Modern Theatre and the Political Imagination

The idea that dramatic writing has a strong political currency, more so than other art forms, is long established. The twentieth century has given rise to diverse forms of political theatre that entertain a privileged relation with the international left, pacifism, anti-colonial campaigns and liberation movements, and to many powerful plays dealing with civil rights, labour rights, women’s rights, gay and lesbian rights, race issues, disability rights, prisoners’ rights, human trafficking and genocide. Yet, as Augusto Boal once pointed out, ‘[t]he argument about the relations between theatre and politics is as old as theatre and... as politics.’ Indeed it remains difficult to identify precisely what a political theatre consists of, not least because the relation between the Western liberal consciousness and the documentation of political history remains difficult to chart.

This module investigates shifting conceptions of political theatre from the 1930s to the present, through a selection of plays that attempt to advance political and historical understanding. The module focuses on published and widely-available scripts that have proved especially provocative and challenging. It enables students to read these plays in dialogue with theoretical texts that shed light on theatre’s capacity for social critique, from the reflections on historical theatre offered by Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator to recent theoretical work on the political subject and the spectacle of suffering. Seminars will explore the aspirations that have shaped the global rise of political theatres, from early theatres of protest influenced by international struggles for workers’ rights and social equality to contemporary theatres concerned with the defense of human rights and contemporary modes of warfare. Issues central to the module include the political ambitions of avant-garde theatre; differing conceptions of the political remit of realism; attempts to explore experimental dramatic terrains divorced from figurative representation; the possibilities and politics of narrative-based theatre; the privileged position of legal records, diaries or testimonies as source materials; and contemporary experiments on the monologue as a radical form in its own right.

This module enables students to gain:
- an understanding of the shifts surrounding ideas of political theatre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,
- a sophisticated appreciation of the intersections between political history and the history of playwriting since the 1930s,
- an understanding of the international reach of political theatres,
- an understanding of the circumstances in which ideas about political writing and its forms have been articulated.

No previous experience of studying drama is required.

The reading list mostly includes short plays, and we will discuss two plays or more per week, plus some theoretical essays. Many of the texts (theoretical and dramatic) will be available in electronic form and you will need to make sure that you come to seminars with an electronic or paper copy of the texts.

Recommended Preliminary Reading:
Michael Patterson, ‘Strategies of Political Theatre: A Theoretical Overview,’ in Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights [e-book]
Dr Emilie Morin
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Tracy C. Davis, ‘Theatricality and Civil Society,’ in Theatricality, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, 127-55 [VLE]
Joe Kelleher, ‘Politics,’ in Theatre and Politics [VLE]

Provisional Schedule and Reading List:

Week 2: Epic Theatres and Workers’ Rights
Ewan MacColl, Johnny Noble [e-book, from the Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook]
Bertolt Brecht, The Exception and the Rule [Drama Online]
Bertolt Brecht, selected essays [VLE]
Erwin Piscator, selected essays [VLE]
Stefan Jonsson, ‘The Ideology of Universalism’ [VLE]

Week 3: Trauma and the Politics of Memorialisation after 1960
Peter Weiss, The Investigation [you need to purchase your own copy]
Caryl Churchill, The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution [photocopy, to be distributed in week 2]
Michael Rothberg, Introduction to Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization [VLE]
Theodor Adorno, ‘Commitment’ [VLE]

Week 4: The Banality of Evil
Ariel Dorfman, Death and the Maiden [Drama Online]
Caryl Churchill, Far Away [e-book, from the Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook]
Hannah Arendt, ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem – I,’ The New Yorker, February 1963,
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1963/02/16/eichmann-in-jerusalem-
Darius Rejali, introduction to Torture and Democracy [VLE]

Week 5: Revolution, Racial Politics and Dramatic Form
Amiri Baraka, ‘The Revolutionary Theater’ [VLE]
excerpts from Antonin Artaud, The Theatre of Cruelty [VLE]

Week 7: Taking War Home
Sarah Kane, Blasted [you need to purchase your own copy]
debbie tucker green, Stoning Mary [you need to purchase your own copy]
Excerpt from Luc Boltanski, Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics [VLE]
Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, introduction to The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry Into the Condition of Victimhood [VLE]

Week 8: Militant Lives and Diaries
David Edgar, The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs [Drama Online]
Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner, eds., My Name Is Rachel Corrie [you need to purchase your own copy]
Dr Emilie Morin
emilie.morin@york.ac.uk

Jacques Rancière, ‘Problems and Transformations of Critical Art’ [VLE]
Jacques Rancière, ‘The Ethical Turn in Aesthetics and Politics,’ in Critical Horizons [VLE]
Didier Fassin, ‘Subjectivity without Subjects: Reinventing the Figure of the Witness,’ in Humanitarian Reason [VLE]

Week 9: Contemporary Warfare
George Brant, Grounded [you need to purchase your own copy]
Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo, Guantánamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom [you need to purchase your own copy]
Excerpt from Paul Virilio, Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light [VLE]
Jacques Rancière, ‘War As Supreme Form of Plutocratic Consensus’ [VLE]

Week 10: Human Rights: the Last Utopia?
Christine Bacon and Noah Birksted-Breen, On the Record [e-book, from the Methuen Anthology Of Testimonial Plays]
Paula Cizmar, Catherine Filloux, Gail Kriegel, Carol C. Mack, Ruth Margraff, Anna Deavere Smith, Susan Yankowitz, Seven [e-book, from the Methuen Anthology Of Testimonial Plays]
Samuel Moyn, Introduction to The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History [VLE]
Slavoj Žižek, ‘Against Human Rights’ [VLE]
Judith Butler, ‘Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation’ [VLE]