

Samuel Beckett, Paris, April 1, 1984



# How I jumped over a wall and met Samuel Beckett

**František JANOUCH**

**I am a complete dilettante, even a barbaric one, as far as theatre goes. I have no time for theatre, especially in Sweden, where I have less time than anywhere and anytime else, moreover, I am not a devoted regular theatre goer because I understand something between 50 or 80 % of what is said, this being dependent on the particular accent the actors use and on the acoustics of the auditorium.**

I did not know much about Beckett either. Years ago, I saw his *Waiting for Godot*, I read a few of his absurd short stories, and sensed that he might be what is called a classical master. The actual depth of his high quality I was able to register only when reading a letter written to Beckett by Václav Havel on his release from prison. For Havel, Beckett was a God from Olympus, and I, a simple and mortal physicist, was to deliver his letter. There were problems straight away: Beckett had no postal address. After a lengthy search I located his agent (actually, my friend, an actor Ivo Palec did that) and was advised to write to Beckett c/o his publisher in Paris. Having added a few informal lines to Havel's letter, I sent it to them.

Shortly afterwards I received Beckett's answer that included a small letter that I was to deliver to Václav Havel. Still blissfully unaware that I had become a messenger between a God and a mortal man, I had no idea that the note written in black ink, in tiny letters sharply incised by an old man's hand, would make the recipient ecstatic. Václav was indeed very excited: he framed Beckett's letter, proudly displaying it under a glass for all his friends to see. The great God Beckett descended to the Earth and wrote few lines for him. I wrote to Beckett a brief note telling him what joy his answer and a book that he sent to Havel, evoked. Beckett answered in a short note accompanied by a fat cheque for the Foundation Charta 77.

SAMUEL BECKETT

Paris  
29.5.83

Dear Vaclav Havel

Thank you for your most moving letter.

To have helped you, however little, and saluted you and all your stand for, was a moment in my writing life that I cherish. It is I who stand in your debt.

I have read and admired your plays in French translation.

I send you my heartfelt wishes for better days.

Samuel Beckett

To await arrival



Museum Janouch  
c/o L. Park  
25 Rue des Ecoiffes  
75004 Paris

Dear Samuel Beckett,

During the dark fifties when I was 16 or 18 of age, in a country where there were virtually no cultural or other contacts with the outside world, luckily I had the opportunity to read "Waiting for Godot" later, of course, I read all your plays, from among which I seem to have been addressed most forcefully by "Happy Days". It may be a foolish expression, but I am looking for a better one in vain: from the first you have been for me a deity in the heavens of spirit. I have been immensely influenced by you as a human being, and in a way as a writer, too. There can never disappear the memory of the adventurous search for, and finding of, spiritual values in the void around me. Even today, after several decades, when I am perhaps older than you were at the time of "Godot", I cannot but feel the consequence of my coming across your work.

I was to you the short time in prison of her one-year, my an obtuse took place and that you

and to make public for the first time, your play "Catastrophe". For a long time afterward, these accompanied me in the prison a great joy and emotion and helped to live on amidst all the dirt and bareness.

The joy had several dimensions to which pertained not only the fact that you are for me what I tried to suggest above, but also my awareness that you are not one of those who gives themselves away in small changes - so that your participation in the Avignon event is even more valuable.

Thank you very much indeed. You not only helped me in a beautiful way during my prison days, but by doing what you did you demonstrated your deep understanding for the meaning of affliction which those who are not indifferent to the run of things have to take upon themselves occasionally at the present time just as well as they had to do it in the past.

With best regards and all good wishes

Yours ever

Vaclav Havel

Prague, 17.5.1983

SAMUEL BECKETT

Paris  
27.3.84

Dear Mr. Janouch

Thank you for yr letter.

I propose we meet as follows:

Sunday April 1st, 11 a.m.,

Hotel RLM - St. Jacques, 17

Boulevard St. Jacques, Paris 14.

I'd be there. Give me if you can.

Sincerely

Samuel Beckett



Vaclav Havel  
František Janouch  
Korespondence  
1978-2001



I wrote back to thank him, and that was the end of the chapter Beckett — as far as I, sinful soul and unbeliever, was concerned. Only, I promised to myself to see any of Beckett's plays if an opportunity arose.

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In the autumn of 1983 I took to the stage in a big way, on the other side of the curtain. Not as a spectator — but what was I? I was not an agent, nor a director, nor an actor, author or manager. Simply, I was a non-viewer.

I asked Havel to write a mini-play for an evening in a theatre, planned for October and organised by some of the best Swedish actors in Stockholm.

Václav obliged, his play arrived and suddenly, I found myself in the middle of events and in an environment of which I knew nothing. It was all new to me: the director, theatre manager, actors, actresses, assistants, agents and all those I have not met yet, translators, ushers and PR people; it was an adventure, and it was unstoppable. It reminded me of the genie let out of the bottle. Every reader of the oriental stories knows how difficult it is to get him back in.

Some 5-6 weeks before the first night, an idea occurred to us that a pretty printed handout would be a welcome addition. I had a notion to publish the letters exchanged between Havel and Beckett, and I shared the thought with the director Stefan Böhm. He agreed enthusiastically, particularly after he read both letters. How did he come to have them? Well, from me. And why did I have them? Is it really necessary to explain that we live in a period of normalization that is fundamentally abnormal, so much so, that I could not send Havel's letter carrying his important declaration onto an insecure Parisian address, and equally, I could not send Beckett's answer to Havel without making a copy, in case it was not delivered.

My experience with the Swedish postal service is not that great. I have a lot of correspondence with them, yielding several thousands Swedish Krona for lost letters that I posted to the East or to the South. For the publication of both letters I needed the consent of both authors. Havel sent his straight away. I sent another request to Beckett with an explanation of how I came to have a copy and that it was for the programme for the evening event. The author of the absurd plays found nothing absurd in my request to respond quickly either by a telegram or a phone call. One evening the phone rang.

"Samuel Beckett speaking" — I heard a deep old voice.

I became speechless, but managed to think how speechless would Václav Havel be at that moment.

"May I speak to Mr Janouch?"

"It's me", I sort of stammered.

"I got your letter. Naturally, you may publish my letter to Václav Havel, by the way, how is he?"

Beckett pronounced the name in a French manner, as *vaklavavel*. It is well known, the French have problems with the "H" at the beginning of a word, a difficulty comparable to the Chinese failure to distinguish "R" and "L".

"Give him my regards, please."

I began telling him about Havel and, because I am not Havel and so a little bit less overwhelmed by Beckett's phone call from his Olympus, I got an idea (I am never short of ideas. Ostop Bender used to quip: ideas — ours, money — yours):

"Mr Beckett, would you let us, at the Stockholm evening, perform the *Catastrophy*, which you dedicated to Václav Havel? (I think I even pronounced it "vaclavavel")

"Of course, you may do that — I am giving you my consent now, and will send the text of the play soon."

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The director Böhm was more than happy. The world premiere of the first Havel play written after four years in prison, and the Swedish premiere of Beckett's play — all in one evening and entrusted to a young director from a small playhouse *Fria Proteater* — moreover in a large auditorium of a city theatre, which we dared to pack full.

However, I am not writing here about our evening event, I am writing about Beckett. Some two weeks before the first night a well known Swedish theatre critic phoned me. He met Beckett in Paris and learned from him about me.

"How did you manage to get in touch with him?" he asked. "Beckett avoids people, does not meet anybody and lives in complete privacy." I am afraid that my answer was not exhaustive: "Havel initiated it, I did not have a clue about Beckett's greatness, about his being this extraordinary phenomenon in the world of the theatre — I took him for an ordinary mortal man."

Not to go into unnecessary details: we exchanged letters about copyright, I sent him a report about our successful evening event in Stockholm, and — as my



thank you to Beckett for his understanding and help — I wrote about sending him a print, inspired by his plays, and made by a Czech artist.

He thanked in advance — and a month later the roll with the print arrived back in Stockholm. The publisher had readdressed the registered packet to the home address of Beckett, who never collected the parcel. In that way I got to know where in Paris he lives. No worry that I would divulge it to a living soul, I respect the old man's incognito.

Two more short letters followed, Beckett gave an address of another publisher to send the print to. He then thanked me for it.

I was getting ready to spend the weekend of 1<sup>st</sup> April in Paris. I had a meeting somewhere in Switzerland — and Paris is an agreeable city to spend a weekend in, especially if the air ticket costs practically nothing.

I do not know what possessed me. I wrote to Beckett that I would be in Paris, and would love to knock on his door, if he would not think it too bold, and thank him personally for all he did for us. If it suited him, could he leave a message at my Parisian address, please?

In Paris, I have this charming tiny loft in the Jewish Quarter, some 150 metres from the Rue de Rivoli. Actually, I do not have a charming little loft, I only have a key to it, and a standing invitation to use it whenever I come to Paris. I go there as home, the concierge greets me as a regular tenant.... What else? Imagine the most romantic place in Paris.

I arrived in Paris on Friday evening. In the room was a letter from Beckett:

He would be in the hotel PLM Saint Jacques on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> April at 11 o'clock. "Join me if you can".

Usually, in Paris, I have not a minute free. There are too many acquaintances, too many good restaurants, and plenty of interesting exhibitions.

It is Saturday evening — the loft has one big flaw, which may be dialectically turned into a great advantage: there is no phone there. I always need pockets full of Francs and lot of patience to wait for a free phone box. Parisian phone boxes evoke in me, from time to time, even some racial adversity — you cannot imagine how long an Arab can talk, and the phones are practically permanently used by the Arabs.

So — Saturday evening I went to make a number of phone calls. It was around ten o'clock. A half an hour later, my particular Arab vacated the phone box. I made my calls, agreed several meetings. I still had

some Francs left. I phoned a friend, a fellow physicist with a musical name, Francois Lehar. I was told to catch the first train and visit. His new house is almost finished, moreover, a mutual friend, whom I have not seen for years, had just arrived from the New World. My argument that I had a full schedule was energetically dismissed by a strict instruction "get your pyjamas and toothbrush, I will collect you in an hour at the station". I forgot to tell you, Francois lives some 40 km outside Paris, it was late on Saturday evening... The Metro is, however, impressively reliable, frequent and fast. I arrived before my friend reached the station. I managed, to my Viking astonishment, to bring with me a few beautifully blossoming twigs of sakkura for the lady of the house.

It was astonishing, several days before I left frozen Sweden, and here and now Spring was already in full swing.

We sat and talked and drank cognac while watching the logs burning in the fireplace.

"We must get up at eight o'clock", I said, "Beckett will wait for me at eleven."

An icy shower awakened me properly and revived me too. In the garage — an unpleasant surprise: the car battery was flat.

It is impossible for me not to go; I cannot let Václav down. I began thinking about alternatives, how to get to Paris from this back of beyond on Sunday morning when all of France still sleeps.

I had phoned Havel Saturday afternoon telling him that I would meet Beckett. He quipped that he would not dare to meet him, and that he would be nervous instead of me and would have a bad sleepless night into the bargain.

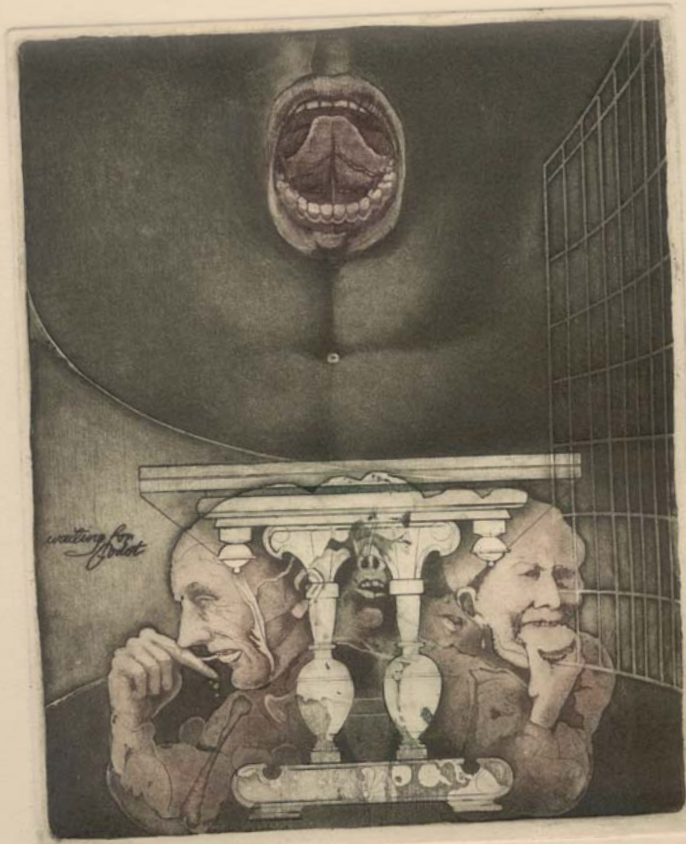
We left the charger on and I looked nervously at how the watch hand moved so quickly and the charger's needle almost not at all. After twenty minutes my physicist friend concluded that, with a bit of luck, it would be enough to get the car to the station without stalling it, if we first pushed it down the hill to start.

Success! We travelled fast on the small roads, like fools, and almost reached the station, with the crossing ramps down. The train for Paris was pulling in. The next one will be in an hour time.

"Run, take the subway, you will catch it."

I run like a maniac to the station, but there was an almost two metres high fence between the train and me,

Waiting for Godot  
by James Janiček, 1974



25/50

Janiček 74



Poster of a Solidarity Evening in Stockholm "Without a Permission from Prague" (28/11/1983), with Havel's Mistake and Beckett's Catastrophe

and no hole in sight. I felt like a figure from our classical author's story, who having a key to the loo, sh...ed himself. In sheer desperation, I jumped over the fence. Two women applauded. I grabbed the last carriage door, pushed the button to open.

I only caught my breath near Paris.

At the Chatelet station — another problem. In the excitement of it all, I forgot that I did not have a ticket. The turnstiles refused to open for me. I could not get out. A salvation came in the shape of a large black man, I almost glued myself to his back and went through the turnstile with him. He was surprised, but said nothing. I also keep quiet when they phone for so long.

I manage it all, shower, change of clothes, and am there on time. While sitting in the hotel foyer watching its door, I wondered: Will I recognize him? How will he recognize me?

Suddenly, an old tall man, his dense grey hair cut spiky short, dressed in a sheepskin coat and a thick Aran sweater, and approached me: "Mr Janouch?"

We went to have coffee. Samuel Beckett ordered double espresso twice.

We talked for almost an hour. As a matter of fact, it was I doing the talking mostly. He asked about the Stockholm event, about the performance of his Catastrophe, and about the situation in Czechoslovakia. He knew very little, his interest was genuinely great. I told him about Václav Havel, his imprisonment, his experience with the authorities who offered to allow him to go to NY for the first night of one of his plays. It was a shady deal, which Havel refused. I told him about people performing plays in private flats, publishing books as copies of typed manuscripts. I told him about the Foundation Charta 77, about its meaning.

His eyes were always on me, with concentration and interest, while his wrinkled old hands betrayed a lack of calm. "How did you get involved?" — he interrupted unexpectedly.

I realized that he took me for a Swede. I explained briefly why I was not, and hardly would be in this life.

We began talking about his plays. I sensed his unease to recall things, for example whether he visited Prague for the first night of *Waiting for Godot*.

I was able to remind him that his wife was there. He switched to the present, his plays were on Broadway in New York, he said, and, he heard that some plays of Václav Havel were performed there too. I asked what inspired him to dedicate the *Catastrophy* to Havel. He became visibly embarrassed — his long fingers moved faster over the marble table top. "I have read his plays, I wanted to express my support for him, my sympathy, my solidarity..."

Our conversation froze. I did not wish to descend into banalities or tire him.

I mentioned Havel's *Beggar's Opera* and that it would be performed next year in the Paris Theatre Festival. Out of my briefcase, I took the manuscript translated into French. Beckett took it, leafing through, and asked: "May I have this to read it later?"

That was precisely what I wished for. Beckett's view and his word could help Václav's loved *Cinderella* into the big world. "Yes, of course".

"I'll write to you", he said.

"May I take few photographs of you", I asked. He gave me an astonished look. "To illustrate all this for Václav Havel." "Naturally, yes, do..." he said with an already somewhat frozen smile, a smile that we all muster in similar situations.

With my pocket size Rollei I took two photographs. After I put the camera away, Beckett's face became animated, again.

"I should not keep you any longer. I am grateful for this meeting and for the chance to thank you in person."

Beckett's hand dismissed that with an almost unnoticeable gesture. I wanted to pay for the coffee. He did

not allow me, called a waiter, and gave him a hundred Francs note, pulled beforehand, all crumpled, from his pocket. We continued in some sort of conversation, while the waiter did not return. After a while, Beckett called another waiter and angrily demanded "Money back" in French. The first waiter returned with the change and an apology. Beckett re-counted the money on the plate, and left some as a tip.

We got up and walked to the exit. He shook my hand holding it firmly.

"I wish you success in all you do and give my warm regards to Václav Havel".

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That evening I told my story to a former French actress. "You have met Beckett? Are you imagining things? I have never met anyone who spoke personally with Beckett." I pulled out of my pocket the invitation note. She read it in disbelief, and gave me an impression, that she would like to taste it, to check its authenticity. For the rest of the evening, she transferred a fraction of her admiration for Beckett onto me, because I managed to meet him.

I am indebted to Václav Havel for entry into the world of theatre. Without him, I would not have met Beckett.

**Post Scriptum:** from a letter sent to me by Václav Havel:

"1.4.1984: At 11 o'clock Zdenek Urbanek and I were thinking about you talking to S.B. (Zdenek once told me, that the only thing he ever envied me was the letter from S.B. I replied: "go do porridge for four years, and maybe you will get such a letter too!")

(May 1984) ■

Translated from Czech by Slávka Svěráková  
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