

Czechs & Balances

David Černý is an interesting mix of energy and despondency. Frenetically energetic and bubbling over with new projects, he insists that he's part of the "not really important garbage left in his country" after the Holocaust, the Beneš decrees and the waves of emigration under Communism.

A conversation on Czechia, a generation after the revolution.

by **Christian Cummins**



CHRISTIAN CUMMINS

first visited Prague as love-struck teenager in 1999 and has been fascinated by the mystery and romance of Czechia ever since.

DAVID ČERNÝ

is a Czech sculptor who has kicked off numerous debates in his country and in Europe with his art, yet insists his art "can't change anything."



You gained international renown when you painted a tank pink in 1991 – protest that made people smile. Do you think cheekiness, humor as a weapon, is important for the Czech character? 06:31 ✓

No. But as Czechs, it is said we have a special sense of irony and self-irony; certain things I have done wouldn't have been possible in, say, Poland or Hungary. It is probably related to our low level of national pride, so we can make fun of ourselves. 06:58 ✓

I grew up loving the stories of the Good Soldier Schwejk, the fictional Czech who helped bring down an Empire with wry humor and impertinence... 08:30 ✓

We do have a special irony, but it is not about winning wars. 09:07 ✓

But stopping them? 10:25 ✓

I wouldn't even say that. The Russian occupation didn't end by anyone having fun. It was, as Solzhenitsyn puts it, the electric guitar. 13:06 ✓

I always loved the story of how, during the 1968 Soviet invasion, Czechoslovak villages changed names and road signs so armies would get lost. It was wonderfully inventive, nonviolent resistance. 13:48 ✓

Yes of course; but you have to realize what happened afterwards. There was maybe one month of this and then, during "normalization," many people lost their jobs. My mother and aunt were sent to milk cows. So it wasn't that funny. 14:14 ✓

When people look back now, what are their thoughts? 14:14 ✓

The older generation sees communism with rose-tinted glasses and the younger generation doesn't seem to bother with the past. If you ask about '68, people who are 40 now say they don't know what happened. That's weird. 14:58 ✓

When Vaclav Havel was President, it seemed like an exciting new start for Czechia, with artists playing a prominent role in the early government. Why not now? 15:26 ✓



My guess is that we expected change fast, and everything would be back to normal within one generation. We were wrong. It will take the same time as it took communism to destroy the country. It was not only [spiritual] destruction but good people immigrating. That fantastic, short time while Havel was President was not normal. The messed-up situation we are in now is the reality. 16:18 ✓



Our President Miloš Zeman is trying to set up a government with the far-right and communists. I would never have expected that. If I had known, I would have stayed in New York. I came back in '96 because there were more opportunities here. Three years later, Václav Klaus was elected, and the messed-up time began. 16:20 ✓

You must be proud of something. 16:48 ✓

I'd like to be proud of where I come from. During that brief period of Havel, it was great that people were excited about my country. Now, I avoid saying where I am from. Of course, I love the city, but the groups who built the Prague that tourists walk through are no longer here. My small wish is that the country would not lean towards the East. 17:17 ✓

You'd like more multiculturalism, but Czech voters are very resistant to immigration. Why? 18:15 ✓

I am not a sociologist, but it has to do with all the wars, from the Swedes to Napoleon going through and looting. It is a fear of something unknown. 18:48 ✓

You were protesting with art 25 years ago. Do you still find the energy to keep challenging power? 19:14 ✓

No 😊 19:18 ✓

Well, what drives you on? 19:38 ✓

Boredom 😊 From time to time, the anger pops up and you can't stop yourself but the last time was four years ago when I put that middle finger on the Vltava river, aimed at the Castle. But at this moment I see sparks of optimism, but it is only tiny sparks. 19:45 ✓

You designed that iconic punk T-shirt of Karel Schwarzenberg with a pink Mohawk, an elderly aristocrat running for President... 19:48 ✓

Well look, Karel Schwarzenberg is a good friend of mine. My adopted grandfather 😊 Beside the fact, I wish he could have been President. 19:58 ✓

Your piece Entropa (funded by the EU) mocked stereotypes within the European Union. What are your feelings on the EU now? 19:59 ✓

Well, I hope we stay, of course. If the far-right politicians would force acting Prime Minister Babiš to hold a referendum and we left, I would jump on the next plane. 20:04 ✓

Entropa is world famous. Can you imagine artists being recognized as coming from the country of David Černý? 20:09 ✓

No. If there was any really famous Czech it was Miloš Forman. He was an icon and a superhero, and he just died. 20:18 ✓

