



**Boston University Study Abroad
London**

**Boston University Study Abroad London
Experiencing London Theatre in the Postwar World
CFA TH 440 (Core course)
Spring 2016**

Instructor Information

A. Name	Dr. Aleks Sierz
B. Day and Time	Wednesday and Thursday, 1.15pm–5.15pm. Commencing Thursday 14 January 2016
C. Location	Cassels Room, 43 Harrington Gardens, SW7 4JU
D. BU Telephone	020 7244 6255
E. Email	sierz@btinternet.com
F. Office hours	By appointment

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 British playwrights 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 and the craft of playwriting; milestone playtexts – from John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956) to Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* (2009), 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), Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, *Changing Stages*, Bloomsbury (2000) and Michael Billington, *State of the Nation*, Faber (2007).

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 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)
Peter Rankin, *Joan Littlewood: Dreams and Realities*, Oberon (2014)
Dan Rebellato, *Modern British Playwriting 2000-2009*, Methuen (2013)
Daniel Rosenthal, *The National Theatre Story*, Oberon (2013)
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)
Simon Shepherd, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Theatre*, CUP (2009)
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)
Micheline 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
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 reading may be found on Blackboard: <http://learn.bu.edu>

Assessment

10% Class participation.

40% Two reviews of theatre performances (20% each).

20% Class presentation.

30% Final Paper on London theatre (2,000 words), submitted in the last week of core phase.

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

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

Session One: Thursday 14th January

Postwar British theatre: the Royal Court and the rise of new writing (1)

1) Course introduction. Overview of London theatre now — from the commercial West End to the underfunded fringe — and an introduction to British theatre traditions and the dominant style of naturalism. Funding through state subsidy of the arts.

2) How British society, in a previous Age of Austerity, expressed itself through drama, and how critics saw the light comedies and the countryhouse settings of these 1950s works as ‘Loamshire plays’. The Lord Chamberlain and the oppositional role of the subsidised Royal Court.

3) 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*.

4) The playwright: case study of John Osborne and *Look Back in Anger* (Royal Court, 1956). [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 20th January

Postwar British theatre: the Royal Court and the rise of new writing (2)

1) Overview of 1950s: recap 1956 and all that — the Royal Court and the birth of new writing. Contemporary new writing: case study of three new writers — Joe Penhall, Debbie Tucker Green and Dennis Kelly — who have emerged in the past decade, and study of examples of their work.

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) Devised and other creative alternatives to new writing.

[Preparatory reading: Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright (236-51, 257-69)]

Session Three: Thursday 21st January

Postwar British theatre: the National Theatre and the RSC

1) Overview of the 1960s: the struggle to set up the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. 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) Class discussion of NT Backstage Tour. The classics today.

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. Video of Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

4) Case study: Peter Brook on Deadly Theatre.

[Preparatory reading: Shellard (34-6, 95-119)]

Session Four: Wednesday 27th January

Postwar British theatre: Critics and theatre reviewing

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. Preparation for first theatre review. Also: introduction to Patrice Pavis, his questionnaire and theatre semiotics.

2) 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.

PLUS: VISITING GUEST LECTURER (THEATRE DIRECTOR):

Anthony Biggs is the artistic director of the Jermyn Street Theatre. As a director, he has worked with Trevor Nunn on Samuel Beckett's radio play *All That Fall* (JST/Arts Theatre), and his productions include the UK premiere of Ibsen's *St John's Night*, Charles Morgan's *The River Line*, Ibsen's *Little Eyolf* and Frederick Lonsdale's *On Approval*.

[Preparatory reading: Shellard (147-85)]

Session Five: Thursday 28th January

Postwar British theatre: Alternative theatres (1)

1) Overview of 1970s: political plays and the state of the nation drama. How, in the 1970s, a group 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. How does large-scale political theatre relate to the latest upsurge in verbatim drama, and what about political drama today?

2) Class discussion of first theatre visit.

3) Video of the influence of Bertolt Brecht, compared to Samuel Beckett. Theatre theory: the ideas of Bertolt Brecht, and how they are manifested on the British stage.

4) The geography of London fringe theatre, alternative theatre and new writing. How are these theatres funded? 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?

[Preparatory reading: Leach (102-39)]

Session Six: Wednesday 3rd February

Postwar British theatre: Alternative theatres (2)

- 1) Recap of the 1970s British theatre and of the geography of London theatre, plus examples of leftfield theatre, and some new playwriting trends. Video of 1960s and 1970s playwrights.
- 2) Preparation of end-of-semester papers, presentations, feedback and second review.

PLUS: VISITING GUEST LECTURER (PLAYWRIGHT):

Ash Soho is a writer and teacher, and works as a Learning Mentor at Kingsmead School. His plays for young people include *Bliss*, *Yeah Whatever*, *Ya Get Me* and the critically acclaimed *Rigged*. His work for television includes two series of the sit-com *Tottenham 2* (Channel 4), and his short film *Blood* has played at film festivals around the world.

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

Session Seven: Thursday 4th February

Contemporary British theatre: the rise of the musical

- 1) The arrival of the blockbuster musical and Andrew Lloyd Webber. Video of contemporary London theatre: musicals. Case study of *Jerry Springer: The Opera* – radical innovation or zoo theatre?

- 2) Class discussion of second theatre visit.

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

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

*** Contingency Class Date: Friday 5th February.** Should any class dates need to be rescheduled, students are obligated to keep this date free to attend classes.

Session Eight: Wednesday 10th February

Contemporary British theatre: latest trends 1

- 1) Students will also discuss the plays they have seen. And recap theatre criticism and semiotics.
- 2) Theatre awards. What are they, and what do they say about the culture of London theatre?

PLUS: VISITING GUEST LECTURER (THEATRE CRITIC):

Matt Wolf, of *The International Herald Tribune*, is a distinguished American theatre critic who is based in London. As an experienced journalist, he is also a contributor to *The Arts Desk* and *TheatreVOICE* websites, and to many other publications such as *The Sunday Times*.

Session Nine: Thursday 11th February

Contemporary British theatre: latest trends 2

- 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?

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

- 3) Theatre theory: the vision of Antonin Artaud.

- 4) Quiz on what you have learnt this semester.

[Preparatory reading: Leach (151-87)]

Exam: Class Presentations: Monday 15th February

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

**** Please note: Students will have their first Internship Seminar meeting on Wednesday 10th February. Check Internship Tutorial Timetable for time and location.**

Deadline for final paper: Monday 15th February
NB: Two copies of all assessed work are required.

*****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 15th February, 1.00-2.00pm in the Boston Room, 43 Harrington Gardens, SW7 4JU. Food will be served!**

Terms and Conditions

I will make some time available in each session for students to raise questions etc. Should students wish to discuss matters with me in person I will also be available during the break mid-lecture and at the end of class. Alternatively, please feel free to e-mail me 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.

Attendance

Classes

All Boston University Study Abroad London Programme students are expected to attend each and every class session, tutorial, 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.

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 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 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.

TH 440 SCHEDULE OF THEATRE VISITS Spring 2015

Visit 1: 21 January (THURSDAY MORNING): Backstage tour of the National Theatre.

Visit 2: 27 January (WEDNESDAY EVENING): *Pink Mist at the Bush Theatre*. Nearest tube: Shepherds Bush (Central line).

Visit 3: 3 February (WEDNESDAY EVENING): *Iphigenia in Splott at the National Theatre*. Nearest tube: Waterloo (Northern, Jubilee, Bakerloo lines).

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