

**THEA 579C: Seminar in Theatre History:  
Modern US Performance 1910-1970**  
Thursday 2:50-5:50pm, Fine Arts 249

Instructor: David Bisaha  
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Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday 12-1 pm  
and by appointment

**Course Description**

This course is an advanced seminar in theater history focusing on a specific topic, in this case US theatre history from 1910-1970. The goal of the seminar is to develop an understanding of American playwrights, performers, artists, and producers' role in cultivating American commercial theatre, as well as contesting the commercial theatre in nonprofit theatres and activist performances. We will also discuss the nature of American modernisms, employ and critique materialist and labor-related theater theory, and investigate theatre history methods and historiography. Seminar readings will be drawn from recently published books and articles, addressing such topics as the decline of vaudeville and the "road," the little theater and New Stagecraft movements, labor theatres and the Federal Theatre Project, the development of regional theatres and university educational theatre, Cold War politics and protest performances, and the development of stage design and technology in the period. Major projects will include presentations and a final seminar paper.

**Course Objectives**

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify and discuss major writers, artists, themes, and movements in American theater history from 1910 to 1970,
- Apply terms and concepts of materialist and labor theories to the study of performance history,
- Plan and execute independent research on past performances
- Critique others' use of the historian's tools: evidence, interpretation, argument, and narrative
- Develop a critical argument through research, and to present that argument in written and verbal formats

**Texts**

**Required Texts:**

These texts are available at the Campus Bookstore. We will be reading most of these texts and students will do presentations on them.

*Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*, by Dorothy Chansky  
*Expressionism & Modernism in the American Theatre*, by Julia A. Walker  
*Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942*, by Ellen Graff  
*Stage Designers in Twentieth-Century America: Artists, Activists, and Cultural Critics*, by Christin Essin  
*American Theatre and the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947-1962*, by Bruce McConachie  
*American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*, by Arnold Aronson

**Recommended Texts:**

We will be reading portions of these texts. I encourage you to purchase copies for your libraries. Selections from these books will be available on Blackboard, and on reserve at Bartle Library. Additional readings will be on Blackboard (BB).

*Highbrow/Lowdown: Theatre, Jazz, and the Making of a New Middle Class*, by David Savran  
*Reading the Material Theatre*, by Ric Knowles  
*Marxism and Literature (Marxist Introductions)*, by Raymond Williams  
*Critical Theory and Performance*, by Janelle Reinelt and Joe Roach

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### Major Course Projects

The majority of our work will be done in the seminar through discussion, research, active engagement with texts, and student presentations. Each student will be responsible for leading discussion in one class period, , presenting a materialist production history to the class, and crafting a final research paper. All projects should address the seminar as the reading/listening audience.

Your final grade for this course will be calculated as follows:

Seminar Attendance/Participation	30% of final grade
Leading Seminar Discussion	15% of final grade
Production History Presentation	15% of final grade
Final Research Paper	40% of final grade

#### Attendance and Participation (30%)

You will complete reading assigned for every seminar meeting. You should also come to class prepared with notes and questions about the reading, and have considered the reading in relationship to material we have already discussed, your critical and creative research interests, and concepts or performances you have previously encountered. In seminar, listen and discuss thoughtfully, participating in exercises and explorations to the extent you are able.

A word on reading assignments: Meetings in Weeks 4-6 and 8-10 have a “Key Text” assigned, and may have additional readings as well. The Key Text will be the subject of our discussion, led by a member of the class. If you are leading discussion, you are responsible for reading the whole book, making a selection for the class to read, and providing that selection one week before your scheduled presentation. If you are not leading discussion, read the selection of the Key Text and all of the listed supporting readings. You are of course encouraged to read more of the Key Text as your interest and time allows.

#### In-Class Presentations (15%)

In weeks 4-6 and 8-10, each student will be responsible for leading discussion in the seminar. You will have the majority of the seminar period to structure as you would like; however, do not read or lecture to the seminar, but think of your job as a host of a discussion or working session.

To prepare, you should read all of the readings, including the Key Text for the day in its entirety. Then, select a portion of the Key Text of approximately 150 pages for the whole class to read. If you are unsure about how to select a portion of a book, please talk to me. Generally, this selection should include introductory material and at least one or two chapters of the book that best demonstrate its content, style, and theoretical approach.

When the class meets, you will distribute a handout that includes the following:

- A summary of the book, summarizing its content chapter-by-chapter (no more than 500 words)
- A brief biography of the author (no more than one paragraph)
- A paragraph critiquing the main types of evidence used by the book to support its claims
- A paragraph or two explicating its use of theoretical concepts. What ideas does it borrow from which scholars? How well are they employed? What new ideas does the book introduce?
- 3-4 discussion questions
- A brief bibliography of sources consulted

Bring enough copies for the whole seminar. You will lead discussion for the day; you may use the handout as an outline of the discussion, or merely as a jumping-off point; but be sure to leave time for discussion!

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Production History Presentations (20%)

On October 6, you will present the results of research into an influential American theatre production during the time period of the seminar. This presentation should last about 15 minutes. In your presentation, you should offer overviews of the production's creation and reception in its original run, supported with primary and secondary evidence. Then, you will draw attention to a few ways the production has been seen as influential by later historians and artists. Was it a watershed political moment? An artistically innovative performance? Did it inspire others to replicate its approach? Or to never try it again?

Keeping in mind Rick Knowles' reminder that "the cultural and ideological work done by a particular production may be seen to have been mediated by the cultural and, particularly, theatrical conditions through which it has been produced...by theatre audiences" (*Reading the Material Theatre*, 10), your presentation should critique the ways in which the meaning your chosen production has been historicized through material conditions. And, perhaps, you will suggest your own interpretations of the production inspired by Knowles' "materialist semiotics."

The productions available for selection are:

*The Hairy Ape*, by Eugene O'Neill, 1922  
*Processional*, by John Howard Lawson, 1925  
*Machinal*, by Sophie Treadwell, 1928  
*Waiting for Lefty*, by Clifford Odets, 1935  
*Pins & Needles*, by Arthur Arent et al., 1937

*Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder, 1938  
*Oklahoma!*, by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, 1943  
*The Glass Menagerie*, by Tennessee Williams, 1945  
*Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller, 1949

You should also have read the play you are presenting on, and be ready to discuss its content. Please confirm your play selection with me by September 15.

At your presentation, you will turn in either your notes and a bibliography of sources consulted. Midterm projects will be assessed on the clarity of your presentation, the quality of your summaries and argument, the quality and extent of your research, and your communication of your subject's key idea(s) in the presentation.

Final Research Paper (40%)

At the end of the semester, you will compose a research paper of 16-20 pages. Your topic may develop out of seminar discussion, or address a topic that we did not discuss. The paper should advance a new, critical idea or interpretation related to your subject, supported by research.

Papers may use any citation style, but should use it consistently. Double-spaced, 12-point font.

Paper topics in the form of a thesis proposal and annotated bibliography of 8-12 sources will be due to me by 5pm on November 3. Your thesis proposal should be one paragraph long, and it should both identify a tentative thesis statement and summarize some of the evidence you expect to use to support that statement. I will respond to and approve your proposals by November 10. "Good faith" drafts (of at least 8-10 pages) will be due at a meeting with me, to be scheduled on or before December 8. The proposal/bibliography and the draft will each comprise 5% of your final seminar grade, and the final paper will comprise 30% of your seminar grade. Final versions of the paper will be due to my mailbox by 5pm on Thursday, December 15.

## Course Policies

### Attendance

It is the expectation of this seminar that you will attend and be prepared for all class sessions, barring professional obligations (conferences and the like), illnesses, and emergencies. Please keep me informed by email ASAP if you will miss class.

Any absence from class will negatively affect your participation grade. If you are absent on a day that you are scheduled to present, you will only be permitted to give a late presentation with instructor approval, which may not be given. Any absences beyond three will lower the final grade in the course by one half-letter.

### Communication

The fastest way to contact me outside of class is through email. I will do my best to respond within 48 hours. Similarly, I expect you to frequently check your Binghamton email and Blackboard.

### Technology & Conduct

Please respect others in the seminar by silencing cell phones and using laptops and tablets for research or note-taking purposes only.

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record audio or video of classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

### Respect for Diversity

In this course, each voice in the classroom has something of value to contribute to class discussion. Please respect the different experiences, beliefs and values expressed by your fellow students and instructor, and refrain from derogatory comments about other individuals, cultures, groups, or viewpoints. This course welcomes individuals of all ages, backgrounds, citizenships, disabilities, education backgrounds, ethnicities, family statuses, genders, gender identities, geographical locations, languages, military experience, political views, races, religions, sexual orientations, socioeconomic statuses, and work experiences. (Adapted from the Texas A&M Department of Anthropology Diversity Statement, [http://anthropology.tamu.edu/images/Statement\\_for\\_Syllabi.pdf](http://anthropology.tamu.edu/images/Statement_for_Syllabi.pdf))

### Academic Integrity

Plagiarism, copying of assignments, cheating, and other breaches of academic integrity will not be tolerated. Violations of the University-wide policy on academic integrity will result in automatic failure of the assignment and possible failure of the course. Binghamton University's Academic Honesty Code and infraction procedures are available in the *Bulletin*, <http://bulletin.binghamton.edu>. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism or academic dishonesty, schedule a meeting with me.

### Accommodations

Students wishing to request academic accommodations to insure their equitable access and participation in this course should notify the instructor as soon as they are aware of their need for such arrangements. Authorizations from Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) are generally required. We encourage you to contact SSD at (607) 777-2686 (for voice and TTY) to schedule an appointment with the Director or Learning Disabilities Specialist. The [SSD website](http://www.binghamton.edu/ssd) ([www.binghamton.edu/ssd](http://www.binghamton.edu/ssd)) includes information regarding their Disability Documentation Guidelines. The office is located in UU – 119.

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**Calendar****August 25** Introduction & Overview of Course

- David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown*, pp. 1-39, 65-102 (BB)
- John Jeremiah Sullivan, "'Shuffle Along' and the Lost History of Black Performance in America," *New York Times Magazine*, March 24, 2016.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/magazine/shuffle-along-and-the-painful-history-of-black-performance-in-america.html>

**Unit 1: Historiography and Materialist Theory****September 1** Questions of Historiography and Materialism

- Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, pp. 1-100 (BB)
- Reinelt and Roach, "After Marx," David Savran, "Shadows of Brecht," and Bruce McConachie, "Historicizing the Relations of Cultural Production" in *Critical Theory and Performance* (BB)

**September 8** Materialist and Cultural Studies Theories

- Selections from Marx, "The Communist Manifesto" and *Capital* (BB)
- Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, pp. TBA (BB)
- In pairs, write two half-page summaries of the following concepts from last week's reading:
  - Cultural Hegemony (Antonio Gramsci)
  - Structure of Feeling (Raymond Williams)
  - Cultural Production: Habitus, Capital, Field (Pierre Bourdieu)
  - Ideology (Louis Althusser, re-read by Stuart Hall)
  - Encoding, Decoding (Stuart Hall)

**Unit 2: Modernisms in the Interwar Period****\*\*September 15** Little Theatres and American Audiences

Key Text: Dorothy Chansky, *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*

- Jack Poggi, *Theatre in America: The Impact of Economic Forces: 1870-1967*, pp.3-64 (BB)

**\*\*September 22** Modernist and Expressionist Playwriting

Key Text: Julia A. Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre*

- Amy Koritz, "Drama and the Rhythm of Work in the 1920s," *Theatre Journal* 53.4 (December 2001), pp. 551-567

**\*\*September 29** Modern Dance and Leftist Politics

Key Text: Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left*

- Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographing History," in *Choreographing History* (BB)

**October 6** Production History Presentations

*DUE TODAY: Production History Presentations*

- Thomas Postlewait, "The Theatrical Event," *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*. pp. 117-153. (BB)

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**Unit 3: Postwar Performances****\*\*October 13** Designing Modernity

Key Text: Christin Essin, *Stage Designers in Twentieth-Century America: Artists, Activists, and Cultural Critics*

- Stephen Eskilson, "Color and Consumption," *Design Issues* 18.2 (Spring 2002), pp 17-29.

**\*\*October 20** Theatre and Cold War Culture

Key Text: Bruce McConachie, *American Theatre and the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947-1962*

- Aaron C. Thomas, "Watching A Raisin in the Sun and Seeing Red," *Modern Drama* 58.4 (2015), pp. 461-481.

**\*\*October 27** American Avant-Gardes: Early, Late, and Dead?

Key Text: Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*

- Additional reading TBA

**November 3** NO CLASS TODAY – ASTR CONFERENCE

DUE TODAY: Thesis Proposal and Annotated Bibliography (via email)

**Unit 4: Applied Materialisms****November 10** Commercial and Noncommercial Economics

- Poggi, *Theater in America*, pp. 245-275 (BB)
- Selections from Baumol and Bowen (BB)
- Selections from Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance* (BB)

**November 17** Women, Materialism, and the Musical

- See BU's *Bells Are Ringing* by this class period
- George Abbott and Richard Bissell, *The Pajama Game* (BB)
- Dorothy Chansky, "Usable Performance Feminism for Our Time," *Theatre Journal* 60.3 (October 2008), pp. 341-364.

**November 24** THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASS**December 1** Materialism's Recent Iterations

- Read Knowles' Editorial Note for *Theatre Journal* Issue 64.3 (October 2012, Theatre and Material Culture), and select two articles from this issue to read and critique in full in seminar

**December 8** NO CLASS – MONDAY CLASSES MEET

DUE TODAY: Paper Drafts (in individual meetings, to be scheduled today or before)

Final Papers Due by 5pm on Thursday, December 15

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