

# POLITICS, LIFE, AND ROCK 'N' ROLL

BY TOM STOPPARD

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In the first draft of *Rock 'n' Roll*, Jan was called Tomáš, my given name, which, I suppose, is still my name. My surname was legally changed when I was, like Jan, unexpectedly “a little English schoolboy.”

This is not to say that the parallels between Jan's life and mine go very far. He was born where I was born, in Zlín, and left Czechoslovakia for the same reason (Hitler) at much the same time. But Jan came directly to England as a baby, and returned to Czechoslovakia in 1948, two years after I arrived in England having spent the war years in the Far East.

The two-year overlap was the basis of my identification with Jan, and why I started off by calling him Tomas. His love of England and of English ways, his memories of his mother baking buchti, and his nostalgia for his last summer and winter as an English schoolboy are mine.

If that had been the whole play (or part of a play I'd often thought about writing, an autobiography in a parallel world where I returned “home” after the war), Tomas would have been a good name for the protagonist. But with *Rock 'n' Roll* the self-reference became too loose, and, for a different reason, misleading, too, because I also had in mind another Tomas altogether, the Tomas of Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

The most important sources for the “Czech arguments” in this play are the essays, articles, and letters written by Václav Havel between 1968 and the 1990s. I'd had most of them on my shelves since publication but had been lazy about reading them properly. (An exception was a speech, “Politics and Conscience,” read out in absentia in Toulouse when Havel was awarded an honorary doctorate from that university but prevented from travelling there to receive it. At his request I represented him on that occasion.) When I did read them all within the space of a few weeks in 2004 I was left with an overwhelming sense of humility and pride in having a friend of such bravery, humanity, and clear-sighted moral intelligence; who, moreover, was as clear even in translation, was as complex and subtle in his long paragraphs as he was adroit in his dialogues. The open letter titled “Dear Dr. Husák” (1975) and the long essay, 90 pages in my edition, called “The Power of the Powerless” (1978) were influential in their own time and place, but transcend both and will continue to be important where “living in truth” requires not merely conscience but courage.

*Rock 'n' Roll* manages to allude to only a tiny fraction of Havel's writing. The Toulouse speech by itself is a mine of timely reminders of the need to put morality above politics,



Václav Havel looks out over the crowd during the Velvet Revolution in 1989 (photo © David Turnley / CORBIS).

and nature above scientific triumphalism; to return life to its human scale, and language to its human meaning; to recognize that socialism and capitalism in their selfish forms are different routes to global totalitarianism. . . . The assertion that Czechoslovakia's need is deeper than a return to Western democracy is one of a hundred striking moments in "The Power of the Powerless." It is in the same essay that Havel observes that "living in truth" could be any means by anyone who rebels against being manipulated by the Communist regime: it could be attending a rock concert.

#### HAVEL AND THE PLASTICS

Even if *Rock 'n' Roll* were entirely about the Czech experience between the Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution, it could only hope to be a diagram. Yet, a diagram can pick out lines of force which may be faint or dotted on the intricate map of history that takes in all accounts. *Rock 'n' Roll* crystallised around one short essay by Havel, "The Trial" (1976), and a few pages in a book-length interview from 1985. (Havel worked on the transcript, which became the first samizdat book to be legally published in post-Communist Czechoslovakia. Translated by Paul Wilson under the title *Disturbing the Peace*, it was published in England by Faber and Faber in 1990.)

The interviewer, Karel Hvizdala, asked about the origin of Charter 77. Havel's reply began like this:

For me personally, it all began sometime in January or February 1976. I was at Hradecek, alone, there was snow everywhere, a night blizzard was raging outside. I was writing something, and suddenly there was a pounding on the door, I opened it, and there stood a friend of mine, whom I don't wish to name, half frozen and covered with snow. We spent the night discussing things over a bottle of cognac he'd brought with him. Almost as an aside, this friend suggested that I meet Ivan Jirous. . . . I already knew Jirous; I'd met him about twice in the late 1960s but I hadn't seen him since then. Occasionally I would hear wild and, as I discovered later, quite distorted stories about the group of people that had gathered round him, which he called the underground, and about The Plastic People of the Universe, a nonconformist rock group that was at the centre of this society; Jirous was their artistic director.

Havel goes on to explain that Jirous's opinion of him "was not exactly flattering either: he apparently saw me as a member of the official, and officially tolerated, opposition—in other words, a member of the establishment."

Havel and Jirous met in Prague a month later: "His hair was down to his shoulders, other long-haired people would come and go, and he talked and talked and told me how things were."

Jirous played Havel songs by the Plastic People on an old tape recorder. "There was disturbing magic in the music, and a kind of inner warning. Here was something serious and genuine. . . . Suddenly I realized that, regardless of how many vulgar words these people used or how long their hair was, truth was on their side; . . . in their music was an experience of metaphysical sorrow and a longing for salvation."

Jirous and Havel went to a pub and talked through the night. It was arranged that Havel would go to their next "secret" concert in two weeks' time, but before that happened Jirous and the band were arrested along with other members of the underground.

Havel set about getting support for the prisoners, but among the people who might have helped almost no one knew them, and those who did tended to think of them as layabouts, hooligans, drug addicts. They were at first inclined to see the case as a criminal affair. But for Havel it was "an attack by the totalitarian system on life itself, on the very essence of human freedom and integrity."

Somewhat to his surprise, his contacts quickly got the point: the "criminals" were simply young people who wanted to live in harmony with themselves, and to express themselves

in a truthful way. If this judicial attack went unchallenged, the regime could well start locking up anyone who thought and expressed himself independently, even in private.

The Plastic People affair became a cause célèbre. The regime backtracked, and started releasing most of those arrested. Ultimately, Jirous and three others came to trial in Prague in September 1976. Havel attended the proceedings and wrote about it in “The Trial.”

#### FINDING A SPACE FOR MUSIC AND “LIFE ITSELF”

Milan Hlavsa, who died in 2001, formed The Plastic People of the Universe (he took the name from a song by the American rock musician Frank Zappa) in September 1968 when he was 19. The fact that the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia had occurred in August was not immediately relevant: “We just loved rock ’n’ roll and wanted to be famous.” The occupation by the Warsaw Pact armies was background, “the harsh reality,” but “rock ’n’ roll wasn’t just music to us, it was kind of life itself.” Hlavsa made the point more than once in his interviews. The band was not interested in bringing down Communism, only in finding a free space for itself inside the Communist society.

But of course there was no such space, and the story that *Rock ’n’ Roll* is telling is that, in the logic of Communism, what the band wasn’t interested in and what the band wanted could not in the end be separated. There were dozens of rock bands in Prague, and elsewhere in Czechoslovakia, who were “not interested in bringing down Communism,” and they prospered according to their lights, in some cases because the ground rules entailed no compromises on their part, in other cases because the ground rules did. The Plastics were among a small number of musicians and artists who wouldn’t compromise at all, so the space for their music and for “life itself” became harder and harder to find until it was eradicated.

The Plastic People of the Universe did not bring down Communism, of course. After the trial, Husák strengthened his grip on the country until the end came 13 years later. What could not be separated were disengagement and dissidence. In the play Jan tells a British journalist, “Actually, the Plastics is not about dissidents.” The reporter replies, “It’s about dissidents. Trust me.” And he’s right. The rock ’n’ roll underground, as Jirous said, was an attack on the official culture of Communist Czechoslovakia, and in case he didn’t get the point, the regime sent him to gaol four times during those 20 years: culture is politics.

Jirous is one of the most interesting and least-known personalities in the story of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic between the Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution. He is not a musician; he was trained as an art historian. He joined up with the Plastic People in April 1969 in the brief period before they lost their licence, and he took over

as their impresario and artistic director on the long bumpy road from professional status to amateur to outcast. It was his own integrity which made the distinguishing attribute of the band, and he managed to see their travails as an enviable fate compared with the “underground” in the West,

where . . . some of those who gained recognition and fame came into contact with official culture . . . which enthusiastically accepted them and swallowed them up, as it accepts and swallows up new cars, new fashions, or anything else. In Bohemia the situation is essentially different, and far better than in the West, because we live in an atmosphere of complete agreement: the first [official] culture doesn't want us, and we don't want anything to do with the first culture. This eliminates the temptation that for everyone, even the strongest artist, is the seed of destruction: the desire for recognition, success, winning prizes and titles, and last but not least, the material security which follows.

This comes from Jirous's “Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival,” written in February 1975, a year before he met Havel. It has an epigraph which might have been written by Havel: “There is only one way for the people—to free themselves by their own efforts. Nothing must be used that would do it for them. . . . Cast away fear! Don't be afraid of commotion.” In fact, it was written by Mao Zedong; a long stretch. In *Rock 'n' Roll*, Max the Marxist philosopher says that he is “down to one belief, that between theory and practice there's a decent fit—not perfect but decent.” The equivalence of theory and practice is nowhere harder to achieve than in “living in truth” in a society which lies to itself. In the Czechoslovakia of 1968 to 1990 a rock 'n' roll band came as close as anyone.

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