Arts • Politics • Society & Space • UC Center London, 2017

THEATRE IN LONDON

Instructor: Mark Wheatley

Course Outline

The aim of this course is to introduce students to as wide an experience of London theatre as possible; to provide students with the theoretical background and historical context to better appreciate the performances they see; and to develop a vocabulary of critical terms for thinking about plays in performance.

As well as looking historically at the birth and growth of theatre in London, we will consider its essentially collaborative character and the roles of those involved – actor, director, writer, designer, etc – along with considerations of its conventions of story and its use of space and time. Students will be asked to examine the function of the explicitly theatrical elements of staging, e.g. scenery, acting, costume, lighting, music and sound in their analysis and discussion of plays, as well as summarizing the basic intellectual arguments or themes. They will also prepare short presentations to the class on aspects of these productions and write reviews and papers.

During the semester comparisons will be drawn between drama and the novel, theatre and film, if appropriate. Different kinds of theatrical institutions will be discussed (e.g. subsidised and non-subsidised theatre, fringe etc.). We will also invite one or two guest speakers from the London theatre community.

In addition, we will devote two or three class sessions to the practical work of writing for the stage. Students will be expected to take part in exercises and readings. The emphasis will be on the process rather than final product.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course students will have:

- an awareness and appreciation of the various dramatic styles and conventions that make up contemporary London theatre.
- a critical understanding of how theatre has been viewed historically and its place in the life of the city.
- an enhanced enjoyment of the theatre and new ways of seeing it, writing about it and discussing it.
- the beginnings of a practical understanding of the nature of writing for the theatre.

Method of Study

Classes include either a lecture given by the instructor or a student presentation on assigned topics (more on this is given below under Assessment).

Students are encouraged to participate enthusiastically in seminars and workshops which follow these lectures and presentations. At other times students will also be required to work alone or in small groups. At the end of the course time is scheduled for individual tutorial sessions.

We will attend a backstage theatre tour and invite at least one guest speaker class. We will see a total of 6 plays for the class but read and discuss many more.
COURSE POLICIES

Contact and Office Hours

Mark will be at the ACCENT Study Center on Wednesdays and is happy to meet with students before class from 1:30 PM or after class from 5:30 PM – 6:30 PM. To contact him outside of class times, please email mwheatley@talktalk.net

Class contribution

The grading of your preparation and class contribution is based on my assessment of the will, energy, attention and commitment you bring to the success of our discussions and in-class exercises. It is heavily dependent on your readiness to contribute and the quality of your contributions. To avoid distractions, the use of laptops and phones in class is restricted. Use of laptops and phones outside designated times will result in the loss of half a letter grade.

Attendance Policy

The attendance policy is written in full in your academic handbook. In short, attendance at ALL sessions and excursions is obligatory, failure of which will result in an automatic grade deduction.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment outline

Good attendance, punctuality, contribution to class discussion, and the quality of your written work all contribute to your final grade:

- 20% presentations to class.
- 15% preparation and class contribution.
- 15% performance analysis
- 25% final essay
- 10% your writing project
- 15% exam

Assessment deadline

Performance analysis: 1st November
Final essay: 6th December
Writing project: 29th November

Preparation and Class Contribution

The quality and content of the seminars are largely dependent on the amount of preparation that you do and the contribution you make to class discussions. You are expected to do a significant amount of independent thinking and research as preparation for each class.

Specific research assignments will be set for each class. Research should be done alongside the reading of the set texts and the plays that we see. You are expected to find and make available resources to the rest of the class. For each assigned reading you are expected to write a question designed to form the basis of our next class discussion.
Our discussions will be based primarily on your responses to and understanding of the plays/productions we see and the issues and ideas they raise. Please be aware of your responsibilities in making the sessions an interesting and productive learning experience.

You will be graded on your research, your questions, your ability to collaborate in groups, your creative suggestions and the will and energy you bring to our work.

Presentations to class

Students are required to present to the class providing material on the following model:

- Background on the play and playwright (please do not repeat material I have supplied). The play's genre is important.
- Political resonance of the play/production.
- Commentary on the play's themes.
- How the themes are suggested through staging, action and characterisation. How lighting, sound effects and costume contribute to them.
- Commentary on individual performances – concentrate on three if there is a large cast.
- The theatre itself and its appropriateness for the play.
- The shape of the stage and the relationship of the audience to the actors and action.
- Critical arguments and debates discussed in the required reading.
- Analysis and discussion of play/productions and discussions of relevant scenes/sections
- Questions to open class discussion.

Presenters may discuss their ideas with the tutor before the presentation.

Performance Analysis (1000 words)

You may choose which of the plays you wish to write a Performance Analysis on. (It may not figure again as a major part of your final essay paper.) You will probably find it useful to make notes immediately after each performance and during our class discussions. Your analysis should contain discussion of the following:

- The theatre space, auditorium and set.
- Lighting
- Sound
- Costumes and props
- Acting
- Structure
- Themes and character
- Please do not give a summary of the plot

Written Essay (1500 words):

Essay topics will be given after the mid-semester break. Students may suggest their own. The topic should allow you to explore and respond to your experiences of London theatre and the
culture that it belongs to and make use of the theatre experiences you’ve had and the critical perspectives you’ve encountered on the course.

**Writing Project**

You will be making your first attempts at writing for performance – ie. one or two scenes for a play. You will have your scenes read aloud in class and participate in the feedback process by which a writer grows to better understand their own work and that of others.

There is an element of subjectivity in grading any artistic creation. Nevertheless, our criteria for doing so are based simply on what works on stage, so we do have guidelines to work with. Your grade will reflect not only the degree to which your work succeeds as a piece of drama (given that this is an introductory class), but how thoroughly executed the work is and the personal investment taken in its creation.

**READING MATERIALS**

**Required Texts**

Contemporary British Drama – David Lane (Edinburgh Critical guides)
The Full Room – Dominic Dromgoole (Methuen)

Some texts will be available in the library and other reading material will be provided by the instructor. Research material and sources will be suggested as required.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

This course outline may be subject to change.
The number in brackets following student preparations and presentations to class is your group number. Students work in groups of 2 or 3.

- Lecture: Plays. A comparison with film. Four fundamentals
- Syllabus. Assign presentations. Taking notes on plays
- Introduction to Play 1
  - Play 1: Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour

- Presentation Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour (1)
- Preparation The Ferryman (2)
  - Play 2: The Ferryman

- Presentation The Ferryman (3)
- Lecture: Economics of theatre in London
- Assignment: reading from Contemporary British Drama (Lane)

- Preparation Girl From The North Country (4)
- Discussion on assigned reading (Contemporary British Drama)
  - Play 3: Girl From The North Country
Presentation Girl From The North Country (5)
Ideas for Performance Analysis (Due 1.11)
Writing exercises: street dialogue; alphabetical dialogue

Introduction King Lear
Lecture: Suspense, three dimensions, three part stories
Play 4: King Lear

Presentation King Lear (6)
Guest artist: Emily Bruni
Writing exercises: 3-line dialogue

Mid-semester break. No classes

Introduction to Part Two (grade check)
Workshop on Every Brilliant Thing (4.30 Orange Tree theatre)
Play 5: Every Brilliant Thing

Presentation Every Brilliant Thing (7)
Preparation Oslo (8)
Performance Analysis due
Play 6: Oslo

Presentation Oslo (9)
Writing exercises: information. Your first scene.
Essay Paper questions assigned (due 6.12)

Reading your scenes
Writing exercises: development and examples of how to cut
The actor’s role. What to look for. Examples from plays we have seen
Assignment: Rewrite your scene

Questions of character. Images to work from
More examples from plays we have seen
Introduction Play 7
Play 7: tbd

Presentation Play 7 (10)
Reading your scenes. More on action and tactics.
Site visit tbd

Tutorials: writing drafts
Final Essay paper due.

Exam: analysis of unseen text
Instructor biography

Mark Wheatley began his professional career researching documentaries for the BBC and then had a two-year period writing for Series and Serials at the BBC (EastEnders) before beginning to write for the theatre. From 1990 to 1997 he was the principal writer/adaptor for Complicite and their literary manager. He adapted many shows with the company, including The Street of Crocodiles, for which he was nominated for an Olivier Award. He remains part of their advisory team and his adaptations for Complicite are published by Methuen. Subsequently he has written for theatre, television, radio and film; his 2008 play, So Close To Home was first seen at the Brighton Festival and then at the Arcola in London. Mark is also an experienced teacher and has taught for many academic institutions in both the UK and the US, including FSU, Penn State, SUNY Binghamton and Madison, Wisconsin.