



The Memorandum

Václav Havel , *Vera Blackwell* (Translator) , *Tom Stoppard* (Introduction)

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A profound satire on all aspects of bureaucracy, a new and impossibly difficult language, 'Ptydepe', is introduced into the office with the alleged function of improving communications by standardisation.

The Memorandum Details

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Author : Václav Havel , Vera Blackwell (Translator) , Tom Stoppard (Introduction)

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Vel Veeter says

I found this book in a little free library, and the person who put it there also put in a bunch of Marxist critique and even writings of Marx, and it was right outside of a school playground. So I was like “Dude” because it was definitely a dude....and I took all the books and redistributed them to other Little Free Libraries in the area (Aha! Marxism!) but I kept this one.

For one, I think I hate, but am interested by absurdist literature, especially plays (on both fronts), and because I definitely like writings of politicians before they were politicians, or in this case a writer who became one.

And this play deals with a government bureaucratic office in which a new language is being introduced in order to streamline the paperwork in the office and in order to have a sort-of top-down language of the people. And of course most in the office just roll with it, while one hapless manager has to deal with it and its issues.

The issues with the language are that it prioritizes interjections in language over thought and action. I liked this little dig, but especially as the play wore on it became clear that the issue is not so much what gets prioritized over what, but specifically trying to maximize efficiency in language itself is a necessarily violent act.

One of the beautiful messy things about language is that it is mostly descriptive and performative. So words come about from use, and when they come about in order to artificially capture form or intent, then it feels crass and annoying. Think about how much people hate fake business speak, mostly because it either elevates commonplace ideas for no good reason, but puts unnecessary structures on top of already existing ideas.

I liked this play, but it was limited, and I wonder if something of the artfulness was lost in translation.

As a teacher who often sits through faculty meetings, one of the banes we often deal with is when something simple or common or commonsense gets twisted or manipulated or overly elevated (often borrowing from business world or worse an idea designed to address a small and specific issue is blown up as a panacea), and so it was satisfying to watch someone react to people around him talking utter nonsense while believing they are speaking wisdom.

amy says

Freshman year - I played an androgynous character and learned how to tie a double Windsor. I'll never forget the cast. We had a great time together...

Rachel says

since i was in a horrible production of this, i absolutely hate this play

reading plan...

Sarah says

So focused on making a point about the society that it doesn't hang together as a play.

Anxhela Cikopano says

I sensed he is a drama master, this just proved me right....

Haaze says

Have you ever been at the mechanic's waiting for your car to get fixed? It is late in the afternoon and in the corner there is an almost empty although hot coffee pot. Have you ever tasted such coffee? This play reminded me quite a bit of the experience of drinking it. Hot, bitter and pointless.

Havel's play is devoted to a new bureaucratic language being introduced in an office complex. It is a satire barbed against the bureaucracy of the state. However, it is also a play lacking in characterizations, plot and poetic language. It is dry, bitter and pointless as far as I am concerned. Not recommended unless one wants to dig deeper into the life of the artists working under the communist regime in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. I understand how the play is a sharp satire focused on the conditions of the bureaucracy in communist Czechoslovakia. I presume drama was one way to build indirect resistance towards the regime. It was similar in nature to Havel's "The Garden Party".

Ah, at this point I long for Ibsen's plays.....an oasis after being lost in the desert!

Ansi Sev Ates says

This play tells about our everyday reality with a unique language that carries the traces of Kafka and Beckett. Both funny and biting familiar.

Steven says

The flawless, absurd logic of bureaucracy is revealed in this dark comedy by Havel where the new language Ptydepe is introduced - a language no-one understands but that eliminates all the ambiguities of our everyday languages.

Andrew says

What a fabulous comment on the state-socialist system. If you aren't very familiar with the dysfunction of that system, you might miss a lot of meaning.

Brad says

Brilliant piece of literature and drama constructed with a brilliant vocabulary, mind-bending word-play and paradox, and a blinding loss of individuality among the corporate rubble.

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Frumpy Mum says

I can't remember the full details of this book, but I do remember that it really struck a chord with me as a linguist and made me think about the language we use and how it carries so much meaning.
