

ENGL 468W: Topics in Drama—Spring 2017
Contemporary Epic Theatre: Staging History after The End of History

Mo 5:30 PM – 9:20 PM
HCC 400, Vancouver

Instructor: Dr. Peter Dickinson
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Office Hours: Mondays 1:30-3:30, GCA 2380

Course Description:

Arising in Europe in the early twentieth century as a reaction to a then dominant style of theatrical naturalism, epic theatre—or what Bertolt Brecht later came to call “dialectical theatre”—referred to both a new dramatic genre and a specific methodological approach to playmaking. Among epic theatre’s characteristic features is a deliberately non-realistic and temporally disjunctive staging of history, with the past frequently invoked to comment on the present (as, most famously, in Brecht’s *Mother Courage*). In this course we will focus on the legacy of epic theatre’s approach to history, examining a range of plays written from the 1970s to the present, a period in which we have supposedly experienced the end of history via the triumph of free market capitalism and liberal democracy—a claim our texts expressly challenge. And they do so not just in terms of the epic scope of their subject matter (juxtaposing the Roman invasion of Britain with the British occupation of Northern Ireland, or the US conflict in Vietnam with its invasion of Iraq, or Canada’s complicity in the creation of the atomic bomb with the country’s treatment of its Indigenous peoples), but also in terms of the scale of their dramaturgy (large casts, sweeping and rapid-fire shifts of scene, bold onstage effects). As such, a key part of our analysis will focus on how to stage these works: by examining production histories; by performing short scenes in class; and by attending and reviewing productions of two of the plays on our reading list (*Love and Information*, at UBC in January/February; and *Angels in America* at the Arts Club in March/April).

Prerequisites: One 300-level English course OR PERMISSION OF INSTRUCTOR.

Required Reading:

- Howard Brenton, *The Romans in Britain* (Bloomsbury)
- Caryl Churchill, *Love and Information* (TCG) and *This is a Chair* (pdf posted to Canvas)
- Marie Clements, *Burning Vision* (Talonbooks)
- Erik Ehn, *Maria Kizito* (pdf posted to Canvas)
- Tony Kushner, *Angels in America, Part 1* (TCG)
- Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine* (pdf posted to Canvas)
- Michael Redhill, *Goodness* (Coach House)
- Naomi Wallace, *In the Heart of America* (pdf posted to Canvas)
- A selection of critical articles posted to Canvas

Grading:

- 15% Attendance and participation
- 15% Reading quizzes
- 15% Production analysis 1 (including peer review and revision)
- 15% Production analysis 2 (including peer review and revision)
- 20% Blog postings, seminar presentation (production and social history) and discussion questions on play 1
- 20% Blog postings, performance presentation and program notes on play 2

Syllabus:

- Jan 2 No class
- Jan 9 Intro: Lesley Stevens, "From Epic to Dialectical Theatre"
- Jan 16 Caryl Churchill, *Love and Information** + *This is a Chair* + Elaine Aston, "But Not That: Caryl Churchill's Political Shape Shifting at the Turn of the Millennium"
 - * UBC Theatre Production (Jan 18-Feb 4; see show between Jan 18-22)
- Jan 23 *Love and Information* production discussion + performance analysis Workshop
 - Revised performance analyses due Wed Jan 25 by noon
- Jan 30 Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine* + Kirk Williams, "The Ghost in the Machine"
- Feb 6 Howard Brenton, *The Romans in Britain* + Sean Carney, "The Art of Living: History as Use-Value in *The Romans in Britain*"
- Feb 13 READING BREAK
- Feb 20 Naomi Wallace, *In the Heart of America* + Lindsay B. Cummings, "Naomi Wallace and the Dramaturgy of Rehearsal"
- Feb 27 Marie Clements, *Burning Vision* + Alana Fletcher, "Around the Backside: Productive Disbelief in *Burning Vision*"
- Mar 6 Michael Redhill, *Goodness* + Jenn Stephenson, "The Notebook and the Gun: Performative Witnessing in *Goodness*"
- Mar 13 Erik Ehn, *Maria Kizito* + Laura Edmondson, "Genocide Unbound: Erik Ehn, Rwanda, and an Aesthetics of Discomfort"
- Mar 20 Performances

Mar 2 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America** + Art Borreca, “‘Dramaturging’ the Dialectic: Brecht, Benjamin, and Declan Donnellan’s Production of *Angels in America*”

* Arts Club Theatre Production (March 23-April 23; see show between Mar 23 and April 2)

April 3 *Angels in America* production discussion + performance analysis workshop + conclusion

Revised performance analyses due Wed April 5 by noon

A Note on the Course Readings

- Plays, unlike some novels, are quick reads. 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, I am asking everyone in the class to read one critical article per week that will help provide some larger theoretical/conceptual focus and continuity to the successive plays 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 ENGL 468W and all the posted material related to this course should appear.

UBC and Arts Club Theatre Productions

- Students are responsible for booking their own tickets to UBC Theatre’s production of *Love and Information* (tickets: 604-822-2678 or online at <http://ubctheatre.universitytickets.com>) and the Arts Club’s production of *Angels in America* (tickets: 604-687-1644 or online at <https://www.artsclub.com/tickets>).
- Students are requested to see each play before we begin discussing the productions in class: January 23 for *Love and Information* and April 3 for *Angels in America*.
- Book early in order to avoid disappointment, as it is very likely some performances will sell out.
- Please make sure to retain your ticket stub/receipt, as I will be collecting these to ensure you have attended the shows.

Seminar Attendance and Participation:

- As this is a senior seminar, 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 comfortable 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.

- As a spur to the kind of active participation I envision, while also providing an easy boost to this portion of your grade, I am asking you to bring a short written response to one of the weekly discussion questions you will have been provided by your classmates (or by me, in the case of Churchill and Kushner) ahead of each new play (see below). Excluding the play you are presenting on, this will mean a total of seven responses, which I will collect at the end of each class, awarding a mark for each completed response. This will leave me with eight additional discretionary participation marks to award based on your overall attendance and participation record.

Reading Quizzes:

- There is nothing worse, after having put a considerable amount of time and effort into preparing a seminar presentation, than to have your fellow students stare back at you with blank faces because they have not read the material.
- As a guard against this, our discussion of each play will be preceded by a short reading quiz.
- Each quiz will include 10 plot-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 15.
- 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.**

Production Analyses

- Students only have to write two short papers in this course, one at the beginning and one at the end. Both papers require you to engage critically with some element or elements from the live theatrical productions of *Love and Information* and *Angels in America* in relation to the playtexts we will have read in class.
- Neither paper should be considered a review of the performance. Rather, I am asking you to consider the following question: How does one or more aspects of the production's staging (including casting, lighting, scenography, music or sound design, transitions between scenes, etc.) help to illuminate OR deepen your engagement OR provide you with an alternative point of view regarding some aspect of the play's epic/dialectical composition as it has been written on the page (and as we will have discussed in class)?
- As with any essay, this assignment requires you to come up with a strong argument announced through a clearly articulated thesis statement and supported, in well organized paragraphs, with evidence both from the playtext AND the staged production. The key to marshalling evidence from the production is to be as detailed as possible in your descriptions of the examples you use. You are free to cite from the critical articles

on the course syllabus, as well as to do additional secondary research. All sources should be referenced according to MLA style.

- In terms of length and formatting instructions, your essay should be no longer than **4 double-spaced pages**, exclusive of title and Works Cited pages; it should be **typewritten, in 12-point font, with one-inch margins. ANY MATERIAL THAT EXCEEDS THIS LIMIT RUNS THE RISK OF NOT BEING READ.**
- Drafts of your papers are due for peer review in class on January 23 and April 3, respectively. Thereafter you will have two days to revise your papers according to the feedback you receive. Final drafts of each paper should be emailed to me as Word attachments by noon on January 25 and April 5.

Presentation Groups

- I am a firm believer in collaborative pedagogy and, as such, my upper-level seminars always include group presentations.
- In this case, you will actually be making two group presentations: one will involve a close reading of an individual play and an introduction to its production and social/historical/cultural contexts; and one will involve the staging of a short scene from one of the plays (DON'T PANIC!).
- In each case, your groups (of three, to be formed at the first class) will remain the same, but the plays will change; that is, each group will be engaging with two different texts.
- The specific requirements/parameters of the presentations are described below.
- It's up to each group to decide how to divvy up the work and presentation tasks (again, more on this below). You and your partners can decide to work very closely together or more independently.
- I realize that two group presentations, combined with the fact that one of them is performance-based, puts added pressure on you in terms of meeting outside of class. In order to compensate for that, the last hour of each class during the first 9 weeks will be set aside for you to work on your presentations.

Seminar Presentation

- Your first presentation will comprise an introduction to and critical analysis of one of six plays on the reading list (excluding Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*). Plays will be assigned on a lottery basis in the first class.
- Following the administering and marking of the reading quiz, scheduled presenters will then lead the discussion on the assigned text. You are free to approach this task in whatever way you feel is warranted, so long as you include, in some fashion, the following core elements:
 - The play's production history to date, including details related to its premiere, significant subsequent productions (if they've happened), and reviews (where available).
 - A brief contextual overview of the main historical and/or socio-cultural issues framing the play (this can be multi-media and interactive if you wish).
 - A close reading of at least one scene that you feel exemplifies key thematic and/or theoretical issues at work in the play as a whole.

- A close analysis of at least one character whom you identify strongly with and/or see as a spokesperson for different ideas expressed in the play.
- A discussion of how the play exemplifies, updates or is otherwise in dialogue with some of the key tenets of epic/dialectical theatre as we will have discussed them in the first few weeks of class.
- A discussion of what additional analytical perspectives the critical article we have also read provides on the play; you may wish to consider this broadly, as it relates to the play as a whole (and the social context behind it), or more specifically as it relates to a key scene/speech/character/etc.
- Three to five questions (no more and no less) for the class to animate our discussion following your presentation. While these questions can begin broadly, as much as possible they should end by directing our attention back to the text. These questions should be posted by 12:00 pm on the Saturday preceding your scheduled Monday presentation to a discussion thread related to your presentation that you will have started on Canvas (more on this below).
- Groups are not limited to presenting only on the above, nor in the order listed. You are also free to divide up the preparatory work and research as you see fit, so long as all members of the group are active participants in the presentation of the material and the facilitation of discussion. I encourage students to meet with me in advance of their presentations to discuss strategies for approaching the material, or to help focus on some specific avenues of inquiry.
- You may also wish to be a bit creative in terms of the format in which you deliver your presentation, and I strongly encourage interaction with your peers throughout rather than reading from prepared notes and soliciting discussion only at the end. Powerpoint or other media should be incorporated into your presentation in an intelligent and integral way: SPEAK TO YOUR AUDIENCE RATHER THAN READING TEXT OFF THE SCREEN.
- One final element of this assignment is the aforementioned Canvas discussion thread related to your presentation. In addition to hosting the questions you will come up with for your peers to address in class, over the course of your preparation for the presentation it should be used as forum to post regular updates on your research: interesting discoveries related to the political history you will be documenting; photos and other material related to some of the previous productions of the plays; biographical material about the playwright and some of her/his other work; etc. I would like each member of the group to make at least two blog posts prior to your presentation.

Performance Presentation

- The second presentation involves the actual staging of a scene from a second play on the course reading list. Again, play assignments will be made on a lottery basis in the first class. Groups are free to select either *Love and Information* or *Angels in America* in this instance.
- Based on your close reading and theoretical parsing of the playtext, on your consultation of additional secondary materials related to the play and its social/political contexts, and on your fellow classmates' interpretive analysis, you and your partners

will now have the opportunity to bring to life a part of the play as you would imagine it being performed before a live audience.

- You are free to choose any scene, or combination of scenes (approximately 15-20 mins in total), that you like, and to assign roles based on mutual agreement. As with the first presentation, you are also free to work as closely or independently as you desire. For example, if you prefer to take on individual monologues from the play, and to rehearse these mostly on your own, that is perfectly acceptable—so long as there is some degree of formal and stylistic coherence in their performance. Alternatively, you can choose a multi-character scene that you develop together from the get-go. Either way, I am sure that you will find this presentation requires a bit more hands-on collaboration (running lines is so much easier when there's someone else there to help). This is a good thing, as the mutual support will go a long way toward easing any nerves and anxiety you might have about this assignment.
- AND ON THAT NOTE, let me do my own part to forestall potential panic: I have incorporated a version of this assignment in most of the drama classes I have taught over the past twenty years, and almost without exception students not only end up loving the experience, but also creating exceptional work. There is no better way to understand how a play works than by examining the mechanics of its performance.
- As far as the actual performances go, the only production requirements from my end are that your lines must be memorized, and that you must use the classroom as your stage (as of this writing I'm doing my best to find a better room). Other than that, you are free to bring in whatever additional props/technical help (including extra persons)/etc., that you need, and to transform the classroom in whatever way you see fit (so long as you put it back the way you found it after you're done). And you shouldn't be afraid to make use of cross-gender and cross-racial casting, as needed.
- Performances will take place on March 20, with a schedule finalized by Reading Break at the latest.
- Following each scene presentation there will be a talkback, with groups having the opportunity to explain some of the choices they made, and audience members offering constructive feedback.
- As with the seminar presentation, I am asking groups to make regular blog postings to an individual Canvas discussion thread relating to their research and rehearsals for the performance: tell us about the scene and casting choices you have made; where you are getting inspiration for costumes and the design of your scenes; the difficulties you are having in rehearsal, and also the breakthroughs. Above all, how does being on the inside of the text as a performer give you additional insight into the epic conception and/or structure of the play? Again, every group member should make at least two blog posts prior to your performance.
- Finally, at the performance itself each group is asked to distribute a program that will serve as a document to the event. Beyond the listing of your names, parts, the title of the play, etc., I do not wish to impose any specific parameters on the design of your programs, other than to encourage you to be creative. But do consider this document as a part of the performance—which is also to say what might you wish to include in it that you cannot in the performance proper?

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:
http://www.english.sfu.ca/documents/doc/academic_integrity_2010. **Ignorance of the standards set out by the department 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	Percentage	Evaluation Criteria
A+	96 - 100	Outstanding performance. Represents work of exceptional quality.
A	90 - 95	Content, organization, expression, and style all of a high standard.
A-	85 - 89	Comprehension of the subject and use of existing research and literature has been abundantly demonstrated. Uses sound critical thinking, has innovative ideas on the subject, argues the topic convincingly and presents sound evidence to back up claims. Shows personal engagement with the topic.
B+	80 - 84	Good performance. Represents work of above average quality with no major weaknesses in argumentation or expression. Writing is clear and explicit and topic coverage and comprehension are more than adequate, although occasional lapses in reasoning or style may be present. Shows some degree of independent critical thinking and personal involvement in the work. Good use of existing knowledge on the subject.
B	75 - 79	
B-	70 - 74	
C+	65 - 69	Satisfactory performance. Represents work of competent quality.
C	60 - 64	Shows some comprehension of the subject, but has more frequent weaknesses and/or problems in content, style, argumentation, expression, or organization. Minimal critical awareness or personal involvement in the work has been demonstrated. Only adequate use of the literature and/or addressing of the topic.
C-	55 - 59	
D	50 - 54	Marginal performance. Represents work of a barely adequate quality. Serious flaws in content, organization, and/or style. Grammatical errors tend to be frequent and often reflect a lack of basic linguistic competency. Argument is mostly off-topic and/or evidence is contradictory or poorly marshaled. Poor comprehension of the subject and engagement with existing research and literature. Minimal critical/personal involvement in the paper.
F	0 - 49	Failing performance. Represents work of substandard quality. Either clearly does not respond to the assigned topic or contains errors in grammar, organization, and expression that do not meet the minimum acceptable academic standards. Work that has been plagiarized should automatically receive a failing grade.