

BOSTON UNIVERSITY BRITISH PROGRAMMES
Modern British Drama: A Critic's Perspective
Lecturer: Aleks Sierz
COM JO 710
Monday afternoons, 3:00-6:00pm

COURSE OBJECTIVE AND OVERVIEW

This course will offer graduate Journalism students an intensive study in Arts journalism in the context of British culture. Although it will concentrate primarily on specialising in theatre, there will be some consideration of how comparable themes are manifest in other art forms. As well as historical and theoretical information, there will be a strong practical element to the course. Students will be encouraged to relate class activities to their future plans as prospective journalists and to have a sound grasp of good journalistic practice. They will also be in a position to compare British and American journalistic practice.

This course provides a broad introduction to postwar British theatre, along with key information about British theatre today. Particular attention is given to recent drama history; milestone playtexts – from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) to Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) – and the way they relate to their wider social and cultural context. Practical information about how to write theatre reviews and features will enhance the ability of students to discuss modern British drama in an informed and balanced manner. The ultimate aim is to increase awareness of British culture and develop practical critical skills which will enable you undertake critical analysis through written work and discussion. In particular you will be taught how to write good reviews, personality profiles and general features.

COURSE METHODOLOGY

Students will be expected to attend all classes, which will be devoted to analysis of a particular play, writer, theatrical movement. The students will be expected, in advance, to have done sufficient background reading to be familiar with the subject under discussion. They will also be required to visit six performances of plays in London, which will be related as closely as possible to the theme of Modern British Drama. Students will also undertake background reading and use their existing journalist skills to write reviews, personality profiles and features. Background reading will involve both textbooks and quality daily newspapers.

COURSE ASSESSMENT

Graduate students will be assessed in a variety of ways. They will be asked to write detailed weekly reviews of each of the plays visited. They will also be asked to make an oral presentation to the class based on the work of an individual playwright whom they have discovered for themselves. There will not be a final examination, but students must present a portfolio comprising six reviews (400-500 words), one profile (1000-1500 words) and one feature article (1500-2000). These must be based on finding out information for themselves and on securing and conducting interviews and original research. The students will be assessed on their written progress during the semester and on their contribution to class discussion. Classes will also involve reading of scenes from modern British plays. Videos will also be shown, where relevant, of productions of contemporary work. The breakdown of marks is as follows:

- 6 x 5% for reviews (30%)
- 1 x 20% for the profile
- 1 x 30% for the feature article
- 1 x 20% for class presentation

READING

The main emphasis of the class will be on practical analysis, and individual writing, but students are expected to have read selected chapters from several books and to research and find out, from printed sources and from the internet, relevant information to enable them to complete the course:

The main textbooks for background reading are:

Changing Stages by Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright (a good overview of British theatre in the 20th century).

British Theatre Since the War by Dominic Shellard (a standard history of British theatre since World War II, particularly useful about the structure of institutions).

A Pocket Guide to 20th-Century Drama by Stephen Unwin and Carole Woddis (discusses key plays of the century).

The Empty Space by Peter Brook (a classic account of the importance of theatre).

One Night Stands by Michael Billington (a collection of recent reviews).

Theatre Criticism by Irving Wardle (a good primer).

In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today by Aleks Sierz (the latest developments in contemporary theatre).

Useful websites:

www.whatsonstage.com (latest news and information about British theatre today)

www.theatrevoice.com (experienced critics discuss issues in contemporary British theatre)

www.inyerface-theatre.com (British cutting-edge theatre in the 1990s and beyond)

COURSE CHRONOLOGY

(PLEASE NOTE THAT PLAYS SELECTED FOR STUDY MAY CHANGE)

Over the semester the classes will be as follows:

Session One: Introduction to Modern British Drama, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and discussion of changes in British society after 1945, with an overview of theatre history.

Session Two: John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the structure of London theatre and more on postwar British theatre history.

Session Three: Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, comparison of theatre and film, and an introduction to theatre criticism.

Session Four: Edward Bond's *Saved*, video of a classic modern play, and group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week.

Session Five: Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week.

Session Six: Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw*, more on theatre criticism and group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week.

Session Seven: David Hare's *Plenty*, and group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week.

Session Eight: Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, and group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week.

Session Nine: Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week and visit by a guest lecturer.

Session Ten: Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and latest developments in British theatre. Plus exam: Oral class presentation by students of work they have discovered for themselves.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Attendance at all classes and visits is mandatory. Students missing lectures without a doctor's letter or authorisation from the Director will automatically be docked a - or a + from their final grade. Persistent lateness will also be penalised in the final grade. A register of attendance will be taken at the beginning of each session, and marks will be awarded for attendance. Absence can be conveyed either by advising a senior member of staff in the Academic Affairs Office with a request that the information be passed on to me; or by emailing me at _sierz@btinternet.com prior to class. Leaving it to another class member to convey messages will not be acceptable. Appointments for interviews for internships should not conflict with attendance at classes.

Any student who is unable to attend a class, or take part in an assignment because of religious reasons, must give notice of the fact in advance. He/she will be required to make up for time lost. In this situation arrangements must be made with another student for class notes to be shared. Written papers must be delivered before agreed deadline, failure to hand in the paper will result in deducted marks.

Aleks Sierz will make some time available in each session for students to raise questions etc. Should students wish to discuss matters with Aleks Sierz in person, he will also be available during the break mid-lecture and at the end of class. Alternatively, please feel free to e-mail Aleks Sierz with questions. If you have problems with the availability of reading materials (all of which should be in the library) please contact Aleks Sierz either through the Academic Affairs Office or via e-mail.

Grading Criteria

The following Boston University table explains the grading system that is used by most faculty members on Boston University's British Programmes.

Grade	Honour Points	Usual %
A	4.0	93-100
A-	3.7	89-92
B+	3.3	85-88
B	3.0	81-84
B-	2.7	77-80
C+	2.3	73-76
C	2.0	69-72
C-	1.7	65-68
D	1.0	60-64
F	0.0	Below 60

"Incomplete" grades are not permitted, because of the obvious difficulty in making up missed work once the student has left the country. All work must be completed on time. The grades reflect the quality of the work. Lecturers and students should use the following criteria for an understanding of what each grade means.

A This exceptional grade is assigned only to work that has persistently outstanding quality in both substance and presentation. The student must demonstrate a sustained capacity for independent thought and extensive study, producing rigorous and convincing analyses in well-ordered prose.

A- Awarded to work that is clearly focused and analytical, and based on wide reading. The student must cover all the principal points of a question and systematically develop a persuasive overall thesis, allowing for one or two venial omissions or inapt expressions.

B+, B, B- This range of grades indicates that the student has shown some evidence of original thought and intellectual initiative. The student has cited sources beyond the class materials, and shown a degree of originality in perception and/or approach to the subject. The work will show thoughtful management of material, and a good grasp of the issues. The differences between a B+, a straight B and a B- may reflect poor presentation of the material, or mistakes in punctuation, spelling and grammar.

C+, C, C- Work in this grade range is satisfactory, but uninspiring. If the work is simply a recitation of the class materials or discussions, and shows no sign of genuine intellectual engagement with the issues, it cannot deserve a higher grade. Should an essay fail to provide a clear answer to the question as set, or argue a position coherently, the grade will fall within this range.

Quality of presentation can lift such work into the upper levels of this grade range. Work of this quality which is poorly presented, and riddled with errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation, will fall into the lower end of the range.

To earn a passing grade, the work must demonstrate that the student is familiar with the primary course material, be written well enough to be readily understood, be relevant to the assignment, and, of course, be the student's own work except where properly cited.

D or F The failing grade indicates the work is seriously flawed in one or more ways:

- * Obvious lack of familiarity with the material
- * So poorly written as to defy understanding
- * So brief and insubstantial that it fails to properly address the subject
- * Material presented is not relevant to the assignment
- * Demonstrates evidence of plagiarism (See next paragraph)

Plagiarism

Boston University's Code of Student Responsibilities states:

All students are responsible for having read the Boston University statement on plagiarism, which is available in the Academic Conduct Code. Students are advised that the penalty against students on a Boston University program for cheating on examinations or for plagiarism may be "...expulsion from the program or the University or such other penalty as may be recommended by the Committee on Student Academic Conduct, subject to approval by the dean."

The value of any grade, credit, honour or degree received by a student presupposes that all work submitted by a student is his or her own. A student who uses or relies upon the work of others or who, except under conditions expressly permitted by the instructor, furnishes assistance to another student, violates the standards of the University. Students must insist upon academic honesty and integrity from their fellow students and must report promptly any case of alleged violation of academic conduct. Failure to do so is a violation of this code.

Plagiarism can take many forms, including the reproduction of published material without acknowledgement, or representing work done by others as your own. This includes the increasingly common practice of purchasing and downloading work from Internet "paper mills." Students should be extremely careful when submitting work for this course that all work is correctly

sourced. Print-outs of web sites that have been used in research may be required by the lecturer in cases of a grade dispute and all web site based reference material should be kept by the student until after the end of the semester.

Aleks Sierz Fall 2004