Political Theatre

What makes theatre political? How has the politics of theatre been imagined and practiced in different times? What hopes for changing the world does theatre dramatize? What does the study of theatre teach us about politics? How does the theatre become a productive site for representing, and even enacting, political change? This course explores these questions by reading plays from three periods in which theatrical production played a significant role in the politics of its world--ancient Greece, Renaissance England, and our contemporary globalized world.

Course Aims: As the above description and the schedule of readings below suggests, the primary objective of this course is to introduce students to plays that not only address a range of political issues (for example, about race, gender, sexuality, class, violence, the governing of subjects, and the production of good citizens) but also attempt to enact change and engage the community. We will thus be reading innovative plays alongside theorists who investigate and imagine the political potential of theatre and performance. By attending plays and participating in experimental theatrical exercises ourselves, we will be able both to think about what makes theatre political and to experience its effects through our own creative actions.

Required Texts:
All texts should be available at the NYU bookstore. In addition to the texts listed below, I will be distributing additional materials.
1) Sophocles, Antigone
2) Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice: Texts and Contexts (You must purchase this edition)
3) Brecht, The Good Person of Szechwan
4) Odets, Waiting for Lefty and Other Plays (Might not be in bookstore)
5) Churchill, Top Girls
6) Kane, Blasted
7) Hoffman, As Is
8) Anna Deveare Smith, Fires in the Mirror (Not yet in bookstore)
COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

CLASS ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION:

"Political Theatre" is a seminar that will develop through class discussion. Like the theatre we will be studying, it is the product of collaborative engagement. Thus, regular attendance (including arriving to class on time) and thoughtful engagement with the course materials are crucial to its success. Be generous with your ideas and questions, and show up with texts in your hand and ready to think in new ways. Careful preparation is a key component of participation. Complete all readings, viewings, and assignments before you come to class in order to be ready to participate in that day's discussion. Come to class with questions you have about the material and/or with specific issues or passages from works you would like to discuss. Be ready to contribute meaningfully to our discussions. Preparation thus means not just having completed the assignment, but having engaged with the materials thoughtfully and actively.

If you are absent, I will assume you have a good reason. You do not need to tell me why. (The exception is if something very out of the ordinary happens that requires you to miss more than two classes in a row.) The course, however, moves quickly and the material is challenging, and those that miss seminar will likely find it difficult to keep up. Whenever you miss class, you are responsible for finding out what you missed from one of your classmates and for keeping up with the assignments.

Performances: Each of you will participate in the performance of a scene from one of the plays we are reading. I will divide you into three groups based as much as possible on your interests. I will ask you to email me your preferences by September 6 so that I can put you in groups quickly, thus giving you as much time as possible to prepare. As a group, you will select the scene or parts of different scenes you want to perform. You will also decide how you want to perform those scenes and what issues you want to raise through your performance. Be creative. For example, you could perform a short scene in two different ways. You do not all need to be actors. You can participate in different ways. You might choose to be a director, or someone who is going to block the scene, or someone who is more involved in thinking about how the scene will be performed in order to raise certain issues. This assignment will give you the opportunity to experience the collaborative effort that produces theatre, and the class as a whole will benefit from seeing scenes from three plays performed. Your participation will contribute to your participation grade. Each member of the group will write a short response about your experience participating in this collaborative work. This will be due at the class meeting after the performance so that you can reflect on the experience of the performance itself. Each group will consult with me about scene selection at least one week before the performance.

WRITTEN WORK: A variety of forms of written work will be required for the class. I detail them below. All written work will share in the project of moving toward
accomplishing the stated goals of the course, of making connections among the different works and discussions of them, and, of course, making new discoveries about why studying this material matters to us. All written work should typed and double-spaced in 12-point font with standard one-inch margins.

**Reading Responses:** In order to help you prepare to participate in discussion and to give you the practice of writing on a regular basis about course materials, you will also be asked to complete a response paper roughly every other week. This paper is an approximately 350 word critical response to the materials assigned since the previous response paper was due. These are typed, thoughtful engagements that address a specific issue, question, or section of a work that you would like to explore. They may also engage with issues raised in class discussion. For some classes, I will assign a specific topic or approach. For others the choice will be yours. Each response paper should conclude with a discussion question. This part of the assignment will help us to bring your questions and concerns to the center of class. Due dates by which responses must be turned in are listed on the syllabus. Response papers are due on the day that the work you are writing about will be discussed. In most cases, you can choose the work and thus the day during the (usually) two-week period when you will be writing. Please number and date your response papers.

**Papers:**
You will be writing three analytical papers for this course. The first paper is a four-page close analysis of a scene from *The Merchant of Venice* or *Antigone*. The second paper (5 pages) will ask you to apply the theories of performance we have read to one of the plays or to develop your own theory from one of the plays. I will be suggesting paper topics and formats based on class discussions and your interests as they develop throughout the semester for the second and final papers. The final paper will be six pages. All papers will be analytical, but analysis by no means excludes creativity. Due dates for papers are listed on the syllabus. I will be giving you handouts to assist you in writing the papers and to explain the assignments in greater detail.

Grades are based on the quality of all written work (response papers and papers) as well as class participation. The following is a rough breakdown of how much each category is worth. If your work gets stronger as the course progresses, I will weigh your later work more heavily. (Attendance and Participation: 30%; Response Papers: 25%; Papers: 45%).

Disabilities: If you have a documented disability and anticipate needing accommodations in this course, please make arrangements to meet with me soon.

Plagiarism: As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.
Do not plagiarize. If you take an idea or more than two or three words directly from any source (including the Internet), you must cite the source in a footnote. If you are not sure if you are plagiarizing, please ask me. Similarly, if you are unsure how to complete an assignment, come talk to me.
Course Schedule: (Schedule May Be Subject to Changes)

Week 1:
Sept. 6:
--Syllabus, Introduction
Sept. 8:
--What is Political Theatre?
--Group Work: Politics of *The Oresteia* and Modern Adaptations
--Come to class having thought about two related sets of questions. Is *The Oresteia* political theatre? Why or why not? How might you reimagine or stage *The Oresteia* to highlight some of the political issues it raises? What current political conflicts might the play help us to think through? How might you alter or work with the play in order to help an audience imagine or consider alternative resolutions to the particular conflict you are thinking about?

Week 2: Subjects and the State
Sept 13:
--*Antigone*: Read the Introduction and through line 630 (p. 46). Come to class having marked and thought about a passage that you have found particularly compelling
Sept. 15:
--Finish *Antigone*

**First Response Paper Due**

--8:30 PM: *Lush Valley*: Here Theatre, 145 6th Avenue at Dominick St (One Block South of Spring)

Week 3: Outsiders and Belonging
Sept. 20:
--Discussion of *Lush Valley*
Sept. 22:
--*The Merchant of Venice* Acts One and Two and pp. 187-94, 230-5, 241-9, 298-300

Week 4: Outsiders and Belonging
Sept. 27:
--*The Merchant of Venice* Acts Three and Four. Read The Introduction
--Discuss First Paper Assignment
Sept. 29:
--Finish *Merchant of Venice*

**--Response Paper 2 Due (Close reading of part of a scene)**
Week 5: Alienation Effects, Scarce Resources, and Good Citizens
Oct 4:
---Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre"
Oct 6: Return Response Papers
---*The Good Person of Szechwan*

Week 6:
Oct 11: Columbus Day; No Class
**October 12: First Paper Due**
Oct. 13: *The Good Person of Szechwan*
Response Paper 3 Due

Week 7: Gender Performance and Resistant Subjects
Oct. 18:
---Scenes from Lyly, *Gallathea*
Oct. 20:
---Augusto Boal, "Poetics of the Oppressed"

Week 8: Resistant Subjects Continued
Oct. 25:
---*12 Angry Lebanese: The Documentary*
---Response Paper 4 Due
(When this response paper is returned you will receive a cumulative grade for the first four response papers.)
Oct. 27:
---“Poetics of the Oppressed” Exercises

Week 9: Theatre of the People
Nov. 1:
---*Begin NgugiWaThiong'o, I will Marry When I Want*
Nov. 3:
---Finish *I will Marry When I Want;*
---*NgugiWaThiong'o, Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Theatre* (excerpt)
---Paper Topic Handout

Week 10: People’s Voices: Class and Racial Conflict
Nov. 8:
---*Waiting For Lefty*
Nov. 10:
---*Fires in the Mirror*
---Response Paper 5 Due
Evening: See either *Measure for Measure* or play on The Dream Act. Exact Dates forthcoming. For extra credit see both. Write a Response to the play that you saw.

Week 11:
Nov. 15:
--*Fires in the Mirror*

**Wednesday November 16: Second Paper Due**
Nov. 17: Women, Work, and Social Equality
--*Top Girls*

Week 12:
Nov. 22:
--*Top Girls*

--**Response Paper 6 Due**
Nov. 24: No class

Week 13: War and Violence
Nov. 29:
--*Blasted*
Dec. 1:
--Theatre Performance Discussion

Week 14: Sexuality and Community
Dec. 6:
--*As Is*
Dec. 8:
--Theatre Performance Discussion

--**Response Paper 7 Due**

Week 15:
Dec. 13:
--**Final Paper Due**
Dec. 15:
--Conclusions/Day for the Unexpected