

An Interview with Pavel Koutecký

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The documentary filmmaker Pavel Koutecký lives with two shelves full of tin boxes of Václav Havel.

They contain 45 hours of film covering twelve years in the life of the former Czechoslovak and Czech President: when the state visit of Bill Clinton was being prepared, when the discussion was about how to cook potatoes, when Havel was getting married, when he was giving an account of his waxworks-like visit to a session of the cabinet of Premier Miloš Zeman, when he was commenting on Václav Klaus, when he was fed up with everything and could only rub his brow. The first part of the unique documentary, which Koutecký filmed with the Film & Sociology Association, could be ready this autumn. On October 5, 2006, Havel will turn 70.

And This Time Take Your Tie!

An Interview with Pavel Koutecký about Twelve Years of Filming

How did you get so close to Václav Havel?

In November 1989 I was lying in a hospital in England with a broken leg. I'd been hit by a car. From the newspapers, television, and telephone calls I found out what was going on at home in Czechoslovakia. And I read that Havel was going to be President. I thought how great it would be to film him.

Wait a second. What were you doing in England? How did you end up there?

To cut a long story short: Thanks to my émigré father, a conspiracy, and the more relaxed conditions in Czechoslovakia in the late 1980s I got a scholarship for post-graduate studies at the National Film and Television School in 1988, where they taught the “observational method” of documentary film, that is, filming with a small crew that doesn't interfere with what is being filmed. It lies in wait for something to happen, ready to get the camera rolling at any time. One reason I was fascinated with that was because it was a completely unknown method in our country. At that time I told myself how suitable the method would be for the new era with Havel as President. To film it with the time-lapse method, store the material, not make it public, and only after a certain period make a coherent picture of the man and his times.

But you missed the beginning of that period by spending it in an English hospital. And yet you soon got to Havel. In the beginning there must have been quite a big crowd around him.

Exactly. I returned to Prague as fast as I could, but when I saw the crowd I almost gave up. At least I filmed the documentary *Oh, How Lucky We Are*, a mildly ironic ten-minute film, which captures the atmosphere in Prague on the day Havel was first “elected” President in December 1989. Havel's secretary, Vladimír Hanzel, liked the film, and Ondřej Krob (his friend, neighbour, and colleague from the theatre) also mentioned that he had seen another film of mine, which was about mentally-handicapped people. Well, it turned out that we got together, he agreed to it on the condition, that it would not be only about him, but about the times as well.

When did you begin filming?

Unfortunately, not till the end of 1992. Before that, I was still finishing up the film *The End of Czechoslovakia in Parliament*.

But back then, Havel wasn't President, and it wasn't even certain that he'd be elected again. You were taking a risk.

Even if he hadn't become President, it would still have been interesting. But back then it was safe to assume that he would probably be President again.

What exactly did the filming look like? Were you with him all the time? Were you permitted to be present for everything?

Not all the time of course. More like a few times a month. It depended on our finances. We were using standard film, and that's expensive, so we had to think hard about every shot. We could film whenever we wanted, but it wasn't clear when something was going to be interesting or have a point to it. It was a bit like telling the future with a crystal ball. It often happened that when we got there either Havel or someone else told us: "Too bad you weren't here yesterday! Now that was interesting!"

Did Havel ever throw you out?

Not Havel, but sometimes he would have a meeting and the other party wouldn't want filmmakers to be present.

What situations or people?

It will probably come as no surprise if I tell you that the difficulty was always with Václav Klaus. He chased us away in Parliament when we were filming the break-up of Czechoslovakia.

So Václav Klaus doesn't appear much in your film.

Not much. There is, however, a lot about him, really a lot.

Was that the aim?

Above all, the tension between Havel and Klaus could not but manifest itself. It was a dispute not only between two people, but also between two conceptions.

Let's return to the filming. How many of you were there?

We used to go round in a team of three plus one: the soundman, who sometimes changed; one cameraman, who was always Stano Slušný, with whom I have worked since film school; and me; and then the production assistant, who looked after other related matters. We usually had four 11-minute film reels with us, a total of three-quarters of an hour of expensive film stock. You therefore have to decide carefully about every second. And sometimes it really turns out well, and you manage to film a superb shot. Other times, you end up with waste. Sometimes it was up to chance. For example, we went to shoot Havel's meeting with Lou Reed, but the rocker had a depression or creative crisis that day. He had come to ask Havel's advice, and didn't want anyone else present. So there was no point in our being there and we were about to leave angry. Suddenly, however, a delegation of People's Party members arrived in the Presidential residence at Lány, which had come to persuade Havel to declare the Opposition

Agreement between the strongest right-wing party and strongest left-wing party unconstitutional. Havel didn't want to do that. But it led to a very lively, dramatic situation.

How did you decide then that you should film?

Intuition, for sure, and perhaps a developed instinct. But I also tried to keep an eye on the topic that was emerging. With Havel, the topic was almost offered, which he had named a long time ago in the essay "Power of the Powerless;" now it was about the "Powerlessness of the Powerful." Another topic was politics and the media. And perhaps mainly Havel as a dramatist, man of the theatre, director, who with this experience continues to "direct" things around himself. And also he perceives the world of politics at a distance, as a piece of theatre of the absurd in which he himself is acting.

What about the topics of fatigue, ageing, illness?

Of course. But we didn't try to compete with the television station Nova, so we didn't push our way into hospital rooms. What we do have is Havel's struggle with fatigue and exhaustion. He often appears in the film saying how tired he is.

In general what was Havel like to film in visual terms?

Particularly after his illnesses, Havel mainly sat and talked. So no real "action scenes" have been captured. What was "striking" about Havel was rather that he behaved as if he didn't notice the camera at all, or at least didn't let on that he noticed it. Some other people, as soon as they sense a camera, begin to behave completely different, proclaim "sentences for history," stylize themselves in various ways. Havel soon forgot about the camera. He couldn't have cared less about it. In that respect he was really great.

But what about the others? Were they also indifferent?

It depends. Olga Havlová, for instance, didn't like the project at all. It was as if she still felt persecuted by the police, the fear that everything could be used against them. That's why she didn't want to be filmed, and several times tried to dissuade Havel.

What about Dagmar Havlová?

I can't complain. She was accommodating.

Did you film the wedding?

We did, but we had no idea that we were going to film it. It was shortly after Havel's operation. We wanted to be present for the filming of the New Year's Day address, but Havel's secretary, Vladimír Hanzel, told us that it had already been filmed. He claimed, however, that he had something even better for us, but couldn't tell me what it was.

"At the Castle?" I asked.

"No. Somewhere else, but in some small offices," he replied.

"Something official?"

"Well, something like that, but private," said Hanzel.

"What should we wear?"

"Better put on a jacket."

"And tie?" I asked, surprised.

"And tie," said Hanzel with a nod.

It was only then that I realized what was about to happen.

Do you need Havel’s final say to complete the film?

Not explicitly, but whenever I release a film I always first show it to the people involved. I’ll do it this time too. I believe, however, that just as he hasn’t interfered with the filming so far, he won’t do so even after the editing.

Nevertheless, your film will be “political,” which means that it can be interpreted politically in different ways, and it might make some politicians angry. Have you taken that into account?

That’s up to each person himself, to each person’s sensitivity, tolerance, and self-reflection. For my part, I have no intention of either hurting or helping anyone. My only concern has been to capture a barely visible level of politics and one special life in it.

Will the viewer understand that? You show high-level politics through the reflections of an ironic intellectual who happens to be the President, who is utterly open, occasionally making fun of everything. And occasionally it really is funny. Isn’t that belittling high office?

First of all, I doubt that it’s possible to belittle anything here. But Havel does nothing disgraceful or disrespectful in the film. He acts as natural as possible, reflecting on people and things, calling them by their proper names, sometimes undiplomatically, it’s true. He expresses himself with hyperbole, humour, and often expresses doubts about himself. By the way, I don’t know what could be more belittling of high-level politics than the vulgar memoirs of ex-Premier Miloš Zeman, and you can see that not only were they a best-seller but also that Zeman is a serious candidate for the next president.

Is there any other film like this elsewhere in the world?

I don’t think so. A famous film, of course, is Robert Drew’s *Primary*, which shows the electoral race between John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey in 1960. There is also the documentary film by Karel Vachek called *Elected Affinities* (*Zpříznění volbou*) from 1968, but that is different. I think that what we have filmed is unique also because Havel was a unique phenomenon in politics. Every ordinary, conventional politician would probably have had second thoughts about being filmed.

Jiří Peňás

Pavel Koutecký

Born in Prague in 1952, where in 1982 he graduated from the Film and Television School (FAMU). In 1988–91, attended the National Film and Television School in Beaconsfield, England. In 1982–89, employed in the video studio of the Czech Technical University (ČVUT). In 1990–98, employed at Krátký film Praha (Prague Film Shorts). Has worked continuously with the Film & Sociology Association (formerly Film & Sociology Foundation). Since 1991, teaching at the Documentary Film Department of FAMU. Has filmed several dozen films almost always with the cameraman Stano Slušný.
