Abstract

VANĚK NA HRAD: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND
DRAMATURGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE VANĚK PLAYS

By Virginia Yvonne Griffith

The purpose of this thesis is divided into two parts. The first deals with constructing a historical context within Czech theatre history for the creation and evolution of the character, Vaněk, and the plays that he is in. The second half establishes the dramaturgical implications of having eight plays by four different playwrights that continue along the same story line.
Vaněk Na Hrad: The Historical Context and Dramaturgical Implications of the Vaněk Plays

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Virginia Yvonne Griffith
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Advisor________________________________
Howard A. Blanning Ph.D

Reader___________________________________
William J. Doan Ph.D

Reader___________________________________
Steve Pauna
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Introduction

The Birth of Vaněk

In the summer of 1975, Václav Havel created the character Vaněk for the one act play, Audience, simply because he needed something to read for group of his writer friends that were coming for their annual weekend visit. Havel said of this play:

After 1969 they [his friends] all had found themselves in a situation similar to mine. [...] The inspiration came from personal experience [...] and the play was intended, as may be evident, primarily for the entertainment of my friends. [...] It never occurred to me that the play might be saying something (more or less significant) to other people, people who do not know me or my situation [...] As it turned out, I was—as I had, after all, been a number of times before in regard to my literary work—mistaken (Goetz-Stankiewicz Vaněk 237)

Havel had no idea just how inspirational his simple character would become. Havel went on to write more Vaněk plays, Unveiling and Protest. Then something interesting happened, other playwrights asked to take up the character of Vaněk. In total, three other Czech playwrights wrote a total of five Vaněk one acts and one full length. Their plays continue Vaněk’s story in a way for which we have no other example in the theatre. There are plenty of examples of playwrights writing their own versions of a character’s story, such as with Oedipus or Faust, and we have examples of a playwright writing a series using the same character. But this is the only example that I could locate where many playwrights used the same character to create new plays that ended up continuing the plot line of the character’s life.

This thesis will deal with this historical context within Czech theatre that allowed for this to happen, and with the dramaturgical implications of these plays continuing the same story.
Chapter One

Prewar Czech Theatre and the Influence on the Vaněk Playwrights

The focus of discussions of the Vaněk plays often centers around a debate questioning if these plays are political in nature. This is not something that should be debated. One only needs to look to Czech theatre history to understand why.

In 1918, a repeated interplay of theatre with political realities almost became the norm, sometimes stifling or deforming the creative urge, but at other times focusing and spurring Czech theatre to greater artistry and relevance. The vital engagement of stage and society—sometimes subtle, even cryptic, sometimes harshly overt—has been a repeated condition of Czech theatre for the past two hundred years. (Burian, Modern 1)

Vaněk was not first created to be political to serve as a vehicle to get across Václav Havel’s agendas; instead Vaněk was created as a character that was influenced by the society that the playwright was greatly impacted by. Vaněk was political because just about everything was political at this time in Czech history. As Havel himself said,

This might surprise you, but it was never my ambition to write a political play. Never, at the beginning of a play, was there that intention. I simply wanted to write about people, about social mechanisms, about the mechanisms [.] which crush people and how people let themselves be crushed, about the inhibiting role which language can play, and things like that. When I wrote it, they always said it was political. In our conditions, everything was political. A play which, under the conditions of Communism, was not said to be political I would have found [it] suspicious, because it probably wouldn’t be about people. (‘Not only” 43)

To have a better understanding of the idea that politics, society, and theatre were all interconnected together; I will briefly explore some areas in the Czech theatre history tradition. While the Czechs have a rich and long theatre history, I will be focusing my
attention to the events and key figures that, in my opinion, impacted and helped to influence the Vaněk playwrights. I will follow Jarka Burian’s lead and start with the Czech theatre in the late 1700’s, which is where Burian began his discussion of modern Czech theatre in his book, Modern Czech Theatre: Reflector and Conscience of a Nation, which is the definitive work in Czech theatre history.

The late 1700’s mark the beginning of a push towards a Czech national theatre. This movement, traditionally known as the National Revival, was spurred on by the introduction of German as the official language of the Czech lands, as well as a smothering of Czech traditions by the Hapsburg Empire. The traditions of the Czech people were being held onto in the rural villages, such as the use of Czech language, but there was a sharp decline in Czech literature and theatre, which would have naturally been fueled in the larger cities. Theatre in the Czech language survived in the form of marionette performances and folk plays in the rural areas, but was rare to find in the cities. The National Revival movement set out to change all of that. The goals of this movement included: regeneration of the Czech language, reawakening of Czech culture and national identity, and a progress towards a political autonomy (Burian, Modern 9). The desire for a Czech national theatre was grounded in the ideals and goals of the National Revival movement.

Theatre [would provide] a popular and powerful instrument foregrounding the legitimacy of the Czech language, often by means of idealized dramatizations of Czech history and legend. Theatre thereby [would reinforce] the Czechs’ sense of their culture and national identity and [would help] to justify their increasing desire for autonomy. (Burian, Modern 10)

The push for a national theatre would not be easy within the Habsburg dominated theatre scene. The Czech language was not often heard in Czech theatres. Some actors did start bilingual theatres, in German and Czech, and some German theatres would allow for a performance or two of a show to be performed in Czech. But this was a far cry from a theatre that represented the Czech people. Václav Thám’s play, Břetislav and Jitka, was “the first Czech play to be performed in Czech by professional actors, in the German Nostitz Theatre in 1786” (Burian, Modern 10) Thám also helped start the bilingual
Patriotic Theatre (Vlastenecké divadlo), which was created “to contribute something to the improvement and spread of the Czech language” (Burian, *Modern* 10). The Patriotic Theatre holds an important place in Czech theatre not only because it was the first theatre to have regular Czech performances but also because this theatre lead to the creation of many Czech plays and translations of foreign plays. It is believed that Thám, himself, helped to write and translate over 150 plays into Czech. (Burian, *Modern* 10) However it would be many more decades before “the Czechs [would] have a theatre exclusively for the production of plays in their own language, the Provisional Theatre (Prozatimní divadlo), built in 1862” (Burian, *Modern* 10).

While Václav Thám did so much for Czech playwriting, his plays were still “essentially imitative of German and Austrian models” (Burian, *Modern* 11) and not truly Czech in nature. Václav Kilment Klicpera was “the first Czech playwright with a distinctive [Czech] voice and undeniable talent […], whose forte was lively, often satiric comedy that captured something essential in Czech speech and character” (Burian, *Modern* 11).

Václav Kilment Klicpera was somebody who definitely helped Czech theatre stand on its own two feet in the 19th century. We have to realize that there were several attempts to do so before Klicpera, but nobody was so systematic and so versatile in genres. Klicpera wrote vaudeville, comedies [,] and historical plays, and succeeded in bringing Czech drama up to a certain level […]

Klicpera’s plays were performed fairly regularly, and as a result Czech drama started gaining experience and was given the chance to develop independently from German culture […](Skodova, “Klicpera” 1)

Klicpera had a special ability to put his characters into a comic situation and at its peak they suddenly stop and we can read their internal thoughts, which are serious. Then everything goes back to laughter. Well, some critics used to say this was proof [that] the Czechs had a inferior complex, because what should have been done was to bring the mockery to its bitter end […]. Instead of that
we step back and smooth the edges in order to return to reality. The other interpretation says that Klicpera enables us to look at people from another angle, from a different situation. Laughter but not mockery, that was Klicpera’s credo. (Skodova, “Klicpera” 2)

In Klicpera’s works we can see the same Czech spirit that is so obvious in the works of Havel and other modern day Czech playwrights.

Another important figure during this time period was Josef Kajetán Tyl, who “like many other Czech theatre people, he was a person of multiple talents and activities” (Burian, Modern 11). “Tyl started to be active in theatre as a student, in fact he [...] escaped from school in Hradec Kralove and became a member of a traveling theatre troupe. What is most important, though, is the fact that since the very beginning young Tyl strove to create a theatre with a national character, which would underline the necessity of a free Czech nation” (Skodova, “Tyl” 1). While “working within the German cultural and political system, he was steadfastly at the forefront of the Czech cause and laid the foundation for the further evolution of Czech theatre” (Burian, Modern 12). Tyl’s plays were often historical and socially focused works. One of his “early play[s], Folk Festival (Fidlovačka) [...] which was a colorful depiction of contemporary Prague life, [which was still not a commonplace topic,[...] is primarily remembered for one of its songs, ‘Where is My Home?’ (Kde domov můj?), which eventually became the Czech national anthem” (Burian, Modern 12). Here we see a prime example of how Czech theatre, even at this early time, has an influence over society. Tyl fully understood the idea that theatre could, and in his opinion that it should, impact society.

More than any other theatre person, Tyl not only consciously and untiringly supported the principles of the revival movement, but proposed a concept for a national theatre as early as the 1840’s. Others may have spoken of a separate theatre for the Czechs, but it was Tyl who envisioned it as something far more impressive: a force of enlightenment and morality and an expression of the national spirit that would be a school for the nation. As he put it:

‘Elsewhere, people may wish theatre to show them as they already
are, but we must want a theatre to show us as we ought to be’

(Burian, Modern 12)

Tyl’s quote could have very easily been made by Václav Havel. “‘All our steps must be led by a love for our nation, and taken to ensure its happiness.’ That was the lifelong motto of Josef Kajetan Tyl” (Skodova, “Tyl” 1). Tyl was a member of “a committee [formed in 1850] to collect donated funds for the building of a National Theatre [...] [However since] most of the 1850’s was marked by repressive Habsburg measures following the revolutions of 1848\(^1\); the committee had to keep a relatively low profile to avoid arousing suspicions of subversive activity” (Burian, Modern 13). The committee was greeted by “a full spectrum of Czech society [...], from the nobility to agricultural and industrial laborers, who were generous not only with money but with personal items of value and building materials (Burian, Modern 13). The Czech citizens were in support and willing to work toward a theatre that would represent the Czechs better on stage. When the foundation stone was laid in May of 1868, it “prompted a huge three-day national and international Slav festival [...which drew] tens of thousands to Prague” (Burian, Modern 13). This was not just a celebration for a theatre, it went much farther than that: it was a celebration for a symbol of a society that had been smothered by the Hapsburg Empire. “It was the greatest national celebration of the Czechs until after World War I. The stone itself was quarried from Mount Říp, a Czech site of mythic overtones from primeval times, but many other Czech cities and regions also sent symbolic stones, which are still on display in the basement of the building” (Burian, Modern 13). On June 11, 1881 “the dream of a National Theatre in a full symbolic spirit and with official status became a reality, as did Tyl’s concept of a theatre of and for the people. [...S]ubstantial portions of the funding came from the individual contributions of ordinary Czechs. The inscription emblazoned above the proscenium was fact, not hyperbole: Národ Sobê (The Nation’s gift to itself)”(Burian, Modern 15).

The Czechs’ pride of personal involvement in an idealistic enterprise centering in theatre as a symbol of national identity fused with the concept of theatre as a moral and educational force.

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\(^1\) This sounds very similar to the events that Havel’s Charter 77 had to deal with during their time.
It became a cultural legacy. Sometimes obscured or faded, sometimes distorted and abused, that legacy has remained an intangible component of Czech theatre and society. It surfaced most recently and forcefully a century later, in the hectic days of the Velvet Revolution of 1989. (Burian, Modern 15)

Even though the National theatre helped bring theatre into the Czech forethought and worked to bring the Czechs together, there were still heavy limitations placed on theatre practitioners, much the same as would be seen years down the road with Havel and other playwrights during the time before the Velvet Revolution. “Subject as it was to strict censorship, Czech playwriting in the nineteenth century after Tyl was not in a position to confront the issues of nationalistic aspirations as directly or forcefully as did the practical activities of the Committee for the National Theatre or other Czech political endeavors” (Burian, Modern 15). But these playwrights, much like the playwrights of the later twentieth century, found a way to get their message across to the people regardless of the censorship.

By drawing on inspirational historical material [...] Tyl and subsequent Czech playwrights fed the Czechs’ need to associate themselves with glories in their past in order to strengthen their sense of the rightness of their present thrust toward autonomy. Direct handling of controversial contemporary material and explicit calls for independence or throwing off of oppression were out of the question. Moreover, the broad flow of events as the century progressed gave hope for increased Czech self-direction, not only in theatre but also in education and other institutions (Burian, Modern 16)

The National Theatre had the unpleasant task of trying to fulfill the artistic and political desires of the government as well as the often-conflicting desires of the people. The first season of the National Theatre was “marked by late Romantic, poetic, and historical drama with emphasis on elaborate scenic displays [...] and by superficially realistic conversation pieces in the French boulevard mode” (Burian, Modern 16). This left many
of the “Czechs [...] disappointed that the drive for a meaningful national theatre seemed to be embodied in a place of ostentatious bourgeois entertainment” (Burian, Modern 17).

Ladislav Stroupežnický, dramaturg and playwright, and Josef Šmaha, actor and director, fought for and were mainly responsible for the staging of foreign and Czech plays at the National Theatre that showed contemporary realistic life in a critical tone at the end of the nineteenth century. Stroupežnický’s village play, Our Swaggerers (Naší furianti) “became a landmark of Czech drama and theatre in its lively yet critical portrayal of Czech characters and behavior. [...] A good-natured but tartly satiric view of traditionally sentimentalized types, the play pioneered a movement toward a maturer vision of the realities of Czech life” (Burian, Modern 17).

The recurrent use of a village setting reflected the historical reality of Czech culture being centered in rural life for over two hundred and fifty years. Despite the great strides in reviving Czech culture and political presence in urban centers during the nineteenth century, most Czechs remained more familiar with village live than with life in the city. Moreover, village life seemed to provide richer material for the dramatic embodiment of elemental passions and states of mind within a social framework of inflexible traditional values and practices. (Burian, Modern 17)

The Švanda Theatre, the only main rival to the National, had in the late “1890’s [...] formulated a repertory program [comprised of] both popular classics (Shakespeare and Czech comedies) and a series of contemporary chamber plays by foreign and Czech writers” (Burian 18). “Poetic treatments of Czech history, myths, and fairy tales were also staples of literature and the stage” (Burian, Modern 18).

As the [nineteenth] century drew to a close, Czech drama was approaching the level of its more established, long-practiced European models. In language, form, creative imagination, and theatrical effectiveness, it had developed significantly from its tentative, imitative roots [...], although it was still looking to foreign dramatic models and theatrical patterns. Similarly, although the Czechs now had two major Prague theatres producing
entirely in Czech, a body of strong actors, and some skilled, creative directors, Czech theatre [had] yet to demonstrate a sustained record of distinctive achievement comparable to the best of European theatre. That goal was to be reached in the new century. (Burian, Modern 19)

“As noteworthy as the Švanda Theatre’s efforts at a serious repertoire may have been, however, it [would be] the sustained creativity of Kvapil [at the National Theatre] and Hilar [at the Vinohrady] [...] that [would lift] Czech theatre to international stature in the early decades of the century” (Burian, Modern 21). I will discuss Kvapil and Hilar in greater detail later.

The goal of autonomy found new fuel with World War I and “autonomy within a federation seemed a realizable goal to the majority of the Czechs, including history professor Tomáš G. Masaryk, future president of what would become Czechoslovakia” (Burian, Modern 20). In Masaryk, we can see glimpses of Havel’s thinking and philosophy on government.

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk was convinced that democracy is the political form of humanity. In his view, the justification of the new state lay in Czechoslovakia’s potential to realize humane ideals. He exhorted all its citizens to strive for this aim: ‘All citizens of good will, without distinction of condition, religion or nationality, have been given the opportunity to build an exemplary democratic state, whose task will be to care for the interests of the whole free self-governing citizenry.’ (Čornej 44)

Masaryk was given the title as “President Liberator” (Čornej 44). The playwright, Karel Čapek, who I will discuss later in this chapter, wrote a book based on his talks with President Masaryk. In reaction to a story the President told about being in the middle of Moscow during the war, Čapek wrote,

But what struck the author of the Talks more than anything was that one brief phrase ‘I didn’t want to lie.’ There he [The President] was—guns shooting from both sides of the square [in

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2 The Czechs have a history of electing intellectuals.
Moscow], bullets raining down on the pavement and buildings
around him—there stands Professor Masaryk, and the porter [of a
hotel] won’t let him in. Had he said he was staying there, the porter
would have let him in immediately, but not even when his life was
at stake would he let himself lie. And when he talks about it, he
uses the short, dry ‘I didn’t want to lie’ meaning it goes without
saying, that’s all there is to it. (Talks 17)

Czech theatre in the beginning of the twentieth century was led mainly by
Jaroslav Kvapil, who worked at the National Theatre, and Karel Hugo Hilar, who was at
the Vinohrady and would take over for Kvapil at the National. These men “led the efforts
to create modern Czech theatre, even as the Czech people were continuing a century long
campaign to achieve autonomy” (Burian, Modern 20). Kvapil and Hilar are best
remembered for their directing but “like many before them in Czech theatre, both had a
literary background as writers, editors, translators, and critics, and their first duties at
these theatres did not involve directing” (Burian, Modern 21). It's important to note that
Kvapil and Hilar were not working together and their approaches to theatre and directing
were quite different from each other. But it would be this contrast and their skills that
would help lift Czech theatre up to the level of other European theatres. I will now
discuss Kvapil and Hilar’s techniques briefly to better show how these men affected
Czech theatre. Together they would help forge the theatre that Havel, Kohout, and others
would find a home and voice in.

Jaroslav Kvapil, who would work as chief director and head of drama at the
National Theatre, “significantly advanced the move of Czech theatre into the flow of the
twentieth-century Western theatre, both in his choice of plays and in his methods of
staging at the National Theatre, where he directed an astonishing number of
productions—over one hundred and fifty in less than twenty years” (Burian, Modern 21).
Kvapil would help advance the repertory of the National through his literary background.
The new repertory was comparable with that of the Švanda. In addition to the classics,
like Shakespeare and the Greeks, Kvapil focused on contemporary international drama
introducing the works of Ibsen, Chekhov, and others into the repertory of the National.
Kvapil was greatly impacted by the work and efforts of other European directors and his
“work represented a synthesis of the approaches of [...] major artists” (Burian, Modern 23) such as Stanislavsky, Brahm, and Reinhardt.

His crucial contribution to Czech theatre [was his][...] fully establishing the director as the unifying shaper of all production elements [...] Eclectic in his tastes, never imposing a strongly personal interpretation, Kvapil blended all elements into a harmonious whole [...] Kvapil adopted a supportive approach with [his actors], relying more on their creativity than on his own subjective slant on the play. His work with designers was essentially conventional, reflecting the transition from painted, representational scenery to more selective, simplified realism with symbolist overtones. (Burian, Modern 23)

Kvapil’s impact on Czech theatre was quite profound but like many Czech theatre people before him and certainly like many after, Kvapil used his influence in the theatre to aid Czechs in their fight for autonomy and cultural awareness. With Kvapil we can see the same spirit and drive for the people and for the Czech society that would be so evident in the work of Václav Havel. One parallel between Havel and Kvapil can be seen in their work with organizations, Havel with Charter 77 and Kvapil with the Czech ‘Mafie’, a covert resistance effort by influential Czechs working within the law to promulgate the Czech cause. [...] In May 1917 Kvapil composed a Writers’ Manifesto addressed to Czech members of the imperial council protesting a previous declaration of loyalty to the monarchy [...] One year later, [...] he organized an even more stirring action: a National Oath of allegiance to the Czech cause by leading representatives of Czech cultural and political life in Prague’s Municipal House. [...] [He organized a] performance of several dozen works by Czech authors to underline the Czech’s yearning for autonomy. [...] [He] took [a] leave [from the theatre] to assume an important function for several years in the new nation’s Ministry of Education, becoming one more

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3 I will discuss Charter 77 in greater detail in Chapter Three of this thesis.
example of a Czech theatre person whose commitment to the national cause was equal to his love of theatre. (Burian, Modern 24)

With Kvapil, we see the roots for Havel, in terms of his political side within his relation to theatre, and with Hilar, we can see the roots for Havel’s plays.

Karel Hugo Hilar was drawn, as a director at the Vinohrady and later National theatres, to the expressionist movement. “Hilar saw theatre as a Dionysian or Baroque rite, a full-blooded, provocative, vibrant celebration. [...] It was a sharper, more concentrated, heightened form of theatre than Kvapil’s, more aggressive and hard-edged, with a distinct inclination toward irony and satire” (Burian, Modern 26). “Hilar and other European theatre artists were attracted to plays dealing with the masses, their turbulence, and aspiration, their ecstasy and pathos. For Hilar, the most apolitical of all major Czech theatre people, the war and the turbulence of peace were equal inspirations for what concerned him most—his creative work in theatre” (Burian, Modern 28).

For Hilar, theatre was essentially self-justifying, certainly not a servant of any ideology or other extrinsic cause, yet it achieved its highest purpose when it reflected or, better, resonated with its time and public. Theatre needs to sense the inner atmosphere of its time, to feel its pause. The director must transform his art in the spirit of his age, to join the mentality of the poet with that of the public. (Burian, Leading 3)

It was said of Hilar’s work, that his productions “were not Reinhardt spectacles of mass movements, but dramatic battles of individuals and collectives for truth and justice” (Burian, Modern 28). With Hilar, we have our best example, besides the work of Havel, of just how interwoven politics was with theatre. When Havel set out to write Audience, for the amusement of his friends, he was not writing a political vehicle with Vaněk, he was just reflecting the society at that time much in the same spirit as Hilar’s works.

By 1920, thanks to the special talents and total dedication of Kvapil and Hilar, as well as their associates, Czech theatre did indeed belong among the front ranks of European theatre. In the next two decades, until stifled in 1938 by events preceding World
War II, Czech theatre established itself even more firmly as a powerful voice in contemporary theatre and in the life of its young nation. (Burian, Modern 28)

Czech theatre during the 1920-1938 had a great level of vitality and variety. The vitality was due largely to the enormous release of spirit accompanying the creation of an independent republic after several centuries of alien citizenship within the Hapsburg Empire [...] For the Czechs, it was one of the rare times when the external pressures of economics or politics were minimal. They were free to create at will. (Burian, Modern 31-32)

November of 1920 marked an event that is important to a discussion on the politics of Czech theatre. At that time, “as if to crown their independence and to reclaim a part of their heritage, Czech demonstrators (some of them actors) seized the Estates Theatre in a spontaneous, problematical show of patriotism triggered by clashes between [the Czechs and the Germans]” (Burian, Modern 28). This move shows that theatres were indeed useful pawns in the battles for autonomy, society, and culture. However it is important to point out, as Burian does, that “for theatre people, the [issue of nationality or culture] was essentially irrelevant. The issue [to them] was a matter of [freedom for] creativity, artistry, freshness, and relevance to the times. Until ideology became decisive (e.g., Nazism, communism) foreign artists like Stanislavski, Reinhardt, [and others] were judged not by nationality but by their talent and professionalism” (Burian, Modern 29).

That is not to say that Czech theatre people were not focused on trying to raise awareness for their culture and society, but instead I include Burian’s comment to help reiterate that the Czechs were open to others for models of theatricality and we not closed minded. “In Czech theatre this tendency toward self-improvement by learning from others produced an exceptional potential for creativity” (Burian, Modern 31). They were fighting mainly for the freedom to be open minded to new ways that would help them create a voice that would be unique to Czech theatre.
During the 1920’s and 1930’s, Czech “theatre, as theatre, was dominated by its directors, first, and its scenographers and actors, second. Czech playwrights, with the striking exception of Čapek [...], did not measure up to their fellow artists” (Burian, Modern 32). Although that may be the case, I will be focusing most of the rest of this chapter on the work of Čapek, due to his great impact on Havel. I will briefly touch on the work of Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich, but I will be over looking the work of many fine Czech directors and scenographers so as to focus my attention on the theatre practitioners whose work, in my opinion, show evidence of having impacted the Vaněk playwrights.

Karel Čapek was probably the best-known Czech theatre person in the world until another Czech playwright, Václav Havel, gained international attention for his plays and his political stance from the late 1960’s onward [...] Čapek’s complex personality was that of a skeptical humanist and ironic, satiric humorist. A journalist and literary person for most of his life, Čapek also sat close to the seats of power as a member of an informal inner circle around Czechoslovakia’s first president [...] Čapek had deep faith in life, in human reason and even goodness, but he was also [depressed] by human folly, greed, and lust for power. He rejected all attempts to apply easy solutions to the mystery of human identity and relationships or to provide formulas or ideologies for the improvement or salvation of society. (Burian, Modern 33-34)

Čapek’s plays, like The Insect Comedy and RUR (Rossum’s Universal Robots), tended to make people laugh while also touching on sometimes painful aspects of human nature, and they often “prompted audiences to think rather than feel” (Burian, Modern 34). A theme that often reoccurred in Čapek’s plays was that of “a wonderful, miraculous discovery [that] becomes destructive or unbearable” (Burian, Modern 37). The descriptions of Čapek’s plays could also be used to describe Havel’s, which is to be expected since Čapek was a large inspiritation to Havel and his plays,
Another possible influence for the Vaněk playwrights might be found within the later works of Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich, whose theatre was the Liberated Theatre of Voskovec and Werich, often just referred to as v+w. The productions were normally structured as satirical revues. “In these revues v+w usually played characters who inadvertently become embroiled in the main action and periodically step outside [of the action] to comment on it and on related issues” (Burian, Modern 46). Their work often showed “the common people as the real protagonists behind the heroic facades of history” (Burian, Modern 51). During the mid 1930’s, a shift in the work of v+w took place. Their revues “extended their satire to [focus on the] flaws in the contemporary Czech political scene (early signs of Facist elements) and the grotesque phenomenon of dictators like Benito Mussolini and Hitler. [...] [The work of v+w moved] from high-spirited entertainment to [works that expressed] concern for sociopolitical relevance” (Burian, Modern 46). By 1938, the Liberated Theatre had lost their license to perform. “The most popular theatre in prewar Czechoslovakia was only a memory, but it [would help to] sustain the Czechs in the dark years to come” (Burian, Modern 51).
Chapter Two

The Effects of World War II on Czech Theatre

With the 1920’s and 30’s, Czech theatre had found its voice and created for itself an international reputation for fine work. It seemed like the difficulties of the past, of fighting against a repressive dominating culture were finally over. That was until the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Germans on March 15th, 1939. This chapter will deal with the fight for survival that Czech theatre had that would continue up until the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Before, Czech theatre was fighting for its voice, now it was fighting for survival, not only for the art but also for the people. This fight greatly influenced and impacted the lives and work of the Vaněk playwrights. Vaněk, as a character, developed out of this spirit. This chapter will provide a historical context for the creation of Vaněk plays. The plays deal very heavily with the political events that were going on at the time, simply because those events were greatly impacting Czech life as a whole. The plays are a reflector of the society at that time and not necessarily a political vehicle.

After fighting since the 1700’s for freedom from the oppressive Hapsburg Empire and in turn the German influence and repression of Czech culture and finally winning the fight, the Czechs were once again faced with a fight to save their culture from the Germans. The fight for culture and theatre can be seen as a microcosm for the larger fight for Czech survival against the controlling force of the Nazi German rule. At the very beginning, the occupation seemed to just be history repeating itself and culture was quick to fight back to protect how far it had come.

For the Czech population[,] the occupation meant yet another shock, and yet more humiliation. On the other hand, it provoked even greater indignation and the determination not to give in to pressure. The nation found encouragement particularly in the field of culture [...] In an atmosphere of general danger[,] interest rose in works which recalled the certainties of [Czech] national life-the native landscape, motherland, [and] history. All these works [...] were really also
polemics against the Nazi propaganda [...] which emphasized the
dependence of Czech cultural development on German traditions. Theatre
performances and concerts of Czech classical music expressed the same
striving for reassurance. (Čornej 59-60)

However it quickly became apparent that this fight would be even more difficult than the
previous one. By the 17th of September 1939, The Nazis had closed down “all Czech
institutions of higher learning [...] [This measure was] meant by the occupiers to break
the power of the Czech intelligentsia as leading elements in the nation” (Čornej 60).

Theatre was allowed to continue under the Nazi regime with obvious restrictions;
“[a]ll plays by Jewish authors and others unacceptable to the Nazi regime, such as
political emigrants and most authors from countries at war with Germany, were banned
 [...] All Jewish theatre artists, German or Czech, were forbidden to work in [the] theatre”
(Burian, Modern 57).

The basic routine of theatre performances continued with minimal change,
except that all theatre activity was forbidden for a month or two in the fall
of 1941 when Hitler’s deputy, Reinhard Heydrich, took over as
“Protector” of the Czech lands. A second extended suspension of all
theatre occurred between September 1944 and May 1945 because of
Germany’s desperate need to conscript labor and conserve resources.
Otherwise, few theatres were closed or restricted in the number of
performances they could give. In fact, attendance was at an all time high
during the whole period. As more than one observer noted, each
performance in each theatre, became an implicit sub rosa tribunal on the
German occupation. That Czechs were able to assemble legally in theatres
was in itself an attraction, particularly in theatres that had special Czech
significance, such as the National Theatre. Moreover, audiences could
almost always perceive morale-reinforcing verbal or visual signals in the
productions’ incidents, themes, or dialogue. Productions involving any
form of tyranny or oppression were always relevant, but with the
unspoken understanding that nothing blatant would be permitted,
including overt reactions from audiences. (Burian, Modern 58)
When Heydrich was assassinated in May of 1942 by “Free Czech agents that had been trained in England and brought to Czechoslovakia to assassinate him” (History Place 8), the Nazis retaliated with murders and “in a more bureaucratic way, by summoning representatives of all Czech theatres to the National Theatre that June to pledge fidelity to the Third Reich” (Burian, Modern 61-62).

It is important to note that during the times of the theatre bans, some groups were performing in secret. One such group, the Dramatic Studio for Youth, had one illegal performance, which led to “a completely public performance on May 18th, shortly after the liberation, perhaps the very first postwar production of a new work on Czech soil” (Burian, Modern 61).

While Czech theatre remained relatively strong and active in Prague and other major Czech cites, theatre, due to its “inherent life force” (Burian, Modern 62) had found for itself a new home in a rather unexpected place, within the Nazi ran concentration camps. Czech inmates, as well as prisoners of other nationalities organized performances. Often different nationalities would come together to put on multicultural, multilingual shows.

One reason for this uncharacteristic beneficent policy on the part of the Nazi German authorities would apply to all concentration camps: cultural entertainment and other recreational activities, obviously monitored as to content and extent, helped distract people and mollify tensions that might lead to disturbances that would complicate the efficient, controlled maintenance of the camp and the flow of human traffic. (Burian, Modern 63)

One such concentration camp, Theresienstadt, stood out for its level and number of Czech performances. The Nazis later used the camp, which was called Terezín in Czech, as a model concentration camp to show foreigners.

Terezín was to send the message that the concentration camps were more like retirement communities, where culture flourished. Terezín became a Potemkin village, a huge stage set, within which theatre and other cultural activities could be displayed, especially when foreign visitations were to occur. In advance of such known
visits, beautification [...] projects occurred to display the camp at its best, including the repair and rehabilitation of living quarters, planting of flowerbeds, and artistic performances of various types. Once the visits were over, camp life quickly returned to bare survival levels, but, even then, reduced cultural activities initiated by the inmates went on. The prisoners realized they were being used, but took advantage of the greater opportunities for creativity. (Burian, Modern 64)

Theatre at Terezín was a unique phenomenon running parallel to the theatre on Prague stages and elsewhere before Czech audiences. In its complexity of elements, its creativity in the midst of immediate and longer-range difficulties that blended into horrors, it was both grotesque and inspiring. Bořivoj Srba, one of the chroniclers of theatre in the camps (not only Terezín), made an observation that seems especially apt for the activities at Terezín: “The elementary power of theatre to elevate a person to a truly human level demonstrated itself in no other surroundings in the years 1939-1945 as convincingly as it indeed did here [in the camps]—behind bars and barbed wire. (Burian, Modern 65-66)

The time after the occupation of the Germans and the end of World War II can be broken into two different periods, 1945-1948 seemed like a positive time for repair and growth after the war, and 1948-1958 when Czech theatre went into a dark era. In 1945 the fate of the Czechs was once more placed in the hands of the Allies, who again made a choice that like the one made at Munich in 1938 would result not in relief for the Czechs but even more pain and suffering. The U.S. Army had, as early as April 18, been in Czech lands and very easily could have pushed through to Prague to liberate them long before the May 9th ‘liberation’ by the Soviet forces. But the U.S. was halted by an Allied agreement while they were in the Pilsen area. If the Allied troops had been allowed to continue on to Prague, Czech history would have been greatly altered. However it was “the Red Army [who] entered Prague as its official liberator. [...] Thus the USSR gained an enormous and psychological advantage in the next few years in the struggle to
determine whether Czechoslovakia would be aligned with the West or the East, capitalist democracy or Communist totalitarianism” (Burian, Modern 68). But “prewar experience made a persuasive case for the position that the only consistent opposition to fascism was communism” (Burian, Modern 74). This idea paved the way for Communism to win out in Czechoslovakia. But before this happened, during the period immediately following the liberation in May of 1945 and ending when the Communist government took control in February of 1948, the Czechs experienced a time of “considerable, although not complete, freedom of expression” (Trensky 3). While some state that “this period produced no truly important plays” (Trensky 3), it was still a notable time for growth and change in the Czech theatre.

The first plays to be staged after the war were those written during the occupation or completed shortly thereafter. Many of these plays attempted to continue the prewar tradition, with little regard for recent events. [...] All these plays were written with considerable skill and sympathetically received, but interest focused on plays that reflected contemporary events and problems. [...] The plays performed during this period can be divided into two basic groups. [The f]irst [group consisted of] historical plays whose themes were related to events of the recent past. [...] [These plays tended to focus on] the general problem of Nazism [...] [The second category includes plays, which attempted to relate to recent history in an indirect way, through symbol[ism] and allegory. (Trensky 4)]

The Czechs wanted a theatre that properly reflected the current situation. This was a luxury that they had before the occupation and one that they did not want to just return to, as if visiting an exhibit in a museum; they wanted to create a new and vibrant theatre that held a mirror up to the current social situation: a theatre very much in the same spirit as the past but one in which excitingly new, relevant plays could be performed. However, the freedom to completely create such a theatre at this time was just beyond their reach. The playwrights were not completely free to write at will and most would have been leery to fight for the right to do so. This was a time to wait and see which way the
government would end up turning. The irony of this period rests in the fact that while the theatre did not have the complete freedom to forge ahead, it did not have the freedom to return to its prewar state either. Many of the successful Czech theatre people had either escaped to other lands, had died during the occupation, or were seen as threats to the newly forming government. While many may have been holding out hope for a democracy, as soon as the Soviet tanks rolled into Prague and liberated the people, Czechoslovakia became a Soviet satellite. Its destiny had already been decided, even though that was not completely apparent at that time.

By February of 1948, the Communists had completely taken over the Czech government. With this control came some rather positive results for Czech theatre, such as the return of the Estates Theatre [which was] reverted to the Czechs as the second stage of the National Theatre” (Burian, Modern 70) and the “establishment of a university-level Academy of Performing Arts [...] For theatre students it meant a five-year curriculum for actors, directors, and designers” (Burian, Modern 69). This would have seemed like a blessing after the Nazis closed all places of higher learning.

One of the basic and generally accepted socialist measures was the nationalization of traditionally profit-making capitalistic enterprises, including theatre. All theatres previously operated for private profit were placed with others under state or collective control, and an official advisory council was established to determine who would be put in charge of each theatre. [...] The number of students admitted [into the Academy of Performing Arts] each year was in direct proportion to the anticipated future needs of the network of theatres throughout the nation. (Burian, Modern 69)

This, at first, was an accepted feature of the new Socialist philosophy and was seen as a positive step in the right direction. However in truth this only allowed the government power over theatre and put an end to the little freedoms that were felt after the liberation.

After the Communist takeover in 1948, the theatre was rapidly transformed into a political tool for the propagation of Marxist ideology. Although plays sympathetic to Communist ideology
were written before 1948, after that year dramatic output was homogenized to pure propaganda whose principles were formulated by elaborate official guidelines of the Party. The ideological content during the Stalinist years was narrow and primitive, and it conformed to the esthetic dogma known as “socialist realism.” The theatre was required to popularize the most essential slogans of Marxism, to endorse specific decisions of the government, and to glorify the party and government leaders. Another of its functions was to discredit the bourgeoisie, domestic as well as foreign, along with alien ideologies and systems. Due to the absence of talented authors willing or able to conform to these requirements, attempts were made to train new dramatic cadres to these requirements untouched by undesirable traditions. The official policy was to encourage plays with proper ideological content regardless of their artistic merit. (Trensky 5)

So the ‘blessing’ of the creation of the Academy of Performing Arts was quickly revealed for its true intent and purpose.

Official ideologists promoted plays based on three [principal] themes. The greatest emphasis was, first, on plays about the working class; second, on plays about village life; and third, on historical plays reflecting ideological conflicts of the past. Plays from the milieu of the middle class and intelligentsia, which [would become] the cornerstone of the Czech drama during its renaissance in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, was given no place in the official calendar. Most numerous were plays about workers. Inspired by prewar ad well as postwar Soviet models, these plays featured, as a rule, the so-called positive hero, who was the embodiment of socialist virtues. His antagonist was a “class enemy”; one frequently connected with foreign intelligence forces. The action usually revolved around the work on a project important for the building of socialism. Sometimes the difficulties
the project ran into were not caused deliberately by a saboteur but rather by [a] lack of morale on the part of the workers. The plays had obligatory happy endings, with the positive forces triumphant. Plays with a village setting were slower to appear and fewer in number. The principal theme of these plays was the collectivization process. Essentially these plays were quite similar to those [about the workers] [...]. Characters were divided into positive and negative according to their political views and their class organs. Plays based on historical and quasi-historical events abounded. Many were adaptations of works written in other genres. [...] Only a very few plays fell outside the[se] three categories [...] [This included] Pavel Kohout[‘s ...] dramatic debut The Good Song (1952), [which] tried to break the formal monotony of the plays of that time by writing a comedy in verse. [His] play dealt with [the] intimate emotional problems of the younger generation, but the solution to these problems was sought in the application of ideological concepts. (Trensky 5-7)

One may look at this structure for Czech plays and wonder why these theatre people contributed works such as these. Would it have been better to have no theatre than a theatre that portrayed this message?

It’s important to realize that at this time the Communist message was one of hope to the Czech people.

[The] Communist Party, much more organized and focused than any other political group, consistently propagated the idea that its programs provided a well-planned, logical solution to social problems in the wake of the six years of wartime suffering and deprivation. In the eyes of many people communism became a universal formula for social justice and well-being, a higher ideal [worth fighting] for. (Burian, Modern 74)

To answer my previous question, the Czech theatre people saw it as their duty and honored privilege to help convey the message of the Communist party to the people.
A special sense of mission [...] came into play. The challenge of creating a new citizenry for a new society, a new order, undoubtedly appealed to many intellectuals and artists, especially the seductive idea that theatre had the power to play a major educational and inspirational role in [this] process, thus promising a special importance to every theatre worker. In this sense the deeply rooted nineteenth century concept of the moral and educational role of theatre experienced an ironic, perhaps even perverse, rebirth. Originally tied to the ideals of national identity and autonomy for the Czechs, the concept was now co-opted by an ideology designed to frustrate both ideals in the name of universal social engineering designed and controlled by Moscow. [...] The Communist promise that theatre would no longer be run by profit-minded entrepreneurs but by theatre people themselves fulfilled the idea of “theatre belonging to those who create it” [...] these powerful appeals were enhanced by the Soviet assurance that the Czechs would be able to formulate their own version of communism, and not simply be stamped in the Soviet mold. Illusory as most of these assurances and ideals [would prove] to be, they help explain the initial decisive move to the left in Czech theatre. (Burian, Modern 74-75)

Before too long, however, the illusions created began to fall apart. The “‘years of flight and terror’ soon began, most shockingly in 1950-1952, with massive show trials and executions designed to eliminate opposition to the new regime and to intimidate the general public” (Burian, Modern 73).

While the theatre of this period is often overshadowed by the powerful Czech theatre of the 1960’s, we cannot dismiss the effect this period had on theatre overall. Aeschylus spoke of wisdom through suffering, and it is likely that a rather special wisdom did develop in those enduring the blackest years of the 1950s. In most people it probably took the form of survival tactics, but in some it may also have sparked a special effort to inject their art with the
distillation of their will to resist, to counter the ego-destroying force of a “socially engineered” system by the nonmaterial means at their command. The oppressive dogmas and directives create a special bond among most genuinely creative theatre artists and workers. They could not overtly denounce the system, but they could be passionately dedicated to condemning it indirectly through their art. [...] Not only wisdom, but also creativity may have been produced through suffering. The deformative and even deadly force of the powers that then prevailed may ironically have prompted the very motivation, heightened concentration, psychological bonding under duress, and total focus to generate a determined through covert resistance of the mind and spirit. And the legacy of this resistance contributed vitally to the creation of the indisputable achievements in the Czech theatre of the late fifties and sixties. (Burian, Modern 91-91)

This period, as dark as it was for the Czech people and theatre, provided the needed catalyst for the Czech theatre of the 1960s. Directly influence by the dark era of the late 1940s-1950s, were the Vaněk playwrights. This period and the emergence of these playwrights will be discussed in greater detail in my next chapter.
Chapter Three

The Door Opens to Vaněk

This chapter will deal with the time period that Burian called the “high-water crest of Czech theatre of the twentieth century” (Modern 93). I will examine the change in society during this time and the impact on the Czech theatre. This chapter will also deal with the evolution of the Vaněk playwrights—Havel, Kohout, Landovský, and Dienstbier—as not only writers but also contributors to the political scene through involvement with various organizations such as the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union and Charter 77. The Vaněk plays were not written until the 1970’s and later but it is quite obvious that the Vaněk plays continue on in the traditions that would be created in Czech theatre in the 1960’s.

Jarka Burian considers the period of 1948-1958 to be the dark era of Modern Czech theatre. The theatre, however, began on the road to recovery as early as 1953. Here are a few reflections on this time period of change:

The death of Stalin in 1953 resulted in an almost immediate relaxation in the political life of the country, one that spread gradually to cultural life as well. The developments after 1953 led the Czech drama away from the socialist realist dogma toward much greater artistic freedom, both in theme and in form. It took the Czech drama many years, however, to reach a level comparable to that of the prewar era. (Trensky 7)

The many repressed talents of the postwar generation began to assert themselves as the contra-artistic ideology and practices of the Communist regime entered a slackened phase after the death of Stalin and other hardliners and, later, the official denunciation [in 1956] of the worst excesses of the Stalinist era. [...] Notable creative work began to appear in the late 1950s. [...] The year 1956 was decisive in marking the beginning of the reversal of the march of dismal years of forced social engineering. The denunciation of
Stalin [...] at the 1956 Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union sent powerful signals [...] In 1956 [...] the Second Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union was held in Prague, and for the first time several writers questioned or even spoke up against certain policies and practices affecting their profession as well as against certain general social abuses. From then until roughly 1963 additional liberalizing measures alternated with arbitrary acts of repression: what was given with one hand was taken away with the other. Nevertheless, increased opportunities for artistic expression became available, and a degree of questioning of previously near-sacred sociopolitical premises was tolerated. (Burian, Modern 93-94)

Another important event happened in 1956, as a direct result of the relaxed feelings after the death of Stalin and denouncement of his practices. A young student of public transport at the Czechoslovak University of Technology wrote a rather heated letter to the magazine, Květen, which was a product of the Writers’ Union. This letter opened up a discussion that resulted in the young man, Václav Havel, being invited to a meeting for writers at the Dobříš castle. Havel in the autobiographical book, Disturbing the Peace, tells the account of his first experience drawing attention to himself for speaking out for things that he believed in. This would later go on to be his calling card. Havel said of this event:

My letter provoked a discussion on the pages of Květen, and it was probably because of this, my first published text, that I found myself on a list of neophyte authors and was then officially invited to a three-day conference (or was it a political meeting?) of young writers in Dobříš. I went there with decidedly mixed feelings: On the one hand, I felt slight antipathy to that whole milieu, and I asked myself what I was really doing there. On the other hand, as a complete unknown, I was uncomfortable at suddenly finding myself among such renowned people as Marie Majerová, Marie Pujmanová, Jan Drda, Pavel Kohout, and others [...] Yet my rather
irrational respect for famous people was strangely at odds with my antipathy toward them. Since they’d invited me and were putting me up for three days, I felt I had to take advantage of the situation and tell them plainly what I had against them; it would have been shameful to accept their invitation and then remain silent. (Havel, Disturbing 31)

Havel went on to say that the conference was not very well organized and no one seemed prepared to talk once the meeting began. Not one to miss an opportunity such as this, Havel quickly volunteered to talk and gave his speech that told everyone exactly what he thought. The response was astonishing.

My contribution more or less determined the course of the conference. In one way or another, most of the discussions in the conference hall and in the corridors were about subjects that I had raised. It was a comic situation; here were a lot of famous authors with a lot of published books to their credit, along with editors and journalists, all of them members of the party and the Writers’ Union, and their deliberations were determined by an entirely unknown person, a public-transport student who had wandered in, God knows how. [... T]hey called my speech “daringly critical” and “courageous” and said that I was one of those voices that had to be listened to in all seriousness at that time. (Havel, Disturbing 31-32)

And with that Havel started to get a name for himself and become known around circles of writers. I will return to Havel later on in this chapter.

After 1956 the thawing out of Czech society and culture really started to take hold and become a reality. Theatre began to recover and move toward the greatness it would achieve during the 1960s. With the slack in the requirements and regulations of plays, playwrights began to experiment with new ideas and techniques, many of which were

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4 Most people would have, in that situation, welcomed the chance to remain quiet. But already at the young age of twenty, Havel was displaying the spirit and drive that would one day take him all the way to another important Czech castle, Prague Castle (Prazky Hrad)
already being used by Western theatres. “After 1956 the establishment ceased to demand adherence to old norms and never again attempted to formulate new ones. Experimentation should be understood here as first consisting of attempts to utilize techniques existing in the Western world. Only later, in the mid-1960’s, can one find independent innovative designs” (Trensky 19).

In the book, Modern Czech Theatre: Reflector and Conscience of a Nation, Burian does an amazing job of discussing the changes in plays as well as staging techniques that happened in the 1960s. My focus for this chapter will mainly be on the plays and playwrights as I see them relating to the creation of the Vaněk plays. Later on in this chapter I will briefly give a biography of the Vaněk playwrights as well as establishing their connections to Havel, who first created the character, Vaněk.

The Czech drama of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s changes as rapidly as the entire character of the Czech stage. The changes are wide-ranging in theme as well as in technique. During the first half decade following 1956 the dramatists generally shy away from polythematic plays with board social and political implications. Man is once again regarded as an individual rather than as a social type, and his private, frequently his most intimate concerns are the center of attention. [... D]rama is interested in the exploration of the “everyday”. Action moves from public meetings to private houses, from factories, fields, and offices to inns, dormitories, and other mundane “private” locales. People cease to be merely workers, collective farmers, directors, party functionaries, soldiers, and youth league members; they also become fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, [friends,] and lovers. Ideological problems are not necessarily avoided, but they are shown as they affect characters, rather than characters being personifications of ideological standpoints. [...] Even in dramas dealing with social problems, playwrights prefer an intimate atmosphere. (Trensky 15) Some Czech plays also reflected the growing spirit of questioning and skepticism [of Communism], although direct
criticism of the regime or Party, or even strong satire, was not yet a feasible option. (Burian, Modern 94)

During the time of the mid to late 1950’s, the influence of the Chekhovian style was strongly felt in these plays. Many of these plays seemed to focus solely on the individuals and the action of the plays was “essentially apolitical. [These plays had] a [rather] calm, seemingly listless surface but [contained] considerable turbulence and intricacy beneath it” (Burian, Modern 96).

Another group of plays of the late fifties and early sixties involved wartime situations, as if to remind audiences of what they had to fight against and what they were fighting for. These plays contain no criticism of the Communist regime, but rather an indictment of human failures to live up to the standards of honor and responsibility, failures still evident in all segments of society at the beginning of the 1960s. (Burian, Modern 97)

Characteristic of the new trend is the rapid disappearance of the central hero, featured prominently in the plays of the dogmatic period. The mainstream of Czech playwrights embarks on the “deheroization” of the drama, a tendency that seems to be motivated philosophically as well as by esthetic considerations. Immediately after 1956 a new figure appears, the passive hero-victim, now no longer the victim of bourgeois society or its vestiges but of socialist society itself. (Trensky 18)

The Vaněk plays were a direct product of this move in theatre. Vaněk, himself, is the prefect archetype of the passive hero-victim being affected negatively by the socialist society around him. This is, however, not the only theatre movement that influenced the creations of these plays.

Coupled with these gradual, tentative improvements [in theatre and society] was a growing awareness of and interest in existential philosophy: the works of [...] Kierkegaard, [...] Sartre, and Albert Camus and the plays of Jean Anouilh, Eugene Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett became more available and could be discussed, although
rarely performed before the 1960s. On a less intellectual level, increased interest began to be paid to the everyday personal problems of the ordinary individual as distinct from schematic figures derived from ideological formulae. (Burian, Modern 94)

The interest in the plays of Ionesco and Beckett helped to open Czech theatre up to the techniques that were best associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. It is important to note, however, the odd way that the Theatre of the Absurd worked its way into the Czech theatre.

[W]hen the plays of Ionesco, Genet, Beckett, and others reached Czechoslovakia, they arrived there under the package-description of ‘Theatre of the Absurd.’ Whatever our attitude to the term, we should remember that Czechoslovaks were acquainted with it even before they has the opportunity to read and see the plays concerned. Perhaps this is why something truly ‘absurd’ happened when the Theatre of the Absurd finally arrived in Czechoslovakia—with a delay of about fifteen years—during the mid-sixties. [...] And so it may be said that Eastern Europeans saw the plays of the Absurd not as avant-garde events that smashed traditions but as literary museum pieces. (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Silenced 18)

Although the Czechs were well aware of the Theatre of the Absurd and interested to find out for themselves “what it really was” (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Silenced 18), that does not mean that they dismissed this as just a movement of the past. Instead the “Czechoslovaks came to two important realizations: first, that they understood this kind of theatre in a different way than did people in the West; secondly, that they had possessed an Absurd Theatre of their own without having known it” (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Silenced 19). The Czechs had heard of the Theatre of the Absurd since the late 1950s. The term was mentioned and discussed in great detail in Czech journals,

but it was one thing to discuss the movement in theoretical studies and quite another to stage or publish translations of the plays. The establishment regarded the Parisian avant-garde of the 1950’s as
representing Western decadence of the worst kind, but even progressive Non-Marxist directors were in no hurry to include the absurd drama in their repertoire. The years immediately following the fall of the Stalinist cult were filled with relative optimism as regards man’s capabilities with the exploration of uniqueness in man and with the formulation of a new humanism. The works of Ionesco, Beckett, Pinter, and Adamov were felt to be ill-suited for the objectives of this era. [...] The interpretation of the Western absurd drama [by Western critics] as lacking in social significance frustrated its introduction to the Czech public.[...] (Trensky 98)

The delay of the Theatre of the Absurd was partially due to the Czechs, who believed what Western critics said about the plays of this genre, decided that they did not need plays that would show life as being a hopeless situation that man was stuck in for his lifetime. They wanted plays that reflected their attitudes that had survived even the darkest eras of their history, that they could overcome any situation and that there was always hope. The true absurdity of the introduction of Theatre of Absurd plays in Czechoslovakia was in the discovery that to the Czechs these plays did show hope, that they did represent their society in a way that they, the Czechs, had been searching for all these years. With the performances of Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, a play that had been condemned by Western critics as hopeless, we can clearly see that the Czechs were wrong to listen to the Western critics. Czech reviewers of the play “noticed the absence of a nihilistic message in Waiting for Godot” (Trensky 100-101). As one reviewer wrote, “[...] Godot is played not as a drama about the hopelessness and absurdity of all human endeavor. It is played as a statement about man’s greatness, as a drama about the indestructibility of hope. As a drama about the miracle of humanity which does not give up, even when faced with a desperate situation”, and other reviewer said, “No matter how sad, no matter how painful, with us Waiting for Godot is a play about hope and not hopelessness” (Trensky 101). The Czechs found the beauty and hope in the messages of these plays just like the American inmates did that were mentioned in introduction to Martin Esslin’s The Theatre of the Absurd, which unconsciously gave a title to this genre. Esslin suggests that the inmates were able to find meaning in Godot because “they were
unsophisticated enough to come to the theatre without any preconceived notions and ready-made expectations” (Esslin 21). But the Czechs did come to the theatre with those very notions and expectations that the inmates avoided and still walked away with the same message of hope. I suggest that the connection between the Czechs and the inmates be made in their similar life situations; they both knew what it meant to hold onto hope even when the situation seemed hopeless.

In addition to the message found in Godot by the Czechs, they were also able to find meaning in other Absurd plays.

[The] playwrights of the Absurd who, trying to write plays that would ‘openly oppose realism, and tacitly reality itself,’ suddenly found that their works contained political messages when performed in a different social atmosphere [...] Despite or, more likely, because of its noncommittal mystery, the Theatre of the Absurd became charged with politically electrifying meaning. Of course this aspect of the performance was not discussed in print but remained the open secret of the dialogue between the stage and the audience, fleetingly recreated with every performance. (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Silenced 35)

These plays “led to the discovery that the methods of absurd theatre offered unique opportunities for the exposure of flaws in the social structure of [the Czech] country” (Trensky 98). This was exactly what the Czechs had been looking for when they first turned away from the ideas of the Theatre of the Absurd before they had even seen one of the plays from that genre.

Playwrights, directors, and designers, who had to cope with the amorphous power of censorship for many years and for whom the truth was the sweetest forbidden fruits, were, of course, aware of the electrifying power of the sub rosa statement, and naturally they used it. Under the guise of nonsense—or absurdity—using the ancient prerogative of the fool to say what others must conceal, they felt free to address themselves to their audiences who responded readily and delightedly to anything that could be taken
as a reference to the current situation—no matter whether it was in actual words, gestures, or a special feature of the stage set. This common ground on which the playwright, director, designer, and actor met the audience—was a very fruitful context in which to make theatre. (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Silenced 37)

Theatre of the Absurd showed the Czechs that their theatre could accomplish what they had always wanted it to, it could reflect their society in such a way that even outsiders would be able to read, watch, and understand not only these plays but also a tiny bit of their culture. And as Havel himself stated,

Naturally, from my youth I loved the plays of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O’Neill—I admired them, but they didn’t provoke me to write plays because I knew that I could never write such good ones. What first provoked me to write plays was the Theatre of the Absurd. I suddenly had a feeling that I might be able to do it too. (“Not Only” 41)

I believe that the theatre history I discussed in my previous chapters can be summed up in this simple quote from Havel, “Theatre can function as a mechanism to help society, people to get to know themselves—it need have no other ambition—and still with this it changes the world” (“Not only” 47); he went on to say in that interview that “under our conditions, theatre, literature—culture—played a certain elevated role, because for long periods of our history we lived under unfree conditions, and the role of national spokesman, as it were, or someone who articulated the general will, was played by culture” (“Not only” 48).

With that, I would like to now move into a further discussion of the lives of the Vaněk playwrights. In terms of theatre and playwriting, these four playwrights came together in a very extraordinary way, as playwrights of essentially the same continuing play. But they were also were united in cause and purpose.

The life stories of all four writers—future biographers are likely to fill many pages with aspects of these true-to-life accounts—have the components of political thrillers. There are prisons and enforced labour, house searches, constant watches, exile, ruthless acts of censorship, ostracism, harassment, confiscation of valuable manuscripts,
and even a poisoned dachshund. However, there life stories also contain (and perhaps in this sense too, they strangely resemble the generally optimistic tenor of popular thrillers) brotherly sacrifice, noble deeds of friendship, patterns of deep loyalties, and unshakable ethics which transcend not only the authors’ above-mentioned difficulties in living but also — on a less tangible level — the tightly closed political border. (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Vaněk xi)

The Vaněk playwrights all became friends with Havel under different circumstances, however the one absolute unifying force between all these playwrights was their involvement with Charter 77.

Charter 77, a human rights document issued in Czechoslovakia in January 1977 which was designated in its Declaration as a movement for ‘a free, informal, open community of people of different convictions, different faiths and different professions, united by the will to strive, individually and jointly, for the respect of civil and human rights in our country and in the world.’ This declaration, signed by 240 writers, artists, and intellectuals resulted in immediate and long-range repressive measures by the Czechoslovak government against its supporters and signatories. (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Vaněk xxix)

Released to the Western press and Czech authorities [and drafted in large part by Václav Havel and philosopher Jan Patočka, it called on Czech leadership to honor in its own country the UN civil and human rights covenants as well as the Helsinki Final Act it had recently signed. The charter not only constituted a serious challenge to the regime, it also revealed to the world an underground of organized, uncontrolled activity in Czechoslovakia. The communist government reacted decisively with a restoration of order in the form of a program of public vilification of charterists in the media, arrests, and increased surveillance in all areas of life, particularly the arts. (Beck 429)

The creation of Vaněk as a theatrical character was possible due to the nature of Czech theatre, but his power and inspiration came about because of his playwrights and what they went through to give him life on stage.
The first of the Vaněk playwrights is, of course, Václav Havel, who in the summer of 1975 created Vaněk for a one-act to amuse his friends. Havel was born in 1936 to a rather long and successful line of capitalists and bourgeoisies. Growing up, Havel felt that his social class created a barrier, which, although [he] was still just a little guy, [he] was very much aware of and found hard to deal with. [He] understood it clearly as a handicap. [...] [He] pleaded to be relieved of them and [he] longed for equality with others, not because [he] was some kind of childhood social revolutionary, but simply because [he] felt about [him] a certain mistrust, a certain distance [...] Add to that the fact that [he] was overweight and that the other children, as children will, laughed at [his] tubbiness, all the more so because it was an easy way to exact a kind of unconscious social revenge.

(Havel, Disturbing 5)

However the advantages of being from this upper class were soon removed from the Havel family once the Communists came into power. The new government removed the family’s wealth. Although the advantages were removed, the disadvantages remained for Havel. The government saw him as simply a danger based solely on his bourgeois background and he was stripped of opportunities, such as higher education.

Denied access to higher liberal arts education by the communist government because of both his class and his “political profile”, he found an outlet for his intellectual curiosity in an association formed with other sixteen-year-olds.5 The Thirty-Sixers6, as they called themselves, met together to discuss philosophy and literature. Havel even drafted a ‘short book on philosophy, which he called A First Look at the World [...] Eventually, he managed to be apprenticed as a laboratory technician at Prague’s Czech Technical High School and passed the exams in 1955; he then took

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5 This need for association and community with other like-minded people would remain important to Havel throughout his life.

6 The Thirty-Sixers were named such because all the members were born in 1936.
a further course in economics and began to write and publish articles on literature and theatre [without a formal background in either]. [...] Havel served in the military from 1957 to 1959 and fell into the writing of a short play that was performed by his [military] buddies and amused his army cohorts. [...] Failing acceptance as a drama student [...], in 1961 he obtained work as a stage technician at Prague’s ABC Theatre, then later as a stagehand at the Theatre of on Balustrade. He began to write scripts and buried himself in the life of the theater. [...] It was not long before Havel’s plays’ implicit critique of Czech cultural reality under the communist regime became too trenchant, and the ubiquitous secret police increased their surveillance of him. In March 1969 Havel discovered a bugging device in his Prague apartment. Over the next twenty years, Havel’s life developed a pattern: he was watched, arrested, interrogated, detained, released, watched, rearrested, tried, incarcerated, released, watched, rearrested, tried again, reincarcerated and released. (Sire 17-18)

One such arrest came just before Charter 77 was released to the Western press and Czech government. All through this Havel kept writing his plays and essays that clearly expressed how he felt. His work, however, was banned in Czechoslovakia after the aftermath of the Prague Spring in 1968. Much of his writings were passed around as samizdat, or underground publications. And of course, in 1989, Havel was at the forefront for the “Velvet” revolution and as a result of his efforts was elected President of the free Czechoslovakia, later to be renamed the Czech Republic. Much more could be written on this man, his works fill volumes and the critiques of him fill volumes more. I

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7 It was here at this theatre that Havel began working as a dramaturg and many of his plays were performed.
8 Jarka Burian discusses seeing this very bug in Havel’s apartment in his book, Leading Creators of Twentieth-Century Czech Theatre.
9 Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz in her book, Good-Bye, Samizdat: Twenty Years of Czechoslovak Underworld Writing, provides an amazingly rich look at these underground writings and includes many of the essays and writings themselves in the book.
can not possibly give him his full credit or due within this few pages, but I hope that I have at least set up why this man was so remarkable and as a result could create such a remarkable character in Vaněk.

The other Vaněk playwrights are in many regards just as inspirational as Havel. They were not only fellow theatre practioners but also friends and fighters for good. Less is written of these men but they are no less important and helped to contribute not only to the freedom that the Czechs would win but also to the well-rounded creation of Vaněk. It is because of their interest in this character that the Vaněk plays are such a unique and special case in theatre.

For my brief biographies of these playwrights I borrow extensively from Goetz-Stankiewicz’s introduction to her book, The Vaněk Plays: Four Authors, One Character.

Pavel Kohout, who wrote three of the Vaněk play, Permit, Morass, and Safari, was born in 1928 and considered to be

[...] a writer of many talents. Less philosophical and searching than his colleague Havel, he has written an extraordinary number of lively dramatic texts and prose works, many of which have been translated into other languages and performed [in many other countries]. In the late 1970’s, after having spent a year in Vienna, where he had been invited to act as consultant and director at the venerable Wiener Burgtheater, he was forcibly prevented from re-entering Czechoslovakia and was thus compelled to start life ‘in exile’. [Undaunted by this, Kohout kept writing.] [...] A Czech literary critic once wrote that “Kohout was given to Czech theatre, so that there would not be any peace and quiet.” There is truth in this ironic adage: Kohout does keep things on the move. He is every inch a man of the theatre, happy to direct his own plays as well as those of others because his whole work [...] is permeated by the intense awareness that the actual text is only one part of whole structure of the play, that the word is only one of the many means to reach an audience. [...] Safari is the first play he has
actually composed in German. Kohout’s work grows in many colours, some of them loud, even gaudy. Yet one thing is certain: with an uncanny sense for topicality, he uses every aspect of the stage with unfailing histrionic intuition. (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Vaněk xvi-xvii)

Pavel Landovský, the first to ‘borrow’ Vaněk, was born in 1936, is “an actor turned playwright” (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Vaněk xvii). Also exiled in Vienna, Landovský had a much harder time adapting to the new language because as an actor he couldn’t simply continue working in his native tongue, like a playwright could.

In Prague, Landovský was an eminent member of the theatre Činoherní Klub, starred in several films, and immortalized the image of several dramatic characters. His unforgettable features were well known to Prague theatre audiences from the late 1950’s to the late 1970’s. Since language is the most important professional took for an actor, Landovský’s talents [were] obviously severely curbed [during his exile]. However, with half a dozen exhilarating comedies to his credit, Landovský’s claim as a playwright is substantiated. [...] he was actually the first to “borrow” the dramatic figure of the shy, and polite forbidden writer Vaněk from his friend and colleague Havel, and introduced [him] in 1976 into his biting comedy Sanitární noc[...]. There circulates a story which, if it is not true, ought to be because it vividly illustrates the nature of Landovský’s ebullient talents and character. When he complained to Pavel Kohout in Vienna that he was never considered for more prominent parts at the Burgtheater because of his deficiency in German, Kohout, with typical resourcefulness, suggested that Landovský write a dramatic text with a mute character in it and thus create a role for himself. Landovský did just that, and we now have Arrest with its wordless

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10 Goetz-Stankiewicz was translated and published this play as Closed for Disinfection. But it does not appear in her book on the Vaněk plays because it is not a one act.
but magnificently theatrical character of the gypsy Matte. (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Vaněk xvii)

The final Vaněk playwright is Jiří Dienstbier, who wrote Reception, which was inspired directly by Havel’s play, Audience, and the time these two men spent together in prison.

[Born in 1937,] Jiři Dienstbier’s [...] writing career has many aspects to it. After working as an editor with the Czechoslovak broadcasting network, he became its Far Eastern correspondent in the 1960’s and subsequently correspondent in the United States. [While working as correspondent, Dienstbier wrote many essays and commentaries.] [...] Forbidden to publish [in] 1969 and fired from broadcasting, he became spokesman for Charter 77 in 1979. Three of his plays, a number of essays, and a collection of international political essays circulate [d] in Czechoslovakia in samizdat editions. [He was imprisoned for his efforts.] (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Vaněk xviii)
Chapter Four

The Dramaturgical Implications of Vaněk

In my previous chapters, I established the historical context for the Vaněk plays. Czech theatre was working toward the goal of a theatre that would really reach the masses; a theatre that could make a difference in people’s lives. We can see the positive results of this in just how active and involved the theatre was during the “Velvet” revolution. The Vaněk plays contributed to this, much to Havel’s initial surprise. To expand on a previously used Havel quote, he said,

It never occurred to me that the play might be saying something (more or less significant) to other people, people who do not know me or my situation [...] As it turned out, I was—as I had, after all, been a number of times before in regard to my literary work—mistaken: the play\(^\text{11}\) was successful not only with my friends but, also, having by various ways soon penetrated the relatively broad consciousness of the Czech public, also won its esteem. At times, it has even happened that total strangers, people in restaurants or casual hitchhikers I picked up, not only knew it but also extracted from it pieces of dialogue, which they then used—in addition to short quotations or paraphrases—in various situations (in some cases as a sort of password among people spiritually akin). This wide domestic acclaim naturally pleased me, the more so as it occurred under conditions which made it impossible for the play to be published or performed publicly in my country. But what pleased me the most is that something apparently happened which, I think, does or should occur with all art, namely that the work of art somehow exceeds its author, or is, so to speak, “clearer than he is,” and that through the mediation of the writer—no matter what purpose he was consciously

\(^{11}\) Havel is here referring to Audience.
pursuing—some deeper truth about his time reveals itself and works its way to the surface. (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Vaněk 238)

The Vaněk plays, regardless of efforts to keep them silent, still found a way to speak to the Czechs in a way that they had been searching for years from the theatre.

In this chapter, I will step away from the historical context as much as I can, and I will be mainly examining the dramaturgical questions that occur with these unique plays. I will focus primarily on the plays’ structures and the characterizations portrayed in them, so I can answer these questions; are the Vaněk plays together as a whole structurally sound or are they best examined as separate one acts? And how does the character of Vaněk evolve from play to play, does his characterization change at all or do the playwrights remain true to Havel’s original creation? I will go back to historical context as needed to support ideas in structure and characterization. I will examine each play separately as to its structure and characterization. In the end, I will provide answers based on these discussions.

**Audience**

**Audience** was the first play to use Vaněk. As I have already mentioned, Havel created this character out of fun and simply for something to read at a friendly get-together at his home. The structure of this play reflects that ideal. With this structure, we see much of the same examples that he used in his other plays that made Havel so well known as an Absurdist playwright. The situation itself is not absurd. Two men sitting down on a break from work is nothing out of the ordinary. But the absurdist quality in his work and in this play can be found in the language. Havel is a master at language and uses wordplay and repetition of plot elements and phrases to make a point. Some examples in Audience of the verbal repetitions include but are not limited to these phrases,

Brewmaster: And don’t let it get you down—
Vaněk: I am not down—(Audience 6,8,14,16)
Brewmaster: Did you take your break yet?
Vaněk: Not yet—
Brewmaster: Well, you can take it later. Just tell the guard at the gate that you been in my office—
Vaněk: Thank you— *(Audience 7, 9, 13-14)*
Brewmaster: What’s the big hurry?
Vaněk: They’ll be looking for me in the cellar—
Brewmaster: Fuck ‘em if they can’t take a joke! They got Sherezy down there, don’t they? You sit here and drink!

*(Audience 17, 22)*

Havel does an interesting thing however with the repetition: after a while he messes it up. For example take the variation found on the “Did you take your break yet?” repetition:

Brewmaster: D’you take your break yet?
Vaněk: Not yet—
Brewmaster: Hell you—you got it made— *(Audience 21)*

This break in the repetition gives the audience a brief hope that things can change and that life for Vaněk could improve, or at least that he could get away from the annoying Brewmaster. Havel uses a special repetition at the end of the play to show that the situation, although it may seem hopeless, like the waiting in *Waiting for Godot*, can improve or at least become different. At the beginning of the play, Vaněk enters and the conversation goes like this:

Brewmaster: Come in—
Vaněk: How are you—
Brewmaster: Oh, Mr. Vaněk! Come on in! Have a seat— [...] How about a beer?
Vaněk: No thank you—
Brewmaster: Oh, come on! Why not? Go ahead and have one— [...] 
Vaněk: Thank you— [...] 
Brewmaster: Well? So how is it goin’?
Vaněk: Fine, thank you— *(Audience 5)*

The changes in this at the end of the play are instead of Vaněk first refusing the beer, he accepts it, and instead of answering with “Fine, thank you” he says “Everything’s all fucked up”, a phrase that the Brewmaster had used repeatedly throughout the play thus creating a bit of a shock to the audience of not only first hearing this meek, mild character use a foul word but that he borrow the phrase from the crude Brewmaster. The audience
is left with the feeling that the situation has indeed changed somewhat but they do not know if this is for the best.

With *Audience*, Havel creates a meek and mild character in Vaněk; however at the end of the play, the audience is left to wonder if this character has a stronger side. As Goetz-Stankiewicz points out, “Soon it dawns on the audience that this awkward, fumbling man could not be moved by ten horses, nor by a powerful hierarchy, to do something he considers to be wrong” (Goetz-Stankiewicz, *Vaněk* xxii). Havel opens the door for interpretation of this character, which will come into play when other playwrights start to use this character.

**Unveiling**

*Unveiling* is the second of the *Vaněk* plays. Again we see Vaněk in a situation with much repetition. Again with this play, the audience has the feeling that Vaněk is rather trapped in the absurdity of the situation. Instead of being at work, *Unveiling* is over at a home of some friends. However he is no less trapped. Near the end we get the feeling that Vaněk has had enough of it all and he begins his rather meekly escape as the stage directions suggest, “(Vaněk has quietly got up and begun shyly to back up to the door [...])” (*Unveiling* 47) However Vaněk cannot escape, his hosts make him feel so bad that he sits back down and we, as the audience, assume that the situation continues long after the curtain has dropped.

Vaněk again is rather quiet. He is not a forward character and does not open up new discussions, something he did not do in *Audience* as well. He is still rather meek and mild. “The silence that Vaněk practices becomes a more eloquent tool of communication than the thousands of words used by the others” Because of this, “As we watch (or read) the plays, we are bound to realize that we steadily give more attention to the characters who surround Vaněk rather than to him” (Goetz-Stankiewicz, *Vaněk* xxii) Vaněk, as a character, has much strength in his meekness.

With the play, again, we find examples of repetition similar to those used in other Havel plays. One such example in *Unveiling* is
Vera: You don’t like to talk about it, I know. But you know, Michael and I have been talking about the two of you lately; we’ve been thinking about you a lot—and we really care about how you two live!
Michael: We’re only trying to help, Ferdinand!
(Unveiling 34, 37, 42)

This changes part of the way through the play to,

Vera: You don’t like to talk about it, I know. But we’re only trying to help you—
Michael: We like you a lot—
Vera: You’re our best friend—(Unveiling 44, 45, 47)

The repetition again creates the feeling that the situation will not really change. The absurdity of this play is that it takes a rather pleasant thing, visiting with some friends, and creates a feeling of being trapped and helpless. Yet Vaněk does not surrender. He may not fight back but he resists in his own quiet way.

Protest

Protest is the final Havel-written Vaněk play. This is the most blatantly political play that Havel has written. Structurally the play is different from the other Vaněk plays, Vaněk is not trapped, there is not a lot of repetition, and Vaněk speaks up more. We can assume that he does this because he is with a writer and intellectual like himself. He feels comfortable talking to Staněk, up until a point however. After a while it becomes obvious the Staněk does not have the same convictions as Vaněk and is much more willing to just go along with the system instead of fighting for what he knows is right. The characters’ names, Vaněk and Staněk, look so similar on the page that we are left to wonder if maybe they are just two sides of the same coin, connected by similarities but opposites that cannot come together. Character wise Vaněk is rather meek still; he does not try and fight with his friend. Instead he can respect his friend’s reasoning. His friend, however, feels some guilt from hearing this from Vaněk and goes into an attack of him. Here we see that Vaněk is the better man. While the other two Havel plays seem as through they could restart at the end, this play is over.
Permit

Permit was not the first play not by Havel to use Vaněk, however, it is the next play in the flow of the Vaněk storyline. This play, by Pavel Kohout, tells the story of Vaněk trying to get a permit to his dog. While Havel’s Vaněk dealt with individuals, Kohout’s deals with bureaucratic situations, such as the office for dog licenses and, in his next play, Morass, a driver’s license/police station. While in Kohout’s plays, Vaněk does not appear to be trapped, however, the situation is no better. The audience is left to wonder if poor Vaněk will ever get his dog license. In the end, Vaněk does get the license but there is a bit of lying going on and the forms are misfiled. This leads to a question of Vaněk’s characterization. Would Havel’s Vaněk allow this to happen in the same way that Kohout’s did? Personally, I would say maybe. Vaněk, in Audience, wants to do things by the book and remain truthful. However the circumstances of Audience are different from Permit. In Audience, if Vaněk lied, he would not only ruin his reputation but also most likely cause problems for his friends. In the case of Permit, the lie would not hurt anyone. Actually the lie shows how absurd and silly the situation that Vaněk is in. All he wants is a simple license to breed his dog, a Czech Grabber. His lie does not hurt anyone, and instead points out how absurd the Communist rules and regulations actually are. I think this is an acceptable ‘lie’ to make and it is not out of character for Vaněk.

Kohout creates an absurd environment in this dog license office but not in the same way Havel would. Kohout’s situation is much more comical. At the beginning, we see Vaněk dealing with a secretary who cannot figure out where certain letters are on the Czech typewriter. Vaněk tries to help her but can’t see because he needs his glasses. She hands him “gigantic-sized dark glasses from her wild handbag” (Permit 81). Vaněk’s dog is never seen but causes many disturbances and comic moments. The bureaucrats in the office are even comical in their own way.

Morass

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines morass as being “something that traps, confuses, or impedes” (‘Morass”). That title very accurately describes this play. Kohout’s Morass is set up in a very similar situation as Permit. Again, Vaněk is forced to deal with bureaucrats, but instead of being here on his own, like in Permit, he has been called in as
a witness. However, since the cops broke down his door to bring him in, Vaněk believes that he is indeed under arrest but finds that he must be careful about what he says to the interrogators. The situation is much more serious than in Permit and at the end of the play, the audience is left with the feeling that the play could just begin again, like in Unveiling. This play, in Kohout style, is full of comic moments. For example, an interrogator tells jokes and their creation is blamed on Kohout himself. Absurdity is created by the various interrogators coming in and out, each creating a new situation and leaving Vaněk in a state of confusion.

Structurally speaking this play reflects Havel’s influence the best of any of the Kohout plays. Morass is a very serious situation however the humor is found in the word play as well as the repetition of one interrogator leaving and another one coming in. In terms of characterization, Vaněk is able to speak out more than in the Havel plays. He argues with the interrogators but still tries to remain respectful and calm even when faced with such hideous accusations as having an affair with Mrs. Havel. But through it all, Vaněk never seems out of character. The spirit and convictions of this character remain quite intact even through this torture.

Arrest

Pavel Landovský’s Arrest takes a very serious condition, imprisonment, and has some fun with it. One of the funniest moments in the play is the revelation that the prison ‘liberation’ is just a movie being filmed there. This moment, while comical, hits the nerve of the audience. Here was hope for these men, and also fear. What if this liberation just caused the situation to be worse; like when the Communists liberated Prague? But luckily the fear of liberation was able to be released quickly and in a comic moment. But it leaves the audience thinking. This whole play does a nice job of creating comical moments but having a deeper meaning. All of the Vaněk playwrights do that in their own ways.

Vaněk, as a character, is pretty consistent with how he was in other plays, although he might be considered to be just a touch more comical, (which, in my opinion, is just the influence of the playwright coming through). Here we see Vaněk trying to fit in with these rough guys. He does his best to adapt and use their courser language. Hearing such phrases coming from Vaněk, this mild, meek intellectual, are quite funny. However
even though Vaněk tries to fit in, he remains true to his convictions and holds fast throughout the play.

The structure of this play is not heavy in repetition, but at the end of the play we still have a sense that the play could start over or at least that these men will be in this situation far past the drop of the curtain.

Reception

With his play, Reception, Jiří Dienstbier tries very hard to continue much in the same vein as Havel’s Audience. It is with this play that we have our first recurring character other than Vaněk, the Brewmaster from Audience. The circumstances for this play are much different than Havel’s, though.

Vaněk has ended up where his steadfastness [had] inevitably led him—in prison. [And much like in Arrest] it is the other prisoners who catch and hold our attention. Not only are they interesting characters in themselves, but they also provide a fascinating picture of the Czech variety of a police-state prison. As we laugh our way through the rambunctious comedies, the dark shadows of more serious, indeed tragic, issues retreat into the background, only to emerge more insistently when we become aware that the hilarious goings-on on stage are a comic reflection of the vast political and social issues, which hover[ed] over [the Czech lands]. (Goetz-Stankiewicz, Vaněk xix)

This play, out of all the Vaněk ones, shows the least connection to the theatre of the Absurd. The situation, while it may be a little far fetched (that Vaněk should run into the Brewmaster here), is believable and nothing about it really stands out as being absurd. There is some minor repetition, Vaněk says “I beg your pardon” and someone tells him to stop begging. However this is not enough to be considered to follow the same pattern as Havel’s plays. The situation is humorous but it just does not stand up to the humor found in Kohout’s and Landovský’s plays.

In terms of characterization, I believe that Reception loses the mark with Vaněk. He starts out as being close to the same character but I feel as the play progresses
Vaněk’s speech, tone, and actions move away from his behavior in the other Vaněk plays. The ending, when Vaněk “grabs Brewmaster and pushes him back into the chair” (Reception 207-208) and tells him what to do, is so out of character for Vaněk that this action in itself is the most absurd in the whole play.

**Safari**

*Safari* by Pavel Kohout is, at least as he says, the last play about the life of Vaněk. Here we have a somehow freed Vaněk who is now in Vienna. The play takes place on the set for a television show where Vaněk is being interviewed by a panel of artists and intellectuals who have been invited by the media to take part in a televised talk-show [...] Again, the playwright [Kohout] is more interested in revealing Vaněk’s surroundings than in the amiable “anti-hero” himself. In a rollicking hour of acerbic fun, Kohout explores notions of freedom, their clichéd ideas of a “forbidden” writer is all about, and their adamant refusal to learn anything that would rock their respective ideological boats. (Goetz-Stankiewicz, *Vaněk* xix-xx)

The structure of this play, even though it does not rely on repetition, reflects Havel’s style very well. The flow of *Safari* is reminiscent of *Unveiling* with its many quick, short lines.

Vaněk’s characterization also seems to be reflective of the earlier Havel plays. Vaněk is again quiet, meek, and mild. He can not seem to get a word in edgewise in this play and in the end he manages to quietly escape away from the chaos, which is exactly what the audience is led to believe would happen in *Unveiling*. The play does end bitterly-sweetly with the knowledge that Vaněk was returned to Czechoslovakia and will most certainly be going back to jail.

This play does open up many questions, such as: how did Vaněk escape from jail to begin with? And would Vaněk actually do such a thing? These questions go unanswered.
The tone of the play is quite lighthearted and comical, however there is a deeper seriousness that does shine through from time to time. Again Kohout is masterful at his language play. The best example of this would be the main mispronunciation jokes on Vaněk’s name.

I believe that if this is indeed the last play about Vaněk, then at least we have come full circle back to the style and structure that Havel created.

In conclusion to the plays, Goetz-Stankiewicz says

> And so we realize that, despite their unplanned nature, the Vaněk plays have come full circle and thus reflect the shape of some of the plays themselves [...], which are structured in such an endless chain reminiscent of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. At the end of *Safari*, the hapless writer Vaněk goes back to his home country where—the thought is inevitable—he will again embark on a cycle of similar experiences. In fact, he might, if permitted by the authorities, again begin working as a labourer, say, in a brewery.... (Vaněk xx)

I, however, disagree with Goetz-Stankiewicz. We know at the end of *Safari*, that Vaněk will be returning to prison and there is no hope in the idea that he will begin working again as a labourer. I believe that Vaněk’s story points towards bigger and better things for the mild intellectual, say for example, the Prague castle. One could almost see the posters hanging around Prague in the same manner that Havel’s were, saying simply ‘Vaněk Na Hrad’ (Vaněk to the Castle).
Conclusion

A Dream Achieved

Much happened in historical terms to the Czechs that I had to leave out of my thesis. But I think in concluding this thesis I will look to the events of 1989, best known as the Velvet Revolution by Western critics. During this time, the Czechs freed themselves from the Soviet Communist grasp and Václav Havel rose to the rank of President, following in the footsteps of Tomáš G. Masaryk. In many ways Czech history had come around full circle, much in the same way that the Vaněk plays have done. For a perfect example of this we can look back to Josef Kajetan Tyl who had “a concrete idea in his mind about the role of [theatre] troupes in Czech society. They were meant to be messengers of all the news from Prague, and to inform people in the countryside about what was going on in the capital, as in Prague there were people who could start fighting for the Czech nation’s freedom” (Skodova, “Tyl” 1-2). Tyl never lived to see this become a reality. That does not mean, however, that Tyl’s dream was not achieved. In the days during the Velvet Revolution,

The nation’s stages became civic forums as members of the parallel polis used the theatres to vocalize openly ideas they had been developing for over a decade. Divadlo na provážku became the center of revolutionary activity for the South Moravian region. Its efforts and those of other theatres outside of Prague proved particularly important in spreading the ideas and hopes animating the revolution to the small towns and industrial areas where no colleges or universities existed to help provide information. Throughout most of the nation, the small groups of performers sent by theatres into the countryside ensured that the revolution would be represented in a perspective other than that provided by the state-controlled media. (Beck 433)
Czech theatre not only served as a reflector for the society but also as an active participant in the creation of the new society.

With this thesis, I hoped to show how much politics and history have affected Czech theatre and the creation of plays focusing on the Vaněk ones. I was drawn to these plays because of their unique situation of having four playwrights writing eight one acts all different and special in their own ways but somehow continuing on the same story line. But the most important thing about the Vaněk plays can simply be found in the impact they made on the Czech citizens. The reason these plays could make such an impact is solely dependant on the very nature of Czech theatre and the desire of the people for it to be a reflector of their society.
Bibliography


