



**Boston University Study Abroad**  
London

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**Modern British Drama: A Critic's Perspective**  
**CAS EN 357 (*Elective B*)**  
**Spring 2016**

**Instructor Information**

A. Name	Dr Aleks Sierz
B. Day and Time	Fridays, 10am-1pm, and last classes on Thursday and Friday 14 and 15 April, plus six class visits mainly on Tuesday or Wednesday evenings to see current theatre performances
C. Location	Alexander Room, 43 Harrington Gardens, SW7 4JU
D. BU Telephone	020 7244 6255
E. Email	<a href="mailto:sierz@btinternet.com">sierz@btinternet.com</a>
F. Office hours	By appointment

**Course Objective**

To provide a broad study of the major developments in British drama over the past 50 years; to relate drama to the changes in British society; to examine the work of specific writers in detail; to stimulate critical analysis through written work and discussion.

**Course Overview**

This course provides you with a thorough 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 Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009) – and the way they relate to their wider social and cultural context. In particular, the notion of national identity (Britishness) will be explored. Practical information about how to write theatre reviews, plus six theatre visits, 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 theatre and develop practical critical skills, which will enable you to address the question of whether or not a new play is any good.

**Methodology**

Each of the classes 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.

## Attendance Policy

### **Classes**

All Boston University London Programme students are expected to attend each and every class session, seminar, and field trip in order to fulfill 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. This may result in the student having to take a medical leave of absence from the programme or withdraw from the programme.

#### *Authorised Absence:*

Students who expect to be absent from any class should notify a member of Academic Affairs and complete an Authorized Absence Approval Form 10 working days in advance of the class date (except in the case of absence due to illness for more than one day. In this situation 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 (first day of sickness): If a student is too ill to attend class, the student must phone the BU London Student Affairs Office (who will in turn contact the student's lecturer).
- Illness (multiple days): If a student is missing more than one class day due to illness, the student must call into to the BU London Student Affairs Office each day the student is ill. Students must also provide the Student Affairs office with a completed Authorised Absence Approval Form and sick note from a local doctor excusing their absence from class.
- 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 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.

#### *Lateness*

Students arriving more than 15 minutes after the posted class start time will be marked as late. Any student with irregular class attendance (more than two late arrivals to class) will be required to meet with the Assistant Director of Academic Affairs and if the lateness continues, may have his/her final grade penalised.

## **Reading**

The main emphasis of the class will be on practical analysis. I expect students to read the text of the plays being discussed in class, and those they have been sent to see, if available. For the first session, every student must read Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Additional readings may be posted on Blackboard: <https://lms.bu.edu>

Main textbooks: Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*, Yale University Press (1999) and Michael Billington, *State of the Nation*, Faber (2007). Also useful: Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, *Changing Stages*, Bloomsbury (2000), Stephen Unwin and Carole Woddis, *A Pocket Guide to 20th-Century Drama*, Faber (2001) and the Methuen Decades series (2012-13).

Some knowledge of postwar British economic, social and political history is an advantage. The best overview is Andrew Marr, *A History of Modern Britain* (2008).

Likewise, the following books cover the theme of national identity: Jeremy Paxman, *The English* (Penguin, 1999), Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Chris Rojek, *Brit-myth: Who Do the British Think They Are?* (Reaktion Books, 2007).

I also recommend these selected books, of value in understanding modern British drama:

Mark and Juliette Taylor-Batty, *Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot*, Continuum (2008)

Michael Billington, *One Night Stands*, Nick Hern Books (1993)

David Edgar, *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting*, Faber (1999)

David Edgar, *How Plays Work*, Nick Hern, 2008

Jim Fowler, *Unleashing Britain: Theatre Gets Real 1955-64*, V&A (2005)

Helen Iball, *Sarah Kane's Blasted*, Continuum (2008)

David Lane, *Contemporary British Drama*, Edinburgh University Press (2010)

Graham Saunders, *'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, Manchester University Press (2002)

Graham Saunders, *Patrick Marber's Closer*, Continuum (2008)

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)

John Smart, *Twentieth Century British Drama*, Cambridge University Press (2001)

Alicia Tycer, *Caryl Churchill's Top Girls*, Continuum (2008)

Kenneth Tynan, *Theatre Writings*, Nick Hern (2007)

Stephen Unwin and Carole Woddis, *A Pocket Guide to 20th-Century Drama*, Faber (2001)

Michelene Wandor, *Postwar British Drama: Looking Back in Gender*, Routledge (2001)

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*, and more recent plays such as *Beautiful Thing* and *Closer*.

## Assessment

The students will be assessed in a variety of ways. They will be asked to write detailed weekly critiques 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 single final examination, but a substantial course essay instead. 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 historic productions.

The breakdown of marks is as follows:

1 x 10% for class participation **(10%)**

4 x 10% for reviews **(40%)**

1 x 20% for class presentation **(20%)**

1 x 30% for the course essay (Deadline, hand in at the exam) **(30%)**

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

## Grading

Please refer to the Academic Handbook for detailed grading criteria and policies on plagiarism:

<http://www.bu.edu/london/current-semester>

*\* Final Grades are subject to deductions by the Academic Affairs Office due to unauthorised absences.*

## Course Chronology

Over the semester the classes will be as follows:

**NB:** Every week, students should read the plays which will be discussed in class (as specified below), as well as background information from the two main course books, by Dominic Shellard and Michael Billington (as given in the bibliography).

**Session One: Friday 26 February.** Introduction to Modern British Drama, discussion of British history and society after 1945, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, with a video of Brecht and Beckett. [READING: Shellard, 38-47; Billington, 78-83]

**Session Two: Friday 4 March.** John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, with a video of British 20th-century drama before 1956, and an introduction to theatre criticism. [READING: Shellard, 51-57, 69-70; Billington, 97-103]

**Session Three: Friday 11 March.** Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, with a video of the Angry Young Men and Kitchen-Sink Drama, and group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week. [READING: Shellard, 89-94; Billington, 112-14]

**Session Four: Friday 18 March.** Edward Bond's *Saved*, with a video of British political theatre in the 1960s and 1970s, and group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week. [READING: Shellard, 140-46; Billington, 179-84]

**Session Five: Friday 1 April.** 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. [READING: Shellard, 108-11; Billington, 198-200]

**Session Six: Friday 8 April.** 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. [READING: Shellard, 120-26; Billington, 175-80]

**Session Seven: Thursday 14 April [NOTE DAY].** David Hare's *Plenty*, and group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week. [READING: Shellard, 161-64; Billington, 259-64]

**Session Eight: Friday 15 April.** Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, and group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week. [READING: Shellard, 217-22; Billington, 307-09, 318]

**Session Nine: Tuesday 19 April [NOTE DAY].** Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*. [READING: Shellard, 223-26; Billington, 353-61]

\* **Contingency Class Date: Wednesday 20 April.** Students are obligated to keep this date free to attend class should any class dates need to be rescheduled.

**Plus exam: Thursday 21 April.** Oral class presentation by students of a British postwar play that they have discovered for themselves. Exam times and locations will be posted on the BU London website and in the Student Newsletter two weeks before exam dates.

### EN 357 SCHEDULE OF THEATRE VISITS SPRING 2016

**8 March (TUESDAY): The Solid Life of Sugar Water by Jack Thorne** at the National Theatre. Nearest tube: Waterloo (Northern/Jubilee/Bakerloo Lines).

**15 March (TUESDAY): German Skerries by Robert Holman** at the Orange Tree Theatre. Nearest tube: Richmond (District Line/Overground).

**22 March (TUESDAY): The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Simon Stephens** at the Gielgud Theatre. Nearest tube: Piccadilly (Piccadilly/Bakerloo Lines).

**30 March (WEDNESDAY: NOTE DAY): Correspondence by Lucinda Burnett** at the Old Red Lion Theatre. Nearest tube: Angel (Northern Line).

**6 April (WEDNESDAY: NOTE DAY): X by Alistair McDowall** at the Royal Court Theatre. Nearest tube: Sloane Square (District Line).

**14 April (THURSDAY: NOTE DAY): Boy by Leo Butler** at the Almeida Theatre. Nearest tube: Highbury and Islington (Victoria Line)/Angel Islington (Northern Line).

*Students must check their email and the weekly Student Newsletter for field trip updates and reminders.*

**I really do hope you enjoy the course  
Aleks Sierz, Spring 2016**