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Johnson Chapel #105
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ENGLISH 231
3, 2, 1: READING SMALL DRAMA

Before long those two-character dramas which occasionally appear will seem positively cluttered, and some day we may have, by way of variety, that ultimate theater proposed by an enthusiast in one of George Kaufman's comedies: "No actors, no text, no audience; just scenery and critics."

– Joseph Wood Krutch in *The Nation* (1952)

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Early in the twentieth century, it was quite common for playwrights to fill their stages with dozens of actors. Over the last sixty years, though, the crowds onstage have thinned. Today, two- and three-person plays are as common as twenty-person plays once were, and nearly every major playwright has written one of them. Since the 1980s, even the one-person play has become commonplace.

Small dramas—experiments at the lower limits of theater-making—allow us to isolate and study some of the most basic units of dramaturgical structure and theatrical style. Once we understand those, we can understand how playwrights use them to construct theatrical worlds and to capture large and complex forces—social, philosophical, political, sexual, etc.—on the bounded stage.

A NOTE ON COURSE MATERIAL:

In using small casts to explore big issues, playwrights often focus on extreme power imbalances among characters. Often, these imbalances turn violent. In the plays we'll read, you'll encounter emotional, physical, and sexual violence, as well as forms of social violence like racism and colonialism. The playwrights meant this material to be distressing, but if you're struggling to stay grounded, please take advantage of the counseling center. We'll talk together in class about how to take care of yourself as you read this material.

READINGS:

Starred readings will appear in the course packet (available in Johnson Chapel #001)

All others are available at Amherst Books in the following editions:

- American Buffalo* by David Mamet (Samuel French) (ISBN: 978-0573640230)
- The Aliens* by Annie Baker (Dramatists Play Service) (ISBN: 978-0822224730)
- Baltimore Waltz* by Paula Vogel (Dramatists Play Service) (ISBN: 978-0822213598)
- The Skriker* by Caryl Churchill (Theatre Communications Group) (ISBN: 978-1559360975)
- Blasted* by Sarah Kane (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama) (ISBN: 978-0413766205)
- Copenhagen* by Michael Frayn (Anchor) (ISBN: 978-0385720793)
- Zoo Story* in *At Home at the Zoo* by Edward Albee (Dramatists Play Service) (ISBN: 978-0822223177)
- Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks (Dramatists Play Service) (ISBN: 978-0822219835)
- Gruesome Playground Injuries* by Rajiv Joseph (Dramatists Play Service) (ISBN: 978-0822225294)

Hughie by Eugene O'Neill (Dramatists Play Service) (ISBN: 978-0822205432)
Fires in the Mirror by Anna Deavere Smith (Dramatists Play Service) (ISBN: 978-0822213291)
We're Gonna Die by Young Jean Lee (Theatre Communications Group) (ISBN: 978-1559364430)

GRADING:

- 10% Active participation (present, engaged, and a vital part of the classroom community)
- 40% Exercises (short, frequent assignments; some specified below, but more to be added)
- 20% Mid-term essay
- 30% Final project

CLASS SCHEDULE:

INTRODUCTION

Tuesday, Sept. 6th – “Just Scenery and Critics”

In-class: handout with selection of no-character plays

Thursday, Sept. 8th—Elements of Drama

Selections from *100 Neo-Futurist Plays** (“Cab Addict,” “Chop Off My Head...,”
“Goodnight Sweetheart,” & “Stretch It Into Overtime”)

Elinor Fuchs, “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet”*

Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many* (excerpt)*

Exercise #1

Transcription Exercise: Transcribe a few minutes’ worth of a conversation you overhear (i.e., not one in which you participated) that involves three people or fewer. Then, write a brief reflection answering one of these questions: 1) what does their manner of speaking/interacting reveal about them, their relationships, and the world(s) they inhabit? or 2) what are these people doing (or doing *to each other*) with their words over the course of this conversation? Please back your claims up with evidence from your transcript. Transcript + 1-2pgs. analysis.

THREE-PERSON

Sept. 13th & 15th – Odd One Out

David Mamet, *American Buffalo* (1975)

Annie Baker, *The Aliens* (2010)

Exercise #2

Double-Casting: Imagine adding one or more characters to *American Buffalo* or *The Aliens*, but without expanding the number of actors involved. Who would these new characters be? Which actor would play them—and why? What effect would this have on the play—or on the audience? 1-2pgs.

Sept. 20th & 22nd – One, Two, Many

Paula Vogel, *Baltimore Waltz* (1992)

Caryl Churchill, *The Skriker* (1994)

Exercise #3

Real-World Dramaturgies: Pick a social issue or large-scale event from recent history. Explain how you would reduce it, in a dramatization, to three characters or fewer. What does your reduction help you capture about the event or issue in question? What does it omit or

obscure? Why do you prefer your version to other possible approaches to dramatizing this event or issue? 1-2pgs.

Sept. 27th & 29th – Power Plays

Athol Fugard, *Statements After an Arrest...* (1972)*

Sarah Kane, *Blasted* (1995)

Exercise #4

Put Things in Perspective: Tell the story of *Statements...* or *Blasted* from the perspective of only one character in it. Before you start writing, think about the difference (if there is any) between what your character experiences and what we (in the audience) experience. Also, think about the difference (if there is any) between what the character knows and what we (the audience) know. Finally, think about the difference between what you and your character believe the point of the play to be. Now write—either in the first-person voice of the character or, if you prefer, in a third-person voice informed by their perspective. 1-2pgs.

Oct. 4th & 6th – Triangulations

Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen* (1998)

debbie tucker green, *trade* (2005)*

Midterm Essay

Fuchs Analysis (from “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet”): “Look at the first image. Now look at the last. Then locate some striking image near the center of the play (the empty box in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* is a good example). To give an account of destiny on this planet range over these three markers. Why was it essential to pass through the gate of the central image to get from the first to the last?” Pick play from our syllabus so far and decide on one “striking image” from it. Ponder Fuchs’s question, then write an essay that interprets your play through the lens of your “striking image.” 4-5pgs.

Draft due: Tuesday, Oct. 11 @ 5pm

Revision due: Sunday, Oct. 16 @ 5pm

Oct. 11th – NO CLASS (mid-semester break)

Oct. 13th – Peer Review of Essay #1

TWO-PERSON

Oct. 18th & 20th – Crossfire

Edward Albee, *Zoo Story* (1959)

Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* (2001)

Oct. 25th & 27th – Collaboration

Cherrie Moraga, *Giving Up the Ghost* (1986)*

Rajiv Joseph, *Gruesome Playground Injuries* (2009)

Nov. 1st & 3rd – Two-in-One

Eugene O’Neill, *Hughie* (1959)

Samuel Beckett, *Not I* (1972)*, *Ohio Impromptu* (1981)*

Nov. 8th & 10th – [Flex Week]

ONE-PERSON

Nov. 15th & 17th – The Self?

Spalding Gray, *India & After* (1979) (available in audio format via course website)

Deb Margolin, *O Yes I Will* (2007)*

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Nov. 29th & 31st – The Other?

Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* (1992)

Ron Vawter, *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (1992)*

Dec. 6th & 8th – Drama?

Richard Pryor, *Live and Smokin'* (1971)

Young Jean Lee, *We're Gonna Die* (2015)

Dec. 13th – Final Class

Final projects due Dec. 16 @ 5pm