

English 342: American Drama *Politics and the American Stage*

Prof. Ryan Claycomb
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Class meets T/Th 10:00-11:15

305 Colson Hall
304-293-9710 (office)
Office Hours: W 9:30-12:30 am
or by appointment

Course Description

In a semester in which American politics will make some of the best theatre around, it makes sense to spend some time looking at how the actual theatre makes politics: the politics of race and ethnicity, the politics of class and money, the politics of sex, gender, and sexuality, and sometimes just the politics of politics. In short, it is drama and theatre that actively works to change the distribution of power in the society around it—this is not just theatre for social interaction, it's theatre for social change.

But Political Drama is always a tricky endeavor, since the whole premise of theatre is that it is not “real,” that when the illusion of theatre dissipates, what has happened on the stage dissipates, too. But those working for political change want that real change to linger well past the final curtain call. As such, we will examine how those writing for the stage imagine the representational messages of their plays, and how they imagine those messages impacting their audiences beyond the end of the play and the walls of the theatre.

The semester will cover a range of historical periods and styles: 19th century sentimental drama, social realism, expressionism, epic theatre, agit-prop, and even a smattering of performance art. We'll examine these plays and styles both for the political positions they espouse and for the way that these styles and forms use the stage to achieve specific political ends.

Our **Course Objectives** will be multiple. By the end of the semester, students will:

- Engage with major trends in American drama from the 19th century to the present
- Compare a range of representational writing and staging strategies as they work to effect social and political change.
- Analyze the play as textual artifacts of theatrical performances in specific historical and political contexts
- Consider and enact various staging possibilities for presenting political drama
- Write in a variety of academic modes in order to critically engage the nuances of political theatre and the American stage.

Texts:

These texts are available at both the University Book Store and the Book Exchange. Please obtain them immediately. It is generally important to obtain the same edition as is denoted here.

- Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal*
- Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty*
- Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (Viking Critical Library)
- Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit and Other Plays*
- David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly*
- Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*
- Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992*
- Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*

Several texts (both primary and secondary) will be made available in PDF format on the e-campus site. Those readings will be marked with three asterisks (***) and clearly labeled on the site. For primary texts, please print them and bring them to class. For secondary texts, you may print, but if not, please bring reading notes to class.

Course Requirements:

You are expected to meet the following requirements to achieve a passing grade.

1. Complete all reading by the date it is listed in the syllabus. There is a LOT of reading in this course, so be sure to budget your time accordingly.
2. Complete all work by the date listed in the syllabus
 - Grades on all assignments will drop one letter grade for every weekday they are late.
 - Work handed in more than one week past the due date will automatically be graded F (55%).
 - Work handed in more than 2 weeks past the due date will earn a zero.
 - A paper is not considered turned until I have a hard copy in my hand.
 - Electronic versions via email or disk are unacceptable unless I give explicit permission beforehand.
3. Participate in class activities in such a way that enhances learning for both yourself and your classmates.
4. Participate actively in the draft workshop process

Writing Requirement

The General Education Curriculum at WVU, which is required of all students entering the University beginning with the fall 2005 semester, stipulates that:

All students must pass at least one course that requires a substantial writing component and in which the grade is partially determined by writing skills. These courses will be designated by a "W" in the Schedule of Courses. Students must complete English 101 and English 102 or English 103 before fulfilling the "W" requirement.

As a course that is designed to fulfill the University's writing requirement, this course seeks to use writing as an integral part of the reading, thinking and responding processes of literary study. As such, the writing of this course will be comprised of several short response papers (2-3 pages each), as well as a shorter paper, and a long final paper. These will total well over the minimum 20 pages required for the W designation. The latter of the two will be workshopped in class, using guided peer workshopping procedures.

Attendance Policy:

Attendance for this class is required. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to gather notes or make up any material. If you accumulate **4 or more** absences (two full weeks of class) for any reason, you **will forfeit your entire class participation grade**. If a circumstance arises that drastically impacts your attendance, perhaps in all of your classes (serious illness, family tragedy, etc.), I'd strongly encourage you to contact Dr. Thomas Sloane, Sr. Associate Dean of Students, at 293-5611 or Tom.Sloane@mail.wvu.edu.

Tardiness:

Excessive tardiness is also a problem and will negatively impact your class participation grade. When you are late, you miss important class announcements, handouts, and the framework for the day's in-class work. Late entrance into class is disruptive to the workings of the class, assignments are collected at the beginning of class, and with only 50 minutes to work with, every moment is precious. Assignments turned in late because of tardiness will be considered late.

Office Hours:

My office hours are times that I am committed to being available to consult with students. Please note that I am always willing to review drafts with students in office hours above and beyond designated draft workshopping dates and times, as well as to discuss any other concerns you may have about the class, its content, and its procedures.

Assignments and Grading:

10% *In-Class Participation* See course requirement #3. Attendance will also factor into this grade, so please see the attendance policy. I will assign a class participation grade every three weeks based on attendance, preparation, meaningful contribution to classroom discussion and in-class activities, and absence of disruptive behavior. Should reading quizzes become necessary, they will be factored into this component of the grade.

20% *Critical Paper #1*: 1500-2000 words (5-7 pgs). The first paper assignment will follow an assigned topic, but will have significant room for I will assign a topic, but you will have significant room and responsibility to develop your own argument within those assignments. As with all academic arguments, you will be asked to craft a unique thesis, and support it with individual claims that are themselves bolstered by substantial textual evidence. Please feel free to come to office hours or make appointments to discuss drafts of papers. This paper will include a draft workshop, where students will read and respond to one another's papers. Failure to come prepared or to participate in the workshop will result in a one letter grade penalty for the paper.

55% *Final Project (Proposal (5%), Annotated Bibliography(10%), Final paper (40%))*: These three components will be graded separately, though they are all part of the a unified final project.

- The proposal should take the form of an abstract for the final paper, laying out the central critical question that you are researching, the texts/ performances you'll use to plumb those critical questions, the general way that existing scholarship has tackled the question, and the intervention that you imagine your work will make in the discussion. It should run between 400-600 words (1½ -2 pages). You may very well want to be in conversation with me about your topic as this due date nears. Please be aware that we will discuss some texts after this is due. If you think you might want to write on one of these texts, do read ahead so that you are prepared to begin work on this process.
- The annotated bibliography should analyze 6-8 critical secondary sources of use to your final project, of which no more than 2 may have been used in class. Each annotation should summarize the main points of the source, zero in on its contribution to the critical conversation, read the text for critical gaps or omissions (attending particularly to points where your work might intervene), and identify ways in which the source will be useful to your research. Each annotation will likely run 200-300 words.
- The final project is a 3000-3500 word (10-12-page) paper suitable for presentation at an academic conference. It should be a focused, theoretically-engaged argument that engages a specific primary text/ performance, but does so in such a way as to also engage the critical discussion in the field American political drama. The argument should follow the conventions of academic argumentation, including MLA format for all citations. This paper will include a draft workshop, where students will read and respond to one another's papers, and an individual conference with the professor. Failure to come prepared or to participate in either workshop will result in a one letter grade penalty for the paper.

15% *Performance project and Group Paper*: The group project will take place throughout the semester on various dates marked in the syllabus. Groups of 4-5 people will choose a scene or short extract from their assigned play to perform for the class. After performing the scene, the group will lead a 15-20 minute discussion on the scene, the choices made, and how those choices reflect a larger interpretation of the play. On the day of the performance, each group will turn in 1) individual work reports on who did what in the group, 2) a brief lesson plan outlining their goals for class discussion, and 3) a group paper of 1500-2000 words (5-7 pages) that argues for their performance as a specific interpretation of the text. Please examine the syllabus for the five possible plays to participate in, and be prepared to list your top three choices by Thursday.. Guidelines to follow.

Format for Papers:

All out-of-class assignments must adhere to the following criteria: typed or word-processed, Times New Roman 12-point font double-spaced, 1 inch to 1.25 inch margins, spell-checked, page-numbered, and finally, stapled or paper-clipped. Since paper assignments are based on word counts, a good rule of thumb is that each page is approximately 300 words. Please head your papers with your name, the date, the course, my name, and the word count, followed by a (creative) title that is centered above your essay.

Submissions that do not meet these requirements will be dropped as much as a letter grade. Please note: I am seriously troubled by students who fiddle with the physical appearance of the paper so as to achieve the illusion of length. This belief assumes that I cannot tell the difference between quantity and quality, and I find that personally offensive. A paper that is shorter than the assigned length but presented in an honest way will earn far more respect. That said, word counts should reduce the impulse to indulge in this practice.

Draft Workshops and Feedback

One week before the due date for each major paper, students will bring to class a complete draft of the paper—by complete I mean that it meets the minimum page requirements, and makes a complete argument, including conclusion. Peer Review will be conducted in the following way: In class, students will meet in pairs or small groups, read one another's papers, and give feedback guided by a worksheet distributed in class. The written feedback from the worksheet and oral feedback from discussion should provide a direction for revisions.

Because draft workshops are an integral part of the writing process, you are required to come prepared and to participate. Not only do you get feedback on your own writing, but you also learn more about the revision process itself, learn by reading others' work, help others polish their writing, and teach others by sharing your work with them. These are crucial to the writing community of the class. Accordingly, students who do not come prepared to workshop a complete draft will be assessed a one-letter grade penalty on the final draft of that paper.

Grading Written Work

Grades on written work will follow the guidelines laid out below, guidelines used in the University's writing program:

A: An outstanding essay that reflects a perceptive and thoughtful response to the assignment. It is well organized with excellent development of its ideas. It reflects the writer's command of appropriate rhetorical strategies. The prose is vigorous and fresh, and the writer is clearly in control of the standard conventions of American prose.

B: A very good essay that fulfills the assignment and shows evidence of clear thought and good planning. It is well organized with good supporting details. The writing is fluent, and there are only minor errors in the mechanics of writing which do not interfere with reading the essay.

C: A standard, satisfactory essay that fulfills the assignment and is adequately developed. This is the basic grade from which all others are derived. Higher grades than this *exceed* the expectations for the assignment, and grades lower than this fail to meet some major component of the assignment. The writing is clear and coherent with relatively few errors in usage and mechanics, but the writer fails to demonstrate any particular strength which would distinguish an above-average essay.

D: A below-average essay that fulfills many components of the assignment but exhibits major problems in writing. It may have difficulty with the presentation of ideas (e.g., lack of a clear thesis, weak organization, poor development of ideas, or inappropriate diction, poor spelling) or be marred by enough errors in the mechanics of writing to seriously distract the reader.

F: An essay that relates to the topic but is so poorly presented that it fails to fulfill the assignment. It fails to present its basic ideas, either because of poor organization and lack of clarity or because the writing reflects a lack of control over the basic conventions of standard American usage. Such an essay may have sentence boundary problems, poor use of idiom, inappropriate diction (words used incorrectly), agreement errors, or verb tense problems.

O: An essay that is either completely unrelated to the assignment, or that represents dishonest work by the student, principally the use of ideas or writing which are clearly not one's own work. Refer to the West Virginia University Undergraduate Catalog for the University policy on Academic Dishonesty.

Social Justice:

West Virginia University is committed to social justice. I concur with that commitment and expect to maintain a positive learning environment based upon open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. Our University does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veterans status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment in this class will be appreciated and given serious consideration.

If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Disability Services (293-6700).

Academic Dishonesty:

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Because the various forms of academic dishonesty have proliferated in the past few years, I have begun to take this problem very seriously, and will aggressively pursue full punishment (an unforgivable F for the course) if I find significant evidence of academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty cheats you out of your education. Moreover, there is an underlying assumption of absolute disrespect for your classmates, your instructor and your institution. If you are panicking and feel like you might be forced to rely on academic dishonesty, please please please try to see me about other options. It is your responsibility to be informed about your responsibilities. For more information on the University's Code of Academic Integrity, visit

<http://www.arc.wvu.edu/admissions/integrity.html>

Class Schedule/Syllabus Fall 2008

Wk	Day	Date	Class Schedule, Readings, Assignments
1	T	8/19	Introduction: Political drama in the U.S.
	TH	8/21	Sentimental Politics Read: <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> *** Acts 1-3
2	T	8/26	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> Read: Acts 4-5
	TH	8/28	Women's Suffrage and the Stage Read: Susan Glaspell, <i>Trifles</i> *** Informal Assignment: Do some research online for arguments pro and con in US women's suffrage movement circa 1916
3	T	9/2	Social Realism Read: Clifford Odets, <i>Waiting for Lefty</i> (all)
	TH	9/4	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>
4	T	9/9	The dilemma of the Modern Woman Read: Sophie Treadwell, <i>Machinal</i>
	TH	9/11	<i>Machinal</i> Read: Gainor and Dickey***
5	T	9/16	<i>Machinal</i> Today!!! Live for one performance only!!! Performance Group 1!!!
	TH	9/18	Political Allegory Read: Arthur Miller, <i>The Crucible</i> (Acts 1-2 + appendix)
6	T	9/23	<i>The Crucible</i> Read: Acts 3-4
	TH	9/25	<i>The Crucible</i> Read: Assigned companion text TBA Today!!! Live for one performance only!!! Performance Group 2!!!
7	T	9/30	Paper 1: Draft Workshop

	TH	10/2	Epic Theatre in the Americas Read: Luis Valdez, <i>Zoot Suit</i> (all)
8	T	10/7	<i>Zoot Suit</i> Paper #1 Due
	TH	10/9	<i>Zoot Suit</i> Read: Brecht, ***Broyles Gonzales*** Today!!! Live for one performance only!!! Performance Group 3!!!
9	T	10/14	The Black Arts Movement Read: Amiri Baraka, <i>Slave Ship</i> , *** Artaud***
	TH	10/16	<i>Slave Ship</i> Guest Speaker, Mike Sell, IUP. Read: Sell*** Please make every effort to attend Dr. Sell's talk later today. Details TBA
10	T	10/21	American Theatre and Empire Read: David Henry Hwang, <i>M. Butterfly</i> (all)
	TH	10/23	<i>M. Butterfly</i> Skim: Shimakawa *** and Kondo***
11	T	10/28	Theatre and the AIDS Crisis Read: Tony Kushner, <i>Angels in America, Part I: Millenium Approaches</i> (1-127)
	TH	10/30	<i>Angels in America, Part II: Perestroika</i>
12	T	11/4	<i>Angels in America</i> Read: Savran*** Today!!! Live for one performance only!!! Performance Group 4!!!
	TH	11/6	Politics and Performance Arts Read: Holly Hughes, <i>World Without End</i> ,*** Tim Miller, "The NEA Four Case"*** Due: Paper Proposal
13	T	11/11	Oral History Performance and the American Community Read: Anna Deavere Smith: <i>Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992</i> .(all)
	TH	11/13	<i>Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992</i> Read: Claycomb, "(Ch)oral History"*** Today!!! Live for one performance only!!! Performance Group 5!!!
14	T	11/18	American History as Political Theatre Read: Suzan-Lori Parks, <i>Topdog/Underdog</i>
	TH	11/20	<i>Topdog/Underdog</i> Due: Annotated Bibliography
Thanksgiving Break			
15	T	12/2	Draft Workshop for Final Paper Due: Completed draft of final paper
	W- F	12/3-5	Individual Writing Conferences
Exam	W	12/10	Final Paper Due in my office by 3pm