

Level: undergraduate intro course

Focus: survey

System: semester

Class size: 15-25 (syllabus could be edited for larger class size with lecture and sections if necessary)

# Script Analysis: Thinking Like a Theater-Maker

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## **Course Intro:**

In high school, play analysis is typically found in literature classes. The study of plays through literary analysis—treating them as though they were books—provides many useful tools for understanding plays as a reader or an audience member. But what if you are part of the team that puts a play onstage? Being a theater-maker implies a different relationship to the script than a reader or audience member has, and requires different skills and tools for play analysis. While a literary critic may comb a script for themes and symbols, an actor may look for motivation and given circumstances. A literary critic might ask how the playwright's life informed the work, while a fellow playwright might instead analyze how (s)he structured the play for presentation onstage. In this course, we will look at playscripts from a number of different angles, emphasizing what each different type of theater-maker must look for when approaching a script for production.

The course is divided into a number of units, each focused on reading through the lens of a different member of a production company. This course should equip you with the proper tools to analyze scripts effectively through your future studies in whatever theatrical capacities you may choose to practice. Along the way, we will look at a variety of scripts from a number of respected playwrights whom you are likely to encounter again as you delve further into the field. These scripts have been chosen to provide you with a broad view of the kinds of playwrights and dramatic forms you may expect to encounter should you continue in our program (or in the theatrical world at large). Upon finishing this course, you will have been exposed to a broad spectrum of both theatrical styles and production roles, so that you can identify and pursue your own particular interests in theater-making both within and beyond your time in the department.

## **Means of Assessment:**

The grade breakdown for this course is as follows:

50% Projects (5 projects at 10% each)

15% Reading Quizzes (1 quiz per week at 1% each)

35% Attendance and Participation

Descriptions of both projects and the attendance and participation grades are given below. Reading quizzes are brief sets of multiple choice questions given each week at the start of class on the day that the reading is due.

## **Projects:**

There are no exams in this course—instead, you will demonstrate your mastery of the concepts we cover in class through completing a short written project at the end of each unit. These projects are designed to allow you to creatively apply the concepts and forms of analysis we learn for each production role.

The prompts for each of the projects are detailed below. Every project will be graded based on:

- coherence of concept (all parts of your project relate to one another)
- demonstrated connection to the play script
- demonstrated knowledge of concepts discussed in class
- clear communication of your thoughts in writing
- spelling and grammar

**Late Policy:** These projects are due via e-mail (with the exception of the Character Analysis and Production Bible, which must be turned in in hard copy) by the start of class on the due date. Projects that are turned in late will be docked half a letter grade (two steps) per day they are late.

EX 1: a project that would have received a B+ but is turned in one day late will receive a B-

EX 2: a project that would have received a B but is two days late will receive a C-

This policy may be waived in the case of a real emergency (family or medical), provided that you e-mail me *in advance of the deadline* explaining the situation. Students who would like to request an extension for other reasons (technological failure, required attendance at a performance/audition/wedding/sporting event near the deadline, etc.) should come see me during office hours to discuss their particular situation and set an alternative deadline.

The prompts:

### **Play Treatment**

(playwriting unit, due at the end of Week 5)

Write a short treatment for a play you might like to write someday, focusing specifically on how you would *structure* the play. This need not be in essay form, simply write one paragraph addressing each of the following elements:

- 1) *Space*: Where will your play be set? Will it jump from location to location or all take place in one area? Do you want the stage set up in a specific way? Explain why you made each choice.
- 2) *Time*: When is your play? How long a time does it span (a second? A lifetime? Something in between?)? Will time move forward, as in real life? Backward? Jump around through flashbacks? Explain why you made each choice.
- 3) *Action*: How many acts are in your play? Will you structure the action realistically, through cause-and-effect? Model it after a musical score (if so, what type of music)? Make it feel like a dream or a Picasso painting? Explain how you will achieve the effect you've chosen.

### **Directing Concept**

(directing unit, due at the end of Week 8)

Choose your favorite of the plays we have read so far and answer (in writing) the following questions:

- 1) What do you like about it?
- 2) Which of its themes speak most strongly to you?
- 3) What do you think is the central message of the play?

Next, imagine you are going to direct a production of this play and you want the audience to leave with a strong impression of the things you just wrote about. Answer the next set of questions and explain how each decision would support your concept.

- 1) When and where will you set the play (you need not comply with the playwright's statements on this). Why then, and why there?
- 2) How would you stage the play (proscenium? In the round? L-configuration?)? Why?
- 3) What kind of "mood" would you ask your designers to create (gloomy? Spacious? Energetic? Moving from one mood to another as the scenes progress?)? How does this support your themes/message/concept?

## Design Pitch

(design unit, due at the end of Week 11)

Choose one of the plays we have read so far, and choose a design role for yourself (set, costume, lighting, sound, or props). Then, write a short pitch (1-2 pages) detailing a design concept for that element which you think would work well for the play. Justify your concept using relevant references to or quotes from the script.

EX 1: "Romeo and Juliet are arguing about whether or not morning has arrived in Act III, scene v, so my lighting in that scene will shift from purples and blues to pinks and oranges, to mimic the rising sun."

EX 2: "The feeling of being trapped is the central theme in this play, as is clearly spelled out in the title *Raised in Captivity*. In order to reflect this, my set will be small and cramped, with audience pressing in on every side like zoo visitors looking at a caged animal."

## Character Analysis

(acting unit, due at the end of Week 14)

Pick any of the plays we have read so far this semester, cast yourself as one of the major characters, and do the following:

1. Highlight the script:
  - a) Use one color to highlight everything that other characters say about your character.
  - b) Use a different color to highlight everything your character says about her/himself
  - c) Use a third color to highlight any stage directions you feel give clues about the nature of your character.
  - d) You may write notes in the margins if you wish, though this is not required.
2. Write a paragraph (or two) summarizing what you have learned about the character through this process, citing specific lines you've highlighted in the script. Who is your character? What traits

define her/him? What does (s)he want and how does (s)he change over time (if at all)?

You will be turning in both the marked-up script and your paragraph(s).

## Production Bible

(stage management unit, due finals week)

Choose one scene from *True West* and create a production bible for the film's version of that scene. We will be watching the whole film in class, and it will also be on reserve at the library for you to check out and re-watch as necessary. Since there is no written portion to this project, your production bible will be graded based on:

- proper use of stage management format, terminology and symbols
- clarity and accuracy of blocking diagrams
- correct placement and clarity of technical cues

## Attendance and Participation:

Students are expected to attend class regularly and contribute to class discussions. The attendance policies are as follows:

**Excused absences:** Excused absences will be issued in the case of illness, accident, or extenuating circumstance (ex: a relative's wedding) provided that the absence is cleared with me *by e-mail in advance*. Excused absences *will not be issued retroactively*, nor is an absence considered excused until I e-mail back with my approval. All excuses are not created equal, so be sure to e-mail me well in advance of your absence in order to make sure that your circumstances warrant an excused absence. Excused absences will not count against your grade, but students will still be responsible for the material covered in class (so get a classmate to take notes for you!). If you miss a reading quiz because of an excused absence, you can come to my office to make it up during office hours.

**Unexcused absences:** Any time you miss class without an advance e-mail from me excusing the absence is considered an unexcused absence. Each student will get one free (no grade penalty) unexcused absence per semester. Each successive unexcused absence will lower your final attendance and participation grade by one step (A to A-, A- to B+, etc.). As with excused absences, you are still responsible for all information missed. Reading quizzes missed during unexcused absences cannot be made up, even if the quiz was missed during your free absence.

**Tardies:** Being late to class three times will be considered equivalent to one unexcused absence for the purposes of final grade calculation.

**Participation:** All students will begin the semester with an attendance and participation grade of B-/C+. Each day that you contribute to class discussions will add points to this score, and each unexcused absence (after the first) or set of three tardies will subtract from it. Students who both attend and participate every day will end the semester with A+ attendance and participation grades.

## Required Reading:

### Course Reader:

- Brecht, Bertolt. *The Good Person of Szechwan*, John Willett, trans. New York: Penguin Books, 2008. 1-115.
- Chin, Frank. *The Year of the Dragon*. In *The Chickencoop Chinaman; and, The Year of the Dragon: Two Plays*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981. 67-142.
- Fuchs, Elinor. "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," in *Theater* 34.2 (2004), 4-9.
- Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll House*. In *Henrik Ibsen: The Complete Major Prose Plays*, Rolf Fjelde, trans. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978. 120-96.
- Ionesco, Eugene. *Rhinoceros*. In *Rhinoceros and Other Plays*, Derek Prouse, trans. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1960. 3-107.
- Ives, David. *Philip Glass Buys a Loaf of Bread*. In *All in the Timing: Fourteen Plays*. New York and Toronto: Vintage Books, 1995. Unpaginated.
- Parks, Suzan-Lori. *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*. In *The America Play and Other Works*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995. 99-131.
- Raznovich, Diana. *MaTRIX, Inc.*, Victoria Martinez and Lidia Ramirez, trans. In *Defiant Acts: Four Plays by Diana Raznovich*, Diana Taylor and Victoria Martinez, eds. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002. 99-127.
- Shakespeare, William. Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*. In *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*. Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1998. 1007.
- Shepard, Sam. *True West*. In *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays*. New York: Dial Press, 2005. 1-59.
- Sophocles. *Antigone*. In *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, Robert Fagles, trans. New York: Penguin Books, 1982. 55-128, 395-405.
- Stein, Gertrude. *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. In *Gertrude Stein: Writings, 1932-1946*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998. 575-608.
- Valdez, Luis. *Zoot Suit*. In *Zoot Suit and Other Plays*. Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1992. 21-94.
- Wilson, August. *The Piano Lesson*. New York: Plume, 1990.
- Zimmerman, Mary. *Metamorphoses: A Play*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2002.

## Schedule:

### Intro

#### (Week 1)

- Welcome to the course! (syllabus, concept, and course expectations)
- Re-conceptualizing the script: from book to blueprint
  - ☐ READING:
    - ☐ Elinor Fuchs, "A Visit to a Small Planet"
    - ☐ William Shakespeare, prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*
  - ☐ in-class viewing: three stagings of the prologue
    - ☐ *Shakespeare in Love*
    - ☐ *Romeo + Juliet*
    - ☐ *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*

### Unit One: Thinking Like a Playwright: Space, Time, and Dramatic Structure

#### (Weeks 2-4)

- Week 2: Traditional structures of space, time, and action

- ☐ READING:
  - ☐ Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll House*
- Week 3: Re-structuring space, time, and action
  - ☐ required READING:
    - ☐ Suzan-Lori Parks, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*
- Week 4: Musical structuring
  - ☐ READING:
    - ☐ David Ives, *Philip Glass Buys a Loaf of Bread*
  - ☐ in-class listening:
    - ☐ the music of Philip Glass
  - ☐ discuss and begin Project 1: Play Treatment (due at the end of week 5)

## **Unit Two: Thinking Like a Director: Message, Visuals, and Shaping Audience Experience** (Weeks 5-7)

- Week 5: Grounding in time, space, and history
  - ☐ READING:
    - ☐ August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*
  - ☐ **PLAY TREATMENT DUE**
- Week 6: Imaginative and alternative stagings
  - ☐ READING:
    - ☐ Mary Zimmerman, *Metamorphoses*
  - ☐ in-class viewing: stagings
    - ☐ Youtube clips: different productions of *Metamorphoses*
    - ☐ *Dionysus in '69*
- Week 7: Malleable meanings
  - ☐ READING:
    - ☐ Sophocles, *Antigone*
  - ☐ in-class viewing:
    - ☐ “Antigones” slideshow
  - ☐ discuss and begin Project 2: Directing Concept (due end of Week 8)

## **Unit Three: Thinking Like a Designer: Shapes, Colors, Mood, Atmosphere, and Period** (Weeks 8-10)

- Week 8: The period piece
  - ☐ READING:
    - ☐ Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit*
  - ☐ **DIRECTING CONCEPT DUE**
- Week 9: Farce!
  - ☐ READING:
    - ☐ Diana Raznovich, *MaTRIX, Inc.*
- Week 10: Doing the impossible
  - ☐ READING:

- ☐ Eugene Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*
- ☐ discuss and begin Project 3: Design Pitch (due end of Week 11)

## **Unit Four: Thinking Like an Actor: Given Circumstances, Objectives, Obstacles, and Actions**

(Weeks 11-13)

- Week 11: Psychological Realism
  - ☐ READING:
    - ☐ Frank Chin, *The Year of the Dragon*
- **DESIGN PITCH DUE**
- Week 12: Allegory and alienation
  - ☐ READING:
    - ☐ Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan*
- Week 13: Experimental
  - ☐ READING:
    - ☐ Gertrude Stein, *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*
  - ☐ discuss and begin Project 4: Character Analysis (due end of Week 14)

## **Unit Five: Stage Management: The Script as Tool**

(Weeks 14-15)

- Week 14: The production bible
  - ☐ READING:
    - ☐ Sam Shepard, *True West*
  - ☐ in-class viewing:
    - ☐ film: Steppenwolf Theater's *True West*
  - ☐ **CHARACTER ANALYSIS DUE**
- Week 15: Course Wrap-Up
  - ☐ discuss and begin Project 5: Production Bible
  - ☐ course review
  - ☐ catch-up day (if needed)

**PRODUCTION BIBLE DUE DURING HOURS OF SCHEDULED FINAL (there will be no sit-down final exam)**