Theatre in London

Instructor: Mark Wheatley  

Course Number: ENGL 110 (also cross-listed as DRAMA 110)

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.) and we will make backstage visits to the Globe, Theatre Royal Drury Lane and the National Theatre. 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 Assignment Details). 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 one or two backstage theatre tours 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
Attendance: Students are expected to attend all classes. Please contact me if you are unable to attend. Each unexplained absence will result in the loss of half a letter grade
Lateness: Students are expected to come to class on time every day. Arriving late is disruptive and will result in a lower Class Participation grade.

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

- 20% presentations to class.
- 30% preparation and class contribution.
- 15% performance analysis
- 25% written essay.
- 10% your writing project

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

Play texts can be bought at the National Theatre or (closer to you) at French’s Theatre Bookshop, 52 Fitzroy Street.

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.

Assignment Details

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.

**Theatre In London**

**Weekly Schedule Fall 2014**

Section 1

Section 2

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.

3.9 Lecture: Plays. A comparison with film. Four fundamentals
- Introduction to Comedy of Errors.

10.9 **Globe Workshop and Tour** (2.45pm)
- **Play 1: Comedy of Errors**
- Assignment: reading tbc

17.9 **Presentation Comedy of Errors** (1)
- Discussion on assigned reading.
- Lecture: Suspense, three dimensions, three part stories
Assignment: Read Closer – Patrick Marber

24.9  Analysis of Closer. Storytelling and structure
      Writing exercises: street dialogue, 3-line dialogue
      Assignment: Read Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time – Simon Stephens

1.10 Preparation Curious Incident (2)
      Ideas for Performance Analysis (Due 5.11)

Play 2: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

8.10 Presentation Curious Incident (3)
      Preparation The Key Will Keep the Lock (4)
      National Theatre Tour: Section 1: 4.45; Section 2: 5.15
      Play 3: The Key Will Keep the Lock

15.10 Backstage tour Theatre Royal Drury Lane (time tba)

22.10 Mid-semester break. No classes

29.10 Presentation The Key Will Keep the Lock (5)
      Preparation Charles III (6)
      Essay Paper questions assigned (due 3.12)
      Play 4: Charles III

5.11 Presentation Charles III (7)
      Writing exercises: beats and scenes
      Performance Analysis due
      Assignment: reading tbc

12.11 Preparation Scottsboro Boys (8)
      Discussion on assigned reading
      Writing exercises: examples of how to cut
      Play 5: Scottsboro Boys

19.11 Presentation Scottsboro Boys (9)
      Preparation Great Britain (10)
      Play 6: Great Britain
      Assignment: reading tbc

26.11 Presentation Great Britain (11)
      Discussion of assigned reading.
      Writing exercises: action verbs

3.12 Preparation production 7 tbc (12)
      Writing exercises: rewriting.
      Final Essay paper due.

10.12 Presentation production 7 tbc (13)
      Tutorials: writing drafts

17.12 Exams
      Final scene readings.

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.