

Christopher Grobe  
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**ENGLISH 435**  
**THE PLAY OF IDEAS**

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Ideas don't just exist; they happen. They aren't just mental abstractions; they move within our daily, material 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 is thought theatricalized?
- What does it matter whether and how an idea is performed?

In the process of confronting these questions, this course will prepare students for thesis-level reading, research, and writing.

**READINGS:**

*Starred readings appear in the course packet (available in Johnson Chapel #001)*  
*All others are available at Amherst Books; please get these exact editions*

Ibsen, *Four Major Plays* (Oxford, 2008)  
Shaw, *Plays Unpleasant* (Penguin, 2001)  
Shaw, *George Bernard Shaw's Plays* (Norton, 2002)  
Chekhov, *The Plays of Anton Chekhov* (HarperCollins, 1997)  
Shaw, *Heartbreak House* (Penguin, 2001)  
Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays* (Penguin, 1984)  
Plato, *Six Great Dialogues* (Dover, 2007)  
Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan* (Penguin, 2008)  
Kushner & Tesori, *Caroline, or Change* (Theatre Communications Group, 2004)  
Miller, *The Price* (Dramatists Play Service, 1998)  
Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (Plume, 1990)  
Stoppard, *Jumpers* (Grove, 1994)  
Wallace, *One Flea Spare* (Broadway Play Publishing, 1997)  
Churchill, *Cloud Nine* (Theatre Communications Group, 1994)  
Campbell, *The Pride* (Dramatists Play Service, 2010)  
Cosson, et. al, *The Civilians: An Anthology of Six Plays* (Playscripts, Inc. 2009)

**REQUIREMENTS:**

- Active participation
- Two midterm essays (5 pages each)
- In-class presentations (introducing on-syllabus material; bringing in off-syllabus material)
- A final prospectus (i.e., proposal for and précis of thesis-scale project)

## COURSE SCHEDULE

**W, Sept. 4,** Opening discussion

### **INTRODUCTION – MODERNISM AND “THE PLAY OF IDEAS”**

**M, Sept. 9,** Ibsen, *A Doll House*; Shaw, “The Technical Novelty in Ibsen’s Plays”

**W, Sept. 11,** Shaw, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*

**M, Sept. 16,** Ibsen, *Ghosts*

**W, Sept. 18,** Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*

**M, Sept. 23,** Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” excerpts from “The Critic as Artist”

**W, Sept. 25,** Shaw, *The Philanderer*

**M, Sept. 30,** Shaw, *Man and Superman*

**W, Oct. 2,** Shaw, *Major Barbara*

**M, Oct. 7,** Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*

**W, Oct. 9,** Shaw, *Heartbreak House*

**F, Oct. 11,** *Paper #1 Due*

### **COMPLICATION – PRECEDENTS & PROBLEMS**

**M, Oct. 14,** \*\*\*\*\*FALL BREAK\*\*\*\*\*

**W, Oct. 16,** Sophocles, *Antigone*; Aristotle, excerpts from *The Poetics*\*

**M, Oct. 21,** Plato, *The Symposium*; Rokem, from *Philosophers & Thespians*\*

**W, Oct. 23,** Plato, *Phaedo & The Republic* (excerpt); Puchner, from *The Drama of Ideas*\*

**M, Oct. 28,** Addison & Steele, *The Spectator* (excerpts)\*; Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (excerpt)\*; Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics”\*

**W, Oct. 30,** Steele, *The Conscious Lovers*\*

**F., Nov. 1,** *All Day*

*Trip to NYC to see Caroline, or Change (Theater on Film & Tape archive) and The Good Person of Szechwan (The Public Theater)*

### **APPLICATION – RECENT APPROACHES**

**M, Nov. 4** Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan*

**W, Nov. 6,** Kushner & Tesori, *Caroline, or Change*

**F, Nov. 8,** *Paper #2 Due*

**M, Nov. 11,** Miller, *The Price*  
**W, Nov. 13,** Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*

**M, Nov. 18,** Stoppard, *Jumpers*  
**W, Nov. 20,** Wallace, *One Flea Spare*

\*\*\*\*\* **THANKSGIVING BREAK** \*\*\*\*\*

**M, Dec. 2,** Churchill, *Cloud Nine*  
**W, Dec. 4,** Campbell, *The Pride*

**M, Dec. 9,** Van Itallie, *The Serpent*  
**W, Dec. 11,** Civilians, *Gone Missing*

**M, Dec. 16,** *Final prospectus due*