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and by appointment

ENGL 203/01
Introduction to Dramatic Writing
Fall 2008
9:30 – 10:45, Tuesday/Thursday
Clough 300

Overview

In this playwriting workshop, you will read several contemporary plays and will write a variety of scenes and exercises culminating in a complete one-act play to be performed in a staged reading at the end of the semester. To get to this end-of-semester goal, we will study several contemporary plays with a keen eye toward narrative structure—how dramatic writing is created and manipulated—in addition to reading a practical text to put our collective vocabulary on a common level to help us discuss these contemporary plays as well as your own. More specifically, we will keep an eye toward how different playwrights deploy a narrator-figure while others explore a documentary-like approach to telling a story and what this means for the audience's understanding of the overall story and theatrical experience.

Texts

The Zoo Story by Edward Albee
Glengarry, Glenn Ross by David Mamet
Tongue of a Bird by Ellen McLaughlin
How I Learned to Drive by Paula Vogel
Equus by Peter Shaffer
Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde by Moises Kaufman
The Exonerated by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen
The Dramatist's Toolkit by Jeffrey Sweet

Workshop

This class is not really a lecture. No doubt I will do a lot of talking and you will do a lot of listening but the primary goal is to force you to write and to force the rest of the class to discuss that writing in sympathetic and constructive ways. Your task as a student is split between writing a short play (as well as the exercises) and discussing the work of your peers, which means your in-class discussion/comments and your written critiques are as important as your own writing. It will not only help your fellow students—giving them valuable feedback, giving them an actual audience, turning a private creation into a public act—it will sharpen your own critical skills. You will be able to view your own writing differently after critiquing your peers' work.

What to say? You should look at your classmates' writing with an eye toward *how* it works, as a piece of drama, and you should evaluate how *well* it works according to some simple conventions of dramatic writing we will discuss.

The One-Act Play

Over the course of the semester you will write three drafts of a complete one-act play, a portion of which will then be performed in a staged reading at the end of the semester. Each draft of your play *submitted for discussion* should be "complete," with a worked-out ending—even a bad one. (Fixing bad endings is

one of the things workshop is for.) The first draft of your play **must be at least 10 pages**. The final draft of your one act should run anywhere from 12 to 30 pages.

At the very end of the semester, you will gather together the two previously workshopped drafts, my comments on these drafts, and the final revised (post-staged reading) version and submit it all to me at the end of the semester for final evaluation. In assessing the merit of the completed one-act portfolio, I will pay special attention to the *revisions* you have made to the play and how you have made use of the two workshops and end-of-semester staged reading.

Rather than read these plays aloud in their entirety during workshop, as we will do with the exercises (see below), you will come to class ready to discuss the scripts in detail. During workshop weeks, we will workshop roughly six plays per class period. You will submit your plays to me via email attachment, and I will then compile all the plays into corresponding packets for the upcoming workshop days and email them back to the class. Each of you is then responsible for printing out that day's packet. Moreover, you will write *at least* a half-page of typed, single-spaced comments for each play up for discussion. Please bring two copies of these typed-out comments, one for me and one for the author up for workshop.

The Exercises

You will write six dialogue/scene exercises over the course of the semester. I will give you specific instructions and parameters for each one. On the day that these exercises are due, you are to bring multiple copies of your typed exercise—one for me, one for yourself, and one for each additional speaking part in your exercise script. The class will read aloud from your exercise scripts and then we will discuss them.

The Reviews

In addition to our discussions of several contemporary plays, you are required to see a handful of local productions throughout the semester and then to write a review of that play/production under the terminology and interests established in the class. There are several performance dates for each show so there's no excuse for missing these performance reviews.

The Mercy Seat by Neil LaBute, Theater Memphis

The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams, Playhouse on the Square

The Skin of Our Teeth by Thornton Wilder, McCoy Theater

Dates for the performances are in the daily schedule below.

Attendance

You are allowed to miss two classes for any reason. For every missed class after two, your final grade for the course will be reduced by one third. I make no distinction between "excused" and "unexcused" absences. **If you miss more than 4 classes total, you will fail the course.** In addition, consistent tardiness will be counted as an absence.

Quizzes

We'll only have quizzes if class discussion lags. If these occur, they'll be folded in with your participation grade.

Grade Breakdown

6 exercises—20%

3 play reviews—20%

One-act play (first draft, second draft and final draft)—50%

Participation (written comments, class discussion)—10%

Your individual pieces of writing won't receive a letter grade but written and verbal feedback instead. How can you make a good grade? Hand in complete drafts and exercises on time; contribute constructive, energetic feedback on your peers' work throughout the entire semester; contribute something to class discussion at each class meeting; engage in a concentrated revision of your play for each draft, not simply fixing the spelling and changing a character's name; and meet the other particular requirements for the various exercises along the way.

The three drafts of your one-act play constitute major assignments for this course; as such, if you do not hand in one of these major assignments, you will fail the entire class.

Late Papers

Each assignment is due on the day stipulated on the syllabus. Any late assignment will be reduced 1/3 of a letter grade for each day that it is delayed (A- to B+, etc.). Any assignment turned in 5 class sessions after the original due date will receive a grade of F and can result in failure of the course itself.

Disclaimer

Many of the plays we will read in this class contain grown-up themes and situations and discuss them in grown-up language. If you are easily offended, you are hereby forewarned. Consequently, I expect you to discuss these grown-up moments as grown ups yourselves.

Plagiarism

As per the Honor Code, all work you hand in during the semester must be entirely your own and produced exclusively for this class.

Disability Accommodation

If you need any accommodations related to a disability, please schedule an appointment with Melissa Butler McCowen, Coordinator of Disability Services, 843-3994, mbutler@rhodes.edu.

This syllabus and the following daily schedule are subject to change with adequate notice.

Tentative Daily Schedule

8/28	Introduction to class	9/30	<i>Equus</i>
9/2	Albee's "The Zoo Story" & "The Sandbox"	10/2	<i>Dramatist's Toolkit</i> , chapters 1-3
9/4	Exercise #1 due ; Wilder essay (handout)	10/3	<i>Glass Menagerie</i> opens, Playhouse on the Square
9/9	<i>Glengarry, Glen Ross</i>	10/7	<i>Dramatist's Toolkit</i> , chapters 4-8; draft #1 of play due
9/11	Exercise #2 due	10/9	workshop
9/16	<i>Tongue of a Bird</i>	10/12	<i>The Mercy Seat</i> closes
9/18	Exercise #3 due	10/14	workshop
9/23	<i>How I Learned to Drive</i>	10/16	workshop; <i>The Mercy Seat</i> review due
9/25	Exercise #4 due Poetry reading, Matthea Harvey, 6:30 p.m.	10/21	Fall Break
9/26	<i>The Mercy Seat</i> opens, Theater Memphis	10/23	<i>Gross Indecencies</i> ; Exercise #5 due

10/26 *The Glass Menagerie* closes
10/28 *Gross Indecencies* continued
10/30 ***The Glass Menagerie* review due**

11/4 *The Exonerated*
11/6 **exercise #6 due**

11/11 *Dramatist's Toolkit*, chapters 9 & 12-13
11/13 **draft #2 of play due**

11/14 *The Skin of Our Teeth* opens

11/18 workshop
11/20 workshop

11/23 *The Skin of Our Teeth* closes

11/25 workshop; ***The Skin of Our Teeth* review due**
11/27 Thanksgiving

12/2 Conferences; staged reading work
12/4 Staged readings

12/9 Last day: Staged readings
12/11 final drafts due by 5 p.m.