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THEATRE FACULTY

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## **Abstract**

My thesis is based on a reflection of Czech absurd theatre and my personal Turkish interpretation for the scenography of this genre. Specifically, this thesis deals with the play *Leaving* by Vaclav Havel I'm explaining and looking closely at selected elements of absurdist drama which inspired Havel and this play in particular, and has also determined my way of thinking. My goal is to find the inspiration and the processes that have influenced my studies at DAMU and culminated in my final diploma work. The aim is to understand the dramaturgic composition of the visual elements that need to be present on stage through the proposed scenography and costume design.

Moje diplomová práce je založena na reflexi českého absurdního divadla a mé osobní turecké interpretaci scénografie tohoto žánru. Ve své práci se konkrétně zabývám hrou Václava Havla Odcházení a vysvětluji a blíže zkoumám vybrané prvky absurdního dramatu, které inspirovaly Havla a tuto hru zejména, a které také určovaly směr mého myšlení. Mým cílem je najít inspiraci a procesy, které ovlivnily má studia na DAMU a kulminují v mé diplomové práci. Hlavním záměrem je porozumět dramaturgické kompozici vizuálních prvků, které musí být prezentovány na scéně prostřednictvím navrhované scénografie a kostýmů.

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## Introduction

When I started DAMU I knew that for my final thesis I wanted to work on a text, which is related to colorful Czech history and bring my own background to it. The curiosity I have for Vaclav Havel pushed me to research about him more and the similarities of his values to Atatürk lead into admiration. I was already intrigued by Czech absurdism and Havel's plays made me enjoy the genre more. It was obvious that I had to write about him and his way of theatre. The reason I picked his last play "Leaving" is that I found similar feelings in the way I was leaving Damu with Rieger, the protagonist who needs to leave being a chancellor which became his life long ago.

The thesis refers on Vaclav Havel's life, how it affected the ideas of his plays and how his way of writing evolved. The interview with Martin Vidlak, a former collaborator of Havel in his private office, helped me understand what kind of a man he is more then any other research. The text delivers information about absurdist theatre and why Leaving is an example of the genre. Then it exhibits a summary of the play and how writing of the play evolved. Later the similarities between Havel's inspirational plays, King Lear by Shakespeare and Cherry Orchard by Anton Chekov. The passage continues with the explanation why Leaving is different then Havel's other plays. Followed by character analysis to understand the story better from different aspects. The content mentions the other productions of the piece to compare my work to how it was done before. Then the artistic process, how my design for the stage emerged and technical solutions to make it happen. Furthermore my inspiration for the costumes of the characters and finally storyboard photos of the important scenes in the play and how it evolves together with the stage.

## **Havel A Life**

Vaclav Havel was born in Prague in 1936; he was a philosopher, writer, protester and statesman. In Czech literature he is known by his essays, plays and memoirs. From 1989 to 1992 he served as the last president of Czechoslovakia and then (1993-2003) the first president of Czech Republic. Havel's Civic Forum Party played a major role in Velvet Revolution that toppled communism in Czechoslovakia.

Because of his bourgeois background his education was limited. He grew up in a well-known, wealthy and intellectual family, which was involved, in political and cultural events. He gained his attachment to humanitarian values of Czech culture from his family. In the early 50's he entered an internship as a chemical laboratory assistant and took evening classes to be able to complete his secondary education. For political reasons he was not accepted to any school with a humanities program so he had to study economy at Czech Technical University but dropped it after two years.

After completing his military services he got married to Olga Splichalova who was interested in drama and acting, she performed in several amateur theatre plays but she had to work in different jobs all her life. She was born in Zizkov coming from a worker family; they had different backgrounds but it was a love marriage. Havel wanted to be able to create within his intellectual line so he had to adapt himself according to restrictions imposed on him. The first job he could find in theatre world was as a stagehand at Divadlo ABC and then Divadlo Na Zbradli, in the mean time he was studying dramatic arts by correspondence at DAMU. His own, first, full-length play was "The Garden Party", which underlines his absurdist style to critique communism. The

first drafts started as adventures of a young man who makes it big in the world , he was working on it with Ivan Vyskocil who brought the idea about networking, connections, patronage and career to the text. The text was called “Jeho Den” (His Day) and it was a crazy comedy about a family pinning its hopes for the future of their promising son. If the text was produced as it was, it would probably be another musical comedy but Havel knew that the play lacked structure and rhythm. He experimented with a building cacophony - loud confusing disagreeable sounds, of unlikely dialogues that became a trademark of his later plays. In the later drafts he exposed the psychological traits of the characters, suppressed the real life aspects of the story and came up with a series of largely meaningless, mechanically repeating patterns.

Havel’s second play at The Balustrade was “The Memorandum” which has a darker, more destructive subtext than The Garden Party. This was the first time that he posed the question of a passive participation in evil, one that he would return to again many times. The style he developed for The Memorandum was one of lines of dialogues which are hard to differentiate whether it is meant seriously or as distortion, again this device was used by Havel repeatedly in future plays. He was influenced by existentialist philosophy and its concepts of alienation, social isolation and depersonalization. In Havel’s case this suspecting and avoiding the others was driven from the totalitarian control of the society. The message of “The Memorandum” reflects both the spirit of the times and Havel’s personal politics. His plays are an accurate record of Czech life in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The third play he wrote was the “Increased Difficulty of Concentration”. After performing his first three plays at the Theater of Balustrade in Prague, “The

Memorandum” was produced at the Public Theatre of New York (1968), which helped him to create his reputation overseas.

He participated in The Prague Spring in 1968 by providing an on-air narrative via Radio Free Czechoslovakia station - blacklisted, his plays were banned in his own country, The Public Theatre of New York continued to produce his plays but he was not able to leave the country and see them. After the invasion of Czechoslovakia he was more politically active. His political philosophy was anti-consumerism, humanitarianism, environmentalism, civil-activism and direct democracy, which are easy to spot in his last play ” The “Leaving”. He described his most serious mistake as being that he didn’t promote his vision of a humanistic and moral society energetically enough.

Lacking money, he had to take a job in a brewery; an experience he wrote about in his play “The Audience”. Ferdinand Vanek the main character of “The Audience” was a stand in for Havel and the character recurs in other plays such as “Protest”, “Unveiling” and “Dozens of Cousins”. Once again he showed his ability at absurdist writing by Vanek plays; they were; short, funny and brutalizing bits of anti-illogical with illogical overtones about the dehumanization of artists. “The Audience” along with two other Vanek plays were distributed by Samizdat; which was a magazine of dissident activity across the soviet bloc, individuals reproduced the censored publications by hand and passed them from reader to reader, which underlined Havel’s reputation of being a protester. This reputation was strengthened by the publication of the “Charter 77 Manifesto” written as a response to the imprisonment of the Czech psychedelic rock band “The Plastic People of the Universe”, he also wrote many other influential essays on the nature of totalitarianism. The most famous essay written by him is the “power of

the powerless” describing how citizens were forced to live within a lie under a communist regime. He was interested in how power works to shape both the individual and his legacy; “The world twists us into unrecognizable shapes that our children sadly, come to regard us the truth”. His political activities and beliefs resulted in multiple stays in prison. His longest stay in prison is documented by his letters to his wife published later as “Letters to Olga” (Published in 1983).

In 1989 Havel became the president of Czechoslovakia while he was the leader of the Civic Forum and soon after his election he was awarded the Prize for Freedom of the Liberal International. In 1990 Czechoslovakia had the first free elections in 44 years and the Civic Forum was elected with Slovak partner Public Against Violence with the highest popular vote share recorded in the country, Havel maintained his presidency. Despite the tension between Czechs and Slovaks during 1992 Havel supported the detainment of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic He pursued reelection and failed to get majority because of the lack of support from Slovak deputies. The biggest political party, the Civic Democratic Party, declared that they were not going to support anyone else. After the Slovaks declared their independence Havel resigned as president saying that he wouldn’t preside over the country’s break-up. After the Czech Republic was created he stood for election (1993) and won. As one of the first acts of his presidency he released political prisoners and many others who may have been falsely imprisoned, as he didn’t trust the judgment of the communist courts. This action led to an increase in the crime rate; the total number of crimes and murder were doubled. The first five-year term of the Czech presidency was not only Havel’s struggle for the preservation of his political vision with the new balance of power in the country, but heralded more serious personal upheavals.

After thirteen years in politics, his departure from the office and Klaus's election to the presidency clearly marked the end of an era. Even though he needed a long rest his diary was full with appointments that he hadn't had time for during his presidency and with his brain full of ideas that he had been nursing for years, waiting for the moment of liberation. Being a productive individual brought him the need to hand on his legacy; dramatic works, dozens of essays, hundreds of shorter text and hundreds of speeches, and little of it would make much sense without the context of the radical historical changes in which he had played such an important role. His first project after he was paroled was a presidential library; a dedicated institution which would collect and analyze all this material and make it accessible to the public. In July 2004, Vaclav Havel Library started its activities. The second task for Havel was to write down all the ideas that he had been keeping for when he had free time. It was impossible for him to concentrate while still in the office, so he retired to the cottage house at Lany, isolated from the rest of the world and came back with a largely finished text named "Leaving".

**Interview with Martin Vidlak; former secretary and a friend  
Vaclav Havel Library  
22.03.2016**

- "I'm not all certain that theatre is my very own mission, I certainly don't feel like a professional theatre person." "I am not, never have been, nor do I want to become a politician, a revolutionary or a professional dissident." Was he a person who felt like he didn't belong to any title and had a low opinion of himself?

It was extraordinary that he could have such worldwide fame as a politician and also be such a well renowned playwright, being successful in both roles.

- "The composition and development of motifs, the way they are arranged, repeated, combined... whether they are more the result of conscious effort or merely of a sensitivity to the matter are what make a play a play." Was he an obsessed structured person in his personal life?

(Laughs) he was really obsessed.

- I believe that with the loss of God, man has lost system of coordinates to which he could always relate anything, chiefly himself. His world and his personality gradually began to break up and when this happened man began to loose his identity. Along with a sense of his own continuity, a hierarchy of experience and values and so on." I know that religion is not a big issue in Czech Republic was he a believer or not? Did it affect his decisions and writings?

He was a catholic with a universal view, he respected every religion because he knew that all religions have similar ideas and values.

-Largo Desaloto, Leaving, Temptation and Urban Rehabilitation; less abstract patterning in plotting, characterization and dialogue, more psychological emotive states and more direct less camouflaged confrontation of ethical and moral issues in contemporary society. They all leave a more depressing impression of the human condition. Is there a reason in his personal life to change his absurdist style and become more realistic?

He was the first writer of Czech absurdist theatre, but later he was inspired by the detailed work of classic playwrights such as Ibsen and Chekhov. His plays were not even absurd, they were all drawn from real life. Four years in prison left him with a feeling of difficult post psychological syndrome. During the period of being active in politics everyone wanted to know about him and that was when he wrote “Largo Desaloto” and “Temptation”. Also post president syndrome affected his way of writing.

-Why did he have a break from theatre for a while before writing “Leaving”?

While he was politically active he lacked time for his creative pursuits, even though he started writing “Leaving” in 1988 he wouldn’t finish it until after his presidency.

-Leaving is a play about the final failure and deep disappointment. A final leaving but it is also general experience of the misery in today’s political world and the need for cleansing laughter that helps to overcome it. Did he always find a way to laugh at bad things around him? Was he an optimist?

Not a real optimist but he always had hope. He was depressed of course that’s why he used to mix humor to produce his tragicomedic plays.

- During the interview he gave at the Wilma Theatre/Philadelphia he underlines that he is not (the character) Rieger and that "Leaving" is not an autobiographical play. But I'm sure people around him influenced the characters. Is Klein a political figure?

Of course there were personal aspects of characters, Klein was influenced from real life but he wasn't a real figure he was combination of different people. Rieger is not Vaclav himself but in every play autobiography exists.

-Vlasta fails Rieger when the family is in need, as did King Lear's daughters fail him. Was the reason that he never had children for fear of disappointment?

It wasn't necessary for him to have a child in order to be a creator. He respected every personality and had lot of young friends, but even though there were lots of kids in the cottage, he didn't know how to communicate with them.

-What did he want to show by adding Albin to the play - a man dominated by his wife?

To underline the relationship of the powerful and powerless.

-Dick and Bob are misleading and cheating characters, did he have bad memories of journalists?

Normally he had many journalist friends but after marriage to his second wife, there were lot of tabloid news about him, and he hated his private life to be in front of people. That's why he started to co-operate with reporters from different countries.

-Did he feel vulnerable like Rieger after retiring from politics?

He was afraid to finish his political work because he was scared for the country's future and that he knew he couldn't be there for the Czech Republic. On the other hand he wanted to return to writing plays so he was glad to have free time.

- Did he really have concrete ideas about what he wanted on the stage?

Was it hard to work with him as a scenographer?

Yes for sure detail was important to him and he expected respect for his ideas from the scenographer.

## **Absurdist Theatre**

### **Why “Leaving” is an absurdist play:**

The theatre of the absurd is a selection of plays written in absurdist fiction by several of playwrights in Europe around late 1950's and a style of theatre, which has evolved by their work. Mainly it is about what happens when human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore the communication breaks down. Even though there is a logical construction and arguments they lead to irrational and illogical speeches and mostly silence in conclusion. The absurd in these plays takes the form of man's reaction to a world without meaning or man as a puppet controlled by invisible outside forces which is the case with “Leaving”. In the play it is mentioned that the government will kick Rieger and his family out from the villa, which is the problem they face all together, because he already fulfilled his duty.

The main characteristics of absurdist theatre, which we can see in this play, are that it is a broad comedy mixed with terrific happenings, characters caught in hopeless situations and forced to do repetitive or meaningless actions and dialogues full of clichés, wordplay and nonsense. “Leaving” is not written by traditional character development instead what you as a reader come across with is stereotypical or flat character types, which are lost and floating in an ununderstanding universe and speaking only clichés.

The play also fits absurdist explanation with the language it has; even though it is nonsense it is still naturalistic. Lot of misunderstandings between characters but

rhythmical and has comedic playfulness. Characters go through routine dialogues full of banality without communicating actually. When Rieger is giving an interview to the journalists from keyhole he tries to talk about his own perception to politics; he still feels like he has a lot to offer to the public but the newspaper is more interested about his personal life and what will happen to the villa because he is retired now. The journalist Dick acts like he listens to Rieger but still asks irrelevant questions about his intimate life.

Main characteristics of an absurdist play's plot are all about absence, emptiness and unresolved mysteries. The aspect we came across with in "the leaving" is; emptiness of the characters, after a major change in their life they don't know how to adapt. Rieger doesn't know how to be a retired man, Irena doesn't know how to be a lover of someone without a title, especially Hanus and Victor who are former secretaries are trying to accommodate with the situation by dividing what belongs to them personally and to the government even though they have been using those for years.

## Leaving

*Leaving* is an original and humorous story about the departure and arrival of a second power in politics. The play is a typical Havel play in that the protagonist is a man under pressure, surrounded by hangers-on who want a piece from him, or competitors who wish to sabotage him. The protagonist usually has a problematic relationship with women, and there is usually a villain intent on bringing him down. In the end, however, what brings the hero down is not an honorable defeat in battle, but the twisted logic he uses to justify his own surrender to a lie. On the surface, there is nothing formally absurd about how the play presents its straightforward story, but Havel disrupts the story with absurdist elements, such as sudden, breaking quotations from Chekhov's *"The Cherry Orchard"*, or Shakespeare's *"King Lear"*, or moments of phantasmagoria when he scrambles the dialogue in scenes that seem like the sudden onset of a nightmare. He also plays fast and loose with time, for if we are to believe Rieger's name-dropping, he must have been in power since World War Two. The most interesting absurdist element in *Leaving* is the way Havel uses the authorial "voice" to interrupt the action. In his memoirs, Havel dreamed of discovering a way of writing a play in which he could reveal to the audience his private intentions and thoughts as he wrote it. The "Voice" in *Leaving* is the realization of that dream.

Grotesque and ironic reflection of changes of political power set in the garden of a governmental villa; *Leaving* is the story of a turning point in a person's life. Dr. Vilém Rieger was a Chancellor for many years; however, he recently was ousted from his office and he evidently is unable to cope with this on the inside. Although he endeavors to not let it show, in essence his world has collapsed. He must move out of the

government's villa, which has over the years become his home, and he must undergo undignified procedures separating the government's things from his private things. This is where a comedy of manners turns into a tragedy of identity. No matter how moral, humble and immune to the temptations of power you are, once you have had it, it's impossible ever to be free of it. Simultaneously - and primarily - he must live through the falling apart of his surroundings, his "court", and realize how little he knew it: his groveling secretary turns out to be a snake, a nasty bureaucrat the only one who looks like faithful to him, Rieger's older daughter slowly backs away from her original intention to have her father live with her, the younger daughter, who appeared to be only a kind of family ornament, on the contrary is the only one who looks for a realistic way out. Rieger receives an offer from higher up, an offer that would allow him to stay in the villa if he publicly supports his cynical adversary.

This offer is backed by blackmail: his enemies, as it turns out, have acquired some incriminating letters, which they are prepared to offer to a tabloid newspaper. The broken Rieger eventually capitulates totally: he accepts the humiliating position of advisor to his former secretary-traitor and he even rationally justifies this move.

The play is not just about the leaving of one politician from his office, but more generally about the phenomenon of change itself: every second something comes and something irretrievably goes. We do not know from where everything emerges and know even less to where it disappears. The play grows out of the archetypal experience of decomposition of the world, values, loss of confidence, reflected in the experience ruler who extends his court. The argument of the play in

Havel's words explained in the book "To the Castle and Back": "The theme of moving, of leave-taking, and of cutting down was something I may have brought upon myself: the play I've long been preparing to write will work with these themes; it will attempt to allude to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, to Beckett's *Endgame*, and above all to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It will be about a statesman who has lost his position and has to move out of the official residence provided by the state; an orchard surrounds him, and he can't come to accept it. The loss of his position and all that pertains to it means the collapse of his world. He goes slightly mad from it all. (The interesting thing is that I started writing this play before the revolution, that is, sixteen years ago, and then I tossed the manuscript away in the belief that after all the changes taking place, the theme would no longer interest me.... But it's far more probable that, having thought about it for so long, I'll never get it written, and then someone else – most probably my longtime friend and colleague Tom Stoppard – will write a play about a writer who prepared his whole life to write the most important play of his life and, of course, he never writes it." This is in fact a classic theme of dramas: the end. The end of a man. The end of an era. The end of a community. The end of love.

## **The evolution of the play:**

For Havel, writing “Leaving” had been a matter of delayed gratification for a long time. First conceived in 1987 as a variation on Shakespeare’s King Lear in a milder Chekhovian tonality.

Summer of 1989 – Havel wrote the first version of Leaving

December 1989 – Havel was elected as president of Czechoslovakia

January 1993 – Havel was elected as president of the Republic

February 2003 – After leaving politics, Havel speaks of the intension to write a new play.

October 2006–March 2007 – Havel completes writing Leaving

May 2007 – Narodni Divadlo announces the launch for Havel’s new play for June

August 2007 – Havel resigns at Narodni Divadlo not happy with the cast of Irena he wants Dagmar to act the role

September 2007 – Havel signs an agreement to launch the play with Divadlo na Vinohradec

December 2007 – Theatre of Vinohrady resigns the agreement due to financial and technical demands Havel then announces the launch of the play in Archa Divadlo

April 2008 – Director David Radok is being examined

7 May 2008 – Dagmar Havel resigns the role of Irena due to health reasons

22 May 2008 – World premier at Archa Divadlo (with Susan Stivínová as Irena)

## Inspirational Plays

### The Cherry Orchard & King Lear

<sup>1</sup>“Watching his wife Dagmar play Madame Ranevskaya in the Vinohrady theatre, he arrived at the idea to superimpose the King Lear theme on the layout of Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard.” Anton Chekhov’s “The Cherry Orchard” concerns an aristocratic Russian woman, who lost her son and husband, then turns back to her family estate after many years living in France with her lover. The family estate has a massive and well-known cherry orchard and it is about to be auctioned to pay the mortgage, even though there are lot of options to save the estate the family talks about how sad they are to loose the orchard but don’t do anything about it and at the end the estate is sold in the auction to the son of a former serf. The story presents themes of cultural uselessness, attempts of the aristocracy to maintain the status and bourgeoisie to find meaning in the new world and also the rise of the middle class after the abolition of serfdom.

Each character has their own perspective and there is a rough division between old and the young thus reinforcing the orchard’s symbolic identification with the past. As in “Leaving”, the orchard symbolizes Rieger’s powerful life as a politician which he is about to loose. The old man servant in “The Cherry Orchard” functions as the plays human connection to the past; like Oswald in “Leaving”, the way Rieger asks how he slept and cares about him shows that he has been there for him for a long time. At the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Zantovsky. “Havel A Life”, Atlantic Books, 2014, pp.509

end of "The Cherry Orchard" the family leaves to the sound of orchard being cut down like the ending of "Leaving".

Shakespeare's "King Lear" concerns the ageing King of Britain who decides to divide his lands among his three daughters by setting them a test. He asks them how much they love him and Goneril and Regan, the eldest daughters, come up with exaggerated fancy words, but his youngest and favorite daughter Cordelia can't come up with an answer, so she says that there are no words which can describe her love towards her father. Lear disowns her but the King of France still wants to marry her even without her land and they leave for France without her father's blessings. Lear quickly understands that he made a mistake with Goneril and Regan sabotaging his little authority. Lear goes insane slowly not being able to believe his beloved daughters betrayed him and flees from both of his daughters houses in a heavy thunderstorm accompanied by his fool. Cordelia comes with the French army to save him, but an English army led by Edmund - who tricks his own father against his brother and is romantically involved with Goneril and Regan for his own interests - defeats the French and captures Lear and Cordelia. Edmund's betrayal of Cordelia leads her to a needless execution in prison and Lear finally dies out of grief.

"King Lear" demonstrates how vulnerable parents and nobleman to the immoral children and thus how fragile they are, like in "Leaving", Rieger doesn't says a word and thinks about signing his own will even though he feels like he has way much more to offer to political world, he doesn't even feels like retrying but he doesn't wants to hurt his daughter Vlasta, even though it means keeping Irena out of the picture. Vlasta betrays her father again by changing her mind about giving them a place to stay when they are

kicked out from the villa; she is never there for her own family when they are in need. "King Lear" is about political authority as much as it's about family dynamics. He is not only a father but also a King and finally the metaphorical chaos also symbolizes the political disorder that has swallowed up Lear's Britain. Like the corruption of new politics showed by Patrick Klein in "Leaving". The thunderstorm Lear gets lost in symbolizes Lear's inner chaos; it is a physical embodiment of Lear's internal confusion. At the same time the power of nature, which forces the powerless King to recognize his own mortality and human weakness, creates a sense of humbleness in him for the first time. The first storm in "Leaving" comes directly after Rieger learns that he is going to lose the villa which symbolizes his power in politics it is a metaphorical thunderstorm of his inner anxiousness. Then the storm comes again when Rieger is giving the King Lear speech in the fourth act which is a symbolic speech of losing power and insanity associated with both disorder and hidden wisdom.

## Why “Leaving” is different to his other plays.

He used to promise to Timothy Garton Ash (the Guardian journalist) that he would write a play about the comedy of high politics and something about the powerlessness of the powerful. “Leaving” is characteristically an ironical play about the loss of power and the effort to gain it back, a tragicomedy that draws on his experiences as president presented by a chancellor leaving his past and trying to get used to the new government whose ideas and values he doesn’t share. Even though he insists that it is not an autobiographical play it comes a lot from his own life and experiences as he admits on an interview with <sup>2</sup>Radio Liberty; “It hasn’t changed a great deal from the original idea, which came to me 22 years ago. I enriched it only with some details from my later experience. For example, the issue of dividing possessions into government-issued and personal. That’s a somewhat obscure procedure I went through at the Prague Castle when I was stepping down as president. I’ve used those kinds of minor experiences, although the main theme is from an earlier date.” that is why there is more backstory included which differentiates the play from the others. Underlined by New York Times journalist <sup>3</sup>Charles Isherwood; “Unfortunately, “Leaving” would need more than the brief coda that follows to qualify as complete, or, in any case, satisfactory. An aimless, mostly leaden satire of contemporary politics, Mr. Havel’s first new play in two decades is little more than a series of ambling, comic scenes decorated with winking allusions to previous theatrical masterpieces, and further tricked out with a meta-theatrical conceit that might not have been fresh even when Mr. Havel put down his playwriting pen in 1989 to become a leader of the Velvet Revolution.”

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.rferl.org/a/havel\\_leaving/2302488.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/havel_leaving/2302488.html)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/09/theater/reviews/09leaving.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/09/theater/reviews/09leaving.html?_r=0)

Vaclav Havel uses his own memories in his plays in an absurdist way mainly to critique communism as in *The Garden Party* or *The Memorandum* or to give us a sight from his life like *the Audience* or *Largo Desaloto*, which leads him to create characters influenced by his own life. Characters in “*Leaving*” are exaggerated realistic figures from his life. That’s why we know more about them, their personalities, against his other plays where characters are only there to serve the intersection he is showing to the reader.

Despite his other plays “*Leaving*” has a storyline therefore an ending. The only play by Havel, which informs us about how the family ended up in this situation and what will happen in the future after the story is over.

## Character Analysis

In every play Havel writes, there are some personal hints and memories of him. Also the characters are always built up according to people around him but he insists that “Leaving” is not an autobiographical play. His close friend a Canadian who translates Havel’s works and a member of “Plastic People of the Universe” - <sup>4</sup>Paul Wilson mentions at an interview: “It would be odd if a person as complex as Havel did not project some aspects of his nature into the characters in his play. It doesn’t make sense, though, to say that Rieger is either like Havel, or his “exact opposite.” Rieger obviously clings to some of the trappings of his former power: the play, after all, centers around what it to become of the presidential villa, which Rieger is loathe to leave. I’ve never seen any evidence that Havel clung to power or the trappings of power or regretted that his time in office was over. On the contrary, I think he was glad when his term was over.”

The protagonist of the play; Vilem Rieger, is an elegant greying man in his late fifties, a former Chancellor who, newly retired, learns that he is going to loose his villa because of that. He is a solitaire, who stands aside, a little bit in his own world; there is always a distance between him and the other characters. He is not ready to loose his power yet, he thinks that he still has a lot to offer in politics and wants people to still be interested in his ideas; commenting on the first interview he has after his retirement, <sup>5</sup>Rieger: “A network of think-tanks. Did you notice that they completely forgot to ask about the economy or social policies? Or about education, for that

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with translator Paul Wilson. (2017, January 24 ).  
<http://wilmatheater.org/blog/interview-translator-paul-wilson>

<sup>5</sup> Vaclav Havel, “*The Leaving*”, faber and faber, 2008, Act1, pp.14

matter....” He is not satisfied by Dick’s questions being only about his social life. He lives in the memories of his recent power. It is clear from his last speech that he is an honest man who wants the best for his country and people; <sup>6</sup>Rieger: “...to demonstrate clearly to everyone that serving my country is of greater importance to me than my personal prestige. I have been guided by that principle, sir all my life and I don’t see why I should back away from it now just because of the trivial concern that I would, officially, hold a somewhat inferior position to the one I have held for so long...” he is not ready to be corrupted for more power. Knobloch - the gardener is Rieger’s only connection to the outside world. Even though Rieger acts like he is the man of the common people he doesn’t know what’s going on in the outside world as the family only receives yesterday’s newspaper, this can be a commentary to show how politicians are, even though they come from a good home and want to help others, they just don’t know what kind of real problems the people are going through! Rieger always asks the gardener if people are still talking about him and what are they saying and respects his words; he firstly believes in the situation of losing the villa when he hears from him. Michael Zantovsky described <sup>7</sup>Rieger as; “not entirely an admirable character. He is as vain and self-centered as any politician. He postures, he cheats on his wife, and he is perfectly incapable of weaning himself from power. When at the end he is offered the humiliating position of an adviser to an adviser to an adviser of an adviser, he accepts it in a tragicomic rationalization, which Havel had widely used to illustrate the moral capitulations of his heroes in his plays from the Communist era.” Besides all Havel’s insistence Rieger was nevertheless interpreted as being based on Vaclav Havel after his retirement.

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<sup>6</sup> Vaclav Havel, *“The Leaving”*, faber and faber, 2008, Act5, pp.76-77

<sup>7</sup> Michael Zantovsky. *“Havel A Life”*, Atlantic Books, 2014, pp.511

His long time companion Irena, played by Dagmar in the movie Havel's second wife was interpreted as her from the beginning by the audience. Michael Zantovsky in "Havel A Life" describes <sup>8</sup>Dagmar as "She was consummate actress, thriving on the limelight and the attentions of spectators and admirers. She apparently was their future together as an integral part of a celebrity lifestyle, spent jet-setting between film festivals, beauty pageants and royal households, with some charitable activities thrown in. She also developed a taste for associating with the very rich. Soon billionaires vied for her favor and attention with mere millionaires providing expensive gifts, foreign trips and rides in private jets." In the play they have been living together for a long period. She is not that welcomed by Vlasta but they get along well with grandma. She loves to control the situations in an obsessed way and has really specific wants, especially when she interacts with Oswald; <sup>9</sup>Irena: "Monika, would you mind looking for Oswald? When you find him, tell him, please, to bring me three baskets with napkins and several fruit knives and some watered down beer for Albin, and then to keep an eye on those potatoes. When they're ready he should drain them nicely, then let them dry and cool down, and then peel them. But he shouldn't use a regular potato-peeler! He just has to remove the skin with a little knife." She is trying hard to be perfect and also sees her status elevated because of Rieger, she loves to talk about her powerful relations and when the journalists are visiting she mentions, <sup>10</sup>Irena: "I brought this champagne back fifteen years ago from Paris. We bought it on the Boulevard St Germain with Jack Lang. He loved this champagne, especially the 1915-October cru." she acts and dresses like a First Lady.

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Zantovsky. "Havel A Life", Atlantic Books, 2014, pp.503

<sup>9</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act1, pp.15

<sup>10</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act3, pp.43

Even though she cares about Rieger, she loves to be the center of the attention in Act3 pg.45, when Rieger is still trying to talk about politics to the journalists Irena is having fun with all the interest focused on her and talking about their relationship with private details in front of the cameras and it disturbs Rieger. She is in conflict with herself though she loves and admires Rieger and forgives him for every mistake for many years but she complains about the things she had to give up to be with him - her career as a make-up artist, her flat or her friends. After catching Rieger cheating on her; <sup>11</sup>Irena: "I'm such a goose. What have I ever got from you? Why do I always forgive you for everything? Why have I not accomplished anything today? Why am I ruining my life with you..." she is not sure about if she did the right thing to adapt her life according to Rieger. Even though she can forgive cheating and other things which affects her own pride, she cares about Rieger's pride more because she is concerned about how people think of herself as Rieger's partner. When Rieger thinks about backing up the new deputy not to loose the villa, she looses her respect for him, <sup>12</sup>Irena: "You're lying to yourself, more than you have to and more than I can bear. I'd happily help you spread manure in the village and eat humble pie if I thought that you had a backbone and I had a reason to respect you." And leaves for good. Irena's helper; Monika, who acts like a friend; even Rieger and Irena introduces her as a friend actually she doesn't have any point of view of her own and just agrees with everything Irena says. She is loyal to her and cares about her and her relationship. When Irena tries to jump off a cliff she informs Rieger directly.

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<sup>11</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act5, pp.64

<sup>12</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act5, pp.77

Rieger's mother; grandma thinks outside of reality, her concerns are insignificant when really hard situations are happening to the family. She asks irrelevant questions in serious moments which breaks the tension and makes it absurd; When Vlasta is trying to start the conversation about Rieger's will, <sup>13</sup>grandma: "why were the large potatoes not properly cooked and the small ones were overcooked?" Also she doesn't know when to stop in Act4 pg.52, when Irena leaves after Rieger's cheating, grandma constantly asks about if she left for good or when she'll be back or should she start the dinner preparations without her and for Rieger it is annoying to hear all these questions that he isn't concerned about and doesn't know the answers to. She is an exaggeration of motherly impulse.

Rieger's elder daughter Vlasta and her husband Albin are the characters who are the least affected by the problems of the family. Vlasta is a really dominant and selfish character. She promises a place to stay for the family till they figure out what to do, then changes her mind and doesn't help her own family when they are in need of finding a place to stay, <sup>14</sup>Vlasta: "But Grandma, whatever gave you that idea? You wouldn't all fit in! and Albin and I have our own lives to live; we haven't time to listen to all your questions." And yet she wants Rieger to sign his own will, Rieger is not even ready to retire and Vlasta doesn't care about how her Dad feels, her only concern is who will own what. She cuts Irena from every right she has in the will she prepared, she doesn't care about Irena at all. In Act4 pg.55 the moment she hears that Irena tried to jump off a cliff she still continues to talk about how her flat is too small to fit all the family. Vlasta can be a reference to how irritated Havel was after his retirement, with the materialistic,

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<sup>13</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act2, pp.19

<sup>14</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act4, pp.55

insular and petty-minded mood that seemed to be prevailing in the nation. Albin is a weak character who doesn't say much and act like how Vlasta wants. The only time Albin talks; Albin: "That was one of the finest, most balanced speeches I've ever heard you give, Vilem. You overstated nothing, and understated nothing either. Am I not right Vlasta?" Vlasta: "Albin you talk too much." Even though it is a supportive thought for Rieger. Because he represses all his thoughts and emotions in Act5 pg.63, he goes wild and expresses himself by running around naked in the cold. These are the best examples in the play of the relationship of the powerful and powerless.

His younger daughter; Zuzanna, is in her own world. She is alienated from her own family and not aware what is going on in the villa. The only time she informs Rieger about her life, is in Act5 pg.66, when she is leaving to be with her French boyfriend and when Rieger gets surprised with this information she underlines that there are lot of things her Dad doesn't knows about her. She chats with her friends all day and sits in front of her laptop without paying any attention to her family she is the best commentary for teenagers in these days.

Rieger's former secretary, Hanus and his former secretary, Victor are two different characters. It is obvious that Hanus has been loyal to Rieger and he cares about his thoughts, when he founds the Gandhi bust trying to separate the stuff owned by the government and the family because he knows that Rieger cares about the bust,  
<sup>15</sup>Hanus: "I'll leave it with you. I'll take the blame for it. Let them lock me up if they want. Morally it belongs to you." He also asks irrelevant questions in critical moments

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<sup>15</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act4, pp.57

like the grandma in Act.3 pg.41 he interrupts Rieger's interview to ask about lost erasers, rulers and pens.

Victor on the other hand cares only about his own interests, he doesn't have strong opinions like Rieger, he just wants to be with the powerful one. He doesn't know his space, in Act.1 pg.10-12, he tries to control the interview of Rieger showing himself more important than he is. Trying to convince Rieger to be with the powerful,

<sup>16</sup>Victor: "I think Dr.Rieger, that you should be firm, but at the same time diplomatic. If you are too dismissive of the new leadership too soon, it could be counter-productive, because it could seem that you simply haven't been able to accept it that you are still harboring a grudge, or nursing some bitterness, or a sense of betrayal, or a feeling that you are irreplaceable, or something like that." He is a great example of what hypocrites diplomatists really are. When he realizes that he can't be on the powerful side with Rieger any more he finds his own way to be with them and becomes the advisor of the new deputy. When it becomes certain that the family is losing the orchard he still mentions that they all could live happily ever after if Rieger just backed the new government,

<sup>17</sup>Victor: "...It's too bad you were so inflexible. You might have won some concessions from them..." He doesn't understand a man with values because his priority is always himself. It becomes obvious what kind of a man he truly is when he starts to act like the lackey of the new deputy and the government. In Act.5 pg.70-73; without any self-respect and without expressing a personal point of view – he just wants to be with the powerful ones despite what it means for him personally. He is the best commentary for politicians nowadays.

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<sup>16</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act3, pp.35

<sup>17</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act4, pp.51

The servant in Rieger household, Oswald has an unnatural power to know what is going to be ordered beforehand. He is Rieger's relation to the past, <sup>18</sup>Oswald: "There was a time when they sent dried cherries by the cartload to Charkov." There is something dreamy the way he talks about the past like he misses those days like Rieger. He is loyal to Rieger and it is obvious that he has been around for a really long time like Hanus. When the family leaves the orchard and forgets him behind he is still concerned about his master, feeling bad that he didn't wear the fur coat on a cold day, like how Firs is left behind at the end of Cherry Orchard.

New deputy and later the Vice-prime Minister - Patrick Klein, makes it clear that he is the one who has the power besides Rieger from now on especially when he underlines, <sup>19</sup>Klein: "We couldn't care less what you think about us." When he is telling Rieger to support them in front of the public. He blackmails Rieger to be on their side in Act.5 pg.70-71, by offering a really low position to show how much they don't need him actually but they are willing to make this concession for him. There is something greedy about even the way he eats the biscuits, which weren't offered to him, but he nevertheless asked for, he starts eating exactly when the biscuits arrive and never stops till he leaves. Gambacci, (the one charged with having sex with animals though it wasn't proved,) uses his new role as Chief of Police, to encourage Klein to trust him. They are the same guys who interrogated Rieger at the station all night and made him sign a document, but when Rieger tries to talk about the situation he just explains about his plans for the villa. The place he is going to build after he gets rid of the villa is all about consumption, people shopping all day and then going to a modern

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<sup>18</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act5, pp.74

<sup>19</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act2, pp.31

erotic environment in the evening. Which even Klein knows is a bad idea for a deputy to have a place like that so he makes his political friend (who is Gambocci's uncle) take over the ownership of the erotic amusement park instead. He even finds the right person to look after the billiard room in Yepichedov, who breaks billiard poles during all the play, which explains a lot about his judgment. He is trying to make Rieger regret about not being cooperative with the new government by telling him how much higher his position could still be, like Victor he doesn't understand values and he is blinded by power. Like mainly all the other powerful men he doesn't take it well when Monika rejects his offer for dinner and he starts telling stupid jokes and laugh at them by himself. He is the best complimentary about how perverted the politics are now a days, the only thing he cares about are his own interests, he is incapable of seeing that he'll be in Rieger's position one day, he is blinded by the power he has now.

A political scientist and multicultural sociopsychologist who visits the villa for an autograph, named Bea Weissenmütelhofova, is an admirer of Rieger and also anyone else who wields power. She is a clever lady but still wants to find her way with a powerful man, she knows how to make a man feel like a man by highlighting his powerful sides. The way she treats Rieger makes the audience think that she is a pure lover of him; <sup>20</sup>Bea: "I've been interested in your ideas for years. I probably know more about you than you do yourself. And the longer I study you, the greater the impact your work has on me... For me, you will always be Chancellor, Mr. Chancellor." But after Klein takes ownership of the villa she acts exactly the same way with him, <sup>21</sup>Bea: "It's wonderful that you intend to keep the individual at the center of your politics. Thank

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<sup>20</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act2, pp.22

<sup>21</sup> Vaclav Havel, *"The Leaving"*, faber and faber, 2008, Act5, pp.82

you.” She can be a critique for how love is nowadays without real feelings only about profits and benefits.

The journalist and the photographer for Keyhole who interviews Rieger and the new deputy during the play; Dick and Bob, are duplicitous and deceitful. They publish only the paparazzi side of the interview they don't care about Rieger's ideas about politics, all questions they ask are about losing the villa and Irena. During their second visit to the villa in Act.5 pg.72-75 they are only interested in Rieger's private life and address the important governmental questions to Klein. Vaclav Havel personally had a lot of journalist friends, but during the 90's after his marriage to his second wife there was a lot of tabloid news about them and he didn't like being in front of the people with his private life. The characters of Dick and Bob are a perfect critic to journalism of our times.

Finally the most absurd and secret hero of the play is the voice, Vaclav Havel himself, giving notes about actors and how the mood of the scenes should be interpreted building a distance from the actors to the audience, underlining that it is a theatre play and so creates that fake environment. When he interrupts the scene Oswald serving Dick a beer and takes out the cinnamon from his pocket like he predicted that Dick is going to ask for it magically,<sup>22</sup> the voice: “This business with the cinnamon there is no psychological or any other explanation for it whatsoever. Or at least as far as I know there isn't. For now, let's just call it a product of pure authorial whimsy, or of my somewhat self-centered delight that I can come up with any hare-brained idea at all and the actors will have to play it with a straight face. But what can I

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<sup>22</sup> Vaclav Havel, *“The Leaving”*, faber and faber, 2008, Act1, pp.12

do? The simple fact is, I like it and it belongs there.” Another example is after Rieger judges that Irena won’t leave him and will be back,<sup>23</sup> the voice: “I don’t know whether it’s better to have Irena come back again, or to have her leave Rieger for good... The plays world ends when the play ends, and all that remains is our impression, our interpretation, our memories, our joy or our boredom. But I don’t want to hold things up while I make up my mind, either. So I’ll leave the matter open. I won’t be the first author, nor the last, who left things open-ended, not because he intended to, but simply because he didn’t know what else to do.” Highlighting that the story is just his imagination and the audience shouldn’t take it seriously.

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<sup>23</sup> Vaclav Havel, *“The Leaving”*, faber and faber, 2008, Act5, pp77-78

## Other productions

**Archa Divadlo**

**May/2008**

**Director: David Radok**

**Scenographer: David Radok and Jaromír Vlček**

**Costume designer: Zuzana Ježková**

The world premier of “Leaving “ was supposed to be in June/2008 at Divadlo na Vinohradech but the theatre couldn't provide the technical support so it was changed to Divadlo Archa. Because of the space characteristics - twelve meters to twelve meters and a black box where viewers can directly connect with what is happening on the stage the set was just not transferable. The play was Havel's return to theatre from politics after twenty years, which led to unprecedented popularity. It was choice from the heart for Havel to work with David Radok - whose success in theatre is international , the son of Alfred Radok the creator of Laterna Magica and Havel's friend. Radok explains his path to the text: <sup>24</sup>“After the first reading of the text I just approached things like decomposition, relativity of values and structured the play based on the absurd.” He underlines that he tried to stage the play as the text and not sort as an exhibition of his own directorial ideas. According to Radok the play could be interpreted with some kind of farce, which could be acted with exaggeration but with eighteen actors, two hours of play can't be executed as burlesque even though maybe it's possible not in his vision of the play. He successfully avoided the excessive emotional exploitation and balanced self-irony with the voice. The production was created in 6 weeks such a short time

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<sup>24</sup> Vaclav Moravec. (2017, February 7). Interview with David Radok. Retrieved from <http://www.impuls.cz/clanky/2008/05/david-radok-v-impulsech-vaclava-moravce/>

especially for Radok who comes from opera background, which has at least three months of preparation and three months of rehearsing, the way he explains the experience at an interview; “I came from the opera world, the journey to what is here was incredible and very absurd as the play itself.” The delay was because of technical and health problems of one of the main actors Irena who was supposed to be played by Dagmar and couldn’t just 18 days before the premier.

Radok’s demands for staging the plays were considered unaffordable and described as the most expensive in Czech theatre, his answer to these rumors even before the premier; “Sure the play has eighteen actors and takes place in an environment of retiring head of state, not a text for two people in the sand box, but anyone could see that the performance coasted below average.” But still there were economic difficulties because Archa Divadlo didn’t receive any money from the city budget that year, the play could only be staged with financial and material donations from other companies. Radok obstinately refused to compromise about the stage design and insisted on technically demanding solutions; the result was modest but atmospheric orchard full of living trees, successful light design which cuts through the stage of side passages to create the effect of corridors to different doors which is underlined a lot in the text because of the entrances and exits. Also the use of the stage elevator at the end when the trees rise up towards the ceiling to give the feeling of cutting the trees down and shows how much the orchard is going to change and become an amusement mall after Rieger’s departure. The most effective scene is when it rains heavily on the stage. Persistent water hitting the wooden floor and then the play starts with authentic sound of falling drops, glossy and wet clothes and moist air in the theatre. Havel commented that he was very nervous about what will happen with the

play and what will come of it but he was really satisfied at the end. He even mentioned that Radok found some things in the play that he didn't even realize; "Like his father, David weighs consistency with an obsessed vision." The production surprised Havel pleasantly. The production won the Alfred Radok award 2008 in the category of best play and stage design.

**Wilma Theatre**  
**May/2010 Philadelphia**  
**Director: Jiri Zizka**  
**Scenographer: Klara Zieglerova**  
**Costume designer: Vasilija Zivanic**

The U.S. premier directed by Wilma's Czech born co-artistic director Jiri Zizka who also directed the Tom Stoppard's edition of Havel's play "Largo Desaloto" to screen and "Temptation" for off-Broadway. Zizka's roots lie in the same soil as Havel's - both came of age artistically in the underground theatres of the political melting pot of the 1968 Prague Spring. Zizka sincerely mentions his adoration for Havel in an interview for Broadway World online magazine<sup>25</sup>; "I have a special admiration for Mr. Havel's writing. When I was fifteen I attended a play at the Theater on the Balustrade, entitled Memorandum, by a then-unknown writer, Mr. Havel. Later, the work was to become a modern classic, and I decided because of its gentle, insightful humor and refreshing absurdity to become more involved in the theater. Over the years, my admiration for Mr. Havel's work has not waned." He also gets approval of Paul Wilson who has been translating Havel's work for a quarter century and also a friend, with a letter; "you bring to this play a doubly useful sensibility: your Czech background makes you uniquely qualified to bring out the nuances of the original work, and your long experience in American theatre will make sure that local audiences get the maximum impact of the play's broad appeal." Wilson even attended the rehearsals to be able to tune the dialogues for maximum impact with the actors, so as not to lose Havel's absurdist

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<sup>25</sup> BWW Newdesk. (2017, March 22). The Wilma Theatre Presents David Strathairn in Leaving. <http://www.broadwayworld.com/philadelphia/article/The-Wilma-Theater-Presents-David-Strathairn-In-LEAVING-Previews-519-20100330-page2>

style. Oscar nominated David Strathairn performed Rieger and F.Murray Abraham recorded the voice instead of Havel himself. A delightful rain sequence, along with large and small doors permit the entrances and exits to keep the play in a circling motion, illustrating that the indecisive Rieger was going nowhere.


The quiet non-realistic set by Czech born, London based production designer; Klara Zieglerova, mixes the grandiose and the rustic in pointedly tacky Euro style and is packed by doors all over the place, even on the grass expanse of the courtyard. In an interview Klara mentions that the metaphysical nature of the play drew her to the idea of multiple doors of various sizes and characters, which symbolizes the hundreds of choices, we make every day. What is behind the doors? What's behind the choices we make every day? We never quite know. To evoke the claustrophobic feel on the set she created an environment that helps the audience look inside Rieger's mind and aimed for a space with a feeling of being trapped in a box even though there are many possible entrances and exits. The grass was used to convey the outside space and formed as a box to take the idea further. Using doors not only on the walls but also on the floor, where they transform as graves, and up above, where they turn into heavens doors gives the claustrophobic and transformative feeling the designer was looking for. The doors have their hierarchy; the largest villa door with steps is the most crucial, the door to the outside gives an oppressive, dark feeling, the barn doors are full of holes and accessible<sup>26</sup>; "There are doors too little to fit in, too high to access easily, too narrow to walk through, too low to walk in without bending one's head, or even so low

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<sup>26</sup> an Interview with Leaving's set designer Klara Zieglerova. (2017, March 27). <https://www.wilmatheater.org/blog/interview-leaving-set-designer-klara-zieglerova>

that an actor has to crawl through. The physical entrances mimic the psychological state of the characters.”

In an interview with Fran Kumin the director of the Philly theatre, Havel is asked to explain more a line of the voice; “What I love about the theatre are arrivals, departures, and returns, entrances and exits, from the wings to the stage, from the stage to the wings. It’s like going from one world into another. And onstage I love gates, fences, walls, windows and of course doors. They are the borders between different worlds.” He answers that he simply likes doors and that he is glad there are lots of them on stage. The performance was published as; “Thrillingly funny... a hilarious send-up of politics and of theatre.” by The Sunday Times.



**The movie**  
**March/2011**  
**Director: Vaclav Havel**  
**Production design: Ondrej Nekvasil & David Radok**  
**Costume design: Zuzana Jezková**

The premier was held at 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2011 at Lucerna, Havel's first intention to direct, coming from a background of the foundation of Czech cinema it was his youthful dream but he got rejected from FAMU three times because of political difficulties. He mentions the reasons why he decided to direct his first film at the end of his career, at the presentation of the concept for leaving shoot; "The play is kind of a semi-finished product, which the author offers to theatres. And it is up to the theatre itself to discover the real substance of the play and to find out things and add to the original half-finished draft. I think that the author has humbly endured. If you can't bare the interpretation of someone else who is not writing novels or plays. After many decades of playwriting, I felt a desire finally to interpret myself. The movie means inner satisfaction for me, originally all my life I wanted to be a filmmaker and now it's probably true." For his first directing project he gathered a team of the best in the field; the editing was made by Jiri Brozek; the holder of seven Czech Lion awards, the production designer Ondrej Nekvasil who is an architect with many international awards and also selection of 2011 Emmy's by the outstanding art direction at the American mini-series "Anne Frank: The Whole Story", the world leading choreographer; Jiri Krylian and leading actors. Havel explained his feelings about directing for the first time at a press conference on the publication of the play; "I have rather specific vision for the planned film, I have an appetite for the work, I have good collaborators and excellent actors have been cast in the film. I want to turn my relative inexperience into a positive: this will make it easier, I

hope to avoid various habits, clichés and conventions.” But naturally it will always be a challenge to convert genre of absurd drama on screen.

“There are many differences between film and theatre. For example: in theatre you see the action as a whole, at most one actor is closer to you than another. Whereas in film, you have the option, even the necessity of alternating close-ups with wide scenes and jumping from one actor to another,” explains the director. “With me it is made even more difficult by the fact that my plays are based on language, something which film does not really like. Yet, when someone does not recite my script precisely as it is written, in its entire and sometimes even unbearable length, it paradoxically loses its meaning and starts becoming boundless tedium. It is strange but true. My plays have been performed for forty years, so I know what I am talking about. In the film version of *Leaving* dialogues and longer discourses are understandably shortened, although not by too much. The biggest difference is the omission of the playwrights voice, which is present in the play but not in the film.” Even to avoid the mechanical conversion of a theatre production into the genre of film, Havel decided to select a different cast. His concern was that after so many performances the actors may have become fixated on a certain way of interpreting their roles. On the other hand he underlines, in an interview with Jan Kerbr and Martin Veselavsky; “I didn’t worry if it looks more like a movie or theatre. I just did it the way it seemed to me that it should be done, as I felt it. And where it belongs let critics deal with that, I leave it to them.” Despite his awareness of the situation the main criticism of the film was that it had a highly theatrical stylized , more staged feeling than “normal” film language with lot of frontal compositions, that made the piece half film and half theatre. According to film and theatre theorist Jan Bernard; “The fact that viewers and reviewers haven’t been

able to accept the film, or at least have considerable problems with it, may perhaps be linked to the fact that Václav Havel controls virtually everything in it, meaning viewers don't have a positive hero with whom they can identify and experience the twists in the struggle for political and moral identity alongside. (...) If viewers can't identify with a character, they can't accept the film without relating to themselves all of the doubts and problems of the central character and the main theme of the work, or without identifying with the viewpoint of the author." Even though the film got mixed reactions from viewers and film-critics it was valued because it returns to film esthetics of absurdity in Czech Republic since the 60's which was rarely seen.

The actual shoot was preceded by the scouting of locations for the film, scenographer and architect Ondrej mentions at the Centrum rozvoje Ceska Skalice; "When I was scouting I mainly went according to the screenplay and consultations with the director regarding the overall layout of the space. The most important thing was to have a dominant entrance from the villa onto the garden, which was to be well tended and rather large. At the same time, it was necessary that the villa be of sufficient size that its designation as 'government villa' would be credible. In addition the director requested distinctive steps descending from the villa to the garden; they were to be almost theatrical in character." The protected villa Cerych designed in mid 20's by architecture Otakar Novotny was selected, its southern façade looks into an extensive garden by a large ornamental pool and gazebo. The second location for the shoot was around Chateau Ploskovic, the chateau wall was temporarily decorated with graffiti among the slogans; "Havel to the Castle" and "Enough Havel Already" which Havel himself helped to spray with relish. Cinematographer Jan Malir scanned the garden in front of the chancellor's mansion so that it is almost dreamlike space. The addition of

almost loving attention settled by Ondrej and other artist friends such as Gebaverona; the result is something like a fingerprint of the soul, the inner landscape of Rieger. The costumes made by scenographer and costume designer Zuzana Jezkova were a distinctive element of the film adaptation. At Havel's request the Art Nouveau painter Gustav Klimt served as an inspiration for her designs, not only in the cuts of dresses and fabric patterns but also in tinny details. Havel himself took on the role of jewelry design.

<sup>27</sup>“The director, Václav Havel, was shooting his first feature film and he kept repeating that he actually did not know how to go about it. This evoked the feeling in everybody that he needs help,” remembers JIŘÍ MACHÁČEK, who plays a shameless tabloid journalist in the film. “This led to such a collective effort, such volition to please the director, as I have never seen on another shoot. It was also obvious that this work made him happy, and this also motivated us. Moreover, we also knew that he was not going to shoot another film, that this was his “once is enough”, so we fell all over ourselves in order to satisfy him. And I am not talking about just the actors. I saw this in the entire crew. I have never worked with a director who could impose his will so profoundly and yet so imperceptibly, as director Havel.” According to Havel, filming of the circle dance was the toughest moment in the entire shoot - a night scene which represents the vision or ravings of Rieger. The characters first repeat the lines of other characters before dancing wildly on the surface of the pool. The scene is accompanied by a rock version of “Ode to Joy” which is the work of the composer and guitarist Michal Pavlicek like the whole soundtrack of the film. Despite all the difficulties and different

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<sup>27</sup> Ceska Televize (2017, April 2). Leaving.  
<http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/program/porady/10301976475/Leaving-presskit.pdf>

reaction the film was nominated for twelve Czech Lion Awards and won two of them, one for the best screenplay and one for the best editing.

## Artistic Process

Havel<sup>28</sup> mentioned during a round table discussion in 1987; “Why not play Hamlet as Hamlet, the way it’s written? Why the constant need to keep on playing something else or interpreting something according to a personal vision? If they have their own ideas, why don’t they write their own play? I know that the best way to spoil a play is to think up some sort of personal interpretation of it.” That is the reason I didn’t want to change his description of the stage a lot, I tried to find a way to describe the story without being too decorative or adding elements from my background.

The set is described in the beginning of <sup>29</sup>act1; “The orchard outside the Rieger villa. Upstage steps lead to the entrance to the villa, on one side. On the other side, opposite, is a coach house, and center upstage a gazebo. Centre downstage is a set of garden furniture, a table with some chairs around it. A swing hangs from the branch of a tree.” It was important to keep the orchard feeling; not to change the space radically and to carry it over as an element from “The Cherry Orchard”, one of his inspirational plays for “Leaving”. The main characteristic about orchards is that there should be lot of corridors the challenge was to create a set with lot of corridors symbolizing the different paths of his life, and find a way to make the space look like an orchard without using fake trees on the stage. The corridors also serve many exits and entrances in the play, which creates a dynamic act, and breaks the tension in some moments. Which is why it was important to have long distances and different angles between the different entrances to create absurd long walking moments for characters, when dividing the stage for different spaces; the villa, coach house and the entrance to the orchard,

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<sup>28</sup> Leading Creators of Twentieth Century, Burian Jarka

<sup>29</sup> Vaclav Havel, “*The Leaving*”, faber and faber, 2008, Act1, pp.3

without walls and doors. The first idea was to create all the aisles with trees but I had to try better ways to make the entrances different; the villa, coach house and the outside world had to have distinctive feelings. Finally the set is divided to three and the entrance of the villa is clear, only one aisle with trees is leading to the coach house and the entrance to the orchard is made from between the swing and the trees.

Only the entrance of the villa has a symbolic entrance; which is just a skeleton of a villa, the audience can see through inside the villa to add one more absurd element to the play, to see Oswald waiting at the door to serve exaggerates the fact that he knows what is going to be asked beforehand in the play. Also to make an allusion to how Havel decorates a <sup>30</sup>house; “Havel always set about furnishing and adapting every new house with much enthusiasm, but soon his energy waned, as if he had already become a little tired of the place. The end result was always a semi-finished product, with many memorabilia and the latest gadgets, but sadly lacking in warmth and even comfort. The only exceptions were Hradecek and Havel’s presidential office, his true homes for forty-five and thirteen years of his life.” The coach house doesn’t exist so Hanus is making a pile of boxes at the end of the tree aisle with everything he carries to the coach house. There is a metal platform on the floor, which the audience can’t see, but it makes lot of noise when Hanus is carrying all the governmental stuff out from the villa and creates funny moments, disturbing more serious situations. The entrance of the orchard is next to Zuzanna’s swing, she is the closest to the exit to show how unrelated she is to the family.

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Zantovsky. “Havel A Life”, Atlantic Books, 2014, pp.465

The next task was to find a way to symbolize trees on the stage, my first idea was to use electric and telephone poles to show the lack of communication of the family and underline 21<sup>st</sup> century problems - ruining nature with technology, but it wasn't this plays problem and trying to symbolize the miscommunication with the trees was a long shot. Then I decided to have metal trees on the set because visually fake trees on the stage is not satisfying, but there wasn't any connection to the play so it was becoming a decorative rather than a meaningful solution. The main problem was to find a particular meaning between trees and Rieger, the reason I used old gutters, is to highlight the power flowing from the government all these years giving Rieger a fancy villa and an orchard, based on a Turkish saying; "oluk oluk akmak" which literally translates "flowing from the gutter" which means to "roll in". Also to make the rain element more absurd coming from the trees and wetting only Rieger and Bea while the cheating happens. The material of the trees is old rusted copper for the all stage besides the furniture to show Rieger's attachment to the space, that they aged together, instead of making it a new and beautiful orchard where everyone will fall in love.

After keeping an element from "The Cherry Orchard" I had to find a way to bring King Lear to the set, Havel's second inspiration for "Leaving". I had to find an element to symbolize the story on the stage maybe an absurdist throne. The reason that it didn't work was because it looked like another absurdist element on the stage without giving the powerful feeling of King Lear. Next idea was to have a throne which is known by everyone to represent politics and power - like Lincoln's marble throne. I chose the throne of Napoleon, which is made of blue velvet and gold. The only shining objects on the set, is the throne and Rieger's portrait, which also belongs to the government, so underlining the power he is losing. But I wanted Rieger to win at the end, so that's why

when he is leaving the villa he also takes his throne with him and not only the Gandhi head as it is written in the play.

The backdrop is semi transparent opera folia; to be able to use the shadows of the trees, which are on the back of the backdrop to give a more mysterious and dreadful feeling during the storm like there is a huge depth to the orchard. Also it helps to separate the space where Rieger is cheating Irena with Bea, from the family space when the rest of the set is in darkness and you can only see the trees on the stage and the shadows of the back trees on the backdrop like they are standing in the deepness of a forest. When Rieger is leaving the orchard at the end of the play all the trees and the villa entrance are falling apart with the chainsaw sounds but the back trees remain standing to underline that the same power that he had remains, but for another person now.

## Technical Solutions

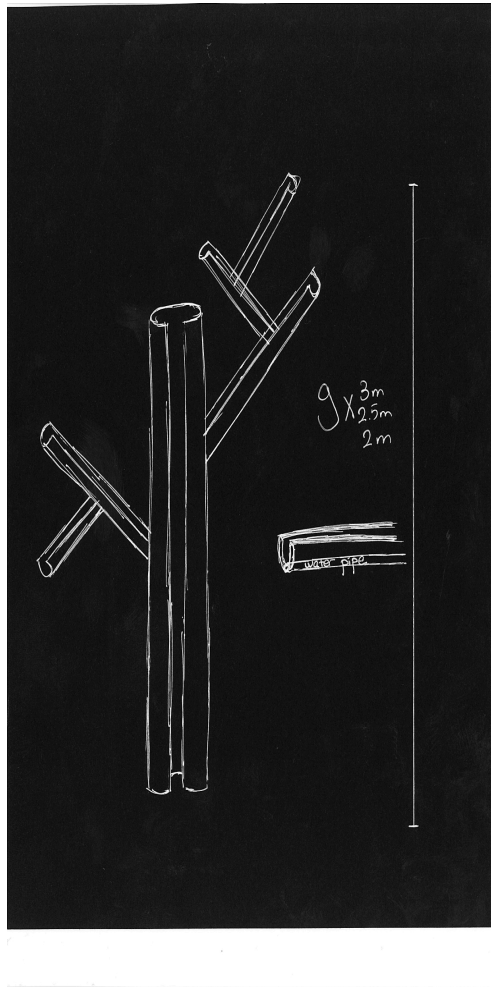
The fact that trees need to squirt water like rain and a full storm on the stage during the King Lear speech brings technical modifications to Archa Divadlo. A metal platform which has holes in the form of an aluminum grid, needs to be installed slanted for the rain and storm and a fabric garden pool under the slanted construction; because the water will leak from the roots of the trees also it will make it easier to drain the collected water away.

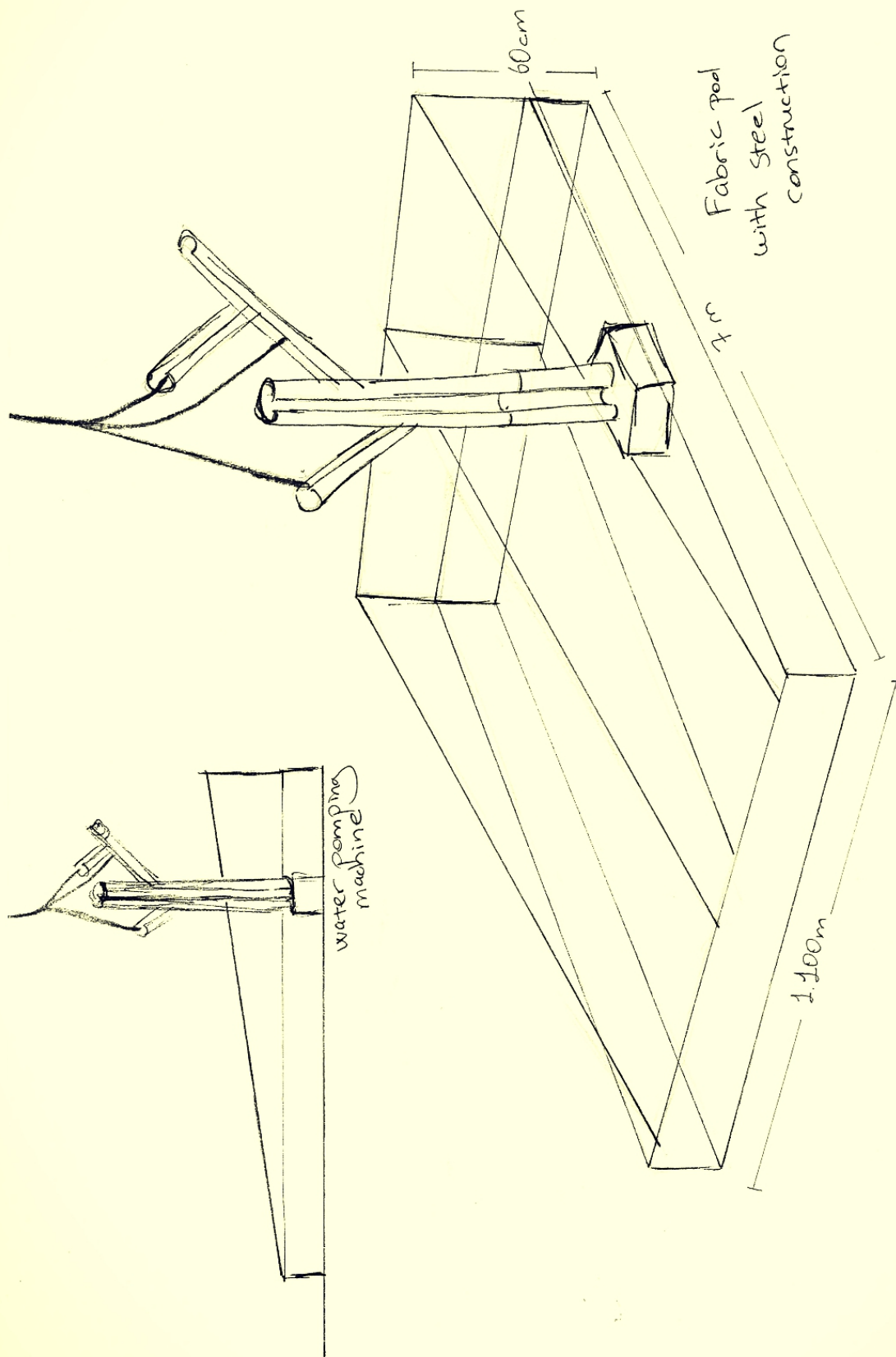
The trees need to be made by steel and painted to rusted copper, water pumping machines need to be attached to the trees from under the slanted construction to make the circulation of water attached to the water pipes hidden in the copper gutters.

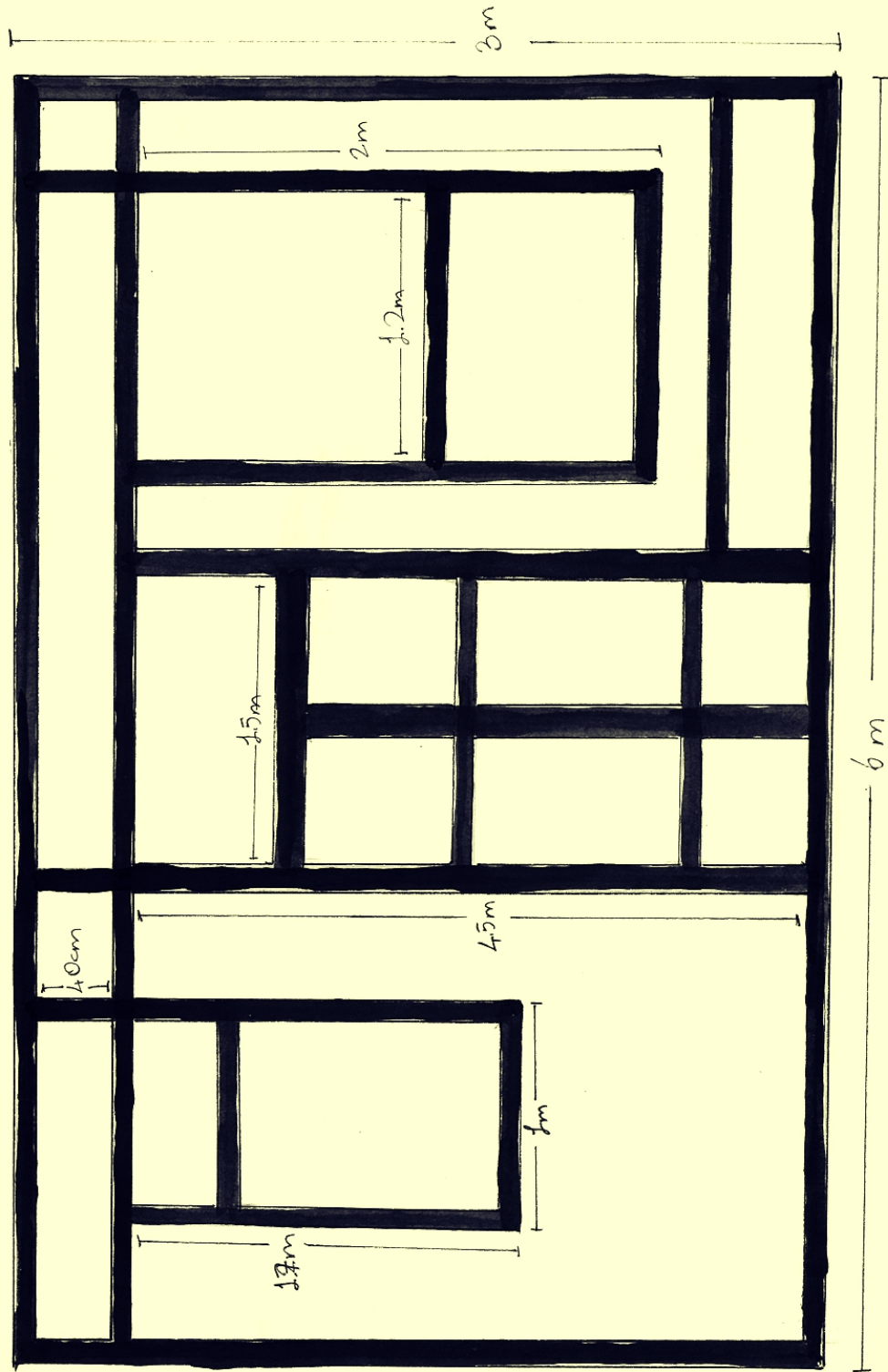
To create the dramatic feeling of the villa entrance and trees falling down at the end of the play they need to be hung by ropes to the ceiling fly-bars from the edges.

The semi-transparent backdrop should be light grey, because it is a better choice than white on the stage to minimize the light reflection, opera folia (projection screen); to be able to show shadows and reflections or make it look like solid with light. The screen should be divided at the back of the entrance to the villa to block the view of the actors taking the stairs to reach the villa; because the villa is transparent and they can't reach the inside villa surface from the same level, not to see them like they need to climb a hill in the villa that action will be blocked by hiding it with the backdrop; they will enter the villa from the back of the fabric which is used like an asymmetrical curtain on the corner.

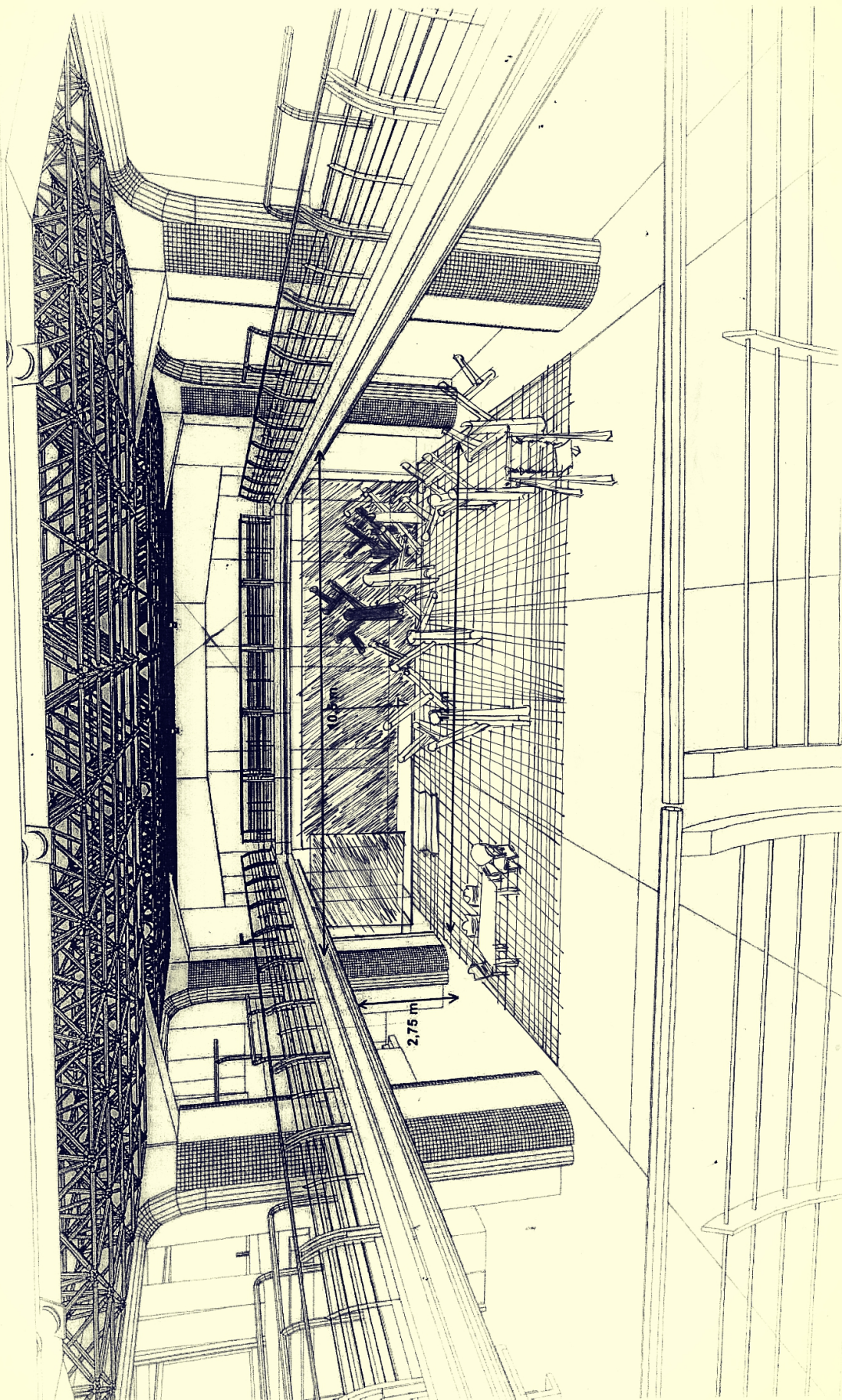
The reason I picked Archa Divadlo even though the extra modifications needed to be done; is because I wanted Rieger's world to be close to the audience at the same level instead of a traditional proscenium stage and a long rectangle space which will accentuate the depth of feeling in the orchard. And of course the fact that the play made its first premier in the world at Archa stage, which was chosen by Havel, further supported my idea.







Velký sál – pohled do sálu - základní rozměry



# Costumes

The task for the costumes was to be able to carry the dramatization of stereotypes feeling of the characters to their clothes by stylized exaggeration.

# DR VILEM RIEGER



Really neat start still dresses formal in dark colors; dark navy, blue or black. Beginning of Act3 shows up in a parka and jeans to show his young and rebellious side to Bea. To be able to show the evolution of the play through him his clothes should be clean and neat in the beginning but need to go down with him by falling into pieces during all the hassle he needs to go through.



# IRENA



My inspiration for Irena's clothes was British royalty; not floating stick figure with heavy fabrics, exaggerated hats and bright colors like purple to show her extravagance.

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# MONIKA



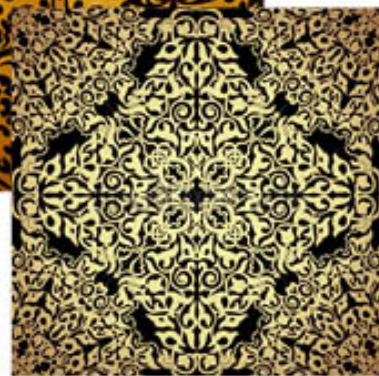
Style like Irena a stick figure all her clothes only one color and without personality to support her grey character.



# BABICKA



Style like a crazy old cat lady; lot of confusing patterns and dark colors.



# ZUZANA



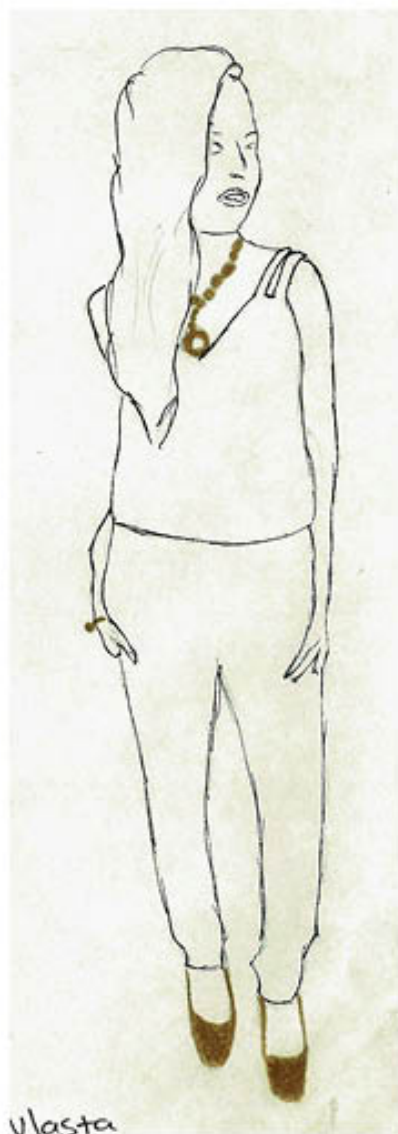
Style like a brand freak to underline her shallow and snob character towards her family; cheap look but with a class.



# ALBIN & VLASTA



Femme fatal look; black leather and gold details to show her furious personality through her clothes.



Dressed like a boy then a man; shorts, polo t-shirt, long socks and loafers, to show his pressed and weak personality.



# DEPUTY KLEIN



Dull politician look; funny tie and suspenders, looking like out of the era.



BEA



Pure but beautiful look not exaggerated in make up or clothes but beautiful naturally; a little nerdy dress.



# OSWALD





# KNOBLOCH





# Storyboard



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ACTI / Pg.7

First visit of Bob and Dick



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ACTII / Pg.19

Vlasta showing her proposal off Rieger's will and asking him to sign it



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ACTII / Pg.26  
First visit of Deputy Klein



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ACTIII / Pg.48

Rieger taking Bea to a privat place



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ACT III / Pg.49  
Irena catches Bea and Rieger



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ACT III / Pg. 57  
King Lear speech



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ACT III / Pg. 60

Circus Scene

“A rock version of the ‘Ode to Joy’ comes up, quietly at first. Everyone begins to sway or move to the rhythm. The music grows louder, the dancing more and more lively, until finally it becomes very wild.”



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ACT III / Pg.60  
Policemen taking Rieger away



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ACTV/ Pg.67

Deputy Klein's second visit with Dick and Bob



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ACTV  
The core family



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ACTV/ Pg.80  
The leaving



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ACTV/ Pg.81

Bea flirting with Deputy Klein

## **Conclusion**

This thesis introduced a general idea of Vaclav Havel's life and how it developed the most autobiographical play of his last times in presidency, "Leaving". I presented my interpretation of the dramaturgy and characters and compared it with other perceptions with analyzing the alternative stages to the same play, also aside Havel himself by studying the film directed by him. Furthermore how it evolved as a design on stage and costumes with my inspirations. Formerly I offered the technical solutions to make it happen on degree. Finally I demonstrated the transformation of the design between the important scenes by the storyboard photos.

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