killing of the song-bird.

The members of the family that 'kill the dream of beauty' have no names. They are rigidified in their roles as Father, Mother, Son, and Daughter, and go through the gestures sanctioned by habit with the predictability of automatons. The Daughter sits on the Mother's lap, the Father tousles his Son's hair, the Son gulps down the rest of the food from other plates. As they tell their visitor about their lives, their complaints and petty aggressions toward each other take on growing proportions. Nightingale can hardly get a word in edgeways and is limited to monosyllabic reactions. They use their guest, as they admit themselves with increasing honesty, as 'a live piece of stage property,' as 'a mirror into which we can look.'²⁵

As the evening proceeds the dinner guest begins to feel increasingly uneasy. The merry atmosphere at the beginning has given way to a feeling of anxiety and guilt. The visitor begins to try to justify his existence by complying with anything that seems to be asked of him. This process is surprisingly close to Kafka's work. From an everyday, ordinary situation we are led by forces which we cannot fully grasp to face questions of crushing magnitude. Objects attain an oppressive quality, and we move with increasing uncertainty through a forest of strange signs.

One of these signs is a bouquet of flowers which Nightingale brought for the hostess. As she looks in vain for water to put them in, a discussion ensues about whether the flowers need water at all because they are probably not real. The visitor claims twice in the course of the play that 'they were real when I brought them,' but

²⁴ Topol *Slavik k večeri* in *Divadlo* (March 1967) 81

²⁵ *Ibid* 84

the Daughter is sure they are artificial. The Mother discovers them to be real about half way through the play, basing her conclusion on the fact that a fly has settled down on a blossom, and surely 'it wouldn't sit on an artificial one.' At the end, when Nightingale is killed upstairs, the Mother, plucking petals from the flowers, hides her face in the bouquet. The Father's final words to the Daughter are 'Think about the flowers. – You are singing to yourself? Why?'²⁶ These are also the very last words of the play. The remark can be taken as a reference to the care needed for a new grave in the garden – a task usually entrusted to the Daughter; but it also refers to Nightingale's bouquet – the one tangible (and perhaps living) proof that he had been there. The Father's reminder of the flowers is immediately followed by the Daughter's song. Why does she sing?

What are we to make of this play which Czech critics came to regard as Topol's 'unsuccessful journey into the Absurd?'²⁷ If we tried to cap it with a definitive symbolic interpretation, we would be behaving as the Mother with Nightingale's flowers: we would look for a proof of its artistic 'reality' outside its own nature. There is, however, one scene that seems to contain the central core of the play. As the death of Nightingale becomes more and more an accepted fact, there ensues a discussion between the Father and the visitor about the reason for living. It is the only time in the play that Nightingale talks at any length. In essence the two points of view are reflected in the following comments:

FATHER You are a nightingale, the king of singers, but you too depend on who is listening to you ... For one it may mean heavenly delight! And for another? A delicious little tidbit, something to sink his teeth into, nothing else ... though we walk on the ground the ground walks on us the same way, that's why we are worn out in the evening and have worn boots! – We breathe the air and the air breathes us, we spend life and life spends us ... You play a game and the game plays with you. Or doesn't it? ...

NIGHTINGALE And if you love a human being? *silence; they look at each other* If you love one, with your whole soul – *silence* If you love – ... With a human being it's different. *Nightingale approaches the Daughter* Why is it different, why? Why is it different?²⁸

This question rings in our ears when we leave the theatre. If, as a Czech critic suggests, we take the figure of Nightingale as representing 'man's eternal dream of beauty and happiness; a dream that must always die when touched by everyday life,'²⁹ we will have found an interpretation that 'works' on all levels. But we are also closing doors which the playwright is desperately trying to open. A play that equates literal-

-mindedness with death in life does not deserve to be systematized by interpretation. Besides, Topol's hero goes to his death with the words, 'And whatever might happen, it will be a dream from which I will awaken.'³⁰ This semi-grotesque self-assertion reminds us as much of Kafka's Hunger Artist as it does of Beckett's clowns, constantly busy in asserting and proving their existence. Besides, Topol warns us of tugging too resolutely at the play's veil of mystery: he subtitles it 'a Play in a Dream.' His next work, *An Hour of Love*, takes this process a step further. Once again simple, even trivial events, acquire a metaphysical dimension and become mysterious, awe-some signs. It is here that Topol's kinship with Beckett is most in evidence.

An Hour of Love (1966-7), Topol's third one-act play, recasts the theme of *Cat on the Rails*, but reduces it to essentials. Again there is a couple at the centre of the action but they are no longer anchored in a specific setting as were Evi, the waitress, and Věna, the furniture mover. Called El and Ela - man and woman – they can no longer be related to any specific social context. Rather they live, like Beckett's characters, in a vacuum of space and time. It is as if their relationship were abstracted from any incidentals; the murmur of the world outside that had interrupted Věna's and Evi's wait for the train has fallen silent.

The plot is so simple that it can hardly be called a plot at all. The setting is a room where Ela lives with her ailing aunt. At the beginning of the play her lover El arrives with the news that by order of some authority – the nature of which we never find out – he will have to leave for good. The lovers have only one more hour in each other's company. Just before the end a message arrives that cancels El's departure. When leaving he assures Ela that nothing has changed. He will be back as usual. Their last hour of love has turned out to be repeatable; a link in a monotonous chain.

The play is all about the way the two people spend what they take to be their last hour together. As in Topol's two other one-act plays the stage action and the duration of the play are equal. The audience is made to experience with painful accuracy how the moments pass – one after another, as the lovers harass each other, each trying to experience the other fully for the last time.

ELA My God, how much time we have! How much time we still have! All those seconds!

EL Only people that are desperate count in seconds.

ELA And criminals. When I say three I'll shoot. One, two, three –

EL *rocking his head from side to side* four, five, six –

ELA Seven, eight, nine, ten –

EL One, two, three –

ELA Four, five, six –

EL Seven, eight, nine –

²⁶ Ibid 19, 82, 85

²⁷ Jan Císar 'Čas lásky a smrti' *Divadlo* (Feb. 1969) 37

²⁸ *Slavík* 90, 91

²⁹ Císar – 'Láska a smrt' 38

³⁰ *Slavík* 91

ELA Ten. –Twenty seconds with you. *motions him to be silent* No, it's a pity!
 EL pity, a pity, a pity –
 ELA Stop it! *Rises and walks about the room*
 EL If we keep silent it doesn't go so fast?
 ELA I'm sure it goes more slowly.
 EL But the clock's ticking.
 ELA *stops the clock* No more.
 EL It's getting dark.
 ELA (lights the lamp on the table) No more. *sits on his lap*
 EL Your heart is beating.
 ELA That I can't stop. –That keeps measuring my time! That keeps measuring our time!
 EL We get older by seconds, by minutes, and by days.
 ELA Now we are still young. One more hour!
 EL No more. Not a whole hour. Now only –
 ELA *interrupting him* You aren't supposed to count! ...³¹

Two elements in the play interrupt the couple's painful awareness: the call of duty and their dreams. The former takes the shape of Ela's elderly Aunt who, lying behind a partition in the same room, can hear everything, and joins into the conversation at the most inopportune moments. She complains about her doctors (but has already outlived two of them), incites Ela to play tricks on El (whom she dislikes), comments on life (for which she seems to have all the answers), and above all, interrupts the 'hour' by constant demands for her medicine, a cup of tea, or a drink from the bottle El has brought as a present. Although Ela feels 'tied down' and responds to these duties with obvious weariness, she knows that "if I am alone, I cease to exist,"³² and anchors her life in these daily duties which make her measure time in terms of meals and doses of medicine rather than in minutes that carry away youth.

The other element that permits the couple to escape the prison of time consists of those moments when their imagination takes over and they roam freely through past and future, telling of dreams and fears, dreams within dreams and hopes. The action is broken up into little plays within plays as the characters recount their dreams or re-enact scenes from the past—the day they met, their first experience of love, moments of particular crisis. We are never quite sure whether these things actually happened, or how much they have changed in the characters' minds by being retold and reshaped during their relationship. We hear about El's nightmare of trying to hide from irate pursuers on a tiny island with only a single tree on it (a dream which the aunt immediately interprets with 'Women's Column' platitudes); we hear about Ela's horrifying waking dream of being stuck in the earth head down after falling from the lofty heights of a tree. At other moments the lovers re-enact their first meeting: Ela,

having swum across a river to dare another man who used only safe bridges, meets El on the other shore and entrusts herself to his care. Or else we witness their first night of love which was spent rather uncomfortably because Auntie was, as always, close by. But then she went to work next morning and the lovers had the whole day to themselves.

In the course of the intricate blending of past and present, imagination and reality, we see Ela gradually get physically weaker, as the certainty of being loved, which gives her the self confidence of being able 'to walk along the edge of an abyss and not get hurt, 'begins to wane. On the other hand the Aunt – in whom we gradually begin to recognize the inevitability of dying, of the flesh relentlessly taking precedence over dreams – becomes stronger and more youthful. Toward the end of the play, in the course of which she actually appears only twice, she has become a young woman sitting before the mirror with loosened hair. It is now that El tells the Aunt of his realization that the freedom without which he had thought he could not live does not exist. After some time 'A man finds out that he carries his cell with him ... drags it around everywhere, does not take a step without it, sleeps and eats and loves in it, and can't escape it ...' This is not news to the rejuvenated Aunt. With a knowing smile she retreats behind her partition.

When at the very end of the play El receives the news that he does not have to leave and 'everything can stay the way it was,' the lovers are unable to rejoice over this change which cancels all the agony of their last hour together. It had been the last hour of their love after all, as the Aunt's voice sings softly from behind. The beautiful dream of timeless love is cut short:

EL Time is not merciful. It breaks off in mid sentence. As it did to Hamlet: I can't tell you any more—And he dies.³³

A dark play indeed. Surely the darkest Topol has written. And yet so charged with human energy that it affirms life in spite of stressing acutely its transitory qualities.

Topol's next play *Two Nights with a Girl*, completed in 1969, was not published in Czechoslovakia. On the surface it appears to be a play about a family (two daughters and two sons) who have just buried their father. In the course of their deliberations about the past and the future two visitors (or rather opportunistic intruders) arrive, falsely claim to be the late father's friends, and after causing all kinds of havoc, leave at the end of the play, having tried (unsuccessfully—a better thief beat them to it) to steal the family jewellery. The family is left alone with their father's cryptic testament, with their momentary relief at having survived the onslaught of the thieves, and with their recurring moments of confusion about the meaning of life.

This threadbare summary of the plot is, however, completely misleading. *Two Nights with a Girl* is Topol's most ambitious and complex play. It is a rare combination

³¹ Topol *Hodina lásky* in *Divadlo* (Oct./Nov. 1968) 60

³² *Ibid* 62

³³ *Ibid* 65

of slapstick and symbolism, language play and philosophical insights. The movements of the actors are described with great precision, so that the reader becomes aware that the playwright has conceived the play as a pattern of movements as much as a pattern of words. The action takes place in a house and adjoining garden. The room is crowded with a jumble of odd pieces of furniture and all kinds of musical instruments; the garden causes the characters all sorts of physical difficulties, ranging from stumbling over protruding roots to getting stuck in bogs and caught on low-hanging branches. Furthermore the stage instructions establish a rhythmic pattern of night suddenly changing into day, and vice versa. This pattern has no obvious relation to the actual passing of time but presents a dream sequence of moods such as we find in Strindberg's *A Dream Play*.

Despite the highly realistic surface action of Topol's play we soon begin to realize that the inhabitants of the house, the four children of the deceased musician-father, must not be interpreted according to a handbook of psychology. On one level they seem to represent basic human traits. There is Rosa, the rational daughter, who is trying to keep the family together but tends to be deceived by appearances; Dolf, the self-indulgent but loyal son; Emmi – the only one who could manage their late father when he was in one of his 'moods' – the down-to-earth girl whose common sense saves most situations and who always has food and drink stored in some hidden cupboard when everything seems empty and everyone is almost starved. Last but not least, there is Rudolf, the family's 'golden boy,' who has inherited his father's traits, his love of music, his wisdom, and his ability to talk to his own dreams.

On one level the play could be regarded as an allegro or capriccio variation on the *Waiting for Godot* theme: the family is trying to survive, until two strangers appear and shake their beliefs in various ways. The strangers' behaviour is alien and destructive: they not only steal jewellery and food; they also try to make off with the big prize of life, 'the fairy princess,' the ideal woman—but this venture is unsuccessful. The princess drives off in their car and they are left to pedal on to other tasks on a borrowed bicycle. When they have left, the family is no further ahead than Didi and Gogo at the end of Beckett's play.

One significant aspect of the play is the author's ability to give visual presence to even the most subtle thought process or philosophical speculation. The best example of this is the concept of the 'girl' in the title of the play. It refers partly to a figurine which dominates the stage visually from the very first moment. Later we hear that the figurine was brought for Rudolf's benefit from his brother's tailor shop. We hear Rudolf converse with it, and his sister refer to it as 'his Girl.' After the figurine has been burned in the garden, it is replaced by a living girl who moves from one male character to another, bestowing her favours and representing for each what he wants her to be. At the end no one gets her, and she makes off with the family's jewellery in a stolen car. Rudolf is the only one who grasped her essence – her changeable nature, her play-acting, the impossibility of possessing her except for an instant. Was she life? – truth? – happiness?

All through the play we feel that we are walking through a forest of symbols and that the reality we perceive is only a reflection of another reality. Realistic details – and there are many of them – somehow disintegrate in the dream atmosphere of this double reality. The apricot tree in the garden is suddenly referred to as a cherry tree, the spaghetti prepared on the stove never gets cooked, the calendar seems to work backwards (Sunday comes before Saturday), a fist fight reduces one of the characters to a twitching marionette; secondary characters appear in stylized fairy-tale numbers – for example, the cast includes Seven Musicians with Wind Instruments, Seven Hunters with Rifles, Three Men with Flashlights.

There is another aspect of the play which is very important: the linguistic. The playwright may suddenly have two characters embark on a dialogue in which they play on words and concepts, reveal the confusing power of language, and shift the meaning of the scene to an entirely different level. Take the following example:

GIRL You stay here and can calmly go on playing–

RUDOLF Who? What?

GIRL For example love.

Rudolf laughs, makes her sit on his chair, and stands behind her

RUDOLF There are many cases in human life. It's the third one that is important: With whom?

GIRL I am still staggering hopelessly around the first one.

RUDOLF Who of them, who of us.

GIRL I dread the fourth one when I get old.

RUDOLF Over whom, over what.

GIRL And you?

RUDOLF Without whom, without what, when you don't stand before me any longer.

GIRL I know another preposition.

RUDOLF You mean behind?

GIRL I mean under.

*Rudolf bends down to her, they kiss ...*³⁴

Although in English some of the sharpness of this grammatical analysis of life is lost, we nevertheless see that the author is trying to explore and reconsider our relationship to language. He makes us rediscover, like children, the mysteries of structures which have become so familiar to us that we no longer notice them. As Ela says in another context to her lover: 'She [the Aunt] has become so used to you, that you no longer exist for her.'³⁵ It is habit, smothering life and gobbling up man's existence like a ravenous monster, that Topol exposes in each area of his mysterious poetic work.

³⁴ *Zwei Nächte* 213-14

³⁵ *Hodina lásky* 61

In the eight plays Topol has written to date, the setting has changed considerably to accommodate the variations on his themes. The early plays are historically defined and realistically localized. *Wind at Midnight* takes place at a certain period during the Middle Ages and *Their Day* is located in a typical small town in central Bohemia with its neon signs above the pubs doors, its stodgy living rooms, its smudgy railway station with red benches and dust-covered flowers planted in wooden barrels. Although Josef Svoboda, who designed the set, used a multi-screen projection process in order to intensify the dramatic conflicts, the overall impact was a realistic one, 'as if a camera had shifted the view of a panoramic whole into the inside of several people on a certain Sunday in a certain small town.'³⁶

Topol's third play, *The End of the Carnival*, which established him as a playwright of international stature, still has a concrete setting – a village with its farm houses and fields, and its barber shop. The stage here is reminiscent of a Breughel painting of a small community, half at work, half at play, teeming with life and activity. In comparing this setting with Topol's fourth (and first one-act) play, *Cat on the Rails*, one finds a surprising difference. The action takes place at night at a railway-stop – not a station but merely a stop somewhere in the country where the train passes a wooden shack by a big tree, where someone may or may not be waiting. The stop is a strange, half real place, its existence defined only for a few moments at a time, namely when the train stops and unloads or takes on an occasional passenger. Afterwards the place sinks again into anonymity until the next fleeting moment of identification when another train stops by.

No longer a Czech town with middle-class homes, no longer a village with farms and a dance hall, but a place 'in the middle of nowhere' that has its reason for being only in having people arrive from somewhere and leave for somewhere, in directions indicated only by two seemingly endless rails. Moreover the number of characters is drastically reduced. *Their Day* has twenty-six, *The End of the Carnival* twenty-five characters. The cast of *Cat on the Rails* consists of only five characters, three of whom are on the stage only briefly and are of no central importance. Basically the play consists of a conversation between two people.

Topol's second one-act play, *Nightingale for Dinner*, moves the action into a home again. However, it is not a home conceived as part of a village or town but rather a room sealed off from the outside, where remnants of food remain permanently on the table, the only sound of the world comes from a worn-out record player, and the view is limited to a piece of garden where visitors who cannot leave – and none of them can – will be buried in a shady spot. The wide sky above the village of *The End of the Carnival* where trees were swaying in the wind has given way to a closed-off garden where nature is fostered as the guardian of death – shading and beautifying the graves of men. The only other way out of the room is the staircase leading upstairs – an area that becomes more and more sinister, as the certainty grows that

this is where the visitor Nightingale will be killed. The open railway station where one stops only in order to leave again has become a locked prison with no way out.

The room in Topol's third one-act play, *An Hour of Love*, does have a door, but whoever goes out inevitably comes back. The only window is a mirror into which the girl makes a grimace at the end; a symbol of the starry sky is flattened against the prison wall, a zodiac sign – stage instructions say – is painted on the partition from behind which the authoritative voice of the Aunt crushes any notion of freedom. In Topol's second full-length play, *Two Nights with a Girl*, the room with its arbitrary assortment of furniture, its array of musical instruments which no one plays, its adjoining garden illuminated by the straying flicker of a flashlight, its stripped chandelier where only one bulb works, is, for all its seeming concreteness, a no man's land of human habitation, a place that neither is what it seems to be nor seems to be what it is. Like a house in a parable it could be found almost anywhere at any time; its reality is the higher reality of a symbol.

Topol's relation to his stage has some similarity to Ibsen, who narrowed down his dramatic world from the universal dimensions of *Peer Gynt* to the stifling rooms of *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm* and then expanded it again to the airy mountains of *When We Dead Awaken*. In his staging of Topol's plays Otomar Krejča revealed his understanding of the playwright's changed expression; he realized that the increased spareness of 'realistic' and localized detail required a more fully structured inner rhythm. In his famous staging of *Cat on the Rails*, for example, Krejča achieved this rhythm by using 'the dynamics of the actors' bodies as well as their language.'³⁷ Especially where the lovers fight and tussle, the director managed to work out a pattern of animal leaps, a fascinating visual mixture of strength and brutal elegance.³⁸

The mask, as Pirandello has told us, is a frozen form in which we constantly try to capture life because we can only perceive life when it does not move. Kierkegaard, using an opposite image to express the same thing, called life a white horse galloping past us on the other side of a high fence so that we are at any one time only able to see a fraction of it. If we were to give a label to Topol's work, we might call him the dramatist of the mask. He uses masks in each of his plays, sometimes explicitly, at other times symbolically. The 'demasking' process is a central theme in this work. We are well aware of the ambiguous quality of the mask: it hides and reveals at the same time. By concealing the identity of its wearer it releases him from personal responsibility and ushers him into the amoral sphere of anonymity.

But just because of this release from law and order it reveals and frees certain suppressed qualities; by sweeping away the borders of convention and habit it

³⁷ Machonin II Dec. 1965

³⁸ The main actors, Marie Tomášová and Jan Tríska, have been widely acclaimed for their meticulous performance. They also acted the leading roles in *An Hour of Love* and in Krejča's internationally famous staging of *Romeo and Juliet* in Josef Topol's innovative and outstanding translation.

³⁶ Krejča 'Director's Note' 7

becomes a provocation to intimacy and a new form of freedom. He who dons a mask no longer plays his habitual role; having lost his set form of behavior he is free to let his innermost qualities come to the surface. In other words, the mask may identify him as the man he really is. This is precisely what has happened to one of the main characters of *The End of the Carnival*: Raphael, who, as a result of an action performed while he was masked, must now for the first time in his life face up to individual responsibility. In his case the mask meant a true identification.

The End of the Carnival is partly about a play within a play. However, not the players but the on-stage audience wear the sign of the theatre, the mask. The events taking place in the village are witnessed by the villagers who have masked themselves to celebrate traditionally the feast of Shrove Tuesday, the end of the Carnival season. The audience in the theatre thus see not only the events themselves but also observe the other audience the masked villagers – who are instrumental in bringing about the catastrophe without being aware of their active part in it.

Faced with a sort of mirror image of themselves on the stage, the theatre audience are made to observe an attitude common to most people in everyday life: that of a partly informed onlooker who makes judgments on very scanty information, the scantiness of which he fails to realize himself. What is shown on stage therefore is an event and at the same its interpretation by society. Unlike Brecht, however, who instructs his audience carefully about the reasons for the events taking place, Topol does everything possible to avoid evoking definite judgment. On the contrary, the image of justice in his plays remains unclear. Because the playwright refuses to freeze it into a certain form, to give it a mask of timeliness, it remains unreachable, even inconceivable in its entirety, like Kierkegaard's white horse on the other side of the fence.

At first glance Topol's next play, *Cat on the Rails*, is a play entirely without masks. But its staging at the Theatre Behind the Gate in Prague during the 1965/66 season proved otherwise. The double bill announced an unlikely companion piece for the evening: Ghelderode's farce *Masquerade from Ostend*. As it turned out, however, the two plays were not strangers at all. Even before the lights went down, fragments of taped conversations of *Cat on the Rails* were heard in the audience, and as people were leaving, the main musical motif from *Masquerade from Ostend* accompanied them out of the theatre. When Ghelderode's play had finished, the masks taken off by the characters were left lying front-stage in full view. During the second part of the evening two people were taking off their masks metaphorically while sitting by a railway track in the place where the masks had been lying before. At the end of the play, as the train for which the lovers had been waiting approached, the rising roar of the engine mingled with the musical motif of Ghelderode's play, increased for a brief moment to an almost unbearable fortissimo, and then abruptly ceased, and the stage fell into darkness.³⁹

³⁹ Cf. Leoš Suchařípa 'Člověk je stejně sám' *Divadlo* (March 1966) 7-8

Topol's third one-act play, *An Hour of Love*, was also staged in a play-within-a-play context. It ran at the Theatre Behind the Gate together with Arthur Schnitzler's *The Green Cockatoo*, a short play about the French Revolution.⁴⁰ Again this unlikely choice turns out to have been the result of Krejča's deep insight into the nature of the plays he worked with. *The Green Cockatoo* deals again with theatre within theatre: an improvised play about revolution is interrupted by the revolution itself. The fictitious action is ironically pierced by reality which spills into the artifact and, by destroying it, proves its theme to be a fact.

Topol's subtitle for the second play of the evening, *An Hour of Love*, is 'a Dream in a Play.' It is as if the subdued trio of actors, taking up the theme from the symphonic treatment of Schnitzler's play, now gave an intimate variation on the subject of man's imagination versus reality. The important thing, however, is that the form of the imagination in Topol's case varies with the reality against which it wrestles. Schnitzler explores how man's imagination wanted to oppose reality by conjuring it, getting ahead of it, as it were. In *An Hour of Love* the characters try to oppose reality by contradicting it, and the flights of their imagination take on various shapes in the course of their struggle. Again and again Ela acts out her fancies to ward off the approaching extinction of her greatest dream – the dream with which 'everything stands and falls for her.' In the end this dream is crushed not by reality proving it to be no dream at all, as in Schnitzler's case, but – a more contemporary and grimmer image – by reality making it 'change under [her] hands,' wearing it away 'drop by drop, pebble after pebble.'⁴¹ Ela gives up her dream once she has found that it no longer has a relation to reality and has become senseless for her.

In *An Hour of Love* the playwright is pushing the theme of the role of man's imagination to its very limits. Whether the play is as stark and hopeless as some Czech critics have found it, has to remain an open question. Seen in the context of the three one-act plays, which I regard as variations on a theme, it does not seem to reveal quite as dark a vision as they would have us believe. Repeatedly the playwright imitates what Evi and Ela did by thinking up new ways of letting the mind play its magic game and turning the tables on the finality of death. 'Only death is real, time is an illusion,' says the Father in *Nightingale for Dinner*, to which his visitor, at the door of death, responds with the impassioned question: 'And if there is someone who turns it upside down? Who realizes himself within the limits of time so completely that he makes death an illusion?'⁴²

Topol once gave us his definition of a happy man as 'a man who lives in harmony with himself, who realizes himself to the greatest extent, who really is.' The

⁴⁰ These two plays, together with Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and Zdeněk Mahler's adaptation of Nestroy, *The Rope with Only One End*, were all performed by Krejča's ensemble of The Theatre Behind the Gate as the Czech entry at the annual International Theatre Festival in London, England, in the spring of 1969.

⁴¹ *Hodina lásky* 68

⁴² *Slavík* 90

playwright was very young then and his formulation sounds obvious, if not commonplace. His definition of the opposite of this kind of life is much better: He refers to 'those who have simply got used to our world, who have settled down in their own way, and not only do not know but never even ask themselves the question "why and for which reason all this is."⁴³ Here particularly we see the spiritual kinship between Topol and Beckett. Remember Estragon and Vladimir with their carrots?

ESTRAGON ... Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets.

VLADIMIR With me it's just the opposite.

ESTRAGON In other words?

VLADIMIR I get used to the muck as I go along.⁴⁴

At the heart of each of Topol's works there is a tension between two ways of looking at life. Generalizing, and therefore necessarily oversimplifying, we might call it the tension between the man who collects answers and the man who collects questions. These two basic poles of the human spirit have been called many names. The Greeks personified them by two gods; Nietzsche considered these gods in turn the key symbols of modern western thought; Santayana told us that one cannot exist without the other, because 'unless irrational impulses and fancies are kept alive, the life of reason collapses for sheer emptiness.'⁴⁵

The problem of the tension between these poles of man's inner life was central to Topol's work from the very start and grew with him, gaining in depth as he matured, paralleling his own development as a man and an artist. When the playwright was twenty-three, he presented the problem with the assured clarity of a young talent. For the 'scientifically minded' middle-aged Mr Dohnal of *Their Day* all the answers to life have been provided because 'nature has pulled it off from the biological cell to homo sapiens,'⁴⁶ and he can settle back into his self satisfied life without aims and dreams, and the responsibilities that come with them. The playwright obviously encourages us to write Mr Dohnal off as a negative figure and suggests that the sooner the young generation struggles free from his influence, the better.

By the time we meet the next of Topol's negative figures, the efficient village barber in *The End of the Carnival*, the playwright is much less explicit. Smrt'ak (a nickname playing on the word 'death' – something like 'Deadfella' perhaps) is no longer an obviously destructive figure; rather he is nondescript, average, and can be called 'a villain' with little more justification than any of the other villagers. Everyone is in some way responsible for Jindřich's death; Smrt'ak only a little more tangibly so, since he provided the make-up and the coffin for the procession.

Still, Smrt'ak is the destructive figure of the play. The fact that the evil he spreads has become less obvious is only due to the playwright's matured vision. Having rapidly outgrown a tendency to be too literal, Topol now moulds the figure with subtlety. Smrt'ak is a tidy man. He likes order and takes every opportunity to urge others to do 'one thing after another,'⁴⁷ he deplores waste and can get indignant when someone does not finish his drink; he himself hardly drinks (his excuses vary from gall-bladder trouble to kidney stones); and anxiously sticks to all rules and regulations. Even when he was a little boy (he has never left his native village) he was so well behaved that he was chosen as altar boy for the church service.

Smrt'ak has few pleasures – the chief one is seeing others get into trouble. Of course he never gets into trouble himself and quickly leaves whenever anything 'stops being funny.' In passing we learn that he directs the local amateur acting group and does the casting according to his knowledge of the villagers' weaknesses and secrets. During the mask festivities, too, he plays the role of the organizer. 'It all depends on me,' are his first words in the play. Even this feast of spontaneous joy he wants to organize according to the rules of his own limitations – for he is incapable of the sheer joy of living. For him the only enjoyable aspect of the masquerade will come when he sees the tragicomic figure of Král's son in the coffin: 'and with that funeral procession you wait until half past five when I close shop,' he orders the masks, 'that I wouldn't like to miss!'⁴⁸

In *Cat on the Rails*, Topol recasts the same figure even more subtly. Determined to work out the character to the last detail, the playwright has moved him into the centre of action. Věna is a man who knows that 'whatever I can't get my hands on gives me trouble.' He is literal-minded and unable to see beyond factual evidence. Evi puts it in her own perceptive way: 'When you laugh you cry! – What do you do when you cry?' Of course Věna never cries, perhaps because he thinks that there must always be a reason for everything. When Evi tells him a story about an actual event, he frets: 'So why do you tell me that? Where's the moral lesson of the story, where?' He cannot grasp the girl's impulsive joy, he cannot join her in her dreams because he has no inner harmony. There is a dark animal in him which he calls 'the mole,' and he is 'never sure who of the two is really me, the one who enjoys or the one who destroys.'⁴⁹

El of *An Hour of Love* is Věna's kindred spirit. He too abhors heights of any kind and when Ela, re-enacting a scene from the past, pretends to be standing precariously on a high rail, he shouts at her just as Věna had shouted at Evi when she had climbed on the roof of the railway shack. None of the men can understand the desire to seek heights even if it involves danger. 'I love heights! I love heights!'⁵⁰ calls Evi perched

⁴³ Kraus 'Masopustní tragedie' *Divadlo* (Feb. 1965) 22

⁴⁴ Beckett *Waiting for Godot* (New York 1954) 14

⁴⁵ George Santayana 'The Comic Mask' *Soliloquies in England* (New York 1923) 137

⁴⁶ *Jejích den* 62

⁴⁷ *Konec masopustu* 12

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 7, 12, 50

⁴⁹ *Kočka* 89, 91, 93, 94

⁵⁰ *Ibid* 89

against the sky. 'My God, what sense does it make?'⁵¹ grumbles El when Ela is balancing on the back of the sofa.

In *An Hour of Love* Topol has penetrated even further into the recesses of human nature. After having given 'the mole' in man the upper hand in *Nightingale for Dinner* and letting it destroy the messenger of joy, he now faces it in *An Hour of Love* with redoubled intensity. At one point Ela drapes herself in a table cloth with a flower pattern. At first El prefers these flowers to real ones 'because they don't grow. And what doesn't grow, doesn't change.' But when the penetrating voice of the Aunt informs him from behind the partition: 'What has got life, has got death,' El draws a 'logical' conclusion: 'So only that which is not alive remains forever? That which is not, is eternal?' Whereupon he shouts at Ela to 'take off that table cloth. Take off that eternity.'⁵² El misses Topol's significant distinction between merely living, and really being. Drawing his literal conclusion, he arrives at the closed door of an absolute statement. He fails to grasp Nightingale's dream about making death an illusion. Neither would he be able to follow Santayana's thought that 'literalness is impossible in any utterance of the spirit, and if it were possible it would be deadly.'⁵³

When Topol wrote *Two Nights with a Girl* he no longer tried to represent 'the enemy of life' in one character. The destructive and life-denying quality becomes less tangible and much more widely suffused. At various moments each character seems to share in this quality. It could be summarized as materialism and greed, an inability to perceive beauty, a refusal to try – with all the imperfections of trying – to arrive at some form of truth. In other words, it is lack of spirituality. The quality appears most obviously in the two intruders, the Doctor and David, who prey on the family's material and spiritual resources.

However, unlike Smrt'ak, the quietly vicious barber of *The End of the Carnival*, these two characters do not project a definite form of 'evil.' When Rudolf, assuming that David has taken off with the Girl, calls him 'a hired murderer,' the Doctor quickly deflates this moral judgment: 'You Romantic. He is a common thief.' Furthermore, as we find out a minute later, David is an unsuccessful thief. At the end the two 'thieves' dejectedly depart, two sorry figures pushing an old bicycle, hiding their faces in their upturned coat collars. The Doctor's last words, 'Night, the black cave of our minds,' pronounced as he leaves the threshold, sound strangely absurd. But not as absurd as Figaro's buoyant aria which resounds immediately afterwards from the record player. The dark forces in man's soul are crowded out by the irresponsible rhythms of a popular virtuoso theatrical performance. Perhaps it is 'all only play. And why not play for a while?' as Rudolf tells the Girl earlier. In play our dreams are released and perhaps only in play can we fill the empty silence which follows our questions about the meaning of life.

⁵¹ *Hodina lásky* 68

⁵² *Ibid*

⁵³ Santayana 'The Comic Mask' 139

In his note to *A Dream Play* Strindberg tells us that 'Time and place do not exist. On a flimsy foundation of actual happenings, imagination spins and weaves new patterns: intermingling remembrances, experiences, whims, fancies, ideas, fantastic absurdities and improvisations, and original inventions of the mind. The personalities split, take on duality, multiply, vanish, intensify, diffuse and disperse, and are brought into focus. There is, however, one single consciousness that exercises a dominance over the characters ...'⁵⁴

These words could well serve as an introduction to Topol's most profound and, in its exquisite combination of histrionics and philosophy, his until now most challenging play, *Two Nights with a Girl*.⁵⁵ From *The End of the Carnival* on Topol has established himself as a playwright-poet who keeps asking the eternal question: 'What is life and what does it mean? Who is man and what does he mean?' And although he knows that this question can never be answered, he bravely sets out to ponder again the nature of good and evil, happiness and sorrow, hope and despair. 'They don't understand you,' Rudolf says to his figurine-ideal once she has come to life and wins all the games everyone tries to play with her. 'They all approach you with sheer reason, they cut off your most beautiful branches, the yellowish green ones, on which not even a bird perches because they break when touched ever so lightly.'⁵⁶

In this paradoxical image lies much of the secret of Topol's play. By reason alone we find no way to the 'meaning' of the play. Its logic is the logic of a dream; its reality combines the invented and sensed reality of a dream merged with physical experience; its time and space become questionable as abstract entities and exist only in the imagination of the characters. Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, in which he placed the whole of humanity on trial, ushered in the drama of the twentieth century. Almost three-quarters of a century later a young Czech writer takes up the heritage of the great prophet of tortured humanity and reshapes it for the generation that knows Samuel Beckett.

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

⁵⁴ August Strindberg, Author's Note to *A Dream Play* in *Six Plays of Strindberg* tr Elizabeth Sprigge (Garden City, NY 1955) 193

⁵⁵ It is unfortunate that at the time of the completion of this book I had not had the opportunity to read Topol's most recent full-length play *Sbobem Sokrate* (Goodbye Socrates) which was written in 1976 and is circulating in typescript in Czechoslovakia as an item of *Edice Petlice*.

⁵⁶ *Zwei Nächte* 213