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University Welcomes Playwright Havel

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If you haven't heard the buzz, Czech writer, dramatist, and political leader Václav Havel arrives at Columbia University today for a seven-week residency featuring lectures, interviews, performances, and panels inspired by his life and ideas.

A lauded playwright, as well as a political and human rights activist, Václav Havel was a vital player in the Velvet Revolution, which succeeded in toppling the communist regime in Czechoslovakia in 1989, using non-violent demonstrations and negotiations. After spending years in and out of prison for his outspoken ideas and radical plays, Havel emerged as president, first of Czechoslovakia and then of the Czech Republic.

The Arts Initiative at Columbia University has organized at least 15 events relating to Havel's life—including a discussion between Havel and former President Bill Clinton about the challenges of new democracies—exclusive to the Columbia community. All tickets are free, but reservations to the events start at noon today. To reserve your spot, go to www.havel.columbia.edu. For events not-to-miss, check the sidebar.

Havel's residency was conceived by University President Lee Bollinger and took almost three years of planning. "This is a Bollinger project all the way," said Gregory Mosher, director of CUArts, who helped organize Havel's residency. "All that kept it alive during that time was Lee and Havel wanting it to happen."

The goal of the events in relation to Havel's residency is to inspire discussion about worldwide questions relating to human rights and freedoms. "We're not here to rehearse Havel's biography. We're here to use his example of courage and intelligence to look at the future," said Mosher.

"I'm really aware that for Columbia students now, it [the Velvet Revolution] is like World War II to me. It's something that happened just before I was around, but it might have been the Civil War ... This question of how do you make this era and history vivid was the first question we approached," Mosher said of the motivation for the events.

"We decided early on this was not going to be just a review of the Velvet Revolution or his [Havel's] career as a playwright in the '50s, '60s, and '70s, his years in prison in the '70s and '80s, and ultimately as his emergence as a leader of a completely peaceful revolution," he added. Instead, most events use Havel's life and work as a springboard for discussion of politics, revolutions, and art today.

With Havel's name attached, CUArts met with little resistance in signing on high-profile speakers, such as Nobel Prize winners like Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk and Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka.

"The respect for Havel is so unbelievable that anyone we asked said yes. There was no argument. The commitment to do an event with Havel, or even about Havel, was instantaneous," said Mosher.

Havel's residency will be the first time he will spend any time in New York "as a citizen, as a private person," said Mosher. "It's clear that this next of period of life is one he doesn't want to waste."

EVENTS:

If you want to see a current application of President Václav Havel's experience, check out the Kraft Program Series, "Challenges of New Democracies: A Conversation with President Václav Havel and former President Bill Clinton." Moderated by President Lee Bollinger. Alfred Lerner Hall. Nov. 15. 3 p.m. to 4 p.m.

If you have no idea who Havel is, check out the introductory lecture by his biographer, Carol Rocamora on Oct. 27, 1 p.m. to 2 p.m., in 702 Hamilton.

If you're into high-profile names, listen in on a conversation about literature and citizenship with recent Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk on Nov. 2, 7:30 p.m., Miller Theater.

If you want to see a concert of the Czech band that was imprisoned during communist rule and that was the subject of Tom Stoppard's most recent play, Rock'n'Roll, check out The Plastic People of the Universe concert on Nov. 11, 8 p.m., location TBA.

If you want to see a performance of one of Havel's plays, check out The Beggar's Opera on Dec. 1 and 2, 8 p.m., Miller Theater. Or attend the reading of The Garden Party directed by Israel Horovitz on Nov. 12, 3 p.m., in Miller Theater.

If you want to hear how Havel's experience relates to free speech, check out the Journalism and Citizenship panel, moderated by Nicholas Lemann on Nov. 21, 7 p.m., at the Journalism School.

If you want to enrich your Core experience, drop by the Core Contemporary Civilization Coursewide Lecture by Václav Havel on Nov. 10, 1 p.m., in Roone Arledge.

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