Modern Theatre and the Political Imagination
Spring 2017
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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. In the past, the dramatists studied have included Brecht, Ewan MacColl, Peter Weiss, Caryl Churchill, Ariel Dorfman, Suzan-Lori Parks, Adrienne Kennedy, Sarah Kane, debbie tucker green, David Edgar and George Brant, among others, and the set reading has included theoretical essays by Michael Rothberg, Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Didier Fassin, Luc Boltanski, Jacques Rancière, Paul Virilio and Judith Butler. However, please note that readings will change from year to year, because the module has a strong contemporary focus.

The 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. A week-by-week reading list will be available on the VLE in advance, long before the start of term. We will discuss two plays or more per week, plus some theoretical essays. All theoretical/contextual essays will be available in electronic form. For the plays, we will use electronic editions when such editions are available. 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]
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]