

Sarah Guthu
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Political Documentary, Activism, and Secrecy
The Problematic *Ceremony in Bohemia* and the Trial of Six

In 1977, a group of concerned citizens of Czechoslovakia drafted a petition to their government, identifying what they thought were violations of human rights according to the recent 1975 Helsinki Accords, which had been designed to improve relationships between the West and the Communist countries of the Soviet bloc. Headed by their spokesperson, Vaclav Havel, this group became known as Charter 77. In 1978, a subgroup of Charter 77, known by the abbreviation VONS, was organized. This subgroup was committed to protesting the unjust prosecutions in Czechoslovakia under Soviet control. In the late spring and early summer of 1979, all sixteen members of VONS were arrested. Most would be released, but six remained in custody. They were held on charges of subversion, and of “working for foreign organizations, including the CIA.” (Popkin, *Sunday Times*, 1980). They were tried in the Prague District Court on Spalena Street, 2nd floor, room 81. Judge Antonin Kaspar presided over the hearing, which lasted two days: October 22nd and 23rd, 1979. The trial became known as the Trial of Six.

The dissidents were not allowed to choose their defense lawyers, and there is evidence that their lawyers were not encouraged to vigorously defend their clients, as Havel’s defense lawyer, Dr. Danisz, was sentenced on January 24, 1980, to 10 months in prison for “insulting the judge” while defending other dissidents (“Since Belgrade,” 5). All six dissidents were found guilty and sentenced collectively to 19 ½ years’ imprisonment. Petr Uhl received the longest sentence – 5 years; Vaclav Havel received 4.5 years’ imprisonment at a top-security prison, serving his sentence with fellow

defendants Dr. Vaclav Benda, who received 4 years, and Jiri Dienstbier, who received three. Otta Bednarova received a three year sentence, but was transferred to Pankrac prison hospital due to ill health. Dana Nemcova received a two year sentence, which was suspended for five years.

On April 2, 1980, the Czechoslovak National Council of America (CNCA) prepared a briefing on the prevailing political atmosphere in Czechoslovakia under Soviet power for the United States CIA. This report, entitled “Czechoslovakia Since Belgrade,” now declassified, records that “only close relatives of the accused were permitted to attend the hearing.” The Sunday edition of the *London Times* later clarified that only twelve family members were permitted to attend the trial – two for each defendant. Furthermore, according to the *Times*, “the wife of one of the defendants, who tried to [take notes on the proceedings], was ejected and kept in a police cell for nearly two days,” leaving only 11 witnesses to the proceedings.

At least 60 of the defendants’ friends and family members gathered in front of the court after being denied admission to the trial, the CNCA records. The regime responded with intimidation tactics designed to suppress demonstration. The CNCA reports that during the course of the day:

... at least 20 of them were detained for questioning, while six of them were taken to a remote village late at night and then, after questioning, driven to various places in Central Bohemia from which they had to walk 4 to 10 miles to reach the nearest railway station. Some of those detained had their hair cropped as a warning to others (2).

Western lawyers, journalists, and representatives of Amnesty International were likewise denied entry to the trial; indeed, all outsiders, save one (John Platt-Mills) were immediately expelled from Czechoslovakia.

Though one of their number was caught taking notes, the remaining eleven family members of the defendants (the sole witnesses to the events in the courtroom) were organized and arranged to commit their recollections to print, comprising an illegal and unofficial minutes of the trial. From Czechoslovakia, the minutes were smuggled to London, the headquarters of the Jan Palach Press, which served as a major anticommunist organization in the West. In a personal email in 2009, Jan Kavan, who operated the Palach Press, confirmed, “My couriers smuggled out of Prague the transcript of the VONS trial which Palach Press made available to a larger number of our subscribers and friends, including to the French theatre group” (Kavan, 2 May, 2009).

The French theatre group Kavan mentions is Ariane Mnouchkine’s world-renown Theatre du Soleil, which developed a theatrical reconstruction of the trial from the materials Kavan was able to recover from Prague. In an interview with Radio Prague in 2006, Claude Confertès recounted that Mnouchkine, minutes in hand, had contacted him to invite him to work with the Theatre du Soleil in order to develop a script for theatrical dramatization from this material. Confertès would also play the role of Havel in the production he helped to pen.¹ The production, *Procès de Prague*, played at the Cartoucheries in December, 1979. Mnouchkine timed her production to coincide with the appeals hearing of the VONS trial, which occurred on December 20th, 1979. The appeals hearing lasted sixteen hours, and upon its conclusion, Dr. Marie Dojcarova, the Presiding

¹ “Ariane Mnouchkine au Théâtre du Soleil dans la Cartoucherie de Vincennes a pu avoir entre ses mains les minutes du procès du VONS, cette association de défense des personnes injustement poursuivies dont Vaclav Havel était le porte-parole. Après il a été arrêté et il s'est retrouvé en prison. On avait donc les minutes du procès où Havel a été condamné et on a fait le spectacle à partir de ce compte-rendu. . . . Alors elle m'avait demandé de tenir le rôle de Vaclav Havel. Evidemment pour moi c'était un grand honneur et on a travaillé ensemble pour présenter ce spectacle à la Cartoucherie.” (“J’ai écrit”)

Judge of the Supreme Court of the CSR, rejected the appeal. Again, outsiders who attempted to attend the hearing were denied entry.

Though the dissidents' appeal failed, the dramatization, which provided the West with its only documentary record of the proceedings and a compelling window into the grave state of repression in Czechoslovakia, moved to influence a wider European sphere through the medium of television. On Saturday, February 9, 1980, Mnouchkine and Patrice Chereau co-directed a single production of the dramatized trial for an audience of 1,000 in a "trashed" in the Dachauerstrasse, Munich (Popkin). Though Carol Rocamora claims in her book, Acts of Courage, that this was a repeat performance of the Cartoucheries production², there seem to be key differences to refute this assertion. Whereas Mnouchkine's production in Paris was in French, the Munich production was in German. Additionally, the Saturday production in Munich seems to have functioned more as a staged reading than a polished theatrical production; actors carried scripts, though only a few relied upon them.³ Finally, the casts of the two productions were different. In Munich, the trial was played by "local actors and a sprinkling of celebrities," notes Henry Popkin in his review of the production for the Sunday edition of the London *Times*. Though "most of the actors were young members of Munich's Furore company," according to Popkin, their ranks were swelled by star turns from French actors Simone Signoret and Yves Montand (playing Otta Bednarova and her husband, respectively). German director Volker Schlöndorff played a defense lawyer, and Hans Christian Blech "obviously enjoy[ed] himself" as the judge (Popkin). Expatriated Czech playwright Pavel

² In December 1979, the Cartoucherie Theater in Paris presented a dramatic recreation of the trial of Havel and the other five condemned members of VONS. This performance was repeated in Munich on February 9, 1980" (200-201).

³ Though Popkin reports that the young local actors held "scripts to which they did not refer," Signoret read her part, though "with very deliberately and with great emotional effect."

Kohout played his friend and colleague, defendant Vaclav Havel, and English playwright Tom Stoppard made a brief appearance as Havel's defense lawyer.

Mnouchkine's involvement suggests that her company's script was used – and as the first scripted dramatization to have been developed, this may have been a matter of expediency – but the necessary translation of the French script into German enabled further dissemination of the production. With a grant from Austrian Television, and the provision of a recording team *gratis*, the Munich performance was recorded and later televised in Austria and Switzerland (Süddeutsche Zeitung, PAGE; Rocamora, 201). In addition, Popkin also noted the presence of television companies from Cologne, Germany, ostensibly representing West German Broadcasting.

In 1980 in Britain, at the Orange Tree Theatre in Surrey, artistic director Sam Walters directed four productions of the trial dramatization, from a new script developed by his assistant artistic director, Anthony Clark, from the original trial minutes. The production played for four Sunday matinees and was accompanied by readings from Havel's book, *Power of the Powerless*, which had not yet been published in English translation. Increasing the profile of the production, these readings were performed by such notable British theatre artists as Tom Stoppard and Peggy Ashcroft, both also subscribers and supporters of the Jan Palach Press. In December, 1981 a version of the Mnouchkine/Chereau script (now apparently transcribed into English) was featured as the Monday play on BBC radio.

In the summer of 1982, with Havel still imprisoned, Mnouchkine hosted a night in his honour in Avignon. In the fall, the international chain of trial dramatizations crossed the Atlantic as a temporary company was organized for the sole purpose of producing an

American dramatization of the Trial of Six in New York, the awkwardly-titled *Ceremony in Bohemia* (Nordin, 4). The production ran for approximately seven weeks, from November 12, 1982 to the week of December 21-27, 1982, at the Greenwich House Theatre in New York. Jiri Fisher, a Czech defector living in the United States, was cast in the role of one of the six defendants, Vaclav Benda. According to Fisher, the “real producer” of the drama was the Jan Palach Press (Fisher, Telephone Interview).

In a telephone interview in 2009, Fisher explained that Kavan’s press provided financial backing and the artistic backbone of the production: the script, for unlike the European productions, the American company does not seem to have developed its own production script from samizdat publication of the trial minutes. Reviewing the production for the *New York Times*, Herbert Mitgang also notes that *Ceremony in Bohemia*’s program acknowledged that the performance occurred “by arrangement” with the anticommunist organization. In a personal email in 2009, Kavan recalled the interest of the “New York group,” and though he could not recall the nature of the arrangement, he supposed “we very likely sent the transcript to them as well which would have explained the remark ‘by special arrangement with Palach Press [that appears in *Ceremony in Bohemia*’s program notes].” (Mitgang, C20; Kavan).

What are we to make of these productions?

These productions serve two primary functions. First and foremost in these productions, the theatre adopts a journalistic function, replacing absent news reportage of the Trial of Six. The Czechoslovakian government so thoroughly suppressed dissidents and flows of information in the Trial of Six that the illicit minutes produced by the eleven witnesses seems to have been the only record of the events of the Trial of Six available

outside Czechoslovak borders. While the minutes were published and dispersed on a small scale by Kavan's press, the dramatizations of the trial were able to reach a much wider demographic, particularly when the Munich production's reach was amplified by the medium of television in German-speaking countries and by BBC radio in Britain. Thus, at heart, these plays were educational: they served as the media through which flows of information were facilitated. As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* review "Appeal Against Injustice" avers, Mnouchkine and Chereau's motive for reprising the Cartoucheries production was to "make [events] known beyond the Czech borders with the help of television." It is in this capacity that these productions are particularly unique: few Western theatrical productions in the media-saturated life of the late twentieth century are positioned to function as primary sources of news and information about current events.

Of course, a strong ideological component also attended production of these dramatizations. It seems unlikely that the coincidence of Mnouchkine's production with the appeals hearing in December, 1979 was merely happy accident. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* proclaimed that the 1980 Munich production not only spread news of events in Czechoslovakia to German-speaking populations, but was also meant to telegraph a message of solidarity to the suppressed Czech population, "in order to also make it clear to the Czech population that the injustice that occurred there will be noted." By 1982, the American production was able to envision itself as participating in an international movement, providing yet another link in an international chain of political performances, as Jiri Fisher recalled. For many members of the international cast of *Ceremony in Bohemia*, involvement in the production "was a matter of principle in our lives,"

according to Fisher. “It was different from any other production at that time,” he explained, “Very, very different. ... It was a political statement, very strong political statement” (Telephone Interview).

Why don't we know more about these productions?

Despite the unique function of these productions in their use of the theatrical medium to present current events and the collaborative investment of prominent European artists, very little trace of these productions remains in theatre history. In her biography of Havel's life in the theatre, Carol Rocamora affords about three sentences to briefly sketch the existence of the Paris, Munich, and American productions. Ira Bruce Nadel's biography of Tom Stoppard (Tom Stoppard: A Life) allots one sentence to note that Stoppard was involved with the Munich production. In the course of updating the official website for the Orange Tree Theatre in 2009, Sam Walter's article about the Sunday matinee productions in 1980 was removed. Mnouchkine's script seems never to have been published in any language. I have been unable to locate a recording of the West German Broadcasting company's recording of *Prager Process 79*. Without such artifacts (another curious absence) a systematic evaluation of these productions – their mission and their efficacy as part of wider political action – is difficult to construct. What reviews remain from the period vary widely: whereas the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reviews stress the importance of *Prager Proces 79*'s ideological purpose, English-language reviews (both British and American) are less effusive and more critical, tending to focus on the details of the means of production rather than the production's message or role in a rising tide of support for Havel's liberation.

The American production is particularly problematic, as it was produced in an atmosphere of secrecy that, according to contemporary reviews, distracted from and ultimately undermined the production's activist mission. The anonymity of the production company, producer, and playwright of a play which sought to promote transparency troubled critics. The production company, the Dominion Company, created for this production and ostensibly dissolved afterward, was comprised of unknown members. The producer was likewise unknown. Production materials variously listed a John/Jon Foster/Forester, an American living in Britain, as the playwright – though I can find no evidence that such an individual ever existed, nor could critics in 1982.

In conversations held in 2009, Fisher was able to provide some clues, but unfortunately no answers, to this puzzle. The producer, Fisher recalled, also performed in the production, playing Judge Antonin Kaspar. Billed as “Robert Hookway” in the program, Fisher reported that this was a pseudonym, and that this unknown man also used the name “Ray Hooker” (Mitgang; Fisher, E-mail, 24 April, 2009). Fisher also recalled that Hookway/Hooker's wife (opera singer Alexandra Hunt) was in the cast, billed under the pseudonym “Lois Rhys.” (Hunt's obituaries in 2006 painted a picture of a woman whose career was spent performing in twentieth-century Eastern European works, but did not list surviving family members or note that Hunt had ever been married.) Her sister, Kenna Hunt, took over direction of the production early in the rehearsal process. Kenna Hunt appeared under her own name in the program (Fisher, E-mail, 24 April, 2009; Fisher, E-mail, 8 May, 2009; Fisher, Personal Interview). Fisher also thought it likely that Hookway/Hooker had organized the temporary “Dominion Company.”

Fisher feels quite certain that the true playwright of *Ceremony in Bohemia* was a dissident author still residing in Czechoslovakia during the production (Fisher, E-mail, 24 April, 2009). “You have to realize,” he wrote in 2009, “that at that time Havel was in jail and whoever was involved in any anti-communist activities at home or abroad was closely watched” (Fisher, Email, 24 April, 2009). Fisher explained that Hookway/Hooker was very concerned about attracting the attention of the KGB and the SNB, and required his cast members maintain a high level of secrecy before the production opened. Fisher assumes that the security of the original author in Czechoslovakia would be at stake if his or her identity were uncovered (Telephone Interview), but this secrecy is admittedly in conflict with the play’s mission to expose secret government cover-ups.

In sum, what do we know? We know that through these productions European artists of high calibre collaborated to form an international effort to protest conditions in Czechoslovakia, and to raise awareness about violations of human rights there. These productions are uniquely situated; they demonstrate that a vital popular and didactic tradition continued to be possible for the theatre even in the media-saturated life of the late twentieth century. These productions even became institutionalized in their own right; I’ve just learned that in 1989 (ostensibly after the liberating events of November), a production of the Mnouchkine/Chereau script was remounted at the Paris Studio, and subsequently transferred to the Hammersmith Theatre in London – such a gesture suggests an act of commemoration; not only honouring the triumph of the bloodless revolution in Czechoslovakia, but also celebrating the history of the artwork itself.

Yet despite the prominence of the individuals involved, and the attractive political message, the history of these productions stands in danger of being erased by the passage

of time. Why? Why haven't the scripts of these radio, television and stage plays been published? Why does the Theatre du Soleil, which sells recordings of many of its productions, not offer the recording of the Munich production for sale? Why was the American production haunted by secrecy? Who was Robert Hookway/Ray Hooker, and why did he feel the need for such secrecy?

Ultimately, Rocamora observes, Havel became something of a liability to the Czech regime in the early 1980s, as international concern for the dissident-playwright's welfare led to increasing political and diplomatic pressure on the Czech regime for his release. These trial dramatizations participated in a vast landscape of artistic protests and hunger strikes for Havel's freedom. More information is needed in order to evaluate the place of these productions as a part of this international protest and the role of individual productions within their local contexts.