

English 342

Katy Ryan, ENGL 342, Fall 2006

ENG 342W:

Movements toward Justice:

Twentieth-Century US American Drama

Fall 2006

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Tues/Thurs 1:00-2:15

Office Hours: Wed: 12:00-2:00

Stansbury 424

They tore the railroad down
so the Sunshine Special can't run
I'm going away baby
build me a railroad of my own
--Blind Lemon Jefferson
from August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

Course Description

This course approaches twentieth-century US American theatre as a site for social change, a place where ideas about justice are articulated, embodied, challenged, and revised. We will take seriously the idea that theatre should not only reflect the world, but attempt to change it, to make it better. Ultimately, the course is about hope, what the playwright Tony Kushner calls a "moral obligation, a human obligation, an obligation to the cells in your body."

We will organize our thinking around three modes of inquiry—reading, writing, and performing. You will be reading plays, theatre reviews, and literary criticism; writing insightful responses and strong formal essays; and cooperating with one another to create dynamic performances for the class.

I have divided our readings into three parts. We will read chronologically within each section. First, we will focus on *Courts, Culture, and the Death Penalty*. In this section, we will encounter a

number of plays in which the American legal system plays a dramatic role, as it often does in popular TV shows. We will focus on the ethical and theoretical questions raised by the action: What is the relation between fear and vengeance? Fear and power? What constitutes a just act? Who decides? How do certain bodies become sites for cultural anxiety and aggression, longing and possibility? How does power (what is power?) intersect with the search for justice (what is justice?) How do we recognize injustice, and what should we do in response?

In Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Big Daddy tells his son, "What do you know about this mendacity thing? Hell! I could write a book on it!" In the second section of our syllabus, *Secrets and Sexuality*, we will think about what is generated by lies and secrets onstage and how moments of revelation, or "recognition" as Aristotle called them, often lead to a crisis and a change in the action, or a "reversal." We will track and critique this conventional ordering of plot as we discuss the power of heteronormativity, sexual discrimination, and queer acts of resistance.

Borrowing from the last line of Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*, I have titled our last section, *Planting the Dead: International and National Violence*. These final plays will give us an opportunity to think about the causes and consequences of war as well as other forms of violence, especially racism within the United States. As we investigate how playwrights have dramatized history on the stage, we will also explore how people respond to injustice and attempt to create more sane and more hopeful lives.

Teaching Philosophy

I want the English classes I teach to be sites of engagement with the world—in all its complexity, beauty, pain. The classroom can be a place where words and our interaction with words compel us to rethink what we think we know. It should not be easy, nor should it always be comfortable. Because I am interested in how literature can change, not simply reflect, realities, my classes move back and forth between texts and contexts, theories and practices. I try to select literature that is formally compelling, socially meaningful, and politically charged. My hope is that our discussions will not be narrowly focused or limited in any way. I hope that we can attend seriously to the challenges of literature and literary scholarship, and to the challenges of a classroom where there may well be differences of opinion and will certainly be differences in experience. I hope that we can, this semester, begin to involve ourselves in the processes of thinking, deliberating, and acting that will, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "make real the promises of democracy."

Course Goals:

- To activate your intellect and theatrical imaginations
- To examine the history and politics of 20th-century American drama, and to make connections to our own historical moment
- To become stronger critical thinkers and writers
- To learn to ask compelling, insightful questions through performance
- To experiment with different writing styles, forms, and voices
- To provide helpful feedback to writers
- To learn to work together, productively and creatively

Required Books (available at the Downtown Bookstore and online)

Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal* (1928)

Lillian Hellman, *The Children's Hour* (1934)

Irwin Shaw, *Bury the Dead* (1936)

Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (1953)

Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)

Lorraine Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun* (1958)

August Wilson *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984)

Tony Kushner, *Homebody / Kabul* (Revised version, 1997)

Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, *The Exonerated* (2003)

Requirements:

Three Essays

5-6 pages double-spaced - 60 points (20 points each)

Four Responses

1-2 pages, single-spaced - 20 points (5 points each)

Participation

Consistent discussion and participation in workshops - 10 points

Performance Groups - 10 points

Grading Scale

A+ (98-100)

A (97-94)

A- (93-91)

B+ (90-88)

B (87-84)

B- (83-81)

C+ (80-78)

C (77-74)

C- (73-71)

D (61-70)

F (60 or below)

WRITTEN REQUIREMENTS

Essays (60 points)

Length: double-spaced, 5-6 pages

You will complete three essay assignments. For one of these, you will have the option to write a creative scene rather than an analytical essay.

My criteria for evaluating analytical essays will be the following:

- A timely and complete draft that engages with a difficult, original, or complex question
- A revision that clearly demonstrates a reworking of the draft, in terms of argument, content, and organization.
- A clear thesis or insight, which is suitably complex, that provides a blueprint for the essay
- Smooth and grammatical integration of critical and/or historical sources
- Solid evidence from the plays (in the form of quotations, paraphrases, and summaries) to support your interpretations
- Strong transitions that move the essay forward logically and thoughtfully
- A polished, clean final essay free of grammatical and surface errors

- Consistent use of MLA style for documentation

My criteria for evaluating creative pieces will be the following:

- A timely and complete draft that engages with a difficult, original, or complex question
- A revision that clearly demonstrates a reworking of the draft, in terms of presentation, focus, and reach
- A new scene that illuminates an important aspect of the original play
- A writing style that signals an understanding of the playwright's use of language
- An opening 250-word preface that explains a) the placement of this created scene in the original; b) your artistic and scholarly intention in creating this scene; and c) an explanation of how you have used critical and/or historical sources
- A polished, clean final essay free of grammatical and surface errors

Revision Option

You will have the opportunity to revise one graded paper, which must be turned in within ten days of when you receive your graded essay. In order to receive credit for a revision, the essay must be substantially changed. I strongly recommend that you make an appointment with me if you want to undertake a revision.

Writing Workshops

Everyone will work in a writing group with several other students. At least twice during the semester, you will read and comment on other students' essays. Your task will be to identify strong areas, locate problems or weaker moments, and offer helpful questions and suggestions. Your participation grade depends on full participation in these in-class writing conferences. On the days of writing workshops, you should arrive with handwritten or typed comments for the other writers. Some of the comments can appear in the margins of the essay; some of the longer comments should appear at the essay's end. Provide at least the following:

For analytical essays:

- A brief paraphrase of the essay's main argument and response to it

- At least one specific question about the writer's thesis
- At least two specific suggestions that will encourage the writer to expand on ideas
- Explanation of how effectively the writer has incorporated critical and/or historical sources
- Clear articulation of what is working well in the draft
- If necessary, suggestions for cutting repetitive or unnecessary information
- A specific evaluation of the essay's organization with your thoughts for making the flow stronger (consider transitions between paragraphs and between major components of the argument carefully)
- Grammatical or typographical corrections, including commentary on MLA documentation
- Suggestions for improving the title

For creative works:

- A brief overall response that addresses how this work illuminates or expands on the original play
- At least three specific questions that will help the writer work through areas that need further development or that were confusing for you
- Clear articulation of what is working well in the draft
- If necessary, suggestions for cutting repetitive or unnecessary information
- Recommendations for incorporating critical and/or historical sources
- Grammatical or typographical corrections
- Suggestions for improving the title

Reader Responses (20 points)

You will write four 500-word, single-spaced responses to the plays and critical essays. This mini-essay should begin and end with a question that you have about the material. Given the brevity

of these responses, you should choose one scene, one character, or one idea to analyze closely, rather than attempting to explicate an entire play or essay. You can choose when you turn in a response, but make sure that you pace yourself throughout the semester. That is, I should not receive four responses from you in the last six weeks of class. Aim to turn in a response approximately every other week. Occasionally, I may also ask you to respond to the plays in writing in class.

PERFORMANCE, ATTENDANCE, AND PARTICIPATION

Two Performance Groups (10 points)

Performance will not be supplemental to your learning in this class but integral to it. Everyone will be in two performance groups that will create an interpretive “take” on a play. These ten-minute performances do not have to be professionally acted or memorized. Think of them as a gift to the class and a way to begin our discussion. Performances should be an interpretative engagement with the script rather than a direct reading. You will have some in-class time to prepare, but it will be necessary for each group to meet at least once outside of class.

Optional Performance: If some students or all of you would like to put on a public performance at the end of the semester, that would be great. You are encouraged to attend productions sponsored by the University College of Creative Arts as well as theatre groups in and around Morgantown. Please let us know when you learn of a theatre event!

Attendance and Participation (10 points)

This course requires you to work closely with other students, so attendance is of critical importance. The success of your performance and writing groups will be compromised if you are absent. If this course were only about reading plays, we could all go off and do that by ourselves. If it were only about listening to what one person has to say about literature, we could all find a great lecture on video or audio. But English courses are about more than the act of reading and the acquisition of information. I believe they are also about learning how to think, and I believe that the best learning happens in literature classes that are truly interactive—with a critical mass of voices participating at every session. So. I expect everyone to participate.

That said, I hated to talk in my undergraduate classes and in many of my graduate classes. I understand the pressure, uncertainty, and boredom that can lead to silence. I will do my best to create an atmosphere conducive to dialogue and open, intellectual inquiry. I have become rather bureaucratic about quantifying participation because I have found that this approach does yield

more voices. Eventually, most students (as they've written on evaluations) begin to speak because they want to and have something to say, and not (just) because they want points.

There are many ways that you can contribute to discussion: you can ask questions about our readings; you can make observations; you can read aloud your written responses; you can lead discussions in small groups. Please note the following policies with regard to participation and attendance.

- In order to receive all 10 points, you must participate regularly, which means about once a week, offering substantive comments or questions. You must also participate fully in all writing workshops.
- If you speak occasionally (one comment every 3 weeks, for instance) you will receive 5 points. Again, you must have participated in all the writing workshops.
- If you never or rarely speak in this class, or if you fail to participate in the writing workshops, you will receive 0 points. (This makes receiving an A in the class impossible.)
- If you miss more than three classes, your final grade will be reduced one letter grade. For each additional absence, your final grade will be reduced by a half letter. If you experience an emergency, please speak with the Dean of Student Affairs and have the necessary documentation forwarded to me.

CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

Plagiarism/Cheating. The following definitions are from the *West Virginia University Undergraduate Catalog*. Please see the section on Academic Integrity and Dishonesty for the full definition and discussion of procedures.

Plagiarism: material that has been knowingly obtained or copied in whole or in part, from the work of others . . . including (but not limited to) another individual's academic composition.

Cheating: doing academic work for another student, or providing one's own work for another student to copy and submit as his / her own.

Scholastic dishonesty: involves misrepresenting as your own work any part of work done by another; submitting the same paper or substantially similar papers to meet the requirements of more than one course without the written approval and consent of all instructors concerned; depriving another student of necessary course materials; interfering with another's work.

Clear cases of plagiarism or cheating may result in an unforgivable F for the course. If you have any question about how to document sources, please talk to me.

Cell Phone and Pager Courtesy. Before class, please turn off cell phones and pagers.

Social Justice. I work to realize my own commitment to social justice in the classroom. Please let me know if there is any way to create a more inclusive environment that is free of discrimination based on race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color, or national origin.

Accommodating Disabilities. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation, please let me know. You should also make arrangements with Disability Services (293-6700).

Emergencies or Health Crises. If you have an emergency or serious health problem in the course of the semester, you or your family should contact the Office of Student Life in E. Moore Hall (293-5611). The Dean of Student Life will communicate with me concerning your problem and authorize me to make arrangements for you. Please reserve the Dean's services for serious circumstances or emergencies.

Schedule

Tues. Aug 22: Introductions; Courts, American Culture, and the Death Penalty

Thurs. Aug 24 Machinal, Episodes One – Three; Introduction by Judith E. Barlow

Tues. Aug 29 Machinal, Entire play; Handout: Sara Freeman, Review of The Hypocrites at Chicago Dramatists. 1 February 2003. Theatre Journal 55.3 (2003): 532-533.

Thurs. Aug 31 Sign up for Performance Groups; Handout: Introduction to Zoot Suit by Jorge Huerta; Clips from Zoot Suit; Recommended: Yolanda Broyles-González, El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement. U of Texas P, 1994.

Tues. Sept 5 Arthur Miller, The Crucible, Act One

Thurs. Sept. 7 The Crucible, Acts Two and Three

Tues. Sept. 12 The Crucible, Act Four; Handout on Aristotle: "recognition," "reversal," "denouement"

Thurs. Sept 14 Performance Group; Christopher Bigsby, Introduction, viii-xxv; Clips from The Crucible

Results of MLA search for scholarly articles on The Crucible

Steps to finding the online MLA International Bibliography:

- 1) WVU Libraries Homepage
- 2) Right side of page, under FIND ARTICLES, click on DATABASES
- 3) Click on "M" and scroll down to MLA International Bibliography
- 4) Enter your search terms into FIND ["Miller Arthur"—you must reverse author's name. In the box below, you can add another term to narrow the results. For instance, "The Crucible"]
- 5) Click on Linked Full Text and PDF File to access the article online
- 6) In order to print, click on the printer icon within the PDF File

Tues. Sept. 19 Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen, *The Exonerated*, entire play

Thurs. Sept. 21 *The Exonerated*; Handout: Esther Kaplan, "The Innocence Argument." *Theater* 33.2 (2003): 96-99.

Performance Group

Drafts of Essay #1 due in class (copies for group)

Tues. Sept 26 Writing Workshop

Secrets and Sexuality

Thurs. Sept 28 Lillian Hellman, *The Children's Hour*, Acts 1 and 2

Tues Oct. 3 *The Children's Hour*, Act 3

Essay #1 Due

Thurs. Oct. 5 Performance Group

clips from *The Celluloid Closet*

Announcement: Professor Elizabeth Grosz, a professor of gender studies at Rutgers University, will be delivering a lecture at noon on Oct. 5 in the Rhododendron Room.

Tues. Oct. 10: Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Act 1

Introduction by Williams and Notes for Designer

Thurs. Oct. 12 Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Act 2

Clips from Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Tues. Oct 17 Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Act 3

Performance Group

John S. Bak, " 'sneakin' and spyin' from Broadway to the Beltway: Cold War Masculinity, Brick, and Homosexual Existentialism." Theatre Journal 56.2 (2004) 225-249

Available on Project Muse—You can find this full text database on the WVU Libraries homepage under "Popular Databases."

1) Click on Project Muse

2) Click on Search

3) Type in a key word from above ("John Bak" or "sneakin and spyin" or "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof")

Planting the Dead: Conflicts on International and National Stages

Thurs. Oct 19 Irwin Shaw, Bury the Dead, entire play

Tues. Oct 24 Bury the Dead

Handout: Douglas McDermott, "The Workers' Laboratory Theatre: Archetype and Example." Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1930. Eds. McConachie and Friedman. Westport, CN: Greenwood P, 1985.

Drafts of Essay #2 due in class (copies for group)

Performance Group

Thurs. Oct. 26 Writing Workshop

[Oct. 27 – last day to drop a class]

Special Optional Event: "Ghosts: A Friday-Before-Halloween Reading." Friday, October 27th at Barnes and Noble, Morgantown (Granville). 6 p.m.

Tues. Oct. 31 Lorraine Hansberry, Raisin in the Sun, Act 1

Langston Hughes, "Harlem" (epigraph)

Introduction by Robert Nemiroff

Essay #2 Due

Thurs. Nov. 2 Raisin in the Sun, Acts 2 and 3

Performance Group

Tues. Nov. 7: No Class: Election Day

Thurs. Nov. 9 August Wilson, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Act 1, "The Play," xv-xvi

Tues. Nov. 14 August Wilson, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Act 2

Houston A. Baker, Jr. from Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory

Thurs. Nov. 16 August Wilson, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

Performance Group

Week of Thanksgiving Holiday

Tues. Nov. 28 Homebody / Kabul, Act 1

Thurs. Nov. 30 Homebody / Kabul, Act 2

Performance Group

Tues. Dec. 5 Homebody / Kabul, Act 3

Drafts of Essay #3 due in class

Thurs. Dec. 7 Writing Workshop

Final Essay due on Monday, Dec 11, by 3PM

Thurs. Aug 31 Sign up for Performance Groups

Thurs. Sept 14 The Crucible

Thurs. Oct. 5 Children's Hour

Tues. Oct 17 Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Tues. Oct 24 Bury the Dead

Thurs. Nov. 2 Raisin in the Sun,

Thurs. Nov. 16 Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,

Thurs. Nov. 30 Homebody / Kabul