

THST S392/ENGL S361: Modern American Drama

Prof. Marc Robinson

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E-mail: marc.robinson@yale.edu.

TA: David Bruin. E-mail: david.bruin@yale.edu

This seminar surveys American theater between World War I and 2000. We'll begin with the pre-history to this century's theater—its melodramas, temperance plays, panoramas, and other popular forms. This work laid the foundation for the startling innovations of the early twentieth century. Eugene O'Neill and Gertrude Stein both began writing plays in 1913—O'Neill consciously allying himself with European innovation, Stein working in a theatrical vacuum, inaugurating a tradition of her own. We read both writers before moving on to the third pillar of American theatrical modernism, Thornton Wilder—someone wrongly assumed to be an unthreatening, homely figure in our culture.

We then re-read canonical works by Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller in the light of the less familiar experiment of previous decades. What, beyond narrative and character, contributes to these plays' enduring value? We'll also look at an idiosyncratic writer—Jane Bowles—who addresses shifting ideas of marginality and sociability in her theater.

The boldness of all these mid-century playwrights sets the stage for the explosion of theatrical experiment in the 1960s. After a consideration of Edward Albee's theatrical vitriol and menace, we'll move briskly through selected playwrights from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s—some of whom are mainstays of our theaters (Sam Shepard, David Mamet), while others are deserving of more attention (Maria Irene Fornes, Adrienne Kennedy). We'll also consider three writers who are also radical performers—Spalding Gray, Anna Deavere Smith, and Wallace Shawn. Throughout the course, in fact, we'll acknowledge the pressure of theatrical production on often resistant texts, drawing on videos to aid our analysis.

SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS

May 29: George Aiken: Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) (server)

Elinor Fuchs: "EF's Visit to a Small Planet" (server)

May 31: Eugene O'Neill: The Emperor Jones (1920) (server)

Long Day's Journey into Night (1941)

June 5: Zora Neale Hurston: Color Struck (1925) (server)

Gertrude Stein: Four Saints in Three Acts (1927, 1934) (server)

“Plays” (1935) (server)

Thornton Wilder: Our Town (1938)

June 7: Tennessee Williams: The Glass Menagerie (1945)

A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)

Suddenly Last Summer (1958) (server)

June 12: Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman (1949)

Jane Bowles: In the Summer House (1953) (server)

June 14: Edward Albee: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962)

A Delicate Balance (1966)

June 16: First paper due (6 pages)

June 19: Adrienne Kennedy: Funnyhouse of a Negro (1964)

A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White (1976)

Maria Irene Fornes: Fefu and Her Friends (1977)

June 21: Sam Shepard: Action (1974) (server)

Buried Child (1978)

David Mamet: The Cryptogram (1995)

June 26: August Wilson: Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1987)

Suzan-Lori Parks: The America Play (1994)

View DVD of Fires in the Mirror by Anna Deavere Smith (server)

June 28: Wallace Shawn: The Fever (1990)

The Designated Mourner (1996)

Tony Kushner: Homebody/Kabul (2001-2004)

View DVD of Swimming to Cambodia by Spalding Gray (server)

June 30: Final paper due (10-12 pages)

Requirements: Two papers, due June 16 and June 30; at least 8 online responses (one or two paragraphs each, due by 8 AM on days we're discussing those plays); lively participation in discussion.

Recommended editions:

Eugene O'Neill: Long Day's Journey into Night (Yale UP)

Thornton Wilder: Our Town (HarperCollins)

Tennessee Williams: The Glass Menagerie (New Directions)

Tennessee Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire (New Directions)

Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman (Penguin)

Edward Albee: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (Penguin)

Edward Albee: A Delicate Balance (Penguin)

Adrienne Kennedy: Adrienne Kennedy Reader (Univ. of Minnesota Press)

Maria Irene Fornes: Fefu and Her Friends (PAJ Publications)

Sam Shepard: Buried Child (Knopf/Doubleday)

David Mamet: The Cryptogram (Knopf/Doubleday)

Wallace Shawn: The Designated Mourner (Farrar Straus)

Wallace Shawn: The Fever (Farrar Straus)

Tony Kushner: Homebody/Kabul (revised version) (TCG)

August Wilson: Joe Turner's Come and Gone (Penguin)

Suzan-Lori Parks: The America Play and Other Works (TCG)

Photocopies on server:

Elinor Fuchs: "EF's Visit to a Small Planet"

George Aiken: Uncle Tom's Cabin

Eugene O'Neill: The Emperor Jones

Zora Neale Hurston: Color Struck

Gertrude Stein: Four Saints in Three Acts

Gertrude Stein "Plays"

Tennessee Williams: Suddenly Last Summer

Jane Bowles: In the Summer House

Sam Shepard: Action

Videos available on server.

Fires in the Mirror by Anna Deavere Smith

Swimming to Cambodia by Spalding Gray