

*Suk, Jiří: Politika jako absurdní drama. Václav Havel v letech 1975-1989 [Politics as Absurd Drama. Václav Havel in 1975-1989].*

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Rightly celebrated for having written the first proper history in Czech of the 1989 revolution, Jiří Suk has now written the first scholarly reflection on the most important person in those events, Václav Havel, since his death in 2011. It is not a full biography, or even a complete account of Havel's activity in the 14 years before he became president of Czechoslovakia; it limits itself to Havel as a writer of political texts and co-organizer of groups such as Charter 77 and the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS), and ad hoc initiatives such as the "Several Sentences" petition of summer 1989. This focus relieves the author of the conventional biographer's tedious checklist – family background, formative years, lovers, and so on – and leaves aside the post-1989 years in the Castle, which would be a fit subject for a separate book. At the same time, however, this focus confines Suk to writing about Havel in his internationally best-known persona, the dissident-playwright often in prison, under house arrest or at least in real danger of persecution. What is there to say about this Havel that is not already common knowledge, even the stuff of myth?

Although the broad contours of the narrative will be familiar to anyone who has read Havel's own reminiscences (such as the book-length interviews with Karel Hvizďala) and works of previous biographers, Suk is able to make original use of new sources. Foremost among these is Havel's voluminous correspondence, either published (such as his letters to Vilém Prečan and František Janouch) or now available in archives, including the Václav Havel Library. Suk also brings in the Com-

munist regime's perspective through the files it held on Havel as an object of investigation and incarceration that were not shredded in the last days of 1989 (most of the routine surveillance records apparently were). The overall effect of these sources is to convey Havel's great skills as an organizer and coalition-builder, not least his savvy exploitation of every opening that the regime allowed, such as for the conversion of foreign earnings and donations into Tuzex coupons that became financial lifelines for dissidents. One also gets a vivid sense of Havel as a prisoner through reports filed on him by informers in his midst, which serve only to heighten one's respect for how Havel endured that ordeal.

Suk takes time to depict moments that have tended to be skipped over in a rush to more dramatic periods, such as the interval between the launch of Charter 77 and his long prison sentence two years later for his work with VONS, or his already very harried state in the months before November 1989. It is these moments that will probably give readers, foreign and Czech, the most in terms of new detail and new understanding of Havel's commitment to political action despite its impact on the artistic pursuits he may have preferred and its toll on his well-being. The account of the campaign for the presidency in December 1989, while familiar owing to Suk's earlier definitive studies and edited compilations of primary sources, is refreshing for its focus on the paradox of having to manoeuvre around an attempt by the Communist Party to shift to direct popular election, while the revolutionary movement Civic Forum preferred to stage-manage Havel's election through the discredited Communist-dominated legislature.

Born in 1966, Suk writes as a member of the generation that grew up under the post-Prague Spring "normalization" and came of age in 1989. His attitude to Havel is therefore positive and respectful, but not worshipful; this is a work of impeccable objectivity, with the messier aspects of Havel's private life neither whitewashed nor sensationalized, as they are largely irrelevant. Suk sets the tone in his introduction by defining these particular years through Northrop Frye's conception of comedy, the gist of which is that by the end of the play an aging usurper is removed by the younger man he has been impeding, often through absurd and cruel laws, and in the process society is peacefully restored to its rightful order. The hero's triumphant "anagnorisis" (recognition) is by no means assured, coming often when he is at the end of his tether, and thanks to an implausibly serendipitous turn of events. In many comedies, there is a "green world", a secluded natural setting from which will burst the concluding victory over the waste land of illegitimate power; Havel's farmhouse retreat at Hrádeček, captured in the marvellous Bohdan Holomíček photographs that illustrate this book, fit the bill perfectly.

While Suk has claimed the correct frame, he could have made much greater use of it beyond the book's introduction. In the spirit of comedy, especially of one tinged with romance and irony, there would have to be more of an appearance by the obstructive "senex iratus" himself, in this case Gustáv Husák, the leader of the Communist Party since 1969. Suk's narrative opens with Havel writing an open letter to Husák in 1975, rebuking him for the lamentable condition of Czechoslovak society seven years after the Soviet-led invasion, and ends with Havel replacing him as head of state, but otherwise Husák stays off-stage. This is regrettable, because

every comedy is enriched by the stock character of the impostor, whose own story may have elements of tragedy; Husák, after all, styled himself an intellectual (something of a lawyer, something of an historian, but neither truly) and had endured long spells as a political prisoner. He was released in 1960 only to be divorced by his first wife (the theatre director Magda Lokvencová, who died shortly after staging Sartre's "The Devil and the Good Lord"), and lose his admiring second wife, Viera, in a helicopter accident in 1977, in the midst of the regime's initial crackdown on the Charter. Husák's pursuit of the presidency in 1975 – the moment at which Suk's narrative opens, but only from Havel's perspective – involved an elaborate quasi-constitutional operation to unseat its debilitated incumbent, not unlike what Havel later had to do to gain the office. While not meant to win the audience's sympathy, "senex" characters need to be present because "the extent to which they have real power implies some criticism of the society that allows them their power" (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 165). In this regard, while starting the book with Havel's open letter makes sense, it cuts out the social critique and thoughts on power he was developing before 1975, through his plays "Conspirators" (and his interpretative essay on it, under the influence of Erich Fromm) and "The Beggar's Opera".

The starting point also cuts out an earlier open letter, to Alexander Dubček, Havel wrote in August 1969. The germ of the idea of political responsibility that Havel developed in the letter to Husák was present in the earlier one to Dubček, and Suk's book ends more with Havel's success in preventing Dubček from becoming president than in removing Husák, which was a relatively easy feat. Here too, the comedy would have benefited from the more vivid presence of Dubček the un-dissident forestry worker and pensioner in Bratislava, biding his dotage in the delusion that he would someday be called back to leadership and thus to a sort of restorative conclusion – the resumption of the interrupted Prague Spring – different from the one delivered by Havel and his Hrádeček "forest folk". In keeping both Husák and Dubček largely out of view, and barely allowing them to be heard even as "noises off", Suk succumbs to his generation's aversion to both men – a distaste that is understandable, but which needs to be overcome to do justice to the comedy.

Des Moines

Kieran Williams