Tom Stoppard and the unofficial culture in Czechoslovakia

by **Barbara Day**

My first (stage) encounter with Tom Stoppard was in 1967, in London's Old Vic Theatre. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was the rave of the town and the theatre was packed. A star had been born, and the theatre world was agog.

At that time the fact that Stoppard's origins were not English was largely disregarded. Later it emerged that he was born in a town that – in the 1960s – bore the grim name of Gottwaldov, in the 'faraway country' of Czechoslovakia. But audiences were more interested in Stoppard's plays than the origins of the playwright.

It was the brilliant, flamboyant theatre critic Kenneth Tynan – in 1963 appointed dramaturge of Britain's new National Theatre and responsible for the London production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* – who in 1977 published a long article drawing the public's attention to the parallels between the Czech-born English-speaking dramatist and the Czech dramatist Václav Havel.[1]

(Tynan had been one of a handful of Western writers and intellectuals who had taken the opportunity in the 1960s to see the Czech new wave for himself.)

By the time Tynan's article appeared Stoppard had already involved himself in a campaign against human rights abuses in the Communist bloc. In April 1976 he met Victor Fainberg, who had spent five years in a Soviet prison hospital after demonstrating in Red Square against the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia.

Fainberg was writing for the London-based journal *Index on Censorship*, at this time edited by the Czech émigré George (Jiří) Theiner (in 1978 Stoppard joined *Index's* advisory board). Fainberg was campaigning to free Vladimir Bukovsky, who spent nearly 12 years in Soviet prisons and psychiatric hospitals.

Stoppard's meeting with Fainberg gave him the impetus to complete a joint project with André Previn, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*. The setting of this unusual, orchestrated play was a cell in a Russian psychiatric hospital shared by a political prisoner and a patient who hears an imaginary orchestra.[2]

The piece was premiered at the Royal Festival Hall in London in July 1977, five months after the Soviet authorities had exchanged Bukovsky for the Chilean Communist leader Corvalán.

Amnesty International declared 1977 Prisoner of Conscience Year, and Stoppard promised to write a TV play to mark the occasion.

In February, when visiting Moscow and Leningrad with an Amnesty representative, he was still intending this to be a play about the Russian dissidents.

Tom Stoppard who, as a critic, wrote under the pseudonym William Boot

"Instead," he wrote later, "the trip to Russian unlocked a play about Czechoslovakia: there was an Archimedean footing, somewhere between involvement and detachment, which offered a point of leverage."[3]

The resulting play, *Professional Foul*, was shown on BBC TV in September 1977.[4]

It is about a double incursion into totalitarian Czechoslovakia, by a philosophy colloquium and by a football team. A professor of ethics commits a 'professional foul' in smuggling out an essay by one of his former students, now working as a cleaner. (The small role of Man 4 was played by the émigré Paul [Pavel] Moritz. It was not until the 1990s that Moritz was exposed as the StB's resident agent in London.)

Simultaneously, the Communist authorities in Czechoslovakia were attempting to suppress the Charter 77 movement. They came up with an 'Anti-Charter', to which they gave huge publicity.

Rudé právo daily covered its front page with lists of signatories, especially those from the arts and the media. On 1 February 1977 Stoppard, backed by thirteen British playwrights and actors, wrote to *The Times* to demand the release of detained Charter signatories, especially Václav Havel. On 11 February the *New York Times* published his article, *Dirty Linen in Prague*: "For Havel's sake and a great deal more, isn't it really time we told them that a human right is not an 'internal affair', that signing a petition is not a 'serious crime' against any state which claims to be civilized, that a weasel is not a bloody whale? And went on telling them at the highest level?"[5]

In April Stoppard joined a delegation from the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, presenting a petition for Havel's release to the Czechoslovak Embassy in London.

Stoppard had first read Havel's plays in the late 1960s and sensed a close affinity, especially with the first two, *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*.

Meanwhile *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* had been translated into Czech, and in 1968 Havel had been trying to schedule a production at the Theatre on the Balustrades.[6]

On June 18 1977, Stoppard returned to Czechoslovakia for the first time since his family's departure in 1938. For the 'dissidents' it was a deeply symbolic occasion.

Over four years later, in August 1981, the philosopher Ladislav Hejdánek briefed Alan Montefiore and Catherine Audard from the Jan Hus Foundation on the kind of western visitor they would like in the 'underground university'. He told them: "those who would most appreciate such visitors would be writers...Tom Stoppard's visit provided inspiration that lasted for two years."[7]

On arriving in Prague Stoppard was led through a complex procedure designed to throw off the secret police, eventually changing cars in front of the Castle to be seated next to his interpreter, Gerry Turner (AG Brain).

(Turner modestly believes he was selected

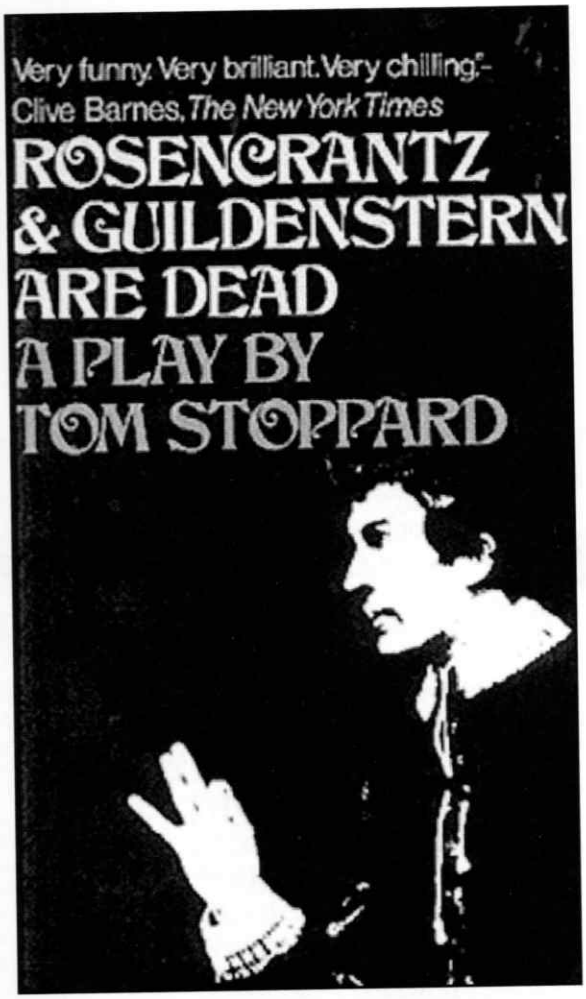
'He told me that evening that he had done nothing, really nothing...'

for this honour because Paul Wilson, the Canadian member of the Plastic People, had recently been deported.)

They embarked on a trip which remains hazy in the minds of those involved. There was a meeting with Ludvík Vaculík at his home in Všenory; to converse more freely, Vaculík took them to the railway buffet at Řevnice. Petr Pithart was at some point a part of the group, as was Pavel Landovský (in 'a battered white Saab').

Stoppard met Hejdánek 'in a cheap 'fish grill' just off Wenceslaus Square', as well as Pavel Kohout, Jan Vladislav and Karel Sidon. Karel Bartošek accompanied him to a rather dishevelled debate and press conference in a stylish Constructivist villa.

Bartošek had just, according to Jan Patocka Jnr, taken Stoppard on a lightning tour of Prague hot-spots from which Stoppard had emerged in better shape than Bartošek. Above all, there was his first and, for many years, only meeting with Václav Havel, who had been released a month earlier.



This widely-acclaimed play was first performed in 1966

Over the next two months Stoppard wove out of his material a long article published in the *New York Review of Books*, Prague: the Story of the Chartists.**8**

With an almost uncanny awareness of what it meant to live under a totalitarian regime, he seamlessly combined what he had learnt about the compilation of the Charter, about Jan Patocka and about the Plastic People, with his own experiences.

In October 1979 Havel was sentenced to four and a half years imprisonment. Stoppard (who by now was *persona non grata* in Czechoslovakia) redoubled his efforts on the dissidents' behalf.

In February 1980 he played the role of Havel's defence lawyer in a TV re-enactment of the VONS trial; other participants included the exiled Czech playwright Pavel Kohout (as Havel), Simone Signoret and Yves Montand. Later that year he wrote an introduction to the English edition of *The Memorandum*, reminding readers that Havel was still at the beginning of a long prison sentence.

At the same time, Stoppard began work on *Cahoot's Macbeth*, inspired by the Living Room Theatre of Vlasta Chramostová.**9**

Pavel Kohout's condensed adaptation of *Macbeth* for Chramostová had been 'premiered' in July 1978, and performed 18 times in different apartments around Prague.

In Stoppard's version, Chramostová's apartment is raided a few minutes into the performance. However, although the police accuse the actors of anti-state activity, they allow the performance to continue while they carry on a running commentary. For Stoppard, the topicality of the play was important; the day before its premiere he told the director, Ed Berman, to keep the play updated with any new reports from Prague.

Further articles, protests and representations followed. When a group of philosophy dons formed the Jan Hus Educational Foundation to support the underground university (home seminars), Stoppard was invited to join the Board of Trustees.

Roger Scruton wrote later: "...it was indeed that work (*Professional Foul*) which made him into a kind of figurehead for us (for me and Kathy [Wilkes] especially), since it so accurately portrayed the situation into which we had stumbled."**10**

Acting on Hejdánek's advice, Stoppard arranged a meeting between the Hus Foundation and the writers James Saunders, Piers Paul Read, Snoo Wilson, John Bowen and Melvyn Bragg (in the end, Read was the only one to risk a visit).

Stoppard was open towards appeals which might help the unofficial culture in Czechoslovakia. In 1983 he endowed the Tom Stoppard Award, presented annually to a writer of Czech origin; the programme is still running under the patronage of František Janouch's Charter 77 Foundation, and the latest award was made to Přemysl Rut. He also supported theatre activities; in 1985 he made a donation to the Bristol Czech-Fest, whose main aim was to bring the Brno Theatre on a String to Britain, and in 1986 he adapted Havel's *Largo Desolato* (dedicated to Stoppard) for its British premiere at the Bristol Old Vic.

I caught up again with Tom Stoppard at the Theatre Festival in Pilsen in 1994, after the onstage discussion, *Not Only About Theatre*, with Ronald Harwood, Arthur Miller and Václav Havel.

He told me that evening that he had done nothing, really nothing, to warrant this attention; that he had been involved, if at all, only marginally. It was not until I began to gather the material for this article (which is far from complete) that I realised how very inaccurate an assessment that was.

■ *This article was originally written for the Brno theatre magazine RozRazil.*

Footnotes: 1 Ken Tynan, "Withdrawing with Style from the Chaos", *The New Yorker*, 19 December 1977. Republished in Ken Tynan, *Show People*, London, 1979. **2** In Tom Stoppard, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* and *Professional Foul*, Faber and Faber, London 1978. **3** Introduction to Tom Stoppard, *Squaring the Circle*, Faber and Faber, London 1984, p22. **4** In Tom Stoppard, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* and *Professional Foul*, op cit. **5** Tom Stoppard, "Dirty Linen in Prague, *New York Times*, 11 February 1977. **6** Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz a Guildenstern jsou mrtví*, translated Vladimír Kusín, Orbis, Prague 1968. Havel, however preferred Jaroslav Kořan's translation, still in typescript. **7** Alan Montefiore and Catherine Audard, report of a visit to Prague in August 1981, quoted in Barbara Day, *The Velvet Philosophers*, Claridge Press, London 1999. **8** Tom Stoppard, "Prague: the Story of the Chartists, *New York Review of Books*, 4 August 1977. **9** Tom Stoppard, *Dogg's Hamlet; Cahoot's Macbeth*, Faber and Faber, London 1980. **10** Roger Scruton, private correspondence, 30 May 2007.
Also used in this article: Ira Nadel, *Double Act*, Methuen, London 2004. Carol Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, Smith and Kraus, Inc, Hanover, New Hampshire 2005.