

Estonians have long found that writers from the Czech and Slovak lands understood particularly well the vicissitudes of the 20th century. Be it the absurdities of war described by Jaroslav Hašek in *Švejk* or the nightmare world of Kafka's *Prozess* or the absurdist dystopias of Karel Capek. Understanding the world can be painful, as when I read an essay by Milan Kundera in the early 1980s that used the term *estonazace* or *estonization* to describe the systematic destruction of one's culture by foreign totalitarian rule. In the Czech and Slovak lands, it seemed, they understood us too well.

In 1978 in his classic essay on totalitarian rule, *The Power of the Powerless*, Vaclav Havel wrote:

Life, in its essence moves towards plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution, and self organization – in short, toward the fulfillment of its own freedom, the (post-)totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline.

What better way to stand up to conformity, uniformity and discipline than through Bohemian (in all senses of the word) freedom of one's own spirit?

What place exemplified this better than Vaclav Havel's theatre, *The Magic Lantern*, in 1989, one of many locations of

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birth of democracy in the 20th century? A mixture of the Athenian Agora, the Roman Forum, Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the Globe Theatre and Monty Python's

Flying Circus

and Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters bus

Furthur

,
the Magic Lantern

was a theatre. Yet it was far more real and alive than the totalitarian world that surrounded it. A magical place, a lantern for the democrats of Czechoslovakia who in the course of 24 days toppled the sluggish, thuggish and stagnant communist regime that had stifled that same vibrant, so modern and European culture of Hasek, Capek and Kafka, crushed the democratic spirit of Tomas Masyryk and the Prague Spring of 1968. And at the centre of

The Magic Lantern

was Vaclav Havel.

Twenty-four days that shook not only the world but brought a velvet non-violent curtain down on a theory of ruling the human spirit that had left millions dead and millions and millions more in spiritual chains.

The battle engaged by Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel and hundreds of thousands of Europeans in Berlin, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw 20 years ago in 1989 lit a thousand magic lanterns of light for those elsewhere still struggling under authoritarian and totalitarian rule. From Estonia to South Africa, the spirit of democracy caught on to light up our lanterns. We have seen that magic light of democracy continue to spread.

And it continues to inspire with revolutions for democracy across the globe that all take the Velvet Revolution as their touchstone.

Yet, we have seen that history is still with us, that the stultifying hand of authoritarianism has not been stayed. No longer do we see democracy qualified as „socialist“ but as „managed“. Again, we hear that democracy and human rights are not universal but a matter of where you live.

It is no accident that Vaclav Havel continues to stand up for democracy and human rights, be they trampled upon in Cuba or Burma.

Therefore, it is a special privilege today to present this award to Vaclav Havel and to the people of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Ā

Additional information [Atlantic Council webpage](#)