

CONTEMPORARY THEATRE AND DRAMA IN LONDON (THTR337201/ENGL224901)

Boston College Theatre Department and Office of International Programs -- Summer 2018 -- Scott T. Cummings

COURSE DESCRIPTION

For five hundred years, theatrical performance in London has been the cultural heartbeat of England. "Contemporary Theatre and Drama in London" will measure that heartbeat by examining the current theater scene in London and the legacy which has led to it. Through attending plays, site visits, lecture, discussion, and writing exercises, we will study representative plays from the Elizabethan era up to the present day. Particular emphasis will be placed on the theatre of William Shakespeare and on recent trends in British playwriting. While much of our work will be classroom-based, our primary 'text' will be the city of London itself, the theater capital of the English-speaking world. Attending theater productions and visits to sites relevant to the history of theater in London are central to the course.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. To gain an understanding of the complex relationship between theater and society through a case study focused on the city of London.
2. To develop analytical and writing skills useful in the practice of theater criticism and to apply those skills to writing about London plays in performance.
3. To become familiar with the development of English/British drama and the history of theater in London from the Elizabethan era to the present day.
4. To experience the diversity of styles and subjects which characterize contemporary theater culture in London.

COURSE STRUCTURE

Course time and activities will be divided between classroom meetings and field research. The classroom component will consist of lecture and discussion sessions (five times a week for roughly three hours). The field research component will consist of theatergoing excursions (minimum of three a week, often more), which will be supplemented by pre-show lectures and post-show discussions, and visits to important London museums and historical sites (minimum of two a week).

Given the site-based nature of this course, flexibility in planning course activities is essential. A regular schedule will be outlined at the start of the course, but in the interest of maximizing the educational value of the course, changes are likely. For the three-week period of the course, four 'off' days will be determined when no course activities are scheduled. On all other days, students will be expected to be available for unexpected opportunities and changes in plans.

COURSE TOPICS

An in-depth examination of the full spectrum of London theatre is not possible in three weeks. Depending on what's on offer in London at the time of the course, our study will focus to various degrees on the following topics or themes:

1. The legacy of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's genius has made him a major industry in London. We will study and see Shakespeare plays and visit the reconstructed Globe, but we will also consider the commodification of Shakespeare and look for experimental adaptations of his plays. What does Shakespeare mean as a cultural symbol and national icon?
2. What's new? The vitality of London theater culture depends on the production of new plays by new playwrights. We will investigate 'new play development' in London, visit theatres that are famous for their work with new playwrights, and attend plays by prominent contemporary playwrights as well as emerging new figures.
3. London as setting and stage. The city of London itself has taken center stage in many plays. We will study one or two plays set in London that reflect the changing character of the city, such as Ben Jonson's BARTHOLOMEW FAIR or William Wycherley's A COUNTRY WIFE. We will also look at site-specific theaters -- such as Punchdrunk -- that use non-theatrical locations around London as places for performance.
4. Theatre and politics/theatre and history. There is a long tradition of English history plays -- from Shakespeare to the present day -- that examine political events, power struggles, and public figures at moments of historical significance. As available, we will see plays that participate in this tradition and consider the ways in which British playwrights use the past to think about the present.

COURSE ACTIVITIES

1. VIEWING

a. Playgoing. Playgoing is the central activity of the course. As a group, we will attend a dozen or more plays at such important London venues as the Royal National Theatre, the Royal Court, Shakespeare's Globe, the Old Vic, the Donmar Warehouse, the Almeida, and the Lyric Hammersmith. Students are encouraged to attend additional productions on their own. For most plays we see as a group, there will be either a brief pre-show lecture/chat giving background on the play or a post-show discussion.

b. Site visits. Two or three times a week, we will visit a museum, gallery, or historical site that is important to the history of theater in London or the history of London itself. Possible destinations include the reconstructed Globe playhouse, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, Hampton Court Palace, The Tower of London, the National Gallery, the

Tate Gallery, and the Museum of London. If feasible, a trip to the town of Bath or the university towns of Oxford or Cambridge or the seaside town of Brighton will be organized.

2. READING

a. Plays. In addition to the plays we see in performance, we will read and study three or four English plays, either landmark plays from the rich history of English/British theatre or more recent works that are relevant to the particular themes or guest lecturers in the course. Classical dramatists who we might study include Ben Jonson, William Congreve, William Wycherly, Richard Sheridan, John Gay, Dion Boucicault, Oscar Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw. Important 20th century playwrights (post-WWII) include John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Joe Orton, Tom Stoppard, Edward Bond, David Hare, Caryl Churchill, Howard Barker, and Sarah Kane.

b. Supplemental reading. In addition to dramatic texts, we will read scholarly essays, chapters in books, performance reviews, historical documents, and internet sites that bear on the subjects of the course.

3. WRITING AND RESEARCH

a. Quizzes. We will begin our study of some plays with a quiz-like written exercise on key performance and structural aspects of the play. Quizzes cannot be given on a make-up basis, regardless of the reason for missing one.

b. Critical writing. There will be a series of short writing assignments that focus on writing about performance generally and theater criticism in particular. Emphasis will be placed on writing with clarity, precision, and a sense of style. A review of a current London production will be a culminating assignment.

c. Diagnostic exam and final exam. Details of these exams and what they will cover will be discussed in class.

4. DOING

a. Discussion. All students in the course are expected to come to class prepared to participate in class discussions. This is a matter both of listening to others, advancing or challenging ideas 'on the floor,' or introducing new ideas at an appropriate juncture in the conversation.

COURSE GRADING

Grading for this course will be based on performance and progress in the different course activities listed above (Reading, Writing, and Doing). Your final grade will be determined in the following manner:

Quizzes =	10% of final grade
Papers/written exercises =	40% of final grade
Final examination =	25% of final grade
Attendance =	5% of final grade
Course participation =	20% of final grade
Final grade =	<hr/> 100%

Most assignments for the course will be graded on a numerical scale, with 10 as the highest grade and descending in increments of half a point. Generally, a grade of 9 (or 90%) or above will be in the 'A' range, 8 (or 80%) to 9 will be in the 'B' range, and so on.

The Office of International Programs has given clear and direct instruction that Summer Seminars Abroad should be as academically rigorous and intellectually challenging as the best courses at Boston College. Summer courses now count towards a student's GPA. Paying the tuition and fees and traveling to London is no guarantee of any particular grade. Students should be advised that it is possible (though certainly not expected) to fail this course.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Attendance is mandatory for all class sessions, theatergoing excursions, (including pre-show or post-show activities), and site visits. The attendance portion of the final grade will be determined by the number (if any) of class meetings, performances, and excursions that you miss according to the following scale: 0 absences = attendance score of 10, 1 absence = 9.5, 2 absences = 9.0, 3 = 8.5, 4 = 8.0, 5 = 7.5, 6 = 7.0, 7 = 6.5, 8 = 6.0, 9 = 5.5, and so on. This scale applies to all absences, 'excused' or unexcused. (Latenesses and early departures will count as half-absences.)