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The Theater of History

CAS/HI 480

Fall 2019

Monday 2:30-5:15pm

Course Description

This course is a workshop in the uses of history as source for artistic productions including theater, narrative film and television and the uses of such creative engagement as modes of historical imagination. The course will offer practice in engaging emotion, intuition and insight with intellect in rendering historical research as artistic expression and in the use of creative imagination as an energy and guide in making history. To provide a common and coherent basis for our creative work and to foster artistic and intellectual exchange among us the course will be anchored in the study of a specific historical *location* and period.

This semester our spatial and temporal boundaries are formed by Japan from approximately 1800 to 1945. Within this spatial-temporal framework our focus will be on the popular and elite comprehension and rendering of the strange, mysterious, wondrous and supernatural. This phase of our work will cover roughly the first two months of the course. The remainder of the course will be entirely devoted to script development. Even during the first two months of the course we reserve considerable time during each class session for discussion of your developing scripts. I will call on each of you in turn to describe the progress of your work. All of you are expected to offer helpful comments and suggestions to your colleagues on how they might improve their scripts.

Course Requirements

This course is a workshop in using history as source for creative work. Therefore I expect each of you to come to each class session fully prepared to participate actively in our work during that session. If you are reluctant to engage the material, your colleagues and the professor in lively discussion you

will not enjoy the course and will probably do poorly grade-wise. I am not interested in whether your views are politically correct, “objective” “strange” or “peculiar”. What I do want is for each of you to study the texts and films we will address and express your considered opinions of them and the issues under review, as well as to articulate your artistic vision and help your colleagues articulate and develop their own. Bear in mind that fifty percent (50 %) of your grade is based on class participation.

Over the course of the semester, each of you will develop the first draft of a script for theater, film or Television based on your work in and for this course. I expect you to format your scripts in the appropriate form for the venue you choose.

Since this course combines both academic and creative work within the span of one semester you will have to decide on a creative project very quickly. To help you decide we will devote the first two class sessions, amounting to nearly six hours, to an overview of the course. This will include my presentation of the historical themes and problems that we will address during the semester. I will next discuss the nature of creative imagination and the crucial and fundamental importance of engaging emotion and intuition in creative work. Although I do not want to confine you to following any standard procedure or template for writing your scripts it may be useful for you to gain an understanding of the normative practices of “successful” script writing. I have listed two helpful works below, Sam Smiley’s excellent book *Playwriting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005) and Harold Clurman’s work *On Directing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972) By the **September 23th** class session each of you should have developed a solid idea of what you would like to write about and have submitted it to me for my approval. You must secure my approval of your topic before pursuing it. Once you get hold of your idea you must not let go of it or give up because you come up against what appears to be a solid wall. This will happen, and when it does you have to press right into it and keep pushing until it moves. I intend that our work shall be collaborative and that your script will evolve in interaction with our historical study, through class discussion, including the advice and criticism of your colleagues and through my advice and guidance. This means that you may start out with a story line, characters and themes that will very likely change, adapt or be modified as a result of your deepening understanding of the historical period and your artistic vision. Likewise, your individual and our collective study of history will be guided and informed by our creative projects, even by the characters we create. Questions and insights arising from our creative work will direct us towards new areas of research or prompt us to go more deeply into areas we have already covered.

After the first several class sessions we will devote at least a half and often the entire class session to discussion of your evolving creative projects. In addition, each of you will make a formal report on the progress of your work,

including reading or performing samples of it. During each class session I will provide guidance and suggestions in response to your questions and as I react to your work. I expect each of you to participate in these sessions by discussing your own work and offering comments on the work of your fellow students. You must submit a rough draft of your script to me by the **November 18th class session**. I will return your scripts with my comments by the next class session. We will reserve the last two class sessions, those of December 2 and 9 for the reading of portions of your scripts in class-your colleagues taking parts, so that you will have to prepare and email 'sides' to each of your colleagues before coming to class. Each reading will be preceded by a summary of the story by its author. You must be present at these sessions or I will deduct a full grade point from your final grade. Your Completed scripts are due in class on December 9th. There will be no exceptions to this requirement.

I want to emphasize that in order for this course to succeed as a workshop each of you must commit to actively engage with the required texts and films. You must also actively engage with your creative project and the creative projects of your fellow students, your fellow students as people and the instructor. By active engagement I mean coming to each class session with a set of questions and observations on readings, films, projects and any other pertinent material and sharing them with your colleagues. I expect each of you to offer constructive criticism and advice to your colleagues on their creative projects as we discuss them in class and to share your progressing creative work, including reading sections of your evolving script to the class, as well as listening to your colleagues' and to my constructive comments and suggestions. Of course, you are not obliged to follow anyone's suggestions but you are obliged to listen to them. In addition, each of you will make a ten minute presentation on your developing creative project during the course of the semester. We will schedule these reports at the first class session. Your report should describe your progress to date, articulating your project themes, artistic technique and difficulties encountered and surmounted. You should regard the occasion of your presentation as another opportunity for seeking the advice of your colleagues and instructor on how you might resolve persistent difficulties in script development. You will be graded on the cogency as well as the regularity of your class participation. Your script will be graded on the degree to which it is historically grounded and artistically compelling.

By historically grounded I mean that your script should demonstrate a solid understanding of the historical era in which it is set or the historical problem (s) or issue(s) that it addresses. This consideration includes elements as fundamental as factual and chronological accuracy. Historical grounding also includes understanding of the nature of culture and society during the period of your work. You may want to bend historical facts and you can do that, but your bending of historical facts must demonstrate your knowledge of the historical facts. It must be self conscious, not done in error.

By artistically compelling I simply mean your skill in using history creatively. This means that you can be as counterfactual as you like provided you satisfy the demands of intellect that you make what you do rationally intelligible. For example, an Indian nationalist whose village is decimated by the Bengal famine of 1943 blames Churchill for the disaster because he refused to send adequate aid. He vows that somehow he will assassinate him in retaliation. Acting on impulse he volunteers for the imperial army on active service in North Africa and comes to the attention of the military authorities through extraordinary *gallantry* for which he is awarded the Victoria Cross. While Churchill is in Morocco he hears about this man, and wanting to dispel his image as an anti Indian racist and to encourage the fervor of imperial troops, he asks to meet him. The man now has an unexpected opportunity to fulfill his vow. In this example you would be using “historical knowledge” to make your story believable and intellectually plausible. This does not mean that you cannot write about the “irrational” or create a fantasy. You could, for example, write a script about the supernatural in which case your work would be informed by a study of irrational beliefs during the era. Your creative project must be accompanied by a five page report that details and discusses the sources that you used in researching your work. The report should have a bibliography that includes the sources you used in your work.

Current Issues and Events

This course will connect current events and issues to the historical topics and issues we discuss. I will frequently bring current problems and issues such as those associated with race, gender, ethnicity, religion, bigotry, and contemporary American and international politics to our discussions. Some people may feel uncomfortable discussing such issues or even hearing them discussed. I make no judgements about their sensitivities. However, if one has such sensitivities you should not be in this course. Writing involves confronting difficult, and sometimes, disturbing, uncomfortable and challenging emotions, facts and human possibilities. Being a creative artist means being open to such discomfort, challenges and disturbances in order that one may grow as a human being and as an artist.

Missed Classes:

If you miss three classes without a reason that I deem acceptable, such as an illness or family emergency, you may be given a failing grade.

Grades

Your grade will be computed as follows:

Class Participation: 50%

Script and Research Report: 50%

Important Dates:

September 23: Your script topics due in class.

November 18: Rough Draft due in class.

December 2: Presentation of scripts in class. You must email you script to all classmates.

December 9: Presentation of Scripts. Final drafts of scripts due to me in class. No exceptions.

Academic Honesty

Be advised that this course follows College of Arts and Science Guidelines on Academic Conduct. Plagiarism may lead to a failing grade and may be reported to the dean. You may access the Academic Conduct Code at this website:

<http://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code/>

Blackboard

There will be a blackboard for this course on which I may post helpful articles, observations, instructions, updates and audiovisual material.

Reference Works

Sam Smiley, Playwriting.

Harold Clurman, On Directing.

Required Texts

Ian Buruma, Inventing Japan: 1853-1964 ISBN-13: 978-0812972863

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, The Monkey As Mirror ISBN-13: 978-0691028460

Uyeda Akinari, Tales of Moonlight and Rain, Translated by Kengi Hamada (Columbia University Press) ISBN-13: 978-0231036313

Lafcadio Hearn, Kwaidan, Stories and Studies of Strange Things ISBN-13: 978-0804836623

Izumi Kyoka, Japanese Gothic Tales ISBN-13: 978-0824817893

Required Films

Mizoguchi Kenji, Ugetsu

Miyazaki Hayao, Spirited Away

Naruse Mikio, A Song By Lantern Light

Course Outline and Reading Schedule

September 9: Discussion of course objectives; overview of the course.

September 16: Overview of Japanese History 1600-1853.

September 23: Overview of Japanese History 1853-1900.

Reading: Buruma, *Inventing Japan*.

Your Creative Topic is due at this session. During the last hour of the session you will each briefly describe your ideas for a creative project and I will comment on each of them. I invite you to follow up our in-class discussion by emailing me questions about your project.

September 30: Self and Others.

Reading: Ohnuki-Tierney, *The Monkey as Mirror*, Chapters 1,2, 3 & 6.

October 7: Japanese Folk Culture:

October 15: Popular Resistance and Millenarian Movements.

October 21: Yonaoshi.

Film: *Spirited Away*.

You should have viewed the film before coming to this class session.

October 28: The Interpenetration of Worlds.

Reading: Ueda, *Tales of Moonlight and Raid*

Film: *Ugetsu*.

You should have viewed this film before coming to this class session.

November 4: The Strange, mysterious and uncanny.

Reading: Hearn, *Kwaidan*.

November 11: Shadows, Lanterns and Bridges

Reading: Izumi, *Japanese Gothic Tales*.

Film: *A Song By Lantern Light*

You should have viewed this film before this class session.

November 18: Workshopping Scripts

November 25: Workshopping Scripts.

December 2: Presentation of Penultimate Drafts.

December 9: Presentation of Penultimate Drafts. Hard copy of your Final Drafts of Scripts Due in class. No exceptions.

YOU MUST PLACE YOUR NAME AND THE COURSE TITLE AND NUMBER ON THE FIRST PAGE OF YOUR SCRIPT. YOU MUST INSERT PAGE NUMBERS ON EACH PAGE. I WILL NOT READ SCRIPTS THAT DO NOT INCLUDE PAGE NUMBERS. YOU MUST STAPLE YOUR SCRIPT IN THE TOP LEFT CORNER.