she contradicts the European critics who see in "Ginger and Fred" a mor-
dant attack on the medium. "It is not hard’ on television, she says. "It's
ironic. This film is not nasty.
"You have to see the errors of your society, but with a smile, without
wickedness," she says.

Such a view of the world is certainly consistent with her role in her
most recent film before "Ginger and Fred." In "Frau Holle," a Czechoslo-
vak and West German co-production of a fairy tale by the Brothers
Grimm, she plays a white fairy, a kind of good witch who sends snow
and rain and sunshine onto the earth.

Shown on Italian television after being well received at the Venice
Film festival as a powerful, unpol-
emical tale for children — and for child-
like adults — "Frau Holle" has not, out-
side Eastern Europe, received the
exposure Miss Masina would like.

But in the end, the conversation
keeps turning to "La Strada," and
one again glimpses an almost fearful
humility in Miss Masina.

The initial Italian critical re-
sponse to "La Strada" was less than
she and Mr. Fellini had hoped for (al-
though it was later overwhelmed by
favorable reaction), and Miss Masina
was truly frightened. "Can you imag-
ine my crisis?" she asks. "Because I
thought I had ruined Federico.

"He had cast me as the main ac-
tress for this film, in a time when the
'maggiorate' were in fashion." Here
she uses the Italian word for volup-
tuous beauty and physical characteris-
tics associated with Sophia Loren or
Dolly Parton.

"Well, I was small, thin," she
says. "The producers knew I was
good from the theater, but thought
that 'La Strada' was a dramatic film,
jealousy and so on, and so they
weren't sure of little, fragile me."

But "little, fragile me" won out
and survived. And yet Miss Masina
still can't quite believe it was really
her own doing. "I didn't decide anything," she
says. "It was destiny which decided
for me."

March 23, 1986

VACLAV HAVEL

Portrait of a Playwright
As an Enemy of the State

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

The cottage belongs to Vaclav Havel, the
Czechoslovak playwright, and although it sits
in the hills near the Polish border it resembles
nothing so much as a Manhattanite's Litchfield
County retreat. Mr. Havel built the
house himself 16 years ago and he has furnished it weil,
thanks to the royalties from productions of his works
abroad. In photographs taken by a recent visitor, one
sees stereo components and a wood stove, embo-
dered tableclothes and goose-down comforters, and a
lined hearth from which the after-dinner fire throws
warm light into the room.

The tip-off is the collection of posters on the wall of
Mr. Havel's study. One is the original advertisement
for "Hair." Several others, with their Day-Glo colors
and wavy lettering, look like reliques from a Janis Joplin
concert at Winterland. It is as if time has not existed
since 1968 for Vaclav Havel. And, in a sense, it has not.

In that year, Soviet troops invaded Czechoslo-
vakia, replacing an increasingly liberal regime with one
of the most repressive in Eastern Europe. For Mr.
Havel, the brief bloom in his dramatic career came to
a crashing end. All of his plays have been banned in Czechoslovakia since 1969, and he
has been arrested and jailed several times
for human rights activities. The fanciful
posters are souvenirs from his trip to New
York in early 1968, when the New York
Shakespeare Festival produced his
drama "The Memorandum." It was
the last time Mr. Havel was outside
Czechoslovakia and
one of the last times
he saw a professional
production of his
work.

There are, of
course, less subtle
measures of Mr.
Havel's status than
the posters. Across a
meadow from his cot-
tage stands a two-
story Swiss chalet. It
is where the police officer assigned to
watch Mr. Havel lives. From time to
time, say those who have visited Mr.
Havel, the policeman is visible in a
window of the chalet, peering through
his binoculars. A grove of timber
once separated the chalet and the
cottage, the watcher and the watched,
but it was cleared to permit greater
clarity in surveillance. The point in
surveillance, as it so often is, is not
that it be secretive but that it be as
blatant as possible, a constant pres-
ence.

This is the world Mr. Havel has
re-created in "Largo Desolato," the
drama that opens at the Public Thea-
ter on Tuesday, directed by Richard
Foreman and starring Josef Som-
mer. The lead character is a philoso-
pher and human rights activist
named Leopold Kopriva. He is a man
reduced by repression to fever, in-
omnia, writer's block and impo-
tence, a man living on rum and vita-
mins and waiting for the inevitable
knock on the door. His crime is "intel-
tlectual disturbance of the peace," a

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typically puckish Havel touch. The late critic Kenneth Tynan once compared Mr. Havel’s facility for satire and wordplay to that of Tom Stoppard; but “Largo Desolato” reminds one of other American audiences who infinitely mistake as absurdity in European drama—whether Mr. Havel’s “Private View” or Janusz Glowacki’s “Cinders,” both recently produced at the Public Theater—rather than a condition of life only too real for the author.

Whatever its achievements as drama, “Largo Desolato” serves to illuminate Mr. Havel’s experience. He is, after all, one playwright quite unable to make the promotional rounds on behalf of his new play, and to answer the question it begets, which is how much the torment Mr. Kopriva reflects the author who invented it. He is only through the writing that Mr. Havel has smuggled into the West, the extensive file PEN has maintained on his case and the recollections of Western artists who have visited him that the bits of his life can be assembled into a mosaic, which one might call a portrait of the artist as enemy of the state.

And as a report issued at the recent International PEN Congress underscored, Mr. Havel’s fate is shared by 450 writers under tyrannies of the right and the left. “Some of the most distinguished, creative visionaries have also been political prisoners,” said Rose Styron, the chairwoman of PEN’s Freedom to Write Committee. “And to highlight the case of one like Havel, who’s been a leader, is to highlight the situation for so many others around the world.”

Vaclav Havel, born May 10, 1936, in Prague, first ran afoul of the Czechoslovak authorities in his late teens. As the son of an affluent family—one uncle owned a film studio—he was denied entrance to college. Instead he found work as a grip in a small Prague theater and, influenced by the work of Beckett and Ionesco, he began to write plays and short stories. Years later, Mr. Havel was permitted to attend night school, but his path by then was clearly in drama, and particularly in a drama of exposure rather than escapism.

“I am not what people are pleased to call ‘a man of the theater,’ ” a professor to whom the theater is the one and only mission in life,” Mr. Havel said in an interview with an unofficial Czechoslovak magazine. “If I devoted myself to theater, then it was only to a certain type of theater, and if I write for it, then it is only in my own way.”

In the liberal years of the mid-1960s, Mr. Havel saw his plays both published and produced in Czechoslovakia. Many of them were staged in Western Europe, and two, “The Menjorandum” and “The Increased Difficulty of Concentration,” played in New York. Signs of repression began in late 1967, with the expulsion of several other members of the official writers’ union, and, on Aug. 20, 1968, Soviet troops invaded.

“People knew it was the beginning of the end,” said Vera Blackwell, a Czechoslovak exile who has translated six of Mr. Havel’s plays. “The changes came gradually. There were doubts, disappointments, tragedies, but people still hoped it was a temporary occupation. Then, in 1980, Dubcek was removed. Censorship was returned. Certain magazines were stopped. The whole intellectual life wasemasculated. We called it the Biafra of the spirit, the murder of the spirit.”

Amid the blackout of his work, Mr. Havel kept writing, not only plays but critiques of the Czechoslovak regime. In an open letter to Czechoslovak leader Gustav Husak in 1975, he argued that Czechoslovakia operated under a “political apartheid” separating the rulers from the ruled. The government had chosen the “most dangerous road for society: the path of inner decay for the sake of outward appearances; of dehumanizing life for the sake of imposing uniformity; of deepening the spiritual and moral crisis of our country and ceaselessly degrading human dignity with the pitiful objective of protecting your own power.”

Two years later, Mr. Havel helped to found Charter 77, a group of 300 Czechoslovaks that issued a call for the human rights supposedly guaranteed under the 1975 Helsinki accords. He also became active in the Committee for the Unjustly Prosecuted. Czechoslovak authorities arrested, tried and convicted Mr. Havel of subversion for his part in the Charter 77 manifesto, and he served three months in prison in 1977. Yet the effect was more uplifting than deflating. “There was a feeling of adrenalin in that whole group,” recalled Tom Stoppard, who visited Mr. Havel shortly after his release from jail. “For all these people, the feeling was not of great fear but of great excitement. It’s like once you’ve done it, you’ve broken cover, there’s a great sense of liberation, of not having to hide anymore. The essential thing to understand was that these people felt they were not breaking any law, that the state was breaking the law.”

The state thought otherwise. When Mr. Havel persisted in the human rights campaign, he was arrested again on a charge of subversion, in May 1979. Authorities that even included the Communist parties of France, Italy and Spain, Mr. Havel received a prison sentence of five years, so unusually harsh that one Western diplomat described it as “swatting a gnat with a sledgehammer.”

While in prison, Mr. Havel recalled in an interview with the American publication Czech Newsletter, he was allowed neither paper nor a notebook. He was permitted only to write letters about “family matters” to his wife, Olga. Prison authorities confiscated many of the letters anyway and punished Mr. Havel for trying to keep a draft of one. Mrs. Havel could visit for one hour every three months.

“Prison seems to me to be totalitarianism’s test tube for the future.” Mr. Havel said in a 1983 interview with the Paris newspaper Le Monde. “It is an atmosphere aimed at systematically breaking down one’s personality.” The Czechoslovak playwright’s arrest, trial and imprisonment generated widespread protest in literary and human rights circles. The American branch of PEN declared Mr. Havel an honorary member, while Amnesty International adopted him as a Prisoner of Conscience. Writers including Arthur Miller, Saul Bellow, Graham Greene, Kurt Vonnegut and Mr. Stoppard (to whom “Largo Desolato” is dedicated) lobbied for Mr. Havel’s release. Joseph Papp offered Mr. Havel a one-year position as playwright-in-residence at the New York Shakespeare Festival if Czechoslovak authorities would release him. Mr. Havel recently told Mr. Papp that the authorities said he was free to accept the position, but that he turned it down because he was afraid that once he left Czechoslovakia the government would never let him return. Precisely that had happened to another Czechoslovak author, Pavel Kohout, after being allowed to travel to Paris.

It was only in 1983 that the international pressure paid off. Word leaked to the West that Mr. Havel had developed pneumonia in prison and had been conveyed, still in handcuffs, to a Prague hospital. A photograph of a gaunt Mr. Havel, barely recognizable, also made its way to the West. Amid a chorus of protest, Czechoslovak authorities released Mr. Havel, and he quickly resumed his public and private writings.

“A Private View,” a collection of three plays from 1975 and 1978, played at the Public Theater in late 1983, and they attested to the isolation and frustration Mr. Havel felt, even as a nominally free man. "A Private View" offered three facades of the life of a dissident playwright named Vanek—asked by his boss at a brewery to sign a confession by the friend he asks to sign a human rights petition, and awkwardly enter-
Since his release from prison, the playwright has been a man neither caged nor free.

summer, the police followed, arresting him briefly, interrogating the friends he visited and searching their homes. Yet, as Mr. Havel wrote of the police in an essay that made its way to The Washington Post, "All of them communicated politely with me. Sometimes, when we lost our way, we got directions from them."

Mr. Havel has even been able to make light of his position as Czechoslovakia's best-known dissident, much as the character Leopold Kopriva does in "Largo Desolato." "He was glad to see me," Mr. Stolpner remembered of his visit to Mr. Havel, "but he also made it clear it was a little bit of a drag to see another Western sympathizer wheeled in. He felt a bit like a tourist attraction, like the Taj Mahal."

But such self-effacing wit is, among other things, a defense mechanism, a tool for survival. Public meetings with Westerners remain a dangerous rarity for Mr. Havel. When Rose Styron was in Prague on behalf of PEN last year, she managed to see only Mr. Havel's wife and brother. A major American writer, who asked not to be identified by name, met Mr. Havel in 1984 only after being alerted at a diplomatic reception that a rendezvous would be arranged that night. A driver, taking a circuitous route through Prague, delivered the writer to a private apartment where Mr. Havel and a dozen other writers were waiting. After the meeting ended, a different driver, following a different circuitous route, returned the American to his hotel.

"One thing I learned," the American author said, "is that these writers got no help from their neighbors. They're quite isolated. The government has been able to make them outcasts. In Warsaw, you had the sense the whole city would protect the dissidents. In Prague you felt the whole city would turn them in."

One consequence of isolation is that Mr. Havel must write plays without ever seeing them performed — a composer who never hears his orchestra. "Havel told me, 'I don't know who I'm writing for anymore,'" Mr. Papp recalled. "He can't test it against an audience. He's writing in a vacuum." Although Mr. Havel has managed to pass much of his writing into the West, dissemination within Czechoslovakia remains difficult. The American writer who met Mr. Havel in 1984 compared the well-printed and widely distributed samizdat — underground newsletters — he saw in Poland with the rudimentary, typewritten ones in Czechoslovakia. "I think the only people in the world who use carbon paper anymore," he said, "are the Czechs."

"Largo Desolato" underscores the toll the years have taken on Mr. Havel, with constant pressure from above to acquiesce and from below to continue his defiance. "There was a ruthlessness about him," Mr. Papp recalled, "and a sadness about the whole place. He's very gentle but very angry. He feels no one can possibly understand how much control there is. He feels, like many Czechs, that he doesn't care if the Russians drop the bomb and blow them up, because they're so much under the boot already. It's an almost suicidal kind of despondency."

Mr. Havel has vented similar cynicism in recent articles published in the West. But simply that he continues to write is the ultimate act of hopefulness. Mr. Havel explained in one essay: "Even a single, apparently powerless man who dares to tell aloud the truth and is prepared to sacrifice his life wins surprisingly more power than thousands of anonymous voters under different conditions."

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