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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 common.

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 better understand how playwrights use them to construct theatrical worlds and to capture large and complex forces—social, philosophical, political, sexual, etc.—on a simple, bounded stage.

**READINGS:**

Starred readings will appear in the course packet (available soon in Johnson Chapel #001)  
All others are available at Amherst Books

**REQUIREMENTS:**

- Active participation (no unexcused absences; an absence counts as excused only if I have approved it 24 hours in advance, or if you can provide proof of emergency circumstances)
- Exercises (informal writing, submitted on occasional Fridays)
- A brief presentation and a lead-off question for one play
- One midterm paper (7-8 pages)
- A final project (10- to 12-page paper *or* a creative/analytic project)

**A NOTE ON COURSE MATERIAL:**

In using small casts to explore big social issues, many of these playwrights choose to focus on extreme power imbalances. Often, these imbalances turn violent. Sarah Kane's *Blasted* is particularly disturbing in its depiction both of physical and sexual violence. To prepare for our discussion of *Blasted*, we will have a visit from one of Amherst's Sexual Respect Educators.

## CLASS SCHEDULE:

### INTRODUCTION

#### January 23<sup>rd</sup> – “Just Scenery and Critics”

In-class: Samuel Beckett, *Breath* (film); Francesco Cangiulio, *Detonation, or Synthesis of All Modern Theatre* (handout); Suzan-Lori Parks *365 Plays* (selections on handout)

### THREE-PERSON

#### January 28<sup>th</sup> & 30<sup>th</sup> – Odd Man Out

Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker* (1960)  
David Mamet, *American Buffalo* (1975)

#### February 4<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> – Power Plays

Athol Fugard, *Statements After an Arrest...* (1972)  
Sarah Kane, *Blasted* (1995)

#### February 11<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> – Triangulation

Brian Friel, *The Faith Healer* (1980)  
Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen* (1998)

#### February 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> – One, Two, Many

Paula Vogel, *Baltimore Waltz* (1992)  
Caryl Churchill, *The Skriker* (1994)\*

**SPECIAL** February 24, 8pm – Laurie Anderson performs *The Language of the Future*  
**EVENT** February 25, 4:30pm – Laurie Anderson gives the Rapaport Lecture on Contemporary Art

### TWO-PERSON

#### February 25<sup>th</sup> & 27<sup>th</sup> – Face to Face

Edward Albee, *Zoo Story* (1959) (in *At Home at the Zoo*)  
LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Dutchman* (1964)

#### March 4<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> - Crossfire

David Mamet, *Oleanna* (1992)  
Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* (2001)

#### March 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> – Collaborations

Athol Fugard, *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* (1974) & *The Island* (1973)  
Cherrie Moraga, *Giving Up the Ghost* (1986)

#### March 18<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup>

SPRING BREAK

**March 25<sup>th</sup> & 27<sup>th</sup> – [Revise, Reboot]**

Tennessee Williams, *The Two-Character Play* (1975)  
[Argument Workshops]

**April 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> – Two-in-One**

Eugene O'Neill, *Hughie* (1959)  
Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) *Not I* (1972), *Footfalls* (1975), *Ohio Impromptu* (1981) (required: attend Beckett on Film screenings)

**ONE-PERSON**

**April 8<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> – E Unibus Pluram**

Laurie Anderson, *Home of the Brave* (1986) (video online)  
Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* (1991) (PBS video on Moodle)

**April 15<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> – The Story**

Spalding Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia* (1986) (film on Moodle)  
David Greenspan, *The Myopia* (1999)\* (video excerpt online)

**April 22<sup>nd</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup> – The Confession**

Peggy Shaw, *A Menopausal Gentleman* (1998)\* (video online)  
Sarah Kane, *4.48 Psychosis* (1998)

**April 29<sup>th</sup> & May 1<sup>st</sup> – Wrap-Up & Presentations on Final Project**

**May 6<sup>th</sup> – Final day**

Final Project (due May 11<sup>th</sup>)

*Option #1*

In consultation with me, choose and read at least two other plays by a playwright on this syllabus. Write a 10- to 12-page paper analyzing some aspect of this playwright's dramaturgy.

*Option #2*

Write a one-act play, paying special attention to the configurations of character we have studied in this class. Attach an explanation of the relationship between your play and the dramaturgical strategies of the playwrights we have studied. (Please consult with me before pursuing this option.)