

# Spring 2012 Dynamics of Play Reading: Elements, Structure, Paradigms

## Basic info

Amherst College THDA 160

Course in the History, Literature and Theory  
of Theater and Dance

Keywords: Fine arts for non-majors, writing and speaking  
attentive

Course meets TTHs from 11:30 a.m. to 12:50 p.m.  
in Studio 3

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Office hours by appointment

## Course description

This course explores various elements of dramatic literature and their implications for audience experiences in performance. Character, language, spectacle, plotting and theme are studied in the light of dynamic play structures. In addition to analytical writing, students undertake experiential projects in realizing the underlying theatrical and narrative paradigms of the plays studied. Exemplary plays are chosen for their contrasting qualities, from antiquity to the present, and are read alongside related theoretical and critical texts. Particular emphasis is placed on exploring the legacy of classical form and later evolutionary and innovative responses to it.

## Focus

We will read a variety of plays in this course and try to get to the heart of how each play “works”. Our primary goal will be to develop facility in the reading of plays as meaningful theatrical experiences. You will gain insight into the dynamics of audience perceptions as they unfold in time and space, and the formal means by which playwrights influence those perceptions in order to translate literary themes into theatrical reality. In terms of dramatic form, our process together will include experiences in integrating parsed elements into a deeper understanding of the whole. If you enroll in this course, you should be prepared to read all of the required plays and to participate in short-form collaborative projects that will deepen your apprehension of the experiential qualities of plays in performance.

## Materials

Required reading is listed below, consisting of plays and Aristotle's *Poetics*. In addition, I will require several shorter critical reading selections that I will either hand to you or for which I will direct you to the library.

Books (available locally at Amherst Books; many also available at Frost library)

*Poetics*, by Aristotle, translated by Kenneth McLeish

*Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles, translation by Fitts & Fitzgerald

*Uncle Vanya*, by Chekhov, translation by Brian Friel

*You Can't Take It With You*, by Kaufman & Hart

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by Shakespeare

*Major Barbara*, by G.B. Shaw

*The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht, translation by Mannheim & Willet

*Marat/Sade*, by Peter Weiss

*Right You Are*, by Luigi Pirandello, translation by Eric Bentley

*A Number*, by Caryl Churchill

*Blasted*, by Sarah Kane

*The Laramie Project*, by Moises Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project

## Assignments overview

- Reading, as listed on the course schedule below, and additional critical reading as provided
- Nearly weekly short writing, as assigned
- Three essays, **due on Mar. 1, Apr. 17, and May 9**, respectively
- Six collaborative experiential projects presented in class during Weeks 3, 7, 8, 10, 12 & 14

## Weekly writing

Short writing assignments are due nearly every week. Assignments will be given one class prior. Missed assignments may not be made up after the following one is due, though you are welcome to re-write any assignment within one week after receiving my comments. Early assignments may not be graded.

## Essays

Three longer essays are required for this course, with topics to be assigned 1-2 weeks before they are due. The first two essays should be 3-5 pages in length. The last essay will be your "final" and should be 7-10 pages long.

## Writing process and extensions policy

- I am happy to read rough drafts and to meet with you individually as you work through the writing process.
- In addition, you may re-write and re-submit any papers (except for the final paper) within one week of receiving my comments, and I will give you a higher grade if your revision warrants one.
- If you need an extension on written work, please ask at least a day in advance, or I may not grant one.

## Experiential projects

The experiential projects should be prepared outside of class. In some cases, we will also re-work on projects in class. I will ask you to do most of these projects in pairs or in groups, in which case all members of the group will receive the same grade. It is essential that you communicate with one another effectively to set aside time to meet and work together outside of class.

## Grading

Experiential projects (6) - 40%

Short writing (10) - 25%

Essays (2) - 20%

Final Essay - 15%

## Course Schedule (subject to change)

### Week 1

Tue. Jan. 24 Introduction

Thu. Jan. 26 Short writing due

### Week 2

Tue. Jan. 31 Aristotle's *Poetics*

Thu. Feb. 2 *Oedipus Rex* Short writing due

### Week 3

Tue. Feb. 7 Experiential Project #1

Thu. Feb. 9 *You Can't Take It With You* Short writing due

### Week 4

Tue. Feb. 14 *The Threepenny Opera*

Thu. Feb. 16 Short writing due

### Week 5

Tue. Feb. 21 *Marat/Sade*

Thu. Feb. 23 Short writing due

### Week 6

Tue. Feb. 28 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Thu. Mar. 1 First essay due

