

# English 234

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Katy Ryan, English 234, Spring 2002, Modern and Postmodern Drama

Eng 234 (Honors): Modern and Postmodern Drama

Katy Ryan

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Office Hours: Mon. and Wed. 10:00-12:00

## Course Description

The stage is a strangely unreal real place, a site of dreams and acts, gestures and words. In this course, we will be reading plays that deviate substantially and creatively from nineteenth century social realism. At first, the plays may seem simply and belligerently indecipherable. We will discuss what we expect from a play, where these expectations come from, and what happens when the entirely unexpected occurs onstage--when, for instance, nothing happens, or actors "step out" of character and speak to the audience, or a character turns into a rhinoceros.

Some of the plays are highly experimental; others follow a more conventional or Aristotelian plot structure. All of them explore the intricacies of social identities and engage with pressing world concerns--wars, colonialism, liberation struggles, family dynamics. We will grapple with how the forms of these modern and postmodern plays alert us to a new way of *seeing*, and knowing, the world. We begin with Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, a metatheatrical meditation on the nature of performance itself. We will consider the innovative drama of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht and trace the movements in theatre away from psychological realism--and back again. In addition to a wide variety of plays, we will read and discuss literary theory and theatre criticism. Most importantly, you will participate in the production of theatrical meanings through student performances, written assignments, and class discussions.

## Required Texts

Walter Levy, ed. *Modern Drama: Selected Plays from 1879 to the Present*

Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage*

### **Course Requirements**

**Attendance and participation** in class discussions are mandatory. We will often work in small groups and your absence will effect other members in your group. If you miss more than three days, for any reason, you must make an appointment to speak with me.

### **Performance Groups**

Everyone will be in a performance group that will create mini-theatrical events for the class. These performances are informal, ungraded, and fun. You will have an entirely kind audience. No one expects professional acting. You receive full credit as long as it is clear that your group has worked thoughtfully and conscientiously. Think of your performance as a gift to the class and as a way to begin our discussion.

Keep in mind that the performance should be an *interpretive engagement* with the text rather than a direct reading. The more insightful and provocative performances come from groups that move into challenging territory. Try to answer a question that you have about a play *through* the performance. You will have some in-class time to prepare but you will need to schedule one meeting with your group outside class. Be as creative as you wish, bringing in props, music, or visual aids. Each performance should be about ten minutes.

For one of your performances, you will write a one-page description of your group's process--how you decided to focus on the particular scene or set of scenes, what interpretation

you were hoping to convey, how you made casting decisions, etc. This description should contain analysis of the play as well as insight into the group's working process.

### **Examinations and Reader Responses**

There will be a midterm and a final examination. In addition to the performance description (described above), you will write six short (1 single-spaced page) responses to the plays. You should pace yourself so that you turn in a response approximately every two weeks. Your responses can focus on a specific scene, idea, image, character, or theme in a play, or they can respond to the literary theory and criticism. These informal and creative

meditations are a chance for you to consider the readings *before* coming to class. At the end of the semester, I will collect again these written responses and give you a grade for the entire group. As the semester progresses, your responses should become more analytical and should offer connections between the plays. Feel free to use the first-person pronoun.

### **Plagiarism Statement**

Plagiarism includes the following: presenting someone else's work as your own; quoting a source (book, magazine, or journal) without proper citation; downloading information from the internet without proper citation. Any instance of plagiarism violates the University's policy on intellectual honesty and may result in a failing grade for the course. If you have any questions, please ask.

### **Grading**

Midterm Exam 30%

Final Exam 30%

Portfolio of Responses (7) 20%

Participation 20%

### **Schedule**

Tues. Jan. 15 Introductions

What is a play?

***Metatheatrical Plays: "We're not beginning to mean something are we?"***

Thurs. Jan 17 Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Act One

Preface by Pirandello

NOTE: Judy Richardson, co-producer of *Eyes on the Prize*, will be speaking at the African Methodist Episcopal Church on Beechurst Ave. at 7 PM.

Tues. Jan. 22 *Six Characters in Search of an Author* Acts Two and Three

Thurs. Jan 24 *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

Peggy Phelan, from *Unmarked* pp. 1143-1147 (xerox)

Tues. Jan 29 Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

**Due: Relevant selections from *Hamlet***

Thurs. Jan 31 *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

**Performance Group**

***The Absurd and the Existential: Ways of Seeing***

Tues. Feb 5 Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

Martin Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd"

Thurs. Feb 7 *Endgame*

Tues. Feb. 12 *Endgame*

Martin Esslin, "Samuel Beckett: The Search for Self"

**Performance Group**

Thurs. Feb. 14 Eugène Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*

Ionesco, from *Notes and Counter Notes: Writings on the Theatre*

Tues. Feb. 19 *Rhinoceros*

Thurs. Feb 21 *Rhinoceros*

**Performance Group**

Tues. Feb 26 *Rhinoceros* and midterm evaluations

Thurs. Feb 28 **Midterm Examination**

Tues. Mar. 5 Edward Albee, *The Zoo Story*

Thurs. Mar. 7 *The Zoo Story*

**Performance Group**

***World Theatre: The Politics of Place***

Tues. Mar. 12 Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage*, Scenes 1-4

Brecht, "The Alienation Effect"

Thurs. Mar. 14 *Mother Courage*, Scenes 5-12

"Two Ways of Playing Mother Courage" and "[Misfortune in itself is a poor teacher']

NOTE: Ben Doyle, author of a collection of poems, *Radio, Radio*, will be reading on Friday, March 14, at 5:30 in the Mon Room in the Lair.

Lewis Nordan, author of seven books of fiction, will be reading on Saturday, March 16, at 7:30 in the Greenbriar Room in the Lair.

Tues. Mar. 19 *Mother Courage*

**Performance Group**

Thurs. Mar. 21 *Mother Courage*

**Performance Group**

**Spring Break**

Tues. Apr. 2 Wole Soyinka, *The Lion and the Jewel* (entire play)

Thurs. Apr. 4 *The Lion and the Jewel*

***Secrets and Consequences at Home***

Tues. Apr. 9 Lillian Hellman, *The Children's Hour* Acts 1 and 2

Thurs. Apr. 11 *The Children's Hour* Act 3

FILM: *The Celluloid Closet*

NOTE: Stephen Dunn, Pulitzer-Prize winning poet, will be reading on Thurs., at 7:30 in the Gold Ballroom.

Tues. Apr. 16 Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* Act 1

Thurs. Apr. 18 *A Raisin in the Sun* Acts 2 and 3

**Performance Group**

Tues. Apr. 23 August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (entire play)

Thurs. Apr. 25 *The Piano Lesson*

Henry Louis Gates, "The Chitlin Circuit"

**Portfolio Due**

Tues. Apr. 30 Marsha Norman, *'night, Mother* (entire play)

Thurs. May 2 *'night, Mother*

Katherine Burkman, "The Demeter Myth and Doubling in Marsha

Norman's *'night, Mother*"

**Performance Group**

**Final Exam: Monday May 6 at 3:00**