

This translation of *Protest* premiered as part of Untitled Theater Company #61's Havel Festival. It played from October 30 – November 25, 2006, at the Ohio Theater in New York City. It was produced by Soho Think Tank.

PRODUCTION TEAM

DIRECTOR
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**ASSISTANT
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CAST

VANĚK.....Andy Paris
STANĚK.....Richard Toth



Richard Toth and Andy Paris.
Photo by Carl Skutsch.

Protest

(The stage represents STANĚK's study. Stage right, there is a massive writing desk with a typewriter, a telephone, a pair of glasses and piles of books and papers; behind it a large window opens into a garden. On the left, there are two comfortable seats with a small table between them. The entire back wall is taken up by a huge bookcase, which has a built-in bar and, on one of its shelves, a tape player. In the rear corner on the right, there is a door; a large surrealist painting hangs on the right wall. As the curtain rises, STANĚK and VANĚK are on stage: STANĚK is standing behind his writing desk and, with a great deal of emotion, looking at VANĚK who is standing by the door in his socks, holding a soft briefcase and eyeing STANĚK awkwardly. A short, tense pause. STANĚK then suddenly and excitedly crosses over to VANĚK, grabs him by the shoulders with both hands, gives him a friendly shake, and shouts.)

STANĚK

Vaněk! My man –

(VANĚK flashes an awkward smile. STANĚK lets go of him and controls his emotions.)

Did it take you a long time to find it?

VANĚK

Not really –

STANĚK

I forgot to tell you to look for the blooming magnolias. Beautiful, aren't they?

VANĚK

Yes –

STANĚK

In less than three years' time, I'm getting twice as many blossoms as the previous owner. Do you have any magnolias at your cottage?

VANĚK

No –

STANĚK

You must have some! I'll get you two quality plants, and I'll come and personally put them in!

(Steps to the bar and opens it.)

Cognac?

VANĚK

Better not –

STANĚK

Come on, at least a symbolic sip!

(STANĚK pours cognac into two glasses, hands one to VANĚK and lifts the other in a toast.)

To seeing each other again!

VANĚK

Cheers –

(They both take a sip; VANĚK shudders slightly.)

STANĚK

I was afraid that you won't come –

VANĚK

Why?

STANĚK

Well, you know, everything's gotten so strangely mixed up –

(Points to a seat.)

Sit down, please –

(VANĚK sits down and sets his briefcase across his lap.)

Do you know that over all those years you haven't changed much?

VANĚK

Neither have you –

STANĚK

Me? Oh, please – I'm almost fifty – the hair is turning gray – the diseases are calling – it's no longer what it used to be! And these times we're living in, they don't do much for one's health, either. How long has it been since we saw each other last?

VANĚK

I don't know –

STANĚK

Wasn't it at your last opening night?

VANĚK

That's possible –

STANĚK

That seems so unreal now! We got into a little row there –

VANĚK

Did we?

STANĚK

You took me to task for my illusions and for my unbounded optimism – I've had to admit so many times since then how right you were! Back then, I still believed that something of the ideals of my youth could still be salvaged, and I thought you an incorrigible pessimist –

VANĚK

But I am not a pessimist –

STANĚK

See, how everything has flipped now?

(Short pause.)

Are you alone?

VANĚK

How do you mean – alone?

STANĚK

Well, do they, you know –

VANĚK

Tell me?

STANĚK

Not that I give a damn – I've called you myself, after all –

VANĚK

I didn't notice anything –

STANĚK

By the way, if you ever wanted to shake them off, do you know the best place for that?

VANĚK

Where?

STANĚK

A department store. You mingle with the crowd, slip into the toilet at an unguarded moment and wait there for about two hours. They'll conclude that you'd walked out unobserved through another exit and they'll give up. Go ahead and try it sometime –

(STANĚK goes to the bar again, takes out a small bowl with pretzels and stands it before VANĚK.)

VANĚK

It's peaceful here, I imagine –

STANĚK

That's why we moved here. One simply couldn't write anything by that train station. We did the swap three years ago. For me, it's all about the garden. I'll give a tour of it later, and I'll boast a bit –

VANĚK

Do you cultivate it yourself?

STANĚK

It has become my biggest private passion. I burrow in there nearly every day. I was just rejuvenating the apricots, I've developed my own method, based on a combination of natural and artificial fertilizers and on a special technique of waxless grafting. You wouldn't believe the results I'm seeing. I'll pick out some grafts for you later –

(STANĚK steps up to the writing desk, opens a drawer and takes out a pack of foreign cigarettes, matches, and an ashtray, and sets everything on the table before VANĚK.)

Have a smoke, Ferdinand! Please!

VANĚK

Thank you –

(VANĚK lights up a cigarette; STANĚK sits down in the other chair; they both take a sip.)

STANĚK

So tell me – how is life treating you?

VANĚK

Can't complain – thank you –

STANĚK

Do they ever give you any respite at all?

VANĚK

That depends –

(Short pause.)

STANĚK

And what about in there?

VANĚK

Where?

STANĚK

Can our kind of person even survive in there at all?

VANĚK

You mean in prison? What else can he do –

STANĚK

I seem to recall you used to have trouble with hemorrhoids. That had to be horrific, with the level of hygiene in there –

VANĚK

They were giving me suppositories –

STANĚK

You should have it taken care of. I have a friend, he's our best hemorrhoidal specialist, he literally performs miracles. I'll set it up for you –

VANĚK

Thank you –

(Short pause.)

STANĚK

You know, sometimes it all seems to me as if it were only some beautiful dream: all those interesting plays – the gallery openings – the lectures – all sorts of encounters – all the endless debates about art! All that energy – hope – all those plans – gestures – ideas! All those cafes, full of friends – the wild nights on the town – the crazy morning rackets – all those party girls in our orbit! And how much work we still managed to get done in spite of it all! That's never coming back!

(Notices that VANĚK is wearing only his socks.)

My God, you didn't take your shoes off, did you?

VANĚK

Hm –

STANĚK

You really didn't have to –

VANĚK

That's all right –

(Pause; they both take a sip.)

STANĚK

Did they beat you in there?

VANĚK

No –

STANĚK

And do they beat people in there?

VANĚK

Now and then. But not the political prisoners –

STANĚK

You were in my thoughts a lot –

VANĚK

Thank you –

(Short pause.)

STANĚK

But anyway – we had no idea back then –

VANĚK

About what?

STANĚK

How far they'd go in crushing it – even you hadn't foreseen that –

VANĚK

Hm –

STANĚK

It's disgusting, my man, disgusting! This nation is ruled by its worst element – and the people? Could these be the same folks who have behaved so magnificently only a few years ago? All that horrible spinelessness now! Nothing but egotism, corruption, and fear everywhere! What did they turn us into? Are we even the same people anymore?

VANĚK

I wouldn't paint it quite as black as that –

STANĚK

Forgive me, Ferdinand, but you're not living in a normal environment – you deal only with the individuals who are able to stand up to it – you draw inspiration from each other – if only you knew what I have to deal with! Be glad you have nothing to do with it anymore! It turns one's stomach –

VANĚK

Do you mean in television?

STANĚK

In television – in film – everywhere –

VANĚK

They showed something by you on TV just recently –

STANĚK

You have no idea of what a martyrdom that was! They kept putting it off for over a year – they reshot it several times – they changed my whole beginning and the ending too – it's incredible what stupid little things they deem objectionable nowadays! Sterility and intrigues, intrigues and sterility! Often, I ask myself whether it wouldn't be better just to chuck it all – hide somewhere – grow apricots –

VANĚK

I understand –

STANĚK

But then one always comes back to the question of whether one has the right to such a getaway. What if that small difference that one can still make even today does mean something, after all – what if it does give somebody somewhere a little more strength or a little lift –

(Stands up.)

I'll bring you some slippers –

VANĚK

Don't bother –

STANĚK

Are you sure?

VANĚK

No need to, really –

(STANĚK sits back down. A pause; they both take a sip.)

STANĚK

What about drugs? Did they give you anything?

VANĚK

No –

STANĚK

No suspicious injections?

VANĚK

Only some vitamin shots –

STANĚK

There's bound to be something in the food, though –

VANĚK

If anything, it'd be a bromide against sex –

STANĚK

But they did try to break you, surely –

VANĚK

Well, that's –

STANĚK

If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to –

VANĚK

In a sense, that's the real purpose of investigative detention – to take you down a few notches –

STANĚK

And to make you talk –

VANĚK

Hm –

STANĚK

If they ever call me in for an interrogation, which is bound to happen sooner or later, do you know what I intend to do?

VANĚK

What?

STANĚK

I'll simply refuse to testify! I won't talk to them at all! That's the best strategy: at least one is sure that one didn't tell them anything one shouldn't –

VANĚK

Hm –

STANĚK

But still – you must have an incredible set of nerves – to withstand all that and still go on with what you’re doing –

VANĚK

What do you mean?

STANĚK

Well, all those protests, petitions, open letters – the fight for the human rights – I mean everything that you and your friends are doing –

VANĚK

I’m not doing all that much, really –

STANĚK

No reason to be unduly modest, Ferdinand, I’m following it all closely! If everyone would do what you’re doing, our situation would be utterly different! It’s enormously important that there are at least a few people here who are not afraid to say the truth out loud – to stand up for others – call a spade a spade! This may sound a little overblown, but it seems to me that you and your friends have taken on a nearly superhuman task: to carry the remnants of our moral consciousness across this swamp we’re living in! To be sure, it’s only a very thin thread you’re weaving, but it may be that any hope of this nation’s moral renaissance hangs on it –

VANĚK

You exaggerate –

STANĚK

That’s how I see it anyway –

VANĚK

That hope is in all the decent people —

STANĚK

But how many of those are there left? How many?

VANĚK

Enough –

STANĚK

And even so, you’re the one who’s under the microscope –

VANĚK

But doesn’t that actually make it easier for us?

STANĚK

I wouldn’t say that! The more visible you are, the greater the responsibility you bear toward those who know about you, believe in you, rely on you, and look up to you as to somebody who is, in a way, saving their own honor!

(Gets up.)

I’ll get you those slippers –

VANĚK

That really isn’t necessary –

STANĚK

My feet are freezing just looking at you –

(STANĚK exits and returns with a pair of slippers, bends down and, before VANĚK can stop him, slips the slippers on VANĚK's feet.)

VANĚK

(Embarrassed.)

Thank you –

STANĚK

Oh, please, Ferdinand! For what?

(STANĚK steps up to the bar, takes the bottle of cognac and tries to pour some in VANĚK's glass.)

VANĚK

No more for me, please –

STANĚK

Why not?

VANĚK

I'm not feeling all that great –

STANĚK

You're not used to it anymore after being in there, are you?

VANĚK

That too, but mainly it's that yesterday – coincidentally –

STANĚK

You went out last night, I understand. Listen, do you know that new wine cellar, "Chez Canine?"

VANĚK

No –

STANĚK

They have vintages from small wineries, the prices are reasonable, it's rarely crowded in there, and the ambience is truly magical, since a few decent artists were still allowed to decorate it. I recommend it without qualification! Where did you go?

VANĚK

Well, we went out a little bit with my friend Landovský¹ –

STANĚK

Oh, I see! There's no way that could have turned out all right! He's an outstanding actor, but once he starts drinking, it's over! You can handle one more glass –

(STANĚK pours cognac for VANĚK and himself, puts the bottle back in the bar and sits down. A short pause.)

And what about everything else? Are you writing?

VANĚK
I'm trying to –

STANĚK
A play?

VANĚK
An one-act –

STANĚK
Something autobiographical again?

VANĚK
In a way –

STANĚK
My wife and I have read that thing from the brewery
just the other day and we had a great time –

VANĚK
I'm glad to hear that –

STANĚK
Even though the copy we had was really poor –

VANĚK
I'm sorry to hear that –

STANĚK
It's a brilliant little piece! Though the ending struck
me as being a little unclear, it called for some less

ambiguous resolution; you do have that in you
of course!

(Pause; they both take a sip; VANĚK
shudders.)

And what about everything else? How is Pavel
Kohout?? Do you ever see him?

VANĚK

Yes –

STANĚK

Is he writing?

VANĚK

He's finishing an one-act too right now – it's
supposed to be shown with my one-act –

STANĚK

So you've joined up as authors now, too?

VANĚK

In a way –

STANĚK

Frankly, Ferdinand, somehow I can't comprehend
this particular alliance of yours. Are you sure you're
not forcing yourself into it? Because Pavel – I don't
know – but don't forget how he got started!

We're the same generation, we've gone through the same developmental arc, but he'd always been pushing it too damn far even for me! But anyway, that's your business of course, and you probably know best what you're doing –

VANĚK

Yes –

(Pause; they both take a sip; VANĚK shudders.)

STANĚK

Does your wife like gladiolas?

VANĚK

I don't know – probably – certainly –

STANĚK

Because it's a rare place where you get the kind of a choice you get here. I have them in thirty two shades of color while a hothouse will have six shades at the most. Do you think it would make your wife happy if I'd send her some bulbs?

VANĚK

Definitely –

STANĚK

There's still time enough to plant them –

(STANĚK gets up, walks over to the window, peers out of it, then paces the room briefly, then turns to VANĚK.)

Ferdinand –

VANĚK

Yes –

STANĚK

Weren't you surprised when I called you out of the blue?

VANĚK

In a way –

STANĚK

That's what I thought. I belong to those who are still somehow officially tolerated, and I understand that you'd probably want to keep a certain distance from me simply on account of this –

VANĚK

Me? No –

STANĚK

Perhaps not you personally, but I know that some of your friends think that anyone who still has any opportunities today has either completely sold out or else is lying to himself in an unforgivable way –

VANĚK

That's not what I think —

STANĚK

Even if you were to think that, I wouldn't hold it against you, because I know all about what gives rise to such prejudice –

(An awkward pause.)

Ferdinand –

VANĚK

Yes –

STANĚK

I know what a heavy price you're paying for what you're doing. But don't think that a person who has the fortune, or the misfortune, of being tolerated by the government and who, at the same time, wants to keep his conscience clear has it any easier –

VANĚK

I believe it –

STANĚK

In some sense, that person may have it even harder –

VANĚK

I understand –

STANĚK

Of course, I didn't call you in order to justify myself – I really don't have any reason to – but rather because I like you, and it would bother me if you

too were to share the prejudices that I presume your friends to hold –

VANĚK

As far as I know, no one has said anything bad about you –

STANĚK

Not even Pavel?

VANĚK

No –

(An awkward pause.)

STANĚK

Ferdinand –

VANĚK

Yes –

STANĚK

Excuse me –

(STANĚK steps up to the tape player and turns on some soft music.)

Ferdinand, does the name Javůrek mean anything to you?

VANĚK

The folk singer? I know him very well –

STANĚK

So you may already know what has happened to him –

VANĚK

Of course, they threw him in jail because, at one of his shows, he told that joke about the cop who runs into a penguin –

STANĚK

All of that was just a pretext, of course, he was pissing them off royally just by singing the way he does. It's all so cruel, senseless, base –

VANĚK

And cowardly –

STANĚK

Yes, cowardly. I tried to do something for him through some acquaintances at the city hall and in the district attorney's office, but you know how it is – they all promise to look into it and then they blow it off because they don't want to stick their necks out. It's disgusting how everybody always thinks only about his own wallet –

VANĚK

Still, it's good that you tried to do something –

STANĚK

Ferdinand, my friend, I really am not the kind of a man that the people in your circle evidently see in me!

(An awkward pause.)

But back to Javůrek –

VANĚK

Yes –

STANĚK

When the private intervention got me nowhere, it occurred to me that maybe something else should be done – you know what I mean – some protest or some petition. And that's mostly what I wanted to talk to you about, you have a lot more experience with these things than I do, of course. If a few of the better-known names, such as yours, were to be included, then they'd surely publish something abroad somewhere – which would create a certain political pressure – not that they pay all that much attention to such things – but I really don't see any other way to help that young man – not to mention Anča –

VANĚK

Anča –

STANĚK

The daughter –

VANĚK

Your daughter?

STANĚK

Yeah –

VANĚK

She –

STANĚK

I thought you knew that –

VANĚK

What?

STANĚK

She's expecting a baby with Javůrek –

VANĚK

I see, that's why –

STANĚK

Wait a minute, if you think I'm only interested in this case solely on account of family reasons –

VANĚK

I know you're not –

STANĚK

You were saying –

VANĚK

I just wanted to say that this explains to me how come you're even aware of Javůrek's case – I assume that you don't follow young folk singers – forgive me if what I've said sounded as if I think that –

STANĚK

I'd get involved in this even if somebody else were expecting a baby with him –

VANĚK

I know –

(An awkward pause.)

STANĚK

What do you think of this idea of some sort of a protest?

(VANĚK starts rifling through his briefcase, then finally pulls out some paper and hands it to STANĚK.)

VANĚK

Presumably, you have something like this in mind –

(STANĚK takes the paper from VANĚK, quickly walks over to the writing desk, finds his glasses, puts them on and proceeds to read it attentively. A longer pause; STANĚK shows clear signs of a surprise. When he finishes the text, he puts away the glasses and excitedly starts to pace the room.)

STANĚK

Well, this is wonderful! This really takes the cake! Here I am, wrestling with how to do this – I finally push myself to ask for your advice – and you have it all done already! Isn't that fabulous? No, no, I knew I had the right address!

(STANĚK returns to the writing desk, puts his glasses back on and rereads the text.)

This is precisely what I had in mind! Short – to the point – polite – and yet emphatic! You can immediately tell that this is an expert! I'd sweat all day over this and never write it this well –

(VANĚK puffs up.)

Listen, just one tiny thing: do you think it's good here at the end to use the word "despotism?" Perhaps one could find some milder synonym, it seems to be slightly off-key anyway, the whole thing is tuned so matter-of-factly that it suddenly strikes me as too emotional, don't you have that impression? Other than that, it's absolutely precise. Perhaps that second paragraph is somewhat unnecessary, it's really just diluting the content of the first paragraph, but on the other hand that notion of Javůrek's influence on the non-conformist youths is nice, that should definitely stay in. If you were to put it at the end here – instead of that despotism – that would suffice completely. But these are just some purely subjective impressions, you don't have to mind me at all, the whole thing is excellent, and it will undoubtedly serve its purpose. Again, I must tip my hat to you, Ferdinand: very few of us have such ability to nail the essence of anything so expressively while avoiding all the unnecessary invectives!

VANĚK

I doubt that –

(STANĚK puts away his glasses, walks over to VANĚK, sets his paper before him,

whereupon he sits back down in his seat and takes a sip. A short pause.)

STANĚK

It's a great feeling anyway, knowing that there's someone whom one can always turn to and depend on in a matter like this!

VANĚK

But that goes without saying –

STANĚK

For you maybe – but in the circles that I am forced to frequent, something like this isn't normal at all! What's normal there is the opposite of it: when someone gets in trouble, everyone else quickly turns his back on him and, fearing the loss of his own position, tries to demonstrate that he's never had anything to do with that individual and that he's always condemned him. But why am I telling you this – you know this better than anyone – when you were in prison, your old theater buddies were denouncing you on television! That was disgusting –

VANĚK

I'm not angry with them –

STANĚK

I am! And I've even told them so, openly! You know, a person in my situation learns to comprehend all sorts of things, and yet, forgive me, but everything

has its limit! I understand it's embarrassing for you to reproach those young men for something that has to do with you, but you have to abstract yourself away from that! If we begin to tolerate such filth, then we're in fact accepting responsibility for this whole moral mess and indirectly making it even worse! Well, am I not right?

VANĚK

Hm –

(A short pause.)

STANĚK

Have you sent it already?

VANĚK

We're still collecting signatures –

STANĚK

How many do you have so far?

VANĚK

About fifty –

STANĚK

Fifty? Not bad –

(A short pause.)

Well, then – I am a day late again –

VANĚK

Not really –

STANĚK

Everything is already rolling, isn't it –

VANĚK

Everything is still rolling –

STANĚK

All right, but now it's of course clear that this will be sent on and published. By the way, you shouldn't give it to the press agencies, they'll only put out a short report which will fall through the cracks, it's better to give it directly to some major European newspaper, that way it will get published in its entirety, the signatures and all!

VANĚK

I know –

(A short pause.)

STANĚK

Do they know about it yet?

VANĚK

Do you mean the police?

STANĚK

Yeah –

VANĚK

I don't know, probably not –

STANĚK

Listen, I don't want to tell you what to do, but I have a feeling you should close it up and send it off as soon as possible, or else they'll get a wind of it and still quash it somehow. After all, fifty signatures is enough – although it doesn't matter as much how many signatures there are as how important those names are –

VANĚK

Every signature is important –

STANĚK

Of course, but in terms of publicity abroad, it's important to have the more renown names – did Pavel sign it?

VANĚK

Yes –

STANĚK

That's good, whatever anybody may think of him, his name really does mean something abroad today!

VANĚK

For sure –

(A short pause.)

STANĚK

Listen, Ferdinand –

VANĚK

Yes –

STANĚK

I want to talk to you about another thing, too. It's a kind of a delicate matter –

VANĚK

Yes –

STANĚK

Look, I am no millionaire, but I'm not hurting financially –

VANĚK

That's good –

STANĚK

And so I thought – well, I'd like to – in your circle, there's a lot of people who have lost their jobs – would you be willing to take some money from me?

VANĚK

That's good of you – some friends really are in dire straits – you know, it's always a question of how to do it – those who are in the greatest need usually protest the loudest –

STANĚK

It isn't going to be anything miraculous, but I think that there are situations where every crown comes in handy –

(STANĚK crosses to the writing desk, pulls out a pair of banknotes, then stops himself for a beat, pulls out one more, steps up to VANĚK and hands him the money.)

VANĚK

Thank you – thank you kindly on behalf of everyone –

STANĚK

But we have to help one another! You don't have to say it's from me – I'm not building any monuments for myself – I think you already know that –

VANĚK

Yes – and thanks again –

STANĚK

Shouldn't we go and have a look at the garden?

VANĚK

Mr. Staněk –

STANĚK

Yes?

VANĚK

We'd like to send it tomorrow – I mean the Javůrek protest –

STANĚK

That's excellent! The sooner, the better –

VANĚK

So today it's still –

STANĚK

Today, before anything else, you should go home and sleep it off! Don't forget you've gone out yesterday, and you have a tough day ahead of you tomorrow –

VANĚK

I know – I only wanted to say –

STANĚK

You'd better go straight home and unhook the phone, or Landovský will call you again and there's no telling how you're going to end up!

VANĚK

Yes, I'm still supposed to see a few more people – it won't take long – I only wanted to say – if you think it might make sense – it would of course be wonderful – your "Crash" has been read by practically everybody –

STANĚK

Oh, please, Ferdinand, that was fifteen years ago!

VANĚK

But it hasn't been forgotten –

STANĚK

What would be wonderful?

VANĚK

I had the impression that you might like to –

STANĚK

What?

VANĚK

Add your name to –

STANĚK

You mean –

(Points at the paper.)

To this?

VANĚK

Hm –

STANĚK

Me?

VANĚK

I'm sorry, but it seemed to me –

(STANĚK finishes his cognac, goes to the bar, brings the bottle, pours himself another drink, puts the bottle back, has another sip, then crosses over to the window, peers out of it for a beat, and then turns to VANĚK with a smile.)

STANĚK

That really does take the cake!

VANĚK

What does?

STANĚK

Don't you feel how absurd this is? I invite you here in order to ask you to write something on Javůrek's behalf – you show me a finished text, with fifty signatures to boot – I can't believe my eyes or my ears – I am happy as little kid – I agonize over how to make sure they don't quash it – and yet the only thing that should have naturally lept into my mind never even occurs to me, which is that I should quickly sign it myself! Well, you tell me – how absurd is that?

VANĚK

Hm –

STANĚK

Ferdinand, this speaks horrifying volumes about the corner they've painted us into! Just think about it: I know it's crazy, yet I've subconsciously gotten used to the notion that there are certain specialists for the signing of protests – certain experts in solidarity – the dissidents – and that when people like myself need something done along those lines, we automatically turn to you – as if to some communal service in the matters of conscience! We are here simply to keep our mouths shut and for that the government sort of leaves us alone – and you are here to speak out for us and take a beating for it here on earth and then reap your rewards in heaven! Do you see how perverted this is?

VANĚK

Hm –

STANĚK

You see, and it's gotten to a point where even a relatively intelligent and decent person, which with your permission is how I still view myself, accepts this situation as something natural and normal! It's disgusting, disgusting, the extremes that it's gone to! You tell me, doesn't it make you want to throw up?

VANĚK

Well, I –

STANĚK

Do you think this nation will ever recover from this?

VANĚK

Hard to say –

STANĚK

What can you do? What can you do? In theory, it's clear: everybody has to start with himself. But is this a nation of Vaněk's? Not everybody is cut out to be a fighter for the human rights, it seems –

VANĚK

Of course not –

(STANĚK picks the glasses off his writing desk and steps up to VANĚK.)

STANĚK

Where is it?

VANĚK

What?

STANĚK

The sheet with the signatures –

(An awkward pause.)

VANĚK

Mr. Staněk –

STANĚK

What?

VANĚK

Forgive me, but suddenly I have a kind of a funny feeling –

STANĚK

What sort of feeling?

VANĚK

I don't know – it's really embarrassing – but I feel as if this wasn't completely fair from me –

STANĚK

What wasn't fair?

VANĚK

In a way, I've ambushed you a little bit –

STANĚK

How so?

VANĚK

I let you talk first, and then I offered it to you to sign – after you were sort of bound by what you'd said earlier –

STANĚK

Are you trying to suggest that, had I known you're collecting signatures for Javůrek, I wouldn't even have brought him up?

VANĚK

No, I'm not –

STANĚK

So all right!

VANĚK

How should I say this –

STANĚK

Or do you mind that I haven't thought of it myself?

VANĚK

It's not that –

STANĚK

So what is it?

VANĚK

It just seems to me that, had I come right out with the signatures, it would have been different – you'd have a choice –

STANĚK

And why didn't you come right out? Did you have me crossed off your list beforehand?

VANĚK

I thought that – given your situation –

STANĚK

See, now that shows what you really think of me: you presume that since I still have my things shown on television, I am no longer capable even of a simple act of solidarity!

VANĚK

You misunderstand me – I only wanted to say –

(STANĚK sits down in his seat, takes a sip and turns to VANĚK.)

STANĚK

I'll tell you something, Ferdinand. If I have subconsciously accepted the perverted notion that morality is the bailiwick of dissidents, then – without realizing it – you have accepted it also!

And that's why it hasn't even occurred to you that I could value some things more than my current social standing. What if I too want to be a free man at last, what if I too want to recover my inner integrity and throw off this burden of humiliation? Hasn't it even occurred to you that this moment may be exactly what I've been waiting for all these years? You had me filed away with all those hopeless cases whom it makes no sense to appeal to, and now – when you have realized that I too am interested in what happens to other people – now with my signature you have shown your cards, only you've immediately caught yourself again, and that's why you started to apologize to me. Do you have any idea, though, how humiliating this is for me? What if I too have been waiting for a long time for a chance to do something that will make a man out of me again, that will give me back my inner peace, imagination, humor, that will free me from all those traumas, from constantly having to run away to my apricots and magnolias? What if I too want to choose to live in truth and to return from the world of TV lies and of writing on assignment back into the world of art where I don't have to serve anybody?

VANĚK

Forgive me – I didn't mean to upset you –

(VANĚK opens his briefcase, searches through it for a beat, then pulls out the signature sheets and hands them to STANĚK. STANĚK gets up slowly and crosses to the writing desk with the sheets. He sits down, puts his glasses on and studies the sheets, nodding his approval to individual signatures. After a while, he puts

away the glasses again, stands up and starts to pace the room, and then he turns to VANĚK.)

STANĚK

Do you mind me thinking out loud?

VANĚK

Not at all –

(STANĚK takes a sip and proceeds to pace the room and talk.)

STANĚK

As far as the subjective component of this goes, I think I've already stated all the essential things: if I sign this, I'll regain – after years of constantly throwing up – my self-esteem, my lost freedom and dignity, and possibly I'll even earn a bit of respect in the eyes of those close to me. I'll rid myself of the insoluble dilemmas, that I'm constantly wrestling with, stemming from the conflict between my social position and my conscience. I'll be able to look straight into the eyes of our Anča again and of that young man when he returns. I'll pay for this by losing my job, which does not satisfy me, which in fact humiliates me, but which nevertheless provides me with a better living than I'd make if I were to work as a night watchman somewhere. My son will probably not be accepted at the university, but he'll admire me for it more than if he were admitted there partly on account of my refusal to support Javůrek whom he idolizes.

So those are the subjective implications of this matter. And now what about the objective component of it? What is going to happen if, among the signatures of a few, well-known dissidents and a few young friends of Javůrek's, contrary to all expectations and to everybody's surprise, there suddenly appears my signature – the signature of a person who has not been active as a citizen for many years? The other signatories, and many of those who don't sign anything themselves, but who internally stand with those who keep signing petitions, will of course welcome my signature with joy: it will break open the closed circle of the notorious petition writers whose signatures have long been losing value, because they no longer risk anything by signing any protests, a new name will appear, a name rare in that it hasn't been seen before and in that its bearer will pay dearly for being on the sheet. This is the objective benefit of my signing the petition. As far as the government is concerned, my signature will surprise, irritate and disquiet it precisely for the same reasons as those that will make the other signatories happy, namely because it will break through the fence that the government has been erecting around you for so long and so laboriously. As for influencing Javůrek's fate one way or the other, my signature isn't likely to have any impact at all, or if it does, then its impact will on balance be detrimental: the government will want to show that it's not panicking and that this kind of a surprise cannot upset it. Now my signature will have much more weight when they get around to deciding my own fate: they will no doubt punish me more severely than one would perhaps anticipate, because they

will want to show to all those who might follow my example in the future – namely all those who might opt for freedom and so multiply the ranks of the dissidents – how much hell there is to pay for this. They no longer fear any dissident activity inside the established ghetto, in some respect these things even play into the government's hands, but they are all the more terrified by any sign that the walls of this ghetto might be coming down. They will quickly move to stop any sign of a possible epidemic by punishing me in an exemplary fashion. The final thing to consider is what reaction might my signature provoke among those who have chosen to accommodate the government, and these are the people who matter the most, because any hope for the future now rests in the effort to awaken these people from their comatose state and to get them actively involved as citizens. I am afraid that when it comes to this most important segment of society, the reaction to my signature will be overwhelmingly negative: these people in fact quietly hate all the dissidents, viewing them as their own bad conscience and as a living reproach, while also envying the inner pride and the freedom, which the dissidents still possess and which these people have been denied. That's why they quite naturally seize every opportunity to dump on the dissidents. And my signature will afford these folks the perfect opportunity to do just that: they'll say that you, who have nothing more to lose, who have long since sunk to the bottom of the hole and who over time have even managed to make a bearable life for yourselves in there, are pulling down there yet another poor soul who has so far been muddling through, that you are taking this poor guy down

with your typical irresponsibility, just for the hell of it, just to provoke the government, just to create the false impression of increasing your ranks while completely disregarding the fact that you're taking the livelihood away from the poor guy and while not even considering how he might survive down there. I am sorry, Ferdinand, but I know the mentality of these people very well, because I have to deal with them every day, and I can tell you exactly what they will say: that I have been shamelessly used, that I am a victim of your cynical appeal to my humanism, an appeal that stoops so low it misuses my personal connection to Javůrek, which once again puts strongly in doubt whether you in fact really hold the humanitarian ideals that you keep proclaiming. I don't need to underline that it will be precisely this popular sentiment that the government and the police will nurture and fan. Other people, those who are more intelligent, may say that the novelty of seeing my signature among all those familiar names only draws attention to itself, deflecting it from the real cause, namely Javůrek, and that this begs a question: what is the real purpose of all this? Is it to help Javůrek, or is it to show that I have become a dissident? There could even appear a voice that might allege that Javůrek has been victimized by you, because his misfortune is now being used for purposes that have nothing to do with any honest interest in his own fate. All the more so that, by obtaining my signature, you have made it impossible for me to work on his behalf behind the scenes, which I might still be able to do and which might ultimately be a lot more effective way of helping him. Don't misunderstand me, Ferdinand: I don't mean to overestimate these reactions, much less to

become enslaved by them, but on the other hand, I do think that it's in the interest of our cause to take them into account. At the end of the day, this is a political decision, and a good politician has to consider all the factors that will determine the final outcome of his actions. Under these circumstances, the question is: what should I choose – the liberating inner emotion that my signature will give me, which – as we can see – will be paid for by its essentially negative objective impact, or should I opt for the more positive objective impact that this protest will have without my signature, which, however, will be paid for by the bitter realization that I am missing a chance – again and possibly for the very last time – to slip out of this bondage of humiliating compromises that has been choking me for so many years? In other words: if I truly want to behave in a moral way – and I hope you no longer doubt that this is what I want – what should I base my decision on – the merciless objective analysis or the subjective inner emotion?

VANĚK

For my part, it seems to be clear –

STANĚK

For my part also –

VANĚK

So we'll –

STANĚK

Regrettably –

VANĚK

Regrettably?

STANĚK

Did you think that –

VANĚK

Excuse me, I probably misunderstood you –

STANĚK

I am sorry if I –

VANĚK

Not at all –

STANĚK

But I really think –

VANĚK

I know –

(STANĚK takes the signature sheets from his desk and hands them to VANĚK with a smile. Awkwardly, VANĚK slips the sheets back into his briefcase, along with the protest letter. STANĚK goes to the tape player, turns it off, and sits back down. They both have a sip; VANĚK shudders. A longer, awkward pause.)

STANĚK

Are you angry?

VANĚK

No –

STANĚK

But you don't agree –

VANĚK

I respect it –

STANĚK

And what do you think?

VANĚK

What should I think?

STANĚK

That's clear of course –

VANĚK

What do you mean?

STANĚK

That when I saw all those names, I got cold feet, after all –

VANĚK

That's not what I'm thinking –

STANĚK

I can see it on you –

VANĚK

It really isn't –

STANĚK

Why don't you say the truth at least? Don't you realize that this kind dishonesty of yours is even more insulting than if you were to spell it out for me? Or do you think that I'm not even worth bothering about at all?

VANĚK

But I've said I respect your deductions –

STANĚK

I am not an idiot, Vaněk –

VANĚK

I know –

STANĚK

And that's why I know precisely what lies under that respect of yours –

VANĚK

What?

STANĚK

A feeling of moral superiority –

VANĚK

That's not true –

STANĚK

Only I'm not really certain if you – you of all people – have any right to such a pride –

VANĚK

What do you mean?

STANĚK

You know very well –

VANĚK

I don't know –

STANĚK

So should I say it?

VANĚK

Yes –

STANĚK

As far as I know, you talked in that prison more than you had to –

(VANĚK jumps up and stares in shock at STANĚK who is smiling triumphantly. A short, tense pause. Right then, the telephone rings. VANĚK collapses back into the seat; STANĚK goes to pick up the receiver. Into the phone.)

Oh, hello – what? – No! – But that – wait – yeah – yeah – and where are you? – Yeah, of course – certainly – good – yes, I'll be waiting! So long –

(STANĚK hangs up and stares straight ahead. A longer pause. VANĚK gets up irresolutely. Only then does STANĚK realize that VANĚK is still there and turns to him with irritation.)

You can burn it downstairs in the boiler –

VANĚK

What?

STANĚK

He showed up at Anča's school cafeteria a little while ago –

VANĚK

Who?

STANĚK

Javůrek, who else!

VANĚK

What? They released him? But that's wonderful! So your intervention did accomplish something, after all! Thank God we hadn't written that petition a few days earlier – they would've dug in their heels and they'd never let him go!

(For a beat, STANĚK eyes VANĚK closely, then he suddenly breaks into a smile, steps up to him with great

animation, and grabs him by the shoulders with both hands.)

STANĚK

Don't you worry about that, my friend! There's always the risk that you may do more harm than good! But if you were to take that into account, you could never do anything at all! Come on, I'll pick out those magnolia grafts for you –

(STANĚK takes VANĚK under his arm and leads him to the door. VANĚK is shuffling along in a comical gait, because the slippers are too big for his feet. The curtain falls.)

INTRODUCTION

Who is Vaněk? He is an alter ego for Václav Havel, though, like most of Havel's alter egos, he is an exaggerated reflection of one aspect of the writer. He is a theatrical construct, a foil whose own presumed moral purity inspires his fellow characters to justify their moral breaches. He is a symbol of the struggle against Czechoslovakia's Communist regime, first employed by Havel, then by Havel's friends, and even appearing in Tom Stoppard's *Rock n' Roll* (and my own *Velvet Oratorio*, written to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution).

I first encountered Vaněk during my freshman year in college. I found *Audience* in a stack of plays at the local library, and I was immediately drawn to the work. I was passingly familiar with the political situation in Czechoslovakia, but the play brought home its human dimensions to me. What struck me at the time was the empathy Havel had for the Brewmaster. The final monologue truly brought home the fact that it is not only the dissidents who struggle within a totalitarian—or rather, as Havel put it, post-totalitarian society. It is also the seeming collaborators, forced by the structure of their society into their roles.

The Vaněk plays (along with all of Havel's work) were banned in Czechoslovakia when they were first written, but that didn't prevent people from performing them in their living rooms, copying them surreptitiously as *samizdat*

(illegal, faded copies of banned work), or even recording them on vinyl. These surreptitiously distributed plays helped create Havel's reputation, which in turn made him the natural leader for the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

The plays were clearly based on events in Havel's life, including his own experience in the brewery in which he worked, once working in a theater was no longer an allowable option for him. On the underground recording of *Audience* made during the Communist years, Havel himself played Vaněk, while his friend Landovsky played the Brewmaster. One year later, Landovsky would go on to write a Vaněk play of his own.

I have directed *Audience* twice, first in 1993, then in 2006 during Untitled Theater Company #61's Havel Festival, in which we produced all of Havel's work. Though removed from the time and place that first inspired their creation, neither *Audience* nor the other plays have lost their power. They all succeed in telling a very universal story about the ways in which we are all susceptible to moral compromise, about the way our own actions can contribute to the very same problems we protest.

The most recent of Havel's Vaněk plays, *Dozens of Cousins*, is more of a short, modern epilogue to *Unveiling*. It is published here for the first time. Despite being set in the post-Communist era, we see the same tropes, the same lying and pretense that are echoes of his earlier work.

One of Havel's core ideas in his philosophical essays is the concept of "living in truth," that each small compromise we make with the truth leads to larger compromises, until it snowballs in a society-wide epidemic in which lying becomes the instinctual path. It is a danger in any society, no matter what the government. We all need a Ferdinand Vaněk to keep us honest.

Edward Einhorn

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Václav Havel was a playwright in danger of being declared a "social parasite" by the neo-Stalinist regime of Gustav Husák. His plays had been banned and, in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic of that time, you could go to prison if you did not have a stamp in the employment box of your Citizen Identification passport. Havel solved the problem by finding a job as a brewery hand. For nearly a year, he rolled barrels in the basement of a regional brewery in Trutnov and the experience profoundly changed his writing.

Havel had then recently finished a play, *Conspirators*, which he later likened to a roast that had been left in the oven for too long and dried up completely. He noted that "it probably was not by accident that I wrote a fifty-page commentary on *Conspirators* in which I had explicated and analyzed in detail all their complicated intentions and motivation." His work in the brewery, however, suddenly gave him back the refreshing existential perspective "from below, from where the absurd and grotesque dimensions of the world are always more plainly visible." And then an incident occurred on the job that gave him the inspirational seed for what is his best loved, and arguably finest, play. Called *Audience* and written quickly and easily "from the hip," this long one-act opened up a new way of working in the theater for Havel – it was his first autobiographical play.

Audience features for the first time the character of Vaněk, a former playwright and an awkward and slightly comical figure. Havel's theatrical

self-portrait is merciless and completely devoid of narcissism. Vaněk soon appears in two more one-acts written "from the hip," *Unveiling* and *Protest*, which between them completely sum up the moral dilemmas of the Czechoslovak life of that era.

The Vaněk plays were quickly recognized and produced abroad, in theaters all over the world, giving Havel an official source of income again. He could no longer be prosecuted as a "social parasite," so he quit the brewery and stopped getting up at four o'clock in the morning to earn his inspiration in the sweat of his brow.

Jan Novák