

“Reading the Arts” ~ HNRS 122 ~ Section 006

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMA

**Taught by Heather McDonald, Professor of Theater and
College of Visual and Performing Arts Writer-in-Residence**

Tuesday/Thursday 3 - 4:15

Mason Hall D001

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Office Hours: Tuesday/Thursday by appointment

Course Description and Objectives

American playwright Thornton Wilder said, “I regard theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be human.”

Through study of contemporary American plays and musicals, students will explore theatre as a mirror of the culture. Dialogue and the importance of valuing and evaluating multiple perspectives and points-of-view are core to theatre. The central concerns of the class are listening to the myriad voices currently working in American theatre, seeking to understand why live stories urgently matter, looking at theatre’s relationship to other art forms, placing theatre in its political and cultural context, forming questions about how contemporary dramatists wrestle with and ask questions about the great American Experiment, and building a portrait of our contemporary world.

Students will both read and see plays and musicals. We will begin by learning the language, story structure, character building, and visual storytelling particular to the art form. Readings in CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMA will be drawn from award-winning plays and musicals with an eye toward including some that will have local productions we are able to attend and discuss.

“I believe in the power of theatre to teach and to heal through compassion, through shared agony. And it also offers a way of developing a critical consciousness. It teaches us how to look at the world, to see it with double vision.”

~ Tony Kushner

READING LIST:

- Disgraced by Ayah Akhtar
- Ruined by Lynn Nottage
- The Humans by Stephen Karam
- The Rivers and Ravines by Heather McDonald
- The Laramie Project by Moises Kaufman
- Joe Turner’s Come and Gone by August Wilson
- Middletown by Will Eno
- The Pillowman by Martin McDonough
- Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel
- The Last Days of Judas Iscariot by Stephen Adly Guirgis
- Angels in America: Part One: Millenium Approaches by Tony Kushner
- Angels in America: Part Two: Perestroika by Tony Kushner
- Detroit by Lisa D’Amour
- A More Perfect Ten by Gary Garrison

“There is a certain immortality involved in theater, not created by monuments and books, but through the knowledge the actor keeps to his dying day that on a certain afternoon, in an empty and dusty theatre, he cast a shadow or a being that was not himself but the distillation of all he had ever observed; all the unsingable heartsong the ordinary man may feel but never utter, he gave voice to. And by that he somehow joins the ages.”

~ Arthur Miller

Course Requirements and Grading

70% written work and class presentation (critical writing, text analysis, production critiques, creative writing, research)

25% class participation (readiness for seminar, contribution to class discussions, text analysis, scene preparation and discussion questions)

5% attendance

This class is run **seminar-style**, so your consistent and thoughtful participation is vital to the success of the course. As you complete the required reading each week, please take careful notes. Come to class prepared to discuss the text with passages noted for discussion and reading and three questions meant to provoke conversation.

All written work **MUST** be brought to class on the day it is due in a **HARD COPY FORM**.

Weekly Reading

There will be play readings assigned weekly. Select a scene to read aloud and analyze in class. Prepare three questions for discussion.

Production Critiques

Two production critiques of a “live” piece of theatre.
Approximately 3 pages in length.

The **first critique** will be of “The Pillowman” produced by The Mason Players at The School of Theater in Theatre Space November 16, 17, 18 at 8pm and November 18 and 19 at 2 pm. Tickets are free for students at The Concert Hall Box Office.

The **second critique** is of any “live” theatrical event of your choosing. Preferably a work by a contemporary playwright. But if that is challenging, a thoughtful, critical, insightful response to any “live” theatrical event will be acceptable. There may be a cost associated with this event.

Some ideas include other productions at The Concert Hall at George Mason University, The Mason Players, “Dead Man’s Cell Phone” by Sarah Ruhl October 4 and 6 at 8pm and October 7 at 2 pm or “1984” October 8 at 2 pm, October 5 and 7 at 8 pm” and The National Theatre Live events at The Angelika Theatre. I will highlight interesting local productions at theatres in the greater Washington, D.C. area. It’s a strong, vibrant theatre community and powerful new work is seen on the stages of Signature Theatre, Woolly Mammoth Theatre, Signature Theatre, Arena Stage, Studio Theatre, and many others.

Dramaturgy Assignment – Group Presentation

For each of the plays, a group of 2-3 students will present to the class research on the play’s background, reviews of significant productions, the playwrights’ biography, important interviews, and any representative visuals and/or video.

The format of your presentation is open to creativity and can include anything from lecture to performance of a scene to You Tube videos to Power Point. The presentation will be evaluated on organization, clarity of presentation, thoroughness of research, and creativity.

Scene Analysis

Write a brief and focused short analysis paper (3-5 pages) on a scene from one of the plays we’ve read. Papers may explore any number of ideas and may expand one of your weekly response questions into a polished paper.

Some things you may choose to explore are theatrical narratives and imagery, dramaturgical structure, character journeys, the nature of theatrical events, the scene’s relationship to the overall story, placing the scene politically and culturally, asking a question about how the scene reveals some aspect of our contemporary world.

Final Project

A research essay (7-10 pages) or a short original play.

You may choose to write about one of the plays we've read in class or you may find another contemporary play you wish to explore. You may also craft an analysis of a single piece of a performance you have seen. You may write a more traditional research paper exploring the play through text analysis and dramaturgy. You may look at several plays seeking to find common themes and concerns. You may write overall about what matters in the "live" experience and what contemporary drama contributes to building a portrait of America now.

You may choose the **creative option and write your own play**.

A **project proposal** for the essay or play will be required and discussed.

Grading Standards:

- A grade of "A" is given for superlative work that demonstrates a profound commitment to the course material, and further, that goes on to employ this material as a springboard for independent thought and work.
- A grade of "B" is given for very good work that completely fulfills all the requirements of the course in a conscientious and dedicated manner, and that demonstrates mastery of the course content.
- A grade of "C" is given for work that fulfills all the requirements of the course in a satisfactory manner, but that falls short of demonstrating rigor and mastery.
- A grade of "D" is given for work that is unsatisfactory
- A grade of "F" is given for work that fails to fulfill the requirements of the course.

GMU Add/Drop Policy: It is the student's responsibility to check to verify that they are properly enrolled in this course as no credit will be awarded to students who are not. Please be aware of the last day to drop this class with no tuition liability. 9/5/17

All communications regarding this course are to occur using GMU email accounts.

Honor Code, Copyright, & Computing Policies: *To promote a stronger sense of mutual responsibility, respect, trust, and fairness among all members of the George Mason University community and with the desire for greater academic and personal achievement, we, the student members of the university community, have set forth this honor code:* Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work.

You are expected to adhere to all University policies and guidelines during your participation in this course. All work must be your own. Inappropriate use of the work of others is a George Mason University Honor Code violation. Please review the University's website for information on the following: Honor Code and Judicial Procedures; Copyright/Fair Use; and Responsible Use of Computing.

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 703.993.2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office. Students must inform the instructor at the beginning of the semester, and the specific accommodation will be arranged through the Disability Resource Center.

Writing Center: Students who are in need of intensive help with grammar, structure or mechanics in their writing should make use of the services of the Writing Center, located in Robinson A116 (703-993-1200). The services of the Writing Center are available by appointment, online and, occasionally, on a walk-in basis.

Other GMU resources: <http://www.gmu.edu/departments/freshman/resources.html>
University Policies: University Catalog can be accessed catalog.gmu.edu
University Libraries "Ask a Librarian" <http://library.gmu.edu/mudge/IM/IMRef.html>
Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) caps.gmu.edu or (703) 993-2380

It is not possible to receive an incomplete grade in this class. If you anticipate difficulty in completing this course see your instructor immediately to discuss your options.

You are encourage to sign up for the Mason Alert System by visiting the website <https://alert.gmu.edu>. An emergency poster exists in each classroom explaining what to do in the event of crises and that further information about emergency procedures exists on <http://www.gmu.edu/service/cert>.

NOTE: Cell phones, pagers and alarms must be turned off in class. No exceptions.

Names & Pronouns. Please let me know of your gender pronoun(s) and how best to address you in class and via email. I use female pronouns for myself and you may address me as Heather or Professor McDonald in email and verbally.

George Mason University is committed to providing a safe learning, living and working environment that embraces its **diversity** and is free from discrimination. The University's environment is meant to be experienced as vibrant and dynamic, and one that includes ample opportunities for exploration of self, identity and independence.

The diversity of our student body is a valuable asset to our conversation and learning. If there is anything I haven't discussed in the syllabus that is of note or concern to you, I welcome your input and value your thoughts and ideas.

