Experiencing London Theatre in the Postwar World
CFA TH 440 (Core course)
Spring

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

Course Description
This course offers an aesthetic and historical understanding of contemporary London theatre, as well as the interpretation of controversies in postwar British theatre history, plus knowledge of evaluative tools — including journalistic skills — for the analysis of current shows. It will enable students to understand contemporary British theatre in London; to engage critically with a broad survey of the major historical developments in British drama over the past 70 years; to relate drama to major changes in British society; to examine the work of important British playwrights and directors in detail; to critically analyse British theatre aesthetics through written work and discussion; and 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 today, especially in London, and give an insight into how it is organised and why it has developed in its present form. Students will prepare for class by reading set texts and set plays, and this knowledge will be consolidated through class discussion of contemporary London theatre and postwar British theatre history, and of primary historical sources, plus presentations by the instructor and use of video materials. The four-hour teaching sessions will be supplemented by four theatre visits to current London shows: the purpose of each theatre visit will be to write a journalistic review of the performance, and to discuss it in class. At the end of the semester, students will deliver a ten-minute class presentation and write an eight-page, double-spaced academic paper.

Hub Outcomes (Course Objectives)
1) Philosophical, Aesthetic and Historical Interpretation: Aesthetic Exploration.

Course Objective 1
Students will demonstrate their knowledge and appreciation of notable works of postwar and contemporary British theatre, including the cultural contexts in which those works were created, and be able to identify their ongoing significance and relevance to current theatre practice. (Aesthetic Outcome 1)

Course Objective 2
Students will demonstrate the reasoning skills and vocabulary necessary to interpret postwar and contemporary British theatre, understanding its various genres and the skills needed for a successful performance. (Aesthetic Outcome 2)

Course Objective 3
Students will produce journalistic reviews of current theatre productions, thus demonstrating an understanding of the formal, historical, social, cultural, and aesthetic characteristics of contemporary British theatre. (Aesthetic Outcome 3)

2) Philosophical, Aesthetic and Historical Interpretation: Historical Consciousness.

Course Objective 1
Students will create historical narratives, evaluate interpretations based on historical evidence, and construct historical arguments about postwar British Theatre. (Historical Outcome 1)

Course Objective 2
Students will demonstrate an ability to interpret primary source material (including play texts, production photographs, original reviews, newspaper articles, video recordings, diary entries, memoirs, etc.) about postwar British theatre, using a range of interpretative skills (such as textual analysis and semiotic interpretation) and situating the material in its historical and cultural context. (Historical Outcome 2)

Course Objective 3
Students will demonstrate knowledge of religious traditions, intellectual paradigms, forms of political organization, or socio-economic forces — including for example the censorship of 1950s theatre and the growth in feminist playwrights in the 1970s — and explain how these factors have affected postwar British theatre and changed over time. (Historical Outcome 3)

Additional Course Objectives
On completion of this course, students will be able to:
• Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of contemporary theatre in London;
• Engage critically with the major historical developments in postwar British theatre;
• Relate drama to broad changes in British society;
• Practice critical analysis of individual plays, and relate them to broader trends;
• Assess the aesthetic strengths and weaknesses of today’s London theatre;
• Write professional journalistic reviews of current theatre shows.
• Be prepared for the breadth of opportunities open to them in the field of Theatre Arts in London.

Other Outcomes
• This course is part of the BU Study Abroad London Internship Programme, and the BU College of Fine Arts School of Theatre and its specialised programmes.
• It aims to enhance life skills, such as independent working, self-motivated study, personal self-confidence and good time keeping.

Approach to Learning
Experiencing London Theatre in the Postwar World is a discussion-based, active-learning and experiential-learning course. Students will prepare for class by reading set texts and set plays, and this knowledge will be consolidated through class discussion of contemporary London theatre and postwar British theatre history, and of primary historical sources, plus presentations by the instructor and use of video materials. The four-hour teaching sessions will be supplemented by four theatre visits to current London shows: the purpose of each theatre visit will be to write a journalistic review of the performance, and to discuss it in class. At the end of the semester, students will deliver a ten-minute class presentation on a postwar British play that they have discovered for themselves, and write an eight-page, double-spaced academic paper which analyses one of the historical controversies that we have studied in class. They will demonstrate not only their understanding of the historical facts, but also their ability to interpret the past and argue in favour of one interpretation, using their research skills, correct referencing and wide reading.
Assessment

10% Class participation.
Class participation marks are given to encourage active participation in class discussion. Grades will depend on students speaking and taking part seriously in discussions. And doing the required reading. Evidence of imaginative intelligence and critical thinking will be valued, as well as your ability to articulate your thoughts clearly and concisely, asking relevant questions and respecting different points of view. There is less concern with “right” or “wrong” answers than with thoughtful contributions which follow the discussion and either add to the debate or move it in a new direction. Students will demonstrate their knowledge and appreciation of notable works of postwar and contemporary British theatre, their understanding of genre and performance skills and their ability to create historical narratives, evaluate interpretations based on historical evidence, and construct historical arguments about postwar British theatre.

40% Four reviews of current theatre performances (10% each).
Typically, the deadline for theatre reviews is the class after the theatre visit, and feedback on each review is provided during the subsequent class. Reviewing grades depend on journalistic skills, which include a clear and direct writing style; convincing argument; coherent structure and decisive final judgment. Plus factual accuracy. Students should engage with the meaning of the play, and articulate what the playwright and theatre-makers are trying to say, as well as evaluating how successful they are in doing this. Students should also follow the prescribed review layout. Students will thus demonstrate an understanding of the formal, historical, social, cultural, and aesthetic characteristics of contemporary British theatre.

20% Class presentation (ten minutes) on a postwar British play that students have discovered for themselves.
Presentation grades depend on presentation skills. Each student will speak for ten minutes on a postwar British play that they have discovered for themselves. The choice has to be approved by the instructor, and although each student may use notes or a prepared speech no other aids (such as PowerPoint, handouts or music recordings) are permitted. Grades depend on the ability to talk, within the time limit, to a small group using mainly the voice. Value will be placed on the ability to articulate thoughts clearly, directly and concisely, including all relevant facts and information, especially meaning and social context. A cool, unhurried delivery will also be valued. Students will demonstrate their knowledge and appreciation of notable works of postwar and contemporary British theatre, including the cultural contexts in which those works were created, and be able to identify their ongoing significance and relevance to current theatre practice.

30% Final paper (eight pages, double-spaced), submitted in the last week of core phase. Title: Choose one of the historical controversies that we have studied and argue in favour of an interpretation based on historical evidence.
The final assignment is an academic paper which analyses one of the historical controversies that we have studied in class. In answering the set question, students will demonstrate not only their understanding of the historical facts, but also their ability to interpret the past and argue in favour of one interpretation. In doing so, they should also show their understanding of changing socio-economic forces, as well as of the formal, historical, social, cultural, and aesthetic characteristics of British theatre. Final paper grades depend on the academic skills of thorough research, correct referencing (including a bibliography) and wide reading. Value will be placed on the ability to deliver a clear academic writing style; a convincing argument using explicit examples; academic rigour (factual accuracy, with correct citations and references); coherent structure and a decisive conclusion.

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

Grading
The following Boston University table explains the grading system that is used by most faculty members on Boston University’s Study Abroad London Programmes.
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<th>Grade</th>
<th>Honour Points</th>
<th>Usual %</th>
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**Grading Criteria**

‘Incomplete’ or I 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. We also do not allow ‘Audits’ (AU), ‘Withdrawals’ (W), or ‘Pass/Fail’ (P) grades.

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 C 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** A marginal pass can be given where some but not all the elements of the course have been completed satisfactorily.
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 following section in Academic Conduct Code)

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.

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 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 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.

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### Course Chronology

**Session One:**

**Postwar British theatre: Introduction and the 1950s.**

1) Course introduction. Overview of London theatre now — from the commercially super-successful West End to the underfunded fringe — and an introduction to British theatre traditions and the dominant style of naturalism.

2) An introduction to the history of postwar British theatre: themes, controversies and issues.

3) Historical controversy (1): was early 1950s West End theatre bland and predictable? The role of the Lord Chamberlain and of commercial producers such as Binkie Beaumont. Primary source study: critic Kenneth Tynan’s Observer newspaper article ‘Apathy’, about ‘Loamshire plays’.

4) 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*.

5) The current state of West End commercial theatre today.

   [Preparatory reading: Billington, pp 46–76]

**Session Two:**

**Postwar British theatre: The Angry Young Men.**

1) Full briefing on how to write 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.

2) Historical controversy (2): Was John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* the most radical turning point of mid-1950s British theatre? Or were plays such as Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Shelagh Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey* more important breakthroughs? Primary source study: *Angry Young Men* newspaper article/Photograph of original production of Osborne’s play/Dominic Shellard chapter.

3) The Royal Court theatre and the tradition of new writing for British theatre. Examples of landmark plays of the past and discussion of the current state of new writing in London. ‘New writing’: its significance and its history. Contemporary dramaturgy: case study of three new writers — Joe Penhall, debbie tucker green and Dennis Kelly — who have emerged in the past two decades, and study of examples of their work.

   **Evening:** First theatre visit — deadline for first review [date].

   [Preparatory reading: Billington, pp 76–122]

**Session Three:**

**Postwar British theatre: The struggle over censorship.**

1) Class discussion of first theatre visit, and deadline for first review. Feedback on class participation.
2) Historical controversy (3): Edward Bond’s Saved, John Osborne’s A Patriot for Me and the fight against the Lord Chamberlain and censorship of British theatre. Primary source study: Document from the Lord Chamberlain’s office.
3) 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 and innovative theatre-maker Joan Littlewood.
4) Censorship revived: recent cases of transgressive work and how social and religious groups have tried to silence them.
5) Shock of the new: devised and other creative alternatives to new writing.
[Preparatory reading: Billington, pp 162–204]

Session Four:
Postwar British theatre: The National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company.
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) Case study of Peter Brook. From directing at tiny arts theatres, he developed into Britain’s finest director, responsible for 1950s West End hits and then major productions that changed our ideas of theatrical possibility. After experimental seasons at the Royal Shakespeare Company in the 1960s, which culminated in the ‘dirty plays controversy’ after his staging of the shocking Marat/Sade, Brook quit Britain and set up in Paris. Videos of Brook’s Marat/Sade and his A Midsummer Night’s Dream.
3) Twin peaks: The National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company today.

Evening: Second theatre visit — deadline for second review [date].
[Preparatory reading: Billington, pp 167–75]

Session Five:
Postwar British theatre: State-of-the-nation plays.
1) Class discussion of second theatre visit, and deadline for second review. Feedback on the first review and on class participation.
2) Historical controversy (4): Were the state-of-the-nations plays of the 1970s the most radical intervention of that decade, or does this accolade more justly go to feminist, gay and BAME playwrights? Primary source study: playwright David Edgar’s analysis of postwar British theatre.
3) Video of the influence of Bertolt Brecht, compared to Samuel Beckett. Theatre theory: the ideas of Bertolt Brecht, and how they were, and still are, manifested on the British stage.
4) State-of-the-nation plays in today’s London theatre.
5) Preparation of end-of-semester papers, and class presentations.
[Preparatory reading: Billington, pp 205–82]

Session Six:
Postwar British theatre: Women playwrights and alternative theatres.
1) Overview of alternative theatres in the 1970s and 1980s: How playwrights from a variety of diverse backgrounds decided to put on large-scale plays that debated the burning issues of the day: sexism, racism, homophobia, capitalism and the failure of socialism. Were these plays just preaching to the converted or did they help change society? Comparison between avant-garde leftfield theatre and agit-prop.
2) Historical controversy (5): How were the women playwrights of the 1980s innovative in terms of form and content? What did their use of non-linear structure say about the way women experience their lives? Primary source study: Charlotte Keatley commentary on her play My Mother Said I Never Should.
3) How does large-scale political theatre relate to the latest upsurge in verbatim drama, and what about political drama today?
4) Experiential theatre today: site-specific, immersive, one-to-one and devised theatre today. How alternative are these productions, and what are their implications for performances and for political engagement?
5) Preparation of end-of-semester papers, presentations, and feedback on reviews.

Evening: Third theatre visit — deadline for third review [date].
[Preparatory reading: Billington, pp 283–323]

Session Seven:

Contemporary British theatre: The rise and rise of the musical.
1) Class discussion of third theatre visit, and deadline for third review. Feedback on the second review and on class participation.
2) 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?
4) The West End today. Overview of the structure of British theatre: from big musicals to small plays in tiny rooms. What are the strengths and weaknesses of British theatre today? How does the size of the venue affect your experience of theatre?

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

Session Eight:

Contemporary British theatre: The 1990s and In-Yer-Face Theatre.
1) Students will discuss the plays they have seen. And recap theatre criticism. Preparation of end-of-semester papers, presentations and feedback on reviews.
2) Historical controversy (6): Was the theatre of the 1990s led by an avant-garde of In-Yer-Face playwrights such as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill? What other relevant theatre forms were being developed? Primary source study: Newspaper articles, and Sarah Kane letter.
3) Video of expanding definitions of theatre and the latest experimental trends. Theatre theory: What were the ideas and what is the influence of visionary and theorist Antonin Artaud on contemporary performance?

Evening: Fourth theatre visit — deadline for third review [date].
[Preparatory reading: Billington, pp 324–61]

Session Nine:

Contemporary British theatre: Latest trends.
1) Class discussion of fourth theatre visit, and deadline for fourth review. Feedback on the third review and on class participation.
2) Historical controversy (7): Were the most original and innovative playwrights of the 2000s from BAME backgrounds, such as Roy Williams, Tanika Gupta and Kwame Kwei-Armah? What other theatre innovations characterise the new millennium? Primary source study: verbatim drama.
3) Contemporary issues in theatre today. Race, ethnicity and diversity: how are these aspects of performance manifest in casting, in colour-blind or gendered casts, and how can the diversity of British theatre be improved? Does the problem of under-representation of black and ethnic-
minorities require government policy, or more direct action? Also: LGBTQ performance, as well as other ethical issues (theatre and the environment).

4) 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?

[Preparatory reading: Billington, pp 362–411]

**Session Ten:**

**Contemporary British theatre: Theatre visits.**

This session is made up of four evening visits to contemporary London theatre shows, with the aim not only of understanding how these performances relate to the other sessions of the course, but also with the purpose of writing graded theatre reviews of these productions (see Assessment). For a schedule of performances, please see the list on the final page of the syllabus.

**Exam: Class Presentations: [date].**

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

This is also the deadline for the final academic paper.

**Please note: students will have their first Internship Seminar meeting on [date], following final exam presentations.**

**Deadline for final paper: [date].**

**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 [date], [time] in the Boston Room, 43 Harrington Gardens, SW7 4JU.***

**Books and Course Materials**

**Required Reading**

**Textbook:** Michael Billington, *State of the Nation*, Faber (2007). (Available from the library)

**Recommended Reading**

Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Penguin (1968, frequently reprinted)
Michael Kustow, *Theatre@Risk*, Methuen (2000)
Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, Faber (2001)
Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, Methuen (2011)
Stephen Unwin, *So You Want To be a Theatre Director?*, Nick Hern (2004)

NB Additional in-class readings will be provided by the instructor.

**Additional Course Materials**
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*.
Primary historical source materials will be made available in class. Additional reading may be found on Blackboard: [http://learn.bu.edu](http://learn.bu.edu)

**Useful websites**
- [www.theatrevoice.com](http://www.theatrevoice.com)
- [www.inyerface-theatre.com](http://www.inyerface-theatre.com)
- [www.sierz.co.uk](http://www.sierz.co.uk)

**TH 440 SCHEDULE OF THEATRE VISITS**

Visit 1: [date]: *Witness for the Prosecution* by Agatha Christie at the London County Hall. Nearest tube: Waterloo (Bakerloo/Northern/Jubilee lines).

Visit 2: [date]: *Amadeus* by Peter Shaffer at the National Theatre. Nearest tube: Waterloo (Bakerloo/Northern/Jubilee lines).


Visit 4: [date]: *Booby’s Bay* by Henry Darke at the Finborough Theatre. Nearest tube: Earl’s Court (Piccadilly/District lines).

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