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English 234

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Katy Ryan, ENGL 234, Spring 2005

What has knowledge got to do with art? --Bertolt Brecht

ENG 234: Modern and Contemporary Drama

Spring 2005

Katy Ryan

Stansbury 354

Office Hours Wed 10:00-12:00

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Course Description

In this introductory drama course, we will study a variety of twentieth-century plays, focusing on the following theatrical forms:

realistic, naturalistic, antirealistic, expressionist, feminist, and absurdist. Most often, plays exhibit characteristics that fall under more than one of these categories, but it is often helpful to identify a play's dominant approach or aesthetic. We will study plays by well-known international playwrights as well as critical commentary on their work. In addition to form, we will consider the plays' political and social content, and discuss whether certain forms are more conducive to didactic purposes. Some feminist critics, for instance, argue that traditional realism is less successful in urging the transformation (or eradication) of gender roles than fantastic, utopian, or nonrealist plays.

Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright and intellectual, insisted that bourgeois theatre (social realism focused on the middle and upper classes) impeded critical thinking and reinforced the status quo. We will examine his theory and practice of epic theatre, a theatre dedicated to revolutionary social change, and identify the strategies he developed (the alienation-effect, separation of the elements, historicization, the social gest) to compel audience members to become active spectators rather than passive consumers of dramatic productions. In turn, Brecht hoped people would become thinking agents in their own lives. This course will ask you to be similarly active in class discussions and performances as we take seriously Brecht's call for socially and politically relevant theatre.

Goals

- To strengthen critical thinking and writing skills
- To learn about major theatrical forms, movements, and plays from the twentieth century

- To consider how drama intersects with public life and policy
- To learn to ask questions through performance
- To work together productively, efficiently, and creatively

Required Texts

The Longman Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Theatre

Recommended Text

Tony Kushner. *Angels in America: Perestroika*

Requirements

Two Writing Assignments 30%

Final Exam 30%

Midterm Exam 20%

Discussion/Performances 20%

Writing Assignments

There will be two writing assignments—one analytical and the other creative. The creative assignment will ask you to convey your interpretation of a play by creating additional scenes, imagining interviews with the playwright and/or characters, or acting as the director for a particular scene. Each of these assignments will require some historical or literary research.

Exams

The midterm and the final will ask you to interpret certain passages from the plays, situating the ' in their overall literary context. The

final will also include short essay questions. I will provide you with questions prior to the exam to help you prepare.

Performance Groups

Performance will not be supplemental to your learning in this class but integral to it. Everyone will be in a performance group that will create an interpretive "take" on a certain play. These ten-minute performances do not have to be professionally acted or memorized. Think of them as a gift to the class and a way to begin our discussion. Performances should be an interpretative engagement with the text rather than a direct reading. You will have some in-class time to prepare, but it will be necessary for each group to meet at least once outside of class.

Discussion

We will be conducting our class in circle discussions, which means that everyone must be prepared to talk at every class session. At any point in the semester, you can check with me about your participation grade. If you miss more than three classes for any reason, you must make an appointment to meet with me.

Schedule

Jan 11: Introductions

Realism

Jan 13: Realism, Naturalism, Expressionism in Theatre, 34-43 Sign up for Performance Groups

Jan 18: Chekhov. *The Cherry Orchard* Acts I, II, and III

Jan 20: *The Cherry Orchard* Acts IV and V, Commentary 108-09

James Wood, "Real Life"

Jan 25: Shaw, *Heartbreak House* Act I

Jan 27: *Heartbreak House* Acts II and III, Commentary 188 and Showcase 190-92; Heartbreak Performance

Epic Theatre: For Pleasure and Instruction

Feb 1: Intro to Brecht; Brecht, "Theatre for Instruction. or Theatre for Pleasure"; Chinese Theatre 319-320

Feb 3: Brecht, *Good Woman of Seizuan Prologue*, Scenes 1 -4A

Feb 8: *Good Woman* (entire play); Good Woman Performance

Feb 10: *Good Woman*, Commentary 317-18

Feb 15: Valdez, *Zoot Suit* Act I

Feb 17: *Zoot Suit* Act 11. Commentary 686; Zoot Performance

Feb 22: Midterm Exam

Feminist Theatre

Feb 24: Ircadwell, *Machinal* Episodes 1-4

March 1: *Machinal* Episodes 5-9, Commentary 248-49, Showcase 249 *Machinal* Performance

March 3: Fornes, *Fefi and Her Friends* (entire play)

March 8: Fefi Commentary 646-47; Fefit Performance

March 10: Writing Assignment Due; Video Clips

SPRING BREAK

March 22: Churchill, *Top Girls* (entire play)

March 24: *Top Girls* Commentary 824-25; *Top Girls* Performance'

Hybrid Fornts-: Fantastic, Realistic, Didactic

March 29: Kushner. *Angels in America, Millenium Approaches, Acts*
One mid Two

March 31: *Angels* (entire play), *Showcase* 938-39 HBO production

April 5: Wilson, *Fences* (entire play)

April 7: *Fences* Commentary 884-85; Interview 886-888; *Fences*
Performance

April 12: *Parks, TopDog/UnderDog* Scenes 1-4

April 14: *TopDog* (entire play) Commentary 984-985

The Absurd

April 19: Beckett documentary; Krapp `s Last Tape (entire play)

April 21: Krapp `s Last Tape

April 26: Gambaro, *Personal Effects* (entire play) Cominentary 896-
97 Krapp `s Last Tape or *Personal Effects* Performance

April 28: Writing Assignment Due; Preparation for final exam

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