



## SYLLABUS

Spring Session Only

**‘THEATRE, AUDIENCE AND SOCIETY’, TRAGEDY AND BEYOND**

**Instructor: Christopher Cook**

**Contact Hrs: 39**

**Language of Instruction: English**

**LONDON, ENGLAND (ILACA)**

### **Course objectives**

This is a course which addresses the potentially life-changing *effects* that theatre’s practitioners and critics, over more than two thousand years, have thought different kinds of theatre can have on audiences.

From the beginning there is an assumption that theatre *does* have a strong emotional, intellectual, physical effect on its audience – that it is, or has the potential to be, a powerfully therapeutic and often disruptive tool rather than an essentially bland form of commercial, escapist entertainment. We will look at the ways in which playwrights, from Euripides to Ibsen, Webster to Congreve, Brecht, Beckett, and Caryl Churchill, have aimed at affecting and changing society and individuals through dramaturgy.

### **WEEK 1                      The Power of Tragedy**

We begin (near the beginning) with Euripides tragedy *The Bacchae* and Aristotle’s championing of theatre as therapeutic and his exploration of the cathartic properties of tragedy. We will explore what tragedy meant in its original Athenian context and what it can mean for an audience today.

**Euripides: *Medea***

### **WEEK 2                      Mystery and Morality**

In the late Middle Ages drama fought its way out of the church into the streets of England’s cities with sequences of Mystery plays performed on travelling carts that trundled through cities like York, Coventry, Wakefield and which endeavoured to ‘justify the ways of God to Man. The tragedy of fallen Man became the divine comedy of Jesus’s redemption, leavened in many of these mystery plays with an all too human earthy humour

**Selection from the *York Mystery Cycle***

### **WEEK 3                      ‘What a piece of work is man’**

At his death Christopher Marlowe was accused of atheism. In his play *Dr Faustus* he pits the Renaissance humanist hero against religious authority – and Faust loses. Marlowe played a decisive role in shaping the way in which an Elizabethan audience understood, and consumed a new kind of drama.

**Marlowe: *Dr Faustus***

### **WEEK 4                      A world gone mad’**

‘I am Duchess Malfi still’, cries Webster’s Duchess as she is strangled. In the midst of social and familial chaos all the hero/heroine can do is to proclaim his or her identity. Webster and Tourneur and Marston chart a dark world in which disillusion with the Jacobean political settlement is

transmuted into tragedy. But for a modern audience are their plays any more than bloody exercises in *grand guignol*?

**Webster:** *The Duchess of Malfi*

#### **WEEK 5**                      **‘Manners maketh Man’**

Restoration theatre intended to point a moral to adorn a tale for a new audience who wanted a new kind of theatre. The idea behind the newly minted ‘comedy of manners’ was the reformation of social behaviour. (And we shall be seeing *Man of Mode* at the National Theatre.) Yet darker threads are woven into the plays of Behn, Wycherley and Congreve where women are often no more than property and true feelings stifled by social conventions.

**Congreve:** *The Way of the World*

#### **WEEK 6**                      **Greek tragedy à la Française**

At the end of the seventeenth century French playwrights such as Corneille and Racine turned back to Aristotle’s ‘rules’ for writing tragedy and sought to emulate the achievements of the Athenian dramatists. Few other European theatre cultures remained immune from this attempt to re-classicise drama, from Neo-classicism. Yet beneath the cool Alexandrine lines crafted by, say, Racine, beat terrifying emotions that threaten disaster to the hero/heroine and may even engulf a whole society.

**Racine:** *Phédre*

#### **WEEKS 7 & 8**                      **Ibsen’s Social and Psychological Theatre**

We move forward nearly two centuries to the birth of modern, naturalistic drama in the prose plays of Hendrik Ibsen, with their probing critique of the hypocrisies of 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois society. We shall have seen one of the earliest of these new naturalistic plays, Emile Zola’s *Thérese Raquin*. Then we shall spend some time discussing Ibsen’s most celebrated social plays, particularly *Hedda Gabler*, and *Ghosts* which we will also have seen in performance). But is Ibsen more than a social critic? Is he perhaps a poetic, psychological explorer of human aspiration and self-delusion?

**Zola:** *Thérese Raquin* (sections)

**Ibsen:** *Hedda Gabler*

#### **WEEK 9**                      **Revolutionary Political Theatre - 1**

In the ninth section of the course we consider the revolutionary political theatre of Bertolt Brecht. We look at Brecht’s theatre in the context of its genesis at the time of the rise of Fascism in Europe and Asia, and Brecht’s own relationship with Marxist Communism. We shall concentrate on *Mother Courage*, Brecht’s great anti-war play, written as World War Two broke out, and try to understand what Brecht meant by his famous *Verfremdungseffekt* – his attempt to get audiences to relate what happens on stage to their own circumstances.

**Brecht:** *Mother Courage*

#### **WEEK 10**                      **Revolutionary Political Theatre - 1**

Federico Garcia Lorca was murdered at the very beginning of the Spanish Civil War when the Spanish Fascists overran his native Andalucia.

Ostensibly his commitment to the legitimately elected Spanish Republic which General Franco’s armies intended to overthrow was the reason for his death, but perhaps it was overtly political plays, his poetry and his homosexuality that disturbed the totalitarian Right. A play like his *Blood Wedding* meditates on liberty and freedom, on sex and death – *Eros* and *Thanatos* in uncomfortable ways

**Lorca:** *Blood Wedding*

#### **WEEK 11**                      **The Theatre of the Absurd – Beckett**

After the Second World War, and deeply influenced by what had happened during the German Occupation a new dark kind of theatre emerged in Paris. The theatre of Beckett, Ionesco and, later, Pinter is a philosophical and linguistic theatre inspired both by the devastation wrought in the War and by the breakdown of established religions and thought- and value-systems. At the same time Beckett in *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *Waiting for Godot* – inspired by music-hall and silent comedy

as much as traditional theatre - finds an extraordinary humour in the apparently doomed human quest for meaning and salvation.

**Beckett: *Krapp's Last Tape***

## **WEEK 12                      The Theatre of Gender, Race, Sexual Orientation**

In the final class section we give close attention to two plays, Jean Genet's *The Maids*, an early attempt to explore the themes of gender, race and sexual orientation, which are co central to much contemporary drama, and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* - an examination of the role of women in history and a thoughtful critique of feminism. We shall consider the relation of issue-based plays to the fragmentation of the theatre audience and society, the exclusion of certain groups and their possible reintegration.

**Genet: *The Maids* and Churchill: *Top Girls***

**Final paper**

### **Assignments and assessment**

You are required to read the plays assigned for class in your own time before we meet together

Assessment will be based on two papers of between 2500 and 3000 words. The first is due at the end of Week 4, the other in our final class.

The first paper will account for 30% of the marks towards the final grade and the second 45%. The remaining 25% will be awarded on prompt attendance and on class participation.

Participation, including reading of the texts, is extremely important as this is in large part a seminar-style course with a short introductory lecture. A grades will be given only for outstanding work.

### **Theatre visits/performances**

We will go to see approximately six to eight performances on the London stage which tie in as closely as possible with the genres of theatre examined in the course. There will be discussions of these performances in class time.

### **Contact**

I am always happy to talk to you about your work or to deal with particular queries you may have about our work together. You can call me on: **(020) 7289 8794** or e-mail me at

**PT@artsreview.demon.co.uk**