

Václav Havel: Theatre, Politics & Dissent

Course code: LIT 406/506

Semester and year: Spring 2021

Day and time: Tuesday 11:30-14:15

Instructor: Prof. Ondřej Pilný, PhD

Instructor contact: ondrej.pilny@aauni.edu

Consultation hours: Tuesday 14:15-14:45 and per individual arrangement.

Credits US/ECTS	3/6	Level	Intermediate
Length	15 weeks	Pre-requisite	TOEFL iBT 71
Contact hours	42 hours	Course type	Bachelor Master Required/Elective

1. Course Description

The primary objective of the course is to introduce the students to Václav Havel, a central figure of the Velvet Revolution in 1989, as Czechoslovakia's first post-communist president, and prior to this a leading political dissident and avant-garde playwright. Students will first discuss Havel's involvement in the theatre *On the Balustrade* in the 1960s. His early absurdist plays will be viewed also in association with the work of prominent European playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, whose work Havel helped to introduce in Czechoslovakia, and Tom Stoppard, who has acknowledged a debt to Havel's drama. The course will move to outline Havel's involvement as a dissident after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact, and follow his removal from the public sphere by the totalitarian regime. Havel's work as a political dissident will be traced through the reading of selected essays and petitions, including his letter to President Husák and the Charter 77 declaration. The latter will be read in its broader context of the coming together of various strands of political dissent (from opposition intellectuals through ex-communist politicians to the Czech underground movement) due to the persecution of the rock band The Plastic People of the Universe. Finally, Havel's official career as a politician will be outlined, from his role as a founding member of the Civic Forum in 1989, through two terms in office as President, up to his retirement from top politics and return to creative writing, as exemplified by his last play *Leaving* and his subsequent film version of the same. Throughout, Havel's career will be viewed on the backdrop of life in Czechoslovakia, through the mild thaw of the 60s, a return to totalitarianism in the 70s and 80s, up to the liberal atmosphere of the Velvet Revolution, with the objective to facilitate a better understanding of everyday life in these various periods. Finally, students will have a chance to discuss a recent (2020) biographical film about Havel, considering how it conceptualises Havel's importance and legacy. The course will be complemented by screenings of plentiful documentary material (and, the COVID pandemic allowing, the physical presentation of a variety of printed and other materials and artifacts).

2. Student Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Comprehend and have a clear understanding of Václav Havel's work as a playwright in the broader context of European theatre, and as a political activist and politician.
- Comprehend the importance of the production context of drama for the creation of meaning, as instantiated by the interpretation of the theatre of the absurd on either side of the Iron Curtain.

- Understand the position of Václav Havel's thought in the context of twentieth-century politics and philosophy.
- Understand the nature of everyday life in the totalitarian regime of communist Czechoslovakia.
- Comprehend the nature of political dissent in Czechoslovakia, including the role of anti-communist intellectuals, pre-1968 reform communists, and radical rock musicians.
- Identify clearly how Czech politics has changed since Havel's time as President.
- Understand how Havel's legacy is perceived in contemporary Czech Republic.

3. Reading Material

Required Materials

- Václav Havel, *The Garden Party and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1993)
- Václav Havel, *Leaving* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008)
- Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990)
- Václav Havel, selected essays from the Václav Havel Library
- Samuel Beckett *Catastrophe*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987)
- Tom Stoppard, *Rock'n'Roll* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)
- "The Charter 77 Declaration"
- A selection of secondary and biographical sources.

All primary material is available to students in e-form on NEO.

Recommended Materials

- Michael Žantovský, *Havel. A Life* (London: Atlantic Books, 2014)
- Michael Žantovský, *Havel* (Praha: Argo, 2014)

4. Teaching methodology

Classes will combine introductory comments by the instructor, student presentations and debates over these, and detailed discussions of the assigned reading. Screenings of documentary material or extracts from productions, audio clips, photographs and printed material will complement the discussion wherever relevant.

Each session features a set of assigned questions. These are intended to focus the students' thinking about the texts and to trigger in-class discussion. Students will be expected to formulate provisional answers to the questions prior to each class.

5. Course Schedule

Date	Class Agenda
9 Feb	<p>Topic: Introduction Description: Václav Havel: His Life and His Work Reading: - Assignments/deadlines: -</p>
16 Feb	<p>Topic: Václav Havel, <i>The Garden Party</i> and the Theatre of the Absurd Description: A discussion of Václav Havel, <i>The Garden Party</i> and the concept of the theatre of the absurd. Reading: Václav Havel, <i>The Garden Party</i> Assignments/deadlines: Questions: 1. Outline the basic plot of the play.</p>

	<p>2. What is the power of the individual characters (the Director, Falk, the Clerk, the Secretary, Hugo) determined by?</p> <p>3. Who, or what, are the characters afraid of?</p> <p>Presentation: Martin Esslin on the theatre of the absurd</p>
23 Feb	<p>Topic: Václav Havel and the Theatre of the Absurd as Hyper-realism</p> <p>Description: A discussion of Václav Havel, <i>The Memorandum</i>, the work of the Theatre on the Balustrade, and the reception of the theatre of the absurd in the Eastern Bloc.</p> <p>Reading: Václav Havel, <i>The Memorandum</i>; Ondřej Pilný, "Jan Grossman, Prague Structuralism, and the Grotesque"</p> <p>Assignments/deadlines:</p> <p><i>Questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How is Ptydepe supposed to function? 2. How does Ptydepe actually function? 3. Is Gross an honest, old-style director? <p>Presentation: Václav Havel, <i>The Memorandum</i></p>
2 Mar	<p>Topic: From Playwright to Dissident</p> <p>Description: Havel's Letter to Secretary General Husák</p> <p>Reading: Václav Havel, "Dear Dr. Husák"</p> <p>Assignments/deadlines:</p> <p><i>Questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the main characteristics of the "consolidation" of contemporary Czechoslovak society according to Havel? 2. How has consumerism been harnessed by the authorities? 3. How does Havel characterise culture in contemporary Czechoslovakia? 4. How does Havel define an entropic regime? <p>Presentation: The Prague Spring of 1968 and the Invasion of the Warsaw Pact</p>
9 Mar	<p>Topic: From Playwright to Dissident</p> <p>Description: The Vaněk Plays</p> <p>Reading: Václav Havel, <i>Audience</i>; <i>Protest</i></p> <p>Assignments/deadlines:</p> <p><i>Questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you interpret the ending of <i>Audience</i> as pessimistic? 2. Why does Staněk in <i>Protest</i> not sign the petition? 3. What are the similarities between Vaněk and Staněk in <i>Protest</i>? Why does Havel not make them much more distinctly different? <p>Presentation 1: Václav Havel, <i>Audience</i></p> <p>Presentation 2: Václav Havel, <i>Protest</i></p>
16 Mar	<p>Topic: The Dissident</p> <p>Description: The Plastic People of the Universe and Charter 77</p> <p>Reading: "The Charter 77 Declaration"; Tom Stoppard, <i>Rock'n'Roll</i></p> <p>Assignments/deadlines:</p> <p><i>Questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the effect of the use of rock music in between the scenes in <i>Rock'n'Roll</i>? 2. Is Max wrong in remaining a Marxist after the 1968 Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia? 3. Does Stoppard's play argue that rock'n'roll significantly contributed to the removal of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia? <p>Presentation: The Music in Tom Stoppard's <i>Rock'n'Roll</i></p>
23 Mar	<p>Topic: The Dissident</p> <p>Description: "The Power of the Powerless" and Imprisonment</p>

	<p>Reading: Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless"</p> <p>Assignments/deadlines:</p> <p><i>Questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does Havel define power? 2. How does Havel define a post-totalitarian regime? 3. How does Havel conceptualise "life in truth"? 4. What are to be the principal roles of the dissidents in the society?
30 Mar	<p>Topic: The Dissident</p> <p>Description: Samuel Beckett and Václav Havel</p> <p>Reading: Samuel Beckett, <i>Catastrophe</i>; Václav Havel, <i>Mistake</i></p> <p>Assignments/deadlines:</p> <p><i>Questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the meaning of the actor's final gesture in <i>Catastrophe</i>? 2. How do you interpret the title of <i>Catastrophe</i>? 3. Is <i>Catastrophe</i> a play about political violence? 4. Is <i>Mistake</i> a play about political violence? And if so, does it relate to a specific context (e.g., 1980s Czechoslovakia)? 5. How do you interpret the final violent action of the prisoners against Xiboy in <i>Mistake</i>? <p>Presentation 1: Samuel Beckett, <i>Catastrophe</i></p> <p>Presentation 2: Václav Havel, <i>Mistake</i></p>
6 Apr	mid-term break
13 Apr	<p>Topic: The Dissident</p> <p>Description: Havel's Reflections in Jail; The Life of Olga Havlová</p> <p>Reading: Václav Havel, a selection from <i>Letters to Olga</i></p> <p>Assignments/deadlines:</p> <p><i>Questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What have you learnt about Havel's life in jail from his letters? 2. What are the likely reasons for Olga Havlová's disagreement with the idea of emigration to the USA? 3. On what grounds does Havel say that one should pay the tram fare even when alone and unwatched? Who or what are we ultimately responsible to, according to Havel? <p>Presentation: Havel's <i>Letters to Olga</i></p>
20 Apr	<p>Topic: The Dissident</p> <p>Description: Disturbing the Peace: Selected Essays</p> <p>Reading: Václav Havel, "Politics and Conscience"; "Stories and Totalitarianism"; "A Word about Words"</p> <p>Assignments/deadlines:</p> <p><i>Questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why does Havel call East European totalitarian regimes "a convex mirror of the inevitable consequences of rationalism" in "Politics and Conscience"? 2. How does Havel define "anti-political politics", and why does he favour it in "Politics and Conscience"? 3. Why is the totalitarian system "directed against the story", as outlined in "Stories and Totalitarianism"? How does Havel define "story"? 4. Why are private and public life in totalitarianism inseparable according to "Stories and Totalitarianism"? 5. Why is it necessary to always be suspicious of words, according to "A Word about Words"? Consider the contrast of humbleness and arrogance as outlined by Havel, and its validity as regards his examples. <p>Presentation: Mikhail Gorbachev's "Perestroika" and its Effect on Eastern Europe.</p>

27 Apr	<p>Topic: 1989. From Dissident to President Description: Havel as Politician and President Reading: Václav Havel, "New Year Address, 1990"; "The Role of the Czech President, 1993" Assignments/deadlines: Essay abstracts due. <i>Questions:</i> 1. What are the two main reasons for the future of Czechoslovakia being hopeful according to Havel's 1990 New Year address? 2. What are the tasks that Havel gives himself as President in 1990? 3. What are the ways in which the Czech president 1) can, and 2) should influence the politics of the country according to Havel's 1993 article? Presentation: The "Velvet Revolution" and the Fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia (1989-90)</p>
4 May	<p>Topic: From President to Citizen Description: The Legacy of Václav Havel Reading: Václav Havel, <i>Leaving</i> Assignments/deadlines: <i>Questions:</i> 1. Given that most audiences are going to view the protagonist (Rieger) as being based on the author, what is the role of Voice in the play? 2. What is the role of allusions to <i>King Lear</i> and <i>The Cherry Orchard</i>? 3. Do you interpret the play as a satirical reflection of Havel's own experience as a politician, or rather a comment on contemporary Western politics in a more general sense? Presentation: Václav Havel, <i>Leaving</i>: The Film Version versus the Play</p>
11 May	<p>Topic: Václav Havel for Posterity? Description: Discussion of Slávek Horák's feature film <i>Havel</i> (2020) Reading: - Assignments/deadlines: Final essays due. <i>Questions:</i> 1. How much have you learnt from the film about Havel as a person? 2. Did you detect any factual errors in the film? 3. Are you happy with the way the film outlines the principal ideas expressed in Havel's essays?</p>
18 May	Final test (online). Detailed feedback on final essays (optional).

6. Course Requirements and Assessment (with estimated workloads)

Assignment	Workload (hours)	Weight in Final Grade	Evaluated Institutional Learning Outcomes*
Class participation in debates based on the assigned reading	42 (class time) + 42 (preparation for class)	25%	1, 2, 3
Presentation	18	20%	1, 2, 3
Final test	18	20%	1, 3
Final essay	30	35%	1, 2, 3
TOTAL	150	100%	

*1 = Critical Thinking; 2 = Effective Communication; 3 = Effective and Responsible Action

7. Detailed description of the assignments

a. Participation in Debates Based on the Assigned Reading

Students are required to do the assigned reading in advance of the class. They are expected to attend class regularly, be on time, and respect the rules and manners of the classroom that are customary at university level. Active participation in debates is a condition of attendance. In case a student is found not to have read the assigned text, they will be marked as absent for the class. Students will be marked absent if they miss 25 percent or more of a class by arriving late or leaving early.

The requirement that students miss not more than 35% of real-time classes is temporarily suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, any unexcused absences in real time must be made up by the submission of answers to the questions listed in the syllabus for the missed class. The minimum length of each submission is 1 000 words; the submissions are going to be graded and the grade is going to count towards the final participation grade.

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
Critical thinking	30
Close-reading skills	30
Participation in debates	30

b. Presentation

Each student will be required to deliver an in-class presentation. The topics of these are indicated in the course syllabus; details should be consulted with the course instructor. Presentations must be based on independent research of relevant sources (online or print); students take the responsibility for any errors of fact copied from their sources. The duration of the presentation should be approximately 20 minutes; each presentation will be followed by a "questions and answers" from the audience. Judicious use of Powerpoint or similar software is recommended, and will be mandatory for online classes. Should the number of students exceed the number of topics, students will be asked to work in couples based on the decision of the course instructor.

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
Independent research (basic)	25
Identification of key issues	25
Ability to explain the topic to peers	25
Presentation skills	25

c. Final Test

Students are required to take a brief test at the end of the course. This will consist of simple, mostly multiple-choice questions, the only purpose of which is to verify that they have read all the assigned texts, including those for sessions that they may have missed. The test will take place on **18 May**. Any students who fail the test are allowed one additional attempt to take the test, provided that their F grade was not the consequence of cheating. The extra date for the re-sit of the test must be requested from the course instructor, and the time for the test will be subject to the course instructor's availability.

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
Knowledge of the texts under discussion	100

d. Final Essay

The final essay is a research paper written out of class, the minimum length of which is 3 000 words. Topics are subject to students' choice, within the range of texts and contexts discussed in the course. The choice of topic is approved (or otherwise) in the form of the submission of a 200-word essay abstract (the **deadline for essay abstracts is 27 April**). The course instructor will be available throughout the semester for consultations regarding essay topics. The chief objective of giving the students a relatively free hand in their choice is to ensure that the essay topic is not only relevant to their academic interests, but also exciting enough to result in high-quality work. The **deadline for the submission of essays is 11 May**. The use of relevant secondary materials is strictly required; all secondary material must be properly referenced with accordance to the MLA or Chicago style. Sources that are not considered relevant for the purpose of the essay include websites of the gradesaver.com-type, personal websites (excluding those of playwrights, directors or other theatre professionals), Wikipedia or similar online encyclopedias, fan sites or blogs. If in doubt as to whether a source is adequate, please contact the course instructor.

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
Independent research	25
Critical thinking	25
Judicious use of relevant secondary sources	25
Academic writing skills	25

8. General Requirements and School Policies

General requirements

All coursework is governed by AAU's academic rules. Students are expected to be familiar with the academic rules in the Academic Codex and Student Handbook and to maintain the highest standards of honesty and academic integrity in their work.

Electronic communication and submission

The university and instructors shall only use students' university email address for communication, with additional communication via NEO LMS or Microsoft Teams. Students sending e-mail to an instructor shall clearly state the course code and the topic in the subject heading, for example, "COM101-1 Mid-term Exam. Question". All electronic submissions are through NEO LMS. No substantial pieces of writing (especially take-home exams and essays) can be submitted outside of NEO LMS.

Attendance

Attendance, i.e., presence in class in real-time, is expected and encouraged. However, the requirement that students miss not more than 35% of real-time classes is temporarily suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Absence excuse and make-up options

Should a student be absent from classes for relevant reasons (illness, serious family matters), s/he can submit to the Dean of Students an Absence Excuse Request Form supplemented with documents providing reasons for the absence. These must be submitted within one week of the absence. If possible, it is recommended the instructor be informed of the absence in advance. Should a student be absent during the add/drop period due to a change in registration this will be an excused absence if s/he submits an Absence Excuse Request Form along with the finalized add/drop form.

Students whose absence has been excused by the Dean of Students are entitled to make up assignments and exams provided their nature allows. Assignments missed due to unexcused absences which cannot be made up, may result in a decreased or failing grade as specified in the syllabus.

Students are responsible for contacting their instructor within one week of the date the absence was excused to arrange for make-up options.

Late work: No late submissions will be accepted – please follow the deadlines.

Electronic devices

Electronic devices (e.g. phones, tablets, laptops) may be used only for class-related activities (taking notes, looking up related information, etc.). Any other use will result in the student being marked absent and/or being expelled from the class. No electronic devices may be used during tests or exams unless required by the exam format and the instructor.

Eating is not allowed during classes.

Cheating and disruptive behavior

If a student engages in disruptive conduct unsuitable for a classroom environment, the instructor may require the student to withdraw from the room for the duration of the class and shall report the behavior to the Dean.

Students engaging in behavior which is suggestive of cheating will, at a minimum, be warned. In the case of continued misconduct, the exam or assignment will be failed and the student will be expelled from the exam or class.

Plagiarism and Academic Tutoring Center

Plagiarism is “the unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one’s own original work.” (Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 2nd Edition, Random House, New York, 1993)

Turnitin’s White Paper ‘The Plagiarism Spectrum’ (available at <http://go.turnitin.com/paper/plagiarism-spectrum>) identifies 10 types of plagiarism ordered from most to least severe:

1. CLONE: An act of submitting another’s work, word-for-word, as one’s own.
2. CTRL-C: A written piece that contains significant portions of text from a single source without alterations.
3. FIND-REPLACE: The act of changing key words and phrases but retaining the essential content of the source in a paper.
4. REMIX: An act of paraphrasing from other sources and making the content fit together seamlessly.
5. RECYCLE: The act of borrowing generously from one’s own previous work without citation; To self-plagiarize.
6. HYBRID: The act of combining perfectly cited sources with copied passages—without citation—in one paper.
7. MASHUP: A paper that represents a mix of copied material from several different sources without proper citation.
8. 404 ERROR: A written piece that includes citations to non-existent or inaccurate information about sources
9. AGGREGATOR: The “Aggregator” includes proper citation, but the paper contains almost no original work.
10. RE-TWEET: This paper includes proper citation but relies too closely on the text’s original wording and/or structure.

At minimum, plagiarism from types 1 through 8 will result in a failing grade for the assignment and shall be reported to the Dean. The Dean may initiate a disciplinary

procedure pursuant to the Academic Codex. Allegations of bought papers and intentional or consistent plagiarism always entail disciplinary hearing and may result in expulsion from AAU.

If unsure about technical aspects of writing, students are encouraged to consult with the tutors of the AAU Academic Tutoring Center. For more information and/or to book a tutor, please contact the ATC at: <http://atc.simplybook.me/sheduler/manage/event/1/>.

Course accessibility and inclusion

Students with disabilities are asked to contact the Dean of Students as soon as possible to discuss reasonable accommodations. Academic accommodations are not retroactive. Students who will be absent from course activities due to religious holidays may seek reasonable accommodations by contacting the Dean of Students in writing within the first two weeks of the term. All requests must include specific dates for which the student requests accommodations.

9. Grading Scale

Letter Grade	Percentage*	Description
A	95-100	Excellent performance. The student has shown originality and displayed an exceptional grasp of the material and a deep analytical understanding of the subject.
A-	90-94	
B+	87-89	Good performance. The student has mastered the material, understands the subject well and has shown some originality of thought and/or considerable effort.
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Fair performance. The student has acquired an acceptable understanding of the material and essential subject matter of the course, but has not succeeded in translating this understanding into consistently creative or original work.
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	65-69	Poor. The student has shown some understanding of the material and subject matter covered during the course. The student's work, however, has not shown enough effort or understanding to allow for a passing grade in School Required Courses. It does qualify as a passing mark for the General College Courses and Electives.
D	60-64	
F	0-59	Fail. The student has not succeeded in mastering the subject matter covered in the course.

* Decimals should be rounded to the nearest whole number.

Prepared by: Ondřej Pilný

Date: 22 December 2020

Approved by: Andrew Giarelli

Date: Jan. 15, 2021