she contradicts the European critics who see in "Ginger and Fred" a mordant 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.

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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 Czechoslovak 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, unpolemical tale for children — and for childlike adults — "Frau Holle" has not, outside 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 response to "La Strada" was less than she and Mr. Fellini had hoped for (although it was later overwhelmed by favorable reaction), and Miss Masina was truly frightened. "Can you imagine my crisis?" she asks. "Because I thought I had ruined Federico.

"He had cast me as the main actress for this film, in a time when the 'maggiorate' were in fashion." Here she uses the Italian word for voluptuous beauty and physical characteristics 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 well, 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, embroidered tableclothes and goose-down comforters, and a tiled 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 relics 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 Czechoslovakia, 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 of 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 cottage 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 presence.

This is the world Mr. Havel has re-created in "Largo Desolato," the drama that opens at the Public Theater on Tuesday, directed by Richard Foreman and starring Josef Sommer. The lead character is a philosopher and human rights activist named Leopold Kopriva. He is a man reduced by repression to fever, insomnia, writer's block and impotence, a man living on rum and vitamins and waiting for the inevitable knock on the door. His crime is "intellectual 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 that what American audiences frequently mistake as absurdity in Eastern European drama — whether Mr. Havel's "Private View" or Janusz Glowacki's "Cinders," both recently produced at the Public Theater — rather is a condition of life only too real for the author.

Whatever its achievement 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 begs, which is how much the tormented Leopold Kopriva reflects the author who invented him. It is only through the writings 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."

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Vaclav Havel, born May 10, 1936, in Prague, first ran afoul of the Czechoslovak authorities in his late teens. As the scion 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 theater 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-1960's, Mr. Havel saw his plays both published and produced in Czechoslovakia. Many of them were staged in Western Europe, and two, "The Memorandum" and "The Increased Difficulty of Concentration," played in New York. Signs of repression began in late 1967, with the expulsion of several outspoken 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 1969, Dubcek was removed. Censorship was returned. Certain magazines were stopped. The whole intellectual life was emasculated. 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 deadening life for the sake of increasing uniformity; of deepening the spiritual and moral crisis of our country and ceaselessly degrading human dignity with the paltry 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, as it were, 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. Above protests 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."

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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.

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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 facets of the life of a dissident playwright named Vanek — asked by his boss at a brewery to inform on himself, turned down by the friend he asks to sign a human rights petition, and awkwardly enter-

tained by two friends who have decided to stop fighting the political battles.

If the plays produced both laughter and shivers, that was Mr. Havel's intent. As he wrote last year in The New York Review of Books, "It seems that in Central Europe what is most earnest has a way of blending, in a particularly tense manner, with what is most comic. It seems that it is precisely the dimension of distance, of rising above ourselves and making light of ourselves, that lends our concerns just the right shattering seriousness."

Mr. Havel meanwhile was renewing his human rights activities. He joined a group of Czechoslovak writers in sending a statement to an unofficial writers's conference in Budapest. He wrote to Polish leader Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski asking that charges against the dissident Adam Michnik be dropped. And in a letter sent to the organizers of the International Day of Freedom and Human Rights in Paris, Mr. Havel apologized for his absence, explaining, "At this moment that I write to you, an automobile with four policemen is parked in front of my home. Their assignment is to check with whom I meet and to prevent foreign visitors from seeing me."

Since his release from prison in 1983, Mr. Havel has been a man neither caged nor free. He is occasionally arrested and detained for a few days. His mail is routinely opened. The police raided a Prague hotel room he rented several years ago for an office and forbade him its use. A few days before Mr. Papp and Gail Merrifield of the New York Shakespeare Festival visited Mr. Havel last summer, police officers searched his cottage in Hraddecek, confiscating such items as the writer's copy of "Hamlet." Mr. Papp and Miss Merrifield were detained and searched at the Prague airport a few days later, evidently to see if they were smuggling out any of Mr. Havel's writings. They were not, for "Largo Desolato" had already reached New York through other channels. "It was part of a plan," Mr. Papp said. "If they could say Havel was sending something out, they could arrest him again."

Yet the situation is not without its grimly humorous contradictions. Even as the Czechoslovak Government banned Mr. Havel's plays, it allowed him to collect royalties from abroad in much-desired hard currency and to spend them in special stores stocked with luxuries unavailable to the ordinary Czechoslovak. Mr. Havel purchased a Mercedes-Benz, which he drove to his official menial job at a brewery. When the playwright went on vacation last 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."

Since his release from prison, the playwright has been a man neither caged nor free.

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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. Stoppard 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."

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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 samizdats — 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 ruefulness 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 wields surprisingly more power than thousands of anonymous voters under different conditions." ■

March 23, 1986

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