

ABSTRACT

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY: THEORY, PRAXIS AND REHEARSAL IN THE PRODUCTION OF VACLAV HAVEL'S *THE MEMORANDUM*

by Kevin Douglas McFillen

This thesis explores the connections between theory, praxis and rehearsal in the preparation and execution of the Miami University production of Václav Havel's *The Memorandum*. By examining the historical and sociopolitical contexts surrounding the playwright and the play, certain aesthetic and thematic devices were identified that served as a critical framework for the formation of a rehearsal praxis. This praxis allowed for the assessment of potential acting methods upon which the rehearsal process could be built, leading to the adaptation of Jerzy Grotowski's *via negativa* acting method as the foundation of the rehearsal process. Based upon the overall success of the rehearsal process in preparing the performers for the production of Havel's *The Memorandum*, this thesis also discusses the possibilities and limitations of similarly adapting Grotowski's *via negativa* to future productions.

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY: THEORY, PRAXIS AND REHEARSAL IN THE
PRODUCTION OF VACLAV HAVEL'S *THE MEMORANDUM*

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Introduction: Why Havel? Why now?

In November 1989, the communist government resigned. On December 29, 1989, Vaclav Havel, the former political prisoner and social outcast, was elected president of Czechoslovakia (subsequently, when the country split in two, he served two terms as president of the Czech Republic, 1993-2003). The dramatist who had always insisted that reality is more complex than progressive ideologies would have us believe, and that the exertions of authoritarian power may be ultimately self-defeating, became a protagonist in one of the most amazing political dramas of the 20th century.

Ganev, Notes on Václav Havel's *The Memorandum*

So concluded Dr. Venelin Ganev in his contribution to the program guide for the Miami University production of Václav Havel's *The Memorandum*, neatly summarizing the often absurd, performative relationship between art and politics that has characterized the life and works of playwright/author/dissident/philosopher/politician Václav Havel since his emergence onto the world stage in the 1960s. Yet while Havel's significance as a world (and specifically Czech) literary, political and historical figure is immediately apparent to anyone familiar with either the former Czechoslovakia or the larger spread of communism through Eastern Europe, the question remains as to what value his works may hold for an American audience in the theatre of today. Why perform a political play for an audience removed in both space and time from the sociopolitical circumstances that generated the work? What possible insights into our own society could be gained from a modern production of a forty-year-old play from an often-overlooked period in European history?

For many the answers to these questions may seem obvious, yet for very different reasons: some arguing for the immediate usefulness of such a production, citing the necessity of working to make the American public more culturally aware, others arguing for the immediate dismissal of such a production, citing the removal of the intended audience from the specific cultural circumstances that made the work topical. Indeed, it was Havel himself who noted (as is stated in chapter one) that theatre "[...] can only achieve lasting value by the profundity of its topical value."¹ This need to render Havel's work as topical to a modern American audience thus came to dominate the initial

¹ Havel, Politics and the Theatre 870.

production planning for the Miami University production of Havel's *The Memorandum*, determining which elements would need to be "fixed" in order to justify the play as retaining topicality to those who might otherwise dismiss a production of the work outside of its historical and cultural context.

Should the production have been a purely hypothetical treatment (as a component of a research, rather than creative, thesis), this problem of proving *The Memorandum's* lasting topicality would certainly have remained central to any discussion of the play. However, in the preparation for building a praxis upon which the rehearsal process of an actual production could be based, it became immediately apparent that *The Memorandum* holds current topical value for any audience, and not merely due to the call for increasing cultural awareness among American audiences. It became clear that the issues of primary importance to any production of Havel's *The Memorandum* are necessarily pushed to the forefront in any society operating under sociopolitical oppression: how do I define myself? How do I measure the passage of time in my life? Am I more important for who I am, or what I do for others? As such, though research into the play, playwright and social and political circumstances surrounding Havel and his works may be heavily informed by theory, it was through the practical, production component of the process (offered by completing a creative thesis) that the real answer to the question of topicality emerged; that there is no need to "fix" Havel because *The Memorandum* touches on concerns that surround the daily lives of people everywhere.

This is not to say that there is no added value in recognizing how cultural specificity can enhance the meaning of a production for those audience members more familiar (either from personal experience or from research) with the circumstances discussed in a play. This is merely to state that cultural specificity should not be used to dismiss the potential importance of a production outside of its cultural context, and that broadening cultural awareness, while important, is not necessarily the only viable reason for producing a work with which the audience may not be familiar. It will hopefully be demonstrated through the discussion of theory, praxis and rehearsal in the following chapters that adopting either of these positions has the potential to greatly diminish the significance of a work, either dismissing the possible usefulness of performance or drawing focus away from the meaning already present in the text. Instead, though the

careful exploration of theory and practice, the topicality that Havel addressed as necessary in sustaining the importance of a work can be uncovered, and without otherwise compromising the text by adapting the production to suit a particular audience.

Please Note: a complete copy of the production prompt book has been placed on file in the archives of the Department of Theatre, including audition information, rehearsal schedule, blocking notes, and rehearsal and performance reports.

Chapter 1: Critical Perspective/Theoretical Framework

The problem of human identity remains at the center of my thinking about human affairs [...] All my plays in fact are variations on this theme, the disintegration of man's oneness with himself and the loss of everything that gives human existence a meaningful order, continuity and its unique outline [...] the importance of the notion of human responsibility has grown in my meditations. It has begun to appear, with increasing clarity, as that fundamental point from which all identity grows and by which it stands or falls; it is the foundation, the root, the center of gravity, the constructional principle or axis of identity [...] It is the mortar binding it together, and when the mortar dries out, identity too begins irreversibly to crumble and fall apart.

Havel, Letters to Olga

Václav Havel thus framed the theoretical basis of his work in the form of a letter to his wife, Olga, writing to her while imprisoned for the very political dissidence that would but a few years later lead him to the presidency of the newly formed Czech Republic.² Although this approach to the formation of individual identity around "human responsibility" is not uniquely suited to either Havel or the cultural circumstances under which many of his works were written,³ a particular combination of cultural and political influences existed within Czech society at the time that would push this issue to the center of Havel's work. Most important of these influences, of course, was Havel's resistance to the abuses of the post-Stalinist communist government of Czechoslovakia.

Prior to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968⁴, bringing with it the hard-line of the Husák government, Havel had begun to establish himself as a major new voice on both the national and international stage, offering up *The Garden Party*, *The Memorandum* and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* between 1963 and 1968.⁵ Havel continued to write after the invasion despite the banning of his works, turning increasingly to more direct dissent through his political essaying and work within such organizations as Charter 77, which called for the government to comply with the

² These "letters" were published in the form of a book of essays after Havel's release from prison in 1982. Havel, Disturbing the Peace 145.

³ A similar theoretical basis can be seen as formative to many Central and Eastern European theatre traditions, but especially those operating under communist control, as was the case with Czechoslovakia.

⁴ It is interesting to note as a parallel that but a few months prior to the invasion the New York premier of *The Memorandum* earned Havel an Obie for best foreign play. Carey, 175.

⁵ Stoppard, 278.

standards on human rights created by the Helsinki accords.⁶ It was this involvement with Charter 77 that ultimately led to his first term of imprisonment on the charge of subverting the government, for which he served four months in prison before receiving a suspended sentence of fourteen months.⁷ This was to set a pattern of imprisonment, release and harassment that followed the playwright through the years of communist control, having been incarcerated for a total of approximately five years between the time of the Soviet invasion and the collapse of the government in 1989.⁸

It was on such self-sacrifice that Václav Havel began to build his reputation not merely as an artist or political dissident, but as what Sire refers to as a “public intellectual,” applying the cultural circumstances of Czech political life to his writing in hopes of bringing about tangible social change.⁹ Recognizing this desire to initiate social change greatly informs Havel’s artistic process, which in turn is built upon the notion of human responsibility (or social function, as it will hereafter be referred to) as the foundation of individual identity. As Havel states above, it is when this social function is removed that an individual’s identity is called into question, beginning to strain under the weight of a society that no longer values the contributions of an individual to the welfare of the whole. Thus, the relationship between identity and social function is not only reflective of the playwright’s own life experience (operating under continual political oppression due to his work for the benefit of the Czech people), but also the social experience of the people as a whole, continuing to exist as individuals despite the undermining of their individual identities.

This structural relationship between social function and individual identity directly informs Havel’s conception of character. As can be observed operating within *The Memorandum*, characters largely define “self” based upon association with actions rather than individual characteristics. Havel describes Hana, the Secretary to the Managing Director, in the stage directions of Act I, Scene 1: “Hana [...] takes a mirror and a comb out of her bag, props the mirror against the typewriter and begins to comb her

⁶ Burian, *Leading Creators of Twentieth-Century Czech Theatre* 188.

⁷ Stoppard, 279.

⁸ Burian, *Leading Creators of Twentieth-Century Czech Theatre* 185.

⁹ Sire, 23.

hair. Combing her hair will be her main occupation throughout the play. She will interrupt it only when absolutely necessary.”¹⁰

Similar treatment extends to the slightly sinister Deputy Director, Jan Ballas, and his cohort Ferdinand Pillar. Indeed, Pillar communicates within the play only as needed in support of Jan Ballas (mostly either nodding or shaking his head). Pillar’s only actual line within *The Memorandum* occurs toward the end of Act II, Scene 10, shouting “Death to all artificial languages! Long live natural human speech! Long live man!” before rushing from the room. This, however, is only as an act of necessity, operating as a scapegoat in order to preserve Ballas’ position as Deputy Director before being immediately replaced by the virtually identical Mr. Column.¹¹

The most potent example of this connection between social function and individual identity is tied to Josef Gross, the Managing Director. Gross acts throughout *The Memorandum* as the primary opponent to the adoption of Ptydepe, the artificial organizational language that dehumanizes the workers under the guise of increasing operational efficiency. Early in the play Gross relates his resistance to the implementation of Ptydepe within the organization:

Gross: [...] I’m a humanist and my concept of directing this organization derives from the idea that every single member of the staff is human and must become more and more human. If we take from him his human language, created by the centuries-old tradition of national culture, we shall have prevented him from becoming fully human and plunge him straight into the jaws of self-alienation. I’m not against precision in official communications, but I’m for it only in so far as it humanizes Man. In accordance with this my innermost conviction I can never agree to the introduction of Ptydepe into our organization.¹²

Gross’ resistance, however, is to be his downfall under the weight of organizational bureaucracy, as his eventual submission to the implementation of Ptydepe earns Ballas the necessary leverage to assume the role of Managing Director in Gross’ place.

¹⁰ Havel, *The Memorandum* 56.

¹¹ Havel, *The Memorandum* 122.

¹² Havel, *The Memorandum* 63-4.

In an act of desperation in the end of Act I, Scene 4, attempting to literally cling to some semblance of social function in the face of losing the last of his human dignity, “Gross collects his papers from his desk and stuffs them in his pockets, then carefully takes down the fire extinguisher hanging on the wall.”¹³ This perhaps gives him some short-lived comfort before the reentrance of Ballas into the office, carrying an identical fire extinguisher that is then placed on the wall. This motif of the fire extinguisher as the last sign of social function is repeated again throughout the remaining action of the play, first in the beginning of Act II, Scene 7, after Gross’ further demotion and probably dismissal from the organization¹⁴ and continuing through until the fire extinguisher is restored to its rightful position with Gross’ reinstatement to the position of Managing Director at the end of Act II, Scene 10.¹⁵

This relationship between social function and individual identity thus develops into an existential dilemma that encompasses the whole of the Czech people, and to which Václav Havel (especially through his years of incarceration) became painfully aware: that without the social function represented by pre-communist society and without the hope for a future promised in the Prague Spring of 1968, individuals are relegated to a never-ending present.¹⁶ As Havel stated upon his appointment to the presidency: “In my offices in the Prague Castle, I did not find one single clock. To me, that has a symbolic meaning: for long years, there was no reason to look at clocks, because time had stood still. History had come to a halt, not only in the Prague Castle but in the whole country.”¹⁷ Existence inside of this eternal present is therefore stripped of meaning, having been violently removed from the purpose derived from either past or future. As this state draws in Czech society as a whole, the existential treatment of time moves beyond the boundaries of the Havel’s works into the realm of a cultural aesthetic.

Individuals continuing to operate within this eternal present do so without motivation; unable to make progress while the perception of time itself slows and threatens to stop entirely. As Majer wrote in analyzing Havel’s works:

[Havel] represents a conflict of the individual struggling with events and

¹³ Havel, The Memorandum 83.

¹⁴ Havel, The Memorandum 98.

¹⁵ Havel, The Memorandum 124.

¹⁶ Majer, 175.

¹⁷ Havel, Projevy 24

human relationships stuck in a time warp. His characters struggle to escape from a cobweb of meaningless events which move predictably and tediously in a closed circle. Their struggle seems equally meaningless to those for whom suspended time has become the only tangible reality, in which they know only how to function, and survive. In Havel's plays, individuals struggle with a world which is grinding to a halt, and that threatens to blur any difference between people and to bring human existence to a fossilized end.¹⁸

Indeed, Havel adopts this cultural aesthetic within the text of *The Memorandum* as the primary forward strategy of the play, creating a microcosmic view of Czech society under communist control. We can therefore observe an intricate paralleling of events that produces a cyclical continuum of action from which the characters in the play have no hope of escape; just as the Czech people could hold no hope for the future without the possibility for reform represented by the Prague Spring.

As Carey states, "the world of *The Memorandum* is a closed system in a deadly present that promises to continue into the future with only slight variations. The references to existentialism suggest a consciousness of alienation that is already passé, a nostalgic remembrance of a time that seems never to have existed [...]."¹⁹ Inside of this system, Havel evenly divides twelve scenes over two acts. As the action takes place in three offices of the organization (the Director's office, the Ptydepe classroom and the Secretariat of the Translation Centre), this allows for the creation of a smaller continuum of action within the larger cycle of the play. This cycle within the cycle that Havel thus generates follows a rotation, the action (largely centered on Gross) literally passing through each office in turn before beginning the rotation anew.

By building this repetitive sequence of action, Havel creates a powerfully dehumanizing environment through which the characters pass, seemingly unaware of the patterned nature of time around them.²⁰ While this cyclical time structure (at once moving forward, yet never progressing) resonated within the cultural circumstances of Czech society at the time, outside of those circumstances the chilling effect of the

¹⁸ Majer, 173.

¹⁹ Carey, 181.

²⁰ Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre: Czech Playwrights Without a Stage* 54.

mechanization of the characters is still felt. Without possessing the social function upon which individual identity is built the characters themselves are locked into the repetition of the eternal present, and without the perception of the larger shape of time the characters cease to exist as individual human beings. As Havel stated in his address to the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague on October fourth of 1996:

The awareness of a structure in space and time, of composition, order—and thus of deviations from that order, or disturbances to it—has been an integral part of our being in the world since the dawn of humanity, and, indeed, must have played an essential role in the first place, for a self-conscious human being lacking this awareness is almost impossible to imagine.²¹

Yet from this process of dehumanization through the mechanization of the characters, Havel moves *The Memorandum* away from a realistic portrayal of social circumstances (though still representative of the political realities of life under communist control) and into the realm of the absurd. As stated above, in portraying the political reality of Czech society under communism, Havel confronts the difficult notion of human beings operating without an awareness of their own passage through time, struggling to move forward without knowing that no true progress is possible. Such an antithetical notion (the impossibility of progress due to the shape of time) is at once reflective of an absurdist treatment of the action within *The Memorandum* yet remains representative of the political pressures acting on both the playwright and the people. While this perhaps seems to be a strange vehicle for the portrayal of what might otherwise be considered social reality, Havel's adaptation of absurdist notions of reality serve to bring perspective to the cultural circumstances of the time, for, as Havel stated, "[...] what else is theater but an attempt to grasp the world in a focused way by grasping its spatiotemporal logic? [...] This is a precise expression of what I mean when I say that theater is a particular attempt to comprehend the logic of space and time, and thus the logic of Being itself."²²

²¹ Havel, *The Art of the Impossible* 250.

²² Havel, *The Art of the Impossible* 251.

Similar to the existential treatment of time, Havel's use of absurdism as a means of portraying social reality in *The Memorandum* reaches far beyond the personal aesthetic of the playwright, moving instead to encompass the shared experience of the culture as a whole. As Havel wrote in his book Disturbing the Peace:

[...] absurd theatre as such [...] was not an explicit part of the artistic program of any of the small theatres in Prague in the 1960s [...] yet the experience of absurdity did exist somewhere in the bowels of those theatres. It was not merely transmitted through particular artistic influences, it was, above all, something that was "in the air."²³

Indeed, the theatre of the absurd, for Havel, reflected perfectly the state of Being under the political and social oppressions of the Czech communist government. As Havel wrote on his use of absurdism:

[...] it demonstrates modern humanity in a "state of crisis," as it were. That is, it shows man having lost his fundamental metaphysical certainty, the experience of the absolute, his relationship to eternity, the sensation of meaning—in other words, having lost the ground under his feet. This is a man for whom everything is coming apart, whose world is collapsing, who senses that he has irrevocably lost something but is unable to admit this to himself and therefore hides from it. [...] Absurd theatre does not offer us consolation or hope. It merely reminds us of how we are living: without hope. And that is the essence of its warning.²⁴

Apart from the inherent absurdity of Havel's characters, generated by their continuation without purpose, this notion of the absurd as another unifying cultural aesthetic is primarily demonstrated in the artificial organizational language created within *The Memorandum*: Ptydepe. Though the new language is presented as a means of making inter-organizational communications more efficient, it proves to be impossibly difficult to understand. The seemingly logical organizing principle of "maximum redundancy," as Stern notes, is not only bound by the formation of ridiculously long words but by similar rules denoting exceptions made for emotion and context, making

²³ Havel, Disturbing the Peace 54.

²⁴ Havel, Disturbing the Peace 53-4.

Ptydepe no different from the inefficient language it's meant to replace (representative of the adoption of a communist bureaucratic system over the former system of government).²⁵ In the beginning of Act I, Scene 2, Mark Lear, the teacher of Ptydepe, explains the organizing principle of the language to his students:

Lear: Ptydepe, as you know, is a synthetic language, built on a strictly scientific basis. Its grammar is constructed with maximum rationality, its vocabulary is unusually broad. It is a thoroughly exact language, capable of expressing with far greater precision than any current natural tongue all the minutest nuances in the formulation of important office documents. The result of this precision is of course the exceptional complexity and difficulty of Ptydepe. [...] As far as official communications are concerned, the most serious deficiency of the natural languages is their utter unreliability, which results from the fact that their basic structural units—words—are highly equivocal and interchangeable. [...] The significant aim of Ptydepe is to guarantee to every statement, by purposefully limiting all similarities between individual words, a degree of precision, reliability and lack of equivocation, quite unattainable in any natural language.²⁶

Thus, the system by which meaning in official organizational documents is made perfectly explicit is the very system that makes communication nearly impossible. As Lear goes on to describe, the length of words in Ptydepe is determined by the frequency of the word's use in communication, however, with only 17 possible perfectly redundant words, all words must be composed of a combination of these 17 "subwords" separated by gaps. The shortest word in Ptydepe, therefore, is "gh," the equivalent of "whatever," though an even shorter word ("f") has been left open in case a word more common than "whatever" is discovered. In comparison, the longest word in Ptydepe is the equivalent of "wombat," consisting of 319 letters.²⁷

²⁵ Stern, 40.

²⁶ Havel, The Memorandum 65-6.

²⁷ Havel, The Memorandum 67.

As Gross soon learns, however, Ptydepe truly serves a double purpose, for while it seeks to create absolute specificity of language it also generates a fantastic bureaucracy unto itself, granting the power over communication to but a few within the organizational structure (allowing Ballas the opportunity to seize control). This again mirrors the social reality of Czech life under communism as well as the personal life experience of Václav Havel, having earned the epithet of “that bourgeois brat” from the officials of the communist Writer’s Union for his efforts in petitioning the union.²⁸ In *The Memorandum* as in Czech society at large, the real power of individuals lay in their ability to express themselves, and by controlling that power the government could seek to control the individuals.

For the communist government this was the ultimate danger of the stage (and therefore, of Václav Havel): that the position of the writer or playwright granted to individuals a greater measure of the power to express themselves as an individual. Even during his years of exile in the North, working in a brewery while beginning to write what would become the Vanék plays, Havel retained a measure of cultural authority:

[...] I’d be sitting in a pub and I’d hear young people shouting lines from the play to each other across the room. That too was very encouraging, not only because it was a flattering reminder of happier days, when my plays were being performed, when it was almost cultural duty to know them, but above all because it suggested to me that even a playwright who is cut off from his theatre can still have an impact on his own domestic milieu. He is still an integral part of it.²⁹

Though authorities may attempt to control individuals through controlling the flow of information (as is certainly the case of Jan Ballas in Havel’s *The Memorandum*), an individual who maintains his/her social function can thus avoid the cyclical trap of the eternal present and operate with greater freedom against political and social oppression.

In approaching the development of a central praxis for the rehearsal process of *The Memorandum*, it is these cultural aesthetics that must be addressed: social function as the basis for identity, existential treatment of time (the violence of the eternal present)

²⁸ Sire, 20.

²⁹ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* 124.

and absurdism as a tool for the representation of social reality. Not only do these concepts function thematically within the body of the play, but shape the structure and actions of the characters in *The Memorandum*. While an audience unfamiliar with Czech culture and history may not understand or appreciate the significance of these devices from the standpoint of cultural specificity, they can nevertheless gain some insight into a Czech perspective on both the playwright and the play by acknowledging these structures out of their cultural context. More important, however, would be the insights gained by examining their own culture against similar measures: the basis of identity in their respective society, their own awareness of the perception of time and whether they can recognize the inherent absurdity in complex social systems. In these qualities we find Havel's lasting legacy on the stage. As Havel wrote in 1967, "[Theatre] attains immortality only through its topicality. It can only achieve lasting value by the profundity of its topical value."³⁰

³⁰ Havel, Politics and the Theatre 870.

Chapter 2: Praxis and Rehearsal

All conscious systems in the field of acting ask the question: “How can this be done?” This is good. A method is this awareness of this “how to do it.” I believe that one must ask oneself this question once in one’s life, but when one enters into the details it must no longer be asked, for, at the very moment of formulating it, one already creates stereotypes and clichés. One must then ask the question: “How not to do it?”

Grotowski, The Actor’s Technique

The primary challenge in developing a rehearsal praxis rooted in the cultural aesthetics discussed in chapter one (social function as the basis for identity, existential treatment of time and absurdism as a tool for the representation of social reality) lies in the adoption of an appropriate acting method for the basis of the process. While a great deal of current actor training/production work lies in some adaptation of psychologically based acting, such as Stanislavski’s “System” or Strasberg’s “Method,” there are certain drawbacks to the use of such a method in addressing these specific criteria. From a purely practical standpoint, relying on psychological modeling as the basis for character development in a production of Havel’s *The Memorandum* does not allow for the often absurdist functions of the characters. Redressing Havel’s description of Hana from Act I, Scene 1: “Hana [...] takes a mirror and a comb out of her bag, props the mirror against the typewriter and begins to comb her hair. Combing her hair will be her main occupation throughout the play. She will interrupt it only when absolutely necessary.”³¹

Assuming that a performer’s natural response would be to adopt some kind of affliction as psychologically justifying such repetitive, absurdist actions, employing either The System or The Method as the foundation of the rehearsal praxis places a performer in the rather dubious (but potentially attractive) position of “playing crazy.” While this might be an appropriate choice in a production without such clear roots in Theatre of the Absurd, in the case of Havel’s *The Memorandum* such a treatment of the action would detract from the purpose of the action itself and negate the larger purpose of Havel’s use of absurdism: as a vehicle for social reality. In Havel’s works, the characters behaving in a manner that may seem affected to an audience (as well as performers)

³¹ Havel, The Memorandum 56.

removed from the specific cultural circumstances of the a play is not symptomatic of an affliction present in the characters, but rather an affliction present in the circumstances under which the characters operate. Stated more simply, it is not the characters that are crazy in *The Memorandum*, but the very society that surrounds them.

Similar to this dilemma presented when addressing Havel's use of absurdism, the basis of The System and The Method on the preservation of initial acting impulses does nothing to address the physical necessities imposed on a production by Havel's existential treatment of time, creating a cyclical progression of action by which we are forced to compare the happenings in each location from cycle to cycle. While under different circumstances it would be very beneficial to employ tenants of The System or The Method toward limiting any seemingly mechanical qualities that might arise in the performers, it is the very structure of *The Memorandum* that purposefully produces a certain mechanical nature in both the actions of the characters and the progression of the play, without which the playwright's political message would again be lost. Thus, while such a method might be used to carry forward the cultural aesthetic of social function as the basis for identity, it cannot adequately address the other criteria central to an understanding of Havel's *The Memorandum*. Instead, an acting method must be employed that focuses on the physical actions generated by both the cyclical time structure and Havel's adaptation of absurdist tenants.

Examining alternative methods to The System, The Method and other similar psychologically based possibilities, there are three interconnected methods that may be employed to stress the cultural aesthetics that are primary to the formation of a rehearsal praxis for *The Memorandum*: Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty³², Brecht's Epic Theatre³³ (more specifically, his work with alienation and *Gestus*) and Grotowski's *via negativa*³⁴. Each of these potential methods possesses individual strengths and weaknesses when compared to the necessary elements of the rehearsal praxis, yet each also holds a similar foundation in that they were generated in response to the demands of politically motivated theatre—in which Havel's *The Memorandum* certainly fits. While there may

³² See Artaud's [The Theater and Its Double](#).

³³ See Brecht's [The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre](#), [Indirect Impact of the Epic Theatre](#) and [Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction](#), collected in Willett's [Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic](#).

³⁴ See Grotowski's [Towards a Poor Theatre](#).

be no set political message inherent in the methods themselves, outside of the singular prompt to engage both performer and spectator in “thinking politically,”³⁵ all three possess the greater engagement with physical process outside of characters’ psychological selves that is needed to carry forward these cultural aesthetics into the rehearsal process. The question, then, becomes which of these methods is best suited to the rehearsal process of *The Memorandum* in particular.

Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty was indeed developed specifically to address the perceived failings of realistic drama, though interestingly he rejected being located under the banner of “political drama” as vehemently as he rejected the psychological basis of character that dominated the theatre of the time:

[...] He rejected drama that was based on logical written text. He rejected drama that was based on the psychological examination of character. He also rejected plays that were political in nature. Artaud dreamed of something else. A theater that would show the mythological, the magical and the dangerous.³⁶

Yet in this rejection of what might be referred to as political politics, Artaud remained focused on what is nevertheless characterized as a political process, and certainly the central focus of much of political theatre: the estrangement of the spectator from themselves in order to bring about social change. For Artaud this meant overwhelming the spectators’ senses with conflicting theatrical elements, seeking to create a cathartic effect by bypassing their rational minds.³⁷

These theatrical elements, often grotesque or violent in nature, were meant to directly dissuade the spectators from similar actions in their own lives. As Artaud stated, “I defy the spectator [...] who will have seen [...] a bloodstream of images [...] to give himself up, once outside the theater, to ideas of war, riot, and blatant murder.”³⁸ While Artaud’s emphasis on the importance of the spectator, along with his rejection of realistic theatrical forms (more specifically, character psychology as central to performance) certainly takes a step towards developing a more appropriate basis for the formation of a

³⁵ Mitter, 80.

³⁶ Brestoff, 156.

³⁷ Brestoff, 156.

³⁸ Wiles, 136.

rehearsal praxis, his focus on catharsis through contrasting imagery offers no answer to the specific physical demands imposed by the cultural aesthetics within *The Memorandum*. Thus, Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty may serve to partially inform the production concept, but has no place in the praxis carried forward into the rehearsal process.

Playwright/writer/director Bertolt Brecht similarly, and more famously, sought to create distance in the audience, but rather than Artaud's estrangement of the audience member from self, Brecht instead attempted to remove the audience from investing in the illusory world of theatrical realism which dominated the stages of the time. As Brestoff states:

Brecht felt that in the realistic style of acting the actors put both themselves and the audience into a kind of hypnotic trance. A trance that transported both the audience and the actor into a world far from their own, a world where they could comfortably believe in the illusion being offered, and leave the theatre entertained and sated, yet numb to the social problems around them.³⁹

While realistic theatre could thus arguably present the "reality" of the social circumstances under which a society operated, the genre itself was at once flawed: drawing attention to these social circumstances within an illusory framework that denied the audience the possibility of a critical perspective by seeking to convince them of the reading of events offered within the world of the play.

Brecht therefore attempted to break down this process present within realism by continually drawing attention to the artificial nature of theatrical performance, employing what he referred to as *Verfremdung*, or, as it is most often translated, alienation. This alienation could occur as the result of any number of technical or non-realistic performance devices, such as sudden bursts of song, projections and narration, which distanced the audience from the world created within the play:

[...] Brecht called on all the resources of the theatre to keep the audience aware of its presence in a theater. By no means were they to be transported out of it. This idea, of course, flies in the face of the received

³⁹ Brestoff, 148.

wisdom that the theater should put audiences into what the poet Coleridge called, a “willing suspension of disbelief.” Instead, Brecht is asking audiences to use their disbelief, exercise their skepticism, and resist the process of identification.⁴⁰

Thus, the audience was prompted to maintain a critical attitude toward the content of the play, allowing them both a certain freedom of interpretation,⁴¹ as well as the ability to examine and evaluate the larger social systems that governed the play’s action. This both identified and addressed another flaw Brecht noted within realistic theatrical performance: the impossibility of presenting that which could not be made physically manifest in the performance space, such as the economic system.

Needless to say, Brecht’s divorce from the accepted tenants of realism presented initial difficulties not only for audiences, but for his actors as well, many of which were trained in Stanislavski-based systems to psychologically (causally) justify the actions of their characters. While alienation was important for instilling the desired critical attitude in the audience, it was doubly important for the actors (being the primary points of contact between the audience and the text), and thus necessitated the creation of new acting techniques to heighten the separation between the physical actors on stage and the characters they performed. This was accomplished through the use of what Brecht referred to as *Gestus*:

[...] What Brecht requires is that his actors drop Stanislavsky’s ultimately quite artificial demand for consistency and regain on stage the quite commonplace ability to tell a story and mimic one’s characters at once. The actors must appear as themselves, intermittently impersonating their characters while speaking the playwright’s lines. The term for this kind of acting is ‘gestus,’ [...] a compound term which intrinsically harnesses both content and opinion.⁴²

⁴⁰ Brestoff, 149.

⁴¹ Brecht, for example, often included long intervals of stage time between the scenes of his plays, attempting to remove the audience from interpreting the action of a play within the linear, causal framework to which they were accustomed, and thus leaving the audience free to consider other possible outcomes to the events presented.

⁴² Mitter, 48.

More specifically, Brecht's notion of *Gestus* called upon the actors to develop a number of iconic behaviors that could encapsulate the greater significance of a character or moment beyond its immediate presentation. This effect, like alienation, could be accomplished through a number of technical or performative means (such as an actor's adoption of particular physical characteristics, the formation of an association between a character and a particular prop or costume piece, etc.) that might highlight an actor's dual presence as actor and character in the performance space. One of the most famous examples of Brechtian *Gestus* arose from Helene Weigel's performance of the title character in the Berliner Ensemble production of Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Faced with the task of performing the interplay between Mother Courage as the personification of capitalist greed and her concern for her son about to be put to death, Weigel turned out to the audience and emitted a silent scream, following through with the physicality of the very human reaction to her son's impending death while allowing Mother Courage to continue doing business by not drawing the attention of the soldiers.⁴³

Brecht thus supplies not only a potential conceptual foundation for a production of Havel's *The Memorandum*, but begins to address the necessity of an acting method with which the cast might begin to access the physical demands of a performance. Like Artaud, Brecht remains primarily focused on provoking a response from the audience. However, unlike Artaud, this response is given a much more specific purpose: bringing the audience to question their perceptions of the social systems that shape their lives. While this is certainly another step toward finding an appropriate basis for a rehearsal praxis (notions of Brechtian alienation can be incorporated to draw attention to the cultural aesthetic of social function as the basis of identity, as well as elements of *Gestus* potentially informing the repetitive action created by Havel's existential treatment of time) Brecht still leaves something to be desired. The Brechtian aesthetic does not allow for the absurdist conventions Havel employs as a vehicle for social reality, ironically, due to its divorce from realism (as they exploit notions of realistic theatrical performance), and although Brecht begins to empower the audience by encouraging skepticism he still falls short of bringing about the sort of direct sociopolitical change that Havel intended.

⁴³ Brestoff, 151.

Logically, then, I must turn to the examination of a method that attempts to incorporate the best qualities of Artaud and Brecht along with the preservation of initial acting impulse central to Stanislavski: Grotowski's *via negativa*. Jerzy Grotowski emerged as a major new voice in Polish theatre in the late 1950s, having trained extensively in both psychologically based acting systems and multiple ritual performance traditions. Seeking to bridge the gap between such disparate influences, Grotowski began researching the nature of acting through multiple productions at Opole's the Theatre of the Thirteen Rows, eventually coming to advocate a middle ground between realism and the non-realistic performance techniques that had come to dominate the politically motivated theatre of the time.⁴⁴ This "Poor Theatre" would focus solely on the relationship between the actors and audience that Grotowski saw as fundamental to any theatrical performance, removing any production elements (such as lighting, scenery and music) that might distract from the creation of this actor-spectator bond.

Grotowski theorized that in order to empower the audience to begin making tangible sociopolitical change (the goal mirrored in Havel's works), it was necessary for the actors to lead the audience by example, demonstrating their own capacity for breaking free of what Grotowski referred to as the "social mask" that prevented individuals from directly facing the social circumstances of their lives. As Grotowski wrote: "If the actor, by setting himself a challenge publicly challenges others, and through excess, profanation and outrageous sacrilege reveals himself by casting off his everyday mask, he makes it possible for the spectator to undertake a similar process of self-penetration."⁴⁵ Thus, rather than looking to a particular acting method or combination of methods as the foundation of his Poor Theatre, Grotowski instead encouraged his actors to identify and work to remove the physical and psychological limitations that prevented them, as individuals, from performing to their fullest:

[...] Grotowski may be seen as proposing a third realm of theatre ideology, one with its own quite distinct means of overcoming the paradox whereby the "truth" of the theatre is that it is a "fiction." In the work of all three directors, actors play characters. The differences are those of

⁴⁴ Brestoff 154.

⁴⁵ Grotowski, Towards a Poor Theatre 34.

emphasis. In Stanislavsky the actor plays a *role* and the result, ideally is illusion. In Brecht, the *actor* plays a *role* and the intended effect is alienation. In Grotowski, the *actor* plays a role in order to more clearly be himself.⁴⁶

Rather than prompting actors on the feelings (Stanislavski) or actions (Brecht) that might underlie a role, Grotowski therefore guided his actors on what choices *not* to make: “I was searching for a positive technique or... a certain method of training capable of objectively giving the actor a creative skill. [...] The actor no longer asks himself: ‘How can I do this?’ Instead, he must know what *not* to do, what obstructs him. [...] This is what I mean by *via negativa*: a process of elimination.”⁴⁷ This allowed Grotowski the freedom to pursue similar political goals as Brecht with a concrete physical method, incorporate the performance techniques suggested by Artaud (such as direct audience engagement and an interplay between discipline and spontaneity) and continue Stanislavski’s work on removing the barriers between a performer’s thought and action. Grotowski’s *via negativa* thus provides an answer to each of the cultural aesthetics central to a production of Havel’s *The Memorandum*, providing a firm foundation for the development of a rehearsal praxis while creating a positive environment in which actors, largely trained in psychologically-based acting methods, can be made comfortable with non-representational performance elements. Ideally, a rehearsal praxis based upon *via negativa* will therefore encourage actors to make original performative choices while freeing them from their individual physical and psychological limitations, or as Grotowski wrote:

We do not look for recipes, the stereotypes that are the natural accompaniment of professionals. We do not attempt to answer questions such as: “What does one do to show irritation? How should one walk? How should Shakespeare be played?” [...] Instead one must ask the actor: “What are the obstacles blocking you on your way toward the total act that must engage all of your psychophysical resources, from the most instinctive to the most rational?” We must find out what it is that blocks

⁴⁶ Mitter, 89-90.

⁴⁷ Grotowski, Towards a Poor Theatre 101.

him in the way of respiration, movement and—most important of all—human contact. [...] I want to take away, steal from the actor all that disturbs him. That which is creative will remain within him. It is liberation. If nothing remains, it is because he is not creative.⁴⁸

This is not to say that the production of Havel's *The Memorandum* could be said to be Grotowskian based upon the adoption of Grotowski's *via negativa* as the theoretical construct upon which the rehearsal praxis may be built, far from it. Without direct experience with the individually constructed performance techniques that Grotowski employed in the exploration of his *via negativa* it would be very inappropriate to claim that this production of *The Memorandum* was truly Grotowskian. Indeed, Grotowski wrote extensively in his later life on the impossibility of achieving his desired artistic results in a circumscribed rehearsal period as is employed in academic theatre.⁴⁹ Instead, as has been stated previously, *via negativa* is merely the theoretical foundation that provides a method for the exploration of the cultural aesthetics central to Havel's *The Memorandum*: social function as the basis for identity, existential treatment of time and absurdism as a tool for the representation of social reality. This having been restated, we can now move forward to the construction of the rehearsal process itself, or, more accurately, the audition process.

While it is often said that the secret to good directing is good casting, the adaptation of *via negativa* to the rehearsal process of Havel's *The Memorandum* pushes the importance of matching actor to character even further. In addition to screening actors for potential resistances to working in a subtractive rather than additive manner, as well as evaluating each performer's preexisting level of physical, vocal and psychological freedom (or performative freedom, as it will hereafter be referred to), special attention must be paid to physical and vocal typing. While a certain amount of external character work could be applied to a performer's work utilizing another method, allowing character choices to instead emerge as a component of the freeing of physical, vocal and psychological blockages means that a performer's final presentation of character is ideally, at best, the best version of that performer's self (having been pushed to free

⁴⁸ Grotowski, *The Actor's Technique* 532.

⁴⁹ See Grotowski's *From Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle* for this discussion relative to similar claims made toward Stanislavski in American academic theatre. Richards, 115-8.

themselves of the social mask that limits the possibilities of performance). As Mitter wrote, “[...] in Grotowski’s theatre, actors play their characters by playing themselves.”⁵⁰

Thus, the primary focus in the audition process must be to select those performers who will best embody Havel’s characters when they are free to act as themselves, though this is augmented by both the other aforementioned criteria: resistance to working through a subtractive method and preexisting level of performative freedom. Grotowski never intended his work on *via negativa* to be employed in such a relatively brief rehearsal period, and as such is it necessary to discern through the audition process which performers are capable of achieving the desired level of performance in a limited time frame. Fortunately, as a certain level of performative freedom is what might allow a performer to forego the audition and rehearsal techniques to which they are accustomed (moving to a subtractive rather than additive method), it is therefore only necessary to test them on one criterion beyond the scope of a general audition process: a performer’s ability to adapt to, and fully utilize, new circumstances while performing their chosen text. This can be accomplished simply by asking the performer to repeat their audition piece a second time, adjusting the circumstances of the second performance to test both their willingness and ability to work outside the self-imposed limitations of their rehearsed audition piece.

For example, for many performers simply prompting them to repeat their audition piece a second time may, and likely will, produce a negative reaction for a number of different reasons (perhaps having chosen their audition piece for its cathartic effect), and thus the second performance will noticeably suffer. Other performers may, and likely will, have formed strong associations in their audition pieces with a particular object (such as a chair), the removal of which in the second performance leaves them unable to physically express their characters. Still others may, and likely will, possess a great deal of unfocused energy that might be grounded into a particular object (again, such as a chair) provided that they choose to fully utilize it in the second performance. All of these examples identify, and give the performer the option of addressing, specific weaknesses in a performer’s audition piece, allowing both for evaluating the quality of the performance and the performer’s ability to adapt.

⁵⁰ Mitter, 79.

Once the casting is complete (callbacks having been called, if necessary, to explore options in the creation of an ensemble), the director should have completed a fair assessment of each performer on the qualities desired for the rehearsal process and final performance, and can thus begin to assist each performer in removing the existing blockages to their performative freedom. The rehearsal process for this production of Havel's *The Memorandum* having been scheduled over five weeks, this allows for one entire week devoted to vocal freedom, one week to physical freedom, and one week to psychological freedom before beginning to polish the performance in preparation for the addition of the production's technical elements. Simultaneously, this allows for one week of table work, one week of exploring physical characterization, and one week of building the relationships between the characters, as the adoption of a subtractive method means that the potentially separate processes of removing blockages and building the performance are in this case one and the same.

Following this basic model, the day-to-day rehearsal activities can, and should, be adjusted to address the individual needs of the performers while continuing to operate within a particular framework that will emphasize the cultural aesthetics embedded within Havel's *The Memorandum*. As such, drawing from the element that will dominate the scenic design (a large constructivist circle painted on the floor of the performance space), the activities of the rehearsal process will be performed within, and based upon, adapting the action of the play to the confines of a circular performance space. This will serve practically as the basis of the final blocking of the performance while beginning to make the cast comfortable with the existential and absurdist elements of the performance. By basing the activities employed in the subtractive acting method on both the major thematic and design element of *The Memorandum* (the circle), the acting method, Havel's existential treatment of time and use of absurdism as a tool for the representation of social reality should, ideally, become mutually reinforcing processes.

More specifically, the circle can be employed as a construct for exploring the power relationships within Havel's *The Memorandum* (the character "in power" standing at the center and being challenged by the actions of other characters entering into the performance space), while generating practical behavior that will eventually both guide the final blocking and inform character choices. By creating such exercises, grounded

both in the cultural aesthetics of the play and playwright and the practical needs of the final performance, the adoption of Grotowski's *via negativa* as the praxis upon which the rehearsal process will be built can serve to address each of the criteria central to this production of Havel's *The Memorandum*. In addition, as rehearsal exercises addressing the specific needs of the performers, *via negativa* allows for exploring elements of Brechtian alienation and *Gestus* as well as methods of audience engagement stressed by Artaud. Thus, ideally, through the careful evaluation of the audition process, the structuring of rehearsal exercises around the practical needs of the final performance, and the introduction of non-realistic performance elements as components of the subtractive acting method, Grotowski's *via negativa* will serve to create the desired emphasis on the cultural aesthetics central to *The Memorandum*.

Chapter 3: Praxis in Rehearsal

What is the role? In fact it is almost always the text of the character, the typed text that is given to the actor. It is also a particular conception of the character, and here again there is a stereotype. Hamlet is an intellectual without greatness, or else a revolutionary who wants to change everything. The actor has his text; next an encounter is necessary. It must not be said that the role is a pretext for the actor, nor the actor a pretext for the role. It is an instrument for making a cross-section of oneself, analyzing oneself and thereby reestablishing contact with others. If he is content with explaining a role, the actor will know that he has to sit down here, cry out there. At the beginning of rehearsals, associations will be produced normally, but after twenty performances there will be nothing left. The acting will be mechanical.

Grotowski, The Actor's Technique

As stated in chapter two, perhaps the most important element of the adaptation of *via negativa* as the foundation of the rehearsal process for Havel's *The Memorandum* lay in the structure of the auditions rather than in the formation of the rehearsal praxis. As anticipated, in simply asking performers to repeat (and sometimes slightly adjust) their audition pieces, an individual's preexisting level of performative freedom (that is to say, physical, vocal and psychological freedom), as well as any potential resistances to working through a subtractive method, could be easily determined. While a certain amount of information could be clearly discerned from the initial performance, most of the evaluating actually lay in the second performance, excepting those very few whose initial performances were of a significant enough level to not require a second performance. Still, the initial performances served at least to identify the level at which an individual performer could perform given enough preparation using the rehearsal method to which they were accustomed, though this was not the main focus of the initial performances.

For the majority of the performers the initial presentation of their audition pieces served primarily to suggest the level of adjustment they may be capable of adapting to without compromising the performance of their prepared texts. This level of suggested adjustment varied widely through the group of performers, though seemed to closely correlate with a performer's age and their amount of previous experience relative to the group as a whole. As previously stated, for some performers simply asking them to

repeat their audition piece (without adjustment) prompted strong reactions, such as dropping out of character, forgetting lines and blocking, being unable to repeat their level of emotional intensity, etc. Others immediately demonstrated their capacities for adapting to more difficult circumstances in the second performances of their prepared texts. The most common prompt provided for a second performance was the addition or removal of a chair to the circumstances of an audition piece (providing the opportunity for a performer to either ground or free their physicality), though others earned much more complex and seemingly arbitrary prompts. These more complex prompts consisted of the addition of a character to play (such as a 50's housewife) or situation to play through (such as being attacked by scorpions), all based upon the level of adaptability suggested by their initial performance. The strongest performers could not only repeat their audition pieces with the suggested adjustments, but could also find a means of justifying the otherwise arbitrary prompts in either the physicality of their presentations or in the delivery of their prepared texts.

As was reflected in the final casting for the production, this structure applied to the audition process seemed to favor slightly younger performers with a relatively high level of previous experience. While this perhaps may seem to be a rather obvious statement to make, it must also be noted that many highly talented and highly experienced performers, both young and older, did not excel in the particular criteria being tested for in the audition process: level of performative freedom and resistance to working through a subtractive method. Outside of the numerous extenuating circumstances that naturally influence the casting process (such as comparing scheduling and the competing auditions of another production), the general trend among those auditioning seemed to be that older performers had less difficulty repeating the presentations of their prepared texts and more difficulty adapting to the application of additional circumstances, while the opposite was true of more experienced performers (adapting more readily to suggested adjustments if they managed to repeat their performances at all). As greater age and greater level of experience did not necessarily, and among those auditioning often did not, coincide, the observations that informed this trend seem to suggest that, in general, older performers exhibited more performative

freedom, but greater resistance to alternative performance methods, while the contrary was true of performers with greater experience.

Therefore, those performers most sought after, and therefore cast in the production, were generally those young enough to be open to working in an alternative performance method while having the experience necessary to faithfully repeat a second presentation of their prepared text (thus providing the best possible combination of performative freedom and adaptability). While the relative scale of age and experience level when casting for undergraduate academic theatre is certainly limited (at most approaching an age difference of approximately five years, and with a relatively minor level of experience when compared to graduate or professional theatre) there can be very little doubt for anyone who has approached casting for a production in undergraduate academic theatre that there can be great depth and enormous variation in an otherwise seemingly uniform casting pool. As was the case in casting for this particular production of Havel's *The Memorandum*, neither age nor relative experience level, though still useful considerations in the casting of any production, should solely inform a director's casting decisions. Rather, a more effective strategy may be to similarly tailor the construction of the audition process itself to suit the criteria established during the formation of the rehearsal praxis.

While callbacks were held in the interim between the initial auditions and final casting, they were not used (as is most common), to explore the possible character combinations of those on the primary casting list. Instead, callbacks were used to give another chance at performance to those on the secondary casting list, as well as to test possible ensemble combinations. More specifically, the callbacks for *The Memorandum* aided in determining which of two male actors from the primary casting list would receive which of the two most difficult roles in the production, while reexamining the most promising of those performers who did not excel at the criteria being tested for in the initial audition process. Simply, the performers were grouped around one of the two primary male actors and, after being assigned roles, were given ten minutes to prepare a short scene from *The Memorandum* for presentation. This ideally gave the performers the opportunity to meet those criteria being tested for in the audition process while in a somewhat more traditional performance setting. While the purpose and structure of the

somewhat unorthodox callbacks were clearly stated to the performers before their initial auditions (and again before beginning the scene work that comprised the callback presentation), there was still some reported animosity from those receiving callbacks yet not making the final cast list, seemingly generated from the break with the traditional callback-to-casting process. As it can be noted, very few of those given a callback were part of the final casting.

After casting had been completed (and after informing the cast as to the method being employed in this particular production), the rehearsal process proceeded as had been planned for in the rehearsal praxis: one week devoted to vocal freedom, one week devoted to physical freedom and one week devoted to psychological freedom. As working through a subtractive method allowed for addressing the practical needs of the final production simultaneously with the work on increasing performative freedom, this also allowed for one week of table work, one week of physical characterization and one week of building character relationships before beginning to incorporate the majority of the technical elements of the production. Following the *via negativa* model, daily vocal exercises in the first week were chosen based on perceived weaknesses in the vocal qualities of the performers, employing Havel's text as material for addressing (primarily) diction, projection and pacing. These exercises were presented as "exercises" or "games" to insure that the performers (especially those specifically targeted by the exercise) did not become self-conscious as to the weaknesses being addressed, while allowing the entire cast to remain active and engaged.

Often these exercises (similar to the prompts used in the audition process) may have seemed arbitrary, however each served in the development of a particular performance skill that was necessary to the final performance. One such exercise that was employed throughout the rehearsal process was calling on the cast to sing through a scene of *The Memorandum* in an operatic style. While this exercise may have seemed to the cast to have little significance in the overall rehearsal process, it also forced those in the scene to fully support their voices and begin exploring the vocal possibilities of the text, all while avoiding the self-consciousness that can stifle vocal work. Another example of a vocal exercise used throughout the entire rehearsal process was prompting a

performer to recite large blocks of dialogue in one breath, drawing their awareness to the pacing of a scene while forcing them to remove unnecessary pauses.

While the cast (even after being screened for their willingness to try alternative performance methods) presented some initial resistance to the emphasis on physical process and structure over a psychologically-based or emotive approach to exploring the vocal possibilities presented by the text, this resistance was broken down by setting particular performance goals on a night-by-night basis and carefully regulating the length of rehearsals. More specifically, by informing them of the plan for each particular rehearsal (such as the goal time for speeding through a reading of the play, or the number of varied performances of a particular scene) the cast was given an alternative motivation to seeking easier, qualitative answers to specific vocal problems. In addition, by slowly increasing both the frequency and duration of rehearsals over the entire rehearsal process rather than maintaining a standard schedule, the cast was given much less time in the initial stages of the rehearsal process to question its construction before becoming accustomed to working through a subtractive method.

By the end of the first week of rehearsals, the cast had thus both begun to address their individual vocal weaknesses and adjust to the method that would be carried through the body of the rehearsal process. This is not to say that the vocal component of the rehearsal process had been completed by the end of the first week, far from it, but with this groundwork established it was possible to move forward and begin to address physical freedom and its effect on characterization. As previously stated, the painted circular scenic element that was to dominate the stage was employed as a convenient construct for the purposes of exploring what was to become the finalized blocking for the performance, and thus was also the foundation of the exercises used in both addressing the performers' existing physical blockages and establishing the physicality of the characters.

Moving slowly from the seated readings and vocal exercises performed around the circle to simple exercises combining vocal work with movement, the cast was gradually made comfortable with the confining nature of the circle while beginning to address the power relationships that underlie Havel's existential treatment of time as well as his adaptation of absurdism as the vehicle for the representation of social reality. An

example of such an exercise used in initially combining vocal work with movement was to prompt the actors to stand when they feel their character is the center of attention, forming a connection in the performers between the text and the impulse for motivated movement. As previously described, however, the primary exercise employed throughout the rehearsal process was establishing the center of the circle as the position occupied by the character “in power,” other characters only being able to challenge the central character’s authority through the use of their lines present in the given text of a particular scene. This provided the cast with a concrete method for physicalizing the relationships addressed in the first week of rehearsal while making them aware of the structures embedded in the text Havel uses in highlighting the thematic elements of *The Memorandum*. For example, while Josef Gross is often the center of attention, his power begins to wane in the first scene and is never fully recovered even after his reinstatement toward the end of the play.

In order to simplify the initial rehearsal process (as well as to draw attention to the changing relationships between the characters), rehearsals during this second week were gathered around location rather than following the chronology of the play’s action. This also allowed for working with each cast member more closely on the exploration of physical characterization (and their preexisting physical blockages, as each performer’s own physical limitations would serve as the basis for their final characterizations). Far beyond identifying and addressing the physical limitations of the performers, however, the most difficult challenge lay in making the cast comfortable with the absurd, often repetitive actions of their characters, both those made explicit (such as Hana combing her hair) and those implicit in the text (such as the related characterizations of Jan Ballas and Ferdinand Pillar). However, by addressing these actions relative to the power relationships explored within the circle, the dehumanizing behaviors of the characters within Havel’s *The Memorandum* could be approached as components of the larger power structure present within the play. This gave the characters additional means by which the authority of the Managing Director (both Gross and later Ballas) could be subverted.

By thus beginning to generate behaviors in the cast appropriate to both the structural and thematic elements within *The Memorandum* (yet grounded within the

spatial reality of the circle), it was then possible to begin addressing the characters' relationships. Setting particular moments created by the cast as the foundation for a loose blocking of the production, the performers were prompted to explore the physical characteristics of their characters as extensions of their relationships, creating subtle similarities and contrasts among the various groupings of characters within the play. For example, as associations are naturally formed within the text of *The Memorandum* between the members of the Secretariat staff (and as the physical limitations of the individual performers addressed in exercises served as the basis of the said performers' characterizations), it follows naturally that their respective physicalities would be related. Thus, while the physical characterization for the performance of Stroll was generated primarily in the lower body of the performer (addressing certain limitations in the performer discovered through the rehearsal process), the physical characterization for the performance of Savant was generated primarily in the upper body of the performer (addressing similar physical limitations in the performer while forming a functional, yet contrasting, relationship between the two characters). This focus on employing character relationships as informing physicality also allowed for the paralleling of particular characters through juxtaposing of behaviors from scene to scene, such as the behavioral similarities exhibited by both Gross and Ballas when acting in the role of Managing Director.

Merging the process of removing limitations to the cast's performative freedom with traditional rehearsal, the performers were prompted to begin exploring the complex structural and thematic elements within Havel's *The Memorandum* while continuing to grow as individual performers. While initial difficulties were encountered in establishing the subtractive method as the basis for the rehearsal process, the structure and scheduling of the rehearsal process served as an effective tool for quickly acclimating the cast to operating without qualitative (psychologically-based or emotive) prompting. In addition, the simultaneous evaluation and addressing of particular performance problems in rehearsal, offered by the adoption of a subtractive acting method, provided a highly adaptive foundation for creating what is a highly personalized rehearsal experience for both performers and director. While a method such as *via negativa* may not be appropriate as the basis for the rehearsal praxis of simply any performance, based upon

the cultural aesthetics present within Havel's *The Memorandum*, it provided the perfect blend of construction and freedom necessary for a successful production.

Conclusion:

Like Havel's life in the presidency, his life in the theater is no fairy tale, either. It is more like a drama, but one with fairy-tale elements. Theatrical and thrilling. Suspenseful and extreme. There is good and there is evil. It may not have a happy ending, but that is because it has no ending. The curtain may go down, but there is still the larger theater, the one of the playwright's vision that can be played on any conceivable stage. It does have a moral, though. It shows us, in the special context of that extraordinary time, what theater can mean and what being a playwright can mean, if one acts and writes with courage.

Rocamora, Acts of Courage

The noted success of the Miami University production of Václav Havel's *The Memorandum* was largely due to the remarkable talents of cast, crew and production staff, yet the final shape of the production (as well as the understanding of the performers) was guided through the adaptation of Grotowski's *via negativa*, which was to form the foundation of the rehearsal praxis. By focusing on the development of performative freedom over causal reasoning, it was possible to build a rehearsal process that simultaneously reinforced the cultural aesthetics central to the play (social function as the basis for identity, existential treatment of time and absurdism as a tool for the representation of social reality) while continuing to address the practical needs of the final performance. Without the ability to adequately address these cultural aesthetics provided by a subtractive approach to the rehearsal process, it would not have been possible to do justice to Havel's work, emphasizing the continuing topicality of *The Memorandum* outside its specific cultural context.

This is not say, however, that a subtractive method would be an appropriate basis for the development of simply any rehearsal praxis. Certainly applying a similar rehearsal process to a production of a realistic play would do little to answer the motivational and emotive questions that may arise in the performers, and provide only minimal framework for the preservation of acting impulses that is often important to the final production (without incorporating elements from psychologically-based acting methods). Still, it cannot be denied, based on the its use in the this production of Havel's *The Memorandum*, that there is definite value in the application of a subtractive acting

method to the body of Havel's theatrical works, which largely employ a similar critical framework as informing their thematic and structural elements.

What yet remains to be explored is the usefulness of adopting a subtractive rehearsal praxis as the foundation of productions of works by playwrights other than Havel. While there are many similar works of political theatre employing absurdist conventions to represent the sociopolitical circumstances under which they were written, analysis would have to be undertaken in order to determine whether a work's critical framework would benefit from the potential emphasis generated by building from a subtractive rehearsal praxis. However, as the fundamental questions Havel seeks to raise in the audience (how do I define myself? How do I measure the passage of time in my life? Am I more important for who I am, or what I do for others?) are central to many such political plays, there is a strong likelihood potential productions could be greatly informed by applying a similar process, moving from theory, to praxis, rehearsal, and finally, to production.

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