

Pussy Riot and the Plastic People of the Universe

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Tom Stoppard's wonderful play *Rock N' Roll* covers the period between 1968, when Soviet tanks rolled into Prague, and 1990, when the Rolling Stones played the city. It's Stoppard at his near-best: warm and funny, romantic and revolutionary, dedicated to ideas.

At the heart of the play is the reluctant dissident Jan. In Prague, says Jan, "there is only one agent of truth. That is not human—humans disagree with each other." He is extolling the virtues of British newspapers. Jan, who has a doctorate and a state-assigned bakery job, loves England nearly as much as he loves rock music.

I picked up *Rock N' Roll* this week, in the aftermath of the Pussy Riot sentencing in Russia. Three feminist/anarchist musicians were given two years in a prison camp for staging a "protest prayer" during mass at Moscow's Orthodox cathedral. Supporters have defaced and cut down crosses. The musicians—who, contrary to the judge's decision, are not anti-Christian—have asked for a stop to this.

There's much to be said about this situation, and the Internet and traditional media have risen to the occasion. While the standard narrative is about free speech, some have complicated this picture. Simon Jenkins [calls](#) the West hypocritical for its handwringing over suppression of speech in Russia. A blogger at [Women in Theology](#) argues that the court's response to the musicians is fundamentally about gender. And indeed, the women of Pussy Riot have been condemned by a culture with an interest in pathologizing politically active women in the name of [defending "tradition"](#). The existence of other attempts to silence dissent or squelch rights—in the West or elsewhere—doesn't change this.

In Stoppard's play, Jan starts out caring only for music. As he grows in his appreciation for the Plastic People of the Universe—or just the Plastics—he claims that the band members aren't dissidents, just musicians. But it becomes increasingly clear that the government is wary of the Plastics precisely because they don't care for fame or notoriety—because they cannot be bought.

The Plastics, a real-life band, were imprisoned in Prague. But they by no means represented all the dissidents lurking in the Czech capital in the '70s and '80s. Jan and his friend Ferdo adopt instead a variety of positions articulated by a host of Czech intellectuals. They debate the how and why of protest, of open letters and essays, of charters and demands for the release of prisoners. They lob charges of “moral exhibitionism” and “political imbecile.” They have exchanges like this:

FERDO. Who is going to lay bare the ideological contradictions of bureaucratic dictatorship? Us intellectuals, or --?

JAN. The Plastics.

As for Pussy Riot, its performances cross the boundaries of what pious Russian Orthodox folks—and many American Christians—want to see in their houses of worship. It’s pretty vulgar stuff. I listened to “Punk Prayer,” and while I’m sure the poetry is lost a bit in the translation, I don't think I'll be playing it on repeat on my stereo.

Of course, whether I like it or not is [not really the point](#). Vaclav Havel said this of the Plastics:

There was disturbing magic in the music, and a kind of inner warning. Here was something serious and genuine... Suddenly I realized that, regardless of how many vulgar words these people used or how long their hair was, truth was on their side... in their music was an experience of metaphysical sorrow and a longing for salvation.

Yes, the women of Pussy Riot trespassed on private property. Yes, they disrupted worship and swore in front of an icon. But would we have paid any mind if they hadn't? The group has staged other events to shine a light on challenges to freedom—of speech, but also of religion and ideology and sexual expression—and we never heard a thing.

We Christians always need to ask if our sensibilities are too easily offended. It’s important to question claims by agents of authority—political, religious, judicial—that someone has blasphemed. As the Republican National Convention invokes sanctity and freedom this week, we should remember that the meanings of these words cannot be taken for granted.

As Jan says, people are meant to disagree. We all experience and interpret things differently. Christians have often resisted this, but it seems to be the way of things—and, finally, the way of God. And so we have to communicate across our differences, or we're left isolated, imprisoned. Pussy Riot caught the world's attention and called us to focus on how society—in Russia and elsewhere—works out the stuff of life and art and truth.