London Theatre: The Contemporary Scene

Theatre in London is a hotbed of innovation and imagination. It is also an agent of cultural definition and change and the site of ongoing explorations of personal and social identities. The public nature of theatrical performance, and its history of engagement with the city and its shifting populations, makes theatre a unique site and subject of study. Taking advantage of plays and performances in London in a variety of venues and formats, this course examines theatre and drama as aesthetic objects, social events, and cultural practices. It introduces methods for reading plays and reading performances, and investigates the various uses and functions that theatre serves within the contemporary cultural scene. As an introduction to the study of drama in performance this course presents key methodological questions and approaches for interrogating dramatic and theatrical performances, and encourages personal exploration of performance strategies and functions. The course combines lecture, discussion, reading assignments, frequent writing assignments, and regular theatre attendance.

Goals and Expectations

This course will:

1. introduce key methodological questions and approaches for reading dramatic scripts and theatrical performances with attention to how verbal, gestural, scenic, spatial and temporal performance signs are used to translate written scripts into performance texts;

2. explore the social dynamics of theatrical performance and its interrogation of notions of social and personal identity through its power to both enact and perform past histories and present aspirations;

3. examine issues of repertory and assimilation (including notions of cultural production) as plays from the past are recreated in performance;

4. encourage personal exploration of contemporary theatrical performances and provide students with the means and opportunity to learn to communicate with clarity, insight, imagination and critical aptitude, both orally and in writing, about plays and performances on the contemporary stage

Evaluation

All work for this class is mandatory, as is attendance. Students will be evaluated on preparedness for and participation in class, as well as on the quality of thought and felicity of expression exhibited in class discussion and written assignments.
Students are expected to spend time outside of class reading and attending assigned plays, and thinking about issues raised in the individual class sessions. To excel in this course a student must do consistently excellent work that is surprising in its intellectual acuity, far-reaching in its imaginative grasp, exacting in its attention to details, thorough in its embracing of complexities, inclusive in its consideration of ramifications, professional in its attention to deadlines, and generous in its clarity of articulation.

**Writing assignments**

Short weekly writing assignments on assigned topics will be due on the Thursday of each week. These assignments will help students evaluate what they are learning and apply strategies discussed in the seminar for interrogating theatrical performances as aesthetic objects, social events, and cultural practices.

**Readings**

It will be useful to have copies of some of the plays we will be seeing on hand and to have read them in advance of attending performances. You should consider purchasing inexpensive editions of the follow plays to bring with you to class. Where available, I recommend paperback editions of single plays rather than collections of plays because they are easier to transport.

Christophere Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*
Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*
Harold Pinter, *Betrayal*
Eugene O’Neill, *Anna Christie*
William Shakespeare, *Richard III*

**Office Hours**

I will be generally available throughout the summer session either by appointment or by random coincidence and hope to have the opportunity to meet with each of you over the coming weeks.
Weekly Schedule

Week One

11 July. Welcome Party (4:45-6:00)

12 July. The Theatrical Mode of Production* (2:00-4:15)
   12 July: Pre-performance talk (6:00) and Doctor Faustus (7:30) at the Globe

14 July. Considering Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus
   14 July: Attend Theatre Brothel at the Almeida (7:30)
   15 July: Attend “National Platform” on The Cherry Orchard at the National (6:00)

Week Two

18 July. Theatrical Space and Time: Innovation and Imagination
   18 July: Attend The Cherry Orchard at the National (Olivier) (7:30)

Week Three

25 July: Attend One Man, Two Guvs at the National (Lyttleton) (7:30)

26 July. Chekhov and Goldoni: Reconsidering Classics on the Contemporary Stage
   27 July: Theatre attendance TBA

28 July. TBA

Week Four

1 August: Attend Roche’s Lay Me Down Softly at Tricycle (8:00)

2 August. Nostalgia and Sentiments of the Modern
   3 August: Attend Pinter’s Betrayal at the Duchess Theatre (8:00)

4 August. The Unknowns of Pinter
Week Five

9 August. Desire, Politics and History

10 August: Attend Brenton’s *Anne Boleyn* (and post-show discussion) at the Globe (2:00)

11 August. (Re)writing History

11 August: Attend O’Neill’s *Anna Christie* at the Donmar (2:30)

Week Six

14 August: Attend Shakespeare’s *Richard III* at the Old Vic (5:00) (NB: This is a Sunday)

16 August. Shakespeare’s *Richard III*: Power and Identity

18 August. Wrap-up

* Class sessions in bold meet in the Seminar Room at the Paul Mellon Centre. Unless otherwise noted classes meet 10:00-12:15