Instructor Information

A. Name
Dr. Aleks Sierz

B. Day and Time
Wednesday and Thursday, 1.15pm–5.15pm. Commencing Thursday 18 January 2018

C. BU Telephone

D. Email

E. 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 today, especially in London, 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 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 Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot (1955) and 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, musical theatre and ethnicity and diversity. The course will look at five narratives about the history of the art form. Finally, the course will familiarise students with a semiotic approach to analysing performances, derived from the French theatre expert Professor Patrice Pavis.
Methodology
The teaching sessions will be supplemented by four theatre visits to current London shows: the purpose of each theatre visit will be to write a review of the performance. Lectures by Aleks Sierz will be supplemented with in-class video screenings, and involve readings from key texts as well as other class exercises.

Required Reading


**Suggested additional readings:**
- Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Penguin (1968, frequently reprinted)
- Michael Kustow, *Theatre@Risk*, Methuen (2000)
- Scales, Prunella and Timothy West, *So You Want To Be An Actor?* Nick Hern Books (2005)
- Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, Faber (2001)
- Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, Methuen (2011)

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 reading may be found on Blackboard: [http://learn.bu.edu](http://learn.bu.edu)

**Assessment**

10% Class participation.
40% Four reviews of theatre performances (10% 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](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 18th 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), the foundational moment of the tradition of ‘new writing’.

[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 24th 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.

3) Latest developments in theatre criticism: blogging and websites; the new young critics; ethical issues in theatre reviewing. Examples of new kinds of theatre criticism.

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

**Evening: First theatre visit:**

**Session Three: Thursday 25th January**

*Postwar British theatre: The Royal Court and the rise of new writing (2)*
1) Class discussion of first theatre visit, and deadline for first review.
2) ‘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. Dramaturgy exercises.
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 theatre-maker Joan Littlewood.
4) Shock of the new: devised and other creative alternatives to new writing.

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

Session Four: Wednesday 31st 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) 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.
3) Case study: Peter Brook on Deadly Theatre.

[Preparatory reading: Shellard (95-119)]

Evening: Second theatre visit:

Session Five: Thursday 1st February
Postwar British theatre: Alternative theatres (1)
1) Class discussion of second theatre visit, and deadline for second review.
2) 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?
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 7th February
Postwar British theatre: Alternative theatres (2)
2) 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?
3) Preparation of end-of-semester papers, presentations, and feedback on second review.

**Evening: Third theatre visit:**

**Session Seven: Thursday 8th February**

**Contemporary British theatre: the rise and rise of the musical**

1) Class discussion of third theatre visit.
2) 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?
4) 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 9th February.** Should any class dates need to be rescheduled, students are obligated to keep this date free to attend classes.

**Session Eight: Wednesday 14th February**

**Contemporary British theatre: latest trends 1**

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

**Evening: Fourth theatre visit:**

**Session Nine: Thursday 15th February**

**Contemporary British theatre: latest trends 2**

1) Class discussion of fourth theatre visit.
2) 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?
3) Video of expanding definitions of theatre and the latest experimental trends. What is the influence of Antonin Artaud on contemporary performance?
4) Theatre theory: the vision of Antonin Artaud.
5) Quiz on what you have learnt this semester.

[Preparatory reading: Leach (151-87)]

**Exam: Class Presentations: Monday 19th February**

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

**Deadline for final paper: Monday 19th February**

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

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). The Authorised Absence Approval Request Form is available from: http://www.bu.edu/london/current-semester/

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 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 a 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.

**Religious Holidays**
Boston University’s Office of the University Registrar states:

‘The University, in scheduling classes on religious holidays and observances, intends that students observing those traditions be given ample opportunity to make up work. Faculty members who wish to observe religious holidays will arrange for another faculty member to meet their classes or for cancelled classes to be rescheduled.’

**Special Accommodations**
Each student will need to contact the Office of Disability Services to request accommodations for the semester they are abroad. Students are advised by BU-ODS not to expect the same accommodations as they receive on campus.

BU London can only uphold special accommodations if we have received the appropriate documentation from the BU-ODS. We cannot accept letters from other universities/centres.

All disabilities need to be known to the ODS in Boston if they are to be used as a reason for requiring a change in conditions, i.e. reduced internship hours or special accommodations for the internship schedule.

**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 Associate Director for Academic Affairs and if the lateness continues, may have his/her final grade penalised.

**TH 440 SCHEDULE OF THEATRE VISITS Spring 2018**

**Visit 1:** 24 January (WEDNESDAY): **Witness for the Prosecution** by Agatha Christie at the London County Hall. Nearest tube: Waterloo (Bakerloo/Northern/Jubilee lines).

**Visit 2:** 31 January (WEDNESDAY): **Amadeus** by Peter Shaffer at the National Theatre. Nearest tube: Waterloo (Bakerloo/Northern/Jubilee lines).

**Visit 3:** 7 February (WEDNESDAY): **The Believers Are But Brothers** by Javaad Alipoor at the Bush Theatre. Nearest tube: Shepherd’s Bush (Central line).

**Visit 4:** 14 February (WEDNESDAY): **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, Spring 2018