Dissent and Modern Identity: Václav Havel’s Protest
Directed Study, Spring 2018, 2cr, meeting schedule to be arranged
Professors David S. Danaher and Manon van de Water, GNS

What can an absurdist playwright and so-called dissident from late 20th-century Czechoslovakia teach 21st-century Americans about dissent and political power? What is the relationship between dissidentism and personal/collective identity in modern society? This directed study provides (partial) answers to these questions by engaging in a critical reading, and ultimately a dramatic presentation, of one of Václav Havel’s plays from 1978.

We will situate the play in its sociocultural context (Czechoslovakia during the “culture of dissent” in the late 1970s) by reading and discussing related plays and writings that help us understand its meaning and message. What is the power of theatrical performativity, and how does Havel craft his play to maximize its effect? In other words, what is the relationship, in Havel’s thinking, between theatrical performance and cultural/political performance? One focus of our discussion will concern the play’s relevance to contemporary society: what can Havel teach us about empowerment in our own society?

The culmination of the course will be a dramatic reading of excerpts from the play (and other related works) to take place in a public forum at the end of the semester (date/location TBA). The reading will be in conjunction with the Václav Havel Library and Foundation’s Fall 2017 event Reading Havel (https://www.facebook.com/cisthavla/), which encourages Czech high-school and college students as well as prominent cultural figures to read Havel’s texts and upload videos of the reading to the Library’s website. Another possible forum for dramatic reading will take place in mid-July 2018 at a CREECA summer workshop for high-school teachers in Wisconsin and Iowa on the Czechoslovak culture of dissent.

Links about Havel’s Protest and Havel as playwright

For more information on this course, please contact David S. Danaher at dsdanaher@wisc.edu.