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“The Velvet Oratorio”: A Revolution Set to Music
By Gwen Orel



Photo by DENIS CAMERON / Rex USA, courtesy Everett Collection
Dissident playwright Václav Havel in 1989

Twenty years ago, Eastern Europe went through a series of revolutions, beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. Images of students jingling keys and singing in Wenceslas Square, in what became known as Czechoslovakia’s “Velvet Revolution,” were televised worldwide. Ten days later, the communists ceded power, and dissident playwright Václav Havel became president.

“The Velvet Oratorio,” by Edward Einhorn, recreates the atmosphere in Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia) from November 17, 1989 to January 1, 1990, using choral music, interviews, and found documents, including correspondence from then U.S. ambassador Shirley Temple Black. Henry Akona, who directs, composed the original music. In the new show, parodies of Havel’s absurd “Vaněk” plays, about dissident Ferdinand Vaněk, show a regime turning upside down. (In 2006, Einhorn’s Untitled Theatre Company #61 produced the Havel Festival, a complete presentation of Havel’s plays.)

There are parallels between what became Czechoslovakia in 1989 and Iran today, Einhorn says. In Czechoslovakia, ideals of freedom, democracy and capitalism helped peacefully overthrow a totalitarian regime, without direct intervention. By inviting dissidents to parties, Shirley Temple Black offered tacit support.

The show is part of The New York Public Library of the Performing Arts’ “Performing Revolution in Central and Eastern Europe,” a Festival including dance, theatre, visual arts, literature and museum exhibits, continuing through the end of March, 2010.

Martin Palouš, a former dissident who became one of the leaders of the revolution, inspired “The Velvet Oratorio’s” first scene. Palouš is now the Czech ambassador to the UN, something he says was “unimaginable” before the revolution. 1989, he says, is not only significant for Central and East Europeans. “1989 was the end of the twentieth century. It was a century of totalitarian governments and divided Europe. What started in ‘89 is a process that goes on and on.”

“The Velvet Oratorio” will be performed Nov. 19th at the Bruno Walter Auditorium, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, 111 Amsterdam Avenue, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (at Lincoln Center) at 6 p.m., and on November 30th at Bohemian National Hall, 321 East 73rd Street, at 7 p.m. Both performances are free.