

Presentation for Panel Session, **“Politics and Art in the Former Czechoslovakia,”**
Pittsburgh Irish & Classical Theatre, April 26, 2009

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In this presentation, I would like to discuss the ways that politics and the arts impacted each other in Czechoslovakia during the period between the Prague Spring in 1968 and the Velvet Revolution in 1989. To connect this discussion with the reading that we just saw of Václav Havel’s play *Largo Desolato* and the upcoming productions of other Havel plays and Tom Stoppard’s *Rock-N-Roll*, I will focus specifically on the role of Havel as a dissident writer and the role of the underground rock group, the Plastic People of the Universe, as a catalyst in the creation of an effective opposition to the repressive Communist regime that governed Czechoslovakia at that time.

First, a few words about the Prague Spring to set the scene for this discussion: The term “Prague Spring” refers to a period of several months in 1968 after Alexander Dubček became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Dubček announced an ambitious program of political and economic reforms, which he said would correspond with the historical democratic traditions of the country. Unlike some other Central and East European countries, Czechoslovakia did actually have a significant democratic tradition, since it had been a parliamentary democracy between the two world wars before it was occupied by Nazi Germany at the beginning of World War II and then fell under Soviet influence when the Communist Party took power in 1948.

Dubček referred to his reform program as “socialism with a human face,” and among various other elements, it involved increasing freedom of speech and officially abolishing state censorship of the press, which he did in June of 1968. Several new political movements were formed during this period, even though previously no political organizations except the Communist Party had been allowed to exist in the country. The arts also flourished at this time due to the lifting of censorship. Not surprisingly, the Soviet government under Leonid Brezhnev did not approve of these developments in Czechoslovakia and perceived them as a threat to the unity of the Eastern bloc. The Soviet Union pressured Dubček to limit or reverse his reforms, but he still continued to pursue them.

Finally, one night in August 1968, the Soviet Union along with four other East European countries in the Warsaw Pact sent 200,000 troops into Czechoslovakia to occupy the country. Dubček and several other government officials were arrested and taken to Moscow, where they were forced to sign an agreement accepting the Soviet occupation before they were sent back home to Prague. Not long afterwards, the Soviets had Dubček replaced by Gustáv Husák as the leader of Czechoslovakia. This was the end of the Prague Spring and the beginning of a 21-year period in Czechoslovak history that was euphemistically called the “normalization” period. What “normalization” really meant was that all of Dubček’s attempts at democratic reform were reversed, strict censorship of arts and the media was reintroduced, all political groups other than the Communist Party were banned, and even non-political interest groups that citizens might try to form on their own without state supervision were severely restricted.

The Husák regime required all citizens to demonstrate their loyalty to the new order by signing a statement saying that they agreed with the Soviet invasion. By doing so, the regime in a sense actually created a distinct social group of people who were referred to as “dissidents” because they refused to sign the loyalty statement. This group included a number of Czechoslovakia’s most prominent writers.

One of these writers was Václav Havel, a young playwright who had become well-known for his satirical and absurdist plays starting a few years before the Prague Spring, when censorship of the arts had already become somewhat less strict than it had been in the first decade or so of Communist rule. Havel and other writers who were considered dissidents had all of their literary works completely banned by the normalization government, so that they were not allowed to publish their work or have their plays performed, and their works that had previously been published were removed from the shelves of libraries and bookstores. Many of the dissidents were fired from their professional jobs, and since being unemployed was illegal, they were forced to take manual labor jobs because they were prohibited from working anywhere else. Havel, for example, worked in a brewery for a while. His play *Audience*, which is the first of the trilogy of Vaněk plays that will be performed here at another reading on May 17th, was based on this experience.

Some of the banned writers still tried to find ways to share their work with an audience even when it could not be legally published or performed. Sometimes their manuscripts were circulated by readers who would type out additional copies by hand and then secretly pass them along to other people. This was referred to as “samizdat,” a Russian word meaning “self-publishing”. Plays by banned writers were occasionally even performed in private homes or other out-of-the-way locations; for instance, one of Havel’s plays, *The Beggar’s Opera*, was performed this way in 1975. The work of the secret police made these kinds of activities very dangerous, and there could be serious consequences for people who were caught participating in them, including arrest and harsh police interrogations.

However, it was not only writers and intellectuals who suffered from the regime’s censorship of the arts. Musicians were also restricted from playing styles of music that were not officially approved. This was particularly true of rock music, which the regime associated with what it viewed as the decadent capitalist West. Czechoslovak musicians and youth culture in general had been significantly influenced by Western popular culture during the Prague Spring period, when Czechoslovak citizens were free to enjoy the music of groups such as the Beatles, the Doors, the Beach Boys, and many others and to form their own bands to play similar types of music. Under normalization, though, musicians were forbidden to perform professionally without a license, which could be revoked if the government did not approve of their music.

One such unlicensed group was the Plastic People of the Universe, a rock band that formed shortly after the Soviet invasion. The members of the Plastic People were strongly influenced by Western rock groups, and especially by the Velvet Underground, an American band that coincidentally happened to be managed by a son of immigrants from Eastern Slovakia who had grown up in Pittsburgh, who, as you probably know, was named Andy Warhol. The Western influences on the Plastic People were also evident from the title of an album they recorded in 1974, which was called *Egon Bondy’s Happy Hearts Club Banned* (with “banned” spelled *b-a-n-n-e-d*), clearly a takeoff on the Beatles’ famous *Sgt. Pepper* album. Also, the group’s unusual name was taken from a Frank Zappa song.

The Plastic People had lost their license back in 1970, but they continued to perform underground concerts. In 1976, they held a countercultural music festival in a small Czech town that was raided by the secret police, and all of the band members were arrested. Later that year, two of the members were put on trial and sentenced to months in prison on charges of “organized disturbance of the peace.” At this point, these rock musicians’ fates became intertwined with those of the country’s dissident intellectuals and writers, a number of whom (including Havel) had attended their trial.

The Plastic People’s trial inspired Havel and several other dissident writers to compose a document called Charter 77, which urged the Czechoslovak government to honor the commitment that it had made by signing the Helsinki Declaration on the protection of human rights at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1975. The writers and signatories of Charter 77 formed a human rights organization, also called Charter 77, which was considered the first serious attempt to establish a movement of political opposition to the normalization regime. Havel and two other leading members were arrested while trying to mail the Charter to a number of government officials and media outlets on January 1, 1977. Havel’s involvement with the Charter would later lead to his receiving a four-year prison sentence, and many of the hundreds of other citizens who signed the Charter were subjected to severe police harassment, but nevertheless the Charter became internationally known.

In 1978, Havel wrote a famous essay called “The Power of the Powerless,” in which he urged the people of Czechoslovakia to give up their passive acceptance of the lies that were constantly repeated by the regime and instead to begin what he called “living within the truth.” He also wrote in this essay about the dissident writers’ support for the Plastic People, stating that: “Everyone understood that an attack on the Czech musical underground was [...] an attack on the very notion of ‘living within the truth,’ on the real aims of life. The freedom to play rock music was understood as a human freedom and thus as essentially the same as the freedom to engage in philosophical and political reflection, the freedom to write, the freedom to express and defend the various social and political interests of society.” (Vladislav, 64) An online music magazine [Perfect Sound Forever] has also quoted Havel as saying that the Plastic People “were defending ‘life’s intrinsic desire to express itself freely, in its own authentic and sovereign way,’ which is as close to a perfect definition of both democracy and rock and roll as has ever been stated.” (Yanosik)

Eventually, in 1989, the dissident-based Charter organization evolved into a much broader political movement called Civic Forum, which led a popular revolution that brought down the Husák regime. This was made possible by a rapidly changing international climate, in which the Soviet Union under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev did not interfere with the efforts of former Eastern bloc countries to change their political and economic systems. The Velvet Revolution restored a democratic government in Czechoslovakia, with Havel as the country’s new president.

The Plastic People of the Universe also reunited in the 1990s and continued to perform in the Czech Republic and abroad. It appeared that the relationship between politics and art had now been transformed, and instead of struggling with state censorship, artists in the Czech Republic and Slovakia could now concentrate on finding new roles to play in an open society.

Sources Cited

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