

Professor Christopher Grobe  
Office: Johnson Chapel #105  
Office hours: Tuesday 2:00-4:00pm (and by appt.)  
E-mail: [cgrobe@amherst.edu](mailto:cgrobe@amherst.edu)

Sara Smith, Arts & Humanities Librarian  
E-mail: [ssmith@amherst.edu](mailto:ssmith@amherst.edu)

Kelcy Shepherd, Head of Digital Programs  
E-mail: [kshepherd@amherst.edu](mailto:kshepherd@amherst.edu)

**COLQ-245 – “ARCHIVAL RESEARCH IN DRAMA”**  
*(Thursdays, 1:00-3:30pm)*

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This is a hydra-headed course: a quick introduction to play-reading, a practicum in archival research, and a collaborative project in digitally-enhanced research. This collaborative project is the true *raison d'être* for the course, so you should think of all the rest as preparation for work on our shared project.

First, we will read a small selection of plays, with special attention to their material life. These plays will be paired with readings on theatrical staging and stage props, as well as archival exercises on how the material life of the stage might be captured on the page. Next, we will consider the special challenges of theater-historical research and of research in material culture. This will include readings in theater historiography, thing theory—and finally in the “distant reading” of a large corpus of plays.

The remainder of the course will be dedicated to the practicalities of the research project described below. Skills we will develop in the early stages of this last phase of the course will include: data modeling and collection, the design and use of controlled vocabularies, and techniques for data visualization. In the end, you will work (alone or together) to *do something*—i.e., convey new knowledge in any format—with the data we’ve assembled and the techniques we’ve developed. This could be a website, a traditional research paper, or indeed anything else we dream up, individually or as a collective.

**RESEARCH GOALS**

We will work together to create a database of things onstage, drawing our information from the prop lists at the back (or front) of many Samuel French editions. Specifically, we will focus on plays French published from 1915 to 1935. (This database will serve as proof of concept for a larger database drawing on *all* Samuel French plays in Amherst College’s collection—then, perhaps, on other plays that include such information.) The purpose of this database will be to help theater historians tell richer stories about what Andrew Sofer calls “the stage life of props”—but it will also help historians of all sorts to draw on theater as a source on the cultural history of material objects.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

**NOTE:** This schedule may be subject to radical change based on participating student's prior preparation and their ongoing progress in the course. The point is not to march you through a predetermined set of readings and exercises, but instead to meet you where you are and prepare you for where we're going—i.e., toward a collaborative research project on theater history and material culture.

### INTRODUCTION: THINGS ONSTAGE

- T Jan 26 Opening discussion – exploring the “acting edition”  
Th Jan 28 André de Lorde & Charles Foley, *At the Telephone* (orig. 1901; SF ed., 1925)  
**Exercise:** Create a scene-by-scene prop list for *At the Telephone*; list all explicitly specified props first, then include any implied props on a separate list
- T Feb 2 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (excerpt)  
Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Things* (excerpt)  
Th Feb 4 Agatha Christie, *Black Coffee* (SF, 1930)  
**Exercise:** Before reading the play, read the scene-by-scene prop lists and record your guesses as to how the mystery might unravel—with reference to at least one prop. After you've read the play, reflect on those guesses, and come to class prepared to discuss.
- T Feb 9 Belasco, *The Girl of the Golden West* (orig. 1905; SF ed., 1933)  
**Exercise:** Read the scene-by-scene prop lists first. Write a speculative description of this play and its world. After you've read the play, reflect on your initial description, and come to class prepared to discuss.
- Th Feb 11 Marc Robinson, *The American Play* (excerpt)  
**Note:** Pay special attention to how Robinson builds an argument on (and around) *The Girl of the Golden West*.

### MAKING ARGUMENTS WITH THINGS

- T Feb 16 Tracy Davis, “The Context Problem”  
**Exercise:** Choose a crucial prop from one of the plays we've read. Speak with a research librarian about how to get “context” on this object—in itself and onstage.
- Th Feb 18 [Present on intriguing bits of “context” you've found for this object]
- T Feb 23 Robin Bernstein, “Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race”  
Th Feb 25 [Thing Theory reading]

**Exercise:** Spend some time with an archived *thing*. Come to class prepared to introduce the rest of us to your thing. What sort of thing is it? What sort of history does it embody? Does it have “scriptive” powers in Bernstein’s sense? How might you imagine using it (or a similar object) onstage?

T Mar 1 Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (further excerpt)  
Th Mar 3 Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps & Trees* (excerpt)  
[Explore our initial database]

T Mar 8 Project planning  
Th Mar 10 Project planning

\*\*\*\*\***SPRING BREAK**\*\*\*\*\*

#### **COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT: THE STAGE LIFE OF THINGS (SLoT) MACHINE**

**NOTE:** From this point forward, our focus will be on perfecting the database (data modeling), making visible sense of the information it contains (data visualization), and forming projects that will make use of its insights into plays (and, by extension, into material culture). The syllabus is unspecified, in other words, because from here on it must stay adaptable to our collective needs. Shared readings may include: works on the digital humanities, readings in material culture and its history, further plays, and/or works of theater or performance scholarship.