



Boston University British Programmes
Experiencing British Theatre: in the Postwar World
Lecturer: Dr Aleks Sierz
CFA DR 443
Wednesday and Thursday (9.00-1.00)
Wilde Room
Theatre Studies Track Core Class

Location:

43 Harrington Gardens
Wednesday 9.00-1.00 and Thursday 9.00–1.00
Plus one class visit to the Questors Theatre in West London
And two class visits to see current theatre performances

Course Objective:

To give an overall picture of contemporary British theatre in London; to provide a broad study of the major developments in British drama over the past 50 years; to relate drama to broad changes in British society; to examine the work of specific writers and directors in detail; to stimulate critical analysis through written work and discussion; to understand the role of the Arts Council and state subsidy of the performing arts. The ultimate aim is to increase awareness of British theatre, and give an insight into how it is organised and why it has developed in its present form.

Course Overview:

The course will introduce the student to a wide range of current theatre practices in London, and will include both straight plays and musicals. It will provide an overview of post-war British drama, and offer a sound introduction to arts administration and reviewing live performance. The British theatre system – from West End to fringe, from Shakespeare’s Globe to the Royal Court – will be covered through lectures and discussions with leading practitioners across the spectrum of the craft. This course will prepare students for the width breadth of opportunities that are open to them in the field of Theatre Arts in London. The course will cover the development of theatre as an industry in London as well as such issues as government funding for the arts, and the future of British theatre. Particular attention is given to recent drama history; milestone playtexts – from Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953) to Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995) – and the way they relate to their wider social and cultural context. Other subjects covered include genre, censorship, theatre criticism, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, political drama, and musical theatre. The course will look at the role of writers, directors, actors and critics. Finally, the course will familiarise students with a semiotic approach to analysing performances, derived from the work of French theatre expert Patrice Pavis.

Methodology:

The teaching sessions will be supplemented by a series of guest lecturers who will examine the London theatre experience through professional master classes: workshops, lectures and discussions with:

- a) a playwright
- b) a critic
- c) technical staff such as set designers, lighting designers, and musicians.

There will be a session on the technical aspects of contemporary theatre, with a visit behind the scenes to the Questors Theatre in West London.

Lectures by Aleks Sierz will be supplemented with in-class video screenings, and involve readings from key texts as well as other class exercises.

The purpose of each theatre visit will be to write a review of the performance.

Required reading:

Main textbook: Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*, Yale University Press (1999) plus downloadable readings.

Suggested additional readings for Theatre Theme:

- Michael Billington, *One Night Stands*, Nick Hern Books (1993)
- Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Penguin (1968, frequently reprinted)
- Peter Brook, *Threads of Time: A Memoir*, Methuen (1998)
- Simon Callow, *Being an Actor*, Penguin (1995)
- David Edgar, *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting*, Faber (1999)
- Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, *Changing Stages*, Bloomsbury (2000)
- Michael Kustow, *Theatre@Risk*, Methuen (2000)
- Robert Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre: An Introduction*, Routledge (2004)
- John Osborne, *Damn You, England: Collected Prose*, Faber (1994)
- Graham Saunders, *'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, Manchester University Press (2002)
- Scales, Prunella and Timothy West, *So You Want To Be An Actor?* Nick Hern Books, 2005
- Dominic Shellard, *Kenneth Tynan: A Life*, Yale University Press (2003)
- Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, Faber (2001)
- Stephen Unwin, *So You Want To Be a Theatre Director?*, Nick Hern (2004)
- Stephen Unwin and Carole Woddis, *A Pocket Guide to 20th-Century Drama*, Faber (2001)
- Michelene Wandor, *Postwar British Drama: Looking Back in Gender*, Routledge (2001)
- Irving Wardle, *Theatre Criticism*, Routledge (1992)

Assessment:

60% Final Paper on Theatre History (2,000 words), submitted in the final week of core phase.

20% Two reviews of theatre performances.

20% Class presentations.

Grading Criteria (Updated July 2006):

The following Boston University table explains the grading system for DR 443:

Grade	Honour Points	Usual%	Definition
A	4.0	93-100	Excellent
A-	3.7	89-92	
B+	3.3	85-88	
B	3.0	81-84	Good
B-	2.7	77-80	
C+	2.3	73-76	
C	2.0	69-72	Satisfactory
C-	1.7	65-68	
D	1.0	60-64	Low pass
F	0.0	Unmarked	Fail

“Incomplete” or **I** grades are not permitted to be issued by faculty, because of the obvious difficulty in making up missed work once the student has left the country. All work must be completed on time. The grades reflect the quality of the work.

It is also important to realise that grades below C may not be transferable to non BU students' home institutions. Lecturers and students should use the following criteria for an understanding of what each grade means.

“Withdrawn” The Boston University Provost has announced that faculty members may no longer assign grades of "W" (Withdrawn). In supporting this policy, the Registrar's Office will no longer assign W grades on individual students' official Boston University records, even if the grade sheet has a "W" recorded for a student. Alternative grades to "W" are "F" (Failing) or "MG" (Missing Grade).

A This exceptional grade is assigned only to work that has persistently outstanding quality in both substance and presentation. The student must demonstrate a sustained capacity for independent thought and extensive study, producing rigorous and convincing analyses in well-ordered prose.

A- Awarded to work that is clearly focused and analytical, and based on wide reading. The student must cover all the principal points of a question and systematically develop a persuasive overall thesis, allowing for one or two venial omissions or inapt expressions.

B+, B, B- This range of grades indicates that the student has shown some evidence of original thought and intellectual initiative. The student has cited sources beyond the class materials, and shown a degree of originality in perception and/or approach to the subject. The work will show thoughtful management of material, and a good grasp of the issues. The differences between a B+, a straight B and a B- may reflect poor presentation of the material, or mistakes in punctuation, spelling and grammar.

C+, C, C- Work in this grade range is satisfactory, but uninspiring. If the work is simply a recitation of the class materials or discussions, and shows no sign of genuine intellectual engagement with the issues, it cannot deserve a higher grade. Should an essay fail to provide a clear answer to the question as set, or argue a position coherently, the grade will fall within this range. Quality of presentation can lift such work into the upper levels of this grade range. Work of this quality which is poorly presented, and riddled with errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation, will fall into the lower end of the range. To earn a C grade, the work must demonstrate that the student is familiar with the primary course material, be written well enough to be readily understood, be relevant to the assignment, and, of course, be the student's own work except where properly cited.

D A marginal pass can be given where some but not all the elements of the course have been completed satisfactorily.

F The failing grade indicates the work is seriously flawed in one or more ways:

- *Obvious lack of familiarity with the material
- *So poorly written as to defy understanding
- *So brief and insubstantial that it fails to properly address the subject
- *Material presented is not relevant to the assignment
- *Demonstrates evidence of plagiarism (see below)

Course Chronology:

WEEK ONE

First Session

Postwar theatre and the arrival of the Angry Young Men

1) Course introduction. Overview of London theatre just after the Second World War, and an introduction to British theatre traditions and the genre of naturalism. How British society, recovering from the ravages of the Second World War, expressed itself through drama, and how critics saw the light comedies and countryhouse settings of these works as 'Loamshire plays'.

2) Video of 1950s British theatre – polite society dramas, theatre censorship and a climate of middle-class complacency. The video extract is from *Changing Stages*, the BBC series introduced by Richard Eyre, former artistic director of the National Theatre and author, with playwright Nicholas Wright of *Changing Stages: A View of British theatre in the 20th Century*.

3) The playwright: case study of John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* and *Dejavu*.

Set reading: Shellard, chapters 1-2; Kenneth Tynan, 'Loamshire'; John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, *Dejavu*, and *Damn You, England*.

WEEK TWO

Second Session

The playwright and the play

Continuation of the study of the work of writers in the new writing theatres (such as the Royal Court and Bush) in contemporary Britain. Analysis of the questions of dramatic language, tone of voice and theatre form.

Set reading: Shellard, chapters 1-2; Kenneth Tynan, 'Loamshire'; John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, *Dejavu*, and *Damn You, England*.

PLUS: VISITING GUEST LECTURER (PLAYWRIGHT):

Fin Kennedy is a young writer and theatre academic, whose work includes *Protection* (Soho Theatre, 2003). He was selected as one of nine writers to represent 30 years of the Pearson Playwrights Scheme at the National Theatre, and has also written for television.

Third Session

Twin peaks: the major British theatre companies

1) Overview of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the struggle to set up the National Theatre. How the century-old struggle to set up a national theatre finally achieved its aim, and how Britain ended up with two major giants, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National, which then competed for prominence in the theatrical landscape.

2) Video of 1960s British theatre – experiment, widening the boundaries of theatre and a climate of adventurous change.

3) The director: case study of Peter Brook. Peter Brook's early days were devoted to directing at tiny arts theatres, but soon he developed into Britain's finest director, responsible for major productions that changed the country's idea of what was possible. After experimental seasons at the Royal Shakespeare Company, which culminated in the "dirty plays controversy" after his staging of the shocking *Marat/Sade*, Brook decided to quit Britain and set up in Paris, where he continued his fresh approach to staging international drama.

Set reading: Shellard, chapter 3; Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* and *Threads of Time*; Stephen Unwin, *So You Want To Be a Theatre Director?*; Peter Weiss, *Marat/Sade*.

WEEK THREE

Fourth Session

Britain and the state-of-the-nation drama

1) Overview of political plays and the state of the nation drama. How, in the 1970s, a series of liberal and left-wing playwrights decided to put on large-scale plays that debated the burning issues of the day: racism, capitalism and the failure of socialism. Were these plays just preaching to the converted or did they help change society? Comparison between avant-garde theatre and

agit-prop. Why did large-scale political theatre die out? And how do they relate to the latest upsurge in verbatim drama?

2) Video of 1960s and 1970s British theatre – social realism and radicalism on the stage, with a special focus on the influence of Bertolt Brecht.

Theatre theory: the ideas of Bertolt Brecht.

3) The critic: case study of Kenneth Tynan. As the theatre critic of the *Observer* newspaper in the 1950s, Tynan advocated a new kind of drama – committed, gutsy and up-to-date – and was rewarded for his successful advocacy by being made the first literary manager of the National Theatre. Because of his superb penmanship, he has become the most famous and most influential of post-war British theatre critics.

Set reading: Shellard chapter 4; Brecht in Leach; Shellard, *Tynan: A Life* (Yale, 2003); Michael Billington, *One Night Stands*.

Fifth Session

The critic and theatre criticism

How do you write a review? A practical session to equip students to write reviews. This will put the work of contemporary critics into a general social context and explore their role within the arts. At the same time, the ideas of Patrice Pavis, the French theatre semiotician, will be explored, and his Performance Questionnaire will be used to help deepen the analysis of actual performances. Students will also discuss the plays they have seen.

Set reading: Michael Billington, *One Night Stands*; Irving Wardle, *Theatre Criticism*.

PLUS: VISITING GUEST LECTURER (THEATRE CRITIC):

Michael Billington, of *The Guardian*, is three times winner of ‘Critic of the Year’ award and is one of Britain’s longest-serving and most eminent drama critics. He has also been a contributor to *The New York Times* and an occasional writer for *Harper’s Bazaar*.

WEEK FOUR

Sixth Session

The rise and rise of the musical

1) Overview of the structure of London theatre today (i): from West End to the fringe. How the old system of subsidised theatre and commercial theatre, with alternative theatre developing after 1968, was gradually changed into a more integrated system during the 1980s. Is the London fringe now dead? The arrival of the blockbuster musical and Andrew Lloyd Webber. Case study of *Jerry Springer: The Opera* – radical innovation or zoo theatre?

2) Video of London theatre: new musicals, expanding definitions of theatre and the latest experimental trends. ? The influence of Antonin Artaud on contemporary performance.

Theatre Theory: the vision of Antonin Artaud.

Set reading: Shellard, chapter 5; Artaud in Leach.

Seventh Session

The actor and acting

1) The actor: case studies of Judi Dench/Simon Callow/Michael Gambon. How actors start – are they born or are they made? Some simple acting exercises, and what they tell us about how to explore the dramatic text more deeply. What workshops can teach you about acting in a play. The career trajectory of some of Britain’s most famous international stars.

2) Plus a revision of British postwar theatre history: how do we conceptualise the past 50 years? How can we write a critical history of this period, and is it possible to write history without bias: in the end, whose history is it?

Students will also discuss the plays they have seen. And recap theatre criticism and semiotics.

Set reading: David Edgar, *State of Play*; Simon Callow, *Being an Actor*.

WEEK FIVE

Eighth Session

Visit to Questors Theatre.

Ninth Session

British theatre today

1) Overview of the structure of British theatre today (ii): from big musicals to small plays in tiny rooms. What are the strengths and weaknesses of British theatre today? What is the role of the critic? How does the size of the venue affect your experience of theatre? What are the best new writers working in British contemporary theatre?

2) Video of in-yer-face theatre and the latest new wave in British playwriting. How is British drama responding to the challenges of the new millennium. Focus on playwright Sarah Kane. Reading of a scene from Patrick Marber's *Closer*.

3) Summary of what we have learnt.

Set reading: Shellard, chapter 5, Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, Graham Saunders, 'Love Me or Kill Me'; Michael Kustow, *Theatre@Risk*.

WEEK SIX

Date Final Exam and deadline for final paper: Friday 5th October

See BU website for updates

Terms and Conditions:

****Attendance at all classes and visits is mandatory. Students missing lectures without a doctor's letter or authorisation from the Director will automatically be docked a – or a + from their final grade. Persistent lateness will also be penalised in the final grade.** A register of attendance will be taken at the beginning of each session. Absence can be conveyed either by advising a senior member of staff in the Academic Affairs Office with a request that the information be passed on to the lecturers; or by emailing either faculty teaching the course (see the contact details at the top of this syllabus) prior to class. Leaving it to another class member to convey messages will not be acceptable. Appointments for interviews for internships should not conflict with attendance at classes. **

Any student who is unable to attend a class, or take part in an assignment because of religious reasons, must give notice of the fact in advance. He/she will be required to make up for time lost. In this situation arrangements must be made with another student for class notes to be shared. Written papers must be delivered before agreed deadline, failure to hand in the paper will result in deducted marks.

Aleks will make some time available in each session for students to raise questions etc. Should students wish to discuss matters with faculty in person they will also be available during the break mid-lecture and at the end of class. Alternatively, please feel free to e-mail him with questions. If you have problems with the availability of reading materials (all of which should be in the library) please contact him either through the Academic Affairs Office or via e-mail.

Plagiarism

Boston University's Code of Student Responsibilities states:

The value of any grade, credit, honour or degree received by a student presupposes that all work submitted by a student is his or her own. A student who uses or relies upon the work of others or who, except under conditions expressly permitted by the instructor, furnishes assistance to another student, violates the standards of the University. Students must insist upon academic

honesty and integrity from their fellow students and must report promptly any case of alleged violation of academic conduct. Failure to do so is a violation of this code.

Plagiarism can take many forms, including the reproduction of published material without acknowledgement, or representing work done by others as your own. This includes the increasingly common practice of purchasing and downloading work from Internet "paper mills." You should be extremely careful when submitting work for this course that all work is correctly sourced. Prints outs of websites that have been used in research may be required by the lecturer in cases of a grade dispute and all website based reference material should be kept by the student until after the end of the semester.

I really do hope you enjoy the course, Aleks Sierz