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ENGL 435
THE PLAY OF IDEAS
(Mondays & Wednesdays, 8:30-9:50am)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Ideas don't just exist; they happen. They aren't just mental abstractions; they are forces that act directly upon our daily lives. This course draws on a wide variety of plays to ask:

- What is a "play of ideas"? How can we "play with ideas"?
- When and why does thought become theatrical?
- What does it matter how an idea is performed?

We begin by considering a few common formats and styles of intellectual life. We then consider these embodied, social modes of intellection in relation to the "play of ideas" in modernist theater. Then, we explore in-depth the work of one contemporary playwright often said to be writing "plays of ideas." Finally, you will devise a major research project related to the theme of this course, submitting a mock thesis proposal on the subject.

Throughout, we will be talking not only about the theater, but also about "performance" more broadly. How and why do we *do* ideas—in private or in public, with our minds or with our bodies, etc.?

COURSE GOALS

- To sharpen your skills at reading and analyzing drama
- To introduce you to interdisciplinary thinking about "performance"
- To prepare you for thesis-level thinking, reading, and research—which includes the ability to read scholarly essays, to survey critical conversations, and to enter into them yourself
- To prepare you for the comprehensive exam in English, which now takes the form of an oral presentation at a department symposium

READINGS:

*Starred readings on the course schedule below will appear in our course packet
All others are available at Amherst Books*

Required texts:

Ibsen, *Four Major Plays* (Oxford, 2008) (ISBN: 0199536198)
Shaw, *George Bernard Shaw's Plays*, 2nd ed. (Norton, 2002) (ISBN: 0393977536)
Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (Oxford, 2008)
(ISBN: 9780199535972)
Chekhov, *The Plays of Anton Chekhov* (Harper, 1998) (ISBN: 0060928751)
Shaw, *Heartbreak House* (Penguin, 2001) (ISBN: 0140437878)
Lee, *Straight White Men* (TCG, 2017) (ISBN: 155936503X)*

* **NOTE:** Lee's *Straight White Men* is due to be published on October 3rd, 2017 – i.e., after the semester begins, but well in advance of our discussion of it. If publication is delayed, other arrangements will be made to ensure you have access to this play.

Recommended texts (video available):

Lee, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven and Other Plays* (TCG 2009)
(ISBN: 1559363266)
Lee, *The Shipment and Lear* (TCG, 2010) (ISBN: 1559363568)
Lee, *We're Gonna Die* (TCG, 2015) (ISBN: 1559364432)

REQUIREMENTS:

- Regular reading responses (You will be sorted into two groups, one of which writes in advance of Monday classes, the other in advance of Wednesday classes. Responses will be due at noon on the day before class.)
- One short, ethnographic essay on a particular method, style, or culture of “doing ideas” (due Sept. 24th)
- One mid-length essay that goes some way toward defining “the play of ideas” as a theatrical genre (due Oct. 20th)
- Two oral presentations: one collaborative, one solo (all October 30th and later)
- One final project: a mock thesis proposal on a topic related to this course

GRADING

Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

10% participation (including reading responses)
10% oral presentations
20% ethnographic essay
20% midterm essay
40% mock thesis proposal

ACCESS & ACCOMMODATION

I want all students to feel welcome and well-supported in this class. If I can do anything to foster the right learning environment for you, please tell me. (Office hours are a great time to do so.) If you have a documented disability that requires accommodations, please enlist the help of Accessibility Services in coordinating them. You can reach their staff via e-mail at accessibility@amherst.edu, or via phone at 413.542.2337.

COURSE SCHEDULE

PLAYING WITH IDEAS

W Sept 6 Opening Discussion

THE LECTURE & THE DEBATE

M Sept 11 *Goffman, "The Lecture" from *Forms of Talk*
 *Heller, "Listen and Learn" from *The New Yorker* (7/9/2012)
 WATCH: selected Onion Talks (links by e-mail)

W Sept 13 WATCH: Baldwin & Buckley debate at the Cambridge Union (1965)
 <https://youtu.be/oFeoS41xe7w>
 LISTEN TO: "Debatable" (an episode of the podcast *Radiolab*)
 <http://www.radiolab.org/story/debatable/>

LEAPING AHEAD TO *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

M Sept 18 Ibsen, *A Doll House* (in Oxford Ibsen)
 *Shaw, "The Technical Novelty in Ibsen's Plays" from *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1913 edition)

W Sept 20 *Cima, "Ibsen and the Critical Actor" from *Performing Women*
 *Wood, "Christina: Shaw's new ending for Ibsen's *A Doll's House*"

Su Sept 24 NYC trip to see *A Doll's House, Part 2*

THE DISCUSSION: SOCRATES, THE SEMINAR, AND CR

- M Sept 25 Discussion of *A Doll's House, Part 2*
*Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (excerpt)
*Plato, *Crito*
*Showalter, *Teaching Literature* (excerpt)
WATCH: "The Art of Discussion Leading"
<https://vimeo.com/104311202>
- W Sept 27 *Williams, "Harkness Learning"
*Gornick, "Consciousness" from *NY Times Magazine* (1/10/71)
*Kalčík, "... like Ann's gynecologist or the time I was almost raped"
*Langellier & Peterson, "Spinstorying"
Explore Phillips Exeter Academy website on The Harkness Method:
http://www.exeter.edu/admissions/109_1220.aspx
- Su Oct 1 **Ethnographic Project due by 5:00pm (3-4 pgs.)**
Two options (See Moodle for further details):
1) Describe one way you have done ideas (or seen them done) at Amherst.
2) Make a "supercut"-style video that reveals something particular about a common intellectual format.

THE PLAY OF IDEAS (MODERN DRAMA)

- M Oct 2 Shaw, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (in Norton Shaw)
W Oct 4 Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* (in Oxford Wilde)
*Wilde, "The Critic as Artist" (excerpts)
- M Oct 9 **NO CLASS (Fall break)**
W Oct 11 Shaw, *Major Barbara* (in Norton Shaw)
- M Oct 16 Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard* (in Harper Chekhov)
W Oct 18 Shaw, *Heartbreak House*
- Fr Oct 20 **Critical Essay due by 5:00pm (5-6 pgs.)**
Contribute to our collective definition of the (modernist) "play of ideas."
- M Oct 23 Discussion of critical essays and future research questions
W Oct 25 *Warner, "Publics & Counterpublics"
Continue discussion of final projects

THE PLAY OF IDEAS (CONTEMPORARY CASE STUDY: YOUNG JEAN LEE)

- M Oct 30 Lee, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (script & video available)

W	Nov 1	Group presentation: Shimakawa, “Young Jean Lee’s Ugly Feelings about Race and Gender” Lee, <i>The Shipment</i> (script & video available) Group presentation: Hatch, “First as Minstrelsy, Then as Farce”
M	Nov 6	Lee, <i>We’re Gonna Die</i> (script & video available) Group presentation: Frieze, “Young Jean Lee: The Technical Restrictions of Personhood”
W	Nov 8	Lee, <i>Straight White Men</i> (only script available) Group presentation: Ybarra, “Young Jean Lee’s Cruel Dramaturgy”
M	Nov 13	WORKSHOP: Oral presentations
W	Nov 15	WORKSHOP: Research skills
F	Nov 17	Pre-proposal due (100 words on the topic for your final project)

***** THANKSGIVING BREAK *****

M	Nov 27	GROUP DEBATE: Which one text should we read and discuss together?
W	Nov 29	Discuss student-chosen text(s)
M	Dec 4	Oral presentations on final project (day one)
W	Dec 6	Oral presentations on final project (day two)
M	Dec 11	Oral presentations on final project (day three)
W	Dec 13	Oral presentations on final project (day four)