



**Boston University British Programmes**  
**CAS EN 357**  
**Modern British Drama: A Critic's Perspective**  
**Dr Aleks Sierz**  
**Elective B**

### **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 Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) – and the way they relate to their wider social and cultural context. 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.

### **COURSE 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.

### **COURSE 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 productions of contemporary work.

The breakdown of marks is as follows:  
6 x 10% for reviews **(60%)**

1 x 20% for the course essay (20%)  
1 x 20% for class presentation (20%)

**GRADING CRITERIA (Updated July 2006):**

The following Boston University table explains the grading system for EN 535

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Honour Points</b>	<b>Usual%</b>	<b>Definition</b>
A	4.0	93-100	Excellent
A-	3.7	89-92	
B+	3.3	85-88	
B	3.0	81-84	Good
B-	2.7	77-80	
C+	2.3	73-76	
C	2.0	69-72	Satisfactory
C-	1.7	65-68	
D	1.0	60-64	Low pass
F	0.0	Unmarked	Fail

“**Incomplete**” or **I** grades are not permitted to be issued by faculty, because of the obvious difficulty in making up missed work once the student has left the country. All work must be completed on time. The grades reflect the quality of the work.

It is also important to realise that grades below C may not be transferable to non BU students’ home institutions. Lecturers and students should use the following criteria for an understanding of what each grade means.

“**Withdrawn**” The Boston University Provost has announced that faculty members may no longer assign grades of “W” (Withdrawn). In supporting this policy, the Registrar’s Office will no longer assign W grades on individual students’ official Boston University records, even if the grade sheet has a “W” recorded for a student. Alternative grades to “W” are “F” (Failing) or “MG” (Missing Grade).

**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.

**F** 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 below)

## **COURSE CHRONOLOGY**

Over the semester the classes will be as follows:

**Session One:** 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.

**Session Two:** John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, with a video of British 20th-century drama before 1956, and an introduction to theatre criticism.

**Session Three:** 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.

**Session Four:** 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.

**Session Five:** 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.

**Session Six:** 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.

**Session Seven:** David Hare's *Plenty*, and group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week.

**Session Eight:** Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, and group discussion of one new play which students have been sent to in the preceding week.

**Session Nine:** Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and latest developments in British theatre.

**Plus exam:** Oral class presentation by students of work they have discovered for themselves. For time & place please consult timetable at BU website.

## READING

The main emphasis of the class will be on practical analysis. But I will expect the students to read the text of the plays seen where available. I also recommend these selected books, which will be of value in understanding modern British drama including:

*British Theatre Since the War* by Dominic Shellard.

*A Pocket Guide to 20th-Century Drama* by Stephen Unwin and Carole Woddis.

*Changing Stages* by Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright.

*Twentieth Century British Drama* by John Smart.

*Unleashing Britain: Theatre Gets Real 1955-64* by Jim Fowler.

*The Coming of Godot* by Jonathan Croall.

*Post-War British Drama: Looking Back in Gender* by Michelene Wandor.

*Theatre Criticism* by Irving Wardle.

*One Night Stands* by Michael Billington.

*In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* by Aleks Sierz.

The library also has DVDs and videos 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*.

## TERMS AND CONDITIONS

**\*\*Attendance at all classes and visits is mandatory. Students missing lectures without a doctor's letter or authorisation from the Director will automatically be docked a – or a + from their final grade. Persistent lateness will also be penalised in the final grade.** A register of attendance will be taken at the beginning of each session. Absence can be conveyed either by advising a senior member of staff in the Academic Affairs Office with a request that the information be passed on to the lecturers; or by emailing either faculty teaching the course (see the contact details at the top of this syllabus) prior to class. Leaving it to another class member to convey messages will not be acceptable. Appointments for interviews for internships should not conflict with attendance at classes. \*\*

Any student who is unable to attend a class, or take part in an assignment because of religious reasons, must give notice of the fact in advance. He/she will be required to make up for time lost. In this situation arrangements must be made with another student for class notes to be shared. Written papers must be delivered before agreed deadline, failure to hand in the paper will result in deducted marks.

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 they 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.

### **Plagiarism**

Boston University's Code of Student Responsibilities states:

The value of any grade, credit, honour or degree received by a student presupposes that all work submitted by a student is his or her own. A student who uses or relies upon the work of others or who, except under conditions expressly permitted by the instructor, furnishes assistance to another student, violates the standards of the University. Students must insist upon academic honesty and integrity from their fellow students and must report promptly any case of alleged violation of academic conduct. Failure to do so is a violation of this code.

Plagiarism can take many forms, including the reproduction of published material without acknowledgement, or representing work done by others as your own. This includes the increasingly common practice of purchasing and downloading work from Internet "paper mills." You should be extremely careful when submitting work for this course that all work is correctly sourced. Prints outs of websites that have been used in research may be required by the lecturer in cases of a grade dispute and all website based reference material should be kept by the student until after the end of the semester.

**I really hope you enjoy the course**