

Interview between Lee Bollinger and Lenka Kabrhelová:

Biography: Lee Bollinger was born in 1946. He is president of Columbia University in New York City. In 2003, Bollinger met Václav Havel and invited him to Columbia for an artistic residence. Bollinger remembers Havel’s “naturalness” at their first meeting. Havel came to Columbia in 2006 and Bollinger recalls that students and faculty “were thrilled by his presence.” In this *Havel Conversations* interview Bollinger, a lawyer specializing in matters of freedom of speech, discusses the overlap between his concerns and the late Czech president’s own. He recalls Havel’s attitude towards public life and politics following the end of his presidency, during his time at Columbia (where he wrote the play *Leaving*). Finally, Bollinger praises Havel’s pragmatism; he argues Havel’s combination of intellectual ideals with political engagement resulted in the Czech “having a huge impact” on world affairs.

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Chapter I: Context – 00:24

Lenka Kabrhelova (LK): So Professor Bollinger, thank you very much for finding time for this interview.

Lee Bollinger (LB): Thank you.

LK: My first question will be a little bit general. You hosted here at the university Václav Havel, eleven years ago, in 2006, for an artistic residence of several weeks. How did Václav Havel

impress you at that time, and maybe overall, if we may start with what he meant for you personally?

LB: Well, I mean for me personally he is an icon of an era. And the more time passes, the more important he becomes, in my mind. It is so unusual to have this combination of talents and gifts that he exhibited; everything from being incredibly artistic and intellectual, but also highly practical and understanding world affairs and having a huge impact. I mean, you can't name very many people over the course of the past hundred years who had this combination of talents. So that's the first thing. The second is that they were all devoted to what I think is an extraordinary set of goals for humanity. So it is not only that he was an incredibly gifted person with an unusual combination of talents, but that he organized them, played them out, really behaved in a way that was towards a set of goals that I think were really extraordinary and good. His residency here was all about that; it was about the relationship of art and citizenship. You know, there were so many people who were thrilled by his presence – students, faculty, members of the public, everybody. So it was quite an extraordinary time.

LK: Do you still recall the time when you met him for the first time?

LB: I do. So it was in 2003, and I went to visit him. And already he was incredibly famous and iconic. But it was so natural. It was like visiting with someone, an old friend, in their living room. And he seemed extremely open to the idea of coming and being part of the university for a period of time. He... I mean, in a way he wanted to return to writing and it was a moment of his life when I think he saw the end of his political career, not as a public intellectual, or a political intellectual, but in terms of service. And [he] was looking to reconnect with those artistic roots in his being. And that made it all the more thrilling, because you felt that there was a new shift in his attention.

LK: When you say that he was very open and friendly, did it surprise you at that time? Did you have other ideas?

LB: Right, you never quite know when you meet somebody very, very, very famous how they will be. I think he may have actually had a drink as well - I mean a whisky or something - which made it all the more friendly! But it was quite, quite nice.

LK: You named all those qualities which you appreciated about Václav Havel; you said that they are quite unique also compared to other people of our era. How much do you think those were qualities of Václav Havel's character, and how much do you think he was shaped by the context of where he grew up and where he lived?

LB: It is very hard for me to answer that question because... Because I think somebody from my lifetime would see him from a distance – so you weren't inside the Iron Curtain, you were not inside of Czechoslovakia or these other countries that were within the orbit of the Soviet Union, and so it was a mystery to someone outside. And then of course the incredible revolution, the change from a communist to a democratic system of government played out in the global, world, international media, and a symbol of a massive change in history, a new direction in history; and you know he represented something so profoundly positive about human life, which goes to the question 'what did I expect when I walked in to see him?' It could have been anything and I would have been impressed, but I was even more impressed just by the naturalness of his character. But how much he was shaped by events and how much he already had those... I find it impossible to know.

LK: He took on so many roles during his life: dissident, playwright, author, essayist, president, internationally-known figure. In what way – and again of course based on how you knew him – in what role do you think he felt most comfortable?

LB: It's a very interesting question. I was just rereading a few of his writings (which I read extensively of course before he came and when he was here) and there is this passage at the beginning of the meditations book [*Summer Meditations*] in which he talks about how he just went naturally from his life as an artist, a playwright, a political activist, into the president of a country and world figure. And it seemed so seamless for him, he was never nervous; he was addressing large bodies in different contexts and it all seemed utterly natural. To my mind that would be an insight that represents the extraordinary nature of this person. I mean how many people do you know, could you name in political life, who would be that honest, who would explain almost with wonder how it happened to him, as if he is the artist observing himself as a character in a public drama? So I mean that's just one point. But this kind of seamless transition from intellectual, artist, political activist, leader, world figure, icon [is] quite amazing. On the other hand, you do have the feeling over time, and the book ends with a discussion of how the political world has become too complex for him, too filled... And I don't know, complex is not the right word; you know, too filled with conflicting kinds of drives, and he doesn't want to necessarily be part of it, maybe his time has happened and he is wondering about that, which is almost exactly, you know, where I entered the scene with this invitation to come to Columbia. But that transition...

LK: Sorry to interrupt you, but did you see the conflict in him when you spoke?

LB: I did very much.

LK: How did it manifest, do you still remember?

LB: Well...

LK: [Because?] he was working on *Leaving*, on the play, here. So probably part of that was reflected in that?

LB: That's right. I don't know how to say it, just that it was in his conversation. That is: how do you give up power, how do you think about power in relation to... Is it something you want to hold on to? Is it something you want to fight for? At the end of this book, as you know, he says 'I am not prepared to fight for this. It is not in my nature. On the other hand, I'm not prepared to be a ceremonial person, I'm not prepared to preside over galas and lay bouquets at monuments.' This desire to know oneself in the context of living and leading and doing these things, I think, is part of the utter deep attraction of this human being. Because by nature he is self-reflective, and you know, god knows we are living in a time where the absence of self-reflection is the dominant way, and the contrast couldn't be more stark.

LK: When you talk about Havel and his writings, do you have any favorite works, favorite essays?

LB: Well these I think are wonderful, that I have just been referring to, but all of them I think are great.

LK: Do you think the reception of his works, and his life as well – and of course I understand that it is difficult for you to judge, because you are not Czech and you never lived in the Czech Republic – but at the same time, do you think that there is a different approach from the people for example here, from an American audience and how they understand Havel?

LB: Can you say that again? I'm sorry.

LK: I'm sorry for such a complicated question, but do you think that the American audience is viewing and understanding Havel differently than, for example, a Czech audience?

LB: I see, you mean over the course of his lifetime, not necessarily now, but... Again, I don't know the answer to that. I mean, I spent some time in the Czech Republic and Czechoslovakia; one of my dearest and deepest friends, Eric Stein, who taught at the University of Michigan law

school and was a colleague for many years, was from Czechoslovakia. I feel like I knew the country through Eric's eyes and experiences, and in visiting the country over time I would have some conversations that give me... But I don't feel that I am in a position to really gauge that. I mean it seems to me almost inevitable though that the US, Western outside view of him would be different than from the inside.

LK: ...And so how? If we talk in general terms, and that is of course difficult, but what would be the general perception of him here in the US?

LB: Well, I mean on that... Because the United States, a major part of its identity is in opposition to the Soviet Union, and the collapse of the Soviet Union was a triumphant moment for the United States' strategy, the values of the country, etc. I think that immediately elevates Havel into a superstar. And I'm sure... I know he was perceived that way within the country, but I... Inevitably like in a family, you have a more nuanced, mixed view of somebody and my sense is over the course of his time as a political leader, that in part is what happened.

LK: How significant do you – you already hinted a lot, but – how significant do you think is the situation where a dissident, a playwright, became president and a leading figure in the international context? Has he changed international politics in that way as well?

LB: I can't think of a person... He has, you know. In that sense you would have to say he was a single moment – I mean, I am sure there are a few others. But he was unique. He turns out to be unique. I think we thought of him as not so unique, more representative of what could happen and would happen and, sadly, it turns out to be not the case. He was singular.

LK: We'll come to the legacy again, but if I go back to the '70s and Charter 77, how much of that was a focus over here, and how much did Havel sort of represent in American eyes Charter 77 and then the struggle for human rights?

LB: Well, I think very much so. Again, you're talking about a long time ago and so... But in the mindset of an American, I think that, you know, these were the sort of brilliant moments of what humanity could do, and could become. I mean, this was courage, this was intellect, this was human rights sensibilities, this was everything you would admire. So I, you know, there are no qualifications about that. I think you also have to understand – not you, but we all have to understand that that was a period in which this country was trying to also define its own ideals, and to ask itself hard questions about how it had failed to live up to those ideals and what needed to be done to address those. So, the civil rights movement began in the 1950s and then into the 1960s and through the '70s and, until it begins to lose some of its broader support, is resonant with these great figures; the Gandhi, the Mandela, the Havel. I mean, you'll know from the interview I did with Bill Clinton and Havel that Bill Clinton made that comparison – 'There are three people,' I think he said, 'Whom I think of as having had the greatest impact in our time,' and those were the other two, and he included Havel in that. And so, I think if you look at the sort of sensibilities of the United States, the sort of ambitions, the sense of what it means to be a good society, a just society... There are many resonances with Havel at that time.

Chapter II: Legacy – 16:52

LK: Do you still see, when we look at nowadays, this spirit, I don't know if we can call it Havel's spirit, but the spirit of what you just mentioned? Do you see it in current politics?

LB: Okay, so this is now a very, very difficult question. I do not see it as present. And I think, you know, I am, just spending the past few days revisiting Havel in anticipation of this discussion, conversation, I am reminded of how extraordinary a moment in time, in history, that was, through the '70s, let's say, into this new century, but not, not very far into this century. I do

not think that the motivating spirit of humanism (including human rights, but not limited to human rights, but an aspiration of what it means to live, to be a civilized, great society in the broader sense than that political term)... Anyway, I don't see that as present today and, candidly, I don't think if you ask people 'Václav Havel, tell me about his life,' far fewer, a far smaller percentage of the population would be able to say 'Oh yes, let me tell you about what I know about Havel.'

LK: So when you, for example, you have students here, but when you think about smaller kids, what would you like them to know about Václav Havel?

LB: Well, I think the... What we have been talking about is I think, to me – are the main themes. Let me just summarize them, see if I can: one is, there is nothing separate in being intellectual, being steeped in the arts and intellectual life, and public service or being in the economic sector. That is, the fullness of humanity, the fullness of being human can play itself out in every sphere of life. They do not have to be segmented. That's something that Havel talks about and lived. I think the second thing is that there are ideals worth fighting for, worth taking risks for, and he is representative of that category of people. You know, not everybody has, in a sense, the bad fortune and the good fortune to be tested in the way that he was, but a good person asks yourself all the time 'What would I do if I were in that?' And Havel is a model that one should keep in one's mind. And then lastly I would say the sense of human rights and democracy and that these are worth fighting for, worth living for, and worth sacrificing for. You know, I do think, even though he in many ways loved the elements of public life, there was something in them that could also be enervating, not as fulfilling, perhaps, as having a really great insight into human existence, which one tries to do through arts and intellectual life. So in a sense that was sacrifice.

And I think to participate in public life for the good ends that he did is something that we all should admire.

LK: When you mentioned at the beginning of the summary the fact that it is still possible to be intellectual and still an active politician, or an active economic elite, that's what we hear today, and there's a backlash against this – against the elites, against the intellectuals, even scientists – where does it come from? How do you personally understand that?

LB: Well I, of course I suppose like most people and maybe everyone, puzzle about this a great deal. Humanity is a complex thing, people have – we all have sides of ourselves that are not what we would like them to be, and if you are suffering, if you feel an injustice, or if just emotions and minds are played upon, there is a vulnerability in populations to turn against the sort of humane values that Havel represented. So I do not, I think we should never, ever take for granted that once we are on a path of goodness and [breadth?] of empathy and compassion and policy that that will continue. I mean, it seems to me if Havel were here today, he would say 'I never once thought that we would not retreat from where we were. I always knew it was a constant, ongoing battle that we would have to fight.'

LK: When I go once again back to his residency over here – when you mentioned the rock-star quality, how much was it present in his life? Did you observe it somehow?

LB: I think he liked it; my sense was he enjoyed it very much. I mean, I said a moment ago that he could also find it enervating and, you know, he alludes to that in some of his writing, but there was also something very natural about him in public settings, and seemingly [he was] fully enjoying it.

LK: How much do you think he was shaped by Olga and, later on, his wife Dagmar?

LB: Hard for me to say, I mean, I didn't get to know him personally at a level that a friend would, but he certainly spoke deeply about them, those influences, yeah.

LK: And when we go back to the overall look at Václav Havel, did you see any mistakes that he made?

LB: I don't. Again, it's hard for me to know, because of the context in which I saw him. I simply have the impression that he may not have had a taste for the day-to-day politics of give-and-take negotiation, people misbehaving, having to deal with people who are insufferable, and having to... I mean I think he may – I'm not positive about this, but I just sense that – now, whether that's a mistake or not is another question. But there is this kind of, at the end of his time, a sort of ruing of the circumstances in which he finds the world going, and wonders whether he missed things that he should have seen coming, should have dealt with – hard for me to say.

LK: But in other words – and there was a criticism of him that he was too idealistic and not ready for real-life politics...

LB: Yeah, that's what I sense. Yeah. Right.

LK: Did it somehow manifest when he was here?

LB: No, because it was not a time of exercise of power. I did not see him, you know, *in situ*.

LK: You once mentioned in an interview before that you admired his dedication to speaking the truth to power, and also to making power speak truth. How relevant is this today for our societies?

LB: Very relevant.

LK: Do you see some methods which he sort of put in which we should use, maybe, in today's society?

LB: Well, I think maybe figuring out how to deal with authoritarianism, what kinds of... How do you talk about it? How do you answer people who want to bring out the worst side of people rather than the best side? I think, you know, one of the things he found was he lived in a moment when he had the ability, the abilities, to be able to speak in ways that would resonate with people. When people are not telling the truth, when people are dissembling, when people are being mean, there are big questions about how do you answer that? In real life, especially when they are popular within a certain group. And I think he found a way to do that, and I think it's well worth going back and reading and listening to how he did that.

LK: And how do you think he would act in the time of fake news and alternative reality?

LB: Well I think he would find it repellant, I have no doubt about that. I guess I would say, I think we would all like to think of ourselves as sort of a Havel, that is in the sense that, there was something kind of everyman about him – we could all be Havel if... But this goes again to the uniqueness. He wasn't just a person who happened to find himself in the right spot at the right moment – he wasn't just a person who was an ordinary person in any sense. I think he was quite extraordinary. That doesn't mean to say that he was perfect, by any means, and I think over the course of his time he found ways which he couldn't grapple with certain parts of... So there is a mix of the context he found himself in... But I think we would be wise to recognize this was an extraordinary person.

Chapter III: Current Affairs – 29:08

LK: You also have a big connection in terms of freedom of speech, freedom of expression, which is your field. You've dedicated a lot of work to it. How do you see it nowadays, when we

have this new field of social media and a completely changed environment? Where are the limits for freedom of speech, freedom of expression? Are there limits?

LB: Well... A big and complicated question, which I am happy to try and address quickly: the United States, over the course of the last century – and it's only been a century since the Supreme Court starting thinking about free speech, writing about it, deciding cases – developed a jurisprudence, a set of doctrines, that is the most protective of speech of any country in the world, and probably in human history. I think Havel really respected that kind of development. There are limits to speech, even within the US doctrine, so you can't advocate violence, if the violence is just about to occur, you can't say false things about people, unless you have... If you have actual 'malice,' it's called, and I won't go into this in any detail, the point is mainly [that] there are limits.

Now, you asked the question 'has the world changed significantly, so that now the doctrines should change? We should have less freedom of speech because now the circumstances are more dangerous; the invasions of privacy are deeper, the threats to governments are greater...' I think the jury is out on that. I don't think, by any means, that we have developed a set of principles that need really significant revision and retraction. I think we do need much more public engagement and debate, I think that people have responsibilities to participate and identify falsehoods and bad speech and debate them, so I have no doubt about the greater need for that. But I don't think at this stage that we should cut back on free speech principles.

LK: How do you think Havel – again, it's the game of 'What if?' but – nowadays if Havel was here, how do you think he would cope with the fact that information is being weaponized and the spread of the information is much easier, and [it is] also much more difficult to cope with fake news, for example?

LB: I'm not sure. I guess I would say that I think he was very deeply experienced in the world of dissembling information, misinformation, lack of access to knowledge, and so I don't think he would say that we have reverted to that level of darkness. But I do think he would say that we have major, major questions to resolve.

LK: So do we see the same tricks being played again, in a way?

LB: We do. I mean, I think there are common practices of people who want to try to take advantage of propaganda. I mean, people have studied propaganda for centuries, and the sides of human behavior that can be highly dangerous. I mean, if you go back into the last century, which of course includes when Havel was very active, but if you go back, there have been periods of deep intolerance, deep censorship, deep authoritarianism – the McCarthy period in the 1950s, go back to the 1920s – very, very severe repression. So, you know, I think the century that Havel lived in has many, many examples that are actually much more severe than what we are facing today. That is not to say they are not important today, but they are not as severe as they were in those periods.

LK: One other thing: you mentioned as well that Havel emphasized very often in his speeches to the Czech people the role of personal responsibility, of civic responsibility, and also moral values. Do you agree that morality should be a trait which politicians should have?

LB: I do, and I like that when he writes it – that there is no separation; you can be a moral person, and be in politics. It's a great message, and I think it is fundamentally true. Yes, I mean I... I also think he was. You know, there was an element of realism in his viewpoints; that is, he may not like capitalism, I mean, he may not feel that he is a capitalist, and that he would thrive in it, but he understands that that's the best system that's been invented to, you know, enhance

prosperity of people. So I... There's a kind of commonsense quality to him that I think is very attractive, which goes to this point about the breadth of his understanding of human affairs.

LK: I might ask you for maybe a personal thought, or a memory of him. Do you have any stories which you could share?

LB: It's the first time I met him. It's walking in and being in this environment where, again, my memory may be wrong, but there's something about having a whisky that sticks with me. And the true... Being in the presence of somebody who is self-reflective – immediately going to King Lear in Shakespeare's play. How do you deal with power, as a person? How do you give up power? How do you escape power? And to be puzzled about this is a kind of act of honesty, of living, that I think is just profoundly appealing and attractive.

LK: Do you think, if I play the devil's advocate; could it make him more vulnerable to critics and also to being subjected to the harsh realities?

LB: This is one of the great paradoxes of life: if you are very tolerant, will you then be ready to stand up when the time comes to fight? If you are hyper-sensitive about life, will you then be able to act when you need to be thick-skinned? Hard for me to say, hard for me to say. My sense is – my guess is – that you can have qualities for a period of time, and then you can grow tired of the circumstances. He may have changed in context, so that he was one way in one period, for a decade or more, and another way for another decade.

LK: And flipped, the question again: isn't it a disadvantage, in a paradoxical way, that a politician who would be like that, very self-reflective and very intellectual, thinking and pondering, isn't that a disadvantage in real life? There are all these sharks, and things are just set differently...

LB: Right. Here I think my view is that life is never the same, societies are never the same, in this kind of sense we are talking about, and what I mean by that is those qualities that we just identified were absolutely the right and powerful qualities for a period of time. But that doesn't mean they are the right qualities for another period of time. Now there are qualities that I think are at base what we must insist upon: but the nature of Havel and the context in which he thrived seem to be [matched?]; he seemed to see that. That doesn't mean that he failed because, you know, the world changed and he couldn't cope with that. So the world can be many different things too, so I would not say... And let me put it another way: there's no human being who has all the qualities to be the right person for every period of time.

LK: Thank you so much!