On Campus

Blue Velvet

Winter 2011-12



Václav Havel (1936-2011) in Low Library, 2006. (Ozier Muhammad / The New York Times / Redux)

Václav Havel, who died in December at seventy-five, spent seven weeks at Columbia in the fall of 2006 as artist in residence. The Czech playwright, essayist, intellectual, humanist, rock-music lover, and dissident was jailed in the 1970s and 1980s, and later led the nonviolent Velvet Revolution that toppled Communist Party rule in 1989. He reluctantly accepted the post of president of Czechoslovakia and then of the Czech Republic.

In his Core Contemporary Civilization Coursewide Lecture, Havel reminded the audience that democratic change sometimes comes in peculiar packages.

“As a dissident, I was many times visited by Western journalists,” he said in his halting English. “And they asked me, ‘What is the sense in what you do? It has not any chance to win or have some results, because you are a small group of a little bit crazy people, and how can you change this big system?’ Or, ‘Where are the millions of workers who support you?’ And I always answered them, ‘Pay attention: something is happening under the surface. You don’t know what, but one day you could be very, very surprised.’

“And they *were* surprised when the situation began to change.”



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