



Course Title and Number: Contemporary British Theatre

Instructor: Althea Stewart

Course Objectives

The aim of the course is to introduce students to a wide variety of plays and to encourage an objective as well as a subjective approach to theatre. Students will develop an ability to write critical prose and to differentiate between the author's contribution to the experience of theatre and that of directors and actors. We also aim to begin to understand the audience's contribution to the performance. We shall be witnessing performances of new plays as well as classics. We shall be visiting commercial theatre, Shakespeare's Globe, a reproduction of the original. We shall discuss the ethics of running state subsidised theatres, such as the National. There will be discussions about community theatre and students will be encouraged to visit fringe productions and to discover and analyse street theatre. All the plays will give us new insights into the way we view events in our own time or the way we represent and understand the past and our literary heritage. All challenge our preconceived ideas about personal relationships. Theatre is always a subjective experience as well as an intellectual and objective one. All the plays that we shall see represent specific genres such as farce, comedy, tragedy and political theatre of ideas. We shall look particularly closely at plays that offer political and social comment. We shall acquire an understanding of the way that different theatrical genres function in text and in performance. Theatre challenges us in many ways and one of the objects of the course is to develop an understanding of how it does this.

Elements of production to be considered are:

- Place of performance
- Performance space
- Audience and actors
- Set
- Lighting
- Sound
- Costume
- Actor's performance techniques
- Directorial interpretation
- Audience reception

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Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course students will have gained knowledge of different kinds of London theatre companies. These are diverse in the way that they raise funds and in the way they serve their respective audiences. Students will be expected to analyse and comment critically upon various plays in performance. Students should look forward to increasing their ability to analyse and appreciate the way that writers and performers both respond to and challenge their audiences. By the end of the course students should be able to:

- 1) Write reviews of live performances and read them with discernment.
- 2) Read and analyse a play script.
- 3) Have developed an increased knowledge of the wide variety of theatre on offer, with an understanding of the way *theatre of ideas* functions.
- 4) Make informed choices about their own theatre going or involvement in performance, based on the knowledge acquired.
- 5) Be willing and able to implement and/or appreciate innovative theatre whenever the opportunity arises.

Required Text

A copy of Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* (example)

Further reading will include:

You will find any of these books useful as you read, write and learn.

General

Aristotle *The Art of Poetry* - any decent paper back translation.

Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*, London/NY: Routledge, 1991

Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990

John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Leiber, (editors) *Tragedy*, Harlow/NY: Longman, 1998

Richard Eyre, *National Service: Diary of a Decade*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd., 2003

Peter Mudford, *Making Theatre from Text to Performance*, London/New Jersey: The Athlone Press, 2000

Don Taylor, *Directing Plays* London: A & C Black (Publishers) Ltd., 1996

Shakespeare

Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, Oxford: Picador, 1997.

A.R.Braunmuller & Michael Hattaway eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Drama*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

John Drakakis ed. *Alternative Shakespeares*, London: Routledge, 1996.

Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language*, London: Allen Lane, 2000.

Kiernon Ryan, *Shakespeare (Second Edition)* London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995.

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Kevin Sharpe & Peter Lake, *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, London: The Macmillan Press, 1994.

Leah Scragg, *Shakespeare's Mouldy Tales: Recurrent Plot Motifs in Shakespearean Drama*, London: Longman, 1992

Co-curricular activities will include:

- **Shakespeare Globe**

Interactive lecture by an actor who explains (with some student participation) the differences between putting on a production 400 years ago on Bankside compared to a West End theatre nowadays. Also a visit to the stage, frequently getting groups actually on stage itself to get the feel of being in an open-air theatre where actors see everyone in the audience. Terrific support for any course with a drama/theatre content because it looks at the mechanics of writing, rehearsing, acting and “hearing a play” as opposed to watching. Interesting for non-theatre majors too with a combination of social history and, surprisingly, business interest – money keeps cropping up as the explanation behind most things to do with theatre.

- **National Theatre Backstage tour**

This is a guided tour by a staff member which underscores the work behind the scenes that goes into a successful production. Visits to the three types of theatre are supported by walks through the prop rooms and workshops.

Instruction Methods

There will be preparation workshops before theatre visits. After seeing each play there will be a class discussion about it. There will also be lectures on genre, play texts, theory and theatre funding. It is hoped to arrange visits to the Theatre Museums and the backstage areas of a theatre. A visiting lecturer will talk to us about some specific aspect of London theatre.

Attendance Policy

Students will be expected to attend all classes, performances and field trips. Failure to do so, except in cases of ill health, will mean a loss of five marks from the final total for each absence. Work that is not handed in on time will lose marks. Five marks will be deducted for each day that work is overdue.

1) A review of the first performance that we attend - write this as if for a local paper in a place where the reviewer is required to encourage theatre attendance. (20% of the final mark)

2) A review of the second play that we have seen as part of the course. This should be written for a more academic paper such as the Times Literary Supplement. (20% of the final mark)

3) An essay. You will be offered a choice of questions relating to the third play. (20% of the final mark)

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4) An examination in which you will be asked to answer two previously unseen questions in two hours. This will be written during the last class of the course. Question one will relate to staging. You will be asked to write an account of the way you would stage a scene from a play that you will probably not have seen or read before.

Question two will be an essay type question based on a script we have read. Question three will require a very short answer of about six sentences or so on what you have learned from your fellow students. The exam represents 40% of the entire mark.

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