

**THEATRE, AUDIENCE AND SOCIETY**

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**Spring Semester Programme 2012**

**LONDON, ENGLAND**

### **Course objectives**

This is a course which addresses the potentially life-changing *effects* that for more than two thousand years theatre's practitioners and critics have thought different kinds of theatre can have on audiences.

From the beginning there is an assumption that theatre *does* have a strong emotional, intellectual, physical effect on its audience – that it is, or has the potential to be, a powerfully therapeutic and often disruptive tool rather than an essentially bland form of commercial, escapist entertainment.

We will look at the ways in which playwrights, from Euripides to Ibsen, Webster to Congreve, Brecht, Beckett, and Caryl Churchill, have aimed at affecting and changing society and individuals through dramaturgy.

During the semester we shall make visits to the theatre trying to see different at least **seven** current London productions in a number of different theatre spaces. In the class meeting after we have made a theatre visit and we shall spend an hour or so discussing what we have seen in terms of the performance and its avowed intentions and how it may relate to some of the issues that are emerging in the short survey of Western theatre we are making each week.

### **Class Meetings**

This class meets twice a week, on **Tuesday** afternoons from **16.30 to 18.00** and on **Wednesday** mornings from **09.30 until 11.00**. In the weeks that we are at the theatre the Wednesday session will centre on a class discussion of the play that we have been to see that week and the Tuesday session be devoted to our survey of Western drama. There will be a short introduction to each play that we are going to see in an appropriate class before these visits to the theatre.

### **Schedule**

#### **Theatre Visits**

14<sup>th</sup> Feb – *Juno and the Paycock* (National Theatre)

22<sup>nd</sup> Feb – *Bingo* (Young Vic)

27<sup>th</sup> Feb – *Tis a Pity...* (Barbican)

5<sup>th</sup> March – *She Stoops to Conquer* (National Theatre)

6<sup>th</sup> March – *Tales of Hoffmann* (London Coliseum)

**FURTHER THEATRE VISITS AFTER THE BREAK**

## **Drama Survey**

### **Weeks One**

#### **The Power of Tragedy**

We begin (near the beginning) with Euripides tragedy *The Bacchae* and Aristotle's championing of theatre as therapeutic and his exploration of the cathartic properties of tragedy. We will explore what tragedy meant in its original Athenian context and what it can mean for an audience today.

**Euripides: *Medea***

### **Week Two**

#### **Mystery and Morality**

In the late Middle Ages drama fought its way out of the church into the streets of England's cities with sequences of Mystery plays performed on travelling carts that trundled through the cities like York, Coventry, Wakefield that endeavoured to 'justify the ways of God to Man. The tragedy of fallen Man became the divine comedy of Jesus's redemption, leavened in many of these mystery plays with an all too human earthy humour

**Selection from the *York Mystery Cycle***

### **Week Three**

#### **'What a piece of work is man'**

At his death Christopher Marlowe was accused of atheism. In his play *Dr Faustus* he pits the Renaissance humanist hero against religious authority – and Faust loses. Marlowe played a decisive role in shaping the way in which an Elizabethan audience understood, and consumed a new kind of drama.

**Marlowe: *Dr Faustus***

### **Week Four**

#### **A world gone mad'**

'I am Duchess Malfi still', cries Webster's Duchess as she is strangled. In the midst of social and familial chaos all the hero/heroine can do is to proclaim their identity. Webster and Tourneieur and Marston chart a dark work in which disillusion with the Jacobean political settlement is transmuted into tragedy. But for a modern audience are their plays any more than bloody exercises in *grand guignol*?

**Webster: *The Duchess of Malfi***

### **Week Five**

#### **'Manners maketh Man'**

Restoration theatre intended to point a moral to adorn a tale for a new audience who wanted a new kind of theatre. The idea behind the newly minted 'comedy of manners' was the reformation of social behaviour. Yet darker threads are woven into the plays of Behn, Wycherley and Congreve where women are often no more than property and true feelings stifled by social conventions.

**Congreve: *The Way of the World***

## **Week Six**

### **Greek tragedy à la Française**

At the end of the seventeenth century French playwrights such as Corneille and Racine turned back to Aristotle's 'rules' for writing tragedy and sought to emulate the achievements of the Athenian dramatists. Few other European theatre cultures remained immune from this attempt to re-classicise drama, from Neoclassicism. Yet beneath the cool Alexandrine lines crafted by, say, Corneille, beat terrifying emotions that threaten disaster to the hero/heroine and may even engulf a whole society.

**Racine: *Phédre***

## **Week Seven**

### **Ibsen's Social and Psychological Theatre**

We move forward nearly two centuries to the birth of modern, naturalistic drama in the prose plays of Henrik Ibsen, with their probing critique of the hypocrisies of 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois society. We shall spend time discussing Ibsen's most celebrated social plays, particularly *Hedda Gabler*. But is Ibsen more than a social critic? Is he perhaps a poetic, psychological explorer of human aspiration and self-delusion?

**Ibsen: *Hedda Gabler***

## **Week Eight**

### **Revolutionary Political Theatre - 1**

In the ninth section of the course we consider the revolutionary political theatre of Bertolt Brecht. We look at Brecht's theatre in the context of its genesis at the time of the rise of Fascism in Europe and Asia, and Brecht's own relationship with Marxist Communism. We shall concentrate on *Mother Courage*, Brecht's great anti-war play, written as World War Two broke out, and try to understand what Brecht meant by his famous *Verfremdungseffekt* – his attempt to get audiences to relate what happens on stage to their own circumstances.

**Brecht: *Mother Courage***

## **Week Nine**

### **Revolutionary Political Theatre - 1**

Federico Garcia Lorca was murdered at the very beginning of the Spanish Civil War when the Spanish Fascists overran his native Andalusia.

Ostensibly his commitment to the legitimately elected Spanish Republic which General Franco's armies intended to overthrow was the reason for his death, but perhaps it was overtly political plays, his poetry and his homosexuality that disturbed the totalitarian Right. A play like his *Blood Wedding* meditates on liberty and freedom, on sex and death – *Eros* and *Thanatos* in uncomfortable ways

**Lorca: *Blood Wedding***

## **Week Ten**

### **The Theatre of the Absurd – Beckett**

After the Second World War, and deeply influenced by what had happened during the German Occupation a new dark kind of theatre emerged in Paris. The theatre of Beckett, Ionesco and, later, Pinter is a philosophical and linguistic theatre inspired both by the devastation wrought in the War and by the breakdown of established religions and thought- and value-systems. At the same time Beckett in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Waiting for Godot* – inspired by music-hall and silent comedy as much as traditional theatre - finds an extraordinary humour in the apparently doomed human quest for meaning and salvation.

**Beckett: *Krapp's Last Tape***

## **Week Eleven**

### **Tutorials for final paper**

## **WEEK Twelve and Thirteen**

### **The Theatre of Gender, Race, Sexual Orientation**

In the final class section we give close attention to two plays, Jean Genet's *The Maids*, an early attempt to explore the themes of gender, race and sexual orientation, which are co central to much contemporary drama, and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* - an examination of the role of women in history and a thoughtful critique of feminism. We shall consider the relation of issue-based plays to the fragmentation of the theatre audience and society, the exclusion of certain groups and their possible reintegration.

**Genet: *The Maids* and Churchill: *Top Girls***

### **Assignments and assessment**

You are required to read the plays assigned for class in your own time before we meet together. Both the texts for the drama survey element within the course and the texts for the plays that we see in the theatre where they are available.

Assessment will be based on a **theatre journal** that you will keep during the semester and on **two papers** of between 2500 and 3000 words. The first of these is due at the end of Week 4, the other in our final class.

The first paper will account for 30% of the marks towards the final grade and the second 45%. The remaining 25% will be awarded on prompt attendance , on class participation and the theatre journal.

Participation, including reading of the texts, is extremely important as this is in large part a seminar-style course with a short introductory lecture. A grades will be given only for outstanding work.