



**Boston University Study Abroad  
London**

**Boston University Study Abroad London  
Experiencing London Theatre in the Postwar World  
CFA TH 440 (*Core course*)  
Spring 2013**

**Instructor Information**

A. Name

Dr. Aleks Sierz

**Course Objectives**

To give an overall picture of contemporary British theatre in London; to provide a broad study of the major developments in British drama over the past 50 years; to relate drama to broad changes in British society; to examine the work of specific writers and directors in detail; to stimulate critical analysis through written work and discussion; to understand the role of the Arts Council and state subsidy of the performing arts. The ultimate aim is to increase awareness of British theatre, and give an insight into how it is organised and why it has developed in its present form.

**Course Overview**

The course will introduce the student to a wide range of current theatre practices in London, and will include both straight plays and musicals. It will provide an overview of post-war British drama, and offer a sound introduction to arts administration and reviewing live performance. The British theatre system – from West End to fringe, from Shakespeare’s Globe to the Royal Court – will be covered through lectures and discussions with leading practitioners across the spectrum of the craft. This course will prepare students for the width breadth of opportunities that are open to them in the field of Theatre Arts in London. The course will cover the development of theatre as an industry in London as well as such issues as government funding for the arts, and the future of British theatre. 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 beyond – and the way they relate to their wider social and cultural context. Other subjects covered include genre, censorship, theatre criticism, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, political drama, and musical theatre. The course will look at the role of writers, directors, actors and critics. Finally, the course will familiarise students with a semiotic approach to analysing performances, derived from the work of French theatre expert Professor Patrice Pavis.

## **Methodology**

The teaching sessions will be supplemented by a series of guest lecturers who will examine the London theatre experience through professional master classes: workshops, lectures and discussions with:

- a) a playwright
- b) a director
- c) a critic

Lectures by Aleks Sierz will be supplemented with in-class video screenings, and involve readings from key texts as well as other class exercises.

The purpose of each theatre visit will be to write a review of the performance.

## **Required Reading**

**Main textbooks:** Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*, Yale University Press (1999) and Michael Billington, *State of the Nation*, Faber (2007), plus downloadable readings.

### **Suggested additional readings:**

- Barbara Baker, *Backstage Stories*, Continuum (2007)  
Michael Billington, *One Night Stands*, Nick Hern Books (1993)  
Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Penguin (1968, frequently reprinted)  
Peter Brook, *Threads of Time: A Memoir*, Methuen (1998)  
Simon Callow, *Being an Actor*, Penguin (1995)  
David Edgar, *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting*, Faber (1999)  
David Edgar, *How Plays Work*, Nick Hern (2008)  
William A Everett, *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, CUP (2002)  
Richard Eyre, *Talking Theatre: Interviews with Theatre People*, Nick Hern (2011)  
Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, *Changing Stages*, Bloomsbury (2000)  
Richard Fawkes, *The History of the Musical* (CD) Naxos Audiobooks (2001)  
Jim Fowler, *Unleashing Britain: Theatre Gets Real 1955-64*, V&A (2005)  
Michael Kustow, *Theatre@Risk*, Methuen (2000)  
David Lane, *Contemporary British Drama*, Edinburgh University Press (2010)  
Robert Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre: An Introduction*, Routledge (2004)  
Graham Saunders, *'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, Manchester University Press (2002)  
Scales, Prunella and Timothy West, *So You Want To Be An Actor?* Nick Hern Books (2005)  
Dominic Shellard, *Kenneth Tynan: A Life*, Yale University Press (2003)  
Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, Faber (2001)  
Aleks Sierz, *John Osborne's Look Back in Anger*, Continuum (2008)  
Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, Methuen (2011)  
Kenneth Tynan, *Theatre Writings*, Nick Hern (2007)  
Stephen Unwin, *So You Want To Be a Theatre Director?*, Nick Hern (2004)  
Michelene Wandor, *Postwar British Drama: Looking Back in Gender*, Routledge (2001)  
Irving Wardle, *Theatre Criticism*, Routledge (1992)  
Steve Waters, *The Secret Life of Plays*, Nick Hern (2010)

### **Useful websites:**

[www.theatrevoice.com](http://www.theatrevoice.com)

[www.inyerface-theatre.com](http://www.inyerface-theatre.com)

The library also has DVDs and videos of movie versions of significant plays such as *Look Back in Anger*, *A Taste of Honey*, *The Birthday Party*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *Beautiful Thing* and *Closer*.

Additional readings may be posted on the course webpage: <https://lms.bu.edu> (you must be logged in to view materials).

### **Assessment**

**40%** Final Paper on London theatre (2,000 words), submitted in the final week of core phase.

**40%** Two reviews of theatre performances.

**20%** Class presentation.

Please submit 2 copies of all coursework. Coursework can be printed double-sided.

### **Grading**

Please refer to the Academic Handbook for detailed grading criteria, attendance requirements and policies on plagiarism: <http://www.bu.edu/london/current-semester>

### **Attendance Policy**

#### **Classes**

Boston University London Programme students are expected to attend each and every class session, tutorial, and field trip in order to fulfil the required course contact hours and receive course credit. Any student that has been absent from two class sessions (whether authorised or unauthorised) will need to meet with the Directors to discuss their continued participation on the programme.

#### *Authorised Absence:*

Students who expect to be absent from any class should notify a member of Academic Affairs and complete an Authorised Absence Approval Form 10 working days in advance of the class date (except in the case of absence due to illness, for which students should submit the Authorised Absence Approval Form with the required doctor's note as soon as possible). **Please note: Submitting an Authorised Absence Approval Form does not guarantee an authorised absence**

Students may apply for an authorised absence only under the following circumstances:

- Illness, supported by a local London doctor's note (submitted with Authorised Absence Approval Form).
- Important placement event that clashes with a class (verified by internship supervisor)
- Special circumstances which have been approved by the Directors (see note below).

**The Directors will only in the most extreme cases (for example, death in close family) allow students to leave the programme early or for a significant break.**

#### *Unauthorised Absence:*

Any student to miss a class due to an unauthorised absence will receive a **4% grade penalty** to their final grade for the course whose class was missed. This grade penalty will be applied by the Academic Affairs office to the final grade at the end of the course. As stated above, any student that has missed two classes will need to meet with the Directors to discuss their participation on the programme as excessive absences may result in a 'Fail' in the class and therefore expulsion from the programme.

## Course Chronology

### Session One: Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> January

#### **Postwar theatre and the arrival of the Angry Young Men (The playwright and the play)**

- 1) Course introduction. Overview of London theatre just after the Second World War, and an introduction to British theatre traditions and the genre of naturalism. How British society, recovering from the ravages of the Second World War, expressed itself through drama, and how critics saw light comedies and countryhouse settings of these works as ‘Loamshire plays’.
- 2) Video of 1950s British theatre – polite society dramas, theatre censorship and a climate of middle-class complacency. The video extract is from *Changing Stages*, the BBC series introduced by Richard Eyre, former artistic director of the National Theatre and author, with Nicholas Wright, of *Changing Stages: A View of British theatre in the 20th Century*.
- 3) The playwright: case study of John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* and *Dejavu*.  
[Preparatory reading: John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, and the sections about the play in Shellard (51-7) and Billington (97-103)]

### Session Two: Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> January

#### **London West and East**

- 1) Recap 1956 and all that. What characterizes John Osborne’s writing style? Examination of the way in which *Look Back in Anger* was originally staged at the Royal Court in May 1956.
- 2) Video of 1950s British theatre, comparing the house styles and dramaturgical practices of two London theatres, the Royal Court under artistic director George Devine and the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, under the legendary theatre-maker Joan Littlewood.
- 3) The director and directing: a brief introduction.  
[Preparatory reading: Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright (236-51, 257-69)]

### Session Three: Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> January

#### **Twin peaks: the major British theatre companies (The director and the play)**

- 1) Overview of the 1960s: the Royal Shakespeare Company and the struggle to set up the National Theatre. How the century-old struggle to set up a national theatre finally achieved its aim, and how Britain ended up with two major giants, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National, which then competed for prominence in the theatrical landscape.
- 2) Video of 1960s British theatre – experiment and a climate of adventurous change.
- 3) The director: case study of Peter Brook. Peter Brook’s early days were devoted to directing at tiny arts theatres, but soon he developed into Britain’s finest director, responsible for major productions that changed the country’s idea of what was possible. After experimental seasons at the Royal Shakespeare Company, which culminated in the ‘dirty plays controversy’ after his staging of the shocking *Marat/Sade*, Brook decided to quit Britain and set up in Paris, where he continued his fresh approach to staging international drama. Theatre semiotics.
- 4) The critic: case study of Kenneth Tynan. As the theatre critic of the *Observer* newspaper in the 1950s, Tynan advocated a new kind of drama – committed, gutsy and up-to-date – and was rewarded for his successful advocacy by being made the first literary manager of the National Theatre. Because of his superb penmanship, he has become the most influential of post-war British theatre critics.  
[Preparatory reading: Shellard (34-6, 95-119)]

### Session Four: Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> January

#### **Reviewing the reviewers**

- 1) Full briefing on writing reviews for publication in British broadsheet newspapers; how to structure your review and how to analyse the meaning of a show. Plus: Peter Brook on theatre criticism. Also: introduction to Patrice Pavis, his questionnaire and theatre semiotics.

#### **PLUS: VISITING GUEST LECTURER (PLAYWRIGHT):**

**Fin Kennedy** is a writer and teacher, whose work includes *Protection* (Soho Theatre, 2003) and *How To Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* (Sheffield, 2007). He has worked with the

Mulberry School, and was selected as one of nine writers to represent 30 years of the Pearson Playwrights Scheme at the National Theatre. He has also written for television.

[Preparatory reading: Brook (34-9); also please access website reviews of current theatre plays]

### **Session Five: Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> January**

#### **Britain and the state-of-the-nation drama (Brecht and his influence)**

1) Overview of 1970s: political plays and the state of the nation drama. How, in the 1970s, a series of liberal and left-wing playwrights decided to put on large-scale plays that debated the burning issues of the day: racism, capitalism and the failure of socialism. Were these plays just preaching to the converted or did they help change society? Comparison between avant-garde theatre and agit-prop. Why did large-scale political theatre die out? And how do they relate to the latest upsurge in verbatim drama?

2) Video of 1960s and 1970s British theatre – social realism and radicalism on the stage, with a special focus on the influence of Bertolt Brecht. Theatre theory: the ideas of Bertolt Brecht.

3) The geography of London theatre, from West End to fringe (what do these labels mean?).

[Preparatory reading: Leach (102-39)]

### **Session Six: Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> February**

#### **Britain after the Lord Chamberlain**

1) Recap of the 1970s British theatre, *Time Out*'s view of the geography of London theatre, and preparation of end-of-semester papers, presentations and reviews.

2) Theatre after censorship: how did young people in the 1970s create new theatrical forms?

#### **PLUS: VISITING GUEST LECTURER (THEATRE DIRECTOR):**

**Anthony Biggs** is the new artistic director of the Jermyn Street Theatre. As a director, he has worked on several plays and with Trevor Nunn on Samuel Beckett's radio play 'All That Fall' (JST/Arts Theatre). In April he directs the classic 1920s comedy-of-manners, 'On Approval'.

[Preparatory reading: Shellard (147-85)]

### **Session Seven: Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> February**

#### **Britain between commerce and subsidy (musicals and in-yer-face theatre)**

1) Overview of the structure of London theatre today: how the old system of subsidised theatre and commercial theatre, with alternative theatre developing after 1968, was gradually changed into a more integrated system during the 1980s. Is the London fringe now dead? The arrival of the blockbuster musical and Andrew Lloyd Webber. Case study of *Jerry Springer: The Opera* – radical innovation or zoo theatre?

2) Video of London theatre: new musicals, and the emergence of a new wave of in-yer-face theatre in the 1990s. How is British drama responding to the challenges of the new millennium? Focus on playwright Sarah Kane.

3) Kevin Spacey and the Old Vic: actors and directors.

[Preparatory reading: Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright (340-6) and Shellard (180, 190-2)]

### **Session Eight: Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> February**

#### **British theatre today and tomorrow (Artaud and his influence)**

1) Video of expanding definitions of theatre and the latest experimental trends. What is the influence of Antonin Artaud on contemporary performance?

2) Theatre Theory: the vision of Antonin Artaud. Students will also discuss the plays they have seen. And recap theatre criticism and semiotics.

[Preparatory reading: Leach (151-87)]

### **Session Nine: Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> February**

1) Overview of the structure of British theatre today: from big musicals to small plays in tiny rooms. What are the strengths and weaknesses of British theatre today? What is the role of the

critic? How does the size of the venue affect your experience of theatre? What are the best new writers working in British contemporary theatre? Quiz on what you have learnt this semester.

[Preparatory reading: Edgar (3-33)]

**PLUS: VISITING GUEST LECTURER (THEATRE CRITIC):**

**Michael Billington**, of *The Guardian*, is three times winner of ‘Critic of the Year’ award and is Britain’s longest-serving and most eminent drama critic. His latest book is *State of the Nation*, and he has also been a contributor to *The New York Times* and an occasional writer for *Harper’s Bazaar*.

**\* Contingency Class Date: Friday 8<sup>th</sup> February. Should any class dates need to be rescheduled, students are obligated to keep this date free to attend classes.**

**Exam: Class Presentations:** Monday 18<sup>th</sup> February

**Deadline for final paper:** Monday 18<sup>th</sup> February

Exam times and locations will be posted on the BU London website and in the Student Newsletter two weeks before exam dates.

**NB: Two copies of all assessed work are required.**

**\*\* Please note: students will have their first Internship Tutorial meeting on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> February, following final exam presentations.**

**\*\*\*All students must attend a mandatory drop-in session (to sign Internship Agreement and for any questions about placement, social programmes, travel and academics) on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> February, 1.00-2.00pm in the Boston Room, 43 Harrington Gardens, SW7 4JU. Food will be served!**

**Terms and Conditions**

Aleks will make some time available in each session for students to raise questions etc. Should students wish to discuss matters with faculty 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 him with questions. If you have problems with the availability of reading materials (all of which should be in the library) please contact him either through the Academic Affairs Office or via e-mail.

**Note:** Please turn off all mobile phones in class; laptops can only be used for note-taking in exceptional circumstances and only after permission has been given by faculty.

**TH 440 SCHEDULE OF THEATRE VISITS Spring 2013**

**Visit 1: 24 January (THURSDAY MORNING): Class visit to the Performance Galleries at the V&A Museum.**

**Visit 2: 30 January (WEDNESDAY EVENING):** *Port* at the National Theatre. Nearest tube: Waterloo (Northern, Bakerloo, Jubilee lines).

**Visit 3: 6 February (WEDNESDAY EVENING):** *Di and Viv and Rose* at the Hampstead Theatre. Nearest tube: Swiss Cottage (Jubilee line).

**I really do hope you enjoy the course, Aleks Sierz, Spring 2013**