

## ENGLISH 303

# FORMS OF DRAMA: MODERN

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Odd Fellows 234, X 4325

Office hours: MWF 10-11, TTH 1:30-3:00, and by appointment

### Texts:

- Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Grove)  
Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, trans. Eric Bentley (Grove)  
Chekhov, *Five Plays*, trans. Ronald Hingley (Oxford World Classics)  
Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (Vintage Books)  
Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (Penguin)  
Ibsen, *Four Major Plays*, trans. Rolf Fjelde, Vol. 2 (Signet Classics)  
Jones, *Dutchman and The Slave: Two Plays* (Harper)  
Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (Penguin Plays)  
Nottage, *Ruined* (Theatre Communications Group)  
O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (Yale)  
Shaw, *Pygmalion and Major Barbara* (Bantam Classics)  
Vogel, *The Mammary Plays* (Theatre Communications Group)  
Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Signet)

The plays we read in this course span more than a century, from 1882, the date of Ibsen's controversial *An Enemy of the People*, to 2008, the year in which Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* demonstrated the extent to which issues of race and gender had infiltrated popular theatre. During that long century, the theatre underwent a revolution such as it had not known since the Renaissance. Nineteenth-century melodrama was replaced first by a theatre of realism, then naturalism; plays were no longer complacently bourgeois but dealt with pressing social problems and were informed by new philosophic and psychological theories. These plays led to more radical experiments: expressionist and dream plays; a so-called "epic theatre" which provoked audiences to think in Marxist terms about the play's social agenda; and finally, the so-called "theatre of the absurd." The profound upheavals in twentieth-century society – two world wars, a global economic depression, political and cultural revolutions – made a break with tradition inevitable. Playwrights simply could not continue to write the same kinds of plays that had satisfied nineteenth-century audiences. But with a questioning of social, moral and political values came a corresponding challenge to the artistic forms through which those values had for so long been inculcated. This course will focus on how new forms arose in response to the breakdown of traditional values.

We shall read a total of fourteen plays for class discussion. As the course will be conducted largely as a seminar, *everyone's* contribution will count, and I expect you to have read plays *before* we begin discussing them. Class participation will constitute 20% of your grade. The rest will be determined by three major assignments – a midterm, a final exam, and a substantial analytic paper – plus two short response papers to Playshop productions in the Vukovich Center. Please note all due dates carefully. Papers will be

penalized by one-half a letter grade each day they are late. Attendance, too, is crucial: you may have two unexcused absences *without* penalty, after which your final grade will be docked by 3 1/3% for each unexcused absence. Absences for medical reasons may be excused *only* with a doctor's note.

Because dramatic scripts are best realized in performance, I have selected a number of plays from which important films have been made. There will be evening showings of these films in Odd Fellows 221. Please note the dates, in boldface. If you cannot make a showing, all films will be on reserve at the library for you to view in a video carrel at your leisure.

**Date            Assignment**

8/26            Nineteenth-century melodrama and the well-made play

**REALISM AND THE PROBLEM PLAY**

8/31, 9/2        Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*: social realism and Victorian hypocrisy

9/7, 9            Shaw, *Pygmalion* and Preface: the influence of Ibsen on comedies of political and social ideology

**9/10-11        See a performance of *The View from Earth*, Playshop Theatre**

**9/13 5pm       Short response paper due**

9/14, 16        Miller, *Death of a Salesman*: an American standard of tragedy. Also handout on Miller and modern tragedy.

**9/16 7pm       Showing of *Death of a Salesman* with Dustin Hoffman**

9/21, 23        Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*: the rise of black theatre and women playwrights in America.

**9/23 7pm       Showing of *A Raisin in the Sun* with Sidney Poitier**

**NATURALISM – THEATRICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL**

9/28, 30        Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya*: Stanislavski, psychological acting, and the emergence of subtext. Also handout: Stanislavski on Direction and Acting.

**10/3 7pm       Showing of *Vanya on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street***

10/5            Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*, Acts 1 and 2: comedy, tragedy, or social satire? Also handout on Chekhov.

- 10/7**            **Mid-term exam**
- 10/12**           **Fall break**
- 10/14, 19        O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night*: American expressionism and the influence of Ibsen and Strindberg. Also handout: Commentaries on O'Neill.
- 10/19 7pm**      **Showing of *Long Day's Journey into Night* with Katherine Hepburn**
- 10/21, 26        Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*: the poetry of sexuality, repression, and power.
- 10/26 7pm**      **Showing of *A Streetcar Named Desire* with Marlon Brando**
- 11/1 5pm**        **Critical paper due on a play or plays of your choice**

#### **EPIC THEATRE AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

- 10/28, 11/2      Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*: epic theater and the influence of Marxism. Also handout on Brecht and the theory of alienation.
- 11/4, 9            Hwang, *M Butterfly*: alienation at the intersection of race and gender
- 11/11, 16        Vogel, *How I Learned to Drive*: the force of feminist voices in America. Also handout on Vogel.
- 11/18, 23        Nottage, *Ruined* and the politics of genocide: more Aristotle than Brecht?
- 11/18-21**        **See a performance of *The Cherry Orchard*, Playshop Theatre**
- 11/22 5pm**      **Short response paper due**
- 11/25**            **Thanksgiving break**

#### **THEATRE OF THE ABSURD**

- 11/30, 12/2      Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* and the absence of God? Also handout: Esslin on The Theatre of the Absurd.
- 12/7              Jones, *Dutchman* and the voice of anger: racism meets the theatre of the absurd. Also handout on Black Theatre.
- 12/11, 2-5pm**   **Final exam**

