

CA 457: Context of Theatre III (Spring 2019)

Performing History/Histories of Performance

Meeting Time: Mondays, 6:30-9:20 pm, Harbour Centre 1505

Instructor: Peter Dickinson (peter_dickinson@sfu.ca)

Office Hours: Thursdays, 1:30-3 pm, or by appointment, GCA 3510

Course Description: This course focuses on the intersections of theatre and history, both the representation of historical events on stage and the historiography of theatre as a form. While our discussions will not proceed chronologically, we will nevertheless remain focused throughout on how performance intersects with the work of historical memory. We begin by considering histories of place, resituating a Western dramatic tradition within the context of our occupation of unceded Indigenous territories. Next, we look at a closet drama from seventeenth-century England to ask why there are apparently so few women in theatre history. We then examine Brechtian techniques of historicization in the German playwright's most famous text, as well as two contemporary feminist responses to his work. After the mid-term break, we turn our attention to ghosted performance histories via a discussion of two postdramatic updates of *Hamlet* and also the hauntings of local Vancouver theatre buildings. The ghosts of theatre history will continue to preoccupy us when next we look at how two contemporary playwrights from the Americas (one Indigenous, the other African-American) re-appropriate the denigrated nineteenth-century form of minstrelsy. Finally, we will conclude by focusing more closely on how a single playwright has formally responded to staging the complexities of the historical present, contextualizing our discussions in terms of the arc of her professional career.

Required Texts:

Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2012 [1939]) ISBN: 978-0413492708

Margaret Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668; pdf posted to Canvas)

Caryl Churchill, *Vinegar Tom* (1976; pdf posted to Canvas)

Caryl Churchill, *Plays 4* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009) ISBN: 978-1854595409

Caryl Churchill, *Love and Information* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013) ISBN: 978-1559364409

Marie Clements, *Age of Iron* (1993; pdf posted to Canvas)

Daniel David Moses, *Almighty Voice and His Voice*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2009 [1991]) ISBN: 978-0887548970

Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine* (1977; pdf posted to Canvas)

Lynn Nottage, *Ruined* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009) ISBN: 978-1559363556

Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play and other works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994) ISBN: 978-1559360920

Rebecca Schneider, *Theatre & History* (London: Palgrave, 2014) ISBN: 978-0230246614
Wooster Group *Hamlet* (2007; to be viewed outside of class)
Additional critical articles will be posted as pdfs to Canvas.

Course Requirements:

Attendance and participation	15%
Quizzes	20%
Three short group presentations	30%
Paper	20%
Final test	15%

Syllabus

Jan 7 General Introduction to the Course

Read: Rebecca Schneider, *Theatre & History*

Jan 14 Whose (Theatre) History?
Quiz #1

Read: Marie Clements, *Age of Iron* + Sheila Rabillard article (both on Canvas)

Jan 21 Women and/in Theatre History
Quiz #2

Read: Margaret Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure* + Susan Bennett article (both on Canvas)

Jan 28 Women and/in Theatre History Presentations

Feb 4 Brechtian Historicization
Quiz #3

Read: Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children* + excerpts from *Brecht on Theatre* (on Canvas)

Feb 11 Feminist Takes on Brecht
Quiz #4

Read: Caryl Churchill, *Vinegar Tom* (on Canvas) + Lynn Nottage, *Ruined*

Feb 18 Reading Break

View over break: Wooster Group *Hamlet* (video will be posted to Dropbox link)

Feb 25 Memory and Materialism
Quiz #5

Read: Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine* + Marvin Carlson article (both on Canvas)

March 4 Vancouver Materialist Theatre History Presentations

March 11 Minstrelsy 1
Quiz #6

Read: Daniel David Moses, *Almighty Voice and His Wife* + Helen Gilbert article (on Canvas)

March 18 Minstrelsy 2
Quiz #7

Read: Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play* + her “Elements of Style” essay (in same collection)

March 25 Returning to Caryl Churchill, Part 1
Quiz #8

Read: Caryl Churchill, *This is a Chair* + *Far Away* + *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You* (all in *Plays 4*) + Elaine Aston article (on Canvas)

Papers due by email at noon on March 27

April 1 Returning to Caryl Churchill, Part 2
Quiz #9

Read: Caryl Churchill, *Love and Information* + Darren Gobert article (on Canvas)

April 8 *Love and Information* Presentations

Final in-class test

A Note on the Course Readings

- Reading a play doesn't take a lot of time. There is no excuse not to have each one listed here read by the week we are to discuss it in class. And, as added insurance on that front, you will be quizzed on their content (see below).
- Additionally, most weeks I am asking everyone in the class to read a supplementary critical article that will help provide some larger theoretical/conceptual focus and continuity to the successive issues we will be discussing. These articles have been posted to our class website on Canvas. Log into Canvas at <https://canvas.sfu.ca> using your SFU computing id and

password; under the “Courses” header, click on CA 457 and all the posted material related to this course should appear.

Seminar Attendance and Participation

- As this is an upper-level class, my expectation is that all members will attend regularly and participate actively and enthusiastically. In order to facilitate this, it is our collective responsibility to maintain a classroom environment where all feel comfortable to speak, and where intellectual curiosity fuels dialogue and debate.
- Some of us feel more at ease speaking in public than others; at the same time, be advised that sustained silence will be construed by myself, and by your fellow students, as disinterestedness or a critical indifference to the material. Likewise, absences that cannot be justified for medical reasons will seriously affect your participation grade.

Reading Quizzes

- Students will write nine short quizzes in advance of our discussion of each of the plays on the course reading list: **see the syllabus, above, for bolded quiz dates.**
- Each quiz will include 10 content-related questions and/or passages to identify. I may also include a question or two pertaining to the content of the accompanying critical articles.
- The quizzes will be written at the beginning of each class and should take no more than 10 minutes (a minute per question). They will then be immediately exchanged for peer evaluation according to answers supplied orally by me. One mark per question for a maximum score of 10 per quiz.
- I will collect and retain the marked quizzes, eventually reducing the total to a final mark out of 20.
- If you do the required reading, then theoretically this should prove another easy way for you to boost your mark. **The catch is that missed quizzes cannot be re-written, even due to illness or other documentable circumstances.**

Group Presentations

- In groups of 3-4 (depending on final enrolment numbers), students will make three class presentations over the course of the semester.
- The first presentation, to be made on January 28, will require groups to research and report on an aspect of women’s/feminist theatre history related to the course: e.g., important women playwrights and actresses and producers in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; or the crucial contributions made by Brecht’s female collaborators; or the individuals and collectives that have helped foster the voices of Indigenous, Canadian and African-American women’s theatre in the Americas.
- The second presentation, to be made on March 4, asks each group to undertake fieldwork related to a material site of Vancouver performance history, which might include visiting a well-known playhouse or performance venue, consulting archives about presentation spaces or training institutions that no longer exist, or researching the site-based genealogies of different local Indigenous and settler performance traditions.

- For their third presentation, to be made on April 8, groups are required to present a rough staging of a selection of scenes from Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information*, which as you will see is a play that seems to afford an unusual degree of choice in how it might be performed. This final presentation asks you to reflect critically on the time-based, historical process (from first reading to actual performance) of how you negotiate those choices.
- **More fulsome details on each presentation, including for the first two suggested topics, have been posted to our Canvas site.**
- Presentations should be no more than 20-30 minutes and everyone should take an active role in researching and sharing the material: you will all receive the same grade. Feel free to incorporate technology and media into your presentations, but **do not read your PowerPoint slides!**
- I realize that these presentations will require you to meet outside of class to plan, conduct site visits, and assemble your material. As a way to facilitate the coordination of this, a portion of every class will be devoted to group check-ins and debriefs.
- Additionally, at the end of the first two presentation weeks we will work collectively to summarize and synthesize what we have learned, and to brainstorm how you might want to respond to the material presented by your peers on the final test (see below). Which is another way of saying that you all need to be active and attentive listeners to each other's presentations.

Paper

- Students are required to write a short essay analyzing one of the plays on the course reading list.
- For example, you may wish to focus a bit more closely on the specifics of Marie Clements' adaptation of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*; or on the use of song in Brecht, Churchill or Nottage; or on how Müller or the Wooster Group respond intertextually to *Hamlet*; or on the historical events that underscore the plays by Moses and Parks.
- I ask that you consult with me about your essay topics, and to not delay in thinking about this assignment.
- You are encouraged though not required to do additional secondary research (beyond the critical readings we will have examined in class) for this essay.
- Your essay must have a clear argument and that argument must be supported by evidence from the play under consideration, as well as any supporting materials.
- Your essay must be **no longer than 4 double-spaced pages (exclusive of Works Cited list and title page); must be written in 12-point font, with one-inch margins; and must follow MLA style and citation guidelines.**
- Your papers are to be submitted electronically as Word documents to my email address by noon on Wednesday, March 27.

Final Test

- In lieu of a final exam, following the performances of *Love and Information* at the last class, students will write a short in-class test asking them to reflect on what they learned from the presentations by their peers.

- There will be three questions. The first two we will develop together in response to our collective synthesis of the women and theatre history and Vancouver performance history presentations. The third question will be a simple prompt asking you to reflect on your experience preparing and performing your *Love and Information* presentations.
- Your answers need be no longer than a short paragraph each and may also be supplemented by reflections on other aspects of the course.
- As you will have the questions in advance, and as you will all be producing the knowledge required to answer the questions, this assignment should not require much by way of extra preparation. It is mostly designed for you to make a summative statement on our discussions over the course of the semester.

Grading Policies

- **No late assignments will be accepted without a documented medical excuse.**
- **Plagiarism or academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated in this course.** Consult the following website for more information:
<https://www.sfu.ca/policies/gazette/student/s10-01.html>. **Ignorance of the standards set out by the School and university will not preclude the imposition of severe penalties for any instance of academic dishonesty.**
- All assignments (oral and written) will be assessed according to **content** and **expression**: that is, **what** you say and **how** you say it. All assignments will be given letter grades and will be assessed according to the following standards:

Grade	GPA/%	Description	Comments
A+	4.33 95-100%	Outstanding	Demonstrates an outstanding knowledge of concepts and techniques with a very high degree of skill and originality; an exceptional ability to communicate; evidence of outstanding research skills and an extensive knowledge base.
A	4.0 90-94%	Excellent	Demonstrates an excellent knowledge of concepts and techniques with a high degree of skill and elements of originality; a strong ability to communicate; excellent research and conceptual skills.
A-	3.67 85-89%		
B+	3.33 80-84%	Very Good	Demonstrates a very good knowledge of concepts and techniques, some originality and independence of thought; above average research and conceptual skills.
B	3.0 75-79%	Good	Demonstrates a good knowledge of concepts and techniques; an ability to organize and analyze ideas and to communicate clearly and fluently; good indication of research.
B-	2.67 70-74%		

C+	2.33 65-69%	Satisfactory	Demonstrates a satisfactory knowledge of concepts and techniques, together with some skill in using them; an adequate indication of research.
C	2.0 60-64%		
C-	1.67 55-59%	Marginal	Demonstrates a marginal grasp of the subject matter; a less than satisfactory ability to communicate and organize ideas; little indication of research.
D	1.0 50-54%	Unsatisfactory	Demonstrates an unsatisfactory grasp of the concepts and techniques; rudimentary knowledge of the subject matter; some evidence that organizational and analytic skills have been developed, but with significant weaknesses in some areas; no indication of research; barely meets the minimum requirements to pass.
F	0-49%	Fail	Demonstrates an inadequate understanding of the subject matter; poor organization and communication skills. A student at this level has failed to meet the minimum requirements to pass.
N	0	Incomplete	Some or all of the coursework is incomplete. The instructor does not expect the student to ever complete the coursework.
DE	N/A	Deferred	Some of the coursework is not yet complete for valid (documented) reasons (e.g., medical). The instructor and student have determined a mutually agreeable timeline for the completion of the coursework.
GN	N/A	Grade Not Available	Grade not available due to circumstances beyond instructor/TA control.
AE	N/A	Compassionate Pass	The student has done at least 50% of the coursework, and would pass the course by completing the remainder, but has a compelling reason not to do so (e.g., medical, family crisis/death, etc.).