THEATRE OF RESPONSE:
20TH-CENTURY and CONTEMPORARY US AMERICAN PERFORMANCE

Together we organize the world for ourselves, or at least we organize our understanding of it; we reflect it, refract it, criticize it, grieve over its savagery; and we help each other to discern, amidst the gathering dark, paths of resistance, pockets of peace, and places from whence hope may be plausibly expected.

--Tony Kushner, Afterword to Homebody/Kabul

Well: all that can be said is that the contrast between learning and amusing oneself is not laid down by divine rule; it is not one that has always been and must continue to be.

--Bertolt Brecht, “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction”

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This semester, we will chart and study US American plays and performances that, over the past 100 years, have addressed social crises and called for justice. Many of these explicitly political plays were staged with the hope of inciting direct social action: freeing the “Scottsboro Boys,” for instance, striking against unfair wages and hours, preventing war, abolishing sexual discrimination. We will begin with Angelina Weld Grimké’s anti-lynching play, Rachel, the winning submission in a NAACP writing contest that invited theatrical responses to the 1915 racist film, Birth of A Nation. (Rachel is also, according to Judith Stephens, the “earliest extant non-musical written, produced, and publicly performed by African Americans.”) A number of our performances respond to imprisonment and the death penalty: an agit-prop by Langston Hughes about the Scottsboro case; an expressionist play by Sophie Treadwell loosely based on the execution of Ruth Snyder; an episodic prison play by Tennessee Williams, only recently found among his papers; and a controversial play about a US military brig originally performed by the Living Theatre in 1963 and revived in 2007. Moving chronologically through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, we will also explore theatrical forms—melodrama, expressionist, Living Newspapers, agit-prop, epic, social realist, and performance art—and consider if one form seems particularly well-suited for moving audiences politically or, as Tony Kushner suggests, if there is not a theatrical “hierarchy to political efficaciousness.”

As we study the public character of performance, we will also address its marginalized status in English departments and a longstanding British and US American “antitheatrical prejudice” (Jonas Barish). If drama is a neglected genre in literary studies, American drama is particularly sidelined; and our plays might be said to be on the margins of the margin—unless that’s where you live, in which case you’re home. Performance theories, however, if not theatrical productions, have become vital to cultural and American studies, and so, with Julia Walker, we will ask, “why performance, why now?”

REQUIRED TEXTS (available at WVU Bookstore & the Book Exchange)

Irwin Shaw, Bury the Dead
Clifford Odets, Waiting for Lefty
Tennessee Williams, Not About Nightingales
Sophie Treadwell, Machinal
Manuel Piñero, *Short Eyes*
Maria Irene Fornes, *Fefu and Her Friends*
Philip Kan Gotanda, *Yankee Dawg You Die*
Tim Miller, *Body Blows*
Mimi D’Aponte, ed. *Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays*
Tony Kushner, *Homebody / Kabul* (revised version)

**REQUIREMENTS/OPPORTUNITIES**

1) **Reader Responses**
On our listserv, everyone will post at least six responses to our readings (approximately 500 words each). Pace your responses throughout the semester and try to post by at least 4PM on Sunday, so we all have a chance to read the responses before we meet on Monday. In any given response, you obviously do not need to touch on everything you have read for that week. Choose one idea or question to develop. Be sure to ground your responses in the language of our dramatic texts. Please bring me a hardcopy and write the number on each response. Our listserv can also serve for follow-up discussions and announcements.

2) **Writing and Creative Projects**
Your first project will be an essay (approx. 10 pp) that develops a critical or theoretical argument based on course material. I will collect proposals (250-500 words) about two weeks before the due date, and we will have an in-class writing workshop the week before the final essay is due.

For the second major project, you can compose another research essay or create any of the following: an original script, a performative essay, or a staged production (either for the class, a limited audience, or the public). These can be individual creations or collaborations.

3) **Performances**
Everyone will be in two performance groups. Each group will collaborate on a ten-minute performance that engages with our week’s reading. Performances are ungraded (except as participation), informal, and great fun. Usually groups meet at least once outside of class to prepare. Feel free to rearrange the classroom, incorporate the audience, bring in props, costumes, music, etc. You do not need to memorize anything (though we’ll all be impressed if you do). Most importantly, your performance should provide us with a certain take on a play, performance, or theory. At the end of the performance, the audience will have a chance to respond, and the performers can say a few words about their process and intent. (Also see handout for ideas.)

The performance group will also be responsible for preparing three questions related to the week’s reading materials. The group can work on these questions together or each person can come up with one or two questions (depending on the number in your group). We will use these questions to propel class discussion.

4) **Discussion**
This class will strengthen your ability to think—to question, analyze, reflect, dispute, and reason. Dialogue is essential to this process. There will be a variety of ways to participate: providing feedback to performers, asking questions of one another, reading from your written responses, and responding to our texts. If you have difficulty communicating in classrooms, please make an appointment early in the semester to speak with me.
GRADING
Six Responses 20%
Participation/Performances 20%
First Essay 30%
Second Essay/Script/Performance 30%

READINGS ON E-RESERVE (in order we will be reading them)
Username: ryan2
Password: 557

Susan Harris Smith, *American Drama: The Bastard Art*. Introduction: The Problem of American Drama 1-8; Chapter 2: Generic Hegemony 9-12; Chapter 4: Did She Jump, or Was She Pushed 114-158.
Tony Kushner, Interview with David Savran, *Speaking on Stage* 291-313. [Under “Savran”]

RECOMMENDED READING
Theoretical Work and Criticism


RELEVANT COLLECTIONS OF PLAYS

RECOMMENDED WEBSITES

PBS on Political Theatre: [http://www.pbs.org/now/arts/politicaltheater.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/arts/politicaltheater.html)
Lydia Sargeant, “Humor, Theatre, and Social Change,”
Political art and critical commentary, including reviews of recent plays:
[http://www.apracticalpolicy.org](http://www.apracticalpolicy.org)
Guerilla Girls: [www.guerrillagirlsontour.com](http://www.guerrillagirlsontour.com)
Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School: [http://authors.aalbc.com/blackartsmovement.htm](http://authors.aalbc.com/blackartsmovement.htm)
Association for Theatre in Higher Education: [http://athec.org](http://athec.org)
7.84 Theatre Company: [http://www.784theatre.com](http://www.784theatre.com)

CALENDAR

NOTE: As indicated in parentheses, some reading material will be found on the WVU Library online databases, Project MUSE and JSTOR.

Aug 24
Introductions. Opening remarks on political theatre
Sign up for performances

**EARLY 20TH-C.: MELODRAMA and EXPRESSIONISM**

Aug 31
*Rachel*, Angelina Weld Grimké (perf. 1916, publ. 1920)
Available at Google Books:
[http://books.google.com/books?id=UpA0AAAMAAJ&printsec=copyright&dq=grimke+rachel#PPA67,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=UpA0AAAMAAJ&printsec=copyright&dq=grimke+rachel#PPA67,M1)

Carol Dawn Allen, chapter 2 from *Peculiar Passages* (e-reserve)


Susan Harris Smith, selections from *American Drama* (e-reserve)

Sept 7
Labor Day—No class

Sept 14
Marita Bonner, *Purple Flower* (1928) and *Exit, an Illusion* (1929) in *Black Female Playwrights* (handout)

Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal* (1928)


1930s: AGIT-PROP and WORKERS’ THEATRE

Sept 21

Langston Hughes, *Scottsboro, Limited* (1931) (handout)

William Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left* (e-reserve)

Michael Thurston, *Making Things Happen* (e-reserve)

Michael Denning, Chapter 1 in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the 20th c.* (1997) (e-reserve)

Recommended: Dan Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*

*Strange Fruit* (documentary film)

*Scottsboro: An American Tragedy* (documentary film)

Sept 28


Irwin Shaw, *Bury the Dead* (1936)

Douglas McDermott, “The Workers’ Laboratory Theatre: Archetype and Example” (e-reserve)

The Federal Theatre Project & Arthur Arendt, *One-Third of a Nation* (watch clip in class)

Bertolt Brecht, “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction” and “The Street Scene” (1935-36) (handout)


Oct 5

Tennessee Williams, *Not About Nightingales* (1939)

Thomas Fahy, “‘In Dark Corners’: Masculinity and Art in Tennessee Williams’s *Not About Nightingales*.” *Captive Audiences* 136-146. (e-reserve)


Proposals due for first writing project
MID 20TH-C.: SOCIAL REALISM and “BLOWTORCH” REALISM

Oct 12  Writing Workshop  
Full essay draft due in class  
In class, we will watch scenes from Kenneth Brown, *The Brig* (1963)

Arnold Aronson, Chapter 3 in *American Avante-Garde Theatre* (e-reserve)  
Erika Munk, “Only Connect: The Living Theatre and its Audiences.” (e-reserve)

Fiona Mills, “Seeing Ethnicity: The Impact of Race and Class on the Critical Reception of Manuel Piñero’s *Short Eyes.*” (e-reserve)  
Bert States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*. Chapter 3. (e-reserve)

Oct 26  Maria Irene Fornes, *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977)  
Fornes, Interview with Una Chauduri. *Speaking On Stage*. (e-reserve)

CONTEMPORARY STORYTELLING, PERFORMANCE ART, and EPIC THEATRE

Mimi Gisolfi D’Aponte’s Introduction to *Seventh Generation* ix-xxiii

Spiderwoman, *Power Pipes* (1993) in *Seventh Generation*  

Nov 23  Thanksgiving—No Class

Kushner, Interview with David Savran. *Speaking On Stage* (e-reserve)
Kushner, Interview at *Salon*, “Coming Out as a Socialist”
http://www.salon.com/weekly/interview960610.html

Proposals due for Final Project

Dec. 7  Concluding Thoughts
Writing/Performance Workshop
Final Projects due by Dec. 14 at noon

WVU College of Creative Arts Theatre Schedule (at the CAC on the Evansdale Campus)

*The World Goes Round* at the Gladys G. Davis Theatre
Music and Lyrics of John Kander and Fred Ebb
September 25 & 26, 2009 at 7:30pm
September 29 & 30, 2009 at 7:30pm
October 2 & 3, 2009 at 7:30pm
September 27 & October 4, 2009 at 2pm

*Dracula* at the Lyell B. Clay Concert Theatre
by Hamilton Deane and John L. Balderston, from Bram Stoker’s novel
October 21, 22, and 23, 2009 at 7:30pm
October 25, 2009 at 2pm

*The Love of the Nightingale* at the Gladys G. Davis Theatre
by Timberlake Wertenbaker, based on the myth of Philomela by Ovid
November 19 & 20, 2009 at 7:30pm
December 1 – 5, 2009 at 7:30pm
December 6, 2009 at 2pm
Sign Up for Performances (2 or 3 students in each group)

Aug 31  Angelina Weld Grimke, *Rachel* (1915) [antilynching, melodrama]

Sept 14  Marita Bonner, *Purple Flower* (1928) or *Exit, an Illusion* (1929) [racism, experimental]

Sept 21  Langston Hughes, *Scottsboro, Limited* (1931) [executions, agit-prop]

Sept 28  Irwin Shaw, *Bury the Dead* (1936) [antiwar, agit-prop]

Oct 5   Tennessee Williams, *Not About Nightingales* (1939) [prisons, expressionist]

Oct 19  Manuel Piñero, *Short Eyes* (1974) [prisons, social realist]
Oct 26  Maria Irene Fornes, *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977) [feminism, experimental]


Nov 9  Leanne Howe and Roxy Gordon, *Indian Radio Days* (1993) or Spiderwoman’s *power pipes*
Native American histories & traditions, radio, dance, storytelling]


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