

# Revolution, romance and a road trip, Czech-style

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A little over 18 years ago, a playwright named Václav Havel stood on a balcony at the Prague Castle and made a brief speech to the jubilant crowd at his feet.

"Dear friends, I will not disappoint you, but will lead this country to free elections," declared Havel, leader of Czechoslovakia's new Civic Forum party and at the moment, suddenly and triumphantly, the nation's first non-Communist president in four decades.

The date was Dec. 29, 1989, and Havel's ascendancy marked the culmination of the now-famous Velvet Revolution which, in a few short weeks, had peacefully ushered the central European country into a new era of independence.

It was a heady time, no less so for foreign visitors like me who watched it happen. But the celebration was short-lived. Four years later, against Havel's wishes, Czechoslovakia split into two separate nations, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. Havel stayed president of his half for another decade, until 2003, when he went back to writing plays and penning his memoirs.

Here are five films on DVD to see you through the darkness and the light of the last half-century of the Czech people.

**The Unbearable Lightness of Being** (*U.S.*, 1988) "Take off your clothes," Daniel Day Lewis commands, and Lena Olin and Juliette Binoche obey in this steamy love triangle story adapted from Milan Kundera's celebrated novel. Set in 1968 around the invasion by Warsaw Pact forces, Philip Kaufman's film has politics, sex, romance, great music and a sublime ending. Filmed in France and now on DVD from Warner in a two-disc special edition.



**Ucho** (*The Ear*) (*Czechoslovakia*, 1970) Before velvet came iron – the Iron Curtain. And one thing the Czech communists did as well as the Soviets was eavesdrop on their citizens. In this thriller, banned until the Velvet Revolution, a senior apparatchik and his wife discover their house has been bugged. "I'm scared," the wife says, and so are we. An all-region DVD from British boutique distributor Second Run (try [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk)).

**L'Aveu** (The Confession) (*France/Italy, 1970*) Another story of totalitarian terror set in Prague, this time in an earlier period (the Communist Party show trials of 1952) and made by a foreigner, the Greek-French filmmaker Costa Gavras. In his previous film, *Z*, Gavras had attacked Greek fascism; now, with the same star, Yves Montand, he showed injustice on the left. The DVD is distributed in Quebec by Christal Films; no extras or subtitles.

**Jízda** (The Ride) (*Czech Republic, 1994*) Two years before winning an Oscar for Kolya, director Jan Svěrák had fun with this New Wave-style road movie perfectly set in its free-wheeling but short-lived time of post-Velvet Bohemian giddiness. Two buddies buy a beat-up old car and set out one summer's day for the countryside, where they meet an alluring hitchhiker (Anna Geislerová). Get the all-region DVD by mail from [www.dvdr.cz](http://www.dvdr.cz).

**Horem padem** (Up and Down) (*Czech Republic, 2004*) When the borders come down, people's prospects start looking up – or do they? This black comedy exposes a cross-section of contemporary Czech life that few tourists ever see: a world of smugglers, soccer hooligans, professors, parvenus and exiles on home leave, all in a country buffeted by globalization and its discontents. The best Czech film of 2004, it's on DVD from Sony Pictures.