

# From the Director

## **CZECHS, THUGS AND ROCK 'N' ROLL**

At the play's core, Tom Stoppard is brilliantly telling the story of Czechoslovakia's struggle through the voice of its youth for whom the right to make music is the expression of personal freedom. As with any good work of art, *Rock 'n' Roll* moves beyond the history of Soviet oppression and an imposed totalitarian regime. It is both a celebration and a warning.



I well remember the days of my youth when as a little white kid in Atlanta, it was verboten to listen to Alan Freed a.k.a. Moondog or Wolfman Jack but we did it anyway. I used to sneak into my brother's bedroom to listen on a crystal set he had crafted out of directions from *Popular Mechanics*. At first it was Rhythm and Blues and then R&R. In those late night sessions, we learned to love the culture of black artists. We heard their pain, their joy and their humanity when everything around us said they were lesser humans. I credit my early love of Fats Domino, the Penguins and Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers with my passionate commitment to civil rights. Not only did the works of R&B and R&R make me more aware of the genius and humanity of African Americans, but also they moved me and a whole generation to embrace our own sense of identity and free choice in matters of civic responsibility.

The role of the arts to "put a human face" on the freedoms of others is unparalleled. Stoppard's recollection of the events of Czechoslovakia's fight for freedom is art unto itself but also homage to art as the central driver in recognizing each other's humanity. It is ironic that the artist is silenced, given Marxist theory. As Max quotes from Marx's well known slogan: "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs."

NPR recently had an interview with Hypernova, a rock band from the Islamic Republic of Iran where it's illegal to perform such music. Although the group now calls Brooklyn home, they began their music in Tehran where harsh punishments were meted out for playing rock music. Their leader, Raam, states: "Growing up in Iran, we were raised in this very Orwellian state, and were always afraid of the authorities. Kids were told to squeal on their parents, and you get to the point where you say, 'F- - - it! I don't care if I'm going to get lashed or thrown into jail. I'm going play my f- - - ing guitar!'"

So too with the Czech band, Plastic People of the Universe. First they are harassed. Then those that listen to them are intimidated. Then kids going to their concerts are beaten and jailed. Stoppard makes a carefully conceived metaphorical point through the character of Eleanor when she describes the way her cancer results in the carving away of pieces of her body. And yet, she declares, "...I am undiminished." And herein lies the tension of the play. Freedoms are always eroded a bit at a time. The hope of the powerful is that the powerless won't notice.

We live in a time where the potential of a national ID is not the stuff of WW II movies. Remember the Nazi at the stateroom door demanding: "Your papers." Corporations are fighting hard to own our DNA and have the same legal standing as an individual. The signing of a nuclear arms treaty is disparaged as giving into a schoolyard bully. Journalism is fighting over ratings as opposed to truth. Fundamental freedoms and rights are eroded, carved away a bit at a time.

So as you watch *Rock 'n' Roll*, recognize it as far more than a dance with history. Rather see it as a call to be vigilant. In Hypernova's debut album, *Through the Chaos*, "Viva La Resistance," says it all: "The boys, they're shouting and the girls, they are dancing, and it ain't no f- - - ing crime!"

—Judith Swift